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AN UNEXPECTED CASE FOR AN ANTHROPOMORPHIC GOD

Daniel C. Peterson

Abstract: Given the knowledge of the corporeal, embodied nature of God that the Prophet Joseph Smith received in his 1820 First Vision, Latter-day Saints have argued from their earliest days that the Bible is most accurately understood as teaching precisely the same thing — that God has a body and that humans are literally created in his physical image. Now, a new book from an unlikely (and quite unintentional) ally makes a strong case for our position. It is a book that will both gratify Latter-day Saints and, at some points, offend them. In any event, readers of Interpreter should be aware of it.

I’m writing to call readers’ attention to a new book that, in my judgment, will be intensely interesting to at least a few members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints — *God: An Anatomy*.¹ The author, Francesca Stavrakopoulou, will be familiar to some as the telegenic British-accented host of programs for the BBC, Britain’s Channel 4, and, in America, the History Channel on the archaeology, history, and religion of ancient Israel and Judah. Not merely a television host, she is also the holder of a doctorate from the University of Oxford and of a chair in Hebrew Bible and ancient religion at the University of Exeter in England.

*God: An Anatomy* is a massive tome that, including endnotes, extends to very nearly 600 pages. But its length is only one reason, and not the major one, why I can’t simply recommend it for all Latter-day Saint readers. It is most emphatically not a Latter-day Saint book.

“I’ve never believed in God,” Dr. Stavrakopoulou says flatly, on her book’s very first page.² Understandably in that light, the book is neither reverent nor awestruck in its approach to her vastly important subject. For her, what she’s discussing is merely a matter of ancient history, not a clue to the ultimate nature of reality or of any relevance to the heavens, human salvation, or an afterlife. After all, she believes in none of those things. And yet, her very lack of belief also frees her from any obligation to grind theological axes and permits her to go with her data. And that liberty, I think, has allowed her to create a book that offers rich material for believers in the Restoration and that can, in some important ways, support the teachings of Joseph Smith and his successors.

Not surprisingly, so far as I can see, God: An Anatomy seems to have received far more enthusiastic reviews from secularists than from religious believers. And here, as in many other regards, the unique position of the Latter-day Saints in the religious world is apparent.

From the time Joseph emerged from the grove of trees near his home outside of Palmyra, New York, in the spring of 1820, the Latter-day Saint view of God has diverged from the mainstream Christian conception of deity — and, for that matter, from mainstream Judaism and Islam. It could not have been otherwise, given his vision of the Father and the Son.

“I have always declared God,” he said to a sizable audience fewer than two weeks before his martyrdom, “to be a distinct personage, Jesus Christ a separate and distinct personage from God the Father, and that the Holy Ghost was a distinct personage and a Spirit: and these three constitute three distinct personages and three Gods.”³ “That which is without body or parts is nothing. There is no other God in heaven but that God who has flesh and bones.”⁴ Somewhat more than a year prior to his death, in a statement that has since been canonized in the Doctrine and Covenants, he taught that “the Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s; the Son also; but the Holy Ghost has not a body of flesh and bones, but is a personage of Spirit. Were it not so, the Holy Ghost could not dwell in us” (D&C 130:22).

². Ibid., 1. Hereafter, page references to Stavrakopoulou’s book are supplied, for the most part, parenthetically within the main text.
In what is arguably the most controversial sermon that he ever delivered, the famous King Follett Discourse, he declared that

God Himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! That is the great secret. If the veil were rent today, and the great God who holds this world in its orbit, and who upholds all worlds and all things by His power, was to make Himself visible, — I say, if you were to see Him today, you would see Him like a man in form — like yourselves in all the person, image, and very form as a man; for Adam was created in the very fashion, image and likeness of God, and received instruction from, and walked, talked and conversed with Him, as one man talks and communes with another. …

Having a knowledge of God, we begin to know how to approach Him, and how to ask so as to receive an answer. When we understand the character of God, and know how to come to Him, He begins to unfold the heavens to us, and to tell us all about it. When we are ready to come to Him, He is ready to come to us.⁵

Given her own lack of theological commitments, I don’t expect that Francesca Stavrakopoulou would be shocked or offended by such a declaration. On the contrary, I have little doubt that she would find it intriguing.⁶ She might even, within the parameters of her atheism, find in it something to cheer. Why? In the very first pages of God: An Anatomy,


she supplies a bit of autobiographical information that leads me to that hunch:

While I was studying theology and religion at university, there was a broad assumption among lecturers and students alike that the God of the Bible is without a body. This was a formless, imageless, invisible deity, who in the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) revealed himself in words mysteriously uttered through his prophets, and then in the New Testament became flesh (“incarnate”) in Jesus Christ, in order to die for the sins of humanity before resurrecting and ascending back to the heavens. But as I looked closely at the books comprising the Bible, I couldn’t find this bodiless God. Instead, these ancient texts conjured a startlingly corporeal image of God as a human-shaped deity, who walked and talked and wept and laughed. A god who ate and slept and felt and breathed. And a god who was distinctly male. (2)

As my undergraduate studies progressed, no one seemed to talk about the body of the biblical God — until one memorable lecture, when the gender politics of modern Christian theology were being discussed. I was excited to discover that feminist theologians had long taken issue with the maleness of God in their scriptures. And yet it soon transpired that the way in which both feminist and traditionalist theologians proposed getting around this sticky issue was to insist that God couldn’t possibly have a sex or a gender, because God didn’t have a body. I vividly recall protesting in the question-and-answer session at the end of the lecture, “But lots of biblical texts suggest that God is masculine, with a male body.” “The problem isn’t God,” replied the professor — a highly respected Christian theologian, and a man of the cloth. “The problem only arises when we take the Bible’s descriptions too literally.” He went on to explain that those troublesome biblical portrayals of a corporeal, masculine God were simply metaphorical, or poetic. “We shouldn’t get too distracted by references to his body,” he said. To do so, he claimed, was to engage too simplistically with the biblical texts. Apparently, we had to look not just at the texts but through the texts, to engage their theological truths. (2–3)
Everyone else in the room seemed remarkably content with this approach to the God of the Bible, but I found it deeply frustrating. Why should I look past the clear image of God as a gigantic man with a heavy tread, weapons in his hands and breath as hot as sulphur? (3)

Everyone else in the room, my theology professor included, was censoring the Bible, sanitizing its deity of any mythological, earthy or unsettling characteristics. I was disappointed by them. And disappointed for them. (3–4)

It seems fairly clear that, for Professor Stavrakopoulou, God doesn’t literally exist but is to be considered something like a fictional literary character — at one time, a very vivid and lively one — who has been turned bland and dull by later readers of the book (or, truer to her way of thinking, in the disparate biblical books) in which he is far and away the most significant protagonist. A once spectacular figure of myth, he has been domesticated, tamed, and left (quite literally) toothless.

Alice Roberts, an English biological anthropologist and, like Stavrakopoulou, an outspoken atheist, academic, television presenter, and author, enthuses that “where pious theologians have abstracted him into emptiness, Stavrakopolou gives him back his substance, and he’s so much more interesting in this bodily form!”

“The modern God of the West and the ancient God of the Bible are very different beings,” Dr. Stavrakopoulou writes. “Western intellectuals have not only rendered the biblical God lifeless, but reduced him to a mere phantom, conjured by the human imagination.” Today, in a complaint in which Latter-day Saints, with their belief in ongoing modern revelation, heartily join, he is “a god who is everywhere and sees everything, but remains absent and says nothing” (415).

With no theological dog in the hunt, Dr. Stavrakopoulou takes it upon herself to clear off the accretions and, perhaps even more, to restore the deletions that have obscured the original God of the Bible from almost all of its modern readers.

“Stripping away the theological veneer of centuries of Jewish and Christian piety,” she announces, “this book disentangles the biblical God from his scriptural and doctrinal fetters to reveal a deity wholly unlike the God worshipped by Jews and Christians today.”

---

in this book is the deity as his ancient worshippers saw him: a supersized, muscle-bound, good-looking god, with superhuman powers, earthly passions, and a penchant for the fantastic and the monstrous” (4).

In pursuit of her argument, she dedicates much of her book to a multidisciplinary reconstruction of the original divinity worshipped by biblical peoples (who, she contends, was related to the divinities worshipped by the cultures that surrounded them). She organizes her treatment anatomically, from the ground up. It is comprised of five sections (Part I, “Feet and Legs”; Part II, “Genitals”; Part III, “Torso”; Part IV, “Arms and Hands”; Part V, “Head”) and an epilogue. In turn, each part is made up of between three and five chapters. Thus, for example, Part V treats the divine ears, nose, and mouth in a quintet of separate pieces.

I won’t go into detail regarding the four chapters of Part II — can you see why I don’t recommend this book for all Latter-day Saints? — but I’ll cite the anonymous review of her book that appeared in The Economist: “This book is a great rebel shout… [A] rollicking journey through every aspect of Yahweh’s body, from top to bottom (yes, that too) and from inside out. … Ms. Stavrakopoulou has almost too much fun.”

Indeed. I’m reasonably certain that more than a few religiously devout readers, including Latter-day Saints, won’t find God: An Anatomy entirely “fun.” Nevertheless, more than a few reviewers have pronounced it both fun and — they’re certainly correct in this — extremely readable (as one might perhaps expect from a person who hosts popular television broadcasts). Here, for example, is Jack Miles, author of such books as God: A Biography, Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God, and God in the Qur’an, writing for the Catholic Herald:

Brilliant … Fascinating … Boldly simple in concept, God: An Anatomy is stunning in its execution. It is a tour de force, a triumph, and I write this as one who disagrees with Stavrakopoulou both on broad theoretical grounds and one who finds himself engaged with her in one narrow textual spat after another … Great fun to read … A stunning book.9

8. “A theologian presents God as few readers will have seen him before: Francesca Stavrakopoulou’s book will offend some. But it will delight more,” The Economist (2 October 2021); https://www.economist.com/books-and-arts/2021/10/02/a-theologian-presents-god-as-few-readers-will-have-seen-him-before.

It is also, writes the prolific and popular author Karen Armstrong in the *New York Times*,

A detailed and scrupulously researched book … [Stavrakopoulou] proceeds, in 21 chapters packed with knowledge and insight, to “anatomize” the divinity from head to toe, starting with the “standing stones” that marked the footsteps of deities in the Late Bronze and Early Iron Age and ending with images of God that enabled people to imagine that they were somehow commencing with him “face to face.”

Latter-day Saints will note Ms. Armstrong’s language when she rather complacently says that ancient people “imagined” that “they were somehow commencing with [God] ‘face to face.’” Neither the modern metaphorical understanding of divine anthropomorphism nor, for that matter, Stavrakopoulou’s atheism allows reports of such encounters to be taken at face value. We’re pretty much on our own — though, in this matter, oddly on middle ground between two extremes that both deny the literal corporeality of God.

Stavrakopoulou, of course, believes that God was and is simply a creation of human minds and imaginations. As an ideologically sympathetic reviewer in *New Humanist* writes, “What emerges is a deity more terrifyingly alive, more damaged, more compelling, more complex than we have encountered before. More human, you might say.” And, near the conclusion of *God: An Anatomy*, she herself describes the divine image that she has created: “This was a god more like the best of us and the worst of us. A god made in our own image” (423).

It is at this point that a Latter-day Saint will want to speak up. Jack Miles, the reviewer for the *Catholic Herald*, notes that Stavrakopoulou consistently tries to break what she calls the “fetters” of metaphorical understanding and to take descriptions of God literally. But, he suggests, even she doesn’t do so consistently. And that is certainly true. For instance, the strong statement of Deuteronomy 32:4 notwithstanding, she never contends that the God of ancient Israel was actually a literal rock. Yes, metaphorical readings have largely and wrongly erased God’s body from mainstream Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Still, there are


places where descriptions of God should be taken metaphorically, even from the perspective of committed, believing anthropomorphists.

And have elements of human culture affected our perceptions of the divine? Absolutely. Without question. As Brigham Young put it,

I do not even believe that there is a single revelation, among the many God has given to the Church, that is perfect in its fulness. The revelations of God contain correct doctrine and principle, so far as they go; but it is impossible for the poor, weak, low, grovelling, sinful inhabitants of the earth to receive a revelation from the Almighty in all its perfections. He has to speak to us in a manner to meet the extent of our capacities.12

Writing to William W. Phelps on 27 November 1832, Joseph Smith exclaimed, “Oh Lord God, deliver us from this prison, almost as it were, of paper, pen and ink, and of a crooked, broken, scattered and imperfect language.”13

Having made her case, though, Stavrakopoulou also devotes attention to the ways in which the biblical God became the attenuated, abstract, bodiless entity — or, in some cases, the nonentity14 — of much sophisticated modern mainstream Christian theology.15 She sees the process as having commenced already in ancient times. But many years were required before that process was complete:

14. For example, the nihil of John Scottus Eriugena (ca. 800–877 AD), the “Ground of Being” or Seinsgrund of Paul Tillich (1886–1965), and the mysterious “creativity” behind the universe as taught by Harvard theologian Gordon Kaufman (1925–2011).
15. Many years ago, I participated in a small seminar, informally called a “trialogue,” of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theologians in Graz, Austria. One evening, the organizer of the seminar sponsored a public event that featured Professor Gordon Kaufman, from Harvard, who was one of the seminar participants. Many of those who attended came from the small Muslim community in Graz, and it was thought that Kaufman’s undemanding form of nominally Christian theology would appeal to them because they found it unthreatening. Instead, they were indignant. They could see no real difference between his theology and atheism. Nor, honestly, could I.
He was hidden, but he was far from disembodied. Instead, God became ever more transcendent. The Jerusalem temple had once been the meeting place of heaven and earth. Now, heaven would begin to stretch away, further from the world, taking the deity deeper into its highest heights, leaving only God’s Torah, his inscribed “name,” or increasingly ephemeral traces of his “holiness” and “glory,” in residence. (418)

Latter-day Saints typically, and I think correctly, see what we call the Great Apostasy as first and foremost a matter of the loss of priesthood authority. But we also recognize doctrinal changes, which we often blame on the influence of Hellenistic philosophy on post-apostolic Christian thinkers. Stavrakopoulou recognizes the same factor in her story of the transformation — the literal de-forming — of God, which she and many others see as occurring already in the famous and enormously important Septuagint Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, as well as in the works of such thinkers as Philo of Alexandria (ca. 20 BC–ca. 50 AD):

It was the cultural heft of certain forms of philosophical abstraction that would strike the deadly blow to God’s body. But it was a slow death. In some communities, the emergence of Greek versions of the Hebrew Scriptures in the third and second centuries BCE had encouraged the gradual — and seemingly natural — metamorphosis of ancient Levantine mythology into cutting-edge Jewish metaphysics. In a Graeco-Roman world in which Judaism and its subsequent Christian inflections were minority religions, some Jewish and Christian intellectuals were keen to demonstrate the erudite, sophisticated truths of their own theologies by identifying the God of their scriptures with constructs of the supreme Divine in Greek philosophy. Qualities and attributes of the Jewish and Christian God were instinctively but insistently mapped onto broadly Platonic abstractions: in Greek, scriptural references to God’s breath (pneuma) and word (logos) became the divine Spirit and Reason of the higher, immaterial world, while references to God’s anatomical features, such as his head, hands, and feet, became increasingly complex metaphors and multi-layered allegories, pointing to higher, esoteric truths. (418)

In Stavrakopoulou’s view, however, it was the rise of Trinitarian theology (beginning at the first great ecumenical Council of Nicaea in AD 325 and continuing at the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451) that gave the final coup de grâce, at least in mainstream, orthodox Christian theological circles, if not necessarily among the masses of ordinary Christians, to the idea that God was a corporeal, anthropomorphic, personal being. There was, simply, no conceivable way in which a bodily person could simultaneously be Father and Son and Holy Spirit. There was no way, in the words of the so-called “Athanasian Creed” (which probably dates to the late fifth or early sixth century), to do so while “neither confusing the Persons nor dividing the Substance.” In her words,

[It was] the insistence that God was at once Father, Son and Holy Spirit, rather than three separate entities or a deity comprising three parts, that would ultimately destroy God’s body. …

At the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE), assembled bishops from east and west had finally agreed that, as Father, Son and Spirit, God was a singular divine nature or “substance,” distinguishable as three “persons” only by the manner in which each possessed that substance. … Ultimately, this meant that God could not have a body. Although the incorporeality of God would not be formally declared at Chalcedon, and earlier theologians had already arrived at this conclusion, the council’s explication of the triune God prioritized and endorsed a Platonic framework for early Christian theology, according to which God was necessarily assumed to be an absolute, simple entity: the supreme, single and permanent ultimate principle, by which the universe and everything within it should be accounted. As the source of the universe, God transcended it, and was therefore utterly unlike it. This rendered God immutable, in contrast to the

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17. There were, I contend, other ways to think of the Trinity or the Godhead that would not have incurred the difficulties — which, to my mind, are insuperable — entailed by Nicene Trinitarianism. But they were not taken. See Daniel C. Peterson, “Notes on Mormonism and the Trinity,” in “To Seek the Law of the Lord”: Essays in Honor of John W. Welch, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson and Daniel C. Peterson (Orem, UT: The Interpreter Foundation, 2017), 267–316; republished as Daniel C. Peterson, “Notes on Mormonism and the Trinity,” Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship 41 (2020): 87–130.
fluctuating, changeable universe, and non-composite, unlike the universe, which was composed of parts. As an immutable, non-composite entity (upon which mainstream Trinitarian theology now insisted), it was impossible that God could have a body, for a body is mutable and composite, which can not only be divided and separated into its constituent parts, but presupposes an external “composer” to put it together in the first place, as Aquinas would later emphasize. As the ultimate principle and source, God could have neither a body nor a composer. The divine is inherently simple, not composite.

When hundreds of Church patriarchs, bishops, abbots and royal representatives from across the Latin West gathered in Rome for the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, this dogma would be plainly stated: God is *substantia seu natura simplex omnino* — a substance or nature that is absolutely simple. (420–21)

However, Stavrakopoulou insists, nothing even remotely like that dictum is to be found in the Bible. Neither in the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible nor in the New. To which we Latter-day Saints would offer a hearty “Amen!”

“All scripture is given by inspiration of God,” wrote the Apostle Paul in his second letter to Timothy, “and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works” (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

The word in 2 Timothy 3:16 — it’s a single word — that the King James translators rendered as “given by inspiration of God” is ἰδυπνευστός (*theopneustos*), which literally means “God-breathed.” In my experience, that verse, often translated in modern versions of the New Testament as “all scripture is God-breathed,” is a popular one among Evangelical Protestants, who use it to argue (however inappropriately) for the inerrancy of scripture and related points of their doctrine. Francesca Stavrakopoulou, however, uses it to make a very different point: “Like the grin of the Cheshire Cat,” she writes, “it was the breath of God that would remain, as his body gradually vanished” (412).

[T]he distance between God and humanity is light years from the image of God in the Bible. The Christian construct

18. Think of the words theism and theology, of course, but also of words such as pneumonia and pneumatic.
of God as a transcendent, invisible and incorporeal being is a distorted refraction, not a reflection, of the biblical image of God. The real God of the Bible was an ancient Levantine deity whose footsteps shook the earth, whose voice thundered through the skies and whose beauty and radiance dazzled his worshippers. This was a deity who crafted god-shaped humans from clay, and breathed life into their nostrils. But this was also a god who wept and talked and slept and sulked. A god who felt and fought and loved and lost. A god who sometimes failed and sometimes triumphed. (422–23)

“It is the first principle of the gospel to know for a certainty the character of God,” said the Prophet Joseph Smith. “I want you all to know Him, and to be familiar with Him.”

John 17:3 declares that life eternal is to know God and Jesus Christ, whom God sent.

I am deeply grateful for the knowledge that has been revealed to us about the character of God. And I’m far from alone in that. The Interpreter Foundation exists, to a large degree, because of the gratitude of its authors, reviewers, donors, designers, source checkers, copy editors, and other volunteers for the Restoration. And I’m grateful to them, for all that they do. Here, I particularly want to thank Allen Wyatt and Jeff Lindsay, the managing or production editors for the Journal. As every other officer of the Interpreter Foundation does, they volunteer their time, their talents, and their labor; they receive no compensation, financial or otherwise. Without them, there would be no Interpreter, and without others like them the Interpreter Foundation as a whole could not function. And yet, as I write, the Foundation is approaching the tenth anniversary of its launch. And the Foundation’s Journal, which published its first article about a week and a half after that launch, has just, on 18 February 2022, marked its five-hundredth consecutive week of publication. That’s a milestone that I contemplate with both satisfaction and deep gratitude.

Daniel C. Peterson (PhD, University of California at Los Angeles) is a professor emeritus of Islamic studies and Arabic at Brigham Young University, where he founded the University’s Middle Eastern Texts Initiative. He has published and spoken extensively on both Islamic and Latter-day Saint subjects. Formerly chairman of the board of the

Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) and an officer, editor, and author for its successor organization, the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, his professional work as an Arabist focuses on the Qur’an and on Islamic philosophical theology. He is the author, among other things, of a biography entitled Muhammad: Prophet of God (Eerdmans, 2007).
A COMPARISON OF THE BOOK OF MORMON’S SUBORDINATE THAT USAGE

Stanford Carmack

Abstract: This paper compares the Book of Mormon’s subordinate that usage with what is found in the King James Bible, pseudo-archaic writings, and the greater textual record. In this linguistic domain, the Book of Mormon manifests as thoroughly archaic, and it surpasses all known pseudo-archaic writings in breadth and depth of archaism. The implications of this set of linguistic data indicate that the translation as originally dictated by Joseph Smith cannot plausibly be explained as the result of Joseph’s own word choices, but it is consistent with the hypothesis that the wording was somehow provided to him.

Book of Mormon excerpt with an archaic subordinate that:
“after that they had hid themselves, I Nephi crept into the city”
(1 Nephi 4:5)

In 1 Nephi 4:5, archaic subordinate that usage (also called pleonastic that in the literature) involves the time conjunction after. This “after that S” usage (where S stands for a sentence-like subordinate clause) is frequently found in the King James Bible (74 times by one count, if we include the Apocrypha, which was often present in earlier Bibles). Yet as we shall see, this particular archaic subordinate that usage, as well as

subordinate *that* in general, occur to a limited extent in pseudo-archaic texts of the 18th and 19th centuries. The reason for this is twofold: some biblical subordinate *that* usage is only lightly represented in the King James text (≤ 5 times), and subordinate *that* usage “declin[ed] rapidly in the 17th century to such an extent that it became virtually obliterated towards the end of that same century.”

I will first review biblical types of archaic subordinate *that* usage, then pseudo-archaic usage, and then the types found in the original Book of Mormon text. Pseudo-archaic writings constitute a control group that is important to consider (see below and the final section of the appendix for how these texts were chosen). The approach taken here is not to assume that any biblical usage was automatically reproducible by Joseph Smith, as a biblical imitator, since such an assumption is not a principled, rigorous approach. Rather, many pseudo-archaic texts have been consulted in order to determine which types were produced

3. Ibid., 5.
4. An anonymous reviewer wrote the following:

First, the construction tends more to the lexical than grammatical on the lexico-grammatical scale. The addition of “that” doesn’t change the structure at all, and is in fact obtrusive, so I would expect that those who have read enough older texts, including the KJV, could have easily noticed the construction. That so many pseudobiblical texts include the construction may indicate that it is a noticeable pseudoarchaic feature. Second, it occurs in the KJV a fair amount, so it may be even more available because of that.

Against what this reviewer wrote, the pseudo-archaic evidence exemplified and summarized in this paper indicates limited, not universal, availability to those authors: first, even the most common biblical subordinate *that* type, “after that S,” occurs in only one of the 25 pseudo-archaic texts; second, very uncommon biblical subordinate *that* usage — whether we call it lexical or syntactic — was not imitated by pseudo-archaic authors. As an additional example, *more part* phraseology, which rarely occurs in the King James Bible, was hardly imitated in the pseudo-archaic genre. At this point, I have not encountered any imitation until William Morris’s late 19th-century writings. Before the 1870s, we find only rare, sporadic usage by various non-pseudo-archaic authors.

Furthermore, I see little reason to be interested in whether we call subordinate *that* lexical or syntactic. I tend to call subordinate *that* syntactic, and Javier Calle Martín does as well, if his keyword “historical syntax” is any indication (see note 2). Indeed, archaic repetition of subordinate *that*, instead of modern repetition of the subordinator, qualifies as more syntactic than lexical (see examples in the body of the paper).
by various biblical imitators, and to what extent, both before and after Joseph’s 1829 dictation of the Book of Mormon.

**Biblical Types of Archaic Subordinate That Usage**

The King James Bible has seven types of archaic subordinate *that* usage (it also has a few other types that are not as clearly or obviously archaic):

- after that S
- because that S
- before that S
- for that S (meaning ‘because’)
- how that S
- lest that S
- until that S • till that S (morphological variants)

I recently counted — using a digital copy of a complete 1611 Bible — 211 instances of archaic subordinate *that* used with the above subordinating conjunctions. Here is the above list ordered according to how many of each type were found in the biblical text.

- after that S (74)
- how that S (45)
- because that S (41)
- for that S (39)
- before that S (5)
- until that S • till that S (4)
- lest that S (3)

The first four types occur much more frequently than the last three types. Here are a few examples of each of these seven types of archaic subordinate *that* usage, ordered alphabetically:

**After that S [74 instances]**

Leviticus 13:7  after *that* he hath been seen of the priest for his cleansing

Tobit 7:1 after *that* they had saluted one another, she brought them into the house

Mark 14:28 after *that* I am risen, I will go before you into Galilee
Because that S  [41 instances]

Numbers 11:20  because that ye have despised the Lord which is among you
Tobit 3:8  because that she had been married to seven husbands
Mark 5:4  because that he had been often bound with fetters and chains

Before that S  [5 instances]

Jeremiah 47:1  before that Pharaoh smote Gaza
John 1:48  before that Philip called thee
Galatians 2:12  before that certain [men] came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles

For that S  [39 instances]

1 Chronicles 15:13  for that we sought him not after the due order
Proverbs 1:29  for that they hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the Lord
1 Maccabees 5:67  for that they went out to fight unadvisedly

How that S  [45 instances]

1 Samuel 24:18  how that thou hast dealt well with me
2 Esdras 5:54  how that ye are less of stature than those that were before you
Matthew 16:12  how that he bade them not beware of the leaven of bread

Lest that S  [3 instances]

Genesis 38:9  lest that he should give seed to his brother
2 Maccabees 6:15  lest that … he should take vengeance of us
1 Corinthians 9:27  lest that … I myself should be a castaway

Until that S  •  Till that S  [4 instances]

Judges 5:7  they ceased in Israel until that I Deborah arose
Psalm 123:2  until that he have mercy upon us
Daniel 2:34  thou sawest till that a stone was cut out without hands
Acts 21:26 until that an offering should be offered for every one of them

Pseudo-Archaic Instances of Archaic Subordinate That

After counting instances of subordinate that in a digital version of the 1611 King James Bible, I checked to see which of the above seven types were found in a corpus of 25 pseudo-archaic texts. I included all the texts mentioned in Eran Shalev’s article on pseudo-biblicism, consulting other sources as well, and even adding some texts whose language is frequently archaic but for which scriptural style was not necessarily a guiding principle. The 12 longer pseudo-archaic writings in the corpus have between 14,000 and 132,000 words. (See the end of the appendix for a complete listing and for further information on how I made up the corpus.)

I found that four of the seven biblical types of subordinate that occurred in the 25 texts, the four most frequent types. The three infrequent types were not imitated (≤ 5 instances). In addition, only one shorter text (with fewer than 10,000 words) had an example of archaic subordinate that; it had an instance of “for that S” (shown below). The most commonly imitated type was “how that S”; five texts had examples of this. The higher usage of “how that S” can be explained by the uniqueness of how in this set. It functions adverbially rather than conjunctively, and in modernizations, the how can be dropped without replacement, without any loss of meaning. In contrast, the same conjunctions or synonymous conjunctions are needed in modernizations of the other subordinators.

Here are the pseudo-archaic examples that I found, ordered according to how many of such writings had them:

How that S  [5 texts, 14 instances]

**Book of Jasher (1751) [1 instance]**
8:3 how that our fathers … dwelt in the land of Canaan and possessed the same

**American Chronicles (1775) [3 instances]**
1:27 how that he putteth the yoke of cannon upon the neck of the Bostonites

---

2:17  how that the heathen threatened their brethren the men of New England
3:54  how that he hath destroyed the sorcerers, the soothsayers, and the witches, out of the land

American Revolution (1793)  [7 instances]
2:12  how that the people of the provinces had refused to obey the decree that he had made, and had destroyed the Indian weed
20:21 how that the servants of the king were gone into captivity
32:1  how that the servants of the king were slain and taken captive at Bennington
32:10 how that the people of the Provinces pressed hard upon the host of the king in the Northern Province
37:1  how that the Northern army was made captive by the people of the Provinces
40:2  how that the men of Britain were gone forth to forage and to distress the husbandmen
42:15 how that the strong hold was taken

Chronicles of Eri (1822)  [2 instances]
3:19:19 how that he was going through Ullad, assembling the men of the land
4:9:30 how that she came over the waves of the sea from Dunmeanac

New Gospel of Peace (1863)  [1 instance]
4:1:26 how that in the beginning he had said, Let the Phiretahs go

For that S  [3 texts, 34 instances]

American Chronicles (1775)  [1 instance]
1:5  for that they have rebelled against thee

Chronicles of Eri (1822)  [32 instances]
1:4:44 for that Calma was no more
2:1:72 for that Er is not of the age
2:1:88 the land mourneth, for that Iber is no more
2:9:16 for that not one of the race of Iolar was of the age
3:2:47 for that Eocaid did abide thereon
3:7:82 Eocaid doth mourn for that Tatla is no more
3:19:50 for that the mind of Cairbre desireth repose
3:20:67 it is for that the words are true I feel the pain
4:1:65 for that he did not perform the promises he did make unto them
4:9:79 Eri was in trouble for that Fionn was no more
4:10:15 for that they so quickly passed his lips
4:10:94 Siorna chode with his brother, for that his ways were evil
4:10:117 Siorna died for that the men did do more than they were bidden to
4:12:14 for that all present did know the thing was contrived between them
4:24:12 they did imagine for that his words were not loud, he was consenting unto their fancies
4:24:13 for that they let it fall by the way
4:28:9 for that he delighteth not in things wherein other men have joy
4:28:53 for that all my remaining time of life, it would pain my spirit if you did
4:28:58 for that he did shun the haunts of men
5:2:37 Eri seemeth not to feel oppressed for that Maca is thereon
5:2:42 the children of the land mourned for that Maca was no more
5:5:5 for that they were pleased because of his pursuit after Bacad
5:5:9 for that Noid is as one of the princes of Gaelei
5:6:17 for that words had come to Fearmor’s ears
5:8:23 for that he did come with many ships to Er
5:9:29 for that they entered into the land as the foe to take off a spoil
5:19:17 for that he felt no hope of a return of his love
5:24:16 for that a prince of the race of Er sat on the throne of Eri
5:24:22 they think for that Iolar ruled Erimionn, Eri should be theirs for ever
5:28:39 for that Geinter was within the portion of Er from the beginning
5:28:113 for that the mind of Scandt was filled with jealousy of the sons of Eri
5:29:41 for that Iolar first did take upon himself the name of Erimionn
Chronicles of Nathan (1758)  [1 instance]

1:2:37  for that by the law of the Jews no man might suffer death for this thing

Because that S  [2 texts, 11 instances]

History of Anti-Christ (1811)  [1 instance]

2:8:11  because that no man was thought fit for a magistrate or church member

New Gospel of Peace (1863)  [10 instances]

2:2:2  because that he could say more and mean less than any other man in that country
2:2:2  because that there was no man who could see more ways of making trouble for other folk and getting out of it himself
2:3:4  because that he had been driven out of the Wilderness of Pharjinnee and that they worked not with him to obtain the victory
2:4:34  for because that he was not a Kopur-hedd
2:4:48  for because that his case is desperate
3:1:4  because that in the days of James … he had joined himself unto the Schynnurs
3:5:29  because that the men of the Eunyun held themselves aloof
3:7:38  because that by your carelessness ye did so mislead and afflict the people
3:7:41  because that he would suffer no man to speak or to write evil of him
4:1:6  because that he cut his way into the country of the Phiretahs

After that S  [1 text, 9 instances]

American Revolution (1793)  [9 instances]

5:1  after that the army of the king of Britain had gotten safe to land
23:16  after that the host of Britain had gone into the ships
24:14  after that the host of the people of the provinces had fled from the army of Britain
25:11  after that William … had gotten into the city
28:1  now after that Donop the captain was slain
38:1 after that the king of Gaul had made a covenant with Benjamin
42:18 after that the people of the Provinces had gotten possession thereof
53:13 not many hours after that Nathaniel had assumed the command of the army
59:4 after that Cornwallis was taken captive

Four of the 12 longer pseudo-archaic texts had two types of archaic subordinate that:

- American Chronicles (1775)
- American Revolution (1793)
- Chronicles of Eri (1822)
- New Gospel of Peace (1863)

None of the pseudo-archaic texts had three or more types of archaic subordinate that.

**The Book of Mormon’s Usage of Archaic Subordinate That**

Most Book of Mormon instances of subordinate that were deleted early in the editing process, primarily for the 1837 edition. These edits by Joseph Smith made the text less biblical. Royal Skousen, as part of his critical text work, documented all the editing that has occurred over time for this syntactic usage, providing counts of the various kinds of subordinate that usage.⁶ What he found is that the vast majority of the time, but not always, there are biblical examples of the usage.

In contrast to pseudo-archaic writings, the Book of Mormon has six of the seven types of archaic subordinate that usage found in the King James Bible. Here are examples of these six types:

**After that S  [115 instances]**

1 Nephi 19:4 after that I was gone
1 Nephi 15:13 after that the Messiah hath manifested himself in body unto the children of men
3 Nephi 28:3 after that ye are seventy and two years old

**Because that S  [34 instances]**

1 Nephi 16:22 because that they had hardened their hearts again

---

2 Nephi 29:10 wherefore because that ye have a Bible
Mormon 9:20 because that they dwindle in unbelief

Before that S  [8 instances]
1 Nephi 13:15 like unto my people before that they were slain
1 Nephi 19:2 the things which transpired before that I made these plates
Mormon 6:22 O that ye had repented before that this great destruction had come upon you!

For that S  [1 instance]
Alma 21:21 for that his father had granted unto him that he might reign

How that S  [8 instances]
Jacob 2:5 how that ye are beginning to labor in sin
Jacob 3:10 how that ye have grieved their hearts
Helaman 5:6 how that it is said … that they were good

Lest that S  [3 instances]
Alma 22:22 he … feared lest that a multitude should assemble
Alma 36:11 lest perhaps that I should be destroyed
Helaman 2:11 he feared lest that he should be destroyed

Additional Types of Subordinate That Occurring in the Book of Mormon

In terms of semantics, the original Book of Mormon text has another type of archaic subordinate that usage also found in the 1611 Bible:

To that S  [like biblical “till that S” and “until that S”]  [1 instance]
1 Nephi 18:9
insomuch that they began to dance and to sing and to speak with much rudeness yea even to that they did forget by what power they had been brought thither

In terms of morphology, this one is different from what is found in the King James Bible.
Since that S  [1 instance]

The original Book of Mormon text has another type of archaic subordinate *that* usage not found in the 1611 Bible:

1 Nephi 22:5

And since *that* they have been led away, these things have been prophesied concerning them,

The subordinate *that* was removed by Joseph Smith in 1837; the archaic *that* can be seen on page 56 of the 1830 first edition.

This same usage is found in the forerunner to the King James Bible, the 1568 Bishops’ Bible, in the book of Acts. This biblical passage can be found in the Early English Books Online database (EEBO). In the following excerpt, the spelling has been modernized:

1568, EEBO A10708  [Bishops’ Bible, Acts 2:33]

Then since *that* he by the right hand of God was exalted, and hath received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost,

*King James reading:*

Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted,

and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost,

Besides this type of subordinate *that*, the Book of Mormon also has two subtypes of subordinate *that* (five instances) not found in the King James Bible; these are covered below.

The Book of Mormon stands out from pseudo-archaic texts in both types and number of instances of subordinate *that*. The longer pseudo-archaic texts, which together have more than twice as many words as the Book of Mormon, have fewer types of subordinate *that*, as well as fewer instances. Taken together, the 12 longer pseudo-archaic texts have half as many types and about one-fifth the rate of occurrence (1.2 instances per about 10,000 words versus 6.9 per 10,000 words in the Book of Mormon, which has approximately 250,000 words in mostly nonbiblical contexts).


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subordinator</th>
<th>King James Bible</th>
<th>Book of Mormon</th>
<th>Pseudo-Archaic Texts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>after that S</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>how that S</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<td>because that S</td>
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<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>for that S</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>before that S</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lest that S</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>until/till/to that S</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Since that S</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Comparison of archaic subordinate *that* usage with eight subordinators in the King James Bible, the Book of Mormon, and 25 pseudo-archaic texts.

Note: Five other subordinating conjunctions discussed in *Grammatical Variation* (see note 6) — “except (that) S”, “insomuch (that) S”, “notwithstanding (that) S”, “save (that) S”, and “than (that) S” — were not included in this study, either because the degree of archaism of the *that*-construction isn’t clear or the lack of *that* is often due to other grammatical factors. The correlation of the subordinate *that* usage of the King James Bible and the Book of Mormon is 0.78.

As shown in Table 2, none of the 12 longer pseudo-archaic texts has more than two types of subordinate *that*, yet the Book of Mormon has eight, one more than the King James Bible. In more than 580,000 pseudo-archaic words (more than 560,000 in the 12 longer texts), all that we find are four types. So from the assumption that, syntactically speaking, the Book of Mormon is a pseudo-archaic text worded by Joseph Smith — an assumption that many LDS scholars make (without necessarily saying so or using that terminology) — we do not expect eight types of this archaic syntax. The upper bound of what we expect is four.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Texts</th>
<th>Types</th>
<th>Instances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>King James Bible, including the Apocrypha</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book of Mormon, nonbiblical sections</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 longer pseudo-archaic (P-A) texts</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 longer P-A texts, considered individually</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1, 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 longer P-A texts, considered individually</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4, 11, 16, 34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All types and instances found in 12 longer P-A texts</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Number of types and instances of archaic subordinate *that* occurring in scriptural texts and 12 longer pseudo-archaic texts.

Moreover, from the perspective that Joseph Smith was a pseudo-archaic author, each type beyond four occurring in the original Book of Mormon text was increasingly unlikely to occur. Specifically, the fifth and sixth biblical types occurring in the Book of Mormon, but
not found in pseudo-archaic texts, were somewhat unlikely to occur. And the more obscure “since that S” and “to that S” types were unlikely and highly unlikely, respectively.

Above is an early modern example of “since that S”, from the 1568 Bishops’ Bible. Here is an early modern example of “to that S”:

1626, James Haig [letter]⁹
and to that I be into fashion, I am ashamed to presume in the

Although there are other examples of this “to that S” language, they are rare, textually speaking, and from earlier in time.¹⁰

**Biblical Subtypes of Archaic Subordinate That Usage**

The King James Bible has three subtypes of archaic subordinate that usage involving an additional degree of complexity or archaism. Here is a case where the sentence has additional subordinate clauses headed by that:

**How that S and that S [1 instance]**

1 Corinthians 15:3–6 how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures and that he was buried and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures and that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve

In this passage, the main clause (not shown here) precedes the complex “how that S” subordinate clause. In a conjoined case like this one, the archaic that is repeated rather than the subordinator how, and the same meaning is conveyed. (This is more noticeable after the subordinator because; see below.) Modern versions drop the how and just use that repeatedly.

**Archaic after that used with future subjunctive shall [1 instance]**

Similar to how subordinate that was primarily a phenomenon of the 16th century and before, the use of shall as a subjunctive marker was much more prevalent in earlier times. In subordinate clauses, it often

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¹⁰. For further examples, see Royal Skousen, *The Nature of the Original Language* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2018), 264.
indicated future indefiniteness or contingency. In English subordinate clauses, the use was mostly taken over by the present indicative, with some initial present subjunctive use. In some languages, such as Spanish, present subjunctive forms have completely replaced future subjunctive forms, except in some relic formulaic uses, and have been maintained.

In English, future subjunctive *shall* usage diminished in the 17th and 18th centuries, becoming restricted in large part to legal registers. The combination of subordinate *that* and future subjunctive *shall* in the subordinate clause is thus a further indication of authentic or well-imitated archaism.

The following passage seems to have the only instance of future subjunctive “after that … shall/shalt” in the King James Bible:

Daniel 4:26 thy kingdom shall be sure unto thee, *after that* thou *shalt* have known that the heavens do rule.

Other potential instances have a pronominal *that* rather than a subordinate *that*, as well as a future indicative *shall*, such as in Genesis 18:5, Leviticus 14:8, and Acts 7:7.

In this verse, the verb *know* conveys an obsolete meaning of “come to know, acknowledge, realize,” as modern versions indicate. The New King James Version does not have a subordinate *that*, and it has the present tense instead of future subjunctive *shalt*:

Daniel 4:26 your kingdom shall be assured to you, *after* [ø] you [ø] come to know that Heaven rules.

**Archaic before that used with future subjunctive shall** [1 instance]

Similar to “after that … «shall»” syntax is “before that … «shall»” syntax. Here is the only instance found in the King James Bible:

Luke 22:34 the cock shall not crow this day, *before that* thou *shalt* thrice deny that thou knowest me

In the following modern versions, *until* is used instead of *before*, and the subordinate *that* is missing, as well as future subjunctive *shalt*:

ESV, HCSB the rooster will not crow this day, *until* [ø] you [ø] deny three times that you know me.

**Pseudo-Archaic Subtypes of Archaic Subordinate That Usage**

In searching 25 pseudo-archaic texts for conjoined usage with *that*, I found only one example, after the subordinator *because*:
Because that S and that S

because that he had been driven out of the Wilderness of Pharjinngee and that they worked not with him to obtain the victory

To clearly indicate the continuing scope of *because* in modern usage, *the because* must be repeated, not the subordinate *that*.

This example comes from the editor of the Riverside Shakespeare. Beyond this, there were no further pseudo-archaic examples of conjoined usage. Nor were any examples of subordinate *that* found with future subjunctive *shall*. That combination of archaism was missing from all such archaic subordinate clauses.

Book of Mormon Subtypes of Archaic Subordinate *That* Usage

The Book of Mormon has five subtypes related to the above biblical usage, including two specific subtypes that do not occur in the King James Bible. The Book of Mormon also has more instances of each of the three biblical subtypes:

Because that S and that S (2 instances)

1 Nephi 2:11 because that he was a visionary man and that he had led them out of the land of Jerusalem

Jacob 5:60 because that I have preserved the natural branches and the roots thereof and that I have grafted in the natural branches again into their mother tree

How that S and that S [2 instances]

2 Nephi 30:4 how that we came out from Jerusalem and that they are a descendant of the Jews

Helaman 2:8 how that it was his object to murder and also that it was the object of all those which belonged to his band to murder and to rob and to gain power

Archaic after that used with future subjunctive *shall* [8 instances]

1 Nephi 11:7 And after that ye shall have witnessed him, ye shall bear record that it is the Son of God.

1 Nephi 13:35 after that thy seed shall be destroyed and dwindle in unbelief
2 Nephi 26:1 after that Christ shall have risen from the dead
2 Nephi 26:3 after that the Messiah shall come
2 Nephi 26:15 after that the Lord God shall have camped against them … and shall have laid siege against them with a mount … after that they shall have been brought down low in the dust
2 Nephi 32:6 after that he shall manifest himself unto you in the flesh

**Archaic before that used with future subjunctive shall**
[2 instances]

Jacob 7:16 I desire to speak unto the people before that I shall die
Enos 1:8 and many years passeth away before that he shall manifest himself in the flesh

**Archaic after that used with past subjunctive should**  [3 instances]

This usage is the past-tense analog of “after that S” syntax with future subjunctive shall:

1 Nephi 10:14  Wherefore [Lehi] said … after that the house of Israel should be scattered, they should be gathered together again,
Ether 4:1  they were forbidden to come unto the children of men until after that [Christ] should be lifted up upon the cross
Ether 13:5  And [Ether prophesied] … after that [Jerusalem] should be destroyed it should be built up again an holy city unto the Lord

**Modernized renderings of these three passages:**

1 Nephi 10:14  Lehi said that … after the house of Israel was scattered they would be gathered back together
Ether 4:1  they were forbidden to come to the children of men until after Christ was lifted up on the cross
Ether 13:5  Ether prophesied that … after Jerusalem was destroyed it would be built up again as a holy city to the Lord

The three analytical subjunctive subtypes are unexpected in a pseudo-archaic effort, and the last subtype, with an analytical past subjunctive marker should, is somewhat more unexpected.
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Texts</th>
<th>Subtypes</th>
<th>Instances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>King James Bible, including the Apocrypha</td>
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<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book of Mormon, nonbiblical sections</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 longer pseudo-archaic (P-A) texts</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 longer P-A text</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All subtypes found in 12 longer P-A texts</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3.** Number of subtypes of subordinate that occurring in scriptural texts and longer pseudo-archaic texts.

It is possible to add even more archaic subtypes to the list in Table 3 (see below), but for this table I have confined it to subtypes related to biblical examples.

**Summary of Findings**

To recap the comparative biblical and pseudo-archaic evidence just seen, the occurrence in the Book of Mormon of the following seven types and subtypes of archaic subordinate *that* usage ranges from possible to somewhat unlikely to unlikely to highly unlikely:

- before that *S*
- lest that *S*
- * since that *S*
- † to that *S*
- after that … shall<sub>fut.subj.</sub> <infin.phrase>
- before that … shall<sub>fut.subj.</sub> <infin.phrase>
- † after that … should<sub>past.subj.</sub> <infin.phrase>

The cases marked with daggers (“to that *S*” and “after that … should<sub>past.subj.</sub>”) probably qualify as usage that was highly unlikely to appear in a pseudo-archaic Book of Mormon. The starred case (“since that *S*”) was unlikely, as it also is not a King James or pseudo-archaic usage, though not as obscure as “to that *S*” or as complex as the analytical construction “after that … should<sub>past.subj.</sub>”.

The degree of unlikelihood of each type and subtype is debatable, depending in part on how frequently they appear in the greater textual record close in time to 1830. Some of them are difficult to search for. “Since that *S*” is one of these, as the *that* following *since* is pronominal
the vast majority of the time. One prose example from the last 30 years of Eighteenth Century Collections Online is this one:

1789, CW0117137214, 68
nor is this now wrinkled brow a stranger to the honours of the martial laurel, since that we have fought against the Barbarians, who did their utmost to deprive Greece of that liberty, which they themselves did not enjoy;

And here is a late 18th-century poetic instance:

1800, CW0124621154, 49
since that I have my first Love lost, And been in the same deeply crost,

So the usage was rare, but persistent. It is of course possible that original instances composed between 1801 and 1830 are found in Google Books or other databases. This remains to be verified. The same thing could be the case for most of the others. But “to that S” is not yet attested as occurring in the late modern period, after 1700. Perhaps a later Scottish English instance occurs somewhere in the textual record, since this was primarily a northern usage.

In the case of “lest that S” usage, the ECCO database shows a fair amount of persistent usage. In the last 30 years of ECCO, there are about one dozen instances of “lest that <subj.pron.> should <infin. phrase>” (the “lest that S” syntax with should is the type found in every King James Bible and Book of Mormon instance). (Because of optical character recognition errors, many of these ECCO examples turn up only by searching for left instead of lest.) But Google Books, between 1801 and 1830, has hardly any actual instances of “lest that <subj. pron.> should <infin. phrase>” (several false positives). Producing three instances of “lest that S” with should was possible for Joseph Smith in 1829, if somewhat unlikely.

In the case of “after that <subj.> should past.subj” syntax, EEBO shows that it was already very uncommon in the 1690s, at the end of the early modern era. (I currently know of two original instances in EEBO from that decade: 1692, A28933, 196; 1698, A52358, 119².) It is typically

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11. Eighteenth Century Collections Online (website), https://www.gale.com/primary-sources/eighteenth-century-collections-online, hereafter referred to as ECCO.

found after that time in older legal language. However, I did find one original example in the 1790s, part of a translation from Latin: *a*1797, CW0123112386 (1800), 459. (The author/translator Joseph Milner died in 1797.) A translator acquainted with a foreign language with analogous past-tense subjunctive usage is a likely profile for a person who might have produced this unfamiliar syntax.

As shown, a pseudo-archaic standard fails to explain the Book of Mormon data; and until we find “to that S” with a meaning of “until” in the early 1800s, the later textual record fails to completely explain the data as well.

One explanation of Book of Mormon archaism is to consider that any and all late modern usage was possible for Joseph Smith to have produced. It is reasonable to grant that individual cases of archaism were possible in many instances, but not that they were likely when persistent usage was textually rare and absent from pseudo-archaic writings. In any event, dozens of barely possible instances multiply into a highly unlikely combination of features.

Furthermore, if we say that the archaic syntax was accessible to Joseph because we can find it rarely in the contemporaneous textual record, then it was even more accessible to earlier pseudo-archaic authors. Yet as we have seen, the depth and breadth of archaic usage in this domain is absent from these biblically imitative writings. Thus the accessibility argument is a weak one. For it to reasonably explain the Book of Mormon’s variety of archaic subordinate *that* usage, in approximately 250,000 nonbiblical words, then we must have found more types and subtypes of archaic subordinate *that* in the approximately 350,000 words of the earlier pseudo-archaic writings in the corpus I have consulted.

**Additional Archaic Subtypes of Subordinate *That* Usage**

The Book of Mormon has two other archaic subordinate *that* subtypes not found in either the King James Bible or pseudo-archaic texts. These involve “after that S” subordinate clauses used with another linguistic feature that was more archaic than modern.

**Pluperfect “after that S” followed by a periphrastic past main clause** [13 instances]

As mentioned at the outset, subordinate *that* usage occurred at a significantly higher rate in the 16th century — before the King James Bible was published — than in the 17th century. The 16th century was also the time of a decades-long surge in non-emphatic, affirmative
periphrastic *did* usage, which dropped off dramatically in the 17th century. Consistent with the fact that the Book of Mormon has so much syntax characteristic of the middle of the early modern period, the earliest text has 13 instances of “after that S” in the pluperfect, followed by a past-tense main clause with archaic periphrastic *did*. Here are three Book of Mormon examples of this wording along with five early modern instances taken from EEBO (part of the “after that S” clause is in italics, periphrastic *did* is in bold, and the infinitive is in small caps; spelling modernized):

1 Nephi 8:25  And *after that they had partook* of the fruit of the tree, they *did* cast their eyes about as if they were ashamed.

1 Nephi 16:14  And *after that we had slain* food for our families, we *did* return again to our families in the wilderness.

Ether 10:10  And *after that he had established* himself king, he *did* ease the burden of the people.

1550, A13758  *after that they had sojourned* there one day, they *did* take the ships of the Chians, *After that the Athenians had heard* both parties, they *did* put the matter into deliberation two times.

1581, A68098  As the apostles, *after that they had preached* in Antioch, *did* plainly forbid the filthiness of idols.

1583, A08548  and *after that I had given* it him, he *did* defy me in mortal battle:

1594, A12568  *after that they had begun* their rebellion, they *did* invent, forge, and make many weapons of war.

The EEBO database, whose texts primarily span the years 1473–1700, gives evidence that this syntax was ten times more prevalent in the 16th century than in the 17th century (40 instances in 0.2 billion words versus 26 instances in 1.25 billion words). So once again we encounter a confluence of syntax in the Book of Mormon that was most characteristic of the time preceding the 17th century.

“Wherefore after that S” [4 instances]
The conjunctive adverb *wherefore* was at its most frequent use in the first half of the early modern era, during the 16th century and before, as was the subordinator *after that*. As a result, their co-occurrence in
the following excerpts marks the language as either quite archaic or well-imitative of archaisms:

1 Nephi 1:17  
wherefore after that I have abridged the record of my father

1 Nephi 13:34  
wherefore after that I have visited them in judgment

2 Nephi 31:8  
wherefore after that he was baptized with water

2 Nephi 32:4  
wherefore now after that I have spoken these words

These begin identically, though one does have an intervening now. The phrase in italics is not found in the King James Bible — not even the shorter phrase “wherefore after.”

A search of the EEBO Phase 1 and ECCO databases currently indicates that the phrase “wherefore after that” (with subordinate that) was more than 10 times as likely to be used during the 16th century compared to the 17th century, and about 40 times as likely to be used during the 17th century compared to the 18th century. “Wherefore after that S” was rare usage after 1750. (See the appendix for further details.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Types</th>
<th>Subtypes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>King James Bible (1611)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book of Mormon (1829)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Gospel of Peace (1863)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Summary of the number of types and subtypes of archaic subordinate that in the King James Bible, the Book of Mormon, and a leading pseudo-archaic text.

Discussion of Joseph Smith’s 1837 Editing

Suppose we argue that Joseph Smith worded the text because he was later willing to edit so much of it, such as the more than 100 deletions of archaic subordinate that. For example, Brant Gardner proposes that Joseph usually worded the text himself, converting concepts from the plates into his own language.13 And Gardner wrote the following about Joseph’s editing:

The most important lesson from looking at what Joseph produced is that he was willing to change words in the text

13. See, for example, Brant A. Gardner, The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Kofford Books, 2011).
after they had been dictated. In all important cases, the changes were made under Joseph’s supervision. Both as the original translator and as a prophet, he was in a position to understand whether or not the words of the text accurately portrayed the meaning intended for the text.14

Yet Gardner has given no evidence of having considered the massive amounts of English linguistic data — both lexical and syntactic — that arguably are key in evaluating whether the text dictated by Joseph Smith was largely shaped by him or by some other source.

To be sure, Gardner identifies some anachronisms in the translation, such as “they shall be driven before like a dumb ass” in Mosiah 12:5, which is obviously problematic in a Mesoamerican setting if presumed to represent an aspect of Mesoamerican culture.15 The English translation here seems to require a “conceptual translation” to convert what may have been a concept of punitive servitude on the plates into a metaphor that modern readers, especially those familiar with the King James Bible, could readily understand, given that neither beasts of burden nor asses were used in ancient Mesoamerica, as far as we know.

Gardner makes the same point about goats and lions in Alma 14:29, when frightened people fled “as a goat fleeth with her young from two lions.”16 However, it is still possible that the concept of asses as a beast of burden or fearsome lions existed among the Nephites based on many references in the brass plates. By the same token, modern writers may frequently make intelligible allusions to mythical creatures such as dragons or unicorns, extinct creatures such as dinosaurs and dodos, or living animals such as lions or kangaroos, which are not part of daily life for the intended audience or even on the same continent. But for expressions that seem most likely to be conceptual translations, there is no need to require that the conceptual translation be crafted by Joseph Smith.

The implications of the English linguistic data very strongly indicate that the translation, as originally dictated by Joseph Smith, abounded in archaic early modern syntax and lexis outside the realm of Joseph’s

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16. Ibid.
linguistic environment, and therefore was being provided to him. Gardner’s paradigm must, in my opinion, be reconsidered in light of the emerging linguistic data.

As for the idea that Joseph’s willingness to edit points to him being the translator, it is not a compelling argument in the case of stylistic, meaning-neutral edits, which constitute the vast majority of Joseph’s first edits in 1837 (when most edits were made). In 1837, for the second edition of the Book of Mormon, Joseph barely made any semantic edits. Relevant to this paper, more than 100 edits of archaic subordinate *that* were meaning-neutral edits. Those familiar with biblical language and English usage intuitively know that when a subordinate *that* is deleted, the meaning is unchanged. And there was nearby variation in this usage during the history of English. Indeed, there is immediate variation of “after that S” and “after S” in the King James Bible, even within the same verse, without any difference in meaning (see the biblical example given in the appendix).

Furthermore, if it were true that Joseph worded the text, then he probably would have understood its referent structure, syntax, and lexical usage better than he did. We can plainly see in some of his edits that he understood the original dictation language imperfectly, such as the eight times he incorrectly marked a nonpersonal *which* in the printer’s manuscript to be changed to *who*, with the edit being rejected at the typesetting stage. Furthermore, he misinterpreted the second *which* of Alma 51:7 as personal, and this one was not caught at the typesetting stage (“the *which* does not refer to people but instead heads a sentential relative clause”). Because of this inopportune edit, to this day we read *who* there. (The *also* after the second *which* quite clearly indicates a nonpersonal reading.)

Moreover, in many of the edited aspects of the text, such as subordinate *that*, Joseph Smith was unlikely to have produced the original forms found in the dictation language. The assumption that he could have been responsible for producing, in a sustained manner, much more convincing archaism than the best pseudo-archaic authors is a dubious one. One

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such author was the Shakespearean scholar Richard Grant White, who wrote his text in the early 1860s. Lexically and syntactically speaking, the Book of Mormon far exceeds his and other pseudo-archaic authors’ archaic usage. This is the case, despite the fact that Joseph knew much less Early Modern English than White, and had little or no time to pause and introduce extra archaism through deliberation, as pseudo-archaic authors did when they penned their works.

**Conclusion**

Overall, when we consider the Book of Mormon’s original subordinate *that* usage and compare it to pseudo-archaic data, we find that it is remarkable for its time and for its presumed genre. It even exceeds the King James Bible in archaism in this domain, and it does so in a way that shows sophistication in language use and early modern sensibility. Indeed, I have found that comparatively studying Book of Mormon English is like taking a master class in lesser-known early modern usage. In many ways, we can learn more about earlier forms and structures reading the Book of Mormon than the King James Bible.

A reviewer of this paper stated that in this domain “there [were] very few syntactic niceties that could bolster an argument that it would have taken a superb philologist to have matched the [early modern] record.” I disagree with this assessment, and encourage readers to consider all the intriguing coincidences with early modern syntax described above, and summarized in the tables, as a way to determine which perspective is more likely to be valid.

Because no pseudo-archaic text comes close to having the Book of Mormon’s array of subordinate *that* usage, the odds that Joseph Smith authored this one aspect of its language are low. Quite simply, in this domain, the dictation language is about five times as impressive in its archaism as any pseudo-archaic writing I have considered to date.

In the Book of Mormon, subordinate *that* usage is clearly early modern in character and not late modern in character, despite remnants of it beginning to be found in the later period (after the year 1700). It is inaccurate to call this linguistic feature 19th-century in character or even 18th-century in character. Probably more than 95 percent of original examples occur in early modern texts, despite far fewer titles being published then. That the Book of Mormon shows more depth and breadth of usage in this domain than the King James Bible means that the text has something special and unexpected in this regard. Not only
that, the Book of Mormon has many other syntactic markers which show similar early modern characteristics.

While this archaic subordinate *that* usage is certainly not the strongest syntactic evidence against Joseph Smith authoring the language, it is solid evidence of it, and one part of the bigger picture of how extremely improbable it was for him to have been responsible for producing Book of Mormon English.

**Appendix**

**On the relative frequency of the word *that* in the Book of Mormon**

The versatile word *that* is the fourth most common word in the Book of Mormon, after the ubiquitous words *the, and, of*. In virtually all lengthy texts, *that* is not the fourth most common word. The words *to, a, and in* almost always rank ahead of *that* in frequency. The relatively high frequency of *that* in the Book of Mormon is mostly due to three stand-out syntactic features: its heavy finite clausal complementation (which almost always features the complementizer *that* after various verbs); archaic personal relative pronoun patterns (where the text, though preferring personal *which*, uses personal *that* more than *who* or *whom*); and heavy subordinate *that* usage. The first two linguistic patterns indicate that Joseph was not the author of the Book of Mormon much more strongly than does its archaic subordinate *that* usage.

**Nearby variation in subordinate *that* usage**

Subordinate *that* usage was optional in the early modern period, and immediate variation occurs in the King James Bible:

Leviticus 14:43  
And if the plague come again, and break out in the house,  
**after that** he hath taken away the stones,  
and **after [ø]** he hath scraped the house,  
and **after [ø]** it is plastered;

This same nearby variation is also found in the original Book of Mormon text, but not in the current 1981/2013 text:

Ether 4:1–2  
until **after [ø]** Christ should shew himself unto his people.  
And **after that** Christ truly had shewed himself unto his people,
This next example is a case of variable subordinate *that* usage after two different subordinators:

3 Nephi 20:26–27

and this because [Ø] ye are the children of the covenant.
And after *that* ye were blessed,

The variation is even found here:

Doctrine and Covenants 42:32

And it shall come to pass,
that after [Ø] they are laid before the bishop of my church,
and after *that* he has received these testimonies
concerning the consecration of the properties of my church,

It could be that the first *after* did not have a subordinate *that* because of the immediately preceding conjunctive *that*.

In my experience, many Latter-day Saint scholars seem to think that Joseph Smith was responsible for wording Doctrine and Covenants revelations and that the issue is settled. For example, Grant Hardy accepts it as a given at the end of his recent Book of Mormon study edition.\(^{20}\) However, in-depth comparative syntactic analysis must be done before coming to such a conclusion, and most researchers have done very little work in this regard. In Hardy’s case, I know that he has not done the necessary comparative syntactic work that might enable him to know that Joseph Smith worded Doctrine and Covenants revelations.

To back up the claim that Joseph worded Doctrine and Covenants revelations, Latter-day Saint scholars sometimes point to grammatical usage found in various revelations, grammar which is ultimately best seen as early modern in character, and which Joseph Smith was probably not directly responsible for.\(^{21}\) Latter-day Saint scholars typically hold


\(^{21}\) See, for example, Grant Underwood, “The Dictation, Compilation, and Canonization of Joseph Smith’s Revelations,” in *Foundational Texts of Mormonism: Examining Major Early Sources*, ed. Mark Ashurst-McGee, Robin Scott Jensen, and Sharalyn D. Howcroft (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 101–23. On page 118, in a section that focuses on some early editing of what is now Doctrine and Covenants section 20, Underwood writes: “Oliver Cowdery revised the grammatically incorrect ‘nor no’ to ‘neither.’” Comparative study has led me to conclude that “nor no” grammar — originally found in both the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants — is not
narrow views about grammaticality, a field in which they have little or no expertise. Some Doctrine and Covenants grammar includes natural language variation of the earlier period, such as we see immediately above. As shown, some of the variation is actually found in the 1611 King James Bible, or in earlier Bibles (sometimes corresponding biblical examples are not readily apparent).

**Projecting prophetic authority by means of archaism**

One academic hypothesis proposes that Joseph Smith used many archaic biblical forms in his 1829 dictation of the Book of Mormon in order to enhance his perceived ecclesiastical authority. Its textual history, however, casts doubt on this hypothesis. Eight years after dictating the text, Joseph reversed many perfectly acceptable biblical archaisms, including scores of archaic subordinate *that* and nearly 1,000 instances of archaic personal *which*. So all the editions after the first edition did not have more than 1,000 markers of original archaism.

**Strictly early modern nonbiblical archaism**

The Book of Mormon’s nonbiblical syntax and lexis are not all found in the modern period. In a few cases, even some “bad grammar” has not yet been found in the modern textual record, such as the phrase “there was many which …” (Alma 1:16; 1548, 1550, 1655), where *many which* refers to persons. Moreover, the Book of Mormon currently appears to have reliable evidence that Joseph Smith worded these revelations. First, “nor no” was probably not something Joseph would have produced from spiritual impressions, which is a key question. His early writings do not provide evidence that he used this kind of mostly archaic double negative. Second, much of the surrounding language of Doctrine and Covenants revelations is early modern in character, and “nor no” usage is much more characteristic of the early modern period than the late modern period. Third, “nor no” was not grammatically incorrect in the early 19th century, even from the narrow view that grammaticality is properly determined by the well-educated (a view that Underwood apparently adopted). At this point, I have been able to verify that it was still occasionally used in the late 18th century by some well-educated persons. The latest examples I have seen are British; further study might reveal some American instances.

22. Gregory A. Bowen, *Sounding Sacred: The Adoption of Biblical Archaisms in the Book of Mormon and Other 19th Century Texts* (Dissertation, Purdue University, December 2016), xii: “inexpert use by writers with a need to establish a sense of spiritual authority indicates that biblical imitation was an active choice used to project an identity as a prophet.”
at least 10 lexical meanings that had died out before major American colonization, according to the current Oxford English Dictionary.\textsuperscript{23}

In the domain of subordinate \textit{that} usage, “to that S” is a potential case of strictly early modern usage (see above). And pluperfect “after that S” with non-emphatic periphrastic \textit{did} was in effect obsolete before the end of the 18th century.\textsuperscript{24}

**Details related to “wherefore after that S” language**

Here are some additional details related to archaic “wherefore after that S” language. In the EEBO Phase 1 database, twenty-eight 16th-century

\begin{itemize}

\item In the last 30 years of ECCO, I found one original instance, in a poem, the refuge for relic uses: “After that Boswel thus had said, / Our pastor did proceed / To prayr” (1790, CW0113123187, 42). The other example that presented itself was from the important 17th-century author John Bunyan: “after that he had finished all actual obedience on earth, did in the power and strength of his Godhead, yield up himself to the wrath of his Father” (1656, CW0119288740 [1771], 64).
\end{itemize}
instances of “wherefore after that S” were found, but only ten 17th-century instances. These centuries are represented by 135 million and 625 million words, respectively. In ECCO, only five 18th-century instances of “wherefore after that S” were found in about nine billion words. From these figures we get that, textually speaking, the phraseology “wherefore after that S” occurred at 13 times the rate during the 16th century compared to the 17th century, and at about 40 times the rate during the 17th century compared to the 18th century. This indicates that the 16th-century textual rate of “wherefore after that S” was between two and three orders of magnitude greater than the 18th-century rate.

Only two of the five original instances found in ECCO were from the last 50 years, even though it has many more titles and words than the first 50 years:

1760, CW0102878820, 712
Wherefore, after that Aix and Caaut had fought for the space of half an hour at the entry of the street that led to the port-royal,

1761, CW0107197386, 208
Wherefore after that a mature consideration of the disease … had irresistibly determined me to prefer the operation,

Google Books cannot currently be searched easily. One must invent indirect strategies to determine persistent usage of many types of syntax. That database currently provides four readable quotes for the archaic wording “wherefore after that <definite/indefinite article>”; they are all from the early modern period, as in these two examples:

1600, lh8DytLfi6QC
Wherefore after that the clods are well broken and all made plaine,

1663, qAhmAAAAcAAJ
Wherefore after that a company of them had met at Antioch in Syria,

Though no attempt was made to be exhaustive, I did find one early 19th-century example in Google Books. It was written by the Church of England clergyman and Swedenborgian preacher John Clowes (1743–1831). It is unclear when he first penned this archaism. He might have initially written it down in the 18th century. It occurs, with some variability, in multiple books, such as these two:

1817, KbZjAAAAAcAAJ
Wherefore, after that He was scourged, and led forth carrying the crown of thorns,
Wherefore after that He was scourged and led out, bearing the crown of thorns,

The Pseudo-Archaic Corpus

A pseudo-archaic text is one in which an author attempted to emulate earlier English usage or King James style — including syntax and lexical usage — in writing a history or related work. Scriptural-style texts of widely varying lengths were popular from about the mid-1700s into the 1800s, in both the British Isles and America.

In order to make the corpus of 25 pseudo-archaic writings, I first consulted Eran Shalev’s article on pseudobiblicism and the following website: https://github.com/wordtreefoundation/books (contributors: Duane Johnson, Matt White, and Chris Johnson). Then I communicated with Shalev and Duane Johnson by email, asking them whether they knew of other pseudo-archaic texts. In the process, I added a few other texts that I found on my own or that I saw mentioned online. My current corpus has longer texts up to 1863, 34 years after the Book of Mormon was set down in writing. It is more likely to be deficient in shorter pseudo-archaic texts, as there are probably many very short pseudo-archaic writings in early newspapers. Yet these are much less important for purposes of comparison with the Book of Mormon, since for the most part we are interested in sustained usage and patterns, which the shorter texts cannot provide.

Here is a list of the pseudo-archaic texts examined for purposes of comparing subordinate that usage; these 25 texts contain approximately 585,000 words total:

**Longer pseudo-archaic texts (12)**

A. Robert Dodsley, *Chronicle of the Kings of England* (1740) [London] [about 16,500 words]

B. Jacob Ilive, *The Book of Jasher* (1751) [London] [about 22,800 words]

C. John Leacock, *American Chronicles* (1775) [Philadelphia] [about 14,500 words]

D. Richard Snowden, *The American Revolution* (1793) [Philadelphia] [about 49,300 words]

E. Matthew Linning, *The First Book of Napoleon* (1809) [Edinburgh] [about 19,000 words]

25. See note 5.
F. Elias Smith, *History of Anti-Christ* (1811) [Portland, ME] [about 15,000 words]

G. Gilbert Hunt, *The Late War* (1816) [New York] [about 42,500 words]

H. Roger O’Connor, *Chronicles of Eri* (1822) [London] [about 131,700 words]

I. W. K. Clementson, *The Epistles of Ignatius and Polycarp* (1827) [Brighton, UK] [about 18,000 words]

J. Philemon Stewart, *Sacred Roll* (1843) [Canterbury, NH] [about 62,000 words]

K. Charles Linton, *The Healing of the Nations* (1855) [New York] [about 111,000 words]

L. Richard Grant White, *The New Gospel of Peace* (1863) [New York] [about 59,000 words]

**Shorter pseudo-archaic texts (13)**

M. Horace Walpole, *Book of Preferment* (1742) [London] [about 2,700 words]

N. *The French Gasconade Defeated* (1743) [Boston] [about 900 words]

O. Benjamin Franklin, *Parable Against Persecution* (1755) [Philadelphia] [about 400 words]

P. *Chronicles of Nathan Ben Saddi* (1758) [Philadelphia] [about 3,000 words]

Q. Samuel Hopkins, *Samuel the Squomicutite* (1763) [Newport, RI] [about 600 words]

R. *The Book of America* (1766) [Boston] [about 2,500 words]

S. Chapter 37th (1782) [Boston Evening Post] [about 600 words]

T. *Chronicles of John* (1812) [Charleston SC?] [about 800 words]

U. The First Book of Chronicles, Chapter the Fifth (1812) [The Investigator, SC] [about 1,800 words]

V. Jesse Denson, *Chronicles of Andrew* (1815) [Lexington, KY] [about 4,800 words]

W. White Griswold, *A Chronicle of the Chiefs of Muttonville* (1830) [Harwinton, CT] [about 900 words]

X. *Reformer Chronicles* (1832) [Buffalo, NY] [about 700 words]

Y. *Chronicles of the Land of Gotham* (1888) [New York] [about 1,300 words].
Stanford Carmack has a linguistics and a law degree from Stanford University as well as a doctorate in Hispanic Languages and Literature from the University of California, Santa Barbara, specializing in historical syntax and textual analysis. He currently researches Book of Mormon syntax and lexis as they relate to English usage and contributes to aspects of the Book of Mormon Critical Text Project carried out by Royal Skousen.
Abstract: The Book of Mormon, being an ancient book, was originally written without typographic punctuation and employs verbal punctuation instead. This article looks at the use of “and now” as verbal punctuation in the Book of Mormon. The phrase is used to mark major breaks in the text, not only for chapters but also within chapters of the text. The Book of Mormon usage is borrowed from Classical Biblical Hebrew (the Hebrew used before the exile) and follows the pattern set by pre-exilic Hebrew scribes. While this usage dropped in the Old World after the Babylonian exile as Aramaic replaced Hebrew as the major language spoken, the Book of Mormon preserved the usage until the end of Nephite civilization.

According to John Gilbert, the typesetter, the printer’s manuscript of the Book of Mormon was unpunctuated: “Every Chapter, if I remember correctly, was one solid paragraph, without a punctuation mark, from beginning to end.” This is in keeping with many ancient languages and scripts that work without punctuation marks. Ancient languages tend to do without typographic punctuation; they use words for punctuation instead. This verbal punctuation provides the signposts that control and structure the flow of the narrative.

Historical Examples of Verbal Punctuation

Sentences in Anatolian languages like Hittite and Luwian, usually start with a particle to which various enclitic particles are attached. The

particle functions as verbal punctuation because it signals where a new sentence starts. Consider, for example, the simple Hittite sentence:

\[ nu-\text{wa-ra-aš} \text{TI-an-za} \]

Now he will live.\(^2\)

The Hittite particle \(nu\) “now” (the Hittite and English words are, in fact, cognates)\(^3\) functions as verbal punctuation to let the sentence start.\(^4\) To this the quotative particle \(wa(r)\)\(^5\) and the enclitic pronoun \(-aš\) are attached.\(^6\) The verb follows. This sentence is taken from the Apology of Hattušilis III, written in the twelfth century BC.

Or consider the following sentence in Luwian, a closely related language:

\[ wa-sá \text{za-ti LOCUS-ta}_i^j \text{-ti-i} \text{ (} \text{“PES}_2\text{”) HWI-HWI-ta} \]

And he marched here in the district.\(^7\)

Here the quotative particle \(wa\)\(^8\) begins the sentence on its own and the enclitic pronoun \(-sá\)\(^9\) is attached to it. This sentence, taken from an inscription by Yariri, the regent of Carchemish in the first part of the eighth century BC,\(^10\) dates to slightly before the time of Isaiah.

Egyptian also has a set of non-enclitic particles that help structure the narrative. Consider the following sentence:

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5. Ibid., 1:354–57.

6. Ibid., 1:135.


9. Ibid., 25.

Then his majesty sent to the governors and generals who were over Egypt: the commander Puarma, and the commander, Lamersekny, and all the commanders of his majesty who were over Egypt. 11

The particle ḥ.r.n at the beginning of the sentence marks a new section in the narrative.

Hebrew sentences often start with particles or other expressions that signal what is happening in the narrative.

The Book of Mormon claims to be an ancient record, and the form of the narrative without any explicit punctuation supports this claim. To date, no significant scholarship has been done on the verbal punctuation of the Book of Mormon.

**Chapter Breaks in the Book of Mormon**

While the most famous and probably most frequent mark of verbal punctuation in the Book of Mormon is “it came to pass,” it is not the best one with which to begin a discussion of the verbal punctuation of the Book of Mormon. First we need to establish that there is some system of verbal punctuation in the Book of Mormon and show what difference it makes in understanding the text. So we will focus on a less complicated example.

In 1994, Professor Royal Skousen noted that in the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon, the beginning of a chapter was marked simply “Chapter,” and the numbering was filled in later. He hypothesized that “as Joseph Smith was translating, he apparently saw some mark (or perhaps extra spacing) whenever a section ended, but was unable to see the text that followed. At such junctures, Joseph decided to refer to these endings as chapter breaks and told the scribe to write the word ‘chapter’ at these places, but without specifying any number of the chapter since Joseph saw neither a number nor the word ‘chapter.’” 12 These original chapter divisions are not the same as those

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used in the current Book of Mormon but were used in the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon. An examination of the beginning and ending sections of each original chapter will help clarify the verbal punctuation used to distinguish chapters in the original Book of Mormon.

The various beginnings and endings can be analyzed. We rank them here according to most common among the 114 beginnings and endings using only the initial phrases of the original chapters:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phrase</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>And now</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amen (ending)</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Now</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behold</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And it came to pass</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I, (personal name)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One can observe that many of these beginning or ending phrases may be concatenated at chapter breaks, but the most common of all beginnings or endings is “and now” or “now,” which, combined, account for more than two thirds of the original chapter beginnings of the Book of Mormon. From Book of Mormon usage we can see that the phrase “and now” functions as a major break in the narrative. We can view “now” as a lesser used variant.

In some places, a number of these phrases are stacked together, which reveals both a complexity of use and an order of use of these phrases. Here we will only look at the initial phrases in the chapters, which are arranged according to the appearance of elements in the standard Book of Mormon order.

### And now

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phrase</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>And now</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And now + behold</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And now + behold + it came to pass</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And now + it came to pass</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And now + it came to pass + I, (name)</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And now + I, (name)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Now

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phrase</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Now</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Now + behold + it came to pass + I, (name)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Now + behold + I, (name)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Now + it came to pass</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Now + it came to pass + I, (name)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Now + I, (name)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The standard order of these phrases is:

- (And) now
- Behold
- It came to pass
- I, (personal name)

The variants indicate some stylistic preferences among individual authors, which we will not explore here. There is also indication of chronological variation. Starting at the time of Alma, a variant in the order appears with “behold” preceding “now.” In general, the phrase “(and) now” is the most frequent and most prominent phrase to begin a chapter. The phrase “and now” is more significant and more prominent in designating chapter breaks than the phrase “it came to pass.”

**Examples of Book of Mormon Usage**

Not only does the phrase “and now” serve as a chapter break but it also functions as a marker of a major break within the chapter. Consider these examples of internal breaks within chapters:

> Which is to show unto the remnant of the house of Israel what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers; and that they may know the covenants of the Lord, that they are not cast off forever — And also to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God, manifesting himself unto all nations — **And now**, if there are faults they are the mistakes of men; wherefore, condemn not the things of God, that ye may be found spotless at the judgment-seat of Christ. (Book of Mormon, Title Page)
In the title page, the phrase “and now” signals a change in narrative. Before the phrase “and now,” the discussion is about the purposes of the book. After the phrase, Moroni asks the reader not to condemn what he wrote. The phrase marks a change in topic.

And after this manner was the language of my father in the praising of his God; for his soul did rejoice, and his whole heart was filled, because of the things which he had seen, yea, which the Lord had shown unto him.

And now I, Nephi, do not make a full account of the things which my father hath written, for he hath written many things which he saw in visions and in dreams; and he also hath written many things which he prophesied and spake unto his children, of which I shall not make a full account. (1 Nephi 1:15–16)

In this case, Nephi had been speaking about his father’s experiences but shifts topic to talk about the record that he is making. The phrase “and now” transitions between the different topics.

And kings shall be thy nursing fathers, and their queens thy nursing mothers; they shall bow down to thee with their faces towards the earth, and lick up the dust of thy feet; and thou shalt know that I am the Lord; for they shall not be ashamed that wait for me.

And now I, Jacob, would speak somewhat concerning these words. For behold, the Lord has shown me that those who were at Jerusalem, from whence we came, have been slain and carried away captive. (2 Nephi 6:7–8)

In this example, Jacob had been quoting Isaiah and uses the phrase “and now” to signal that he is finished with quoting Isaiah and is about to talk about what he has quoted.

And the Lord said unto me: Thy fathers have also required of me this thing; and it shall be done unto them according to their faith; for their faith was like unto thine.

And now it came to pass that I, Enos, went about among the people of Nephi, prophesying of things to come, and testifying of the things which I had heard and seen. (Enos 1:18–19)

Here Enos quotes what the Lord said to him and uses “and now” to transition to an account of his deeds among the people.
… for there is nothing which is good save it comes from the Lord: and that which is evil cometh from the devil.

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.

And now I would speak somewhat concerning a certain number who went up into the wilderness to return to the land of Nephi; for there was a large number who were desirous to possess the land of their inheritance. (Omni 1:25–27)

In this example, Amaleki switches between three different subjects. In the first, he is discussing spiritual gifts. In the second, he invites the reader to come unto Christ. In the third, he discusses historical events. At each break he includes the words “and now.”

And he also unfolded unto them all the disadvantages they labored under, by having an unrighteous king to rule over them;

Yea, all his iniquities and abominations, and all the wars, and contentions, and bloodshed, and the stealing, and the plundering, and the committing of whoredoms, and all manner of iniquities which cannot be enumerated — telling them that these things ought not to be, that they were expressly repugnant to the commandments of God.

And now it came to pass, after king Mosiah had sent these things forth among the people they were convinced of the truth of his words. (Mosiah 29:35–37)

Here Mormon, narrating, changes from a summary of king Mosiah’s words to a description of his actions and at the narrative change employs the phrase “and now.”

Now, as my mind caught hold upon this thought, I cried within my heart: O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me, who am in the gall of bitterness, and am encircled about by the everlasting chains of death.
And now, behold, when I thought this, I could remember my pains no more; yea, I was harrowed up by the memory of my sins no more. (Alma 36:18–19)

In Alma’s narration to his son about his conversion experience, he finishes quoting the prayer of his heart, and after using the transitional phrase “and now,” he tells the result of his prayer.

And the Lamanites had also retained many prisoners, all of whom are chief captains, for none other have they spared alive. And we suppose that they are now at this time in the land of Nephi; it is so if they are not slain. (Alma 56:12–13)

In his letter to Moroni, Helaman outlines the desperate circumstances in which he found himself and then transitions to a list of the cities that have been lost. The transition is marked by the phrase “and now.”

Behold, I have given unto you the commandments; therefore keep my commandments. And this is the law and the prophets, for they truly testified of me. (3 Nephi 15:10–11)

Here Jesus changes the audience whom he has been addressing from the multitude to the disciples. The transition is marked with the phrase “and now.”

… therefore there was blood and carnage spread throughout all the face of the land, both on the part of the Nephites and also on the part of the Lamanites; and it was one complete revolution throughout all the face of the land. (Mormon 2:8–9)

Here Mormon shifts from a general description to a specific event and transitions with the phrase “and now.”

Behold, this is a choice land, and whatsoever nation shall possess it shall be free from bondage, and from captivity, and from all other nations under heaven, if they will but
serve the God of the land, who is Jesus Christ, who hath been manifested by the things which we have written.

And now I proceed with my record. (Ether 2:12–13)

In this case, Moroni changes from his prophecy to his historical record and uses the phrase “and now” as a transition.

... and if ye will lay hold upon every good thing, and condemn it not, ye certainly will be a child of Christ.

And now, my brethren, how is it possible that ye can lay hold upon every good thing?

And now I come to that faith, of which I said I would speak. (Moroni 7:19–21)

In this passage, Mormon switches from talking about judging to identify what is good, to asking a rhetorical question, to starting to talk about faith. He uses “and now” to change topics.

These examples show how the phrase “and now” is used not just to mark changes in chapters but also to mark changes in topic within a chapter. In the Book of Mormon, the phrase “and now” is used to mark breaks or transitions in the narrative and allows the narrative to be structured. As an example of verbal punctuation in the Book of Mormon, the phrase “and now” serves as the rough equivalent of a new paragraph marker. It can mark a change of topic, the end of a quotation, the beginning of a new chapter, or some other major transition in the text.

**Hebrew Antecedents**

The Book of Mormon use of the phrase “and now” has historical roots. In the Isaiah passages, the expression is used to translate the Hebrew expression wē-ʾattāh, which literally means “and now” (2 Nephi 15:3, 5; Isaiah 5:3, 5). The phrase comes up in letters, the basics of which were part of scribal training since one of the jobs of scribes was to write letters.

In Hebrew letters, typical elements begin an introduction (praescriptio) that includes an address formula. The introduction sometimes includes a greeting formula or a divine benediction. The introduction is then followed by a formal transition to the body of the letter, “and now (wʾt).”

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An example of this can be found in an early sixth century letter from Arad:

‘l. ʾlyšb.
w’t. ntn. lktym yytn b1 111 wktb. šm hym.
wm’wd. hqmḥ hrʾšn. trkb. 1 kr14 qmḥ lʾšt. lhm lhm.
myyn hʾght. ttnt

To Eliashib: And now, give to the Cyprians 1 bath and 3 hin of wine and write the date. And the rest of the first-rate flour you will transport one kor of flour to make bread for them. You will give from the wine of the amphora.15

The contents of this letter are rather mundane at first appearance. The letter begins with the address. This is followed by the phrase wʾt “and now” that designates the beginning of the letter. This is followed by the contents of the letter requesting flour and wine be delivered. This letter demonstrates how the expression “and now” functioned in Hebrew letters. This letter was written to a subordinate. So the address is brief, and the letter is terse. Letters to superiors contained more niceties.

‘bdk. hwšʾywḥ. šlh. lhgd lʾdny. yʾwš.
yšmʾ. yhwḥ. ʾt. ʾdny. lʾsmʾt. šlm. wšmʾt lbd
wʾt. hpqḥ nʾt ʾzn bdk. lspr. ʾšr. šlhḥt. ʾl ʾbdk. ʾmš. ky. lb ʾbdk
dhw mʾz. šlhk. ʾl. ʾbdk wkyʾmr. ʾdny. lʾ. ydʾth. ʾqrʾ. spr. hyḥwḥ.
ʾm. nshʾ. ʾyš. lqrʾ. ly. spr. lnšʾh. wgm. kl spr. ʾšr. ybʾ. ʾly. ʾm. qrʾty.
ʾth. wʾwd ʾtnnhw ʾl. mʾwmh wlʾbdk. hgd. ʾlʾmr. yrd sr. hšʾb.
knyhw bn ʾlntn lbʾ. mšrymh. wʾt hwʾdwyhw bn ᵅʾḥyw wʾnšw
šlh ᵃqḥt. mzh. wspr. ᵃbyhw ʾbd. hmlk. ᵃbʾ ʾl. šlm. bn ydʾ. ʾmʾt.
hnbʾ. ʾlʾmr. hšmr. šlḥʾh. ῃbkʾ. ʾl. ʾdny.

Your servant Hoshayahu sends to inform my lord Josh. May Yahu cause my lord to hear tidings of peace and tidings of good. And now, open the ear of your servant concerning the letter which you sent to your servant yesterday because

14. For the reading of this sign, see Stefan Wimmer, Palästinisches Hieratisch: Die Zahl- und Sonderzeichen in der althebräischen Schrift (Wiesbaden, DEU: Harrassowitz, 2008), 256.
the heart of your servant is ill since your sending it to your servant. And since my lord said: “Do you do not know how to read a document?” As the Lord lives, has a man ever tried to read me a document. And again, every letter which comes to me, do I not read it, and furthermore I certainly give it attention. And to your servant it has been reported saying: The prince of the army, Konyahu, son of Elnathan has come down to enter Egypt. And he sent Hoduyahu son of Achiyahu and his men to take from this. And the letter of Tobyahu, the servant of the king, came to Shallum son of Yada, from the prophet saying: “Beware.” Your servant sent it to my lord.¹⁶

A number of features about this letter have echoes in the Book of Mormon.¹⁷ Here we are interested in the start of the letter proper, which begins with the phrase w’ṭ, “and now.” It is a “transition word … employed” when “the body of the letter begins.”¹⁸

The expression, w’ṭ(h), “and now,” was an important device that functioned as a new paragraph marker and was learned by ancient scribes when practicing the writing of model letters. The use of w’ṭ(h) is especially important in ancient Hebrew because the writing system did not have many auxiliary markers to mark semantic functions in the way we have in modern languages (e.g., commas, periods, spaces, line breaks, tabs, paragraphs, etc.).¹⁹

The phrase “and now” functions in both Epigraphic Hebrew and the Hebrew Bible the same way that it does in the Book of Mormon.

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Dating Implications

There is more, however, to the use of the phrase “and now” in the context of Biblical Hebrew than its use as verbal punctuation to indicate the beginning of a new section. There is a chronological dimension to the phrase as well.20 “The use of *w*’t is as a transition marker so consistent in Iron Age inscriptions that one must assume it was a device scribes learned to use in writing letters.”21 But there seems to have been a change in scribal practice after the Jews were carried captive into Babylon. Although there was an Aramaic equivalent that was used in the Persian period, in later Hebrew it completely disappears.22 “It shows that the use of *w*’th in biblical literature was closely tied to scribal learning. When the scribal curriculum changed, the expression *w*’th disappeared with it.”23

In the time period before the Babylonian exile, scribal education in Israel and Judah was standardized across the country. “The Old Hebrew epigraphic evidence demonstrates that there was formal, standardized scribal education in ancient Israel.”24 This is shown in the general consistency of the paleography,25 orthography,26 phraseology,27 and use of hieratic numerals28 found in pre-exilic inscriptions from Israel and Judah.

As an offshoot of the tradition of Biblical Hebrew, the Book of Mormon seems to have kept this pre-exilic scribal convention when the main line of Hebrew abandoned it. This may be a function of the scribal education of Book of Mormon authors. Nephi claims that he “was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father” (1 Nephi 1:1). King Benjamin taught his children “concerning the records which were engraven on the plates of brass” (Mosiah 1:3). There is a conscious preservation of the writing system and, from the usage, of scribal and rhetorical conventions.

Although there are mentions of Egyptian in the Book of Mormon (1 Nephi 1:2; Mosiah 1:4; Mormon 9:32), Egyptian does not preserve an

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22. Ibid., 113–14.
23. Ibid., 113.
25. Ibid., 91, 97–104.
equivalent expression. In Middle Kingdom literary texts, the particle \textit{rf} / \textit{rk} was used to signal a change in subject but not a major break in the text. By the time of Isaiah, it is not used to mark a major break in the narrative, even in classicizing texts.\textsuperscript{29} In other texts,\textsuperscript{30} it has dropped out completely. The presence of an equivalent transition particle in Hebrew that is lacking in Egyptian indicates that the Book of Mormon is more strongly influenced in this feature by Hebrew than by Egyptian.

**Joseph Smith’s Usage**

There are those who view Joseph Smith as author of the Book of Mormon. If that were the case, then we would expect that such a frequent usage in the Book of Mormon would reflect Joseph Smith’s own usage. We will test this hypothesis by examining Joseph Smith usage. We have limited the scope to material produced by Joseph Smith in his own name from 1829 to 1832, excluding things like minutes of meetings taken by others and notes of ordinations in others’ handwriting.

If we look at Joseph Smith’s usage in the time period closest to the production of the Book of Mormon, we discover that he does not use the phrase “and now” in the Preface to the Book of Mormon.\textsuperscript{31} He does use it once, and correctly, in a letter to Oliver Cowdery dated 22 October 1829:

\begin{quote}
give our best respects to Father & Mother and all our brothers and Sisters to Mr. [Martin] Harris and all the company concerned tell them that our prayers are put up daily for them that they may be prospered in evry, good word and work and that they may be preserved from sin here and from the consequen[c]e of sin here after and now dear brother be faithful in the discharge of evry duty looking for the reward of the righteous and now may God of his infinite mercy keep an<d> preserve us spotless untill his coming and receive us all
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{29.} E.g. Piye Stele 20, in N.-C. Grimal, \textit{Le stèle triomphale de Pi(ankh)y au Musée de Caire JE 48862 et 47086–47089} (Caire: Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale, 1981), 41. The major break in the text is marked by the \textit{sd₅m pw ir.n=f} construction, not the use of \textit{rf} in the following sentence.

\textsuperscript{30.} E.g. Papyrus Rylands 9, see Günther Vittmann, \textit{Der demotische Papyrus Rylands 9} (Wiesbaden, DEU: Harrassowitz, 1998).

to rest with him in eternal repose through the attonement of Christ our Lord Amen\textsuperscript{32}

Joseph Smith does not use the phrase “and now” in any of the following:

- His 16 January 1830 agreement with Martin Harris\textsuperscript{33}
- The Church’s Articles and Covenants from April 1830\textsuperscript{34}
- The 9 June 1830 licenses for John Whitmer,\textsuperscript{35} Christian Whitmer,\textsuperscript{36} or Joseph Smith, Sr.\textsuperscript{37}
- The 28 August 1830 letter to Newel Knight\textsuperscript{38}
- The 2 December 1830 letter to the Church in Colesville\textsuperscript{39}
- His 22 February 1831 letter to Martin Harris\textsuperscript{40}
- His 3–4 March 1831 letter to Hyrum Smith\textsuperscript{41}
- His 16 June 1831 notes on ordinations\textsuperscript{42}
- His 1831 license for Edward Partridge\textsuperscript{43}
- The 5 October 1831 license for William Smith\textsuperscript{44}
- His 2 November 1831 testimony\textsuperscript{45}
- His 6 June 1832 letter to Emma Smith\textsuperscript{46}

In other words, Joseph Smith does not use the phrase “and now” in any of the documentation he produced under his own name from January 1830 to June 1832.

The next time that Joseph Smith uses the phrase is in a 31 July 1832 letter to William W. Phelps:

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 1:108.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 1:120–26.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 1:144–46.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 1:149–50.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 1:147–48.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 1:174–77.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 1:215–17.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 1:262–64.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 1:270–73.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 1:344.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 2:72–74.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 2:113–14.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 2:249–57.
I dispise a hypocrite or a covenant breaker, I judge them not, God shall Judge them according to there works, I am a lover even of mine enimies for an enimy seeketh to destroy openly, I can pray for those who dispitefully use and persicute me, but for all I can not hope, and now I conjure you and exhort mine accusers and the hypocrite in zion in the love of Christ yea in the name of Jesus of Nazreth to remember the covenant which they have made with God, and to me & repent of there iniquities and give satisfaction to the innocent whom they have injured.

Here Joseph Smith does use the phrase “and now” the way it is used in the Book of Mormon.

In Joseph Smith’s 1832 History, he was specifically modeling some aspects of his account on the Book of Mormon. He starts his account modeling it after the beginning of Nephi’s account in 1 Nephi 1:1: “I was born … of goodly Parents who spared no pains to instruct<ing> me in <the> christian religion.” Despite this imitation, he never uses the phrase “and now” at all in his account.

Joseph Smith also does not use the phrase “and now” in his 13 October 1832 letter to Emma Smith nor his 27 November 1832 letter to William W. Phelps.

In Joseph Smith’s Journal from 1832 to 1834, the phrase “and now” only occurs on page 89 of the Journal, after the recording of a covenant on 29 November 1834:

And now, O Father, as thou didst prosper our father Jacob, and bless him with protection and prosperity where ever he went from the time he made a like covenant before and with thee; and as thou didst, — even the same night, open the heavens unto him and manifest great mercy and favor, and give him promises, so wilt thou do by us his sons;

50. Ibid., 2:316–21.
51. The Joseph Smith Papers: Journals, Volume 1: (1832–1839), eds. Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s
The phrase is used the same way here as it is in the Book of Mormon, but the frequency is not the same at all.

These quotations show that Joseph Smith could use the phrase the way that it was used in the Book of Mormon but usually did not do so when he had the chance. The phrase was not characteristic of Joseph Smith’s style during the production of the Book of Mormon.

Conclusions

Ancient languages tend to use verbal rather than typographic punctuation. The Book of Mormon manuscript follows this convention, as does the text of the Book of Mormon. An analysis of the original Book of Mormon chapter division shows that the phrase “and now” serves as verbal punctuation marking a major break in the text both between and within chapters. The Book of Mormon phrase is a literal translation of the Hebrew expression $w't(h)$, which is used both in the Hebrew Bible and in Epigraphic Hebrew to mark a transition between major sections of text. This feature dropped out of Hebrew after the Babylonian exile, indicating that the Book of Mormon language split off before the Babylonian exile and the scribal tradition that employed the expression was preserved among the Nephites. The phrase is also not characteristic of Joseph Smith’s style.

The use of the verbal punctuation “(and) now” in the Book of Mormon thus shows three things. (1) It serves as a means to mark transitions between sections in the text. This helps structure the narrative using internal markers. (2) It provides evidence for the ancient origins of the Book of Mormon consistent with the Book of Mormon’s internal claims. (3) It poses a problem for those who argue that Joseph Smith wrote the Book of Mormon since it is not a common feature of Joseph Smith’s style at the time he translated the Book of Mormon, even when he tried to imitate the Book of Mormon.

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“The Lord God Will Proceed”:
Nephi’s Wordplay in 1 Nephi 22:8–12
AND THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

Matthew L. Bowen

Abstract: Nephi quotes or alludes to four distinct Old Testament passages — Genesis 22:18; Isaiah 29:14; Isaiah 49:22–23; and Isaiah 52:10 — twice each in 1 Nephi 22:6, 8–12. These four texts form the basis of his description of how the Lord would bring to pass the complete fulfillment of the promises in the Abrahamic covenant for the salvation of the human family. These texts’ shared use of the Hebrew word gôyim (“nations” [> kindreds], “Gentiles”) provides the lexical basis for Nephi’s quotation and interpretation of these texts in light of each other. Nephi uses these texts to prophesy that the Lord would act in the latter-days for the salvation of the human family. However, Nephi uses Isaiah 29:14 with its key-word yôsîp (yôsip) to assert that iterative divine action to fulfill the Abrahamic covenant — taking the form of “a marvelous work and a wonder” — would be accomplished through a “Joseph.” Onomastic wordplay involving the names Abram/Abraham and Joseph constitute key elements in 1 Nephi 22:8–12.

Some of Nephi’s most sophisticated and significant prophetic uses of Isaiah’s writings involve appropriations of Isaiah 11:11–12 and Isaiah 29:14. For example, in 2 Nephi 25:17 he merges these two prophecies to create his own prophecy of the latter-day gathering of Judah and Israel: “And the Lord will set his hand again [yôsîp] the second time to restore his people from their lost and fallen state [Isaiah 11:11]. Wherefore, he will proceed [yôsîp (or yôsip)] to do a marvelous work and a wonder among the children of men [Isaiah 29:14].” As has been argued elsewhere,1 Nephi interprets these two Isaianic prophecies in light of

each other on the basis of their mutual use of the Hebrew verb yāsap, “to add”; “continue to do, carry on doing”; “increase, have more”; Hiphil (causative), “increase,” “to do again, more.” Nephi’s evident juxtaposition of the homophonic and morphologically-similar forms yōsīp (Hiphil, third-person masculine singular jussive) and yōsīp/yōsīp (Qal masculine singular participle) evokes the name “Joseph” (yōsēp, “may he [God] add”). In light of the patriarch Joseph’s, his father Lehi’s, and his own knowledge that a future “Joseph” (see 2 Nephi 3:15) would be the “instrument” of divine “restoration,” Nephi’s exegetical juxtaposition of Isaiah 11:11 and 29:14 appears to create a deliberate onomastic wordplay on the name Joseph. Nephi’s subsequent statement mere verses later that this divine restoration would be orchestrated “that the promise may be fulfilled unto Joseph [yōsēp], that his seed should never perish as long as the earth should stand” (2 Nephi 25:21) confirms as much.

In 2 Nephi 25:17, Nephi further equates Judah and Israel’s “lost and fallen state” with its scattering among the seven listed nations


4. HALOT, 418.

5. Commenting on Isaiah’s use of hinēni + yōsīp/yōsīp in Isaiah 29:14 and 38:5, J.J.M. Roberts writes, “Since yōsīp differs in vocalization from the third masculine singular qal participle only in having ī for ē in the second syllable, one has the overpowering suspicion that the form in both passages is just a mispointed qal participle.” The Bible and the Ancient Near East: Collected Essays (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 293.


8. In Mosiah 16:4, Abinadi uses the collocation “lost and fallen state” to refer to humanity’s general fallen condition. Alma does something similar when addressing the people of Ammonihah: “[W]e see, that by his fall, all mankind became a lost and fallen people” (Alma 12:22). Alma had earlier designated the
— a number of fullness and perfection — and “the islands of the sea” from which the Lord would “add” his hand to gather his people: “And it shall come to pass in that day, that the Lord shall set his hand again [yôsîp] the second time to recover the remnant of his people, which shall be left, from Assyria, and from Egypt, and from Pathros, and from Cush, and from Elam, and from Shinar, and from Hamath, and from the islands of the sea” (Isaiah 11:11). Isaiah had elsewhere given prophetic expression to the Lord’s intent to “add” to “do a marvellous work”: “Therefore, behold, I will proceed [add, yôsîp/yôsip] to do a marvellous work among this people, even a marvellous work and a wonder: for the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hid” (Isaiah 29:14). In 2 Nephi 25:17, Nephi interprets this “marvellous work and a wonder among this people” as a wider “marvellous work and a wonder among the children of men.” In other words, Nephi offers an expansive interpretation of Isaiah 29:14 beyond the narrow delimitations of the house of Israel seemingly implied in the phrase “this people” (Hebrew hāʾām hazzeḥ).

In 2 Nephi 29:1, Nephi records a revelation from the Lord, again in the language of Isaiah 11:11 and 29:14. This oracle, however, reverses the order of quotation found in 2 Nephi 25:17, with Isaiah 29:14 preceding Isaiah 11:11: “But behold, there shall be many — at that day when I shall proceed [yôsîp or yôsip] to do a marvelous work among them [Isaiah 29:14], that I may remember my covenants which I have made unto the children of men, that I may set my hand again [Isaiah 11:11], which are of the house of Israel” (2 Nephi 29:1). Here, as previously, Nephi’s revelation expands the concept of “this people” from Isaiah 29:14 to include all “the children of men.” But note too the use of “children of men” in a broad purpose clause: “that I [the Lord] may remember my covenants which I have made unto the children of men.” Given that the language of the Lord’s “remembering” covenants in the Book of Mormon is connected

people of Ammonihah as “a lost and a fallen people” in Alma 9:30 and 32, which they understood as an anti-Nehor religious polemic that Alma was directing against them. In the broadest sense, however, the description was true of all humankind. In a narrower sense, “lost and fallen” describes any individual or people estranged from God. As Nephi’s use of “lost and fallen state” in 2 Nephi 25:17 makes clear, it also specifically designates an individual or a people who are in a “scattered” condition, from which they need to be gathered.

9. Cf. Isaiah 28:11, 14: “For with stammering lips and another tongue will he speak to this people [hāʾām hazzeḥ]. … Wherefore hear the word of the Lord, ye scornful men, that rule this people [hāʾām hazzeḥ] which is in Jerusalem.”
to the Abrahamic covenant (e.g., 1 Nephi 15:13–18; 22:9; 2 Nephi 29:14; 3 Nephi 20:25, 27), these “covenants” appear to constitute those aspects of the Abrahamic covenant that specifically pertain to the entirety of the human family. In other words, these covenants pertain to the Lord’s promise to Abraham that “in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed” (Genesis 22:18). In fact, 2 Nephi 29:14 frames the whole 2 Nephi 29 oracle on the coming forth of “more” of the Lord’s word in terms of the Abrahamic covenant:

And it shall come to pass that my people, which are of the house of Israel, shall be gathered home [cf. Hebrew yēʾāsēp] unto the lands of their possessions; and my word also shall be gathered [cf. Hebrew yēʾāsēp] in one. And I will show unto them that fight against my word and against my people, who are of the house of Israel, that I am God, and that I covenanted with Abraham that I would remember his seed forever.

Noel B. Reynolds correctly observes that “the Abrahamic covenant is the key thread of the salvation history presented in the Book of Mormon.”

In this article, I wish to examine 1 Nephi 22:8–12, which constitutes a part of one of Nephi’s prominent expositions of Isaiah’s writings, in which the former twice uses Isaiah 29:14 and also expands that text’s notion of “this people” in order to detail the Lord’s future fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant. When Nephi combined the prophesies of Isaiah 11:11 and 29:14 on the basis of their common use of forms of yāsap, he did so as a wordplay on the name of Joseph: first, as a reminder that it was the seed of Joseph that the Lord would gather in fulfillment of Abrahamic covenant promises, and second, to foretell the instrumentality of a future Joseph in this gathering and the coming forth of additional scripture. In a similar way, Nephi twice uses Isaiah 29:14 with its participial yôsīp/yôsip-idiom (“he will proceed”) in 1 Nephi 22:8–12. He does so in tandem with an exegetical, Gezera Shawa-type juxtaposition of Isaiah 49:22–23, Genesis 22:18, and Isaiah 52:10 — texts that he joins together and interprets on the basis of the noun gôyim (“nations”). Using Isaiah’s yôsīp/yôsip-idiom, Nephi emphasizes that the “marvelous work,” which would result in Israel’s complete restoration and redemption, would also bring about the Lord’s promise to Abraham that “all the kindreds [nations, gôyim] of the earth

11. Ibid., 55.
would be “blessed.” Here too, Nephi’s yōsīp/yōsip wordplay calls attention to the fact that the miracle would be accomplished through a “Joseph.” Accompanying wordplay on the name Abraham reinforces the connection to the Abrahamic covenant.


According to his own record, in 1 Nephi 22 Nephi interprets and explains to his brothers Isaiah 48–49, a text that he read aloud to them to “more fully persuade them to believe” in the Lord their Redeemer (1 Nephi 19:23). Broadly speaking, Isaiah 48 (1 Nephi 20) describes Israel in its “lost and fallen state” — i.e., its “scattered” condition — a process of which the Lehite-Ishmaelite party was a part. Isaiah 49 (1 Nephi 21) details the steps to gather Israel from its scattered condition. For example, Isaiah 49 (1 Nephi 21) details the calling and commissioning of a servant-prophet to gather Israel from its scattered condition. The specific mission of that servant-prophet pertains to the “gathering” of Israel: “And now, saith the Lord that formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob again to him, Though Israel be not gathered

12. The Book of Mormon translation of Nephi’s quotations of Genesis 18:22 in 1 Nephi 15:18 and 1 Nephi 22:9–10 matches the KJV translation of Acts 3:25 (“And in thy seed shall all the kindreds [Greek pasai hai patriai] of the earth be blessed”), which is itself a quotation of Genesis 22:18. The quotation in Acts 3:25 does not follow the LXX (Septuagint) which has panta ta ethna for (“all the nations”). Although the Book of Mormon translated text of 1 Nephi 22:9–10 reflects the wording of Acts 3:25, I propose that the underlying text — Nephi’s text from the brass plates — represents a form of Genesis 22:18 similar to what we have preserved in the Masoretic Text. Nephi’s use of Genesis 22:18 on the basis of gōyim with other gōyim-texts — Isaiah 49:22–23, Isaiah 52:10 — reflects that likelihood.

[Hebrew Ketiv: lōʾ yēʾāsēp]” (Isaiah 49:5, KJV), or better, “And now the Lord says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him [Hebrew Qere: lō yēʾāsēp]” (Isaiah 49:5, NRSV). The latter reading is particularly significant in that the prophet’s explicit mission is the “gathering” (yēʾāsēp) of Israel to the Lord. The verb and its form here are both significant in the broader prophetic context of 1 Nephi 19–22 in that the verb ‘āsap, “to gather,” “to bring in, gather in”, “withdraw, take away” is one of the verbs — along with the verb yāsap (“add”) — used to etiologize the name Joseph in Genesis 30:23–24. The form yēʾāsēp (“that he might gather”) constitutes a close homonym of yōsēp (Joseph). As Russell M. Nelson has pointed out, the yāsap verb-form wayyōsep (“and he added,” i.e., “and he added together”) takes on precisely this meaning in 2 Samuel 6:1: “Again, David gathered together [wayyōsep] all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand.”

These observations have relevance for Nephi’s use of Isaiah 29:14 in 1 Nephi 22:8–12 as a part of his explanation and interpretation of Isaiah 48–49 and the future steps the Lord would take to gather Israel through a “gathering” prophet. After briefly restating the content of Isaiah 48–49 in 1 Nephi 22:1–7, including the function of the Gentiles/nations as described in Isaiah 49:22–23, Nephi uses the language of Isaiah 29:14 to give a more specific description of how the Lord would gather Israel:

And after our seed is scattered the Lord God will proceed [yōsīp] to do a marvelous work among the Gentiles [gōyim, nations], which shall be of great worth unto our seed; wherefore, it is likened unto their being nursed [vs. nourished] by the Gentiles and being carried in their arms and upon their shoulders. And it shall also be of worth unto the Gentiles; and not only unto the Gentiles but unto all the house of Israel, unto the making known of the covenants

14. HALOT, 74.
16. See Royal Skousen, Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part One: Title Page, Witness Statements, 1 Nephi 1–2 Nephi 10 (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 461–62. Skousen writes, “As he was copying from [the original manuscript] into [the printer’s manuscript], Oliver Cowdery accidentally misread nursed as the visually similar nourished. Of course, the semantic possibility of nourished prevented its discovery as an error, except by reference to the original manuscript.”
of the **Father of heaven** unto **Abraham**, saying: In thy seed shall all the kindreds [gôyim, nations] of the earth be blessed.

(1 Nephi 22:8–9)

Nephi appropriates Isaiah’s use of the verbal idiom yôsîp/yôsîp + infinitive (lĕhaplî, “to do a marvelous work”) in Isaiah 29:14 to detail how the Lord and his prophet-servant will “gather” (yê’āsēp) Israel to the Lord (Isaiah 49:5; 1 Nephi 21:5). The “marvelous work” that the Lord would “proceed” (yôsîp) to do would be a written record as suggested by the phrase “making known of … covenants” (1 Nephi 22:9). Just as Nephi’s use of Isaiah 11:11 and 29:14 intimates the role of a “Joseph” in the gathering foretold in 2 Nephi 25:17, 21 and 29:1, so too Nephi’s use of Isaiah 29:14 and Isaiah 49 (including Isaiah 49:5) in 1 Nephi 21–22 suggests the identity of this prophet-servant, a “Joseph.”

Moreover, where Nephi expansively interprets “this people” in Isaiah 29:14 as “the children of men” in 2 Nephi 25:17 and 29:1, he had previously gone even further in that direction in his explanation and interpretation of Isaiah 48–49 (1 Nephi 20–21) in 1 Nephi 22. Nephi interprets “a marvelous work among this people” as “a marvelous work among the Gentiles.” This appears to have been influenced or prompted by Isaiah 49:22–23, the very text Nephi subsequently quotes:

Thus saith the Lord God, Behold, I will lift up mine hand to the Gentiles [gôyim, nations] and set up my standard to the people[s]: and they shall bring thy sons in their arms, and thy daughters shall be carried upon their shoulders. And kings shall be thy nursing fathers, and their queens thy nursing mothers: they shall bow down to thee with their face toward the earth, and lick up the dust of thy feet; and thou shalt know that I am the Lord: for they shall not be ashamed that wait for me. (Isaiah 49:22–23)

Isaiah 49:22 matches “Gentiles” (gôyim, nations) with “the people[s]” (ʿammîm) as a poetic pair (i.e., in parallelism). Isaiah’s semantic pairing — which also prominently occurs with the ensign/standard (Hebrew nēs) in Isaiah 11:10\(^\text{17}\) — seems to have prompted or justified Nephi’s substitution of “Gentiles” for “this people” in his quotation of Isaiah 29:14 in 1 Nephi 22:8.

\(^{17}\) Isaiah 11:10: “And in that day there shall be a root of Jesse, which shall stand for an ensign of the people; to it shall the Gentiles seek: and his rest shall be glorious.”
This has implications for Nephi’s quotation of Genesis 22:18 as part of his invocation of the Abrahamic covenant in 1 Nephi 22:9, where goyim constitutes the key lexical basis for quoting the former text: “In thy seed shall all the kindreds [goyim, nations, Gentiles] of the earth be blessed.” Nephi’s quotation of Genesis 22:18 appears to have in view the “covenants” that the Lord made with Abraham, beginning in Genesis 12:2–3 and concluding in Genesis 22:16–18, texts that form a kind of inclusio or bracketing around the Abrahamic covenant narratives.

The Abrahamic narratives begin in earnest with the Lord’s promise to make of Abram a “great nation”: “And I will make of thee a great nation [goy gadol], and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: and I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families [mi’shpehot] of the earth be blessed [or, bless themselves]” (Genesis 12:2–3). In addition to anticipating Abraham’s future “paternal” relationship to the nations/Gentiles, this promise looks back to Genesis 10:5, where goyim occurs for the first time: “By these [sons] were the isles of the Gentiles [haggoyim, nations] divided in their lands; every one after his tongue, after their families, in their nations [begoyehem].” The “isles of the Gentiles” or “islands of the nations” will be the locus of the future gathering of Israel, especially in the Isaianic corpus (see, e.g., Isaiah 11:11–12; 49:1, 22–23).

Abram’s change of name to Abraham constitutes one of several climactic covenant moments in the Abrahamic covenant cycle. Yahweh’s promise to make Abram (’abrām = ’āb, “father” + rām, “exalted,” “high”; i.e., “the Father is exalted” or “exalted father”19) “a father of many nations” and its imminent fulfillment necessitates a change of name that concords with Abraham’s desire as expressed in his autobiography: “desiring … to be a father of many nations” (Abraham 1:2). The Lord thus declared to Abram,

As for me, behold, my covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be [become] a father of many nations [’ab hāmon goyim]. Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram [’abrām], but thy name shall be Abraham [’abrāhām]; for a father of many nations [’ab hāmon goyim] have I made thee. And I will make thee exceeding fruitful [wēhiprēti], and I will

make nations \[gōyim\] of thee, and kings shall come out of thee." (Genesis 17:4–6)

Robert Alter writes, “The meaning of both versions of the name is something like ‘exalted father.’ The longer form is evidently no more than a dialectical variant of the shorter one. The real point is that Abraham should undergo a name change — like a king assuming the throne, it has been proposed — as he undertakes the full burden of the covenant.”

Notably, the nations-kings sequence of Isaiah 49:22–23 (“Behold, I will lift up my hand to the Gentiles \[nations, gōyim,\] and set up my standard to the people … And kings shall be thy nursing fathers, and queens thy nursing mothers”) parallels the nations-kings sequence of the Genesis 17 iteration of the Abrahamic covenant: “I will make nations \[Gentiles, gōyim\] of thee, and kings shall come out of thee” (Genesis 17:6). Just as the covenantal giving of the new name in Genesis 17 revolves around the nations-kings theme, Nephi’s description of the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant in terms of Isaiah 29:14, including his use of names and divine titles, also revolves around the nations-kings theme.

As virtually every exegete of the Hebrew Bible is aware, the etymology of the name ʾabrāhām, whether a dialectic variation of Abram or otherwise, does not strictly correspond to its explanation ʾab hāmôn gōyim, “father of many nations.” Regarding the relationship of Abraham to ʾab hāmôn gōyim, Nahum Sarna writes:

“I will make your name great,” that is, your name Abram will be enlarged by the addition of a syllable. The anomalous grammatical formulation supports the midrashic nature of the interpretation. It is possible that, by means of word play, the consonants ABRHM were interpreted as shorthand (called notarikon in postbiblical Hebrew) for ABiR (“mighty one”) and Hamon (“multitude”) + goyiM (“nations”), as Ibn Ezra suggests.

Sarna’s observations have potential implications for at least two aspects of Nephi’s text here. First, Nephi clearly plays on the typological aspects of Abram/Abraham’s theophoric\(^{22}\) name: “the making known of the covenants of the Father of heaven [cf. Hebrew ʾab šāmayim] unto

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22. Theophoric names are names that “bear” (Greek -phoros) (i.e., include) the name of deity in some way.
Abraham ['əbrəhām], saying: In thy seed shall all the kindreds [nations, ʾgōyim; cf. ʾab hāmôn ʾgōyim] of the earth be blessed” (1 Nephi 22:9). One hears in the Hebrew words ʾab šāmâyim — “Father of heaven” — an echo of “exalted Father”/“Father is exalted” and “Father of a Multitude”/“Father of many nations” as titles of the one cutting covenants with Abraham, which covenants will enable Abraham to become like the “Father of heaven.” One also hears echoes of the Abraham-Melchizedek tradition, including the words of Melchizedek in his blessing of Abram/Abraham: “And Melchizedek [malkî-ṣedeq] king of Salem [melek šālēm] brought forth bread and wine: and he was the priest of the most high God. And he blessed him, and said, Blessed be Abram of the most high God, possessor of heaven [qōnē šāmâyim, i.e., procreator or father of heaven] and earth” (Genesis 14:18–20). Melchizedek himself received the name-title “king of heaven,” as restoration scripture makes clear: “And this Melchizedek [malkî-ṣedeq], having thus established righteousness [ṣēdāqâ], was called the king of heaven [melek šāmâyim] by his people, or, in other words, the King of peace [melek šālôm or melek šālêm]” (Genesis 14:36 JST). Alma 13:18 appears to cite the same tradition: “And Melchizedek did establish peace [šālôm] in the land in his days; therefore he was called the prince of peace [ṣar-šālôm; cf. Isaiah 9:6], for he was the king of Salem [melek šālēm; cf. Genesis 14:18]; and he did reign under his father [ʾābīw].” We note that Abraham had the express desire “to be a greater follower of righteousness [Eg. mš’t; Hebrew ṣēdāqâ], and to possess a greater knowledge, and to be a father of many nations [cf. Hebrew ʾab hāmôn ʾgōyim], a prince of peace [cf. Hebrew šar-šālôm]” (Abraham 1:1).

Second, in 1 Nephi 22:12 Nephi alters the Isaianic divine title “mighty one of Jacob [ʾābîr yaʾaqōb] to a form attested only one other time within the Isaianic corpus, “mighty one of Israel [ʾābîr yišrāʾēl]” (Isaiah 1:24). The alteration, however, perhaps suggests Nephi’s consciousness of the significance of ʾābîr yaʾaqōb and ʾābîr yišrāʾēl from Isaiah in the context of the Abrahamic covenant and the name Abraham as a notarikon of ʾābîr hāmôn ʾgōyim (“mighty one of many nations”; cf. ʾab hāmôn ʾgōyim “father of many nations”; Genesis 17:4–5). We should also note here

23. In Isaiah 30:29, the KJV renders the divine title šûr yišrāʾēl as “mighty one of Israel.” However, it would be better translated “Rock of Israel.”

24. One further wonders in light of Nephi’s wordplay on Joseph in 1 Nephi 22:8–12 and elsewhere whether Jacob’s blessing upon Joseph (Genesis 49:22–26) constitutes part of Nephi’s conceptual framework in 1 Nephi 22. The first part of Jacob’s blessing upon Joseph invokes the divine title ʾābîr yaʾaqōb: “Joseph [yōsēp] is a fruitful bough [bēn pōrāt, or a “fruitful son”], even a fruitful bough [fruitful son] by a well; whose branches [bānôt] run over the wall: the archers have sorely
that ʾābîr constituted an “epithet of the father-god”\(^\text{25}\) whom Abraham worshiped and what Abraham was becoming (compare D&C 93:19 with D&C 132:29).

Near the end of Abraham’s biography and following Abraham’s arrested sacrifice of his son Isaac (sometimes called the Akedah, “the binding”), the Lord reiterates to Abraham his initial covenant promise from Genesis 12:3 (“in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed”). The Genesis 22:16–18 text forms the closing bracket of the biblical *inclusio* and ultimately represents the text from which Nephi twice quotes:

> And said, By myself have I sworn, saith the Lord, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son: that in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; and in thy seed shall all the nations [gôyim] of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice.

**“The Lord God Will Proceed to Make Bare His Arm”: Nephi’s Exegetical Blending of Genesis 22:18, Isaiah 29:14, and Isaiah 52:10 in 1 Nephi 22:10–11**

Nephi’s second iteration of Genesis 22:18 becomes the basis of an additional *Gezera Shawa*-type quotation of Isaiah 52:10 (in the second iteration, blended with Isaiah 29:14), the passages being joined together on the basis of the noun gôyim, “nations”:

> And I would, my brethren, that ye should know that all the kindreds [gôyim, nations] of the earth cannot be blessed unless he shall make bare his arm in the eyes of the nations [gôyim]. Wherefore, the Lord God will proceed [yôsīp/yôsip] to make bare his arm in the eyes of all the nations [gôyim], or

*...*
Gentiles] in bringing about his covenants and his gospel unto those who are of the house of Israel. (1 Nephi 22:10, 11)

Thus Nephi rephrases the key phrase from Genesis 22:18 (“in thy seed shall all the nations [gôyim] of the earth be blessed”), “all the kindreds of the earth cannot be blessed unless,” and then adds another biblical text — another Isaianic text — in which gôyim constitutes a key term: “The Lord hath made bare [hāšap] his holy arm in the eyes of all the nations [haggôyim]; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God” (Isaiah 52:10).

Nephi then quotes Isaiah 52:10 again, blending or hybridizing it with Isaiah 29:14: “the Lord God will proceed [yôsîp/yôsip] to make bare [cf. Hebrew laḥsîp] his arm in the eyes of all the nations [haggôyim].” In using the yôsîp/yôsip idiom from Isaiah 29:14 a second time, Nephi draws together and functionally equates the divine action there characterized as a “marvelous work” or “marvelous work and a wonder” with the divine action characterized here as hāšap (Hebrew strip off, bare)26 — the Lord “mak[ing] bare his arm in the eyes of all the nations” from Isaiah 52:10.

**Excursus: The Name Joseph as Symbolic Extension of Abrahamic Covenant Promises**

The growth of Jacob’s family represents a further development of the Pentateuchal theme of the Abrahamic covenant and its fulfillment.27 The divine bequest of children to the heretofore barren Rachel in Genesis 30:22 employs language that recalls the Lord’s fulfillment of the promise to multiply Abraham’s posterity: “And God remembered Rachel, and God hearkened to her, and opened her womb.” The statement that “God remembered Rachel” (wayyizkôr ʾĕlōhîm ʾet-ʾrāḥêl) directly recalls the statement that “God remembered Abraham” (wayyizkôr ʾĕlōhîm ʾet-ʾabrâhām, Genesis 19:29)28 in his preservation of Lot from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Moreover, the statement “and God hearkened to her” (wayyišmaʿ ʾĕlêhā ʾĕlōhîm) harks back to the etiological wordplay on Ishmael (yišmâʾēl “may God hearken”) in terms of šāmaʿ (“hear,” “hearken”; see Genesis 16:11–12; 17:17–20; 21:5–6,

26. HALOT, 359.


28. In addition to Genesis 19:29; 30:22, see also Genesis 8:1: “And God remembered Noah, and every living thing, and all the cattle that was with him in the ark.”
9–12, 17; 28:8–9; 37:27), and the beginning of the fulfillment of divine promises to Abraham regarding a numberless posterity. At this point in the text the Genesis narrator includes a chiastic double-etiology for the name Joseph, voiced through Rachel his mother:

A And she conceived, and bare a son

B and said, God hath taken away [ʾāsap] my reproach:

C And she called his name Joseph [yōsēp];

B' And said, The Lord shall add [yōsēp] to me

A' another son. (Genesis 30:23–24)

The bracketing inclusio A-A', with its key term bēn (“son”) anticipates not one, but two sons for Rachel: the firstborn Joseph and his younger brother Benjamin (binyāmīn, “son of the right hand”), to whose name also bēn alludes. Within this inclusio a clever double alliteration ʾāsap ʾĕlōhîm (“God hath taken away” or “God hath gathered up”) and yōsēp yhwh (“may the Lord add”) in B-B' pivots around the naming of Joseph in C: “And she called his name Joseph.” The double-etiology and the desire for alliteration appear to drive the alternation of divine name-titles: ʾĕlōhîm in B and yhwh in B'.

The structure of the double-etiology, then, highlights the importance of the name Joseph in C and his role as “birthright” son above those of his brothers. The double-etiology with its ʾāsap/yāsap dyad represents a “double portion” for Joseph, as it were. But it also represents a doubling for Rachel. Robert Alter writes, “Rachel’s double etymology refers to birth and, prospectively, to a future son. She remains true to the character of her initial speech to Jacob, where she demanded of him not a son but


sons.” Sarah bears Abraham one son, Rachel bears Jacob two. In other words, the double-etiology represents the Lord “multiplying” Rachel\(^{33}\) and Jacob in fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant.

The name יֹסֵפ, as the third-person masculine singular causative (Hiphil) form of the Hebrew verb יָסָפ, is not merely the predictive “the Lord shall add” (KJV) but an expressed hope or even a prayer: “may the Lord add,” “may the Lord increase [him],” or “may the Lord cause [him to] continue.” “The Lord shall increase [יֹסֵפ יְהוָה] you more and more, you and your children” (Psalms 115:14, KJV), or better “May the Lord give you increase [יֹסֵפ יְהוָה], both you and your children” (Psalms 115:14, NRSV). The language of Psalms 115:41 seems to deliberately echo Rachel’s words in Genesis 30:24 and gives expression to the Abrahamic covenant notion of multiplying in terms of the causative jussive form of יָסָפ as a near homonym of Joseph, יֹסֵפ.

Just as the name Joseph in the senses “may he cause [him] to continue” and “may he increase” — and in the context of Rachel’s double etymology — expresses the Abrahamic covenant notion of “a continuation of the seeds”\(^{34}\) and “increase”\(^{35}\) in mortality and beyond, the name of Joseph’s “birthright” son Ephraim (“doubly fruitful”) also extends the hope and promise in Abraham’s renaming as “father of many nations”: “But thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee. And I will make thee exceeding fruitful [וֶהָיַרְפֵּטִי], and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee” (Genesis 17:5–6). Joseph explains the giving of the name Ephraim (“doubly fruitful”) thus: “And the name of the second [son] called he Ephraim: For God hath caused me to be fruitful [הָיָרְפֵּטִי] in the land of my affliction” (Genesis 41:52).

The etiology in Genesis 41:52 intentionally recalls the foregoing promise made to Abraham in Genesis 17:5–6. Therefore, just as Joseph (“may he [God] add”) extends the meaning of Abraham (“Father is exalted” > “Father of many nations”), Ephraim’s naming, voiced through the patriarch Joseph, extends the meaning of the name Joseph. Joseph — “May he [God] add” — becomes “fruitful son”/“bough” (בֵּן פֹּרָט) with “daughters”/“branches” (בָּנֹת, 32. Alter, *Five Books of Moses*, 109.
34. D&C 132:19.
Within the double-etiology for Joseph, the verb ʾāsap serves a nearly antonymic function to yāsap on one level — “hath taken away” vs. “may he add” — though both verbs express Abrahamic covenant concepts. The broader range of meaning for ʾāsap is to “gather”37 — i.e., “to bring in,” “gather in.”38 Moses’s gathering of Israel for the first time begins with the “gathering” of Israel’s elders. The key term in this initial gathering is ʾāsap. The Lord commanded Moses, “Go, and gather [wĕʾāsaptâ] the elders of Israel together” (Exodus 3:16). The narrator subsequently notes, “And Moses and Aaron went and gathered together [wayyaʾaspû] all the elders of the children of Israel” (Exodus 4:29). Thus, the ʾāsap/yāsap pairing is not merely antonymic — “taking away” vs. “adding” — but also on another level complementary: “gathering” and “adding” or “gathering” and “increasing.”

“Wherefore He Will Bring Them Again out of Captivity”: Nephi’s Use of Adding and Gathering as an Explanation of Isaiah 29:22–24 and 49:25–26

The complementary dimension of ʾāsap and yāsap — of gathering and adding — emerges in 1 Nephi 22:12. Nephi prophesies that the Lord will act in his covenant role as kinsman redeemer (gōʾēl) to “add” or bring Israel out of Egypt-like bondage and to “gather” Israel and bring them to their lands of promise as at the beginning:

Wherefore, he will bring them again out [cf. Hebrew *yōsīp lēhōṣî ʾîm] of captivity, and they shall be gathered together [cf. wĕʾussēpû39] to the lands of their inheritance; and they shall be brought out of obscurity and out of darkness; and they shall know that the Lord is their Savior and their Redeemer, the Mighty One of Israel. (1 Nephi 22:12)


37. HALOT, 74.

38. Ibid.

The context of exodus-like deliverance suggests the underlying presence — conceptual or written — of the verb yāṣā’ which is abundantly used throughout the Hebrew Bible to describe Yahweh’s “bringing” Israel “out” or “forth” from the captivity and bondage of Egypt. Jeremias 31:32 provides a useful example, contemporary to Lehi’s time, in the phrase “the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out lĕhōṣîʾām of the land of Egypt.” If so, the expressions “he will bring them again out” and “they shall be brought out” would constitute a polyptoton involving active and passive forms of the Hebrew verb yāṣā’. Donald W. Parry notes the anaphoric grammar evident in the successive third-person plural verbal constructions “and they shall be gathered together,” “and they shall be brought out,” “and they shall know.”

If the “bring them … out” represents an infinitival construction like lĕhōṣîʾām, then the phrase “he will … again” becomes additionally significant. One of the most common idiomatic ways of expressing “he will [do something] again” in biblical Hebrew is by means of the Hiphil third masculine singular verbal form yōsīp. The presence of yōsīp here would not only reverberate Nephi’s uses of it in the previous verses (“the Lord God will proceed to do a marvelous work,” 1 Nephi 22:8) and 1 Nephi 22:11 (“the Lord God will proceed to make bare”), but also, together with the verb “and they shall be gathered together” (cf. wĕʾussĕpû), would evoke the name Joseph and the double-etiology of Genesis 30:23–24. Here too Nephi appears to follow a precedent set by Isaiah.

40. See, e.g., Exodus 6:6: “Wherefore say unto the children of Israel, I am the Lord, and I will bring you out wĕhōṣēʾtî from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will rid you out of their bondage, and I will redeem you with a stretched out arm, and with great judgments”; Exodus 20:2: “I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out hōṣēʾtîkā of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.”


43. Lanham defines anaphora as “repetition of the same word at the beginning of successive clauses or verses” (Handlist of Rhetorical Terms, 11). In this case, the text certainly represents different underlying verbs, but the conjunction “and” itself and the third-person, plural, and (probably) imperfect grammatical markers would have been present in the verbs — especially if written in Hebrew — creating the anaphoric effect.
Nephi’s words in 1 Nephi 22:12 draw on several Isaianic texts beginning with Isaiah 11:11–12, which, as noted earlier, prophesies of the gathering of Israel from seven (symbolic) nations and “the four corners of the earth,” i.e., a complete gathering of Israel, as in the beginning, but on a much grander scale. Isaiah’s prophecy also uses ʾāsap and yāsap in a complementary, rather than antithetical, way:

And it shall come to pass in that day, that the Lord shall set his hand again the second time to recover the remnant of his people, which shall be left, from Assyria, and from Egypt, and from Pathros, and from Cush, and from Elam, and from Shinar, and from Hamath, and from the islands of the sea. And he shall set up an ensign for the nations, and shall assemble [wēʾāsap, and shall gather in] the outcasts of Israel, and gather together [yēqabbēṣ] the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth. (Isaiah 11:11–12)

Nephi further develops Isaiah’s prophecy in terms of the Abrahamic covenant beyond 1 Nephi 22:8–12 in 2 Nephi 29:14, where he makes clear that the complete gathering of Israel will be concomitant with the gathering of the Lord’s word “in one”: “And it shall come to pass that my people, which are of the house of Israel, shall be gathered home unto the lands of their possessions; and my word also shall be gathered in one. And I will show unto them that fight against my word and against my people, who are of the house of Israel, that I am God, and that I covenanted with Abraham that I would remember his seed forever” (2 Nephi 29:14).

In prophesying that “they [of the house of Israel] shall be brought out of obscurity and out of darkness” (1 Nephi 22:12), Nephi appeals to Isaiah 29:18–19: “And in that day shall the deaf hear the words of the book, and the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity, and out of darkness. The meek also shall increase [wēyospū] their joy in the LORD, and the poor among men shall rejoice in the Holy One of Israel.” Nephi equates blind and deaf Israel44 “hear[ing] the words of the [sealed] book” and “see[ing] out of obscurity and out of darkness” with being “brought out of obscurity and out of darkness” by the Lord as Divine Warrior. In other words, the Lord would act to gather Israel from its scattered state and the book would be the instrument of gathering — a gathering

44. See also Isaiah 42:18–19; Isaiah 42:19–23 JST.
“servant.” In invoking Isaiah 29:18–19, Nephi also invokes the stated results of the gathering, “the meek also shall increase [wĕyospû] their joy in the Lord” — or, as he later phrases it, “And the meek also shall increase [wĕyospû], and their joy shall be in the Lord” (2 Nephi 27:30). The Lord’s “proceeding” (yôsîp, Isaiah 29:14; 1 Nephi 22:8, 11) to do this marvelous work would result in this marvelous “increase” (wĕyospû, Isaiah 29:19) — all brought to pass through a “Joseph.”

Only verses later does Isaiah situate the entire prophecy within the context of Abrahamic history and thus implicitly in the context of the Abrahamic covenant:

Therefore thus saith the Lord, who redeemed Abraham, concerning the house of Jacob, Jacob shall not now be ashamed, neither shall his face now wax pale. But when he seeth his children, the work of mine hands, in the midst of him, they shall sanctify my name, and sanctify the Holy One of Jacob, and shall fear the God of Israel. They also that erred in spirit shall come to understanding, and they that murmured shall learn doctrine. (Isaiah 29:22–24)

The Hebrew text rendered “the Lord, who redeemed Abraham, concerning the house of Jacob” — yhwh ’el-bêt ya’aqôb ’āšer pādâ ’et-’abrahāhm — would be better rendered as “the Lord, God of the House of Jacob, who redeemed Abraham.” In other words, the word ’el taken here as a preposition should have been pointed as the word ēl, “God.” Jennifer C. Lane has insightfully noted that the phrase ’āšer pādâ ’et-’abrahāhm (“who redeemed Abraham”) could constitute a brief allusion to the Lord’s rescue of Abraham from the Egyptian altar in Ur of the Chaldees, as mentioned in the Book of Abraham but otherwise unmentioned in the biblical corpus. The redemption of Abraham,


Jacob, and their posterity by the kinsman redeemer across time — salvation history — reflects the atonement of Jesus Christ having its intended effect and the Lord’s eventual triumph over evil (see Jacob 5).48

1 Nephi 22:12 concludes with the prophetic declaration, “And they shall know that the Lord is their Savior and their Redeemer, the Mighty One of Israel.” As noted above, Nephi’s words constitute a direct quotation of Isaiah 49:26. The immediate context of that text as deliverance by the Divine Warrior:49

But thus saith the Lord, Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken away, and the prey of the terrible shall be delivered: for I will contend with him that contendeth with thee, and I will save thy children. And I will feed them that oppress thee with their own flesh; and they shall be drunken with their own blood, as with sweet wine: and all flesh shall know that I the Lord am thy Saviour and thy Redeemer, the mighty One of Jacob. (Isaiah 49:25–26)

Conclusion

In 1 Nephi 22:6, 8–12, Nephi quotes or alludes to four Old Testament passages twice in his description of how the Lord would bring to pass his promises in the Abrahamic covenant for the salvation of the human family: Genesis 22:18, Isaiah 29:14, Isaiah 49:22–23, and Isaiah 52:10. On the basis of their shared use of the Hebrew word כיולה (“nations” [> kindreds], “Gentiles”), Nephi prophesies that the Lord would act in the latter-days for the salvation of the entire human family. As he does elsewhere, in 2 Nephi 25:17 when he combined Isaiah 11:11 and 29:14 on the basis of their shared use of יָסָּפ, Nephi uses Isaiah 29:14 with its key-word יוסי (“Joseph”) to suggest that the iterative divine action to fulfill the Abrahamic covenant would take the form of “a marvelous work and a wonder” and would be accomplished through a “Joseph.” Sophisticated wordplay involving the names Abram/Abraham and Joseph, evident in 1 Nephi 22:8–12, also reinforces the close connection between the gathering of the seed of Joseph the patriarch and the “marvelous


work” — including the coming forth of additional scripture from the Gentiles — that would help bring the Abrahamic covenant to complete fulfillment.

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Honoring Joseph’s Theophany
Two Centuries Later

Spencer Kraus


Abstract: In the year 2020, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints celebrated the 200th anniversary of the First Vision of the Prophet Joseph Smith. As a part of honoring that seminal moment in the Church’s history, the Church History Symposium focused on the context, place, and meaning of the First Vision. Selected papers from the conference have been published in Joseph Smith and his First Vision: Context, Place, and Meaning, edited by Alexander L. Baugh, Steven C. Harper, Brent M. Rogers, and Benjamin C. Pykles, offering new insights and research into Joseph Smith’s theophany in the Sacred Grove that has inspired millions worldwide to ask of God as Joseph did. The papers selected for publication are well-written and provide a great deal of new scholarship relating to the dramatic theophany that Joseph Smith experienced, and, as such, it is a great addition to any Latter-day Saint’s library.

For Latter-day Saints, the year 2020 was especially a noteworthy year, marking the 200th anniversary of what is appropriately described as the founding event of the Restoration of the Gospel in modern times:

Two hundred years ago, on a beautiful spring morning in 1820, young Joseph Smith, seeking to know which church to join, went into the woods to pray near his home in upstate New York, USA. He had questions regarding the salvation of his soul and trusted that God would direct him.
In humility, we declare that in answer to his prayer, God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, appeared to Joseph and inaugurated the “restitution of all things” (Acts 3:21) as foretold in the Bible.¹

As a part of the efforts by Latter-day Saints to follow President Nelson’s urge to remember the First Vision,² the biannual Church History Symposium hosted a range of scholars, professors, and other Latter-day Saints to delve into the beginning of our shared history, memory, and origins as Latter-day Saints. The symposium — miraculously held just before the Church made efforts to limit in-person meetings to stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus — hosted multiple papers dealing with the context, place, or meaning of the First Vision for Joseph Smith and for Latter-day Saints in general. The insights shared in the published papers in this volume are a great addition to any Latter-day Saint’s library.

The fourteen papers selected are divided into four categories. The first category combines the three keynote addresses, given at the beginning and closing of the symposium. The next section deals with the historical context in which the First Vision should be understood, followed by a section relating to the Sacred Grove, the place where God the Father and God the Son appeared to the boy prophet. The fourth and final section deals with various theological or analytical lessons that can be drawn from the First Vision, and modern efforts to portray and teach the First Vision to a growing Church.

The first keynote paper is from President Dallin H. Oaks, who delivered the closing remarks of the symposium. President Oaks’ paper, “Writing about the Prophet Joseph Smith” (pp. 3–20), does not deal exclusively with the First Vision but expands to his other writing projects regarding Joseph Smith. Of the five writing projects he wrote about, it is little surprise, given President Oaks’ background, that four of them deal heavily with legal matters surrounding Joseph Smith. Because he is a lifelong scholar of Joseph Smith and an Apostle, we can gain a new appreciation for President Oaks’ works in this discussion.

President Oaks’ paper is followed by Sheri Dew’s work, “Joseph Smith and the Problem of Loneliness” (pp. 21–48). Dew argues that the loneliness Joseph Smith felt throughout his life began in large part


with the First Vision.\(^3\) Joseph “alone saw the Father and the Son and then endured ridicule for declaring what he had seen” (p. 25) and was constantly “hounded for his imperfections” (p. 38) by nonbelievers then and now. For much of his prophetic career, Joseph had no forerunner to turn to for an example of how to behave. In fact, “in this dispensation, the knowledge that the heavens are open began when Joseph Smith had the faith to walk into a grove of trees” (p. 29). Dew’s remarks are hopeful, drawing on Joseph’s example throughout his life and offering assurance to readers, even when they too feel the burden of loneliness in their lives.

Richard Lyman Bushman’s is the final keynote paper, titled “The First Vision in 2020” (pp. 49–62). Noting that we live in a time when multiple accounts of the First Vision are widely accessible, he focused primarily on the 1832 account of the First Vision. Bushman delivers hopeful remarks in this volume, viewing the First Vision primarily as a conversion tool to Christ, just as the First Vision converted Joseph fully to Christ and caused Joseph to seek salvation.\(^4\) Bushman ends his paper with the simple and accurate observation: “Those who lose faith in Christ because they have lost faith in Joseph Smith have things backward. … We must place our faith first in Christ and believe in him apart from our faith in his messenger. Christ should be the anchor when we struggle and question” (pp. 60–61).

Perhaps the greatest additions to scholarship on the First Vision this volume offers come from three papers that explore the Second Great Awakening in the world leading up to Joseph’s fateful spring of 1820. Together, the presented papers offer a wide panorama of the religious revivals occurring in Joseph Smith’s present world. A picture can be drawn of a young boy who, in the midst of conflict between

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3. This loneliness is perhaps best described by Joseph Smith himself. After the Three Witnesses viewed the golden plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated, Smith is reported as saying, “I was relieved of a dreadful burden which was almost too much for me to endure … and it does rejoice my soul that I am not any longer to be entirely alone in the world.” Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845, p. [11], bk. 8, https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1844-1845/103. Joseph Smith would feel that same loneliness at the very end of his life when accused of cowardice for leaving Nauvoo: “If my life is of no value to my friends it is of none to myself.” Joseph Smith Jr., History, 1838–1856, volume F–I, 148, https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-f-i-1-may-1844-8-august-1844/154.

4. Joseph’s drive to pray in the Sacred Grove came primarily over a sorrow for his sins and desire to be forgiven, according to his 1832 journal, and little is said regarding his desire to know which church he should join. See Joseph Smith Jr., History, circa Summer 1832, 2–3, https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-summer-1832/2.
Presbyterianism and Methodism, draws upon the inspiration of multiple reviveralist traditions in his own quest for knowledge, a fitting beginning for the time of a “restitution of all things” (Acts 3:21).

Rachel Cope’s paper “The First Vision Within the Context of Revivalism” (pp. 65–88) presents a concise portrait of contemporary experiences similar to Joseph Smith’s own quest for forgiveness and salvation. Cope demonstrates that the revivals occurring in Joseph’s vicinity show an increased desire of many for forgiveness and deeper conversion to the Lord, much like Joseph Smith experienced. While revival meetings may have initially sparked an interest in religion, “the vast majority of converts encountered divine forgiveness in quiet, peaceful moments that occurred within private spaces in nature or at home” (p. 76). Joseph’s experience in the Sacred Grove can be understood better in the context of revivalist converts who similarly sought peace and forgiveness.

Richard E. Bennett presents a new argument in his paper “Quiet Revivalism: New Light on the Burned-Over District” (pp. 89–108) that is especially noteworthy for future studies regarding the religious revivals of Joseph Smith’s day. When Latter-day Saints read of the “war of words and tumult of opinions” that Joseph Smith records in his 1838 history (see Joseph Smith—History 1:10), it can be easy to assume that the spirit of revivalism was so domineering that conflict was commonplace among the various sects fighting for converts. However, at the same time, while some Presbyterian ministers may have been especially loud in their struggles for new converts, others were in a spirit of “quiet revivalism,” as Bennett describes (p. 90). This form of revivalism did not gain new converts through loud shouts and camp meetings, but rather personal home visits, somber and reverent meetings, and instructions for the youth to pray privately for salvation after meditating upon the scriptures. Many details of Bennett’s proposed quiet revivalism are strikingly consistent with details of the First Vision provided by Joseph Smith throughout his life (pp. 103–104).

5. Bennett expands upon this paper in his book 1820: Dawning of the Restoration published shortly after the symposium. In this book, Bennett explores more of the religious revivalism that occurred in the American landscape beginning with the Puritans at Plymouth Rock, while his present paper focuses on the more personal approach of Presbyterian revivalism. See Richard E. Bennett, “From Plymouth Rock to Palmyra: Joseph Smith Jr., the Second Great Awakening, and the Quest for Divine Truth” in 1820: Dawning of the Restoration (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2020), 317–42.
Mark L. Staker and Donald L. Enders’ paper “Excitement on the Subject of Religion: Controversy within Palmyra’s 1819 and 1820 Preaching District” (pp. 109–28) also provides new light on the revivalism occurring in the Palmyra preaching district. Staker and Enders point to specific debates that occurred between Methodist and Baptist ministers during these years that likely had an impact on the “war of words” Joseph described. Baptism and its role in salvation was often the central issue of these debates, and Staker and Enders provide compelling evidence that during these formative debates, would-be converts were affected by still-developing doctrines of these Protestant sects which likely influenced many people in their quest for salvation, Joseph Smith included.6 A compelling reason to believe that Joseph was influenced by these debates is that Joseph himself records that his interest in the religious revivals was a multi-year effort beginning “about the age of twelve years.”7 Being “somewhat partial to the Methodist sect,” Joseph likely would have been aware of debates regarding Methodist doctrines surrounding baptism and its significance for the seeker of salvation (Joseph Smith—History 1:8).

Another valuable contribution that appears in this volume is a paper by Quinten Zehn Barney discussing the context of Joseph Smith’s 1844 recital of the First Vision to Alexander Neibaur (pp. 129–46). Barney is the first to attempt a contextual reconstruction of this event. His analysis includes a potential cause for Joseph Smith to share his experience in Neibaur’s presence and a possible date that Neibaur would have returned to in his journaling efforts to capture his memories of the Prophet Joseph.

Two articles appear regarding the sacred place where Joseph saw God. Matthew C. Godfrey’s paper (pp. 149–66) discusses the influence Joseph’s natural environment had on the revelations that Joseph received, and Gary L. Boatright Jr. discusses a brief history of the Sacred Grove from Joseph Smith’s life to modern times (pp. 167–84). Godfrey emphasizes the impact that traditional Puritan understandings of the land may have had on Joseph Smith and how his revelations in sacred, natural environments reflect those worldviews, a previously unexplored topic when studying the First Vision.

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Steven Hepworth’s paper (pp. 187–204) is also an excellent addition found in this volume. During the Second Great Awakening, Hepworth demonstrates that many contemporaries of Joseph Smith had what they believed to be communications with the divine and confrontations with the devil in their own quest for salvation. The visionary world Joseph Smith lived in has previously been addressed by Richard Lyman Bushman, and in many ways Hepworth’s paper builds on Bushman’s work. Hepworth, however, focuses on diabolic visions that were experienced, wherein deliverance from the devil is offered, resulting in accounts of miraculous salvation. In Joseph Smith’s day, “many mainline Protestants believed the age of miracles and visions had ended. For them, all supernatural effects necessarily sprang from either fraudulent illusions or the workings of the devil. … Satan both impeded revelation and explained it away” (p. 199). Hepworth’s scholarship provides additional details in understanding the public’s bitter rejection of Joseph Smith’s theophany and future revelations.

Kent P. Jackson offers additional insights into Joseph’s quest for the true church as well (pp. 205–18), focusing his paper on the Apostasy and promised restoration. Jackson discusses the Apostasy in terms of the Greek word *apostasia*, meaning “rebellion” (pp. 211–12), which should be understood by Latter-day Saints as the rebellion against the early Apostles. “Later developments in Christian belief, some of which are very troubling, did not constitute the Apostasy but were consequences of the Apostasy” (p. 212). John W. Welch’s work is especially useful in further understanding the creeds of Christianity and doctrinal developments that God likely was referring to as “an abomination” (Joseph Smith—History 1:19). While Jackson provides only a brief introduction, Welch discusses all of the developments of early Christianity and Protestantism as well as what Joseph would have likely been familiar with at the time of the First Vision.

Another paper presented by Steven L. Olsen offers insights regarding the literary craftsmanship of Joseph Smith—History as a scriptural narrative (pp. 219–36). Olsen describes the three main narrative plots found in the

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brief canonized history, including how their conflicts and resolutions each tie into the other. While the decision to canonize Joseph Smith—History did not deal with the literary qualifications of any surviving writing from Joseph Smith or other leaders of the Church, Olsen provides an interesting analysis of this scriptural history for Latter-day Saints.

The last two papers offer remarks regarding the later retellings of the First Vision. Lisa Olsen Tait discusses Susa Young Gates and her article “Vision Beautiful” celebrating the centennial anniversary of the First Vision (pp. 237–56). The article originally discussed what the First Vision meant to women, especially in their fight for suffrage, and provides fascinating insights. Casey Paul Griffiths’ paper discusses a brief history of theatrical attempts to portray the First Vision (pp. 257–77). Griffiths shows that the insights provided by people attempting to capture the theophanic beauty of the First Vision highlight some of the challenges that Joseph Smith likely faced when trying to capture the details of this event in words. Around the same time Griffiths presented this paper, Anthony Sweat published an article in *BYU Studies Quarterly* discussing artistic representations of the First Vision. Similar themes are discussed in the two papers that will interest readers, such as how different Church leaders wanted to depict this event, the effect these depictions have on Latter-day Saints, and how various representations incorporated different accounts of the First Vision.10

This volume is a wonderful addition to any Latter-day Saint’s library. The research behind the various papers ranges in topic, depth, and scope, offering new insights to many aspects of the First Vision. The editors and researchers who have together provided access to these papers in this volume have done a great service to the Latter-day Saints, and the insights offered in this volume may prove instrumental in Church history and the early life of Joseph Smith studies moving forward.

[Author’s Note: My thanks to Neal and Jasmin Rappleye for reviewing an earlier draft of this review and for their insights.]

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Covenant Theology for Latter-day Saints

Jasmin Gimenez Rappleye


Abstract: Covenants are central in the Latter-day Saint temple liturgy, our scriptural canon is infused with them, and General Authorities have increasingly drawn attention to their importance in the last half-century. Yet many Latter-day Saints are still unfamiliar with the form and function of covenants and the role they play in God’s plan of salvation. Kerry Muhlestein, well-informed by his academic training in ancient history and scripture, provides a lucid introduction to covenants for Latter-day Saints.

Latter-day Saint theology is, at its core, a covenant theology. Latter-day Saints believe that God first covenanted with man in the Garden of Eden. That covenant was perpetuated through Abraham, Moses, David, the Nephites and Lamanites, Jesus Christ, and finally through Joseph Smith in the restoration of the gospel. By entering into this new and everlasting covenant, Latter-day Saints promise to love and obey God and to love and serve others. In return, God promises exaltation and eternal life. This essentially describes God’s plan of salvation, yet many Latter-day Saints struggle to understand the importance of covenants and the brethren’s recent emphasis on “the covenant path.”

1. The first reference in General Conference to “the covenant path” was in 2007 in an address by Elaine S. Dalton. She quoted an Ensign article wherein Elder Jeffrey R. Holland taught that “The promptings of the Holy Ghost will always be sufficient for our needs if we keep to the covenant path.” See Jeffrey R. Holland, “What I Wish Every New Member Knew — and Every Longtime Member Remembered,” Ensign (October 2006), 11–12; Elaine S. Dalton, “Stay on the Path,”
Kerry Muhlestein provides an approachable introduction to and exploration of this covenant theology. His explanation of these ancient and sometimes esoteric concepts is easy to understand. Because of his rigorous academic background in ancient Near Eastern studies and Egyptology, he helps Latter-day Saints view covenants through the rich lens of antiquity, while keeping the concepts relevant to our day. Muhlestein’s book is comprised of eight chapters with three appendices. He first defines the new and everlasting covenant that encompasses God’s great plan of happiness, covering how it operated in the Old Testament, and focusing particularly on its implementation with Abraham. After a brief excursus to explain this covenant’s inclusivity, he details both its blessings and stipulations. The rest of the book largely deals with the covenant’s implementation in our lives — how to be a covenant people, how to gather Israel in the latter days, and how to rely on the grace of Jesus Christ for our shortcomings.

The Many Covenants in Israel’s History

One of the important contributions of this book is Muhlestein’s ability to simplify what at first appears to be a confusing assortment of different covenants with different people. Latter-day Saints are likely familiar with covenants made in the temple and thus familiar with the idea that God covenanted with Adam and Eve. However, God also made a formal covenant with Abraham, called the Abrahamic Covenant. Then God covenanted with the Israelites on Mt. Sinai to form the Mosaic Covenant and the Law of Moses. God forged a covenant with King David and his line. Jesus’s teachings in the four gospels are sometimes referred to as the “new” covenant, which supersedes the Mosaic law. Then finally, in the latter days, God established a “new and everlasting covenant,” often thought to refer to celestial marriages.

While these may all seem like disparate covenants, Muhlestein argues that they are one and the same (pp. 4–6), so the New and Everlasting Covenant is the Abrahamic Covenant. The covenant given to Moses, Adam and Eve, David, the Nephites, and Joseph Smith are all reImplementations of the same promise that God makes with his

*Ensign* (May 2007), 113. Since that time, there has been an exponential increase in discussion on “the covenant path,” which refers to the way to eternal life that is paved with covenants.
children. As Joseph Fielding Smith explained, “the new and everlasting covenant is the sum total of all gospel covenants and obligations.”

The phrase “new and everlasting covenant” (D&C 22:1; 131:2; 132:6, 19, 26–27, 41–42) can cause confusion because of its seeming relationship to recency and to marriage. Many Latter-day Saints associate the “new and everlasting covenant” with celestial marriage and even plural marriage because of its extended discussion in D&C 132. However, the phrase was first used years earlier to refer to entering into the gate of baptism (D&C 22:1). This implies that the new and everlasting covenant is not just about the sealing covenant but the totality of all covenants that lead souls back to Heavenly Father. The reason it is referred to as “new” is not because of its recent invention but because of its perpetual novelty. “New and everlasting” form a hendiadys: two words joined by a conjunction to express a single, unified idea. Instead of viewing the covenant as paradoxically both eternal and never-before-seen, one can view the covenant as eternally fresh or everlasting new. As Muhlestein puts it, “This covenant is everlasting because it was established before the world was created, and its blessings will never end. It is new because it is continually reestablished in dispensation after dispensation. It is new each time it is given again” (p. 5).

Muhlestein takes some time to note that the topic of covenant has garnered increased interest among Latter-day Saints. Muhlestein attributes this increased interest to President Nelson’s emphatic coverage of the topic. He noted several instances since 2018 when the prophet has spoken extensively on covenants. I believe President Nelson’s emphasis on covenants is one important data point within a larger trend. The Church has seen a steady increase in covenant discussion for most of the 20th century, as seen by a survey of General Conference mentions of “covenant” over the years (see Figure 1).

In this first chapter, Muhlestein also answers why covenants are necessary. A God of unconditional and infinite love wants to bless His children. However, God knows that the greatest blessings and joy are to come from forging a special bond with Him and ultimately learning to become like Him. The process of drawing close to God and becoming like God can only come through a covenantal connection. Covenants require commitment and sacrifice from both parties and result in strong ties of loyalty and love. The particular kind of love engendered

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through God’s covenant was referred to in the Old Testament as *hesed* or “loving-kindness,” “mercy,” or “love.” This covenantal kind of love compels God to love and care for us as his children. No matter how many times we stray or falter in our commitments, God’s *hesed* means that he will never stop working with us to reach our potential.

![Figure 1. The number of times “covenant” has been mentioned in General Conference from 1839–2021, determined by a search in the Word Cruncher General Conference library. (Excludes instances of “Doctrine and Covenants.”)](image)

**Establishing the Covenant**

The second chapter of this book expounds on the history of how God first implemented this eternal covenant with mankind. This covenant was first formed before the creation of the earth. God the Father covenanted with the Son, and the Godhead covenanted with mankind. They established the plan of salvation by covenanteding to save mankind through faith and obedience to gospel principles. God first covenanted with mortal man upon the Fall of Adam and Eve. However, because of wickedness, the commitment to the covenant eventually waned. God renewed his covenant with Noah and his family and again with Abraham and Sarah.

After establishing that this Abrahamic Covenant is the same covenant made with Adam, Muhlestein clarifies that the Abrahamic iteration of this covenant required the members of this covenant to be part of Abraham and Sarah’s seed. From this point on, the covenant would be associated with lineage (p. 23).
Muhlestein takes time to helpfully explain the practice of covenant making in the ancient world through an explanation of Genesis 15. In this episode, the Lord desires to ratify his covenant with Abraham, so the Lord has Abraham cut various animals in half and line them up in two rows. A smoking, burning light then passes through the severed animal carcasses to certify the covenant. As strange and morbid as this scene appears to modern audiences, the act is pregnant with meaning. In antiquity, one did not simply “make” a covenant, but rather one “cut” a covenant. Cutting a covenant alluded to the sacrifice of animals or signaling potential bodily harm as a consequence for breaking the covenant. God’s presence passing through the halved animals was an outward sign to communicate something to the effect of, “may I be cut as these animals if I do not fulfill my end of the covenant.” Muhlestein rightly points out this context, as it is crucial for understanding the solemnity of covenants and the consequences of disloyalty.

Between Genesis 11–25, the Book of Abraham, the Joseph Smith Translation,3 and the Book of Mormon,4 we have quite a bit of information on the Abrahamic implementation of God’s covenant with mankind. This covenant includes possible officiators (Melchizedek), a progressive sequence of initiation, terms and conditions, a symbolic ritual to confirm the covenant, new names for both Abraham and Sarah, and children (pp. 24–25). Latter-day Saints may find helpful parallels in their own temple worship as they strive to understand the magnitude of God’s covenants with his people.

This focus on covenant persists throughout the Old Testament, when Jacob receives a new name as a token of his new covenant with God and again in the Exodus narrative, which is preoccupied with Israel covenanting with God on Mount Sinai. When God establishes his tabernacle, he ritualizes many aspects of this covenant through the cult of priests, who wear sacred robes, perform ritual gestures, and administer in God’s liturgy. The covenant is again reiterated in the entirety of the book of Deuteronomy, which resembles the structure of other Near Eastern covenant-treaty patterns (p. 29). This covenant is renewed regularly between the time of Joshua and the reign of Israel’s kings. As Muhlestein articulated, “the teachings of the Old Testament

3. See Genesis 14:25–40 JST; Genesis 15:9–12 JST; Genesis 17:3–12 JST; Genesis 17:23–24 JST; Genesis 21:31–32 JST.
prophets make clear that the covenant was the central and unifying theme of their society” (p. 29).

**The Inclusive Nature of a Chosen People**

The third chapter in this book is a short but effective one. It targets a pain point for many members of the church who feel that being a “chosen people” is a form of elitism. Being the “one true church” can seem exclusionary to other religions with virtue and truth. However, Muhlestein explains that such sentiments arise from misunderstanding covenant theology. Those who participate in God’s covenant are indeed a chosen people. However, the purpose of being “chosen” is not to assume a position of power but rather to be of service. Members of the covenant community have a sacred obligation to share the covenant with all humanity. The ultimate goal of Heavenly Father’s plan is to make all of his children “chosen.” “The covenant is not only a group that all can join, it is a community of which everyone is vigorously encouraged to become a part” (p. 32).

Part of being in God’s covenant is sharing the covenant. When one understands this concept, the Church’s emphasis on missionary work reflects new significance. Volunteering to serve a mission is not simply a recruitment trip, it’s a consecration of time that allows all God’s children to join the new and everlasting covenant. Missionary work opens the gate for all to become the peculiar treasure of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This work applies to more than full-time missionaries; it is a sacred obligation of every member of the covenant community. Historically, there are several examples in the Old Testament of willing outsiders being brought into the covenant community. This includes groups such as Jonah’s converts at Ninevah as well as individuals such as Caleb and Ruth. Muhlestein argues that Jesus may have limited his ministry to Israel because Christ needed to reestablish the covenant he had already made with them. It was then the task of Israel to go out to all the world and gather everyone else (pp. 36–37).^{5}

The author notes that covenant keepers throughout history have not always been perfect at creating inclusion. There have been times in the history of ancient Israel and the restored Church when imperfect people have contributed to exclusionary behavior and attitudes. However, the most important truth of the covenant is that “there are no covenant

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^{5} Muhlestein further adds that the inclusivity of the covenant is not limited to people currently living. Part of being a member of the covenant is spreading the covenant with those on the other side of the veil (p. 38). This involves dedicated temple and family history work.
blessings that are not fully available to each and every person who is willing to make the covenant” (p. 39).

**Blessings, Cursings, and Obligations of the Covenant**

Chapters four and five deal with the content of God’s covenant: the obligations, the blessings, and the cursings. If the participants of the covenant successfully adhere to the covenant’s stipulations and requirements, they will be overwhelmingly blessed with all that God has. Conversely, covenant members who do not fulfill their obligations will be met with consequences. However, as Muhlestein points out, God’s blessings far outweigh the consequences, and the Atonement of Jesus Christ redeems mankind from their missteps.

The most important blessing and result of the covenant is a new relationship with God:

> It also welds a special connection between covenanters and God, one in which they behave more like God and develop/receive a more godly nature as God aids them in this process. Covenants are about connections, and the primary connection is the one we make with God. This is one of the main reasons why the path God has chosen for us is the covenant path, because it has within it the ability to help us become what we need to become by helping us create an exalting connection with God. (p. 45)

In addition to a new relationship, the covenant brings about a multitude of blessings. Muhlestein summarizes the blessings of the covenant as follows:

- Special relationship with God
- Access to special mercy and love
- Prosperity
- Promised land
- Protection
- Rulership
- Posterity
- We will be a blessing to posterity
- Access to the gospel and its ordinances for us and our posterity
- We will be gathered
- Exaltation
For each item, he goes into detail explaining how that blessing fits into the overall covenantal plan. He details the specific blessings promised to Abraham, and how those blessings map onto latter-day Israel. Of particular interest is his discussion on priesthood ordinances. While the Abraham narrative is predominantly from a male perspective, Muhlestein is careful to frequently emphasize the necessary feminine component of the new and everlasting covenant. One of the main vehicles for God’s covenant is priesthood ordinances. Muhlestein explains, “It seems covenant is the primary way we draw priesthood power into our lives” (p. 48). Instead of emphasizing particular priesthood offices or functions, he underscores how the ordinances of the temple are what truly manifest the power of godliness. Both men and women have equal access to the priesthood through the ordinances of the temple, which help us become more like God.

With the abundant blessings of the covenant come covenantal obligations. Covenants are two-way promises, and the blessings are conditional upon our fulfilling our obligations. However, Muhlestein is quick to point out that the list of blessings far outstrips the few requirements God asks of us. Our obligations to God are as follows:

- Love God
- Worship no other Gods
- Let God prevail in our lives
- Obedience
- Love and care for others
- Enter into covenantal ordinances
- Share the covenant, its ordinances, and the gospel (gather Israel)
- Return (repent) when we stray

The requirement of obedience is of particular interest to Latter-day Saints, who receive instruction in temples to obey the Lord. Obedience to God’s commandments may seem to some an arduous or mundane commitment. However, it is the first law of heaven and is much more than checking off a list of “thou shalt’s” and “thou shalt not’s.” “When our relationship with God is such that our burning, overarching, and overwhelming emotion, the yearning of our soul, is a love for Him, then we naturally seek to do His will. We call this keeping the commandments” (p. 63). Muhlestein notes that while the English phrase “keep the commandments” refers to obedience, its Hebrew counterpart contains rich undertones of meaning. To “keep” in Hebrew is shamar, which also connotes to “guard, watch, observe, or protect.” In this light,
“‘Keeping’ isn’t just something we do, it is something we feel; it is part of who we are” (p. 63).

As Jesus taught in his ministry, and as the law of Moses emphasizes, second to loving God is loving one’s fellow man. Muhlestein teaches that Alma’s admonition to “mourn with those that mourn” and “comfort those that stand in need of comfort” (Mosiah 18:8–9) entails protecting “groups of people who were at an inherent disadvantage” (p. 65). Bible justice refers to meting out fair and equitable judgments to the poor, widowed, and disadvantaged in society. It is the obligation of every covenant keeper to identify the vulnerable segments of society and do our best to minister to their needs.

Since all of humanity are fallen and imperfect, it is inevitable that we will falter in our adherence to God’s covenant. The new and everlasting covenant lays out consequences for breaking the covenant as well as the path back towards progress. The beauty of God’s consequences is that they all lead back to him. Because of God’s covenantal love towards his people, when his people turn away from him, God responds by inflicting circumstances that would naturally draw his people back to him in contrition. Affliction and difficulty are never enjoyable, but they are often the catalyst needed to compel God’s people to humility and repentance (p. 70). The Lord promises Israel that no matter how many times they stray, if they sincerely turn back to him, he will have compassion and gather them into covenantal communion once again.

### How to Be a Covenant People

Chapter six turns the reader’s attention to how to build a covenant community. Many Latter-day Saints conceptualize their covenants as individual commitments with God. However, God’s new and everlasting covenant is both individual in attention and corporate in scope. The covenant deals with how individuals can return to the presence of their Heavenly Parents. However, the covenant is incomplete unless the entire human race is saved. The atonement of Jesus Christ allows all of humanity the opportunity for exaltation. Part of entering into this covenant with God entails sharing that covenant with others and building a covenant, Zion community.

We must realize that our own salvation is tied to how well we bring salvation to others on both sides of the veil, and at the same time, we must forget about saving ourselves and concentrate on saving others, on saving Israel. We have to
recognize that for covenant holders, salvation is a community affair. Jehovah is the Redeemer of all Israel. (p. 82)

Individual piety will get a person only so far. The covenant community is vital for becoming like God, for only by loving others can we approach godliness. According to Muhlestein, members of a covenant community:

- Are a “peculiar” or special, distinct people from the rest of the world
- Are sanctified by God when they obey His commandments.
- Help and support each other temporally and spiritually
- Belong to the tribes of Israel through lineage and adoption

Muhlestein goes over principles of birthright and primogeniture in ancient Israel. He then takes time to discuss the blessings and heritage of each tribe of the house of Israel. While many Latter-day Saints claim Ephraim as their spiritual heritage, each tribe has rich blessings associated with it. “While each tribe has its own unique characteristics and role, the tribes of Israel have more in common within the covenant than they have differences. They will each do their individual part, while all will experience the blessings of Abraham” (p. 96).

**Covenant in the Latter-Days**

In the final chapters of his book, Kerry Muhlestein turns from antiquity to the present day by helping readers gain perspective on how God’s new and everlasting covenant has been implemented in the dispensation of the fulness of times. While the ancient world is clearly his area of expertise, he does a good job situating covenant theology in the 19th century and in today’s church. Our discussions on the Restoration often center on plates, angels, seer stones, and miraculous visions, yet Muhlestein argues that covenant theology was always a primary focus of the restoration of the gospel. The Lord taught Joseph Smith in his First Vision that “the Everlasting Covenant” was broken and needed to be restored; the angel Moroni emphasized to Joseph that the Restoration existed “that the covenant which God made with ancient Israel was at hand to be fulfilled” (p. 99). Emphasis on God’s covenant is continually woven throughout Joseph’s revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants.

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Muhlestein helps shift perspective on the purposes and nature of the Restoration. Instead of viewing the Restoration as a long list of discrete doctrine and practices that needed to be restored (such as baptism, priesthood, apostleship, temple rites, Relief Society, celestial marriage, etc.), readers can appreciate that the Restoration of the Gospel of Jesus Christ can be framed in one holistic paradigm: God’s new and everlasting covenant. All ordinances, priesthood offices, organizational structures, policies, doctrines, and theological innovations can be circumscribed into one great whole, as God’s covenant relationship with His children.

The covenant theology described in the Bible, Book of Mormon, and Doctrine and Covenants comes to tangible fruition in the ordinances of the temple. The dedication of the Kirtland temple restored the keys necessary to make sacred covenants in the temple and gather Israel. The gathering of Israel is essential for God’s plan of salvation, as gathering allows all of God’s children to develop a more intimate, covenantal relationship with Him. The primary tool for the gathering of Israel will be the Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ. With the tribe of Ephraim as the messengers, the message of the Book of Mormon will gather the members of Israel who have lost their covenant consciousness to a remembrance of their Redeemer. Essentially, to be a covenant people, we must be focused on developing a close, covenantal relationship with our Heavenly Father and on gathering Israel through the message of the Book of Mormon.

Yet despite the simplicity of the formula, Muhlestein warns that we must be careful not to get complacent in our covenant keeping. One check against complacency is always assessing whether our actions are motivated by Christlike love. Our behavior should be motivated by pure love for our God and pure love for our fellow men:

After feeling God’s love, we are more able to love Him, and that is even more powerful. Feeling loved by others, including God, is fulfilling, motivating, and joyful. Still, the greatest joy we will ever experience is when we are consumed with a love of God. This should not be surprising. God is not trying to help His children become beings with a perfect capacity to feel loved, He is trying to help us become beings with a perfect

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capacity to love. That is the higher ideal, and hence, it will lead to the higher joy. (p. 120)

One helpful connection Muhlestein makes is between covenant and sacrifice. He underscores the importance of the Atonement of Jesus Christ by reminding readers that covenants always involved sacrifice. Jesus Christ sacrificed his life to atone for the sins of the world and put in motion God’s new and everlasting covenant. Members individually sacrifice themselves when they enter into the covenant of baptism. In the temple, members again promise to sacrifice. Our individual sacrifices emulate the great sacrifice of Jesus Christ’s atonement and help us exemplify true covenant keeping.

Jesus Christ is at the center of the new and everlasting covenant. His atonement enables all God’s covenant children to return to his presence. Christ’s influence can help sanctify us and make us more holy in God’s eyes. Focusing our thoughts and hearts on Jesus Christ can help us develop greater love and charity for God and for God’s children. To conclude the book, Muhlestein summarizes:

Above all, remember this: the covenant you have willingly made has bound you to the Great God of the Universe. That bond provides you with access to Christ’s redeeming power. If you seek to remain bound to Christ, you cannot fail, for He has already succeeded. Learn about and from the covenant and put your heart into keeping it, foremost by loving God. For, above all things, the covenant is about us giving ourselves to God, just as His Son did, and as He has fully devoted Himself to saving us. (p. 135)

Conclusion

Kerry Muhlestein’s book is an excellent introduction to covenants for Latter-day Saints. It explains their purpose, their format, their structure, how they manifest throughout various dispensations, and how Latter-day Saints can be covenant people today. The book’s brevity and approachable writing make it deceptively simple. Despite its accessibility, it conveys sophisticated concepts that undergird the very foundations of Latter-day Saint theology. Muhlestein’s book is a thorough treatment of covenant theology for Latter-day Saints. It provides helpful background in ancient scripture while remaining highly applicable to daily devotion and modern worship. God Will Prevail is an excellent addition to Latter-day
Saint literature, especially in preparation for the 2022 *Come, Follow Me* curriculum in the Old Testament.

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**Abstract:** In a must-have book written for a Latter-day Saint audience, Donald Parry offers profound insights into 175 features of ancient and modern temples, including architectural features, aspects of ritual, and temple-related doctrine.

In this book written for a temple-going Latter-day Saint audience, Donald W. Parry, professor of Hebrew Bible at Brigham Young University, provides a personal yet intriguing introduction to the complex symbolism of temples in the restored Gospel of Jesus Christ. Although clearly oriented to latter-day temples and temple doctrine, the book repeatedly highlights the continuity between ancient Israelite and modern concepts of the temple.

The book is nicely bound and illustrated with more than 110 images, mostly color photographs. It includes a table of contents listing all 175 entries, an introduction laying out the purpose and principles of the book, entries organized in alphabetical order, a bibliography, and a single alphabetical index.

The selection of topics in the 175 entries covers temple ritual and general temple-related doctrine as well as temple architecture. Among entries relating to ritual, the topics of hand gestures and sacred vestments are well represented (see “Gestures of Approach,” “Hands and Covenants,” “Hand, Filling the Priest’s,” “Hand, Raised in Oath,” “Hands, Clasped,” “Hands, Laying On of,” “Hands, Laying On of, on Sacrificial Animals,” and “Hands — Prayer with ‘Uplifted Hands’”; “Garments,” “Symbols, Diverse,” “Vestments, Sacred,” “Vestments,
Sacred, Anticipate the Resurrection,” “Vestments, Sacred, Point to Jesus Christ and His Atonement,” “Vestments, Sacred, Symbolism of,” and “Vestments, Sacred, Worn by God, Angels, and Redeemed Souls”). The emphasis in these areas reflects the similar emphasis in Parry’s previously published works. Other entries also deal with topics Parry has published about, including “Prayer Circle (Ancient and Modern)” and “Recommend, Temple” (see my comment 7, below).

Although this book contains much that deals with ancient temples and that is of interest to scholars (drawing on Parry’s decades-long professional engagement with ancient studies), it is not a purely scholarly treatment of temples. Indeed, the book is unapologetically devotional. Parry frequently bears his testimony of temple work in these pages. In the introduction, he shares inspiring personal experiences from his own life and those of his relatives (pp. 10–11, 25–26). Time and again throughout the book, he reminds the reader that temples — both ancient and modern — are Christ-centered (see, for example, pp. 16–18, 41–42, 43–44, 60–61, 162–63). Parry clearly sets forth a paradigm of temple doctrine in which ancient temples, the Bible, modern temples, and the teachings of the restored Gospel of Jesus Christ represent one continuous whole. Thus, he quotes from modern prophets and apostles to illuminate the ancient temple, and he refers to the Bible to explain the modern temple (see pp. 5–8, 21, 25–26).

Many readers will be surprised to find their knowledge expanding as they encounter facts and insights they never considered before. To cite just one of my personal favorites, the entry on “Big Dipper (Ursa Major)” (pp. 65–67) mentions four temples that include representations of this constellation (Salt Lake, Washington DC, Winter Quarters Nebraska, and Anchorage, Alaska) and provides profound insights into the symbolism of these representations, one of which was originally given by Truman O. Angell, the architect of the Salt Lake Temple.

On the whole, this book is highly recommended for any reader who seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the modern temple and to enrich his or her experience in attending the House of the Lord. The book will expand the horizons of even advanced Gospel scholars, yet it is also appropriate reading for youth just beginning their temple experience. It is difficult to imagine a better addition to the library of a family seeking a more invested pattern of worship centered on the temple.

Here I offer some comments on selected portions of the book, including some suggested improvements that could be taken into account if a future edition is made:
1. On page 14, Parry points out that “God has ‘always commanded’ His covenant people to build” temples, citing Doctrine and Covenants 124:39. He correctly explains that “each and every dispensation has had temples” — or, he writes, “the equivalent of temples, which includes mountains and mountaintops.” It is true that mountains have sometimes functioned as temples where men and women have experienced theophanies (see the entry “Mountain as ‘Temple’ and Temple as ‘Mountain’” and the subsequent mountain-related entries, pp. 182–86). However, the inclusion of mountains in this context on page 14 seems to obscure the point. The verb build implies an actual constructed temple, and it is significant that the practice of constructing such buildings has existed in every dispensation. In the context of D&C 124:39, the emphasis is on the importance of a built structure with a baptismal font as the preferred place for temple ordinances on behalf of the dead.

2. In the entry “Ascension” (pp. 58–59), it may be worth mentioning that even smaller temples that do not require upward movement through staircases, like the Nashville and Saint Paul temples, are constructed so there is an incline from the endowment room to the celestial room. Thus, the architectural embodiment of the notion of spiritual ascent is very common. This entry ends with a rare (and welcome) cross-reference, referring the reader to the entry “Stairs/Staircases”; another related entry is “Jacob’s Ladder (‘Flight of Steps’)” (p. 162).

3. In the entry on “Blemishes, Priests and High Priests with” (p. 67), Parry states that priests with “certain physical conditions” were not permitted to serve at the altar “nor partake of the holy food,” citing Leviticus 21:16–23. Actually, according to this passage, priests with blemishes were permitted to partake of the holy food (see verse 22: “He shall eat the bread of his God, both of the most holy, and of the holy”). Parry also states that this restriction of priests with blemishes was enforced by “excommunication or even death,” citing Leviticus 22:1–9. However, this latter passage deals with a different commandment regarding priests who are ritually unclean. The law regarding priests
with blemishes does not involve a prescribed punishment and has to do with a distinction between the holy and the profane, not with the distinction between clean and unclean, as Jacob Milgrom and other commentators have noted.¹

4. In the entry on “Gethsemane, Temple Symbolism in” (pp. 131–32), Parry points out that Jesus’s progressive separation to pray left concentric groups of eight and three apostles. This recalls the eight witnesses and the three witnesses of the Book of Mormon. It could be that the apostles in Gethsemane were likewise to serve in the role of witnesses (which would make the fact that they fell asleep all the more poignant). There are also many points of similarity between this event and Jesus’s sacred intercessory prayer in 3 Nephi 19:16–36.

5. In the last row of the table on page 136, Parry compares different types of food associated with the graded holy spaces in the Israelite temple. Under “Most Holy” (corresponding to the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle), he has “Sacrifices”; under “Holy” (corresponding to the Holy Place), he has “Sacrifices, tithes”; and under “Less Holy” (corresponding to the court surrounding the altar of sacrifice), he has “Pure food.” More explanation would be helpful here. I would tend to put “Sacrifices” under “Less Holy,” “Shewbread” under “Holy,” and “Pot of manna” under “Most Holy” (compare the entry on “Seven Promises ‘to Him that Overcometh,” p. 222, with the explanation of the “hidden manna” in Revelation 2:17 — the reference in Revelation is to the manna “hidden” in the ark of the covenant in the cella of the temple).

6. Under “Hands, Laying On of, on Sacrificial Animals” (p. 145), Parry cites the procedure for the scapegoat ritual in Leviticus 16 to demonstrate that the laying on of hands “symbolically transmits the sins of the human(s) onto the animal’s head.” However, the scapegoat ritual was different

from the laying of hands on animals offered for sacrifice. Many commentators consider these to be entirely different gestures with different functions. The function of the gesture as described by Parry is one among many options. Some discussion on the relationship between this gesture and the laying on of hands in priestly ordination (which Parry includes as a separate entry) would also be helpful.

7. In the entry on “Prayer Circle (Ancient and Modern)” (pp. 200–201), I wish that Parry had included a reference to his own article about the possible reference to a prayer circle in Psalms.² This would be significant because it would demonstrate the continuity of the prayer circle from ancient Israel through early Christian times and into the modern dispensation. Elsewhere, Parry does provide references to his own studies where relevant, such as in the entry on “Recommend, Temple” (pp. 208–10), which includes a reference to his article “‘Who Shall Ascend into the Mountain of the Lord?’”³

8. The discussion of “Women and the Ancient Temple” (pp. 274–75) should be read together with “Hannah, Anna, and Mary” (pp. 147–50). In these two sections, the omission of any discussion of differences in women’s access to sacred space over time is noticeable. For instance, one wonders about Hannah’s ability to approach the sanctuary in Shiloh (1 Samuel 1:9, 12), while the “court of the women” in the temple of Herod was separated from the temple court by the “court of the men of Israel.” Parry states (p. 274) that “women had access to the temple court area,” but this statement should be qualified.

Finally, I offer one general suggestion for improvement. As Parry states in the introduction, despite the alphabetical organization of the entries, the book is not intended to be encyclopedic. The alphabetical organization allows all the topics to be made accessible without the need

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for a subjective hierarchical organization of the topics. However, this also means that some topics which logically belong together have to be split up — for example, “Cherubim (Guardians of Sacred Space)” and “Guards, Temple (Sentinels and Angels)”; “Clouds and Cloudstones,” “Earthstones,” “Moonstones,” and “Sunstones/Sun Images.” There are no cross-references between these entries. Also, the Index already functions as an alphabetical guide to the entries. Thus, in a subsequent edition, there may be an opportunity for a structuring of the entries based on a logical progression rather than on alphabetical order. Alternatively, if alphabetical order is retained, it would be helpful to have more cross-references, perhaps in the form of a “See also” section immediately under each header or at the end of each entry.

Parry, an exceptionally perceptive and creative scholar of the ancient world, has given us the cream of decades of study on temple symbolism. This book promises to deepen the faith and enrich the temple experience of any who undertake to peruse its pages.

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Abstract: In previous and pending publications I have proposed interpretations of various features of Nephi’s writings. In this paper I undertake a comprehensive discussion of the seven passages in which Nephi and his successor Jacob explain the difference between the large and the small plates and describe the divinely mandated profile for each. While most readers of the Book of Mormon have been satisfied with the simple distinction between the large plates in which the large plates are a comprehensive historical record of the Nephite experience and the small plates are a record of selected spiritual experiences, including revelations and prophecies, that approach has been challenged in some academic writing. What has been missing in this literature is a comprehensive and focused analysis of all seven of the textual profiles for these two Nephite records. In the following analysis, I invoke the insights of Hebrew rhetoric as developed by Hebrew Bible scholars over the past half century to articulate a vision of how these scattered explanations are designed and placed to support the larger rhetorical structures Nephi has built into his two books. The conclusions reached support the traditional approach to these texts.

The intent of this paper is not to advance either a comprehensive or a final interpretation of Nephi’s writings in First and Second Nephi. Rather, it is limited to a discussion of one dimension of those writings which has not previously been adequately identified and analyzed, but which should play an important role for any attempt at comprehensive interpretation. My own understanding of Nephi’s two books continues to evolve in important ways and benefits continually from the insights of other students of the text. I agree with Ben McGuire’s conclusion
that both individuals and reading communities should keep their interpretations of this sacred text open to future insights.¹

Readers of the Book of Mormon commonly assume the adequacy of a simple and straightforward explanation for the existence of Nephi’s Small Plates (sometimes abbreviated herein as SP).² As explained at various points in the text, Nephi had undertaken a shorter version of his Large Plates (LP) record by selecting out the spiritual teachings, prophecies and revelations for a more focused presentation. But the adequacy of that explanation has come under considerable strain from two very different directions. In 1986 Fred Axelgard advanced the idea that the description provided for the Large Plates of Nephi as being more historical also applied to all of First Nephi and the first five chapters of Second Nephi.³ And now in an as yet unpublished working paper, I am advancing a new paradigm for interpretation of the Small Plates that both supports and pushes well beyond the traditional analysis by emphasizing Nephi’s use of Hebrew rhetoric⁴ to structure all of First


² For purposes of clarity, I will depart from common practice by capitalizing the common names of the different Nephite records as they appear in modern discourse.


⁴ In the Western world we have inherited a highly developed analysis of compositional techniques and verbal formulations (figures of speech) that are designed to persuade readers and audiences that was developed by ancient Greeks and then Romans as early as the sixth century BCE. Over the last century or so, Bible scholars have discovered a different system of Hebrew rhetoric that was being taught in seventh-century scribal schools in Jerusalem and that surfaces frequently in the writings of the Bible. For a more extended explanation, see Noel B. Reynolds, “The Return of Rhetorical Analysis to Bible Studies,” Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture 42 (2018): 77–93.
and Second Nephi as a carefully calculated expansion and elaboration of Lehi’s vision of the Tree of Life. In this essay I will explain why Nephi provides so many versions of his explanations for the Small Plates by showing how these repeated passages provide key pieces of Nephi’s rhetorical structures. Finally, the information will be condensed into a table that displays the multiple ways in which the seven different profiles for Nephi’s two sets of plates are composed and related.

**The Small Plates of Nephi and Hebrew Rhetoric**

Nephi’s writings constitute the bulk of the Small Plates of Nephi as we refer to them today. When he undertook that new composition thirty years after leaving Jerusalem, he was a mature prophet/ruler. He drew upon three primary records and his own experience:

1. The Brass Plates that Lehi’s family brought from Jerusalem contained the five books of Moses, the genealogy of ancient Joseph’s descendants, “a record of the Jews from the beginning, even down to the commencement of the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah, and also the prophecies of the holy prophets from the beginning, … and also many prophecies which have been spoken by the mouth of Jeremiah” (1 Nephi 5:12–13). These plates included the writings of prophets not mentioned in the Hebrew Bible and apparently a version of Genesis similar to the Book of Moses that was revealed.

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7. The account of how Lehi’s sons retrieved the Brass Plates from Laban, who was his relative and custodian of the plates, is told in 1 Nephi 3–4, and the contents of those plates is summarized in 1 Nephi 5:10–16. All quotations from the Book of Mormon are taken from the Yale critical edition, including punctuation and capitalization. Italics are sometimes added to call readers’ attention to key terminology. See Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

8. Other prophets mentioned in the Book of Mormon include principally Zenos, but also Zenoach and Neum.
to Joseph Smith. The genealogy it contained and possibly the selection of prophetic texts it preserved belonged to the descendants of Joseph of Egypt, or at least to the descendants of his son Manasseh. The bulk of, or at least the older materials in, the Brass Plates were written in Egyptian and appear to have been a Manassite record preserved in the northern kingdom by a Josephite scribal school.

2. The record of his father Lehi minimally contained original accounts of his numerous revelations and probably his own account of his life and experiences.

3. And the Large Plates of Nephi contained Nephi’s own record of the revelations received by Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob, their teachings, and the history of their descendants that Nephi had been commanded to record at some earlier point. This was the main record handed through generations of Nephite kings and prophets and which eventually provided Mormon a primary resource for the abridgment which he prepared at the end of the Nephite dispensation and which Joseph Smith translated “by the gift and power of God” and published as the Book of Mormon in 1830.


11. Nephi refers to “the record which has been kept by my father” (1 Nephi 6:1). It may have been written on some kind of paper or engraved on metal. The most thorough study of elements of that book that may have been preserved in the writings of his descendants can be found in S. Kent Brown, “Recovering the Missing Record of Lehi,” in *From Jerusalem to Zarahemla: Literary and Historical Studies of the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1998): 28–54. Don Bradley has now taken the search for lost elements of the Book of Lehi to an important new level in Bradley, *The Lost 116 Pages*.

12. See Nephi’s explanation at 1 Nephi 19:1. These plates contained much of what would have been found in Lehi’s record. It also contained Nephi’s own prophecies. And it was continued by his successors and became the principal record of the Nephites from Nephi’s time down to the last days of the Nephites when Ammoron and then Mormon took charge of the records. These Large Plates of Nephi provided Mormon with his principal source for his “small abridgment” known today as the Book of Mormon.
New Plates, New Profile

Nephi provides us with no less than six explanations of the differences between, and reasons for, his two sets of plates. His brother Jacob begins his continuation of Nephi’s Small Plates with a seventh and long explanation of those differences according to instructions he had received from Nephi (Jacob 1:1–8). From these seven explanations, we learn that both writing projects were responses to direct commandments of the Lord. Nephi was surprised by the second command that came later in his life but took full advantage of his earlier work and his prior scribal education to produce a thoroughly planned and concise expression of the central revelations and teachings given to Lehi and Nephi for their dispensation. The importance of these explanations for Nephi is emphasized not only by their number, but also by their rhetorical structuring and placement.

All six of Nephi’s explanations are themselves structured in classical Hebrew rhetorical forms and include six chiasms, two sets of parallel couplets, and two sets of parallel triplets. All but one are placed strategically in the text to support larger rhetorical structures — as will be explained further below. In Hebrew rhetoric, these rhetorical forms serve to demarcate and identify these passages as separate and important textual units serving specific purposes — which purposes can be inferred from their contents and contexts in each case.

Two additional passages provide passing comments that also confirm the traditional understanding of the distinction Nephi made between his large and small plates — without rising to the level of independent Hebrew rhetorical structures. In describing the tense family division he was dealing with immediately after the death of Father Lehi, Nephi writes in these Small Plates that the extended sayings of Lehi “are written upon mine other plates, for a more history part are written upon mine other plates. And upon these plates I write the things of my soul and many of the scriptures which are engraven upon the plates of brass” (2 Nephi 4:14‒15). And at the very end of his writings in the Small Plates, Nephi shifts into a reflective farewell mode that does not clearly distinguish the two sets of plates and could be interpreted to refer to both. Pondering the potential future impact of his writings, he recognizes that many will “harden their hearts against the Holy Spirit” and “cast many things away which are written and esteem them as things of naught” (2 Nephi 33:2).

13. See 1 Nephi 1:1–3, 16–17, 6:1–6, 9:1–6, 19:1–6, and 2 Nephi 5:28–34 as displayed with rhetorical analyses in Table 2.
Nephi has struggled endlessly with that problem in his own family, as his writings forcefully attest. Now at the end, he simply invokes the Semitic idiom of *idem per idem* to close the debate: “I Nephi have written what I have written” (2 Nephi 33:3).  

2 Nephi 5:28–34

The sixth and final explanation offered by Nephi provides the specific historical context for the original commandment to make this second record and tells us it was not yet finished after a full decade of work. While the full text and its intricate rhetorical structure must have been worked out by this point, he had only reached 2 Nephi 5 in the process of engraving his composition onto the metal plates. Like most others that have written about the Small Plates, I used to assume that the form and content evolved over the decade or more that Nephi spent writing First and Second Nephi. But as is obvious in my recent writings, I now see strong evidence that these two books were carefully designed and polished as a finished whole before being committed to their final form on metal plates.

A  And *thirty years had passed away* from the time we left Jerusalem.
B  And I Nephi had kept the records upon my plates *(LP)* which I had made of my people thus far.
C  And it came to pass that the Lord God said unto me:
   a  “Make other plates *(SP)*;
   b  and thou shalt engraven many things upon them *(SP)* which are good in my sight for the profit of thy people.”
D  Wherefore I Nephi, to be obedient to the commandments of the Lord, went
   a  and made these plates *(SP)*
   b  upon which *(SP)* I have engraven these things.
C*  And I engraven that which is pleasing unto God.
   a  And if my people be pleased with the things of God,

b they be pleased with mine engravings which are upon these plates (SP).

B* And if my people desire to know the more particular part of the history of my people, they must search mine other plates (LP).

A* And it sufficeth me to say that forty years had passed away, and we had already had wars and contentions with our brethren.

While this last account helps us understand the historical context, it does not do much to clarify the prescribed profile for the new plates beyond saying that they should contain only those things “which are good in my sight for the profit of thy people.” And we are told that the Large Plates contain “the more particular part of the history of my people.” Nephi’s other five explanations all occur in First Nephi and provide a much more complete explanation of the profile. But before looking at each of these individually, it will be instructive to consult Jacob’s version of that profile as summarized in detail at the very opening of his contribution to the Small Plates.

Jacob’s Version

 Interestingly, Jacob’s account of the instructions given to him by Nephi gives us a much more complete and far richer explanation of the distinctive profiles assigned by divine mandate to the two sets of plates. We cannot miss what Jacob is doing when his opening line exactly mimics Nephi’s opening in the foregoing passage by informing us that “fifty-five years had passed away from the time that Lehi left Jerusalem.” But what follows is a considerably expanded statement of the guidelines he has been given by Nephi for choosing what to include in the Small Plates. By describing how those guidelines relate to his responsibilities and activities as the spiritual leader of his people, he provides us with a more practical and in-depth understanding of the Small Plates and their contents.

Jacob 1:1–8

For behold, it came to pass that fifty and five years had passed away from the time that Lehi left Jerusalem;

A wherefore Nephi gave me Jacob a commandment concerning these small plates (SP) upon which these things are engraven.
B And he gave me Jacob a commandment that I should write upon these plates (SP) a few of the things which I considered to be most precious,
1 that I should not touch save it were lightly concerning the history of this people, which are called the people of Nephi.
2 For he said that the history of his people should be engraved upon his other plates (LP).

C and that I should preserve these plates (SP) and hand them down unto my seed from generation to generation.
1 And if there were preaching which was sacred, a or revelation which was great, b or prophesying,
2 that I should engraven the heads of them upon these plates (SP) and touch upon them as much as it were possible, a for Christ’s sake b and for the sake of our people.

D For because of faith and great anxiety, it truly had been made manifest unto us concerning our people what things should happen unto them.

E And we also had many revelations E* and the spirit of much prophecy; D* wherefore we knew of Christ and his kingdom, which should come.

C* Wherefore we labored diligently among our people That we might persuade them to come unto Christ 1 and partake of the goodness of God, that they might enter into his rest,
2 lest by any means he should swear in his wrath they should not enter in, a as in the provocation in the days of temptation b while the children of Israel were in the wilderness.

B* Wherefore we would to God that we could persuade all men 1 not to rebel against God, to provoke him to anger, 2 but that all men would believe in Christ a and view his death
b and suffer his cross

c and bear the shame of the world.

A Wherefore I Jacob take it upon me to fulfill the commandment of my brother Nephi. (Jacob 1:1–8)

This long passage does not constitute a clear chiasm with repeated terminology in each of its parallel elements. But it does seem to feature a chiastic organization in that it begins and ends with references to the commandment Jacob had received from Nephi — making it minimally a rhetorical inclusio. And the two center lines feature simple synonymous descriptions of the key contents of the Small Plates. Further, it is easy to believe that Jacob saw parallels in the other elements marked out here as parts of a possible chiasm that may have been more obvious in the original language.

Given some of the interpretive confusion in the literature about the divinely prescribed purposes for Nephi’s second record, it is more than helpful to have the instructions he gave to his chosen successor author and custodian of the small plates as he (Jacob) interpreted those instructions. For Jacob the distinction between the Small Plates and the Large Plates was both simple and clear. Inasmuch as the Large Plates contained the history of the people of Nephi, he was instructed to touch only lightly on that history in the Small Plates. Rather Jacob was to include only “a few of those things which [he] considered to be most precious,” whether they be “preaching which was sacred, or revelation which was great, or prophesying.”

Jacob then goes on to make it clear that he was talking about preaching, revelation, and prophecies about Christ. Nephi took a more gradual approach, sprinkling references to Christ throughout his text. He eventually made his focus on Christ explicit and clear:

For we labor diligently to write, to persuade our children and also our brethren to believe in Christ and to be reconciled to God, for we know that it is by grace that we are saved after all that we can do. And notwithstanding we believe in Christ, we keep the law of Moses and look forward with steadfastness unto Christ until the law shall be fulfilled, for for this end was the law given. Wherefore the law hath become dead unto us, and we are made alive in Christ because of our faith, yet we keep the law because of the commandments. And we talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ; and we write according to our prophecies that
our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins. (2 Nephi 25:23–26)

Rather than beginning with a statement of his focus on Christ, Nephi made that focus even more powerfully clear by building the chiastic center of Second Nephi on that witness of Christ.¹⁶

One reviewer asked if I should recognize comments by three of Jacob’s successors as additional explanations of the purpose of the Small Plates, inasmuch as they seemed to echo Jacob’s phraseology that linked prophesy and revelation in Jacob 1:4 and 6, all in the context of references to the prophesied future coming of Christ. While I agree that these passages in Jarom 1:2, Omni 1:11, 25, and Words of Mormon 1:6 do reflect an awareness of Jacob’s account, they are only echoes and do not seem to constitute additional developed explanations of the purpose of the Small Plates, nor do they add additional insight on that issue. But the question does point to what eventually became a hard linkage in Nephite discourse between revelation and the spirit of prophecy, which I have treated at some length as one prominent example of the many hendiadyses that characterize Nephite discourse.¹⁷

As predicted by Nephi, Jacob and others found the Small Plates to be a precious resource as the spiritual leaders of the people of Nephi. That practical role had led Jacob to see the spiritual choices of the Nephites in a binary way:

Wherefore we labored diligently among our people that we might persuade them to come unto Christ and partake of the goodness of God, that they might enter into his rest. …

Wherefore we would to God that we could persuade all men not to rebel against God, to provoke him to anger, but that all men would believe in Christ and view his death and suffer his cross and bear the shame of the world. (Jacob 1:7–8)

Nephi’s Other Five Explanations

From these explanations, we learn that the Large Plates contain the “full account of the history of my people,” including “an account of the reigns of the kings and the wars and contentions of my people” (1 Nephi 9:2, 4). This included “the record of my father and also our journeyings in the

wilderness and the prophecies of my father,” “the genealogy or [Lehi’s] forefathers,” and also “many of mine own prophecies” (1 Nephi 19:1–2). In his final explanation, Nephi says, “if my people desire to know the more particular part of the history of my people, they must search mine other plates” — the Large Plates (2 Nephi 5:33).

The Small Plates were to meet a different profile. Nephi was instructed by the Lord God to “engraven many things upon them which are good in my sight for the profit of thy people” and “that which is pleasing unto God” (2 Nephi 5:30, 32). Nephi had earlier explained what he meant by “the things of God” and “things which are pleasing unto God” when he said: “For the fullness of mine intent is that I may persuade men to come unto the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob and be saved” (1 Nephi 6:3–5). For Nephi, that phrasing constitutes a meristic (abbreviated) version of the doctrine or gospel of Jesus Christ, which will be spelled out in its fullness only at the climax of his writing in 2 Nephi 31.18 But at this point he is ready to plunge into an account of the visualization of that gospel as given to Lehi and Nephi in the vision of the tree of life. In another paper, I show how these central chapters of First Nephi provide the foundation and visualization of the spiritual teachings and prophecies that are distributed throughout First and Second Nephi.19

At another point, Nephi explained that the Small Plates were made “for the special purpose that there should be an account engraven of the ministry of my people” (1 Nephi 9:3). Another explanation provides even more detail and nuance:

And after that I made these plates by way of commandment, I Nephi received a commandment that the ministry and the prophecies — the more plain and precious parts of them — should be written upon these plates, and that the things which were written should be kept for the instruction of my people, which should possess the land, and also for other wise


19. See Reynolds, “Lehi’s Vision, Nephi’s Blueprint.” Recognizing the foundation of Nephi’s spiritual teachings and prophecies in this section of First Nephi demonstrates again the error of interpreting 1 Nephi 1–2 Nephi 5 as the historical part of Nephi’s writings in contrast to the spiritual part in the remainder of 2 Nephi. See Reynolds, “On Doubting Nephi’s Break.”
purposes, which purposes are known unto the Lord. (1 Nephi 19:3)

The “other wise purposes … known unto the Lord” are usually interpreted to refer to an incident in the modern translation process which necessitated the insertion of the Small Plates translation as a replacement for the lost 116 pages of translation from the beginning of Mormon’s Gold Plates abridgement. The key point is that these Small Plates would preserve the prophecies and teachings “for the instruction” of the people. They may contain select bits of Nephite history to contextualize and support those teachings, but prophecies of Christ and God’s future dealings with Israel and the Gentiles and the teaching of the gospel and the plan of salvation will prove to be the clear focus of all of Nephi’s writings. The six stories that give First Nephi a historical cast are in fact carefully constructed into parallel chiastic sections designed to prove the decidedly spiritual thesis announced in chapter one:

But behold, I Nephi will shew unto you that the tender mercies of the Lord is over all them whom he hath chosen because of their faith to make them mighty, even unto the power of deliverance. (1 Nephi 1:20)

Inspired by the mid-century writings of Jacques Derrida, literary specialists began to rethink reading and writing and produced studies relating authors, audiences, and narrative beginnings in the 1970s and 1980s. LDS writer Benjamin McGuire leveraged some of this work to interpret some of these passages in Nephi in his 2014 postmodernist reading of Nephi. Of particular relevance to this paper, McGuire discussed four “narrative beginnings” he had identified in Nephi’s writings. I see McGuire’s paper as a very helpful contribution to the larger project of interpreting Nephi’s Small Plates. Once the role of Hebrew rhetoric is identified and assessed in Nephi’s writings, I see numerous additional ways in which McGuire’s framework can produce valuable new insights. But that will fall outside the limited scope of this paper.

1 Nephi 1:1–3

Nephi launched his introduction of the Small Plates with the facts that he “was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father” and that he had received “a great knowledge of the goodness and the mysteries of

20. See the detailed analysis of these six stories and their spiritual messages in Reynolds, “Nephi’s Outline.”
God.” This preface points us to the mental and spiritual profile of the Small Plates as discussed above. But he also brings in the material and physical aspects of metal record production:

A I Nephi having been born of goodly parents,
B therefore I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father.
A* And having seen many afflictions in the course of my days,
B* nevertheless having been highly favored of the Lord in all my days, …

The alternating parallel lines of this opening construction simultaneously introduce the blessings of being born in Lehi’s family and the afflictions suffered during his life of service to the Lord in a negative contrast. They also introduce his qualifications for writing an important book in a positive pairing. First, he has been taught in the highest compositional arts known to the Jerusalem scribal schools. And second, he has been taught by the Lord directly. This latter point will be repeated and made more explicit as he continues:

A yea, having had a great knowledge of the goodness and the mysteries of God,
B therefore I make a record of my proceedings in my days.
C Yea, I make a record in the language of my father,
   a which consists of the learning of the Jews
   b and the language of the Egyptians.
C* And I know that the record which I make to be true.
B* And I make it with mine own hand,
A* and I make it according to my knowledge.22

Nephi holds this small chiasm together with an inclusio that refers to his “great knowledge of the goodness and mysteries of God,” which in turn provides the basic motivation and justification for making this record. While the scribal skills he has developed in Jerusalem — mastery of the Egyptian language, the learning of the Jews (Hebrew rhetoric), and the ability to manufacture writing materials, including metal plates — are also listed here, we will see that his knowledge of the goodness and mysteries of God will come from his own visions and revelations, and not from his scribal training.

As Nephi later confirms in regard to the Large Plates, he personally made the “plates of ore” and engraved the record of his people upon those plates.\textsuperscript{23} Nephi has explicitly laid claim not only to the educated skills of writing, rhetoric, and foreign languages, but also to the material skills of producing metal plates and metal engraving. As several new studies of Ancient Near Eastern literacy have shown, this rare combination of intellectual and material skills could be obtained only through years of training in a scribal school and its workshop.\textsuperscript{24}

1 Nephi 1:16–17

Nephi’s second explanation of the Small Plates says more about the internal rhetorical structure of First Nephi than it does about the spiritual profile of the larger Small Plates project itself and emphasizes a distinction between an account of Lehi’s proceedings and Nephi’s own account. This prepares us for the fact that First Nephi will be divided structurally between those two accounts and gives us a more fine-grained understanding of Nephi’s writing.

\begin{itemize}
  \item A And now I Nephi do not make \textit{a full account of the things which my father hath written},
  \item B for \textit{he hath written many things} which he saw in visions and in dreams.
  \item C And \textit{he also hath written many things} which he prophesied and spake unto his children,
  \item D of which I shall not make \textit{a full account}.
  \item D* But I shall make \textit{an account} of my proceedings in my days.
  \item C* Behold, I make an abridgment of the record of my father upon plates (SP) which I have made with mine own hands.
  \item B* Wherefore after that I have abridged the record of my father,
  \item A* then will I make \textit{an account} of mine own life.
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{23.} See 1 Nephi 19:1.

It would be reasonable to ask why these five sentences are not attached immediately to Nephi’s first explanation in verses 1–3, where they would have fit perfectly by expanding that first explanation. What we will now see is that this multiplication of explanations in First Nephi serves an important purpose in the rhetorical structure of that book. Because of their connection to and identity with each other, these explanations can be located in a series of chiasms to provide parallel elements for those chiasms and make their chiastic structures more recognizable. Note how these first two explanations provide parallel structure for the chiasm embedded in chapter one:

### I Nephi 1

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<td>(13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f*</td>
<td>Lehi’s <strong>whole heart filled</strong> ... praises God</td>
<td>(15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e*</td>
<td>Lehi records other prophecies</td>
<td>(16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d*</td>
<td>Nephi’s record ... his own hands</td>
<td>(17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c*</td>
<td>the <strong>Messiah and redemption</strong> of the world</td>
<td>(19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b*</td>
<td>Lehi’s <strong>afflictions</strong></td>
<td>(20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a*</td>
<td>Nephi’s <strong>teaching</strong> (learned from his father)</td>
<td>(20)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Any long, conceptual chiasm like this one needs to have multiple solid parallel elements indicated by the repetition of the same words — as we see here the repetitions in d-d*, f-f*, h-h*, combined with the strong apex structure in j-k-j*. Here we see Nephi’s first two explanations of the Small Plates located parallel to one another in the rhetorical structure of 1 Nephi 1 labeled d and d* above. Two of the other three explanations located in First Nephi will serve this same function in multiple overlapping chiasms, demonstrating the options a seventh-century
The remaining three of Nephi’s explanations of the Small Plates will be taken up out of order to make it easier to track how they provide key anchors for his rhetorical structures in First Nephi.

1 Nephi 9: 1–6

The first edition of the Book of Mormon shows that the current chapter 9 constituted the closing sentences of Nephi’s original second chapter and brings the section labeled “Lehi’s Account” to a conclusion. This fourth explanation of the Small Plates and their relationship to the Large Plates is placed at the end of Lehi’s account to connect back to the opening sentences of that account — the first explanation of the Small Plates in the opening sentences of chapter one. The presentation of this fourth explanation will be followed below by an outline of the chiasm that structures Lehi’s account that it anchors. Nephi has inserted this fourth explanation between his description of the Tree of Life portion of Lehi’s great vision in chapter eight and the long list of other prophecies and teachings that Lehi passed on to his family at the time he reported that vision to them, as summarized by Nephi in chapter ten. This fourth explanation emphasizes the different role of the Large Plates as a comprehensive history of Lehi’s descendants and states only once the primary “special purpose” of the Small Plates as an account “of the ministry of my people.” The explanation begins with a simple chiasm that explains the purpose of the Large Plates, followed first by a trio of couplets articulating the different purposes of the Large and Small Plates and concluding with a pair of parallel couplets relating the Small Plates to the Lord’s unstated purposes:

And all these things did my father see and hear and speak as he dwelt in a tent in the valley of Lemuel, and also a great many more things which cannot be written upon these plates (SP).
A  And now as I have spoken concerning these plates (SP),
B  behold, they are not the plates (LP) upon which I make a full account of the history of my people,
B* for the plates (LP) upon which I make a full account of
my people I have given the name of Nephi;
A* wherefore they are called the plates of Nephi after mine
own name.

Ballast:26 And these plates (SP) also are called the plates of
Nephi.
A Nevertheless I have received a commandment of the Lord
that I should make these plates (SP)
B for the special purpose that there should be an account
engraven of the ministry of my people.
A* And upon the other plates (LP)
B* should be engraven an account of the reigns of the kings
and the wars and contentions of my people.
A** Wherefore these plates (SP) are for the more part of the
ministry,
B** and the other plates (LP) are for the more part of the
reigns of the kings and the wars and contentions of my
people.
A Wherefore the Lord hath commanded me to make these
plates (SP) for a wise purpose in him, which purpose I
know not.
B But the Lord knoweth all things from the beginning.
A* Wherefore he prepareth a way to accomplish all his works
among the children of men.
B* For behold, he hath all power unto the fulfilling of all
his words.

Closer for Nephi’s chapter 2 and Lehi’s account: And thus it is.
Amen.

Chiastic organization of Lehi’s account

In a 1980 publication I identified a complex rhetorical structure in First
Nephi in which the twelve subsections of Lehi’s account match up with
the twelve subsections of Nephi’s account in the second half of the
book.27 These lists are included below. Most of the important discoveries
about Hebrew rhetoric in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE have

26. Following earlier discoverers of Hebrew rhetoric, Jack Lundbom
distinguishes “ballast lines” that bring balance or resolution at the conclusion of
small rhetorical structures in biblical writing and illustrates this phenomenon with
examples from Isaiah. See Lundbom, Biblical Rhetoric, 133–35.
been published after that date, and while I see that original article as a still-serviceable guide to the rhetorical structure of First Nephi, I can see many ways in which it can be expanded and enriched from the perspective of Hebrew rhetoric as now understood by Bible scholars. The proposed chiastic analysis of Lehi’s account follows here and shows the connection of Nephi’s first and fourth explanations for the Small Plates in that account (italicized). The parallel listings of the twelve elements of each account will then be introduced to show the roles of Nephi’s third and fifth explanations.

**Chiasmus in 1 Nephi 1–9 (Lehi’s Account)**

A  *Nephi discusses his record, and he testifies it is true* (1:1–3).

B  Lehi’s early visions are reported, followed by his preaching and prophesying to the Jews (1:6–15, 18–20).

C  Lehi takes his family into the wilderness (2:2–15).

D  The Lord speaks prophecies to Nephi about Lehi’s seed (2:19–24).

E  Lehi’s sons obtain the brass plates, and Nephi records the most striking example of the murmuring of his faithless brothers (3:2–5:16).

D*  Lehi, filled with the Spirit, prophesies about his seed (5:17–19; 7:1).

C*  Ishmael takes his family into the wilderness (7:2–22).

B*  Lehi’s tree of life vision is reported, followed by his prophecies and preaching to Laman and Lemuel (8:2–38).

A*  *Nephi again discusses his record, and he records his testimony* (9:1–6).

This analysis recognizes that the story of retrieving the Brass Plates is the centerpiece of Lehi’s account, which emphasizes the critical role that record played in Lehi’s dispensation and its supreme importance to Lehi and Nephi, who, as trained scribes in the tribe of Manasseh, may even have been involved in its very recent production. Further, Nephi has framed the account of his father’s proceedings with two of

28. In Reynolds, “Lehi’s Vision, Nephi’s Blueprint,” I explain why Lehi’s second vision reported in 1 Nephi 1:8–15 may be the tree of life vision reported in 1 Nephi 8 and 1 Nephi 11–14. That equivalence reveals B and B* in this chiasm as complementary accounts of the same vision.

29. See Reynolds, “Trained Manassite Scribes.”
his explanations of the nature and purpose of the full record of which it constitutes the first of three sections — the Small Plates.

Lehi’s Account Compared to Nephi’s Account

1 Nephi 19:1–6
This fifth explanation, coming near the end of the book of First Nephi, is the most comprehensive of the six that Nephi has distributed throughout his writings. In this passage, Nephi clearly states the sequence in which he received divine commandments to make records. The first must have come early on and led Nephi to make his Large Plates, which contained both the history of his people and the prophecies and revelations received by him and his father. He was then surprised by the second command received thirty years after leaving Jerusalem to make a another set of plates. He was then commanded to write “the ministry and the prophecies — the more plain and precious parts of them” on these Small Plates. These would “be kept for the instruction of my people” and “for other wise purposes … known unto the Lord.”

This fifth explanation begins with a parallel pair of triplets (or extended alternates) that explain the Large Plates as a predecessor to these Small Plates. This is followed by a second pair of parallel triplets focused on explaining the Small Plates and how they are distinguished in their content and usage from the Large Plates.

A And it came to pass that the Lord commanded me,
   a wherefore I did make plates of ore (LP)
   b that I might engraven upon them (LP) the record of my people.
B And upon the plates (LP) which I made I did engraven the record of my father
   a and also our journeyings in the wilderness
   b and the prophecies of my father.
C And also many of mine own prophecies have I engraven upon them (LP).
A* And I knew not at that time which I made them that I should be commanded of the Lord to make these plates (SP).
B* Wherefore the record of my father and the genealogy of his forefathers and the more part of all our proceedings in the wilderness are engraven upon those first plates (LP) of which I have spoken.
Wherefore the things which transpired before that I made these plates (SP) are of a truth more particularly made mention upon the first plates (LP).

And after that I made these plates (SP) by way of commandment, I Nephi received a commandment that the ministry and the prophecies — the more plain and precious parts of them — should be written upon these plates (SP), and that the things which were written should be kept for the instruction of my people, which should possess the land,

and also for other wise purposes, which purposes are known unto the Lord.

Wherefore I Nephi did make a record upon the other plates (LP), which gives an account or which gives a greater account of the wars and contentions and destructions of my people.

And now this have I done and commanded my people that they should do after that I was gone and that these plates (SP) should be handed down from one generation to another or from one prophet to another until further commandments of the Lord.

And an account of my making these plates (SP) shall be given hereafter. And then behold, I proceed according to that which I have spoken; and this I do that the more sacred things may be kept for the knowledge of my people.

Ballast: Nevertheless I do not write any thing upon plates save it be that I think it be sacred.

Nephi’s creativity in using the principles of Hebrew rhetoric is on display in many ways in this book, but none is more compelling than the way he uses his fourth and fifth explanations of the Small Plates in his parallel linkage of the twelve subsections in Lehi’s and Nephi’s accounts. In Table 1, these subsections are easy to connect — except for the puzzling partial reversal of the order in two instances. Subsections #3 and #5 of Lehi’s account match up with subsections #5 and #3 respectively in Nephi’s account. And then at the bottom of the table the same reversal recurs as subsections #9 and #11 of Lehi’s account match up respectively with #11 and #9 of Nephi’s account. This allows Nephi to use his fourth explanation twice in the rhetorical structure — first in parallel position with the first explanation in the chiastic organization of
Lehi’s account — and then in parallel position with the fifth explanation which is placed well before the end of his own account.

Table 1. Lehi’s Account Compared to Nephi’s Account.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1 Nephi 1–9 (Lehi’s Account)</th>
<th>1 Nephi 10–22 (Nephi’s Account)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Nephi makes a record (or account) of his proceedings but first gives an abridgment of Lehi’s record (1:1–3, 16–17).</td>
<td>1. Nephi now commences to give an account of his proceedings, reign, and ministry but first “must speak somewhat of the things of [his] father, and … brethren” (10:1).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Nephi gives a brief account of Lehi’s prophecies to the Jews, based on visions he received in Jerusalem (1:5–15, 19).</td>
<td>2. Nephi reports Lehi’s prophecies about the Jews, as given to Laman and Lemuel in the wilderness (10:2–15).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Lehi is commanded to journey into the wilderness, and he pitches his tent in the valley he names Lemuel (2:1–7).</td>
<td>3. Nephi desires to see, hear, and know these mysteries; he is shown a great vision by the Spirit of the Lord and by an angel (10:17–14:30).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Lehi teaches and exhorts his sons, and they are confounded (2:8–15).</td>
<td>4. Nephi instructs and exhorts his brothers, and they are confounded (15:6–16:6).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Nephi desires to know the mysteries of God; he is visited by the Holy Spirit and is spoken to by the Lord (2:16–3:1).</td>
<td>5. Lehi is commanded to journey further into the wilderness, and he pitches his tent in the land he names Bountiful (16:9–17:6).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. They gather seeds of every kind (8:1).</td>
<td>8. Lehi’s family plants the seeds and reaps in abundance (18:24).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Lehi reports to his sons the great vision received in the wilderness (8:2–35).</td>
<td>9. Nephi details the distinctions between the two sets of plates (19:1–7).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Lehi exhorts Laman and Lemuel, preaching and prophesying to them (8:36–38).</td>
<td>10. Nephi preaches and prophesies to Laman and Lemuel, his own descendants, and all Israel (19:7–21:26).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Nephi makes a distinction between the two sets of plates (9:1–5).</td>
<td>11. To explain Isaiah’s prophecies to his brothers, Nephi draws on the great vision given to him and Lehi (22:1–28).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Nephi 6:1–6

This leaves Nephi’s third explanation of the Small Plates with no obvious role in the larger rhetorical structures. It comes immediately after and therefore juxtaposed to Lehi’s survey of the newly acquired Brass Plates and the genealogies contained therein. Nephi exploits this opportunity to make two points about his Small Plates in two short chiasms. The
first explains why the Small Plates will not contain their genealogy — which would have been an expected initial component for any lineage history in the Ancient Near East. The second provides a clear and precise statement of the mission of the small plates: the fullness of his intent in this writing is to bring men to God and to the salvation he offers.

A And now I Nephi do not give the genealogy of my fathers in this part of my record,
B neither at any time shall I give it after upon these plates (SP) which I am writing,
C for it is given in the record which has been kept by my father;
B* wherefore I do not write it in this work.
A* For it sufficeth me to say that we are a descendant of Joseph.30
A And it mattereth not to me that I am particular to give a full account of all the things of my father,
B for they cannot be written upon these plates (SP),
C for I desire the room that I may write of the things of God.
D For the fullness of mine intent is that I may persuade men to come unto the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob and be saved.
C* Wherefore the things which are pleasing unto the world I do not write,
B* but the things which are pleasing unto God and unto them which are not of the world.
A* Wherefore I shall give commandment unto my seed that they shall not occupy these plates (SP) with things which are not of worth unto the children of men.

The characteristics of the seven passages are summarized in Table 2.

Conclusions

This paper provides a detailed review of the six passages in which Nephi refers to his second record directly and distinguishes its purpose from the first record. It also recognizes a seventh similar passage at the beginning of Jacob’s writings. All of these make it clear that Nephi and Jacob both understood the Large Plates to be a repository for a history of

30. See Parry, Poetic Parallelisms, 12.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Rhetorical Form</th>
<th>Key Element in Structure</th>
<th>Principal Contribution</th>
<th>Small Plates Description</th>
<th>Large Plates Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 Nephi 5:28–34</td>
<td>Chiasm</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 1:1–8</td>
<td>Chiasm</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 16:1–17</td>
<td>Chiasm</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 1:1–3</td>
<td>Chiasm</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 1:10</td>
<td>Chiasm</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 1:16–17</td>
<td>Chiasm</td>
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<td>1 Nephi 1:13–17</td>
<td>Chiasm</td>
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<td>1 Nephi 9:1–6</td>
<td>Chiasm</td>
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<td>1 Nephi 6:1–6</td>
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<td>Chiasm</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Summary of seven statements profiling the Small Plates (SP) and the Large Plates (LP).
the people of Nephi, including their migrations, wars, and other events including preachings and revelations. The Small Plates were given a much narrower purpose by divine commandment. They should include only “a few of the most precious things” selected from the preaching, revelations, and prophecies. As it turned out, Jacob and his successors did not add that much to extend the Small Plates, and eighty percent of these plates would consist of Nephi’s writings. It is even more explicit in Jacob’s summary of Nephi’s instructions that the most precious things would be the prophecies and teachings about Christ that could be used to bring the people to him and be saved rather than rebelling against God — what Nephi referred to in his opening statement as his “knowledge of the goodness and the mysteries of God” (1 Nephi 1:1). And, finally, it has also been shown that Nephi had multiplied the passages in which he distinguished the two records in order to provide needed anchors for the rhetorical structures he had designed for his first section of the Small Plates (First Nephi).

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“We Might Have Enjoyed Our Possessions and the Land of Our Inheritance”: Hebrew yrš and 1 Nephi 17:21

Matthew L. Bowen

Abstract: The verbal expression “we might have enjoyed,” as used in a complaint that Nephi attributes to his brothers, “we might have enjoyed our possessions and the land of our inheritance” (1 Nephi 17:21), reflects a use of the Hebrew verb yrš in its progressive aspect, “to enjoy possession of.” This meaning is evident in several passages in the Hebrew Bible, and perhaps most visibly in the KJV translation of Numbers 36:8 (“And every daughter, that possesseth [Hebrew yōreš] an inheritance [naḥālā] in any tribe of the children of Israel, shall be wife unto one of the family of the tribe of her father, that the children of Israel may enjoy [yîršû] every man the inheritance [naḥālat] of his fathers”) and Joshua 1:15 (“then ye shall return unto the land of your possession [lē’ereṣ yērušsatkem or, unto the land of your inheritance], and enjoy it [wîrištem ’ôtāh].”) Examining Laman and Lemuel’s complaint in a legal context helps us better appreciate “land[s] of … inheritance” as not just describing a family estate, but as also expressing a seminal Abrahamic Covenant concept in numerous Book of Mormon passages, including the covenant implications of the resettlement of the converted Lamanites and reconverted Zoramites as refugees in “the land of Jershon” (“place of inheritance”).

In 1 Nephi 17:20–22, Nephi recalls the gist of his brothers’ complaints about leaving behind their family estate, “the land of … inheritance”

1. Nephi does not directly quote any of his brothers. He is paraphrasing or giving us the gist of their complaints as he notes in the next verse: “And after this manner of language did my brethren murmur and complain against us” (1 Nephi 17:22).
(1 Nephi 2:11; 3:22; 5:2; and 17:21), “at” or near Jerusalem and the concomitant abandonment of considerable material possessions (e.g., 1 Nephi 2:4; 3:16, 22, 26). This recollection reflects several significant Hebraisms: “Behold, these many years we have suffered in the wilderness, which time **we might have enjoyed our possessions and the land of our inheritance;** yea, and **we might have been happy**” (1 Nephi 17:21).³

In this study, I will examine how the complaint “we might have enjoyed our possessions in the land of our inheritance; yea, and we might have been happy” reflects the Hebraism “land of … inheritance,” as well as a possible polyptoton⁴ and an allusion to the tree of life in Lehi’s dream. I will further examine how the main verb in this complaint — enjoy — reflects a specific secondary meaning of the Hebrew verb yrš, “enjoy possession of.”⁵ The meaning of this verb in its secondary, progressive (or continuous) aspect is reflected in several important passages in the Hebrew Bible, including Ezekiel 33:24–29, Psalms 37:9, 11, 22, 29, and Judges 2:6–10.⁶ Additional support for this more nuanced meaning of yrš underlying the Book of Mormon translation at 1 Nephi 17:21 occurs in Numbers 36:8 as part of formal legislation regarding lands of inheritance remaining within tribes, and in Joshua 1:15. Early translators of the Bible into English — beginning with Tyndale⁷ and including Miles Coverdale,⁸

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2. Nephi describes his former dwelling place as being “at Jerusalem” in 1 Nephi 1:4, 7; 5:4; 2 Nephi 6:8 (quoting Jacob); 2 Nephi 9:5 (quoting Jacob); and 25:6.


7. Tyndale rendered the purpose clause in Numbers 36:8, “that the children of Israel maye enioy euery man the enheritaunce of his father.”

8. Miles Coverdale, evidently following Tyndale, rendered Joshua 1:15 thus: “tyll the LORDE haue broughte youre brethren to rest also as well as you: that they also maye take possession of the londe, which the LORDE yor God shal geue them:
Thomas Matthew (John Rogers),⁹ the translators of the Geneva Bible¹⁰ and the King James Version, all of whom followed Tyndale’s work to greater or lesser degrees — recognized or at least preserved the secondary, more nuanced meaning of *yrš* and lucidly rendered it in English with the verb, “enjoy” in these passages. Recognition of this lexical subtlety at work in 1 Nephi 17:21 helps us better understand the brothers’ attachment to the family estate and material wealth. It provides additional context for understanding the tenuous nature of their filial loyalty to Lehi as father and patriarch of the clan and their skepticism regarding his (and Nephi’s) spiritual guidance. It also provides additional context for these brothers’ temporal focus and consequent failure to find happiness in their lives.¹¹ Moreover, an examination of the brothers’ complaint helps us better appreciate *yrš* and “land[s] of … inheritance” / “land[s] … of possessions” as legal expressions within an Abrahamic covenant as used throughout the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Mormon.

Then shal ye turne agayne in to the londe of youre possession, that ye maye enioye it, which Moses the seruant of the LORDE hath geuen you on this syde Iordane towarde ye Easte.”

⁹. The Matthew Bible renders Joshua 1:15: “vntyll the Lorde haue geuen your brethren reast, as he hath you, and vntyll they also haue obtayned, the lande which the Lord youre God geueth them. And then retourne vnto the lande of youre possessyon and enioy it, which lande Moses the Lordes seruaunte gaue you on thys syde Iordan towarde the sunne ryseynge.” See “Matthew’s Bible 1537,” Textus Receptus Bibles, http://textusreceptusbibles.com/Matthews/6/1.


¹¹. President Russell M. Nelson stated, “My dear brothers and sisters, the joy we feel has little to do with the circumstances of our lives and everything to do with the focus of our lives.” “Joy and Spiritual Survival,” *Ensign*, November 2016, 82. Nephi and his brothers, Laman and Lemuel, shared many of the same circumstances, but not the same focus. Nephi’s faith in and focus on Jesus Christ led him to happiness and joy (cf. 2 Nephi 5:27), while Laman and Lemuel’s temporal focus and refusal to “look unto the Lord as they ought” (1 Nephi 15:3) did not lead them to joy.
To Possess, Inherit, Enjoy Possession of: The Meanings of yrš

The basic meanings of the verb yrš as a covenant-legal term are “to take possession of,”¹² “to be heir to someone,”¹³ or to “inherit, dispossess.”¹⁴ This verb occurs first as a legal term in Genesis 15:3–4 where Abraham receives the promise of an heir (yôrēš) of his own descent (i.e., seed) who would “inherit” (yîrāšekā) his possessions. It then occurs as a key Abrahamic covenant term a few verses later in Genesis 15:7–8, a text in which the Lord grants the land of Canaan to Abraham and his descendants: “And he [the Lord] said unto him [Abraham], I am the Lord that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees, to give thee this land to inherit it [lĕrištāh]. And he said, Lord God, whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it [ʾîrāšennā]?” (Genesis 15:7–8).¹⁵ There follows a covenant-making ceremony (literally, a covenant-cutting¹⁶ ceremony; cf. kārat … bĕrît in Genesis 15:18), with the Lord ritually passing between the halves of the sacrificed animals (see Genesis 15:9–21).

Recently Joachim J. Krause,¹⁷ following up on the earlier work of Norbert Lohfink,¹⁸ and citing evidence from Ezekiel 33:24–29, Psalm 37, and Judges 2:6–10, has shown that yrš, more than “to take possession of” (ingressive aspect),¹⁹ means “to enjoy possession of” (progressive or continuous aspect) in several instances. For example, in Ezekiel 33, the Lord instructs Ezekiel to pronounce divine judgment on

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¹³. HALOT, 441.

¹⁴. BDB, 439.

¹⁵. Forms of yrš continue as a key Abrahamic Covenant word in Genesis 22:17; 24:60; 28:4 (cf. 21:10).


¹⁹. Ingressive — i.e., to begin an action. Verbs with an ingressive aspect describe the beginning or initiation of a particular action, while verbs with a progressive aspect describe a particular action that is ongoing, continuing, or progressing rather than beginning. To “take possession of” the land describes the beginning of the action of inheriting the land, while “enjoy possession of” the land describes the continuous action of inheriting the land.
Judahite survivors of the Babylonian exile who remained in the land of Israel-Judah and continued in the sinful practices for which most Israelites and Judahites had been exiled from the land, all while claiming divine sanction for retaining inheritance or possession of the land:

Son of man, they that inhabit those wastes of the land of Israel speak, saying, Abraham was one, and he inherited the land [wayyiraš]: but we are many; the land is given us for inheritance [lēmôrāšā]. Wherefore say unto them, Thus saith the Lord God; Ye eat with the blood, and lift up your eyes toward your idols, and shed blood: and shall ye possess the land [wēhāāres tirāšû]? Ye stand upon your sword, ye work abomination, and ye defile every one his neighbour’s wife: and shall ye possess the land [wēhāāres tirāšû]? Say thou thus unto them, Thus saith the Lord God; As I live, surely they that are in the wastes shall fall by the sword, and him that is in the open field will I give to the beasts to be devoured, and they that be in the forts and in the caves shall die of the pestilence. For I will lay the land most desolate, and the pomp of her strength shall cease; and the mountains of Israel shall be desolate, that none shall pass through. Then shall they know that I am the Lord, when I have laid the land most desolate because of all their abominations which they have committed. (Ezekiel 33:24–29)

The arguments of the Judahite survivors and the Lord’s holding them accountable for their unrighteousness revolve around the covenant-legal use of yrš. Lohfink explains the logic of the survivors’ claims and the Lord’s counterclaims in terms of the survivors’ and the prophet’s respective uses of yrš:

They say: ‘Abraham was only one man, yet he took possession of (wayyiraš) the land; but we are many — so the land is surely given to us to possess (nittenâ hāāres lemôrāšâ)” … The argument a fortiori perverts the statement about Abraham. Its point is that Abraham did not receive the land by virtue of his own efforts — he was only a single individual — but through Yahweh. But the argument of those dwelling in the ruins boasts of their numbers and their own efforts. The prophet’s response … makes this perversion quite clear. It demolishes any claim to yrš: idolatry and bloodshed rule out any right
to possess the land. Here yrš should probably be translated ‘enjoy possession of.’

Here we must bear in mind that the Abrahamic covenant, Israel-Judah’s covenant claims on the land as Abraham’s descendants, and the meaning of the Babylonian exile form the backdrop of this dispute. The translation of yrš in terms of its primary meaning “inherit” certainly best fits in the first instance with Abraham as its subject, while “enjoy possession of” would better fit the Lord’s twofold question: “and shall ye possess the land?” or further, “and shall ye enjoy possession of the land?”

In support of yrš as “enjoy possession of” in some contexts, Krause further cites Psalms 37, in which the Psalmist repeatedly uses the yîršû- ʾāres/lârešet ʾāres idiom (Psalms 37:9, 11, 22, 29). In all these instances the sense of the verb yrš is not simply “inherit the earth” or “possess the land,” but to “enjoy possession of the land” or “enjoy the possession of” the earth. This is especially clear in Psalms 37:11, where the matching clause in the bicolon supports the idea that yrš in some contexts means, not just “to inherit” but to “enjoy possession of,” “enjoy inheritance of” — “But the meek shall inherit [yiršû] the earth [ʾăres]; and shall delight themselves [wēhitʿannēgû] in the abundance of peace.”

The semantic “matching” (or “parallelism”) of the paired verbs in bicolon makes much better sense if yrš here is understood to mean “[they] shall enjoy” or “they shall enjoy possession of.” Thus, “the meek shall enjoy the earth and delight themselves in the abundance of peace” (translation mine). Psalms 37:11, famously, is the text that Jesus quotes or paraphrases in the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5) — in other words, “happy [Greek makarioi = Hebrew ʾašre] are the meek for they shall inherit [Greek klēronomēsousin = Hebrew yîršû] the earth.”

Here true happiness is causally linked to enjoying possession of the land in fulfillment of the divine covenant. Notably, it is the poor, meek, or humble — the ṣănāwîm — whose circumstances have been adverse, but whose focus has been on

the Lord, who enjoy possession of the land and are “happy” (compare Nephi’s statement at the outset of his autobiography: “having seen many afflictions in the course of my days, nevertheless having been highly favored of the Lord in all my days,” 1 Nephi 1:1).

The Abrahamic covenant concept of inheriting the land of Canaan is central to Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic conquest narratives. The narrative description of Joshua’s dismissing the people to go home to their inheritances to take possession of them captures an important moment in the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant:

And when Joshua had let the people go, the children of Israel went every man unto his inheritance [lēnḥālātō] to possess [lārešet] the land [‘et-hāāreš]. And the people served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders that outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great works of the Lord, that he did for Israel. And Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died, being an hundred and ten years old. And they buried him in the border of his inheritance in Timnath-heres, in the mount of Ephraim, on the north side of the hill Gaash. And also all that generation were gathered unto their fathers: and there arose another generation after them, which knew not the Lord, nor yet the works which he had done for Israel. (Judges 2:6–10)

Since Israel by this time had already taken formal possession of the land and they were returning to their inheritances, the meaning of yrš (lārešet) must be progressive: “the children of Israel went every man unto his inheritance to enjoy possession of the land” (adaptation of the KJV is mine).

“That the Children of Israel May Enjoy Every Man the Inheritance of His Fathers?:

Additional Example #1 of yrš as “Enjoy”

Another illustrative example of yrš as not only “inherit” or “possess,” but also “enjoy possession of,” or “enjoy” occurs in a Mosaic decree requiring daughters who had inherited land to marry within their ancestral tribe, thus helping to retain the territorial integrity of tribal lands: “And every daughter, that possesseseth [yōrešet] an inheritance [nahālā] in any tribe of the children of Israel, shall be wife unto one of the family of the tribe of her father, that the children of Israel may enjoy [yîršû] every man the
inheritance [naḥālat] of his fathers” (Numbers 36:8). William Tyndale rendered the purpose clause in this verse, “that the childern of Israel maye enioy every man the enheritaunce of his father” and subsequent translators followed suit. Tyndale deftly recognized that the land had already been taken possession of, rendering the feminine participial form yōrešet in its ingressive sense, and then rendering the second instance of the verb in its progressive sense, “enjoy.”

“Then Shall Ye Return unto the Land of Your Possession and Enjoy It”: Additional Example #2 of yrš as “Enjoy”

The outset of the conquest narratives furnishes us with another lucid example in which the verb yrš extends beyond the sense of “inherit” or “possess” into the sense of “enjoy” or “rejoice in the possession of,” as the King James translators and earlier translators of the Bible into English recognized. In addressing the Transjordanian tribes (Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe Manasseh), Joshua instructed the men of the tribe to cross over Jordan, after settling their wives and children in the land, and to help the other tribes conquer the remainder of the land covenanted to Abraham and his descendants:

Your wives, your little ones, and your cattle, shall remain in the land which Moses gave you on this side Jordan; but ye shall pass before your brethren armed, all the mighty men of valour, and help them; Until the Lord have given your brethren rest, as he hath given you, and they also have possessed [wēyārēšû] the land [ʿet-hāʾāreṣ] which the Lord your God giveth them: then ye shall return unto the land of your possession [lēʾereṣ yēruššatket or, unto the land of your inheritance], and enjoy it [wīrištem ʾótah], which Moses the Lord’s servant gave you on this side Jordan toward the sunrising. (Joshua 1:14–15)

In the first instance, the verb yrš — wēyārēšû — clearly has the sense of “possess” or “inherit.” However, in the second instance yrš — wīrištem — requires a sense that goes beyond the notion of merely possessing or inheriting, already present in the phrase “land of your possession/inheritance.” Whether or not this phrase represents a scribal

23. This statute, which encouraged endogamy within tribes, has served to promote endogamy and marriage within narrow degrees of consanguinity (including cousin marriage) within Israel’s tribes from ancient days even into modern times.
gloss,²⁴ the KJV translators recognized that to render it “possess” would have been redundant. The translation’s expression of the notion “enjoy the possession of it” — “and enjoy it” (i.e., be happy in the enjoyment of it) — obviates the potential redundancy.

“We Might Have Enjoyed Our Possessions in the Land of Our Inheritance”:
The Imprint of yrš as “Enjoy” in 1 Nephi 17:21

The Deuteronomic legislation that received renewed emphasis during Lehi’s lifetime (under king Josiah), predicates²⁵ Israel’s continued inheritance or possession of the land under the Abrahamic covenant in terms of collective obedience to the “commandments,” “statutes,” and “judgments” in Deuteronomy:

> But as for thee [Moses], stand thou here by me, and I will speak unto thee all the commandments, and the statutes, and the judgments, which thou shalt teach them, that they may do them in the land which I give them to possess it [lērištāh] … Ye shall walk in all the ways which the Lord your God hath commanded you, that ye may live, and that it may be well with you, and that ye may prolong your days in the land which ye shall possess [tīrāšūn]. Deuteronomy 5:31, 33 (MT 28, 30)

Thus, the penalty for failure to observe the Deuteronomic legislation would be the loss of the land. Indeed, it would be said in a time to come: “And the Lord rooted them out of their land in anger, and in wrath, and in great indignation, and cast them into another land, as it is this day” (Deuteronomy 29:28). The Lord reiterated the Abrahamic Covenant with Isaac (see Genesis 26:1–5) and Jacob (see Genesis 28:10–22; 35:9–15) in subsequent generations. Similarly, the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant could be gained or lost in every subsequent generation. Although the Abrahamic Covenant was unconditional to Abraham and his “seed” (posterity) across time and into eternity, the blessings of the covenant were conditional upon obedience to God’s commandments for

²⁴. See, e.g., Jacob Weingreen, From Bible to Mishna: The Continuity of Tradition (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1976), 34–35. Weingreen notes that the phrase intrudes awkwardly in the flow of the sentence and is missing in the Septuagint (LXX).

each individual Israelite and for the community as a whole — it was both everlasting and new (cf. the collocation “new and everlasting covenant”).

A century before Lehi, the northern kingdom of Israel had been exiled from enjoying possession of the promised land (see 2 Kings 17:1–23), the right to which it had long been forfeiting. During Lehi’s time Judah was in the process of being exiled from enjoying possession of the land for similar covenant dereliction (see 2 Kings 24). To be able to “live,” prosper in the land, and to prolong one’s days upon it — to “enjoy” possession of it — all constituted aspects of “happiness.” Laman and Lemuel never recognized that Israel and Judah had collectively lost that privilege — at least for that time — with respect to the land of Canaan. Nevertheless, they still could have the privilege of enjoying possession of and being happy in the new land of promise to which they were being led (which some of Lehi’s family, in fact, did. See 2 Nephi 5:27).

Lehi and Nephi recognized that the family’s departure from Jerusalem and “the land of [their] inheritance” represented a small part of an exile from covenant lands that had begun well over a century prior to their departure. Nephi stated as much even as he tried to help his brothers see how their family fit into the bigger picture: “And behold, there are many which are already lost from the knowledge of they which are at Jerusalem; yea, the more part of the tribes have been led away, and they are scattered to and fro upon the isles of the sea. And whither they are none of us knoweth, save that we know that they have been led away” (1 Nephi 22:4).

The collocation “land of our/your/his inheritance” or “land of our/your/his possession” clearly represents a Hebraism in the Book of Mormon text (see, e.g., 1 Nephi 3:22; 5:2; 17:21; 2 Nephi 10:20; Jacob 3:4; Helaman 7:22; 3 Nephi 15:13; Mormon 3:17 and the excursus below).

26. The collocation “new and everlasting covenant” occurs in D&C 131:2; 132:6, 19, 26–27, 41–42 in the context of the eternal covenant marriage relationship entered into by Abraham and Sarah and their successors.

27. Cf., e.g., Leviticus 14:34; 25:24; Joshua 1:15; 22:4, 9; Deuteronomy 2:12.
As the eldest sons in the family, Laman and Lemuel would have stood to benefit first and most with the division of the estate upon Lehi’s passing at which time they would “inherit” the land — that is, in Lohfink’s description, “take formal possession of real property acquired by virtue of basic rights.”28 They would not be able to “enjoy the possession of” their possession (progressive) and the family estate until after taking formal possession of it (ingressive) — i.e., and thus be “happy.” Thus, Nephi seems to infer here that Laman and Lemuel wished that their father had been killed with the result that they had never left Jerusalem and that they would now be enjoying possession of the family wealth and estate. This is supported by his later equation of Laman and Lemuel with Lehi’s Judahite religious opponents: “And the Jews also sought to take away his life. Yea, and ye also have sought to take away his life. Wherefore ye are murderers in your hearts and ye are like unto they” (1 Nephi 17:44).

Indeed, Nephi’s recollection of his brothers’ complaints in the land Bountiful harks back to the beginning of his small plates record where he lays out the fundamental complaint that Laman and Lemuel had about leaving the family estate and property outside Jerusalem: “Now this he [Lehi] spake because of the stiffneckedness of Laman and Lemuel. For behold, they did murmur in many things against their father because that he was a visionary man and that he had led them out of the land of Jerusalem, to leave the land of their inheritance and their gold and their silver and their precious things, and to perish in the wilderness.

And this they said that he had done because of the foolish imaginations of his heart” (1 Nephi 2:11).

Nephi depicts his brothers as valuing the temporal “inheritance” — including their father’s estate in Jerusalem’s vicinity — much more than the “land of … inheritance” to which the Lord had been leading them. Moreover, Nephi’s repetition of the possessive suffix “their” here — “their inheritance,” “their gold and silver,” “their precious things” has the rhetorical effect of emphasizing the brothers’ attachment to the family estate and wealth. Nephi had used this same list earlier, emphasizing Lehi’s possession of and attachment to the family estate and wealth and his complete abandonment of all of it for the sake of the preservation of his family: “And it came to pass that he departed into the wilderness. And he left his house and the land of his inheritance and his gold and his silver and his precious things and took nothing with him save it were his family and provisions and tents, and he departed into the wilderness” (1 Nephi 2:4). Lehi found the strength to leave or forsake the “land of his inheritance” in the land given by covenant to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their descendants in the faith that the Lord had another land of inheritance in store for him and his family.

“We Might Have Been Happy”:
The Unrealized Results of yrš for Laman, Lemuel, and the Sons of Ishmael

Just as the second clause in the bicolon, “But the meek shall inherit [yîršû] the earth [ʾāres]; and shall delight themselves [wēhit ṣāʾēgû] in the abundance of peace,” suggests that yîršû here means “enjoy possession of” (as noted above), the declaration “we might have been happy” suggests a use of yrš with the same sense in 1 Nephi 17:21: “[W]e might have enjoyed our possessions and the land of our inheritance; yea, and we might have been happy” (1 Nephi 17:21).

What’s more, the words that Nephi attributes to his brothers ironically recall the words of Lehi’s dream: “And it came to pass that I beheld a tree whose fruit was desirable to make one happy” (1 Nephi 8:10). Years ago Daniel C. Peterson noted the wordplay evident in ʾšr/ʿasrê (“happy”), Asherah/the asherah, and the tree of life as also in Proverbs 3:13, 18.29 Lehi, in recounting his dream-vision, states that Laman and Lemuel “would not come unto me and partake of the fruit” (1 Nephi 8:18).

Despite having actually heard the voice of God (1 Nephi 16:39; 17:45), Laman and Lemuel persisted in the belief that forsaking their family estate, as part of Israel-Judah’s broader Abrahamic covenant inheritance, had been unnecessary. Like the survivors of the Babylonian exile against whom Ezekiel prophesied, they believed that they were justified in their conduct. In fact, their next reported words aver that they “know” the people against whom their own father had preached and who sought his life (1 Nephi 1:20; 2:13; 7:14; 17:44), were justified or “righteous” in their conduct:

And we know that the people which were in the land of Jerusalem were a righteous people, for they keep the statutes and the judgments of the Lord and all his commandments according to the law of Moses; wherefore we know that they are a righteous people. And our father hath judged them and hath led us away because we would hearken unto his word; yea, and our brother is like unto him. And after this manner of language did my brethren murmur and complain against us. (1 Nephi 17:22)

In their lamenting the loss of “the land of [their] inheritance” and their justification of the Jerusalemites, Laman and Lemuel side with the very ones who had “driven [their father] out of the land” (1 Nephi 7:14).

Laman, Lemuel, and the sons of Ishmael evidently had difficulty not only envisioning the complete temporal fulfillment of divine judgment against Jerusalem, but also recognizing the broader temporal and spiritual horizons of the Abrahamic Covenant and the Lord’s promises to Israel. This narrow perspective is reflected in the question to Nephi regarding the words of Isaiah in Isaiah 48–49 (1 Nephi 20–21):

“What mean these things which ye have read? Behold, are they to be understood according to things which are spiritual which shall come to pass according to the spirit and not the flesh?” (1 Nephi 22:1). For these brothers, rejoicing in the possession of temporal things — “enjoy[ing] their possessions and the land of [their] inheritance” (1 Nephi 17:21) — was the essence of finding happiness in mortal life. Thus, they did not enjoy their possession of the new land of promise or “live after the manner of happiness” (2 Nephi 5:27) with Nephi and those who “joyed with him in the promised land” (Helaman 7:7). They did not hold in view the bigger picture of rejoicing in their posterity as a true heritage and enjoying an eternal land of inheritance.

We should also note here that in addition to “enjoy” as representing the progressive aspect of yrš, if either of the Hebrew words môrāšâ
“possession,”
“acquisition, property”
“possession, inheritance”
yĕruššâ
“possession, inheritance”
“possession[s]”
“inheritance”
yĕruššâ
“possession, inheritance”

Excursus: “Land[s] of Their/Your/Our Inheritance”
as an Abrahamic Covenant Term

Nephi’s writings use the collocation “land[s] of … inheritance” early on to refer to Lehi’s family’s estate at or near Jerusalem (1 Nephi 2:4, 11; 3:22; 5:2; 17:21). Beginning in 1 Nephi 10:3 (“and after that they [the Jews] are brought back out of captivity, to possess again their land of inheritance”), Nephi and his successors use this collocation as an Abrahamic covenant term.

Originally referring back to the Lord’s original grant of the land of Canaan to Abraham, Lehi, Nephi, et al. also reapply it to their new land of promise “which is the land which the Lord God hath covenanted with thy father that his seed should have for the land of their inheritance” (1 Nephi 13:30), and to all lands which constitute the points of return: “Wherefore he will bring them [i.e., those of the house of Israel] again [cf. Hebrew yôsip] out of captivity, and they shall be gathered together to the lands of their first inheritance” (1 Nephi 22:12). Nephi uses similar language elsewhere to describe the return of exiled Jews/Judahites: “And notwithstanding that they have been carried away, they shall return again and possess the land of Jerusalem. Wherefore they shall be restored again to the lands of their inheritance” (2 Nephi 25:11).

Nephi also records that Lehi, in his final paraenesis or counsel to his sons, had predicated inheritance of the land on observance of divine commandments, similar to Deuteronomy: “And if it so be that they shall keep his commandments, they shall be blessed upon the face of this land. And there shall be none to molest them nor to take away the land of their inheritance, and they shall dwell safely forever” (2 Nephi 1:9). Lehi knew that the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant and the Lord’s

30. BDB, 440.
31. HALOT, 561.
32. BDB, 440. HALOT glosses yĕruššâ as “possession,” 442.
covenants to him would be gained or lost individually and collectively by his descendants in each generation. Lehi resorts to similar language in his final counsel to and blessing upon his son Joseph, “And may the Lord consecrate also unto thee this land, which is a most precious land, for thine inheritance and the inheritance of thy seed with thy brethren, for thy security forever, if it so be that ye shall keep the commandments of the Holy One of Israel” (2 Nephi 3:2).

The idea of lands of inheritance constitutes an important theme within Jacob’s “covenant speech” (2 Nephi 6–10), a sermon which expands on Isaiah 49:22 to Isaiah 52:2. Although Israel and Judah had been and would be scattered from lands of inheritance granted by the Abrahamic covenant, the Lord would gather and restore them to multiple “lands of their inheritance”: “Nevertheless the Lord will be merciful unto them, that when they [the Jews] shall come to the knowledge of their Redeemer, they shall be gathered together again to the lands of their inheritance” (2 Nephi 6:11). Later, Jacob explains his reading of Isaiah 49:22 to Isaiah 52:2 — with its descriptions of gathering, covenant reinstitution, the Divine Warrior’s defeat of Israel’s enemies (Rahab/Egypt, Yamm, Tannin), and resurrection — thusly:

And now my beloved brethren, I have read these things that ye might know concerning the covenants of the Lord, that he hath covenanted with all the house of Israel, that he hath spoken unto the Jews by the mouth of his holy prophets, even from the beginning down from generation to generation until


the time cometh that they shall be restored to the true church and fold of God, when they shall be gathered home to the lands of their inheritance and shall be established in all their lands of promise. (2 Nephi 9:1–2)

The horizons of Jacob’s view of this restoration include not only the literal physical restoration of Israel and Judah to “lands of . . . inheritance,” but also, evidently, a restoration to those lands in connection with the resurrection of the dead (cf. Ezekiel 37:1–14): “But behold, thus saith the Lord God: When the day cometh that they shall believe in me, that I am Christ, then have I covenanted with their fathers that they shall be restored in the flesh upon the earth unto the lands of their inheritance” (2 Nephi 10:7).

With prophetic authority, Jacob declared the land in the New World a divine “land grant” in Abrahamic Covenant terms, including a provision for the “Gentiles” (gôyim; cf. Abraham as “father of many nations/gentiles,” ḥâmôn gôyim, Genesis 17:4–5). These Gentiles or “others” were then being incorporated into the people of Nephi (and thus into Israel)38 and those who would be in the future: “But behold, this land, saith God, shall be a land of thine inheritance; and the Gentiles shall be blessed upon the land” (2 Nephi 10:10). Near the conclusion of his covenant sermon, Jacob reiterates the Lord’s granting of the land to the faithful descendants of Lehi and the Gentiles who would be “numbered” among them:

Wherefore I will consecrate this land unto thy seed — and they which shall be numbered among thy seed — forever, for the land of their inheritance . . . And now my beloved brethren, seeing that our merciful God hath given us so great knowledge concerning these things, let us remember him and lay aside our sins and not hang down our heads, for we are not cast off. Nevertheless we have been driven out of the

land of our inheritance, but we have been led to a better land.  
(2 Nephi 10:19–20)

In a temple sermon given later on in life (Jacob 1:17–19; 2:2), after the death of his brother Nephi (Jacob 1:12), Jacob again appealed to the Abrahamic Covenant language of “lands of … inheritance” when he warned the Nephites against the burgeoning apostasy in their midst: “And the time speedily cometh that except ye repent, they [the Lamanites] shall possess the land of your inheritance and the Lord God will lead away the righteous out from among you” (Jacob 3:4). The Lamanites’ commitment to monogamy and family relationships qualified them as “more righteous than” the Nephites at this very early date (Jacob 3:5–7). Jacob’s prophecy eventually proved true: the Lamanites did take possession of the Nephites’ “land of … inheritance” in the land of Nephi and the Lord did “lead away the righteous” from the wicked under the leadership of Mosiah I (see Omni 1:12–13).

One generation after the exodus of Mosiah I with the Nephite faithful, Amaleki, writing near the end of the small plates, uses covenant language very similar to that used by Jacob in Jacob 3:4 when he states that many Nephites wanted to re-inherit or repossess the land of Nephi that they had lost: “a large number [of Nephites] … were desirous to possess the land of their inheritance” (Omni 1:27). The record of Zeniff confirms that these colonists viewed “the land of our fathers’ first inheritance” (Mosiah 9:1), as the land which they had a legal right to by covenant. Later in his record, Zeniff describes one of the traditional grievances of the Lamanites — who continually threatened the colonists’ tenuous possession of the land — against the Nephites as: “they were wronged while in the land of their first inheritance after they had crossed the sea” (Mosiah 10:13).

Also Mormon records that one generation after Mosiah I and his people’s relocation from the land of Nephi to Zarahemla, King Benjamin, the son of Mosiah I, and king in Zarahemla expelled the Lamanites who were attempting to dispossess the Nephites of the “lands of their inheritance”: “And in the strength of the Lord they did contend against their enemies until they had slain many thousands of the Lamanites. And it came to pass that they did contend against the Lamanites until they had driven them out of all the lands of their inheritance” (Words of Mormon 1:14). The Nephites under King Benjamin were living faithful to the covenant, and thus received the “strength of the Lord” in maintaining their “lands of … inheritance.”
The Lamanite conversion narratives (Alma 17–27) — one of the most significant covenant restoration accounts in the Book of Mormon — begin in the land Ishmael (see Alma 17), which Mormon characterizes as a “land of … inheritance”: “And it came to pass that Ammon and Lamoni returned from the land of Middoni to the land of Ishmael, which was the land of their inheritance” (Alma 21:18). The Lamanite conversion narratives conclude with introduction of the toponym (place name) called Jershon (a name which, in accordance with the rules of Hebrew name formation means “place of inheritance”) and the clear correlation and juxtaposition of the name Jershon within the text, with yrš/inherit language, creating a lucid wordplay: “And this land Jershon [place-of-inheritance/possession] is the land which we will give unto our brethren for an inheritance” (Alma 27:22). This wordplay includes the apparent use of the verb yrš in its ingressive sense, “inherit,” “take possession of”; “And now behold, this will we do unto our brethren that they may inherit the land Jershon. … And it came to pass that that they went down into the land of Jershon and took possession of the land of Jershon” (Alma 27:24, 26). The granting and reception of lands of inheritance in Jershon at the end of the Lamanite conversion narrative stands as a powerful symbol of their restoration to the Abrahamic covenant and reintegration into the house of Israel.

Mormon takes pains to show that one generation later, the converted, covenant-restored Lamanites provide the same inheritance in Jershon to the reconverted Zoramite poor, symbolic of the latter’s reinstitution.


40. Robert F. Smith, unpublished manuscript. In an October 2015 personal communication to me he indicated that he first noticed the correlation of Jershon and “inheritance” in the late 1960s. Paul Hoskisson suggested in an August 2015 conversation with me that John W. Welch “came up with his ideas while learning Hebrew in L[A]s Angeles.”

to the covenant: “And they [the people of Ammon] did nourish them [the Zoramite poor] and did clothe them and did give unto them lands for their inheritance” (Alma 35:9). Preserving the verb tense of his source, he further writes, “And as many [Zoramites] as were brought to repentance were driven out of their land; but they have lands for their inheritance in the land of Jershon” (Alma 35:14). Mormon’s narrative illustrates the great truth and promise, noted earlier, as articulated in Psalms 37:11, “But the meek [the poor] shall inherit the earth,” or “but the poor shall enjoy the inheritance of the earth.” It is worth noting, the Nephites continued to grant lands of inheritance to the Lamanite converts even after many of them migrated out of Jershon in the second generation: “And the Nephites would not suffer that they [the people of Ammon] should be destroyed; therefore they gave them lands for their inheritance” (Alma 43:12). The socio-religious importance of lands of inheritance receives attention later in the book of Alma as well.

Perhaps one motivating reason Mormon uses the events surrounding Jershon and the granting of lands of inheritance as evidence of the Lord’s special concern for converted Lamanites and reconverted Zoramites and their restoration to the covenant is Jesus’s emphasis on “land[s] of inheritance” as a covenant concept in his Sermon at the Temple to the Nephites and Lamanites. What he had taught in the Sermon on the Mount, he also taught there: “And blessed [happy] are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth [land]” (3 Nephi 12:5). Later on the same day he


43. In a pointed letter to the Lamanite king, Ammaron, who was also a Nephite-Zoramite dissenter, Moroni writes:

And behold, if ye do not this [i.e., exchange prisoners on the terms Moroni had just laid down] I will come against you with my armies, yea, even I will arm my women and my children; and I will come against you, and I will follow you even unto your own land, which is the land of our first inheritance. Yea, and it shall be blood for blood, yea, life for life. And I will give you battle, even until you are destroyed from off the face of the earth. Behold, I am in my anger — and also my people. Ye have sought to murder us, and we have only sought to defend our lives. But behold, if ye seek to destroy us more, we will seek to destroy you. Yea, and we will seek our lands, the lands of our first inheritance. (Alma 54:12–13)
reiterated the covenantal grant of the land, “And behold, this is the land of your inheritance, and the Father hath given it unto you” (3 Nephi 15:13).

As part of his teaching at the temple in Bountiful on the second day — teaching in which he interwove even more of the writings of Isaiah — Jesus reaffirmed the covenant promise that Jerusalem and its vicinity would serve as a future, eschatological “land of … inheritance” for the Lord’s people at the time of their gathering: “Verily verily I say unto you: All these things shall surely come, even as the Father hath commanded me. And then shall this covenant which the Father hath covenanted with his people be fulfilled. And then shall Jerusalem be inhabited again with my people, and it shall be the land of their inheritance” (3 Nephi 20:46). The latter-day restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ in its fullness would serve as the Father’s means of preparing the way for this gathering to lands of inheritance: “Yea, and then shall the work commence with the Father among all nations in preparing the way whereby his people may be gathered home to the land of their inheritance” (3 Nephi 21:28). Later, Mormon adds his own summation of what Jesus had articulated in his covenant temple teachings: “And now behold, I say unto you that when the Lord shall see fit in his wisdom that these sayings shall come unto the Gentiles according to his word, then ye may know that the covenant which the Father hath made with the children of Israel concerning their restoration to the lands of their inheritance is already beginning to be fulfilled” (3 Nephi 29:1).

In his personal account of his own life and times, Mormon details the loss of covenant “lands of … inheritance” concomitant with the Nephites’ apostasy then afoot. The Nephites first lost, but then regained, the lands of their inheritance: “But behold, we did go forth against the Lamanites and the robbers of Gaddianton until we had again taken possession of the lands of our inheritance” (Mormon 2:27). However, this victory proved fleeting. The Nephites’ strength would continue to erode and Mormon reports, “we made a treaty with the Lamanites and the robbers of Gaddianton, in the which we did get the lands of our inheritance divided” (Mormon 2:28). The Nephites would eventually lose everything. Yet Mormon had hope for the fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant among Lehi’s descendants in the future.

Like his predecessors and Jesus himself, Mormon prophesied that the future restoration of the gospel would signal Israel’s gathering and “return” to lands of inheritance: “Therefore I write unto you Gentiles, and also unto you house of Israel, when the work shall commence, that ye shall be about to prepare to return to the land of your inheritance”
(Mormon 3:17). The preserved writings of Mormon, Moroni, and their predecessors would serve a vital role in this gathering and return to covenant lands of inheritance:

And for this intent shall they [the writings in the Book of Mormon] go, that they may be persuaded that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, that the Father may bring about through his Most Beloved his great and eternal purpose in the restoring the Jews or all the house of Israel to the land of their inheritance, which the Lord their God hath given them, unto the fulfilling of his covenant. (Mormon 5:14)

Alma the Younger articulates the bigger picture that Nephi and other righteous men and women understood what Laman and Lemuel did not: all covenant lands of inheritance symbolized “a far better land of promise” (Alma 37:45) — i.e., the celestial kingdom. Abraham and Sarah and their successors saw the bigger, eternal picture too, as noted by the author of Hebrews: “These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth” (Hebrews 11:13).

Moroni near the end of the Book of Mormon continues to use the “lands of inheritance” idiom in Ether 7:16; 9:13 and 13:8. In the latter passage, Moroni describes the new world land of promise as a land of inheritance for all the descendants — the remnant — of Joseph: “Wherefore the remnant of the house of Joseph shall be built up upon this land, and it shall be a land of their inheritance” (Ether 13:8).

Given the foregoing evidence, Laman and Lemuel rightly saw their family estate as “the land of their inheritance” within the framework under the Abrahamic Covenant and the law of Moses (including Deuteronomy). However, the brothers — unlike Lehi and Nephi — could never fully grasp the bigger picture of the Abrahamic Covenant, the scattering of Israel (and their family’s place in it), nor did they grasp the importance of the Abrahamic Covenant and the scattering of Israel within the Lord’s broader plan of salvation for the human family, including the exaltation of the righteous as joint-heirs with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob — and with the Savior himself — of the celestial kingdom.
Conclusion

The verbal phrase “we might have enjoyed” in Laman and Lemuel’s reported complaint, “we might have enjoyed our possessions and the land of our inheritance” (1 Nephi 17:21), reflects a use of the Hebrew verb yrš in its progressive aspect “to enjoy possession of.” This is evident in several passages in the Hebrew Bible, and perhaps most visibly in Numbers 36:8 (“And every daughter, that possesseth [yōrešet] an inheritance [naḥałā] in any tribe of the children of Israel, shall be wife unto one of the family of the tribe of her father, that the children of Israel may enjoy [yîršû] every man the inheritance [nahâlat] of his fathers”) and Joshua 1:15 (“then ye shall return unto the land of your possession [lĕ’ereṣ yēruššatκem; or, unto the land of your inheritance], and enjoy it [wîrištem ʾôtāh].” Examining Laman and Lemuel’s complaint in a legal context helps us better appreciate “land[s] of … inheritance” as expressing a seminal Abrahamic Covenant concept. Moreover, we can better appreciate how Laman and Lemuel’s close association of their temporal inheritance with what they saw as happiness, and their failure to see the bigger eternal covenant picture of yrš/inherit, prevented them from “enjoying” their new land of inheritance. This limited and limiting perspective deterred them from their living after the manner of happiness, rejoicing in their posterity, and looking forward in faith to the celestial kingdom, the true land of eternal inheritance, of which all other lands of promise constitute but a type.

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Overwriting Ether: Moroni’s Transfiguration of Jaredite Scripture

David J. Larsen


Abstract: The Book of Ether is a sometimes-overlooked gem of a text within the Book of Mormon, a history within a history that deserves careful and innovative investigation. Rosalynde Frandsen Welch offers such with a novel perspective in her entry in the Maxwell Institute’s series of “brief theological introductions” to the books within the Book of Mormon. The principal focus of Welch’s analysis is on issues concerning Moroni’s editorial purposes, how he interacts with his source text, and the ethics of his agenda for his abridgment of the Jaredite record. She critiques what she sees as Moroni’s lack of interest in the Jaredite record for its own sake and his attempts to “Christianize” the indigenous religion and culture of the former inhabitants of the land he occupies. Additionally, Welch presents Moroni as offering his future audience a “reader-centered theology of scripture” that seeks to transfer the authority of Scripture from the author to the reader. This review finds some of Welch’s proposals to be problematic but recognizes the great value of her beautifully written contribution to the academic study of the Book of Ether and the Book of Mormon.

Rosalynde Frandsen Welch is an independent scholar of Latter-day Saint literature, theology, and scripture. She earned a PhD from UC San Diego in early modern English literature. She is a member of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute’s advisory board and received a research grant from the Institute to write the manuscript for this study of the Book of Ether. Welch has published an impressive number and variety
of scholarly works that can be found in academic journals such as *BYU Studies*, the *Mormon Studies Review*, and the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, as well as in multiple blogs and in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. The focus of this review is on her entry in the Maxwell Institute’s *Book of Mormon: Brief Theological Introductions* series, which looks at the Book of Ether.

Welch is a wondrous wordsmith, with a highly articulate and lucid writing style, so much so that I could honestly read her eloquent prose all day. The way she organizes her treatment of the Book of Ether is accessible, fluid, effective, and interesting to read. In this theological analysis of the Book of Ether, she builds upon the work of scholars such as Grant Hardy and Joseph Spencer and adds notable original perspectives in an effort to present this singular Jaredite/Nephite blend of inspired writings in a light that most readers would not have previously considered.

In Welch’s introductory remarks, she explains her approach to this volume:

> My basic method in this study is threefold: (1) to make the best sense I can of the text’s language and structures, (2) to infer something of the writer’s intent, and then (3) to press beyond the plain sense and authorial intent to draw out emergent patterns of meaning at work in the passage. (pp. 12–13)

Readers should keep in mind that this collection from the Maxwell Institute is a series of “brief theological introductions,” not the standard verse-by-verse commentaries or intensive doctrinal expositions many may be used to seeing. Instead, Welch’s approach is to more broadly “search the book of Ether for themes at the heart of religion as it is experienced by believers” (p. 13). Although the author does occasionally touch briefly on particular points of the story of the brother of Jared and other highlights of the Jaredite record, it is clear from the outset that her principal focus is on what Moroni’s intentions are and how he is interacting with his source text. She foregoes extensive discussion of some well-known motifs from the book, such as the “recurrent theme of secret combinations” (p. 12), to examine issues relating to authorship such as Moroni’s editorial purposes, the ethics of his agenda for his abridgment of the Jaredite record, and how he “models a wrestle with God over the pages of a written text” (p. 13).

This may sound like a rather ethereal approach to Ether for some readers. Indeed, the chapters in this short treatment cover expansive, overarching concepts that run through the text such as “the salvation of the Gentiles” (Chapter 1), “faith after Christ” (Chapter 2), Moroni’s
“Christianizing” of the original Jaredite record (Chapter 3), and how the Book of Ether encourages a “reader-centered approach to Scripture” (Chapter 4).

In her Introduction, Welch makes a broad statement regarding Moroni’s approach to the original writings of Ether that I feel represents the position she generally takes throughout her book. She asserts, “Moroni has a clear agenda for the book of Ether, and at times he overwrites Jaredite history and culture in order to convey his own priorities” (p. 14). She notes that although the original Book of Ether, compiled by the Jaredite prophet of that name, was Moroni’s primary source, “Ether’s voice is largely absent from Moroni’s rendition” (p. 5). She goes on to explain:

It is Moroni’s prophetic mind, then, that prevails in the book of Ether. As Mormon does with the large plates of Nephi, Moroni introduces interpretive comments to highlight lessons of Jaredite history. Unlike Mormon, however, Moroni directly addresses these comments to a particular readership and expands them at length in his own voice. (p. 5)

What is Moroni’s agenda, then, according to Welch? What is his purpose in “overwriting” Ether’s original record to share so many thoughts of his own? She expands on this in Chapter 1 and returns to this subject throughout her writing. She turns to Grant Hardy’s work in Understanding the Book of Mormon to launch her discussion of her views on this. She states:

Hardy argues that Moroni’s abridgement of the twenty-four gold plates aims quite simply to transform the Jaredite text into Christian scripture. He shows that the Jaredite record in itself, without Moroni’s interspersed comments, contains little material about Jesus Christ and the Christian gospel, beyond the passage in Ether 3:6–16 describing the brother of Jared’s encounter with Christ. (p. 19)

For Welch, Moroni’s approach to the Jaredite record is to “Christianize” whatever material he can from the original text and include that in his abridgement. She sees Moroni as being determined to prove that the God of the Jaredites is the same Jesus Christ that appeared to the Nephites, as recounted in the book of 3 Nephi. She explains:

Moroni’s first step in transforming the Book of Ether into Christian scripture, then, is to highlight any connection he sees between the Jaredite record and the Christian gospel
preached among the Nephites. Moroni wants to persuade the reader that this ancient indigenous text, distinct from Nephite culture and religion, independently confirms the universal truth of the Christian revelation given to his people centuries before their extinction. (p. 20)

It is hard to tell how much merit Welch sees in Moroni’s Christianizing efforts. She expresses great interest in his ability to apply Nephite Christian theological principles to the Jaredite story and then extrapolate the results for a future Gentile audience. For example, she presents Moroni as solving the puzzle of how salvation can be extended to groups like the Jaredites and Gentiles — people not born under the Abrahamic covenant — through the Christian principle of faith. “The brother of Jared’s salvation occurs through faith alone, outside of birth-covenant” (p. 25), she explains. Later, she further asserts, “Moroni uses the Jaredite record as raw material to work out a theology of salvation for those beyond the reach of the Israelite covenant and Mosaic law” (p. 36).

Modern Ethics, Ancient Texts

Despite her apparent admiration for Moroni’s theological and literary nimbleness, she still questions at length the ethical appropriateness of his transformation of an indigenous people’s sacred text. She points out a clear distinction between Moroni’s frequent and lengthy interpolations into the text he is redacting and, in her view, his father’s more reserved and respectful treatment of the original texts he was working with. She argues, of Moroni’s approach, that “one can imagine an alternate treatment of the Book of Ether in which Moroni prioritizes Jaredite experience in his interpretation” (p. 62), one that demonstrates “honoring and caring for ethnic difference” (p. 63).

“Moroni is not especially interested in the Jaredite record for its own sake” (p. 55), Welch complains. “He passes over aspects of Jaredite experience that do not connect with Nephite experience. He shows little curiosity about the specifics of religious belief and practice. He has no comment on Jaredite society, culture, or politics” (p. 55). When he does show interest, “he does so because the material seems to confirm Nephite history or prophecy” (p. 56). In Welch’s view, Moroni’s approach constitutes a troubling violation of a responsible “ethics of reading” (p. 56). She explains:
It’s puzzling that Moroni, finally able to unfold the full meaning of the Jaredite record, seems incurious about the civilization for its own sake … But it also raises ethical questions. From a modern perspective, Moroni’s translation could be seen as an ethnocentric appropriation of the original text, insensitive to the value of Jaredite experience in its own right. … But the book of Ether foregrounds the ethical stakes of looking for Christ in somebody else’s book. Moroni, unlike previous Nephite redactors, is putting his fingerprints on the sacred text of another people, not his own. (pp. 58–59)

Welch admits that “it is a thorny enterprise to impose modern ethical perspectives on ancient texts” (p. 59), but she justifies her repeated chastisement of Moroni’s work by arguing that the Book of Mormon authors themselves reflect on the ethics of reading borrowed sacred texts. She suggests that Nephi, for example, is careful in his treatment of others’ scriptures and advocates that all readers use the same care. She interprets 2 Nephi 29:4–6 as Nephi arguing that the Gentiles would appropriate Jewish scripture without showing appropriate respect for Jewish culture and history. “To responsibly ‘occupy’ the text of another people, Nephi suggests, means to value their history and sacrifice” (p. 61).

Mormon, Welch argues, was similarly concerned about the future Gentiles’ treatment of the Lehites, from whom they would receive the Book of Mormon (see Mormon 5:9–10). She claims:

The Book of Mormon itself, the voice of the slain from the dust, is to be the chief agent of the Gentiles’ ethical awakening to the indigenous inhabitants of their continent. Like Nephi, Mormon sees the ethical treatment of persecuted peoples as part and parcel with the ethical reading of their texts. (p. 61)

She argues that Moroni was certainly aware of these teachings and that he, likewise, accuses the modern Gentiles of “transfiguring” the scriptures (Mormon 8:33, 37), willfully misinterpreting the holy word to justify their pride, materialism, and neglect of the poor and needy. She feels, however, that Moroni does not have the same awareness of, and mastery over, this concept that Nephi and Mormon have.

1. Welch cites 2 Nephi 29:4-6 and 2 Nephi 25:1-2. I do not, however, agree with her conclusions regarding Nephi’s intent in these passages. I see her reading her own ethics into these verses — neither have anything to do, in my view, with producing a faithful and culturally sensitive translation of another people’s scriptures.
In any case, Moroni does not express the gratitude, honor, and compassion for the Jaredites that his predecessors advocate in the delicate work of interpreting the religious text of another people. He is quick to interpret the Jaredite record in Nephite terms and use that interpretation to exhort the future readers, but he is rather slow to seek its meaning on its own terms. (p. 62)

I found it rather disheartening and frustrating that the author chose to spend so much space on this subject — it is the main topic of concern in Chapter 3 of her book and comes up frequently in other chapters as well. Her attention to this matter is so ubiquitous throughout her writing that it seems that she is deeply offended by it. She finds the lack of what she deems authentic Jaredite religious and scriptural tradition to be, in her words, “jarring” (p. 65). It is rather ironic that Welch can be seen as similarly guilty of attempting to “occupy” or colonize Moroni’s ancient text. The complaints she raises and ethical standards she imposes are anachronistic and presentistic; they are the preoccupation of modern scholars, not ancient ones. Perhaps Welch is not aware that in ancient times, the reworking, repurposing, or “updating” of older texts was a common practice that was seen as honorable and inspired when done by an author/editor who had the spirit of prophecy.2

Before she ends her passionate protestation against the Nephite prophet-author, she makes a rather ineffective and somewhat condescending attempt to soften the blow:

In the end, I am inclined to judge Moroni gently for his “transfiguration” of the book of Ether. We can learn caution from his hasty interpretive move to pave over the Jaredite text with a Christianizing gloss. We can honor his invitation to be “wiser than [he]” by treating other people’s sacred texts with gratitude, sensitivity, and respect — and by amplifying that same gratitude and care in our interactions with the peoples from whom those texts were borrowed. (p. 68)

Christ in Jaredite and Other Ancient Scripture

As I read Welch’s book, I was left wondering, at times, what she was hoping to see of Jaredite religious tradition and why she assumed that Moroni was giving us something so markedly different. She refers

2. Although, she does clearly understand the importance of “translating,” or interpreting, a text in modified form for the benefit of one’s audience (pp. 64-65).
frequently to “Nephite Christianity,” and apparently sees this central characteristic of Nephite religion as stemming from the fact that Jesus Christ visited them at a certain point in their history. But, as Welch notes, one of the Jaredite progenitors had his own vision of the Savior, in which the Deity specifically introduced himself as Jesus Christ. She also brings up the fact that there is another reference to Christ by Emer, a later Jaredite king (Ether 9:21–22). As such, what reasons do we have to imagine that Jaredite religion is particularly less “Christian” than Nephite religion? Notwithstanding this, Welch appears to see no room for Christ and “Christianity” in the original Jaredite record.

We do not, of course, have the original Jaredite record, so we do not know how Christian they might have been after the brother of Jared’s vision. Also, the story of that vision bears many similarities to the rituals of the Israelite high priest. They apparently had the story of Adam and Eve in a form that was familiar to Moroni as well (Ether 1:3–4). With the forgoing in mind, I do not believe it would be out of line to ask what evidence Welch has that Moroni is not being faithful to Jaredite religion and traditions? What real grounds are there to conclude that Jaredite religion was so different from Nephite or from Israelite religion? It is obvious that there would have been some differences due to the fact that they did not have access to the same prophets, revelations, scriptures, and so on; however, it seems to me that Welch is both imposing a foreign ethical standard on Moroni’s treatment of historical texts and also failing to properly acknowledge the continuity of divinely-revealed religion that is portrayed throughout the sacred texts (ancient and modern) of the Restored Gospel.

The scriptures revealed in modern times place Christ at the center of divine interaction with humanity in every age. From early on in the Book of Mormon, many hundreds of years before His visit, Nephi and his descendants knew the name of Jesus Christ (2 Nephi 10:3; 25:19). The Nephites were “Christianizing” the Torah and the Prophets long before Moroni got his hands on the Jaredite plates (see 2 Nephi 11:2; 25:24–30).

Looking at the Pearl of Great Price, we see that in Moses 5, Adam was told that the sacrifices he was commanded to offer were “a similitude of the sacrifice of the Only Begotten of the Father” and that he should do all things “in the name of the Son” (Moses 5:7–8). Later, the “Gospel”

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regarding the “Only Begotten Son” who “should come in the meridian of time” began to be preached among Adam’s posterity. In Moses 6, we learn through Enoch’s preaching that Adam was taught that all need to be baptized in the “name of mine Only Begotten Son … which is Jesus Christ” (Moses 6:52). In Moses 8, Noah taught the people, “Believe and repent of your sins and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, even as our fathers, and ye shall receive the Holy Ghost” (Moses 8:24).

If we take these revealed words at face value, the early biblical patriarchs were arguably just as Christian as Moroni was. If Noah was preaching the first principles and ordinances of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, why should we not expect the early Jaredites, not many generations afterwards, to have been comparably “Christian” as well, especially after the brother of Jared’s vision? Whether they were or not, Welch’s polemic against Moroni’s presumed Christianizing transfiguration of Jaredite culture and religion seems, to me, antithetical to the general Christ-centered thrust of restored scripture.

Before moving on from this point, I would note that Welch also seems to be leaving out Christ himself from this equation. She suggests that Moroni’s abridgement “raises ethical questions” and that it “could be seen as an ethnocentric appropriation of the original text” (p. 58). She claims that Moroni essentially silences Ether’s personal voice, and, as previously noted, she tries to “imagine an alternate treatment of the Book of Ether in which Moroni prioritizes Jaredite experience in his interpretation” (p. 62). However, Welch has apparently failed to notice that Moroni was in close communication with Jesus Christ himself during this process and that he prepared the record following the instructions given to him, including leaving out much that he may have otherwise included:

And now I, Moroni, have written the words which were commanded me, according to my memory; and I have told you the things which I have sealed up. (Ether 5:1; see also 8:20, 26)

And I was about to write more, but I am forbidden; but great and marvelous were the prophecies of Ether. (Ether 13:13)

It would appear that, to some essential degree, Christ was responsible for the final shape and content of the Book of Ether. For some parts of his manuscript, at least, Moroni claims to have had the guidance, approval, and authority of Jesus Christ to write the things that he did. These
considerations are a fitting segue into a discussion of Welch’s fourth and final chapter, “A Reader-Centered Theology of Scripture.”

**Whence the Authority of Scripture?**

Chapter 4 represents one of the most unique contributions to how Moroni’s approach should be interpreted. Welch starts the chapter with the question, “How does writing become scripture?” She sees Moroni as wrestling with this very question, as he views his own weaknesses and considers “his written expression insufficient to inspire anything but derision in potential readers” (p. 72).

In her discussion, Welch points out that both Mormon and Moroni use the expression “these things” to refer to their work on the Book of Mormon (see Mormon 5:12; Ether 5:3; Moroni 10:4). Drawing on the meaning of “thing” in the American English of Joseph Smith’s time (“that which comes, falls or happens, like event” [p. 74]), Welch suggests that Mormon and Moroni use the phrase “these things” to point to the notion that the Book of Mormon is more of an event than an object. The event that she sees these prophet-authors referring to is the reception of the Book of Mormon by modern readers.

Many hundreds of years before it will be taken up by its first reader, the Book of Mormon frequently imagines the moment of its own reception, whether faithful or faithless. I suggest that this is what Mormon and Moroni mean when they so often refer to their work as “these things”: the Book of Mormon distributed through millions of potential microevents, ordinary yet fraught with spiritual significance, wherein the Book of Mormon is sincerely received by a reader. (pp. 74–75)

If the true power and potential of the Book of Mormon lies in its reception by modern readers, then, Welch argues, “the potential flowering of ‘these things’ waits to be unlocked — and it is the reader, not the writer, who holds the key” (p. 75). Mormon and Moroni are undoubtedly concerned with the book’s reception and direct many comments (especially Moroni) towards the future readers of the book. For Welch, this focus “points us toward a reader-centered theology of scripture” (p. 76).

What this fourth chapter becomes is Welch’s definition of what scripture is, according to her interpretation of Mormon and Moroni’s view of their work on the Book of Mormon. As I suggested previously,
this will be quite a novel perspective for most readers — one that will cause them to consider where the authority of scripture comes from. For Welch, the Book of Mormon weighs in on this question and “implicitly denies that scripture is defined by any of the following”:

- the infallibility of its writers, because human error is regularly acknowledged (Mormon 9:31);
- its comprehensive or sufficient character, because the book itself promises a flood of additional scripture (2 Nephi 29:12–13); or
- the ecclesiastical authority of an existing church, because the publication of the Book of Mormon preceded the organization of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (p. 76).

What the book does affirm, according to Welch, is that “text becomes scripture in the hands of humble, receptive readers who are moved upon by the Lord or his Spirit” (p. 76). In fact, Welch argues that the reference to “weak things” that will “become strong unto them [the Gentile readers]” in Ether 12:27 is the Book of Mormon itself. “Moroni shifts the locus of scriptural authority away from the prestige of a sacred text’s writers … more toward readership to establish scriptural authority” (pp. 76–77). It is the reader that “completes its final transformation into scripture in the moment of sincere encounter” (p. 77). In short, Welch’s perspective in this chapter is that:

A reception theory of scripture treats scripture less as an established deposit of truth certified by “author”-ity and more as a field of potential ready for communities of readers to unlock its meaning and power. (p. 77)

There is certainly value in the type of reader-response criticism that Welch advocates. Too much focus on the historical (or “authorial”) approach to interpreting biblical texts led many scholars in recent decades to turn their focus to how the reader/audience, whether ancient or modern, affects the creation and meaning of scripture. This methodology is especially useful, in my view, if inclusive of both the authors’ intentions and the readers’ encounter with the text. Welch does this as she considers both Moroni’s concerns to offer up the best work he can, in his weakness, to the Lord and also how his humble (in his view, inadequate) efforts will be received by future readers. Moroni’s foreseeing of how readers might experience and react to his words certainly seemed to influence the content and style of his writing.
The strength of this reader-reception approach breaks down, in my opinion, when it is applied to our understanding of the authority — as well as the definition — of scripture. Welch describes her view as shifting the authority of scripture from the author to the reader. Placing the locus of scriptural authority on each individual reader’s experience with the text is a poignantly postmodern approach that deemphasizes the clearest and most important source of scripture’s authority — the Divine.

Popular biblical scholar N.T. “Tom” Wright has argued that the phrase “‘the authority of scripture’ … must mean, if it means anything Christian, ‘the authority of God exercised through scripture.’” Ultimately, the authority of scripture does not come from the reader or the author — it comes from God.

To say this is not to deny the weakness of men’s hands, or minds, in producing texts that we consider to be sacred. Moroni, as did other ancient authors, made it clear that he did not consider his writings to be perfect. We do not view the authors of scriptural texts (or the texts themselves) to be inerrant. However, if we are in agreement with the author of 2 Peter 1:20–21, then we should not emphasize the “private interpretation” of scripture but should view the “prophecy of the scripture” as coming not “by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.”

The authors of the Book of Mormon certainly believed that they were producing what they wrote under the direct authority and guidance of God. As noted previously, Moroni believed that he was writing with God’s authority and writing what the Lord has asked him to write.

And now I, Moroni, have written the words which were commanded me, according to my memory. … And now, if I have no authority for these things, judge ye; for ye shall know that I have authority when ye shall see me, and we shall stand before God at the last day. Amen. (Ether 5:1, 6)

Later, in one of the passages where Moroni uses the phrase “these things,” he acknowledges the weakness of his writing but emphasizes that much of what he did write came directly from Christ. What Moroni records is not something that is waiting to be “scripture” when the reader receives it, but it is the express Word of God, coming directly from the mouth of Deity.

4. N.T. Wright, Scripture and the Authority of God, 18, emphasis in original.
And then shall ye know that I have seen Jesus, and that he hath talked with me face to face, and that he told me in plain humility, even as a man telleth another in mine own language, concerning these things; And only a few have I written, because of my weakness in writing. (Ether 12:39–40)

In some of his final recorded words, Moroni again claims that what he has engraved on the plates are God’s own words and that the Lord himself will testify of this fact in the next life.

And I exhort you to remember these things; for the time speedily cometh that ye shall know that I lie not, for ye shall see me at the bar of God; and the Lord God will say unto you: Did I not declare my words unto you, which were written by this man, like as one crying from the dead, yea, even as one speaking out of the dust? I declare these things unto the fulfilling of the prophecies. And behold, they shall proceed forth out of the mouth of the everlasting God; and his word shall hiss forth from generation to generation. And God shall show unto you, that that which I have written is true. (Moroni 10:27–29)

In very similar manner to Moroni, the last author of the Book of Mormon, the first author, Nephi, believed it important to declare to future readers that the words he wrote “are the words of Christ,” given to Nephi by Christ himself with the divine command to write them down.

And now, my beloved brethren, and also Jew, and all ye ends of the earth, hearken unto these words and believe in Christ; and if ye believe not in these words believe in Christ. And if ye shall believe in Christ ye will believe in these words, for they are the words of Christ, and he hath given them unto me; and they teach all men that they should do good. And if they are not the words of Christ, judge ye — for Christ will show unto you, with power and great glory, that they are his words, at the last day; and you and I shall stand face to face before his bar; and ye shall know that I have been commanded of him to write these things, notwithstanding my weakness. … For what I seal on earth, shall be brought against you at the judgment bar; for thus hath the Lord commanded me, and I must obey. Amen. (2 Nephi 33:10–11, 15)
Welch seeks to parry this type of criticism of her theory by acknowledging that the Book of Mormon does not allow for simply any reader-determined definition of scripture and that it “will countenance no ‘unfaithed’ or reductively naturalistic account of its emergence” (p. 81). She explains that just as the brother of Jared’s sixteen stones required God’s “sanctifying touch” to turn them from normal rocks into the miraculously illuminated objects that the Jaredites would need for their journey, so the writing of Mormon and Moroni, et al., no matter how weak and humble, would become Scripture through the intervention of Divine grace (p. 81). She expands this metaphor to include the idea that readers need to exercise faith to be able to see through the weakness of the Book of Mormon authors’ writing to behold its divine origin, just as the brother of Jared was able to perceive the divine power emanating from what looked like the rather normal (perhaps even “weak” and “mangled,” considering its post-crucifixion look), human-like finger of the pre-mortal Christ (pp. 81–87).

In my view, Welch is correct to suggest that the faith and charity of the Book of Mormon’s future readers are key for them to accept the book as scripture. However, notwithstanding the helpfulness of the above-noted elucidation of her perspective, Welch’s emphasis on the written words of the book becoming scripture in the hands of the reader strikes me as an inadequate representation of what the Word of God is. For sure, the worth of God’s Word for the individual will only unfold when that individual applies their own faith and charity to what they read, but if they fail to do so, this will not affect the fact that the words of the books are Holy Scripture, as Moroni and Nephi both so forcefully asserted. I would argue that for Moroni, Nephi, and other Book of Mormon authors, the authority of scripture lies not with the author or the reader, but clearly with that Divine Source that directs, guides, and inspires the words of scripture.

**Concluding Thoughts**

This review of Rosalynde Frandsen Welch’s brief theological introduction to the Book of Ether has been critical of some of her principal arguments, including her critique of the ethics of Moroni’s “Christianizing” approach to Ether’s record and her description of his perspective on the authority of scripture. Despite these disagreements with her views, I did find much of value in Welch’s effort.

I enjoyed her repeated emphasis on how Moroni’s message to both Jew and Gentile is that “God will never cease working to bring outsiders
into his blessed presence” (p. 9). She underscores how the Book of Ether demonstrates the “limitlessness of Christ’s saving work” by teaching that those from any ethnic or cultural context, including those with no background in Christianity, can access the redemptive power of Christ through faith. Considering the scope of Christ’s Atonement and the reach of His grace, Welch notes:

Looking backward to the non-Israelite brother of Jared and his extraordinary faith, Moroni sees a template for the future salvation of the Gentiles. Both views, past and future, assure Moroni that the saving power of the Messiah is available in all times and in all places. The book of Ether is Moroni’s historical “proof of concept” for the universal salvation promised in Christianity (see 3 Ne. 16). (p. 36)

Even though Moroni has “witnessed the apocalyptic destruction of his world” and wanders alone as “a time traveler, a ghost walking the border between two worlds” (his own and that of his future Gentile readers), he can find a place in both for faith and hope (p. 10). Welch brilliantly shines a spotlight on this beacon that Moroni lights for his envisaged audience. She repeatedly calls attention to how Moroni reassures the Gentiles that “ye may also have hope, and be partakers of the gift, if ye will but have faith” (Ether 12:9). For Welch, Moroni’s message is timeless and not limited to ethnic/cultural identity or whether one is born under the Abrahamic covenant or not. I close with Rosalynde Welch’s eloquent expounding on that message:

Hope leads us to the sober, patient labor of good works. It comforts us in the groanings of the present. This is true whether we live long before, long after, or in between the comings of Christ, as Nephi and Moroni testify. Every day may be the day of our salvation. Every second may be the Messiah’s door. Every moment bears the image of Christ because time is the inexhaustible well of life. (p. 51)

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**Lehi and Nephi as Trained Manassite Scribes**

Noel B. Reynolds

**Abstract:** *This paper brings together contemporary Ancient Near East scholarship in several fields to construct an updated starting point for interpretation of the teachings of the Book of Mormon. It assembles findings from studies of ancient scribal culture, historical linguistics and epigraphy, Hebrew rhetoric, and the history and archaeology of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Levant, together with the traditions of ancient Israel to construct a contextualized perspective for understanding Lehi, Nephi, and their scribal training as they would have been understood by their contemporaries. Lehi and Nephi are shown to be the beneficiaries of the most advanced scribal training available in seventh-century BCE Jerusalem and prominent bearers of the Josephite textual tradition. These insights give much expanded meaning to Nephi's early warning that he had been “taught somewhat in all the learning of [his] father” (1 Nephi 1:1). This analysis will be extended in a companion paper to provide the framework that enables the recognition and tracking of an official Nephite scribal school that ultimately provided Mormon with the records that he abridged to produce our Book of Mormon.*

Current approaches to the interpretation of the Book of Mormon often share the assumption that in reading the English Book of Mormon through the lens of contemporary literature, history, theology, or philosophy, readers can fully understand what it says or what it teaches. In his study of ancient Judaism, Michael Stone went to some lengths to explicate how modern perceptions and orthodoxies can shape how we see the facts and words of the ancient world:

It is those orthodoxies that have formed the cultural context of the scholars’ own days, for, to a great extent, the scholars’ contemporary cultural context determines what they perceive. Consequently, they tend to privilege the elements
that are in focus through those particular “spectacles,” even if other phenomena are present in the same data. This selectivity is, for the most part, not deliberate … It is necessary to recognize our own inherited cultural complex and to attempt to challenge it from varied perspectives and so achieve a more nuanced view of the past preceding the coming into being of our inherited orthodoxies.¹

What is ever more glaringly lacking is a thorough attempt to interpret the Book of Mormon on its own terms as a starting point for all other forms of analysis. How would its first prophets have been understood by ancient near eastern peoples at the end of the seventh century BCE? And so I propose to gently reframe the question asked by scholars who have explored possible ancient near eastern connections for the Book of Mormon to ask how contemporaries of Lehi and Nephi would have understood their teachings.

We need to know how the teachings of the first Book of Mormon prophets would have been understood by their contemporaries before we can confidently compare them to ancient or modern cultures. Like James Hoffmeier, who wrote about evidences that ancient Israel may have sojourned in Egypt, I recognize there is no hard evidence today for anything like a separate Josephite scribal culture in seventh-century Jerusalem. So the next best thing is to explore the plausibility and the implications of such claims: “In the absence of direct archaeological or historical evidence, one can make a case for the plausibility of the biblical reports based on the supporting evidence.”² I will argue below that the Book of Mormon itself constitutes strong evidence for such a Josephite scribal culture in seventh-century BCE Jerusalem.

**Traditions of the Ancestors**

Like their contemporary Israelites, Lehi and Nephi exhibited a clear concern for their heritage as descendants of Abraham through Joseph and as heirs of the covenants God gave to them anciently. They attached high importance to their descent through Joseph and his son Manasseh. But our modern Old Testament was produced primarily by the Judahite scribal schools and makes little effort to convey northern kingdom perspectives or traditions. Most of what we “know” about


those ancient figures comes from traditions that cannot be verified by scientific means at this point in time. But it is also true that the scientific efforts of thousands of scholars over the past 150 years have produced an enormous increase in our understanding of the historical, linguistic, and cultural contexts in which those ancient Israelites lived and which inspired the traditions that have come down to modern times. In what follows, relevant findings of these recent studies will be harnessed to construct a context and a plausible backstory for the writings of Nephi and his successors and for the Brass Plates which served them as “holy scriptures.”

Although we have Nephi’s reports on selected statements and teachings of his father, we do not have clear excerpts from Lehi’s writing. Nevertheless, S. Kent Brown has identified an impressive amount of material that Nephi likely drew from the Book of Lehi. Even though our access to Lehi is through the writings of his son, this essay assumes they were both on the same level in their scribal training. For as Nephi tells us in his opening sentence: “I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father” (1 Nephi 1:1).

Nephi and Lehi were Trained Scribes

The growing body of studies that illuminate ancient near eastern and ancient Mesoamerican scribal schools has opened an important new window for interpreting the Book of Mormon. There is more direct information available about these schools in Mesopotamia and Egypt than those in Jerusalem. We know of their existence because the Old Testament does refer to the scribes directly. Everything that is known about them and their products over time, down to and including the Qumran version, is consistent with what is known about the other literate cultures of the Ancient Near East (hereafter ANE). In fact, the intellectual elites spawned by the scribal schools had their own web of international


connections as they mastered multiple languages and literatures and traveled to foreign scribal centers as part of their advanced training. The basic reality was that all literacy in the ANE depended on these schools as they produced students with wide ranges of competence.

**Pre-industrial Crafts Provided Social Identity**

In recent decades, archaeologists and anthropologists have explored the ways in which craft production in pre-industrial societies constructs and maintains the social identities of those engaged in the crafts. A general explanation points out that

> crafts and crafting intersect with all cultural domains — the economic, political, social, and ritual — because every thing made and used by pre-industrial people is the object or outcome of crafting, and thus through crafts and crafting we can see the formation and expression of identity across a broad spectrum of social phenomena.⁵

But as far as I’ve been able to find out, scholars following that line of inquiry have not thought to include scribalism in the range of crafts studied. And the growing list of studies on scribalism in the Ancient Near East have focused more on the content of scribal education than on the ways in which the scribal craft developed and maintained social identities in that ancient world. But it would seem that these modern social science studies might offer important insights that could be applied as they attempt to fill out the picture of the world of ancient scribal craftsmen.

**Brant Gardner First Linked Nephi to Israelite Scribalism**

In an important essay published ten years ago, prominent Book of Mormon scholar Brant A. Gardner argued persuasively that the accumulating archaeological evidence for literacy and its supporting institutions in the ANE provided sufficient evidence to conclude that Nephi had been trained professionally to become a scribe. Leveraging the recent publication of Karel van der Toorn’s seminal study on the scribal cultures of the ANE, Gardner made a convincing case that in the world described by van der Toorn, there is no way a Nephi could have become such a capable writer without undergoing an extensive

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scribal training regimen. In other words, Nephi’s writing in the Book of Mormon provides incontestable evidence that he had received scribal training at the highest level in Jerusalem, whatever other skills he might have developed in his youth.

It also appears that Nephi may have been the only one of Lehi’s sons who received that scribal training in Jerusalem. Only Lehi and Nephi are described as reading or writing in the wide variety of situations described in Nephi’s books. Only these two invoke their understanding of the scriptures or other literature in speaking or preaching. When questions arise about the interpretation of Lehi’s dream or Isaiah’s writings, even Laman and Lemuel turn to Nephi: “Behold, we cannot understand the words which our father hath spoken concerning the natural branches of the olive tree and also concerning the Gentiles” (1 Nephi 15:7).

Both in his summary of Lehi’s teaching at 1 Nephi 10:12–14 and in his brief explanation to his questioning brothers at 1 Nephi 15:12–18, Nephi seems to assume that both his readers and his brothers have some level of familiarity with the Allegory of the Olive Tree, which the educated Nephi knows from his study of the allegory in the writings of Zenos, which are included in the Brass Plates. Jacob, as heir of Nephi’s Small Plates, correctly recognizes that future readers, like Laman and Lemuel, will not be familiar with Zenos, and so he inserts the full allegory into his own brief appendage to Nephi’s Small Plates (Jacob 5).

None of Ishmael’s family is ever described in a way that would suggest they had a scribal background. Nephi’s Small Plates do not provide a backstory that would explain why the youngest son was chosen for that training. Perhaps it was a choice based on tradition, disposition, individual aptitude, or birth order. And the later division of Lehi’s and Ishmael’s families and Zoram, the keeper of Laban’s library, as Lamanites or Nephites looks like a division that could reflect lines of literacy competence.

Since the advent of the printing press, we live in a world of near universal literacy. But we are thinking anachronistically when we project our literate environment onto Nephi’s world and fail to see the need to


explain his exceptional mastery of reading and writing at a level that may well have placed him in the top one percent of his contemporaries.\textsuperscript{8} Ian Young offers a persuasive analysis of literacy in ancient Israel that recognizes the severe limits of functional literacy and that echoes the more recent studies of literacy in ancient Greece and Rome, and the estimates from the ANE that will be discussed in more detail below.\textsuperscript{9} In a similar vein, William Harris, relying on the comparative methodology that begins with an identification of the social and economic conditions that promote increased literacy, concluded that “the classical world, even at its most advanced, was so lacking in the characteristics which produce extensive literacy that we must suppose that the majority of people were always illiterate.”\textsuperscript{10}

**Orality and Literacy in Ancient Israel**

Recent scholarship has challenged our tendency to casually divide the world between those who can and cannot read and write as being literate or illiterate. We now know that many people who cannot read can write in certain limited ways, and many readers cannot write. So there are many levels of functional literacy below the high literacy of someone like Nephi who can compose instruction, prophecy, history, and poetry — while simultaneously employing highly developed and even interconnected Hebrew rhetorical structures to organize his presentation. And there is the additional complication that all ancient cultures were basically oral in their standard discourse and that the literate few were fully engaged in that oral culture.\textsuperscript{11} As David Carr has argued that

\textsuperscript{8} There has been some parallel discussion about how literate the Nephite peoples may have been, but I will not pursue that question in this paper. See Brant A. Gardner, “Literacy and Orality in the Book of Mormon,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 9 (2014): 29–85, where he advances a detailed explanation and documentation of the connections between orality and literacy in ancient Israel and Mesoamerican civilization against the text-based argument in Deanna Draper Buck, “Internal Evidence of Widespread Literacy in the Book of Mormon,” *Religious Educator* 10, No. 3 (2009): 59–74. For a first attempt to trace scribal training in Nephite culture see Noel B. Reynolds, “The Last Nephite Scribes,” https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/5590/.


\textsuperscript{11} See the wide-ranging exposition of the levels and uses of writing and reading skills in tribal societies in both the modern and ancient worlds and the extensive use of scripts in oral cultures in M. C. A. Macdonald, “Literacy in an Oral
the literacy that most counted in these ancient societies often was not a basic ability to read and write. Rather it was an oral-written mastery of a body of texts. Moreover, this “literacy” was something that separated the members of an elite from their contemporaries. Such mastery of written texts, then, was not widespread. For it to perform its social function, it had to be a limited competency used to mark off a cultural and (often) social elite.¹²

Scholars who have studied orality and literacy at these deeper levels can show how writings produced in oral cultures, like the books of the Hebrew Bible, often evidence traits typically associated with ascertainably orally composed works. They belong somewhere in an “oral register.”¹³ The majority of trained scribes in the ANE probably used their training to support the mundane activities of daily life in their immediate communities, without attaining the higher levels required for the thoughtful literary compositions that appeared in seventh-century Israel and shortly thereafter in Greece.

By the middle of the twentieth century, philologists had unlocked the secrets of Homer’s orally composed epics.¹⁴ With the establishment of the Greek alphabet — which had added vowels to the recently developed Hebrew alphabet — sixth and fifth century thinkers in the Greek world were able to engage in sustained philosophical reasoning

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and argumentation, creating a new human product that could itself become the subject of systematic investigation and development, as in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*. Meanwhile, from the eighth century forward in Israel, alphabetic writing focused more on prophecy, history, and literary compositions. While the ability to read and write provides only a partial definition of literacy, it was essential for the higher literacies that emerged in both the eastern and western intellectual traditions in those centuries.

**Scribal Training in the Ancient Near East**

While Nephi’s ability to read and write at a high level already identifies him with a relatively small percent of the population, Nephi had also acquired exceptional skill in applying the distinctive principles of Hebrew rhetoric to his compositions (as will be shown below) which placed him in a truly elite category of the literate. In this essay, I will both update and broaden the base of this discussion as I extend the reach of plausible conclusions regarding the character of writings by Nephi and his successors. Using Gardner’s essay as a starting point, this study collects and incorporates the relevant findings of additional research publications that support an expanded case for seeing both Nephi and Lehi as trained scribes and as participants in a Manassite scribal circle.

Van der Toorn’s study was made possible by the work of generations of archaeologists, historians, epigraphers, and linguists working with the ancient inscriptions, manuscripts, and even libraries as these were collected and analyzed from ruins dating back more than two millennia BCE. The accumulated findings of all that research finally made it possible to identify a system of scribal schooling and advanced activities in ancient Mesopotamia that shared similar teaching strategies and

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15. Hebrew Bible scholars today recognize Hebrew rhetoric as a body of distinctive writing conventions that reached its full development in late seventh-century Jerusalem. This would seem to be the most likely candidate for “the learning of the Jews” that Nephi claims as a qualification for writing this record (1 Nephi 1:1). See the summary historical background on Hebrew rhetoric provided in Jack R. Lundbom, *Biblical Rhetoric and Rhetorical Criticism* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013), 3–8.

text collections across a wide geographical and cultural area. Similar evidence was also found in collections of Egyptian papyri. While there was every reason to conclude that a similar system of scribal education lay behind the production and transmission of Israel’s traditional literature, the continuing obstacle to modern study of such schools is the dearth of original texts from pre-exilic Israel.

The Kinship Ground of Scribal Systems

As will be explained below, scribal training, like so many other crafts in the ANE, always had a basis in family relationships. Because advanced literacy was usually assumed to be a strength of sages as teachers of wisdom, they were usually assumed to have a scribal background. The standard model was that of educated fathers teaching their sons. In more advanced urban cultures, that family pattern could be integrated with scribal schools that may be independent of or attached to the temple, priesthood, or royal bureaucracy. Various studies have shown that “on the whole, the scribal profession was hereditary.” For example, “the ‘inner circle’ of royal advisors … came from a limited number of influential families.” Especially at the more advanced levels of scholarly training, “knowledge was also passed from father to son,” and a scribally trained son might also expect to inherit the father’s personal library.

Scribes and Sages

In ancient Israel, families were identified with clans and tribes through which their roles in the larger society could be defined. Scribes were widely regarded as sages. But families also had their own sages whether or not they had scribal training. As Carole Fontaine has explained,

one must envision here a network of ever-widening kinship ties that span the movement from the private domain … all

17. In his study of scribal education at Ugarit, Hawley found it easy “to imagine a continuous scribal tradition from at least the eighteenth century down through the end of the Late Bronze Age” in “a general cultural context which lends itself well to the application of the long-established Mesopotamian scribal tradition as a model for the teaching and learning of a more recently developed local alphabetic script.” See Robert Hawley, “On the Alphabetic Scribal Curriculum at Ugarit,” Proceedings of the 51st Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale held at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago July 18–22, 2005, ed. Robert D. Biggs, Jennie Myers, and Martha T. Roth (Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2005), 60.
18. See van der Toorn, Scribal Culture, 62.
19. Ibid.
the way to the public domain. .... Within this scheme, the specifics of the role of the sage are colored by the context in which it is played out. In the private domain of the family, the role of sage is a nonformalized one; in the public domain of the tribe, it tends to become more formalized, as part of the expectations of those enacting the role of “elder.”

The father in every family played the role of a sage for his family. Those sages that emerged in larger social and religious roles were usually drawn from the trained scribal elites. Presumably, “the elders of the Jews” with whom Laban had spent the night before Nephi found him drunk and unconscious in the street would have also been from the scribal class — as would Laban himself have been.

Fathers were primarily responsible for the instruction of their own sons “both in the religious traditions of the group … and in preparation for a useful trade.” This is illustrated repeatedly in Proverbs 1–9, which many scholars regard as a practice text in the Hebrew scribal curriculum:

Listen, my sons, to a father’s instruction; pay attention and gain understanding. I give you sound learning, so do not forsake my teaching. For I too was a son to my father, still tender, and cherished by my mother. Then he taught me, and he said to me, “Take hold of my words with all your heart; keep my commands, and you will live.”

Readers of the Book of Mormon will recognize this pattern in multiple texts where a father gives personal and sometimes final instructions to his sons.

André Lemaire well summarizes the interplay between family sages and the scribal schools:

The weight of evidence suggests that schools were the setting of the wisdom texts and more precisely of the wisdom books in the Bible. ... The teacher in these schools was generally considered to be “the sage” *par excellence*. ... Even if sages and instructors in traditional wisdom existed outside these schools among family and tribal leaders, ... it is impossible to understand how the Israelite wisdom tradition was collected and handed down without taking into account the significant role played by sages and scribes functioning in schools.”

25. André Lemaire, “The Sage in School and Temple,” *The Sage in Israel*, 180–81. The widespread theory that the Hebrew proverbs were written specifically for instruction in scribal schools has been carefully examined and rejected by Stuart Weeks in his *Early Israelite Wisdom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
opening statement informs his readers that both he and his father have been trained in an exclusive scribal school — one that maintains and teaches fluency in the Egyptian language and the manufacture and engraving of metal plates, in addition to all the other training offered by such schools in ancient Israel.  

**Mesopotamian Scribal Culture**

In his summary description of ancient Mesopotamian scribal culture, van der Toorn emphasizes that “formal education was the prerogative of the upper classes,” as “illustrated by the fact that even kings boasted of their prowess at school.” For a thousand years scribal schools were small family arrangements, but by the middle of the second millennium BCE the schools or workshops associated with temples had taken over much of this teaching function.

The curriculum of these schools focused largely on the basics of literacy. “The emphasis lay on memorization and scribal skills rather than on the intellectual grasp of the subject matter.” Those who aspired to a specialized scribal career could eventually move on beyond the basics to the study of canonical texts included in a national curriculum by specializing in astrology, exorcism, divinization, medicine, or cult singing. It has been estimated that only ten percent of scribal students reached this higher level of training and subjected themselves to a final examination before the Assembly of Scholars. Those who met all these requirements would receive a diploma that recognized their acquisition of “all the depths of wisdom,” which certified them for the professional practice of their specialization.

There were places for such highly trained men in the royal court, in temple administration and schools, in commerce, and in the military. Their mastery of the traditional wisdom, combined with their ability to communicate effectively — often in multiple languages — made them a valuable resource in most significant enterprises, and most scribes could expect a life “of moderate riches.” Van der Toorn and others also

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28. Ibid., 56.
29. Ibid., 57.
30. Ibid., 59.
31. Ibid., 60.
support these generalizations by reference to ancient texts such as “In Praise of the Scribal Art,” a scribal curriculum text which states:

Strive after the scribal art and it will surely enrich you,
Work hard at the scribal art and it will bring you wealth. …
The scribal art is a good lot, one of wealth and plenty,
When you are a youngster, you suffer,
When you are mature, you [prosper].32

Modern prestige studies strongly support this historical inference in their conclusions that wealth, power, and prestige correlate strongly with levels of educational attainment across time, geography, and cultures.33

In Mesopotamia, the temple workshops provided the common meeting place for scribes across the disciplinary professions. The temple provided not only a school, but a workshop where writing materials and tools as well as copies of texts were produced. It provided a central meeting place for the Assembly of Scholars and for all who wished to engage themselves in learned discussions with their peers or in other joint activities.

Temple libraries attempted to assemble comprehensive collections of the literature of their cultures. Archaeologists have uncovered temple libraries containing hundreds of tablets. The reputed oldest library in history belonged to the Shamas temple just north of ancient Babylon in Sippar, found essentially intact with more than 800 tablets, including curricular materials, scholarly works, and traditional texts. The organization and standardization of texts and text collections led to the creation of literary canons through a process that was later followed by Jewish and Christian scribal guilds.34

32. This Thomas Römer translation of lines 5–6 and 11–13 was included in the third edition of Benjamin R. Foster, Before the Muses, 3rd ed. (Bethesda, MD: CDI Press, 2005), 1023.

33. See Donald J. Treiman, Occupational Prestige in Comparative Perspective (New York: Academic Press, 1977), 223–26. Treiman’s studies across numerous cultures and geographical areas showed no variance in their results. All studies were based on the last three centuries, but the authors were confident that their causal explanations could be trusted to predict similar outcomes in earlier historical periods for which suitable data is not now available.

Scholars who commissioned or manufactured such texts and donated them to the library could expect to be rewarded by the gods with good health, intelligence, and a stable professional situation. Once deposited in the temple, the tablet became the “sacred property” of the deity of the temple. Tablets were available for consultation, but only for professional scholars. Scribes were allowed to take a tablet home for copying on condition that they would not alter a single line and would return the tablet promptly.  

In the oral cultures of the ANE, the scribal professions could seem quite mysterious and even secretive to outsiders. As van der Toorn concludes,

The Assyrian and Babylonian scholars were heirs to, participants in, and perpetuators of a scribal culture that venerated written tradition to a degree seen only in oral cultures. They regarded the scribal craft, including its scholarly specializations, as something beyond the reach of the common masses. Recruited from the aristocracy, they followed in the footsteps of their fathers. Their institutional locus was the temple workshop, situated in the vicinity of the temple library. Their knowledge was mastered through copying and memorizing and honed through discussion and scholarly debate.  

Perhaps the most detailed and readable account of the earliest scribal schools was given by British Assyriologist and Sumerologist Cyril Gadd in his inaugural lecture for the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London. His comprehensive survey of cuneiform tablets that can be linked to scribal education confirm the high social status of accomplished scribes on the one hand and the free use of corporal punishment to punish poor performance on school assignments on the other. Some of their writings give us a peek into the intellectual snobbery of some who saw themselves as the agents who could take youngsters from the untutored masses and make them into men as they were introduced to the high culture of their civilization. Naturally, both teachers and students were ranked according to their skill levels, but the language of fatherhood and sonship permeated the various titles that

35. Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 64.
36. Ibid., 67.
could be acquired as one progressed. The most accomplished would gain fame as the sages of their generations.\textsuperscript{37}

\textbf{The Scribes of Emar}

The salvage excavations of the ancient Syrian provincial center Emar (near Aleppo) in the 1970s made over a thousand tablets available for a study of individual scribes and scribal families that were active in Emar the century and a half before 1185 BCE. Using those tablets, Yoram Cohen was able to track sixty scribes through this period and to reconstruct their family and school affiliations.\textsuperscript{38} Cohen’s findings basically corroborate the general picture painted by van der Toorn. There were two major scribal families in Emar through the period and also a similar number of individual scribes not obviously from those families. Most of the scribal product featured the ephemeral documents of business and private life, but there was also evidence of more advanced scholarly activity.

As a frontier city in the Middle Euphrates region at the crossroads of the Syrian, Hurrian, Hittite, Assyrian, and Babylonian cultures, Emar’s scribes seem to have been trained in the Old Babylonian traditions and were conversant with multiple languages and the classical texts of the larger region. While the local Semitic vernacular was Emarite, almost all the tablets were written in Akkadian, the dominant Semitic language internationally. Two scribal traditions or schools (Syrian and Syro-Hittite) functioned in the city with only minor evidence of crossover between them. The scribal class formed an elite that had its own social history and patron gods — which were taken seriously by the city as a whole.\textsuperscript{39} I refer to this richly detailed and documented study to demonstrate the possibility of multiple scribal schools or traditions

\textsuperscript{37} See C. J. Gadd, \textit{Teachers and Students in the Oldest Schools} (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1956).

\textsuperscript{38} Yoram Cohen, \textit{The Scribes and Scholars of the City of Emar in the Late Bronze Age} (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2009). Cohen applied his findings at Emar to the question of how the scribal schools identified in his study contributed to the transfer, dissemination and employment of knowledge. See further, Yoram Cohen, “The Historical and Social Background of the Scribal School at the City of Emar in the Late Bronze Age,” \textit{Theory and Practice of Knowledge Transfer: Studies in School Education in The Ancient Near East and Beyond}, ed. W. S. van Egmond and W. H. van Soldt (Leiden: Nederlands Instituut Voor Het Nabije Oosten, 2012), 115–27.

\textsuperscript{39} The bulk of Cohen’s study is devoted to specific documents and scribes. These summary observations are stated best at Cohen, \textit{Scribes and Scholars}, 27–28 and 239–43.
existing side by side in Jerusalem during the seventh century after the late eighth-century Assyrian invasions forced many of northern Israel’s elites to migrate south in search of refuge.\textsuperscript{40}

**Egyptian Scribal Culture**

Toronto Egyptologist Ronald J. Williams provided one of the first overviews of the scribal culture in ancient Egypt with his identification of prominent scribes and scribal writings that contributed to Egyptian culture.\textsuperscript{41} He points out that with the invention of the hieroglyphic writing system “shortly before 3000 B.C.E.” and the rise of the Old Kingdom a few centuries later, “a large educated body of scribes was required to staff the civil service.”\textsuperscript{42} Two decades later, van der Toorn’s study of the Egyptians described a scribal culture similar to what he found in Mesopotamia. Literacy belonged to the elite 5% and was usually a family affair. Scribal offices were often hereditary, and the “scribal dynasties” were drawn from the high-ranking families. “The typical teaching relationship was modeled on the bond between father and son.”\textsuperscript{43}

Surviving papyri make it possible to understand the Egyptian scribal culture in a more specific and detailed way than any other. In the last half of the second millennium as Egyptian territory grew, the bureaucracy expanded and schools proliferated to meet the demand for literate workers. Elementary scribal instruction required four to five years using a standard manual that included writing exercises in the various kinds of documents that a scribe might be required to read or write in the basic hieratic script. This primary education included

\textsuperscript{40} We also have now a similarly intensive study of cuneiform tablets found in ancient Hattuša, the Hittite imperial capital. Shai Gordin, *Hittite Scribal Circles: Scholarly Tradition and Writing Habits* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2015) shows that family-based scribal groups associated in the larger scholarly society through “collegial circles.” Another large collection of clay tablets from the sudden destruction of ancient Ugarit were found in archives of “the Royal Palace and related buildings, in the homes of government officials and other notable individuals, and in the house of the High Priest, ... which may also have functioned as a scribal school.” Adrian Curtis, “Ilimilku of Ugarit: Copyist or Creator?” in *Writing the Bible: Scribes, Scribalism, and Script*, ed. Philip R. Davies and Thomas Römer (Durham, UK: ACUMEN, 2013), 10.


\textsuperscript{42} Williams, “The Sage,” 19.

\textsuperscript{43} Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 67.
“geography, arithmetic, and geometry.” The annual flooding of the Nile created extensive demand for geometrists who could survey and redraw correct property lines.

After four years of training and with the mastery of the basics, students were called “scribes,” could write, and were eligible for professional employment. Some would continue on as much as another 12 years to learn hieroglyphics and study wisdom texts and the specified curriculum for apprenticeship in the professions. Most of these would complete their studies by age twenty. The schools for this advanced training were often connected to temples and served as centers for further learning, collaboration, and research for practitioners of various professions. In these Houses of Life, more advanced scribes became scholars through access to the temple library (a collection of texts that included rituals, cultic songs, myths, astrology, astronomy, exorcisms, medical handbooks, and funerary literature) and through interaction with other learned men. Williams concluded that these Houses of Life were primarily centers of scribal activity installed in every principal town. Some have compared them to universities, but he argues that producing “written works” was their principal role.

While there are many similarities here with the scribal culture of Babylon, one key difference stands out: the second rank of Egyptian priesthood, the lector-priests, were charged with the preservation, exegesis, and recitation of the sacred texts. But they were part-time, serving the temple in annual three-month rotations, and making their living as businessmen in the other months. In both systems, scribes with advanced training constituted an elite literati as the “wise men” of their time who studied, used, edited, and wrote sacred texts, including the composition of new texts. These lectors are also the court magicians described in Genesis. As a dream interpreter, Joseph is implicitly linked with them in Genesis 40 and 41. John Gee, who conducted a count of surviving scribally produced documents from Egypt and Israel in New Testament times, reported that overwhelmingly they reflected business

44. Ibid., 68–69.
45. Ibid., 69.
46. Ibid., 70.
49. See Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, 88–89.
or bureaucratic activity and that only a tiny percentage were religious documents.  

Aaron Burke has helpfully spelled out the ranges of expertise that were expected from Iron Age Egyptian scribes stationed in the Levant:

Based on the characterization in Egyptian literature, the scribe’s value far exceeded his capability in the written arts. … A list of the scribal arts should include, however, at least the following capabilities: technological (e.g., work with pen, palette, papyrus), linguistic (e.g., ability in Egyptian and Canaanite dialects), pedagogical (i.e., knowledge of teaching tools), mnemonic (i.e., keeper of traditions, wisdom, and memory), administrative (e.g., mathematical, logistical, legal), geographic (e.g., political, geography, biogeography), and relational (i.e., socially networked to other scribes and administrators).

No employment was guaranteed, and many of these positions were political appointments at some level. “Because their positions were always precarious, there was constant competition and rivalry among the scholars.”

**Historical Background of the Scribal Traditions in Ancient Israel**

Academics have been slow to affirm or describe an early scribal culture among the ancient Israelites. Epigraphers believe that the first alphabetic Hebrew script did not appear until around 800 BCE. Archaeologists have not excavated anything they would identify as scribal facilities. And the oldest surviving Hebrew documents of consequence are papyri or parchment from the second century BCE. Nonetheless, in his article for the *Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies*, Richard Kratz confidently reasons backwards from the great outpouring of biblical and related

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52. Ibid., 60–61. See also a description of the wide range of services provided by Israelite scribes in Joseph Blenkinsopp, “The Sage, the Scribe, and Scribalism in the Chronicler’s Work,” in *The Sage in Israel*, 308–10 and 314–15.
writings in later centuries to the assumption of a developed scribal culture that exceeded other ANE models in significant ways:

The growth of the Old Testament presupposes the Israelite-Judaean scribal culture. From it the biblical tradition took over the practices, knowledge, and literary remains of the scribes. At the same time they pioneered with what they took over, or produced independently on the basis of it, a very particular way that was also unique in the whole of the ancient Near East. The genre and the content of the biblical books burst the limits of the usual praxis of the scribes. From the scribes developed the scribal scholars, and from the Israelite-Judaean scribal culture they developed the Jewish tradition in the Old Testament.53

Possible Origins of Scribal Schools in Israel

Some of the most recent work based in archaeological evidence has produced two different theories about the origins of Hebrew scribal schools — one Mesopotamian and the other Egyptian. Schniedewind argues that the early Hebrew inscriptions (circa 800 BCE) found at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud “represent fragments of the entire range of an educational curriculum for an ancient Israelite scribe” and that “the outlines of this early scribal curriculum will correspond strikingly with the framework of the Mesopotamian scribal curriculum.” Using what is known about the Mesopotamian curriculum, he proposes that it can then be shown how that scribal education “shaped the composition of biblical literature.”54 On the other hand, Seth Sanders warns scholars who emphasize the connections of Israelite scribal traditions to those in Mesopotamia that however similar they may have been in the roles and functions they served, the Hebrew scribes were much more adventurous and open to change in their rewriting of traditional texts than were the Babylonians.55

55. He makes this argument in many ways in Seth L. Sanders, From Adapa to Enoch: Scribal Culture and Religious Vision in Judea and Babylon (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007).
One of the first attempts to describe the rise of scribalism in Israel focused on the officialdom described in the Hebrew Bible for the United Monarchy as supplemented by the archaeological evidence then available. Mettinger collected the biblical references to the royal secretaries of David and Solomon and their assistants to support the assertion of scribal schools established to train administrators in both the palace and the temple. Invoking the arguments of H-J. Hermisson, he concluded “that Israel actually had a scribal school for the education of officials.” He speculated that David may even have employed a native Egyptian as royal secretary with a support staff of bilingual scribes while borrowing the model for “royal secretary” from the Egyptians.

Understood in this way, the royal scribal school would then have been the source or channel through which the monarchy and culture developed a broad range of Egyptian influence. Mettinger’s argument would also be strengthened by noting that the Egyptian script was the most obvious candidate for writing and record keeping in the centuries before the development of Hebrew alphabetic script around 800 BCE.

Studies of early Hebrew scribalism have accelerated dramatically over the last three decades. Mark Leuchter has summarized the current state of these studies:

Whereas earlier approaches to the study of biblical texts saw scribes either as incidental transmitters of valuable material or as hindrances to recovering the original contours of such material, contemporary approaches recognize that scribes did not simply textualize tradition but profoundly shaped it and even served as its fundamental architects. Likewise scribal culture — the universe of ideas that provided context for understanding texts and the very process of their production and preservation — has emerged more prominently in recent years as a fundamental feature of ancient Israelite/Judahite and Jewish social identity in relation to the biblical record. It is clear to most scholars now that scribes were not simply literate elites sequestered away in the depths of a temple or palace and given to composing strictly esoteric or theoretical

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58. Ibid., 48‒49.
59. Ibid., 146‒57.
literature. Scribal works were reflections on, reactions to, and foundations for larger trends in the societies surrounding them. The texts they created were not simply witnesses to identity claims and boundaries within ancient Israelite/ancient Jewish communities, but often the very forces by which those claims and boundaries were formed and delineated.60

To be more specific, Leuchter and others believe they have refuted the ideas that literacy was widespread in ancient Israel, that the palace and temple were the only sponsors of important scribal schools, that the Jerusalem scribes were more advanced than the northern schools (the likely source of Deuteronomy), and that the official scribal schools were in ideological harmony with other independent or prophetic schools. Each of these new conclusions strengthens the grounds for the hypothesis of an advanced Manassite scribal school that I will develop shortly.

David Carr maintains that like the rest of the ANE, basic scribal schooling was mostly a family affair:

I do not think that ancient Israel had many “schools” of the sort we would recognize as such. Instead, I maintain that most “schools,” when they did exist, were probably conducted in an apprenticeship model at the home of the master/teacher, a master/teacher who might or might not be the biological father of the student.61

In general, scholars now agree that the Israelites had only oral traditions which would be eventually transcribed by the emerging class of scribes and finally collected and edited into the Hebrew Bible by scribal schools in Jerusalem in the seventh century or later. If the primarily Egyptian textual tradition of the Brass Plates had been handed down from Abraham’s time in written form, as will be hypothesized below, that documentary history has not left any obvious trace in the archaeological record of ancient Palestine. Energized by the development and spread of alphabetic writing systems in the Levant early in the first millennium,62 it is possible that all of these proposed origins for Israelite scribal activity

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62. Schniedewind, Finger of the Scribe, 12, argues that the plaster inscriptions at Kuntillet Ajrud show that “a scribal curriculum had already developed in early Israel” coincident with “the very beginning of alphabetic writing in the early Iron Age.”
contributed to the scribal schools that did leave clear traces in the eighth and seventh centuries.

**ANE Scribal Culture and the Book of Mormon**

Recognizing how this study of ANE scribal cultures can apply to the Book of Mormon helps us think about some other key questions. As van der Toorn makes abundantly clear, most people who were educated as scribes were the sons of men similarly educated. In spite of earlier scholarly speculation about large schools with a hierarchy of staff, current scholarship confirms that all the identifiable schools excavated in Old Babylonian (early 18th century) contexts occupied small rooms in private homes that were dedicated to the scribal training of the sons of elite families.\(^6^3\)

The power of literacy, the heightened economic opportunities it provided, and the intellectual sophistication produced at more advanced levels defined an elite that was integrated into the highest levels of government, military, business, and priestly organizations — not to mention their international connections to other scribal schools. Even the basics of reading and writing required years of instruction, and the advanced training in the texts and literatures of multiple language traditions required many more years. The same argument that demonstrates Nephi’s scribal training reaches to his father Lehi, who appears to be no less literate in Nephi’s story. Recognizing this, we get an entirely new reading of Nephi’s opening sentence: “I Nephi having been born of goodly parents, therefore I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father” (1 Nephi 1:1).

Abraham and his principal descendants inhabited the largely illiterate oral cultures of the ANE at a time when different kinds of writing had been invented centuries earlier and were being used by tiny groups of elites in support of government, commercial, religious, and military organizations. Modern scholars variously estimate that between one and five percent of these ANE populations could read at some level, and that a small fraction of these elites had the advanced skills necessary to produce significant texts during the transition periods in which oral

traditions were being captured in written form and standardized in various cultures.  

Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and their successors who settled Palestine are presented in the Bible and other traditions as people who had those scribal skills. They were multilingual and could interact in sustained ways with elites in Ur, Haran, the Levant, and Egypt. They seem to have been treated as peers of the international elites wherever they went. The Dead Sea Scrolls portray Abraham as a man renowned for wisdom and sought out by the Egyptian nobility who were “searching for scribal knowledge, wisdom and truth” and as teaching from the book of the words of Enoch (1QapGen 19.25).

Van der Toorn also notes that professional scribes could be employed in different ways, but their professional headquarters would usually have been a workshop associated with either a scribal school, a temple, or a royal bureaucracy. And the scribal workshops provided much more than classes in reading and writing. They also produced the materials for those activities and provided a library of papyrus scrolls or clay tablets that could be shared and even checked out for study and copying purposes. The biblical vocabulary for the material culture of the Israelite scribes and their workshops has been exhaustively identified and analyzed by Philip Zhakevich in his most helpful research monograph. While the extent and organization of ancient Israelite scribalism continues to be controversial in some ways, this new study makes it clear that there was a highly developed and extensive vocabulary for scribal tools and materials which the biblical writers repeatedly assumed would be understood without explanation by their readers — who would also have been trained scribes.

This becomes particularly relevant when we realize that it had to have been a Jerusalem scribal school and workshop which produced the plates of brass that play such a prominent role in Nephi’s story. The Manassite scribal school hypothesized in this paper may not have enjoyed full access to the temple or royal scribal workshops and libraries because of their sharp political and religious differences. The more significant those

differences might have been, the more necessary it would have been for a Manassite scribal school to provide its own comprehensive support system.

**Of Treasuries and Libraries**

The hypothesis that Lehi and Nephi may have participated at some level in the manufacture of the Brass Plates would certainly explain how Lehi knew of the existence and location of the plates in the scribal school library that was in Laban’s custody. And it may also provide some light on the fact that Lehi thought he had a right to ask Laban for access to the plates. It would also explain the fact that Nephi knew how to manufacture metal plates and inscribe his record on them “with mine own hand” (1 Nephi 13). That skill could only have been learned in a scribal school workshop.

It would also seem probable that Lehi and Laban were cousins and well known to each other as members of the same Manassite scribal school. From what is known today of such ancient scribal schools, they consisted of closely related elites and constituted only a tiny fraction of their respective tribal or clan units. Within such a school, the ongoing division of traditional responsibilities would have included (1) maintaining proficiency in languages, (2) mastering the textual tradition and its content, (3) providing and managing a workshop that would produce the needed writing materials and maintain a current collection of papyrus manuscripts, and (4) managing and guarding an official library of the traditional texts. While scribal education would usually include training in all these areas, Nephi tells us that Laban’s “fathers had kept the records” (1 Nephi 5:16). Nephi only mentions the distant family relationship that Lehi and Laban are descendants of ancient Joseph, while Amulek specifies, several centuries later, that Lehi was a descendant of Manasseh (see Alma 10:3). This suggests that the Brass Plates are the product of a Manassite scribal school but does not tell us which of the six Manassite clans would have inherited the responsibility to support this school and their version of the records of Israel going back to Joseph and even Abraham.

The fact that Lehi can connect himself and Laban to Joseph (and Manasseh) through the genealogy in the Brass Plates may also indicate that these plates were produced in a sufficiently recent generation — and perhaps even in their own — to make that connection evident.\(^ {67} \)

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67. For a helpful summary of how biblical genealogies were compiled and used, see Roland K. Harrison, s.v., “Genealogy,” *The International Standard Bible*
While it is not surprising that students of the Book of Mormon have often assumed that the Brass Plates may have been written centuries before Lehi and that in some sense they were Laban’s property by inheritance, the *modus operandi* of ANE scribal schools revealed in today’s scholarship would suggest that Laban’s inherited family position designated him as only custodian and protector of the family scribal school’s library composed principally of a continually rotating collection of papyri.\(^{68}\) I will argue in a companion paper that the politics and ideology of late seventh-century Jerusalem may have inspired this self-consciously separate Manassite scribal school to create its own metallic version of the library’s core texts to be left in the hands of the same custodian.\(^{69}\) They could even have created multiple Brass Plates copies — such as the set reported secondhand in the memoirs of seventeenth-century British sea captain Alexander Hamilton.\(^{70}\)

Our English translation calls the library protected by Laban a *treasury* (1 Nephi 4:20), but the same term was also used for libraries in Nephi’s day. In this case it seems likely that Laban provided protective storage for both worldly treasure and the invaluable records of his clan.

\(^{68}\) For example, in his excellent study of the nineteenth-century history of the translation of the Book of Mormon, Don Bradley has repeated these assumptions without discussion. See Don Bradley, *The Lost 116 Pages* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2019), 134.

\(^{69}\) In his insightful effort to recapture bits and pieces of the lost 116 pages, Don Bradley has found some statements made in the early decades of the Restoration that could support at some level the idea that Laban and Zoram were Ephraimites. This is perfectly possible, but it is based on some rather tenuous connections between actual and hypothesized sources — none of which are compelling. For example, one piece of that chain of reasoning claims that the sword of Laban was made for Joseph of Egypt and passed down through an Ephraimite line to Joshua and eventually to Laban (Bradley, *Lost 116 Pages*, 138–42). Given the current conclusions of Egyptian archaeology, it is most unlikely that any Egyptians possessed such a high-quality steel weapon in Joseph’s day. See Jack Ogden, “Metals,” in *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology*, ed. Paul Nicholson and Ian Shaw (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 168. While the scribal school I am hypothesizing as a Manassite tradition may well have included an Ephraimite partnership, it seems more likely that after a thousand years it could only have been maintained by a highly motivated direct family line. In that case, the library custodian would likely have also been a Manassite. But it would be wrong for me to insist on this, given the infinitude of possible events that could have occurred in the preceding centuries.

\(^{70}\) See note 118.
Ezra 5:17–6:2 speaks of a “treasure house” containing written records. The Aramaic word rendered “treasure” in this passage is *ginzayyd*, from the root meaning “to keep, hide” in both Hebrew and Aramaic. In Esther 3:9 and 4:7, the Hebrew word of the same origin is used to denote a treasury where money is kept. Also from this root is the Mishnaic Hebrew word *g’niznh*, denoting a repository for worn synagogue scrolls, and *gannaz*, meaning “archivist,” or one in charge of records.71

**Lehi’s Occupations**

Brant Gardner also reviewed the efforts of earlier scholars to identify the basis of Lehi’s livelihood — none of whom had considered scribalism as a possibility for him.72 Whenever a scribe’s life was not filled with his scribal duties, he could go on to develop businesses that could produce even greater levels of income. Lehi has been interpreted as both a merchant and a metal worker on the basis of the limited clues available in Nephi’s text.73 Either or both would have been possible for a wealthy member of the scribal elite. One leading scholar sees a tangible connection between “the crafts of scribe and metalworker” in the inscription of names on metal weapons in the early Iron Age.74

**The Abrahamic Scribal Tradition**

Prominent Egyptologist Kenneth Kitchen has pointed to Egyptian evidences that would indirectly support the idea that “written family records concerning the Patriarchs may have been handed down from


Joseph’s time through four centuries of the Hebrew sojourn until Moses’s day, and that such records were used by Moses and so lie behind the present book of Genesis.” Hoffmeier concluded his long and technical study of the plausibility of the biblical account of Israel in Egypt with the observation that “because of the close connection between figures like Joseph and Moses and the Egyptian court, it seems that there is reason to believe the biblical tradition that ascribes to Moses the ability to record events, compile itineraries, and other scribal activities.” Furthermore, Joseph would seem to be the obvious heir for Jacob’s family records going back to his grandfather Abraham. Joseph’s descendants were clearly accorded elite status and would have had access to advanced scribal education in Egypt.

**From Abraham to Lehi**

References to Abraham in ancient literature characterize him as an unusually literate man engaged prominently with the educated elite both as a youth in Ur and as an adult sojourner in Egypt. In his autobiography in the Book of Abraham he explains that the records of his ancestors had come into his hands and that he intended to update and perpetuate that record for his posterity:

> But *the records of the fathers, even the patriarchs*, concerning the right of Priesthood, the Lord my God preserved in mine own hands; therefore a knowledge of the beginning of the creation, and also of the planets, and of the stars, as they were made known unto the fathers, have I kept even unto this day, and *I shall endeavor to write some of these things upon this record, for the benefit of my posterity* that shall come after me.  
> (Abraham 1:28, 31)

Abraham’s own scribal training and visionary commitment are an essential starting point for any exploration of the scribal traditions that may have contributed to composition and preservation of the texts we know today as the Hebrew Bible, the Brass Plates, and the Book of Mormon.

In the pages that follow, I will offer (1) a proposed sketch of a connecting scribal tradition between Abraham and Lehi, (2) a review of the history of writing that shows the plausibility of such a scribal tradition,

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(3) an archaeologically informed survey of the history of the Israelite people that throws new light on the distinctive character of a possible Manassite scribal tradition, (4) a review of the harmonizing efforts of the seventh-century Israelite scribal schools then relocated in Jerusalem in a period when primarily oral traditions were being transcribed using the new paleo-Hebrew alphabet, and (5) an introduction to the system of Hebrew rhetoric that reached its heights in the late seventh century as evidenced in both the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Mormon.

Abraham’s Geographic Origins

The Book of Abraham solves the biblical puzzle of when and where Abraham lived. According to that autobiographical account, his homeland would have been in what is today northwest Syria/southern Turkey in the area known generally as Aram-Naharaim, which lies directly east of the northeastern tip of the Mediterranean Sea. Cyrus Gordon has also marshaled several arguments for locating Abraham’s homeland in that northern region. Even Abraham-skeptics have come to recognize that the biblical texts signal northern Syria as the geographical homeland of Abraham and his family when Harran and Aram are mentioned.

Twelfth-Dynasty Egypt ruled in that area of northwest Syria during the last half of the nineteenth century BCE when Abraham was probably born. When he finally arrived in Egypt, he was dealing with the pharaohs and the elites of the Fourteenth Dynasty (1805–1650 BCE). Over the last

77. The seventh-century harmonizing of Hebrew Bible texts as identified by Bible scholars who have developed (1) various versions of the Documentary Hypothesis and (2) the concept of the Deuteronomistic History is treated in the companion paper “The Brass Plates in Context: A Book of Mormon Backstory,” a working paper, https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/5378/.


several decades, scholars have increasingly come to realize that by that time the Nile delta area contained a large population of mixed Asiatics who spoke different languages, and who, like Abraham, driven by wars or famine or other forces in the north, had fled to the well-watered Nile flood plain, where they even dominated the local population during the mysterious Hyksos period. This suggests that Abraham may not have been dealing with a traditional Egyptian pharaoh and administration.

Modern Sanliurfa (Urfa) in that same area of southeastern Turkey claims today to be Abraham’s birthplace. It played an important role during the crusades, when it was called Edessa. Historical linguists believe the area was “Aramaic-speaking from the earliest times.” It served in later centuries as an important center for multiple eastern Christian traditions. The region was significant in prehistoric times as well. Plant DNA studies have led botanists to conclude that it is the most likely region for the domestication of wheat.

Abraham 1:10 mentions “the plain of Olishem” as part of his early life. John Gee has summarized the archeological, geographical, and inscriptive evidence that would identify Abraham’s Olishem with modern Olyum, which is almost 200 kilometers west and south of Sanliurfa and 50 kilometers north of Aleppo. While the archaeologists working this site claim they have evidence linking the site to ancient


Contemporary archaeologists generally dismiss the Bible and other texts as valid sources for dating or locating Abraham in antiquity. This leaves them with meager evidence of Abraham as a historical figure and reduces the biblical account to a compilation of late compositions. See, for example, Israel Finkelstein and Thomas Römer, “Comments on the Historical Background of the Abraham Narrative: Between ‘Realia’ and ‘Exegetica,’” in Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel, ed. Gary N. Knoppers et al. (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014): 3–23.


Abraham, no publications as yet report those findings. After a thorough review of the scholarly debates about Abraham’s geographical origins, Stephen Smoot has concluded:

Unlike the vague and contradictory details provided in Genesis, the Book of Abraham appears to ground Abraham’s Ur in Syria. The added geographical (Olishem/Ulišum) and cultural details (an Egyptian presence at Abraham’s homeland) in the Book of Abraham make a northern location for Ur essentially inescapable.

A Wandering Aramean

Traditionally, the statement in Deuteronomy 26:5 that “my father was a wandering Aramean” was interpreted as a reference to Abraham. But many twentieth-century Bible scholars took it to be a reference to Jacob or even corporately to Jacob and his descendants — but not as an explanation of Abraham’s ethnicity — as there was no known record of such a tribe. But now “the gentilic term *Aramayu* is attested for the first time as designation for nomadic tribes in the Upper Euphrates region being in conflict with Tiglath-Pileser I (1114–1076 BCE).” Bekkum observes that the statement in Deuteronomy therefore “can hardly be characterized as an invented tradition and most likely reflects a chain of memory indicating that the Haran region at some time had been the homeland of Israel’s second millennium BCE nomadic ancestors.”

Daniel Machiela proposed a reading of the *Aramaic Genesis Apocryphon* (1QapGen 19:8) that provides much earlier support for interpreting “a wandering Aramean” as a reference to Abraham and his staged migration from Haran southward through Canaan to Egypt. As Machiela points out, the Qumran text seems to deliberately associate Abraham with the wanderer: “[And] he (i.e., God) spoke with me in the night, ‘and take strength to wander; up to now you have not reached the holy mountain.’”\(^{87}\)

Some recent scholarship sees Abraham as a post-exilic invention of writers motivated to establish a memory that would unify all of the peoples from the promised land or Canaan of Genesis 15:18 reaching from the “river of Egypt” to the Euphrates under one common ancestor — a broad grouping that would eventually be narrowed down by Judahites to a center in Jerusalem.\(^{88}\)

**Abraham and Writing**

Most ancient references to Abraham link him to writing in some significant way. The Bible and a huge number of other early and late accounts that have grown up in Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and even pagan traditions describe Abraham as an associate or even a teacher and leader of the learned Egyptians, pharaohs, and Chaldean and Canaanite kings. Even the accounts of his early life portray him as highly literate and involved routinely with learned and royal elites.\(^{89}\) Douglas Clark has gathered up the traditional texts that describe the youth Abraham and his father Terah as high-ranking persons in the court of King Nimrod, where he had access to the best scholars and the important texts of his day — thus receiving an elite education.\(^{90}\) Unfortunately, there is no way


\(^{88}\) Davies, “From Moses to Abraham,” 4–10.

\(^{89}\) See the exceptional selection of 120 accounts from Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and pagan traditions published in English translation in John A. Tvedtnes, Brian M. Hauglid, and John Gee, eds., *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2001).

\(^{90}\) E. Douglas Clark, *The Blessings of Abraham: Becoming a Zion People* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2005), 40–41. LDS readers with extended interest in Abraham will benefit from Clark’s exhaustive study of the references to Abraham in Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and other literatures — bringing them together with an LDS perspective.
that these traditions can be confirmed through more ancient texts or archaeology.\textsuperscript{91}

The perceived erudition and linguistic facility that landed Abraham in the highest social and intellectual circles during his sojourn in Egypt adds credence to claims of a similar level of elite positioning in the civilization of his youth. The consistent suggestion of these traditions is that Abraham may have been, from an early age, a native speaker of Aramaic and a trained speaker and writer of Egyptian. The years between his departure from Haran and his arrival in Egypt and after he left Egypt were spent among speakers of West Semitic (Phoenician), the parent language of Hebrew, Edomite, Ammonite, and Midianite — all of which would become distinct national languages by 800 BCE, and which may have been the vernacular of his first descendants.

Joseph Smith’s \textit{Book of Abraham}, written in Egyptian,\textsuperscript{92} included Abraham’s explanation that “the records [of the fathers] have come into my hands” and his stated intention “to write some of these things upon this record, for the benefit of my posterity that shall come after me” (Abraham 1:28, 31). While the records of the fathers may have been written in Aramaic by the time they reached Abraham — making them readily accessible for him — they might have been written in an even older language that could have required additional linguistic competence on his part.

While the Aramaic language is presumed to go back beyond Abrahamic times in northwest Syria, the alphabetic Aramaic script known by linguistic historians today, like paleo Hebrew, is generally believed to be a late 9\textsuperscript{th}-century spin-off from the newly developed Phoenician alphabet. As Holger Gzella explains,

\begin{quote}
The second-millennium ancestors of the Arameans were presumably nomads who spoke different dialects but did not write any of them. Once Aramaic had become a written
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[91.] Some of the most trustworthy and illuminating accounts of Abraham’s reputation in the ancient Egyptian world are reviewed and documented in Gee, \textit{Introduction to the Book of Abraham}, 49–55. See Nibley, \textit{Abraham in Egypt}, 254–318, for a rich discussion of ancient texts linking Abraham to ancient Egypt.
\item[92.] Two Egyptian scripts were in use by Abraham’s day; and the Joseph Smith Papyri from a much later period display hieroglyphic, hieratic, and demotic scripts. The demotic script emerged in the seventh century BCE. See Gee, \textit{Introduction to the Book of Abraham}, 59.
\end{footnotes}
language, it rapidly conquered the Fertile Crescent from Egypt to Lake Urmia during the 8th-6th centuries BCE and thus promoted the alphabetic script in Syria, Mesopotamia, and elsewhere.  

**Abraham’s Posterity and Scribalism**

The biblical accounts of Abraham’s son and grandson describe how they continued in the pastoral occupation of their father in Canaan, where they and their posterity would have learned Canaanite speech, which scholars refer to as Phoenician or Northwest Semitic. Cyrus Gordon has leveraged Ugaritic tablet accounts to argue that Abraham may have also been a prominent merchant in that region, which would have created even greater need for mastery of the local languages. Linguistic evidence, generally neglected by theologians, historians, and archaeologists, points to a strong continuity of peoples and cultures since the Late Bronze Age, as second-millennium material already exhibits several phonological and morphological features of later Canaanite varieties.

The historical origins of the Hebrew language and its earliest script will be described in more detail in a later section of this paper.

**Isaac and Jacob**

Considerable explanation is provided in the Hebrew Bible for the identification and prioritization of the posterity of Isaac and Jacob as heirs of the blessings of their fathers, but we do not read much about their own literacy or engagement with the written records that they would have inherited from their father Abraham. One exception has been noted by Hugh Nibley in the second-century Jewish text *Jubilees* where Joseph recalls “the words which Jacob, his father, used to read, which were from the words of Abraham.” This lack could be due to the fact that our biblical account comes from eighth or seventh-century Judahite scribes who had no written tradition to work with, who are not

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believed to have preserved literary competence in Egyptian, and who
are believed to have been transcribing the oral traditions as preserved in
Hebrew by their ancestors. However, if we ask ourselves to whom would
Abraham have bequeathed his invaluable record collection and which of
his children would most likely have been chosen to receive the linguistic
and scribal training in Egyptian and possibly other languages necessary
to comprehend and extend those records, the biblical account only offers
Isaac and Jacob as plausible candidates.

While the biblical accounts of Isaac’s life do not illuminate these
matters, we are told explicitly of both Jacob’s and his direct interactions
with the Lord, including Yahweh’s renewal of his promises made to
Abraham to be realized through Jacob’s posterity. Although his
favored son Joseph — the one not involved in tending the flocks — was
the obvious candidate to receive scribal and Egyptian language training
and inherit the records, that plan would have been severely threatened
after Jacob was told that Joseph was dead. Judah steps to the fore in the
interim until Joseph is found alive years later in Egypt. Possibly both
were trained and supplied with copies of the family library. The Hebrew
Bible is our inheritance from the Judahite tradition. The Brass Plates
contain a Josephite tradition.

Joseph, Manasseh, and Ephraim

Kenneth Kitchen, surveying examples of Egyptian genealogies and
legal documents that were preserved and used over long periods of
time, concluded that it would have been a simple matter in their time
for Joseph and his descendants to maintain and perpetuate an actual
written record of their patriarchal ancestors down to the time of Moses.

In the light of this varied evidence, it is clear that Joseph as
a high minister of state in Egypt would have every facility
for recording patriarchal traditions of his forebears, and for

98. 1 Chronicles 5:1–2 twice states that the birthright belonged to Joseph.
Commentators on Genesis have noted the careful interweaving of the accounts
of Joseph and Judah that prepares readers for the eventual division of Israel
into two kingdoms led by their descendants. See the helpfully integrated
review of those insights in Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, “Why Are the Stories of Joseph
and Judah Intertwined?,” March 12, 2018, https://interpreterfoundation.org/
transmitting them through the hands of his descendants until Moses’ time.99

Kitchen also explains how that record could have been preserved either in Egyptian or in “Joseph’s own West-Semitic dialect for which a proto-Sinaitic script was already available.”100 Egyptian hieratic script was far more suitable for sophisticated manuscripts.

Possibly the strongest evidence that Jacob continued in the literate tradition of his grandfather in training one or more of his children in languages and literacy would be the meteoric rise in the career of Joseph once he arrived in Egypt. Given his family background, it would seem possible that Joseph was able to speak, read, and write in Egyptian before he arrived in Egypt. As a young and newly arrived slave, he quickly advanced to the position of steward over the household of Potiphar. And before long, he found himself chosen to be the pharaoh’s second in command, ruling over one of the most literate and educated elites of the ancient world. Kitchen found the presence of Joseph as a Semitic servant in the household of an important Egyptian to fit perfectly with the way Semitic and Egyptian elements blended together during the Hyksos period in ancient Egypt.101

Joseph as Teacher of Wisdom in Egypt

In the second-century Aramaic Levi Document (4Q213), Levi chooses “the year in which my brother Joseph died” to call his descendants together for instruction in wisdom, following a standard pattern borrowed from what scholars see as the scribal curriculum in Proverbs 4:1–4, and exalting Joseph as the scribe or paragon of wisdom in the process:

A And now, my sons, <teach> reading and writing and teaching <of> wisdom to your children and may wisdom be eternal glory for you.

B For he who obtains wisdom will (attain) glory through it,

B* But he who despises wisdom will become an object of disdain and scorn.

100. Ibid.
A* Observe, my children, my brother Joseph
[who] taught reading and writing and the teaching of wisdom,
for glory and for majesty;

Ballast line: and kings <he advised>.102

David Rothstein has assembled an impressive textual argument that provides biblical and post-biblical support for the claim that Joseph was a teacher of wisdom for Pharaoh’s advisors, but also possibly for royalty.103 Psalm 105:21–22 (NIV) preserves a traditional understanding that pharaoh had installed Joseph as a ruler to “instruct his princes … and teach his elders wisdom,” which can remind us of Abraham’s emergence as a teacher to the educated men of Egypt during his sojourn among them. The later Christian recension of this document in Greek presents Joseph as a teacher of the law, rather than of wisdom.104

Egyptian Scribalism and Joseph’s Posterity

Joseph then married an Egyptian, the daughter of one of the more distinguished priests of the kingdom and presumably one of the more entrenched members of the educated elite. His sons Manasseh and Ephraim would have been cared for by this Egyptian-speaking mother and her Egyptian staff. They would also naturally have been recipients of the best Egyptian education in conjunction with the traditional Abrahamic training that Joseph and his father-in-law could have provided them.

By Joseph’s time, a centuries-old “system of education for the children of the aristocracy” had been in place.105 John Baines and Christopher Eyre, noted British Egyptologists, explain further that “at latest by the early Twelfth Dynasty (c. 2000 BC) … a standard system of formal elementary education in literacy was established.”106 In Egypt, 102. I have reformatted these lines from 4QLevi 13:4–6 as translated in Jonas C. Greenfield, Michael E. Stone, and Esther Eshel, The Aramaic Levi Document: Edition, Translation, Commentary (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 103, according to the style of Hebrew rhetoric to make their chiastic structure even more obvious.
104. Ibid., 225.
106. Christopher Eyre and John Baines, “Interactions between Orality and Literacy in Ancient Egypt,” in Literacy and Society, ed. Karen Schousboe and
the cursive hieratic script was used in this educational system down to the seventh century, during which the transition was made to the new demotic script. While it is true that alphabetic writing first emerged in a mixed Egyptian/Phoenician context using signs borrowed from Egyptian script, Egyptian writing itself did not become alphabetic until the early centuries CE, when signs were borrowed back from the Greek alphabet. Even though there was a one-to-one match between cursive hieratic signs and the hieroglyphs, the classical hieroglyphs were only taught as a secondary topic for scribes at advanced levels.107

This means that the hieratic script was firmly established for most uses centuries before Abraham and may well have been the Egyptian script that he and the scribal school that arose among his Josephite descendants would have used for the Egyptian texts in their tradition. There does not seem to be any direct evidence that would tell us whether the Josephite scribes in seventh-century Jerusalem attempted to transcribe their Egyptian-language corpus into the new demotic script that was taking over in Egypt itself, but that does not seem probable.

Many of Joseph’s descendants would likely have benefitted from these same educational privileges down to the time that Manasseh and Ephraim, the two tribes of Joseph, resumed their place with the rest of the Israelites sometime before the exodus when there arose a pharaoh who “knew not Joseph” (Exodus 1:7–9). It would make sense to assume that Joseph’s posterity were native Egyptian speakers at the time of the exodus, which may have set them apart in their relationship with the other tribes, who had most likely retained their unwritten dialect of West Semitic — which gained recognition as its own national language (Hebrew) sometime before 800 BCE.

The Rise of Manassite Scribal Schools

Of significance for this study, the Samaria Ostraca found by archaeologists in the ninth-century Omride palace treasury confirm the six Manassite clan names listed in the land distribution of Joshua 17:2 and in the census of Numbers 26:28–34.108 We have no biblical or archaeological evidence

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107. Ibid.
108. See W. F. Albright, “The Site of Tirzah and the Topography of Western Manasseh,” *Journal of the Palestinian Oriental Society* 11 (1931): 241–51, to see how these ostraca helped Albright identify the geographical areas assigned to the Manassite clans and the location of Tirzah, the longtime northern capital before Omri moved it to nearby Samaria.
that would show us how many of these clans might have maintained scribal schools. The needs of the royal bureaucracy and of the regime’s Baalist temple may have defined the scribal activities of one or two such schools. The traditional Abrahamic ideology evident in the Brass Plates would suggest that it was the product of yet another separate school that conscientiously maintained a mastery of Egyptian language and the family collection of papyri in their charge. The efforts of some scholars to break these six clans into smaller units has no textual support.\textsuperscript{109}

**A Hypothetical Manassite Scribal School**

To this point I have hypothesized the existence of a scribal school that traces its origins to Manasseh himself and is based in one or more of the Manassite clans, which may have been headquartered after settlement in the promised land in Shechem, the first capital of Manasseh, or later in Ephraimite Shiloh or Bethel, which scholars believe was a center of “strong scribal activity” before the Assyrian invasion,\textsuperscript{110} or some other town. This would most likely have been a school separate from schools that later served the bureaucratic and ritual needs of the royal court and the Baalist temple in Omri’s new capital Samaria. Jeroboam, the first king of the secessionist northern kingdom, was an Ephraimite and may have assembled an initial scribal staff near the end of the tenth century with scribes recruited from any of the northern tribes to serve the needs of his royal court.

**Possible Locations for a Josephite Scribal School**

It is not obvious in the English translation of Jacob’s final blessing to Joseph that he gave him Shechem. “And to you I give one more \textit{ridge of land} than to your brothers, the \textit{ridge} I took from the Amorites with my sword and my bow” (Genesis 48:22 NIV). As explained in the NIV notes, “The Hebrew for this phrase [\textit{ridge of land}] is identical with the place-name Shechem.” The prestige of this hypothesized Manassite scribal school would have been highest at the time of the Exodus and the subsequent settlement in Israel. Shechem’s history with Abraham and Jacob and its provision of the final resting place for the bones of Joseph


brought from Egypt, together with the fact that it was also a holy place for the Canaanites and their temple, could have made it an obvious location for a Josephite shrine and a headquarters for this official Josephite scribal school. As Israeli archaeologist Israel Finkelstein explained:

The Bible gives pride of place to the traditions of the sanctity of Shechem and Mt. Ebal, while archaeological surveys have revealed an almost unparalleled site density. …

“The uncrowned queen of Palestine,” as Wright described Shechem, was the most important city in the northern part of the central hill country. … Mentioned frequently in the historical sources, Shechem was an important cult place throughout this time span. … The abundance of historical information makes Shechem one of the most tantalizing sites in the country.\(^{111}\)

Further, Shechem was the new Manassite capital as well as the oldest and most important city in the area for centuries. From the nineteenth century down to the thirteenth, Shechem appears to have been the leader of a coalition of seven city-states subservient in varying degrees to their Egyptian overlords. Both the Egyptian presence and the prominence of Shechem ended around 1300 BCE when Shechem itself was destroyed — possibly as a result of two centuries of the overly aggressive activities of its infamous Lebayu dynasty. The demographic and cultural decline and lower quality construction that replaced fourteenth-century Shechem was in place by the time the Israelites arrived a century later. All evidence indicates that the Manassite immigrants integrated peacefully with the existing Canaanite population.\(^{112}\)

In addition, Shechem was the resident population nearest to the site of the covenant altar prescribed by Moses and built by Joshua on Mt. Ebal. As will be explained in more detail below, archaeologist Adam


Zertal found and excavated a large and perfectly preserved cultic altar site on the northeast slope of Mt. Ebal, which may include Joshua’s actual altar and may have served annual renewals of the initial covenant ceremony described in Joshua 8:30–35 for the first century of Israelite settlement. In his 1988 summary of Zertal’s findings, Finkelstein agreed with the dating, but worried that it seemed a century or two too early for a pan-Israel cult site — according to the “low chronology” that he has advanced to reconcile archaeological discoveries with the history presented in the Deuteronomistic History.\(^{113}\) In his Andrews University dissertation, Ralph Hawkins, in examining Zertal’s work and the alternative interpretations of archaeologists, has concluded that Zertal’s initial connection of the site to the biblical account makes more sense than the alternatives.\(^{114}\)

**Features of a Hypothesized Manassite Scribal School**

The official Manassite scribal school I have hypothesized here would have a more complete and technically competent tradition deriving from its origins in the highest levels of training in Egypt. It would have defined itself minimally in terms of (1) a designated family line responsible for maintaining quality and continuity across generations (2) and a unique mission to maintain scribal competence in the Egyptian language and script (3) to preserve and perpetuate the records most likely written on papyri and inherited from Abraham through Joseph and (4) to maintain an ongoing historical record and collection of prophecies — probably in Hebrew after 800 BCE and using the new alphabetic script that may even have been developed by these manuscript-focused Manassites from the proto-Phoenician script that was shared throughout the Levant in the ninth century.\(^{115}\)

The multiethnic character of the northern kingdom may have also contributed to the determination of a Manassite scribal school to maintain the purity of its Abrahamic tradition. The long-term mix of Israelites, Arameans, Canaanites, and Phoenicians in one polity and in several cities may have taught these ethnic Manassites how to maintain

\(^{113}\) Finkelstein, *Forgotten Kingdom*, 82–85. The best explanation of his “low chronology” can be found in *Forgotten Kingdom*, 1–11 and 159–64.


\(^{115}\) See the discussion in Noel B. Reynolds, “A Brief History of Writing from the Perspective of Restoration Scripture” (working paper, 2021), https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/5591/.
their differences while living peacefully with competing cultural and religious systems.116 Along with other prudent elites in the northern kingdom, these scribes relocated to Jerusalem before the Assyrian assault and deportation of northern-kingdom peoples. The palace and temple scribes are believed to have been deported to Assyria along with the royal family and the rest of the ruling elites in Samaria.

By the time of Lehi, the northern and southern tribes outside Jerusalem had been devastated by the repeated Assyrian deportations and by the settlement of other Assyrian captive peoples in the place of the lost Israelites.117 Only those who had escaped south to Jerusalem as refugees remained. Any remaining Josephite scribal schools holding on in Jerusalem likely would not have survived the subsequent Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and deportation of its rulers and skilled peoples in 586 BCE. One intriguing, but unproven potential example comes from the Kerala Jews on the southeast coast of India who told a 17th century British sea captain that they were descendants of Manasseh that had been carried by Nebuchadnezzar’s forces to the east end of the Babylonian empire after the fall of Jerusalem and that they had maintained ancient records on brass plates.118 The memory of that origin story has been completely lost and replaced in the memories of the few surviving Kerala Jews in the twenty-first century.119


117. The biblical account of Assyria deporting Israelites to distant imperial provinces and replacing them with other captive peoples from southern Mesopotamia (2 Kings 17:24) has been studied extensively and documented in both Palestinian archaeology and in studies of the Assyrian annals. See Nadav Na’aman and Ran Zadok, “Assyrian Deportations to the Province of Samerina in the Light of Two Cuneiform Tablets from Tel Hadid,” *Tel Aviv* 27, no. 2 (2000), 159–88 and Na’aman’s earlier overview in Nadav Na’aman, “Population Changes in Palestine Following Assyrian Deportations,” *Tel Aviv* 20, no. 1 (1993), 104–24. Also see an important corrective to earlier generalizations in a comprehensive review of all relevant excavations in Avraham Faust, “Settlement and Demography in Seventh-Century Judah and the Extent and Intensity of Sennacherib’s Campaign,” *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 140, no. 3 (2008), 168–94.


A Levite Appropriation?

Besides the Brass Plates as described in the Book of Mormon, there are no known ancient texts that provide direct evidence for a Manassite scribal school and textual collection as hypothesized here. But it may be of some interest that priestly writings from the second century BCE did make these same kinds of claims for Levi and his descendants. Jubilees 45:16 says it straight out: “And he [Jacob] gave all his books and the books of his fathers to Levi his son that he might preserve them and renew them for his children until this day.”

A trio of less well known Pseudepigrapha with priestly origins from the same century make similar claims and are attested in the Qumran finds. Michael Stone has shown how the Aramaic Levi Document the Testament (or Admonitions) of Qahat, and the Visions of Amran, focus on tracing the priesthood and a tradition of written records back to Abraham through their ancestor Levi and then on to Noah and even to Enoch and Adam. 

Henryk Drawnel has demonstrated how all three of these documents promote the responsibility of the Levites to instruct the next generation in the traditional texts and in the moral and religious ways of the patriarchs and to avoid contamination of their family line as they preserve that tradition. It may be that the newly ascendant Levites in the Greco-Roman period had appropriated an older story previously used to describe the Manassites who disappeared with their records at the beginning of the sixth century. The Levite version of the story, however, does not provide an explanation of how their collection of writings in Hebrew script came from Abraham. The Brass Plates, on the other hand, claim a heritage of Abrahamic records written in Egyptian.

120. Michael E. Stone, Ancient Judaism, 31–58.
122. James Kugel, on reviewing previous efforts to date the composition of the Aramaic Levi Document in 2007, concluded that while it seemed to draw on a few somewhat earlier documents, several prominent features of the document “point unambiguously to the late second century” BCE as a date of composition. James Kugel, “How Old is the Aramaic Levi Document?” Dead Sea Discoveries 14, no. 3 (2007), 312.
Multiple Scribal Schools in Israel

There is no reason to doubt that the scribes of Judah might already have been custodians of a parallel oral or even partially written tradition before Joseph rejoined the family in Egypt, possibly setting the stage for at least two largely independent scribal traditions within the twelve tribes of Israel. Given the central role played by Moses and Aaron and the tribe of Levi as priests and teachers in Israel, there is abundant reason to expect that the Levites would also have maintained their own scribal tradition, possibly in collaboration with the Judahites.

Albright has shown that the biblical list of cities assigned to Levites shows how they were evenly distributed among the various tribal territories. As time went on the Levites were known as the teachers of Israel, a role that eventually required literacy and access to the traditional scriptures, but that may also have relied on oral traditions in the earlier centuries.

As Israelite society regrouped and entrenched itself as a centralized monarchy, the Levites strove to preserve their society-wide, village-oriented roles performing the Lord’s ritual service, arbitrating judicial matters, and fostering societal harmony. …

The Levites, not the monarch and his state bureaucrats, are those qualified to render final judgment based on their vocational expertise in covenantal instruction and interpretation.


Although scholars have identified or hypothesized various scribal traditions as being derived from northern traditions in ancient Israel, none have been linked specifically to the Josephites.

**The Origins of Hebrew Language, Script, and Scribal Traditions**

Archaeologists and epigraphers have worked to establish the origins of Israelite scribalism using the inscriptions found in excavations. The usual assumption is that until the adoption of a Hebrew version of the northwest Semitic alphabet around 800 BCE, Israel only had oral traditions. “Writing is never mentioned in the history of the patriarchs.”[^125] The emergence of a Hebrew alphabet provided the opportunity to transcribe the oral traditions of Israel and to edit them in various ways for posterity.[^126] Scribal schools would presumably have developed significantly as part of that process. As Israel Finkelstein recently summarized,

> Assembling all available data for scribal activity in Israel and Judah reveals no evidence of writing before approximately 800 BCE. In fact, it shows that meaningful writing in Israel began in the first half of the eighth century, while in Judah it commenced only in the late eighth and more so in the seventh century B.C.E. ... Recent archaeological and biblical research has made it clear that no biblical text could have been written before circa 800 B.C.E. in Israel and about a century later in Judah. ... Ninth-century B.C.E. and earlier memories could have been preserved and transmitted only in oral form. (emphasis added).[^127]


Scribes and Tribes

It is not known how many of the tribes of Israel may have maintained their own scribal schools or which of these may have had dominant influence in the royal court or the temple schools. It is clear, however, that the royal courts of both Israel and Judah did have scribes in the councils that advised the kings. Whybray concludes that both royal courts and the temples were “centers of intellectual activity” because of the inclusion of scribes on their staffs. Scribal cultures have been linked solidly to the wisdom traditions of the ANE as both producers and distributors. A less obvious finding has been that tribes and clans are “a logical source for pre-monarchic wisdom traditions.” And Claudia Camp “has advanced the understanding of how the ongoing institution of the patriarchal family shaped wisdom thinking and traditions.”

While it would be of great interest to know how the surviving refugee scribal schools from the northern tribes, now forced to live in close proximity in seventh-century Jerusalem, might have interacted and may have worked out systems of independence and deference during that century, we have no surviving textual commentary to help us with that question. What we do know is that the royal scribes and temple scribes of the northern kingdom that stayed in Samaria were almost certainly taken captive and deported.

However, the Brass Plates narrative in the Book of Mormon provides clear evidence of an independent Manassite tradition that escaped the Assyrian invasion and appears to have been protecting its own scriptural and historical tradition with great determination. Yet, that long century in Judah’s capital may also have produced inroads of cultural and political assimilation, even within their group. By Lehi’s day, their traditional librarian was cozily ensconced with the “the elders” of Jerusalem. Meanwhile, Lehi and others, who heeded the divine call to prophesy imminent destruction as punishment for the sins of Judah and Israel, were marked by those same elders for execution or banishment.

129. Ibid., 137.
131. Ibid., 156. See also, Claudia V. Camp, Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1985), 79–97.
132. “The elders represent and maintain the community and are thus the focal point of the community.” They also often exercised judicial functions. See
Laban’s personal standing with those same elders must have been a factor in his refusal to allow Lehi the access to the Brass Plates that he obviously expected.

**Harmonization Efforts in the Scribal Schools of Jerusalem**

Two decades into the twenty-first century, we can see that several independent lines of research have led to the realization that the scribal schools of Jerusalem in the seventh century BCE were effectively harmonizing both the varieties of Hebrew language and script and the literary traditions coming out of the different tribal areas of Israel and Judea. The late eighth-century Assyrian invasions of northern Israel threatened the elites in particular, and many fled to Jerusalem as refugees, effectively bringing the scribal schools of most of Israel together in the same community with the Judahites. A careful look at harmonizing developments in writing, Hebrew dialects, a distinctive Hebrew rhetorical system, and the formulation of a standard Hebrew Bible will provide an important context for understanding other possible textual traditions, such as the Manassites, that may have resisted some dimensions of the harmonizing movement.

**Accommodation of Hebrew Dialects**

It is impressive that ancient Hebrew could develop so decisively as its own language in such a small geographical area surrounded by near-sister languages like Phoenician, Aramaic, Moabite, Edomite, and Ammonite. Scholars have long realized that the inscriptions that have accumulated from archaeological excavations display recognizable dialectical differences between northern and southern Israelite populations. These studies include multiple northern dialects (Ephraimite, Gileadite, and Galilean), but they do not attempt to define the Benjaminite dialect that had developed in the intermediate space between Judah and Ephraim territories.

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G. Henton Davies, “Elder in the OT,” *s.v.*, *Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 2:73. They were active in this role in Jerusalem in Lehi’s day, as HB reports how Josiah summoned “the elders of Judah” and “read to them the entire text of the covenant scroll which had been found in the House of the Lord” (NIV, 2 Kings 23:1–2). De Vaux describes them as a “municipal council” that “takes actions under the laws” in ways that reflect the common practice throughout Phoenicia and Mesopotamia. Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Social Institutions I* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1965), 138.
In recent decades, a small group of historical linguists have focused on dialectical studies in ancient Hebrew. A detailed and instructive 2003 progress report written by Gary Rendsburg focuses on the dialectical variations that can be detected in the Hebrew Bible.\(^{133}\) While recognizing that the northern and southern dialects preserve different features of the second millennium precursor language, Rendsburg focuses on grammatical and lexical traits that can be demonstrated in the parts of the Hebrew Bible that are directly attributable to northern sources.

Starting with a list of likely northern Israelite texts that constitute 16 percent of the Hebrew Bible, Rendsburg’s research group has identified a set of dialectical features that turn out to be prominent in almost 30 percent of the standard text.\(^{134}\) These findings may support the conclusion that the seventh-century scribal schools of Jerusalem were assembling the pieces of what would eventually become the canonical text of the Hebrew Bible. While taking the lead in standardizing the Old Hebrew script, they were also taking an inclusive approach to materials written in different Hebrew dialects.\(^{135}\) Rendsburg found it remarkable that the process of including northern texts into the Judahite Bible did not entail the editing out of northern dialect features: “The ancient texts were not altered, but rather were faithfully transmitted by the ancient scribes and tradents — even during the process of the arrival of these compositions from northern Israel into southern Judah, ... where they found a home in what eventually would emerge as Jewish canonical literature.”\(^{136}\)


\(^{134}\) Ibid., 8–9.

\(^{135}\) Rendsburg’s initial forays into these dialectical studies met considerable scepticism in some quarters. See, e.g., Daniel C. Fredericks, “A North Israelite Dialect in the Hebrew Bible? Questions of methodology,” *Hebrew Studies* 37 (1996): 1–11. Koert van Bekkum also expresses reservations about Rendsburg’s approach. See Bekkum, “The ‘Language of Canaan’,” 75–76. Na’ama Pat-El has also concluded that the evidence “is weak and does not support the dialectical hypothesis.” “Israeli Hebrew: A Re-Evaluation,” *Vetus Testamentum* 67 (2017): 227–63. Rendsburg’s research group subsequently expanded the lists of lexical and semantic dialectical differences considerably, as demonstrated in the 2003 progress report. But the project is ongoing, and final results are not yet available.

Scribal Schools and Hebrew Rhetoric

Since the middle of the twentieth century, there has been a growing awareness among Bible scholars that many parts of the Hebrew Bible exhibit a distinctive rhetorical system that was fully developed by the late seventh century and at least a century before its Greek counterpart. While it does include some of the figures of speech recognized in classical Greek and Roman rhetoric, the overall system features a fundamentally different approach. These scholars now recognize the important rhetorical system and techniques that developed in the Jerusalem scribal schools and that reached their apex as a widely shared set of expectations for premier writers before the end of the seventh century.\(^{137}\) The development and adoption of a shared and powerful system of rhetorical principles provided a dynamic for enhancing textual meaning and persuasiveness that could be used in creative ways by the most highly skilled Israelite writers.

A Manassite Contribution?

While the growing awareness of the forgotten kingdom of Israel in Shiloh and Samaria has featured political and economic expansion that is demonstrable from archaeological excavations, we still do not have any evidence to show us what kind of cultural developments might have occurred during that prosperous time period. Certainly, the northern kingdom would have had advantages in that arena as well with its much larger population, much greater wealth to sponsor cultural activities and scholarship, and its likely privileged access to the lineage histories and prophetic writings that would have been passed down from Jacob to Joseph to Manasseh and his descendants.

Modern students of Hebrew rhetoric have identified a dramatic flowering of that literary art before the end of the seventh century, and they have all assumed that it displayed the achievements of the Judahite scribal schools. But might not the seventh-century rise of Hebrew rhetoric in Jerusalem have been imported from Samaria by the refugees

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fleeing the Assyrian invasions? If so, it could have been a Manassite scribal school — the immediate ancestors of Lehi — that brought it. That speculated chain of events would provide us with an easy answer to the otherwise perplexing question: How was Nephi, who was educated in a Josephite scribal school, able to create more complex and artistically perfect examples of Hebrew rhetoric in his writings than anything we can find in the Hebrew Bible written by Judahite scribes?

Scribal School Curricula

Schniedewind has perceptively pointed out how “scribal creativity had its foundation in the building blocks of the educational curriculum.”\(^{138}\) He has shown multiple ways that the basics of the curriculum in Hebrew scribal schools could be adapted by creative Hebrew writers in their work. For example, some used the alphabet as a principle of ordering as in acrostics. “One of the more significant aspects of the curriculum was the making of lists,” and that would become “one of the most important everyday tasks” for most scribes. But for more advanced and creative writers, the abstract idea of lists “could be a way of organizing knowledge and the universe.”\(^{139}\)

Nephi may be exhibiting exactly that kind of creative adaptation of his training with lists when he presents the central teaching of his work, the doctrine or gospel of Christ, as a list of six points that can be arranged and amplified in different ways.\(^{140}\) By characterizing the gospel as a list of “points,” Nephi and his successors are able to invoke it quietly and repeatedly using the Hebrew rhetorical figure of *merismus*.\(^{141}\) Old Testament writers used this rhetorical device to invoke all the elements of a known list in readers’ minds by mentioning only selected items from the list — most commonly the first and last item of an ordered list. As Schniedewind concludes, “Ancient Israelite scribes adapted these

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139. Ibid.
141. See Noel B. Reynolds, “Biblical Merismus in Book of Mormon Gospel References,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 26 (2017): 106–34, for a demonstration of the ways in which Nephite writers used meristic statements of the gospel hundreds of times with the apparent expectation that their readers would refer to the full six-point list in their minds.
lists for a variety of purposes in the composition of biblical literature.”\textsuperscript{142} Other basic elements of the scribal curriculum that were adapted by advanced writers would include verbal punctuation, letter writing, and parallelism, which became a dominant principle of Hebrew rhetoric.\textsuperscript{143} All of these show up in Book of Mormon compositions.

**The Principles of Hebrew Rhetoric**

Only in the last half century have Bible scholars developed a clear view of the principles and conventions of Hebrew rhetoric that informed and shaped the writing of scripture and other texts. The development of the defining principles of Hebrew rhetoric is thought to have peaked in the late seventh century, precisely at the time that Lehi and Nephi would have received their training. The principles and conventions that are now recognized to characterize ancient Hebrew rhetoric shine through Nephi’s writings in the ways in which he organizes and presents both his own and his father’s teachings and prophecies. It is hard to imagine any other way this could have been accomplished by someone not trained in the scribal schools of late seventh-century Jerusalem.

Hebrew rhetoric featured four principles of composition that show up consistently — repetition, demarcation, parallelism, and subordination.\textsuperscript{144} The principle that proved most frustrating for early translators of the Old Testament was repetition.\textsuperscript{145} From the perspective of modern western education, repetitive writing seems tedious, redundant, and inefficient. But the ancient Hebrews had developed varieties of repetition as devices for connecting and developing thoughts and meanings across small or large expanses of text and for demarcating the boundaries and signaling the rhetorical structures of discrete textual units. In the absence of other writing conventions, such as punctuation, Hebrew rhetoric provided a

\textsuperscript{142.} Schniedewind, *Finger of the Scribe*, 167.


\textsuperscript{145.} For an excellent explanation and illustration of the ways in which Hebrew writers used repetition to provide structure for poetic and rhetorical texts see James Muilenburg, “A Study in Hebrew Rhetoric: Repetition and Style,” in *Congress Volume Copenhagen 1953*, eds G. W. Anderson et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1953), 97–111.
variety of tools for demarcating and structuring texts. Inclusio was the most common of these. The end of a textual unit could be signaled by repeating at the end of that unit a word, phrase, or sentence used in its opening lines, thereby establishing bookends for the passage.

Combined with a third principle of parallelism, repetition could be used to expand, elaborate, complicate, enrich, or intensify the meanings of an initial statement. In his study of elementary-level scribal education, Schniedewind observed that “the well-known Hebrew poetic technique of parallelism can be observed” by the early eighth century in the plaster fragments in the southern military outpost of Kuntillet ʿAjrud and noted that “parallelism and word pairs are also hallmarks of oral composition and ready-made for memorization.” In the advanced writing of Hebrew rhetoric or poetry, when two words, phrases, sentences, pericopes, or even books (e.g., First and Second Nephi) are given parallel standing in a composition, readers are invited to examine the similarities and differences and the rhetorical structure itself as they explore the potential for additional unarticulated meanings in an author’s composition.

Finally, smaller rhetorical structures can be incorporated into larger ones using a fourth principle of subordination that allows the smaller rhetorical units to have their own independent characteristics while simultaneously serving a different role in the larger structure. Multiple layers are created in large rhetorical structures as smaller and smaller structures are incorporated into subordinated levels.

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146. There is some evidence for verbal punctuation conventions in ancient Hebrew writing. Schniedewind, Finger of the Scribe, 111, gives one prominent example: “The expression, wʿt(h), “and now,” was an important device that functioned as a new paragraph marker.” See the full discussion in pages 109–16 and 167–68. John Gee relates this and other Hebrew examples to Book of Mormon usage in “Verbal Punctuation in the Book of Mormon I.”

147. For a helpful explanation of inclusio, the history of this usage in studies of biblical rhetoric, and biblical examples of its use, see Lundbom, Biblical Rhetoric, 325–27.

148. Schniedewind, Finger of the Scribe, 163.

149. Robert Alter explained these dynamics in the parallelism found in Hebrew poetry, but Hebrew rhetoric has since been shown to employ the same dynamic for other genres of literature. See Robert Alter, The Art of Biblical Poetry (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

150. The most impressive example of this that I have found in the Book of Mormon is in Alma 36. See the analysis in Reynolds, “Rethinking Alma 36,” 38, where it is shown that every word of the chapter is accounted for in the subordinated rhetorical structures which reach briefly to a sixth level at one point.
In all of this, Hebrew rhetoric creates meanings at a distance across large or small texts in ways that can seem foreign, obtuse, or even unintelligible to western readers whose textbooks adhere rigorously to the linear and logical development of concepts and teachings. Western education equips readers to understand a text fully in a first reading. But writers of the Hebrew Bible expect you to have multiple parts of a text in mind at any point in order to appreciate the full meaning of an author. The authors and editors expect readers to read the piece multiple times and to examine it from several perspectives, as you would a work of art — which it is — in order to capture all the intended meanings. As Hebrew scribes implemented these advanced rhetorical principles in their writing and editing, they were silently harmonizing their sacred texts at another level altogether.

Most Bible scholars do not yet exhibit close familiarity with these new developments in biblical interpretation. But these turn out to be of central importance for the interpretation of Nephi’s writings as the product of a trained, seventh-century Jerusalem scribe. As demonstrated elsewhere, Nephi’s Small Plates display an exceptional mastery of the principles of Hebrew rhetoric that he could have learned only in a seventh-century scribal school.¹⁵¹ In fact, Nephi uses those principles to organize his writing and present his story in more comprehensive and artistic ways than most of the corresponding examples we have in the Hebrew Bible.¹⁵² The only plausible explanation for this increasingly recognized dimension of Nephi’s writings in the Book of Mormon is that he had been trained at the highest levels of seventh-century scribalism in Jerusalem.

2 Nephi 11 provides a clear and simpler example with three levels of subordination. See Reynolds, “Chiastic Structuring,” 184–89.


A Nephite Scribal School

Finally, not only do we have good evidence that Nephi was a trained Manassite scribe, as I argue in a companion paper, the Book of Mormon itself appears to document the perpetuation of an official scribal tradition that served the Nephite people across a millennium of their own history. The principal product of that Nephite scribal school was the large plates of Nephi, which provided Mormon with the long prophetic record that he abridged to produce the Book of Mormon that we have today. The Manassite character of that school is evidenced first by its continuing guardianship and propagation of the original Brass Plates, the Josephite version of the Bible which the Nephites called their “holy scriptures.” But second, the Nephite scribes also perpetuated the learned ability to read and write in both Hebrew and Egyptian languages and scripts, in addition to their own Nephite language as it had evolved over that thousand-year period.

One way in which the Book of Mormon outshines the Hebrew Bible is that its editor preserved the accounts of how the records were maintained and how they were transmitted from one generation to another. The responsibility for maintaining and extending the Nephite records over time shifted under changing circumstances from monarchs to chief judges, prophets and high priests, military leaders, and to chief scribes. As with the Hebrew Bible, the terminology modern scholars have developed to talk about ancient scribes and scribal schools does not appear in the Book of Mormon. But its editor has carefully accounted for the key individuals and events that would be recognized in an oral culture as the activities of scribes and scribal schools. And Mormon leaves no gaps in the story. Readers from a modern literate culture tend to overlook the importance of the passages in which Mormon reports the transmission of scribal responsibilities from one generation or chief scribe to the next. But for Mormon, these provided the same kind of authentication that is so important to modern art collectors when they require documented provenance for the works they purchase.

153. See Reynolds, “The Last Nephite Scribes.”
154. Given the great deference the Nephite writers displayed toward the Brass Plates, it is tempting to speculate that Mormon may have borrowed that pattern of documenting inter-generational responsibility for the records from those plates.
Conclusions

This paper brings contemporary findings of Bible scholars, ANE archaeologists, linguists, epigraphers, and historians together to explore how the Book of Mormon account of its first prophets, Lehi and Nephi, would have been understood in ancient Jerusalem at the end of the seventh century BCE. In that setting, it appears that both Lehi and Nephi would have been seen as highly trained and independently wealthy scribes positioned in a Manassite scribal tradition which traced its origins to Joseph, the son of Jacob in ancient Egypt, and which would have maintained custodial responsibility for all the records Joseph inherited from his great grandfather Abraham. Their family businesses may have included metal work and commerce, as has been suggested by other writers.

The principal corpus maintained by this Josephite scribal school was written in Egyptian and would have required its members to learn and perpetuate Egyptian language and script, even while the more recent additions would have been written in the newer Hebrew language and script. Now, as a refugee group in Jerusalem, where the Judahite scribal schools enjoyed the patrimony of the monarchy and the temple administration, they may well have seen the looming possibility of extinction for themselves and their unique scriptural tradition in the growing threat posed by Babylon’s westward expansion. The initial motivation for manufacturing the Brass Plates edition of the Josephite records may have been to preserve that tradition intact for future generations in view of the significant trends toward syncretism and politically motivated redaction that was evident in the Judahite scribal schools of the time and that may already have taken hold among members of their own group.\textsuperscript{156}

This study’s examination of the scribal traditions of the ANE and how they have been used by scholars to illuminate the origins and character of the Hebrew Bible can also be extended to provide a framework for identifying the role of an official Nephite scribal school in creating and

\textsuperscript{156} In another working paper, I continue this inquiry to explore possible back stories for the origins of the Brass Plates. See Reynolds, “The Brass Plates in Context.” There it will be argued that the synchronistic and redactionist projects modern Bible scholars have identified with the labels “Documentary Hypothesis” and “Deuteronomistic History” may well have alarmed the multi-century guardians of this Josephite version of Israelite history and prophecy.
maintaining the records used by Mormon as he compiled the abridgment that has been given to us today as the Book of Mormon.\textsuperscript{157}

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\textsuperscript{157} Reynolds, “The Last Nephite Scribes.”
The story of the Israelites getting bitten in the wilderness by “fiery serpents” and then being miraculously healed by the “serpent of brass” (Numbers 21:4–9) is, according to one writer, “one of the most widely attested miracles in holy writ.” Perhaps no other book of scripture refers to the story as frequently as the Book of Mormon, which not only has several explicit references to the story (1 Nephi 17:41; 2 Nephi 25:20;
Alma 33:18–22; Helaman 8:13–15), but also makes various typological echoes and allusions to it as part of a larger pattern of Exodus typology occurring throughout the text.  

Naturally, Nephi is the first writer to use this episode, citing it on two separate occasions and within different contexts (1 Nephi 17:41; 2 Nephi 25:20). In each instance, Nephi utilized the story for different purposes which dictated how he told the story and what he emphasized. Despite their different emphases and contexts, these two retellings of the brazen serpent narrative combined to establish a standard interpretation among the Nephites. Later Book of Mormon prophets used the story essentially in the same ways Nephi son of Lehi did, with only minor, albeit somewhat significant, adjustments in the interpretation (see Alma 33:18–22; 37:45; Helaman 8:13–15). Thus, the origins of Nephite interpretations of the brazen serpent episode seem to have emerged from Nephi’s world.  

Therefore, to better understand the Book of Mormon’s use of the brazen serpent narrative, I will first examine each of the two occasions Nephi made use of that story, contextualizing them within the iconography and symbolism of pre-exilic Israel and its influences from surrounding cultures. In doing this, I will occasionally tie in the later Book of Mormon references to this story, as appropriate. Then, I will consider the (minimal) development evident in how this story was interpreted by Nephites across time, comparing it to the way ancient Jewish and early Christian interpretation of the brazen serpent was adapted over time to address specific needs and consider the circumstances that drove Nephite adaptations as well. Overall, this contextual approach yields a variety of insights into the Book of Mormon’s use of this symbol and suggests it was based on an authentic strain of ancient Israelite tradition.  

“Flying Fiery Serpents”  

Nephi’s first time relating the story of the brazen serpent occurred while the family was in Bountiful, as part of an extended argument with his brothers. Nephi used this story to illustrate the stubbornness of the children of Israel — and by analogy, of Laman and Lemuel themselves — and so his focus is less on the brazen serpent and its meaning and more on the serpents that were sent as a means of chastisement, as well as the people’s reaction to this punishment. As he tells it here, there are some key differences in the story in contrast to the account given in the Hebrew Bible. In order to create a context in which to interpret how Nephi tells the story and the differences in his account, I will draw on the iconography of ancient Judah, origins of serpent symbolism in
Israelite religion, the geographic setting of both the original story and Nephi’s retelling, and the contested role of the serpent in proper worship of Yahweh (Jehovah) during the 8th–7th centuries BC.

**Winged Seraph-Serpents in Texts and Iconography**

As Nephi related the story on this occasion, the Israelites had not merely been bitten by “fiery serpents” but “flying fiery serpents” (1 Nephi 17:41). In the biblical text, “fiery serpents” is always a translation of šrp, Anglicized as seraph (pl. seraphim), which, as a verb, typically refers to “burning.” Sometimes it is paired with the word nhš, “snake, serpent,” other times šrp itself (without nhš) refers to a venomous serpent. Thus, when the children of Israel complained about their hardships in the wilderness, “the Lord sent fiery serpents [h-nhšym h-šrpym] among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died” (Numbers 21:6). In Deuteronomy 8:15, nhš šrp are also paired together in reference to the “fiery serpent” in the wilderness, likely alluding to this same event. In response, the Israelites went to Moses, confessed to their sins and implored him “pray unto the Lord, that he take away the serpents [h-nhš] from us” (Numbers 21:7). The Lord then instructed Moses, “Make thee a fiery serpent [šrp], and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live” (Numbers 21:8). Moses then made a nhš nhšt, “serpent of brass,” mounted it on a “pole” (ns), and those who looked upon it, lived (Numbers 21:8–9). Subsequently, the brazen serpent was installed in the Jerusalem temple until the reign of Hezekiah, when he had it removed and broken to pieces as part of his religious reforms (2 Kings 18:4).

Although the seraphim (šrpym) in this story are not described as being able to fly, Isaiah mentioned šrp m’pp, “fiery flying serpents” that lived in the Negev (Isaiah 30:6; cf. 14:29), generally the same geographical region where the brazen serpent narrative takes place. Furthermore, seraphim is the same term Isaiah used to describe the fiery, angelic beings with six wings that he saw as part of his throne-theophany (Isaiah 6:1–7). The image of a royal or divine symbol flanked on both sides by serpents acting as guardians is common in the ancient Near East, including Israel. In light of this iconography, plus the typical usage of šrp to refer to a type of serpent, many scholars believe that the angelic seraphim of Isaiah’s vision were most likely winged serpent-like beings who acted as guardians of the heavenly throne.

In addition, the “source of much of the imagery for Isaiah’s vision appears to have come from physical realities that Isaiah regularly saw in
the temple.” As such, the seraphim would represent the brazen serpent — the seraph (šrp) the Lord commanded Moses to create (Numbers 21:8) — which was mounted on a pole inside the temple precinct at that time. In fact, the discovery of two Israelite bronze bowls depicting winged serpents mounted on poles suggests to some scholars that the brazen serpent itself had wings. As with the royal seals, the scenes depicted on these bronze bowls show a pair of winged serpents guarding a sacred or royal symbol, which could be an indication that in Isaiah’s day, there were actually two bronze seraphim in the temple, one on each side of the ark of the covenant, paralleling the cherubim.

Additional Hebrew seals and other artifacts further depict winged serpents, variously with two wings or four wings. Scholars generally equate this winged serpent imagery with the biblical seraph (šrp). Ironically, much of this iconography is attested during the reign of Hezekiah, the king who reportedly destroyed the brazen serpent. For the most part, seraph-serpent iconography did disappear after the time of Hezekiah, perhaps as a result of his efforts to reform Judah and eliminate anything that could be perceived as idol worship. Yet it did not completely vanish. A seal discovered in 2012 — found in a 7th century bc home in the part of Jerusalem believed to be Lehi’s area of residence — depicts a four-winged seraph-serpent, illustrating that the symbol persisted into Lehi’s day.

This evidence strongly suggests that, whatever the actual nature of the serpents which pestered the children of Israel in the wilderness, in the 8th–7th centuries bc, seraphim (šrpm) were understood to be flying, winged serpents. In fact, renowned Hebrew scholar Moshe Weinfield even translated nḥš šrp as “flying serpents.” James Charlesworth similarly interpreted the term šrpm as “winged-serpents” or “fiery winged-serpents.” Thus, Nephi’s reference to “flying fiery serpents” reflects the common Israelite understanding of seraph-serpents at that time.22

Origins of the Seraph-Serpent Tradition

Visually, the winged serpents depicted on artifacts from Israel and Judah are clearly inspired by Egyptian iconography. “Winged snakes are depicted in Egyptian art and are found frequently in religious texts,” according to Nicole B. Hansen. For example, Manfred Lurker noted, “The Book of the Dead crawls with serpent demons, sometimes winged, rearing up or standing on legs, spitting fire or armed with a knife.” More specifically, the Israelite seals and other artifacts reflect the imagery of the Egyptian uraeus — the upraised cobra, depicted variously with
and without wings, closely associated with the power and protection of the Pharaoh. The uraeus was also the symbol of the goddess Wadjet, who “was sometimes depicted as a winged snake.” Egyptian imagery was in vogue throughout the Syro-Palestinian region, including Israel and Judah, in the 9th–7th centuries BC, so the Egyptian influence on depictions of the seraph-serpents comes as no surprise. Most scholars conclude from this that the meaning and symbolism of the seraph-serpents has an Egyptian origin, and that the seraph (like the uraeus) was a type of cobra. Certainly, the Egyptian connection to the seraph-serpents is noteworthy in light of Nephi and Lehi’s evident knowledge of Egyptian scribal culture (1 Nephi 1:2).

In recent years, however, another theory has emerged that has even more intriguing implications for the Book of Mormon’s use of this symbol. Nissim Amzallag, professor of Bible, Archaeology, and the Ancient Near East at Ben Gurion University of the Negev, has argued that while the imagery used to represent the seraph-serpent was influenced by Egyptian iconography, the symbol itself was not an Egyptian import, but rather was native to the southern Levant. More specifically, Amzallag argues that the seraph was the saw-scaled viper common to the desert region south of Judah and that this snake was adopted as a religious symbol by a community of Yahweh-worshipping metallurgists connected to the copper mines in that same region. Eventually, through trade and migration, members of this community became integrated into the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, infusing a metallurgical dimension into the imagery and symbolism of ancient Israel’s theology. Many of the key elements of this theory — the geography, the seraph-serpents, the metallurgical component, and of course the worship of Yahweh — come together in the story of the brazen serpent.

In light of this model, it is noteworthy that Lehi is said to be from the tribe of Joseph (1 Nephi 5:14, 16; Alma 10:3), while the onomastics of Lehi’s family — especially the name Lehi itself — share an affinity with names attested in the region around the Gulf of Aqaba, where a tribal kingdom called Liḥyan (Liḥyan) emerged in the mid-first millennium BC. The names Lehi (Liḥy), Laman (Lmn), and Nephi (Nfy) are all attested in inscriptions from that area, while Lemuel appears as an Arabian name in the Old Testament (see Proverbs 31:1, 4), and Sam is “the normal Arabic form of Shem,” according to Hugh Nibley. Furthermore, based on several clues in the text, it appears Lehi was a metalworker, and scholars have even hypothesized that he regularly traveled to the mines near the Gulf of Aqaba to obtain copper supplies. Thus, if Amzallag’s
theory is correct, Lehi’s personal background converges with that of the community for whom the seraph-serpent was an important religious symbol. As such, it is plausible that Lehi had ties to that community, and thus the brazen serpent narrative would have held particular theological import to him and his family.

Serpent Symbolism in Ritual Metallurgy

The very last act Nephi performed before he was confronted by his brothers at Bountiful was to “make tools of the ore which [he] did molten out of the rock” (1 Nephi 17:16). Nephi had been guided to that ore by the Lord (vv. 9–10), after which he constructed “bellows” for blowing the fire, and then ignited the flames to molten the ore (v. 11). In the modern, developed world, all of this strikes the reader as an entirely mundane event. In antiquity, however, these metallurgical processes would have held religious and ritualistic meaning. According to Amzallag, there was a “ritual dimension of metallurgy … [that] became an esoteric and hidden fundament of the religions in the Southern Levant and more generally in the ancient Near East.” Due to its esoteric and mysterious nature, some regarded metalworking as one of the “angelic arts,” a piece of divine “wisdom” taught to mankind by beings from the heavenly realm. “To possess this wisdom made one as wise as an angel,” explained Margaret Barker. The essence of this wisdom was “a body of knowledge and practices which gave power over creation when used in conjunction with supernatural forces.” This is exactly what some believed the ancient metalworker could do — since the earth and firmament were perceived as being made from metal, ancient metallurgists were believed to wield the very powers of creation.

The language used to refer to theophanies in biblical texts can be interpreted as describing the celestial domain as a giant furnace, with the Lord blowing through bellows and tuyère to stoke the flames, a pillar of smoke and fire emanating out the top, and the “glory” of the Lord symbolized by the radiant glow of the molten ore. Thus, at least symbolically, “YHWH revealed himself to the smith at his work.” For Nephi, the opportunity to finally light a fire — after being unable to for at least a portion of their journey (1 Nephi 17:12–13) — and practice his metallurgical craft was an opportunity to receive divine instruction, see the glory of the Lord, and feel the Lord working through him.

For our purposes, of particular significance is the way the metallurgical process of taking a copper rod or scepter, remelting it into molten/liquified copper and then refashioning it into a new
rod or other object imitates the miraculous sign the Lord gave to Moses of turning his staff or rod (mṭḥ) into a snake (nḥš) and then back into a staff (Exodus 4:1–5; 7:8–13). In addition to the similarity between the Hebrew terms for “serpent” (nḥš) and “copper” (nḥšt), molten or liquified copper would resemble a snake — an especially fiery snake — as it “winds on the ground before solidification.” This resemblance would naturally be evident to an ancient metalworker in the story of Moses forging a “fiery serpent” (nḥš śrp) out of “copper” (nḥšt) as well (Numbers 21:8–9). In Exodus, the transformation of Moses’s rod into a snake is meant as a sign to Israel that Moses was sent by the Lord (Exodus 4:5). “In other words,” in the eyes of an ancient smith or smelter, at least, “the wonder becomes a demonstration of Moses’s metallurgical skill,” with the implication that by demonstrating such skill, Moses established his “status [as] emissary of YHWH in the eyes of the Israelites.”

In the context of 1 Nephi 17, Nephi had just engaged in the process of bringing ore to its molten state and reshaping it — and did so with direct assistance from the Lord — thereby demonstrating his own status as one commissioned by the Lord to perform his task. Then his brothers enter the scene, “murmur” and deride him, calling him a “fool,” and denying that he was “instructed of the Lord” (1 Nephi 17:17–18). When Nephi mentions the “flying fiery serpents” in his response (v. 41), it seems deliberately crafted to evoke the symbolism of the rod-to-snake transformation, which was related to the metallurgical process, as described above. After the Lord brought the children of Israel out of Egypt, Nephi says:

> And he did straiten them in the wilderness with his *rod*,
> for they hardened their hearts even as ye have.
> And the Lord straitened them because of their iniquity.
> He sent *flying fiery serpents* among them. (1 Nephi 17:41)

The parallelism of the verse seems to suggest that the Lord’s method of “straitening” the Israelites “with his rod” is equated with the seraph-serpents biting the Israelites — a natural association in light of the pervasive use of the rod or staff as a serpentine symbol in the ancient Near East, including the Exodus narratives. In the immediate context of Nephi’s narrative, however, he seems to have alluded specifically to the rod-to-serpent transformation performed by Moses and Aaron, and symbolized by taking solid copper (in the form a rod) and bringing it into a molten state reminiscent of a “fiery serpent.” The fact that Nephi himself had just performed a similar act of metallurgy signified that he, like Moses, had encountered the Lord’s glory and been sent as his emissary, directly countering his brothers’ claims. It further illustrated
that — also contrary to his brothers’ claims — Nephi was no fool: he possessed the wisdom of angels, bestowed by divine instruction.

Seraph-Serpents Along Lehi’s Trail

As elaborated in the previous section, there is a convergence in Nephi’s text of ritual metallurgy, worship of the Lord, and his reference to “flying fiery serpents.” There is also a geographical component to the winged serpent traditions that intersects with the primary setting of 1 Nephi. Biblical, Assyrian, and Greek sources from the 8th–5th centuries BC all consistently identify Sinai and the desert region south of Judah as the place of the flying serpents. Isaiah identifies the “fiery flying serpent” (šṛp mʾpp) as one of the fearsome beasts of the Negev wilderness (Isaiah 30:6). Esarhaddon, an Assyrian king, reported seeing “yellow snakes spreading wings” while marching his army through this same region in 671 BC.

Herodotus, a 5th century BC Greek historian, went to “a place in Arabia somewhat near the city of Bouto in order to learn about the winged serpents” (Histories 2.75). Bouto was a city in the Nile Delta, in Egypt; thus the location Herodotus is referring to would be somewhere around the Egyptian-Sinai border or the northwest Arabian desert. According to legends at that time, “when spring arrives, winged serpents fly from Arabia toward Egypt,” but were stopped at the Egyptian-Sinai border by the ibis bird (Histories 2.75). In that area, Herodotus said that he encountered “the bones and spines of serpents” laying in “heaps” large and small (Histories 2.75). “The snake has a form like that of the water snake and bears wing-like membranes that lack feathers, quite similar to the wings of a bat” (Histories 2.76).

The encounter narrated in Numbers 21:4–9, specifically, is set in the region near the Gulf of Aqaba (also known as the Gulf of Eilat). In this region, archaeologists have uncovered a copper serpent in a tent-shrine near the Timna copper mines, dated to the Late Bronze/Early Iron Age. This site bears no direct relationship with the Exodus, but for our purposes it is noteworthy that the worshippers there were almost certainly metalworkers, and Amzallag argues it was among the earliest sanctuaries dedicated to Yahweh.

Upon his initial departure (1 Nephi 2:1–5), Lehi went directly into this same “winged serpent”-infested region described in all these sources. The exact route followed out of Jerusalem cannot be known with certainty, but Warren Aston most recently proposed a route that would lead southwest out of Jerusalem, down toward Be’er Sheva, through the Negev, past Timna, and to the Gulf of Aqaba. This course would have taken them through Makhtesh Ramon, where numerous fossils of extinct amphibian species
are visible that, Karen Radner argues, could be interpreted as the bones of winged snakes. Radner thus proposes that this was the place of winged snakes referred to in the accounts of both Herodotus and Esarhaddon.67

After traveling through this region, Lehi’s family established their first long-term encampment in the Valley of Lemuel (1 Nephi 2:6–8), a location that would have been only a few days away from the Timna copper mines — a place scholars believe Lehi was familiar with due to his profession as a metalworker.68 Nephi and his brothers traveled back and forth between here and Jerusalem at least two additional times (1 Nephi 3–4; 7). It is not until 1 Nephi 16:11–12 that Nephi reports the family’s departure from this area. Thus, the bulk of the narrative in 1 Nephi takes place in this region between Jerusalem and the Red Sea, in the midst of the traditional habitat associated with the winged seraph-serpents.

Despite this contact and proximity to the region most closely associated with winged serpents, Nephi did not appeal to the episode in Numbers 21 and the “flying fiery serpents” during this time. While staying in this region, however, the Lehites obtained two artifacts made of brass (nḥṣṭ): the “plates of brass” (1 Nephi 5) and the ball of fine brass, later identified as the “Liahona” (1 Nephi 16:10; cf. Alma 37:38). Scholars have suggested that each of these are framed symbolically as the “serpent of brass” (nḥṣ nḥṣṭ) in Nephi’s Exodus typology.69 The Liahona in particular is noteworthy as a type for the brazen serpent because not only was it made of “brass,” but it was used to “look upon” in order to gain knowledge from the Lord (1 Nephi 16:26), a process known ancienly as “divination.”70 Both serpents and metallurgy were symbolically associated with divination, and the Hebrew root for “divination, enchantment” (nḥṣ) was closely related to the terms used for serpent and copper (or brass/bronze).71 Furthermore, in some cultures, metalworkers used “copper paraphernalia” in their divination rituals.72 Thus, the term nḥṣ nḥṣṭ, “serpent of brass,” may have also evoked — to Nephi, at least — the notion of “diviner of brass,” e.g., a copper/bronze object used in divination, such as the Liahona.73

Nephi’s direct citation of the brazen serpent narrative occurred when the family had arrived in Bountiful (1 Nephi 17:41), which lay on the southern shores of Arabia, in the frankincense-producing region of Dhofar.74 The South Arabian cultures that occupied Yemen and controlled the trade in frankincense certainly had their own serpent-based iconography, symbolism, and traditions.75 For example, a cast bronze snake was found near al-Ḥadāʾ, with the name of the god Wadd (wḍm) inscribed on it — the deity associated with snakes in the
South Arabian pantheon. In southeastern Arabia (northern Oman), archaeologists have uncovered one of the most extensive sites of serpent worship in all of the ancient Near East. As with the serpent iconography of the southern Levant, the worship of snakes in Oman appears to be connected to copper mining and metallurgy.

Perhaps most relevant, Herodotus not only talked about “winged serpents” near the border of Egypt and Arabia, as already mentioned, but he also reported that in the region “where frankincense grows … great numbers of winged serpents which are small and have variegated markings … carefully guard each [frankincense] tree” (Histories 3.107). The stories and claims Herodotus makes about these winged serpents are quite fanciful, leaving scholars puzzled as to what he could possibly be referring to. While the details are likely garbled and exaggerated, laborers gathering incense surely encountered venomous snakes during their work. Other classical sources more realistically refer to snakes that “leap” or “jump” out at their prey. For instance, Strabo (writing in the 1st centuries BC/AD) described “snakes a spitame long and red in color that can jump as far as a hare and make an incurable bite” living in the territory of the Sabeans (Geography 16.4.19).

Both the Egyptian cobra and the saw-scaled viper — the main candidates for the biblical seraph-sarpents — are also known in Yemen and Dhofar, where frankincense grows. The saw-scaled viper is an especially good candidate for the frankincense tree-guarding “winged serpents”: it is known to get into bushes and small trees to prey on birds, and often has a reddish color consistent with Strabo’s description.

Thus, while traveling through South Arabia and staying in the Dhofar region, Lehi and his family would have encountered the same snake species found in the desert south of Judah and identified with the seraph-sarpents from biblical traditions. At least by the time of Herodotus, who wrote about 100 years after Lehi’s journey, local South Arabian legends apparently referred to these snakes as being “winged” and able to fly. This means that between both the Valley of Lemuel and Bountiful — the two locations where most of Nephi’s narrative takes place — the Lehite group had spent a large portion of their time near or within the habitat of the seraph-sarpents. As such, when Nephi reminded his brothers of the “flying fiery serpents” sent by the Lord to chastise the children of Israel for their murmuring (1 Nephi 17:41), it would have held a relevance that is often lost on readers today: they, too, were traveling and camping in regions believed to be infested by
flying serpents, and if they were not faithful, the Lord could just as easily punish them by unleashing those dangerous snakes.\textsuperscript{84}

\textbf{Suppression of the Seraph-Serpent}

As mentioned previously, in ancient Israel the seraph-serpent iconography largely proliferated in the 9th–8th centuries BC after which it faded out and disappeared.\textsuperscript{85} The reason for this is likely connected to Hezekiah’s removal of the brazen serpent from the temple (see 2 Kings 18:4).\textsuperscript{86} Prior to that time, the brazen serpent evidently played some kind of role in Israelite worship, but its exact function is not known for certain. It is possible it was more strongly associated with the traditions and worship practices of northern Israelites, which may be why the biblical authors give it such scant attention.\textsuperscript{87} Most likely, given the story in Numbers 21, it was used in some kind of ritual wherein worshippers would seek to invoke the Lord’s healing power.\textsuperscript{88} Victor Hurowitz has even argued that the text of Numbers 21:4–9 was a kind of invocation or prayer that the worshipper would ritually recite while burning incense and looking upon the mounted serpent of bronze.\textsuperscript{89} This means that the Lord’s promise, “that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it [the brazen serpent], shall live” (Number 21:8), was believed to be \textit{active and ongoing} for generations of Israelite worshippers prior to the reign of Hezekiah.\textsuperscript{90} Furthermore, based on multilingual wordplays involving the Hebrew terms for “live” (ḥyh, ḥyy, ḥwh) and “snake” (nḥš) with the Aramaic term for “snake” (ḥwy’) and the Akkadian terms for “live, life” (naʾāšu, nīšu), Hurowitz argues that the passage would invite worshippers to use a [brazen serpent] not only to treat snake bites … but to give life more generally.\textsuperscript{91} For centuries then, humble Israelites with a variety of ailments evidently sought the Lord’s healing power by approaching the brazen serpent, believing the promise given to Moses still applied in their own day: “that every one that … looketh upon it, shall live.”

All of that changed, however, when Hezekiah had the object destroyed (2 Kings 18:4), reportedly in connection with extensive reforms of Israelite religion. There is ongoing debate among biblical scholars as to the historical reality of — and if real, the nature, extent, and purpose of — Hezekiah’s reforms,\textsuperscript{92} but most scholars agree that the destruction of the brazen serpent is a historically authentic detail.\textsuperscript{93} Whatever the exact nature and purpose of its removal, it is clear that the account of this event as recorded in the Deuteronomistic History (2 Kings 18:4) shows disdain for this object and the worship practices connected to it. Richard Lederman, a professor of Bible and Religion at Georgetown University, argues that this account is
a “Deuteronomic polemic against forbidden forms of worship,” patterned after Deuteronomy 12:3 (cf. 7:5), thus characterizing the brazen serpent as the idolatrous image of a foreign god, inauthentic to true Israelite religion — despite its reputed Mosaic origins.\textsuperscript{94} The declaration of it as “Nehushtan” (\textit{nḥštn}) is probably not a proper name as typically translated but rather a pejorative dismissal of the object as just a “piece of bronze/copper” unworthy of worship.\textsuperscript{95} According to Leslie S. Wilson, “during or just after the period of King Josiah and the Deuteronomist reporter(s),” the “serpentine (\textit{nḥš}) traditions became the symbol of all things evil and abhorrent to YHWH.”\textsuperscript{96}

In contrast, ancient metallurgists such as Lehi and Nephi — especially given their ties to the northern kingdom of Israel — likely viewed the brazen serpent as a legitimate Yahwistic symbol and an authentic and integral part of Israelite worship.\textsuperscript{97} Both serpent symbolism and the metallurgical arts were traits of the ancient “wisdom” tradition — a tradition that the Deuteronomists disapproved of and sought to change.\textsuperscript{98} This controversy over the origin and legitimacy of the brazen serpent may very well be lurking in the background of Nephi’s expansion and commentary on the brazen serpent narrative.

As certain Book of Mormon scholars have previously argued, it appears Lehi and Nephi embraced at least parts of the ancient wisdom traditions that the Deuteronomistic school of thought vehemently opposed.\textsuperscript{99} In contrast, Laman and Lemuel were apparently ideologically aligned with the Deuteronomist movement, as is most evident in their criticism of Nephi just before he gave his speech mentioning the brazen serpent narrative (1 Nephi 17:22).\textsuperscript{100} As already discussed, Nephi’s metallurgical activity just before he was confronted by his brothers established his \textit{bona fides} — based on pre-Deuteronomistic traditions — as one sent like Moses (cf. Deuteronomy 18:15–18).\textsuperscript{101} Thus, the conflict between Nephi and his brothers in 1 Nephi 17 is a microcosm of the larger debate over the proper form of Israelite religion that was going on at the time.

With that in mind, consider a key difference between the account in Numbers 21:4–9 and Nephi’s version of the same story. In Nephi’s version, there is a group of people unmentioned in the biblical account who refused to look upon the brazen serpent.

> And after they were bitten,  
> he prepared a way that they might be healed.  
> And the labor which they had to perform were to look.  
> And because of the simpleness of the way or the easiness of it,  
> there were many which perished.  
> And they did harden their hearts from time to time,
and they did revile against Moses and also against God.  
(1 Nephi 17:41–42)

Alma, too, mentioned this additional detail, indicating that it continued to play a part in the Nephites’ brazen serpent tradition:

But few understood the meaning of those things — and this because of the hardness of their hearts. 
But there were many which were so hardened that they would not look; therefore they perished. 
Now the reason that they would not look is because they did not believe that it would heal them. 
(Alma 33:20–21)

A similar tradition implying that some did not look and thus perished is found in later Jewish sources. If generations of Israelites had continued to look upon the brazen serpent seeking the Lord’s healing power, then the tradition of those who would not look because they did not believe it to be efficacious may have developed after Hezekiah destroyed it, as a polemical response to the desecration and denunciation of the serpent symbol in Deuteronomistic ideology. To those who still believed and followed a pre-reform version of Yahweh-worship, it was the Deuteronomistic elite in Jerusalem who rejected the simple and easy way prepared by the Lord; who failed to understand “the meaning of those things” — that is, the meaning of the serpent and the worship practices involving it. For that, they were doomed to perish, as Lehi had prophesied and as was fulfilled when the Babylonians destroyed the city (1 Nephi 1:13; 2 Kings 25). By aligning themselves with the Deuteronomists, Laman and Lemuel were joining the ranks of those who “did harden their hearts.” Although they claimed to revere Moses and worship Yahweh according to the law, by rejecting a Yahwistic symbol attributed to Moses, they were actually reviling against them both.

The Serpent “Raised Up” in the Wilderness

When Nephi was speaking to his brothers in Bountiful, he did not provide an interpretation of the brazen serpent itself. Later, when Nephi appealed to this story again while commenting on the prophecies of Isaiah (2 Nephi 25:1), the context and setting was different. His conflicts with his brothers were largely behind him, and he had shifted his attention to “proving unto my people the truth of the coming of Christ” (2 Nephi 11:4), an event he had seen in vision (1 Nephi 11). He appealed
to Isaiah as an eyewitness who had also seen the Redeemer in vision (2 Nephi 11:2). Thus, his focus shifted away from the Israelites’ reaction to the punishing “poisonous serpents,” and onto “the serpent which [Moses] did raise up” — that is, the brazen serpent itself (2 Nephi 25:20). Nephi used the serpent that Moses “did raise up” as an illustration of the Lord’s power to deliver and save — which he then implicitly connected to the Messiah he had seen “lifted up upon the cross” (1 Nephi 11:33):

   For according to the words of the prophets,  
     the Messiah cometh … [and]  
     his name should be Jesus Christ the Son of God.  

   And as the Lord God liveth that brought Israel up out of the  
   land of Egypt  
   and gave unto Moses power that he should heal the nations  
   after that they had been bitten by the poisonous serpents,  
   if they would cast their eyes unto the serpent which he did  
   raise up before them,  

   yea, behold I say unto you that as these things are true  
   and as the Lord God liveth,  
   there is none other name given under heaven  
   save it be this Jesus Christ of which I have spoken  
   whereby man can be saved. (2 Nephi 25:19–20)

According to the Gospel of John, Jesus himself made a similar association:

   And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so  
   must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth  
   in him should not perish, but have eternal life. (John 3:14–15)

Douglas W. Ullmann reasoned that this passage “captures the main thought of Numbers 21:4–9 and applies it to Jesus Christ’s death,” explaining:

   the Lord provided only one means of salvation (from the snake bites): the bronze serpent. If anyone refused to look at the uplifted serpent, he was not healed. In a similar way the Jewish leaders of Jesus’s day disbelieved that Jesus was the Messiah (John 3:11), thereby rejecting God’s means of providing them with eternal life. Yet God had provided Jesus
Christ as the only means of salvation. If anyone refused to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, he was not saved.\textsuperscript{104}

The story is used “as an illustration of God’s plan for salvation through Jesus Christ,” but the Gospel of John “does not … suggest that the bronze serpent is a type of Christ.”\textsuperscript{105} Ullmann concludes that, as used in the Gospel of John, “the [bronze] serpent was not intended to be a prediction of any of the details of Jesus’s vicarious death, [but] several points of similarity between the lifting up of the serpent and the lifting up of Jesus Christ made the bronze serpent an appropriate symbol.”\textsuperscript{106}

Brant A. Gardner has similarly argued that “Nephi is not using the [the brazen serpent] incident typologically but rather as evidence of Yahweh’s power as manifest through a prophet.”\textsuperscript{107} It is true that Nephi, like Jesus himself in John 3:14–15, did not \textit{explicitly} say that the serpent was a type for Christ, and nothing Nephi said suggests that the serpent was a prophecy of His crucifixion.\textsuperscript{108} Yet, Nephi did \textit{implicitly} compare Jesus Christ and the brazen serpent as an illustration that there is no other means of salvation but Christ — precisely as used in John 3:14–15, according to Ullmann. As S. Kent Brown explained:

Nephi highlighted the brazen serpent incident, along with the Lord’s guidance of the Israelites and his gift of water from a rock, as indisputable evidences of Jehovah’s power to save temporally as well as spiritually. Nephi swore an oath “that as these things are true, and as the Lord God liveth, there is none other name given under heaven save it be this Jesus Christ … whereby man can be saved” (2 Nephi 25:20). Hereby, Nephi drew attention to the link between Moses’s actions and Jesus’s atonement.\textsuperscript{109}

Of course, Nephi predates the Gospel of John by several centuries, so it is significant that James Charlesworth argues that this “image[ry] and symbolism … are reflected in Jewish thought long before the composition of the Fourth Gospel.”\textsuperscript{110} As previously noted, it is difficult to completely recover the role and meaning of the seraph-serpent in the pre-reform Israelite religion which may have influenced Nephi’s thinking. Furthermore, its meaning was probably somewhat fluid rather than fixed.\textsuperscript{111} As Jacqueline Tabick observed: “it is obvious that the interpretations of a symbol can be made from many possible view points, and … it should also be obvious that the interpretation is bound to be a subjective one, influenced by the cultural background and personal experience of the interpreter.”\textsuperscript{112} Thus, Nephi’s interpretation needn’t be assumed to represent a \textit{universally} applied interpretation of the brazen
serpent among ancient Israelites; but it should make sense in light of his “cultural background and personal experience.”

Nephi himself had just stressed the importance of understanding the cultural background of scripture — the “manner of the Jews” — in order to be able to interpret it (2 Nephi 25:1–6). Furthermore, although Nephi was clearly commenting on the narrative in Numbers 21:4–9, he was not interpreting it in a vacuum; rather, it was part of his larger commentary on Isaiah 2–14, which was just quoted (2 Nephi 12–24). This block of text includes two other key passages that refer to seraph-serpents — Isaiah 6 / 2 Nephi 16 and Isaiah 14:28–32 / 2 Nephi 24:28–32 — and three passages referring to standards which are “lifted up” — Isaiah 5:26 / 2 Nephi 15:26; Isaiah 11:10, 12 / 2 Nephi 21:10, 12; and Isaiah 13:2 / 2 Nephi 23:2.

Thus, to understand Nephi’s commentary here on the narrative in Numbers 21:4–9, I will consider that narrative together with these Isaiah passages, as well as the cultural background of serpent symbolism and iconography in ancient Israel and the ancient Near East more generally. I will specifically discuss the use of serpents as symbols of healing, life, immortality, resurrection, salvation, purification and atonement; as representations of the Messiah (and kingship more generally), divine messengers and dispensers of justice, and members of the heavenly hosts; as well as the use of serpents on deified battle-standards — all of which are roles, functions, and attributes that at least some ancient Israelites close to Nephi’s time likely connected to the seraph-serpent. When discussing each of the qualities of serpent symbolism, I will also consider Book of Mormon commentary on the brazen serpent story against this cultural background and Nephi’s personal experiences (especially his visions), illustrating that such commentary makes logical sense as an interpretation of a pre-exilic symbol.

**Healing**

As previously mentioned, the primary association of the seraph symbol in Israelite religion was likely one of healing, especially healing from snake bites, with Numbers 21:4–9 possibly functioning as ritual text recited by the worshipper as they looked upon the brazen serpent. Healing was one of the most widespread and common meanings of the serpent in ancient Near Eastern symbolism. According to Charlesworth, the serpent was “the quintessential symbol of healing, health, and rejuvenation in the ancient Near East, including Palestine, from circa 1850 BCE to at least 135 CE.” Maciej Münnich similarly notes
that “throughout the entire Near East the snake was considered a symbol of health and even immortality.” Nephi understood that the brazen serpent represented the “power … [to] heal the nations” (2 Nephi 25:20) and Alma, likewise, emphasized the healing function of the serpent (Alma 33:21–22). Just before telling the story of Moses raising the brazen serpent, Nephi explained that Jesus Christ would “rise from the dead with healing in his wings” (2 Nephi 25:13).

**Life, Immortality, and Resurrection**

Closely related to its healing function, serpents were also often associated with life. As already pointed out, Hurowitz argues that multilingual wordplays with terms for “snake” and “life” in Numbers 21:4–9 suggest that the brazen serpent not only healed but gave life. Amy Birkan also argues that this narrative puts emphasis on the serpent as more than merely a means of healing but as “the chief emblem of new life.” In many ancient Near Eastern myths, it is paradoxically “the slaying of the dragon, or serpent, [that] provides life.” As Münnich mentioned (above), the lifegiving powers of the serpent were not limited to mortal life but included the power to give immortality, and thus it was often associated with resurrection, life after death, and eternity. As Münnich further explains, “This was usually connected with snakes shedding their skins, which made a semblance of rebirth into eternity.” Likewise, in Egypt, according to Lurker, “the snake, because it sloughs its skin, became a symbol of survival after death.”

After talking about how the “type was raised up in the wilderness, that whosoever would look upon it might live” (Alma 33:19), Alma encouraged his Zoramite audience to “cast about your eyes and begin to believe in the Son of God … that he shall rise again from the dead, which shall bring to pass the resurrection” (Alma 33:22). In a more cryptic allusion to the story, discussed in some detail later, Alma said “if we will look, we may live forever” (Alma 37:46). As noted above, Nephi son of Lehi spoke of Jesus Christ “rising] from the dead with healing in his wings” (2 Nephi 25:13) shortly before he related how the Israelites “would cast their eyes unto the serpent” to be healed; soon thereafter, he stressed that the purpose of his teaching was so his posterity would “look forward unto that life which is in Christ” (2 Nephi 25:20, 27). Later, Nephi son of Helaman most strongly associated the symbol with Christ’s life-giving powers:

Yea, did [Moses] not bear record that the Son of God should come? And as he lifted up the brazen serpent in the wilderness, even so should he be lifted up which should come.
And as many as should look upon that serpent should live,
even so as many as should look upon the Son of God with faith,
having a contrite spirit, might live,
even unto that life which is eternal. (Helaman 8:14–15)

Salvation

Given these healing and life-giving associations, it was only natural
that the serpent would also become a symbol of salvation, “since
healing and salvation are cognitively synonymous” according to
Charlesworth.127 Andrew Skinner observes, “As a bringer of salvation
and giver of everlasting life, the snake became a divine reptile” in
ancient Near Eastern conceptions.128 A prime example of this comes
from the Apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon, a pre-Christian Jewish text.129
Retelling the story of when the Israelites “perished with the stings of
crooked serpents,” the author refers to the brazen serpent as “a sign of
salvation, to put them in remembrance of the commandment of thy law”
(Wisdom of Solomon 16:5, 6).130 “Under God’s command,” explained
Emerson B. Powery, “Moses created a bronze serpent to symbolize God’s
salvation.”131 When Nephi compared Christ to the serpent, he stressed
that it is by Jesus Christ “whereby man can be saved” (2 Nephi 25:20), and
Alma mentioned that “he will come to redeem his people” (Alma 33:22).

Purification and Atonement

The role of the seraphim in Isaiah’s vision both overlaps with and extends
the symbolic meaning of the seraph-serpents in Numbers 21. When
Isaiah begins to fear because he, “a man of unclean lips,” had seen the
Lord of Hosts (Isaiah 6:5), it is a seraph who comes to purify him with
“a live coal,” declaring “thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged”
(v. 6–7). As such, this purifying function is an extension of the healing
connotations of serpents generally, one that particularly makes sense
when speaking of “fiery” or “burning” (ṣrp) serpents.132 LeGrande Davies
argues the verb ṣrp, “to burn,” is primarily used to refer to the “cleansing,
purifying or refining of ritual objects, people, cities, etc.,” and that this
was the purpose of the seraph-serpents in the wilderness as well as the
function of the seraphim in Isaiah 6: “The seraphim acted as the agents
of the ‘cleansing fire’ to Isaiah, as the ‘cleansing’ or ‘fiery serpents’ of the
wilderness acted on the Israelites.”133

The connections to purification are further strengthened by the use of
the roots ṣṛp, “to burn” and the homophonic ṣṛp, “to refine” earlier in Isaiah
(Isaiah 1:7, 25), and the use of ṣrṣph for the burning coal in Isaiah 6:6, forming
wordplays with *seraphim*. The prophet and the people are unclean and sinful,” observed Peter D. Miscall. “Cleanliness and innocence are achieved by burning and refining both the prophet and the people; in the process, the guilt, the dross, is removed.” Thus, Udo Rüterswörden called this “an atonement act,” and Karen Randolph Joines noted that to Isaiah these “winged serpents are agents of divine redemption and healing.”

Nephi most likely interpreted Isaiah’s vision in context with Lehi’s own throne-theophany (1 Nephi 1:6–14), in which case he probably identified the seraph who purged Isaiah’s sins with the “One descending out of the midst of heaven” in Lehi’s vision — a figure usually interpreted to be Jesus Christ (1 Nephi 1:9). Since, as one biblical scholar puts it, “the seraph that cleanses Isaiah … may function as a symbolic allusion to the seraph in Numbers 21:8 that heals the children of Israel,” it is significant that Nephi talked about looking upon the brazen serpent in the context of teaching his posterity “to what source they may look for a remission of their sins” (2 Nephi 25:26) — the very function of the seraph in Isaiah 6:7. Likewise, when comparing Christ to the seraph Moses “raised up in the wilderness,” Alma said He would “come to redeem his people” and “atone for their sins” (Alma 33:19, 22), both roles scholars have associated with the actions of the seraph in Isaiah 6.

**Messiah (Kingship)**

Snakes also acted as guardians throughout the ancient world. As mentioned previously, this was a common function of the seraph-serpent in Judean iconography in the 8th century BC, and the role is also evident in Isaiah 6, where the seraphim are acting as guardians or gate-keepers of the heavenly throne and the divine council. In both Egyptian and Judean iconography, the protective function of the seraph (in Judah) and uraeus (in Egypt) is prominently linked to the king and royal symbolism. Nicole B. Hansen explained, “The *uraeus* was the image of the Egyptian cobra (*Naha haje*), worn in the front of the king’s headdress. … Thus the uraeus came to be considered a protector of kingship.”

Eventually, such prominent displays of the protective uraeus led to its adoption as not only a protector or guardian, but also as a direct symbol of royalty, authority, and kingship itself. As Charlesworth explains, “the uraeus … was placed in royal palaces and on the heads of pharaohs to symbolize their godly and kingly powers.” This same conflation appears to have taken place in Judean iconography. While, as mentioned earlier in this article, the winged serpent was typically depicted as the
guardian(s) of a royal symbol, in some instances “the winged seraph alone seems to symbolize Judean kingship.”

Isaiah evidently drew upon this royal imagery when he warned Philistia, “Rejoice not … because the rod of him that smote thee is broken: for out of the serpents’ root shall come forth a viper, and his fruit shall be a fiery flying serpent” (Isaiah 14:29). In this passage, the serpent, viper, and a flying seraph-serpent are presented as the root, trunk, and fruit of a tree — and thus represent succeeding generations of rulers. According to Shawn Zelig Aster, “The root represents previous generations, the trunk represents the present, and the fruit represents the future. Each of the types of serpents mentioned is more rare and more dangerous than the previous one.” Thus, the flying seraph-serpent is a future royal figure who will subjugate the Philistines and protect Zion (Isaiah 14:29–32).

Given its use of Judean royal iconography (a flying seraph-serpent) combined with imagery used elsewhere in Isaiah (11:1) to refer to a future Davidic king or “new David,” this passage naturally lends itself to messianic interpretations. As John N. Oswalt pointed out, if this is interpreted as “a reference to the Jewish nation or the Davidic monarchy,” then “the Messiah is the flying serpent.” Indeed, at least by the early centuries AD, that is precisely how Jewish interpreters were reading the passage, as illustrated by the Targumic rendering: “Rejoice not, all you Philistines, because the ruler who was subjugating you is broken, for from the sons of the sons of Jesse the Messiah will come forth, and his deeds will be among you as a wounding serpent” (Tg. Isaiah 14:29). At least one modern scholar similarly argued, “The broader meaning [of Isaiah 14:28–32] seems to be that from the root of Judah, ‘the serpent’s root, the deliverer shall come to save Israel.’ This one is symbolized as ‘a flying serpent.’” In light of the interpretation in the Targums, Bruce Chilton suggests “it may just be that the connection between serpent imagery and messianic thinking was something of a conventional one.”

In the Book of Mormon, both Nephi son of Lehi and Nephi son of Helaman used the title “Messiah” for Jesus Christ when making the comparison with the brazen serpent (2 Nephi 25:19; Helaman 8:13). Furthermore, just as ancient Jewish interpreters reasoned that the Israelites had to look upon the brazen serpent with “a long and insistent gaze” to be healed of a snake bite, so Nephi taught that if his people “look forward with steadfastness unto Christ [i.e., the Messiah]” they would be “made alive” (2 Nephi 25:24–25).
Divine Messenger and Dispenser of Justice

Isaiah 14:29 also clearly reflects “the use of the serpent and the pit viper to symbolize God’s messenger.” As discussed earlier, the transformation of the rod or staff (mṭḥ) into a serpent (nḥš) was used as a sign that Moses had truly been sent as Yahweh’s messenger to deliver the Israelites from Egypt (Exodus 4:1–5). Similar imagery is at play in Isaiah 14:29, where the broken “rod” or “scepter” (ṣḥḥ) becomes the “serpent’s root” (mṣrš nḥš) from whence God’s emissary emerges as a “fiery flying serpent” (ṣrp mʾpp). Likewise, according to Izaak J. de Hulster, “the seraphs of Isaiah 6 might be understood as carrying out an intermediary role as a type of divine messenger.” Other biblical passages likewise identify serpents being commissioned or sent by God to accomplish a specific task (e.g., Genesis 49:17; Amos 9:3).

As God’s messenger, the serpent was frequently associated with judgment. Charlesworth noticed, “Often biblical authors choose the serpent to symbolize the agent of God’s judgment, usually punishment.” For example, Trevor Cochell argues that the flying seraph in Isaiah 14:28–31, “behaves much as the uraeus in an Egyptian royal context,” bringing “fiery destruction upon the enemies of the true King, Yahweh, and his people. … [T]he mythical fiery serpent (seraph/uraeus) is the symbol of Yahweh’s judgment.” This meaning is evident in the brazen serpent narrative, where the seraph-serpents were sent (or released) by the Lord to punish the Israelites for their murmuring (Numbers 21:6). In Egypt, the serpent mounted on a pole or standard was often used to represent Pharaoh’s judgment against his enemies — a symbol that Numbers 21 seems to invert by using the same iconography (a serpent mounted on a pole) as a means of sparing the Israelites of a negative judgment.

Serpents did not exclusively convey the negative aspect of judgment. Charlesworth proclaims, “the serpent … symbolizes God’s messenger who brings justice, judgment, and goodness.” As Davies puts it, “The subtlety of the serpent … exemplifies the justice of God, which knows no bounds and can seek out the righteous or wicked anywhere to bring forth justice.” In Greco-Roman culture, according to Skinner, it was perceived that “the serpent could give life or take it, let another creature live or cause it to die by invoking, as it were, a kind of ‘instant judgment’ in deciding to strike or not.” Thus, it could naturally symbolize God’s judgments to both reward the righteous and punish the wicked. Once again, this very dualism is at play in Numbers 21, “where the Snake is seen as the messenger.
of both life and death,” as Tabick points out. When Alma compared Christ to the brazen serpent, he mentioned “that all men shall stand before him to be judged at the last and judgment day according to their works” (Alma 33:22). Nephi likewise emphasized the coming judgment “at the last day” when he mentioned the raised up serpent (2 Nephi 25:18, 20).

One of the Heavenly Hosts/Sons of God

In most ancient Near Eastern cultures, snakes typically symbolized a specific god or goddess of healing, life, or other properties commonly associated with serpents. Some scholars believe it was the same in Israel, with the brazen serpent representing one of the heavenly hosts — divine beings variously referred to as “gods,” “sons of God/the Most High,” “holy ones,” and “angels,” among other titles. “It has long been recognized,” according to Lowell K. Handy, “that this object stood for a deity” which was “clearly part of the Judean pantheon and almost certainly a deity of healing.” Charlesworth likewise argues that before Hezekiah’s reforms, “citizens of Judah … most likely perceived the [brazen] serpent as a celestial being,” from within “Yahweh’s heavenly court.” Similarly, Tallay Ornan reasoned that the four-winged seraph on a 7th century BC Israelite seal represented a “member in the [heavenly] entourage of Yahweh.” Indeed, as discussed earlier, Isaiah — possibly inspired by the brazen serpent(s) in the temple — envisioned members of the divine council as seraphim, or winged fiery serpents (Isaiah 6).

Typically, scholars trying to identify the specific deity represented by the brazen serpent link it to Canaanite healing gods or serpent deities. Based on Isaiah’s vision, however, the seraph form was not necessarily limited to a specific individual within the heavenly hosts; furthermore, as discussed in this paper, the seraph-serpent clearly conveyed a wide-range of meanings — well beyond just healing — all within the context of Israelite worship of Yahweh. Thus, in seeking to identify a deity which ancient Israelites might have associated with the brazen serpent, it makes sense to look for one that embodies all of the attributes of the seraph-serpent discussed above.

In this light, it is noteworthy that, according to some scholars, early Israelite religion featured a “second god”: a divine redeemer-figure who was one of the “sons of God,” a heavenly guardian, God’s primary agent or emissary (mlʾk, “angel”), and was manifest on earth as the Messiah (the Davidic king). The role and identity of this divine son figure was obscured by the Deuteronomistic reformers, but the earliest Christians drew upon surviving traditions about this “Son of God” in their understandings of
Given the overlap between the roles of this particular member of the heavenly hosts and the meanings and functions associated with the seraph-serpent discussed in this paper — both are connected to redemption, messengers, judgment, guardianship, and the Messiah, among other things — it seems plausible that at least some ancient Israelites would have associated the brazen serpent with this same “Son of God.”

This divine emissary evidently played a role in the theology of ancient metallurgists, and Latter-day Saint scholars have likewise argued that Lehi and Nephi’s revelations about Jesus Christ make sense against the backdrop of these pre-reform beliefs. It thus comes as no surprise that Nephi and later Book of Mormon writers would specifically use the title “Son of God” when identifying Christ with the brazen serpent (2 Nephi 25:19; Alma 33:18, 22; Helaman 8:14–15).

The Deified Battle Standards and the Brazen Serpent

The identification of the brazen serpent as symbolizing a deity or divine being is further implied by Moses’s placing it on a “pole” (Numbers 21:9), which is a translation of ns, which typically means “standard, banner, ensign,” etc. Ancient Near Eastern armies often used standards as a means of advancing and rallying their armies, but they often had religious and ideological symbolism as well. As Heinz-Josef Fabry explained, “In the ancient Near East, standards symbolize concretely the gods advancing into battle.” Specifically, in Egypt, “The principal purpose of the standards was to serve as a physical repository of the power of the gods. … In reality, the gods were thought to be embodied in the standards,” and as such, “Egyptian texts … often use the words standards and gods interchangeably.” Similarly, Mordecai Cogan explained that the Assyrian battle-standard known as the “weapon of Ashur,” was “topped by the symbolic representation of Ashur,” the supreme god of the Assyrian Empire. Such “deified standards,” as one scholar described them, would have surely shaped Israelite perceptions of the brazen serpent on a “pole” or “standard” (ns), contributing to the notion that it symbolized a divine being, as discussed above.

Inherent in the act of placing something on a standard is “raising” or “lifting” it up, so that it can be seen from all around. This is reflected in the etymology of ns, “standard, ensign, banner,” which is likely derived from the rarely used verbal root nss, which means “to lift something up for the purpose of displaying it.” In Zechariah 9:16, nss is translated “lifted up as an ensign.” Setting up a standard is frequently described using the verbal root nsʾ, a common term in the Hebrew Bible with the primary meaning
being “to raise” or “lift up.”¹⁹¹ This can be seen in several of the Isaiah passages that Nephi quoted just before retelling the brazen serpent story:

And he will lift up \[w-nś’\] an ensign \[ns\] to the nations from far and will hiss unto them from the end of the earth. (2 Nephi 15:26; Isaiah 5:26)

And he shall set up \[w-nś’\] an ensign \[ns\] for the nations and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth. (2 Nephi 21:12; Isaiah 11:12)

Lift ye up \[ś’w\] a banner \[ns\] upon the high mountain, exalt the voice unto them, shake the hand that they may go into the gates of the nobles. (2 Nephi 23:2; Isaiah 13:2)

Significantly, the grand army envisioned in Isaiah 5:25–30 (2 Nephi 15:25–30), raising its ensign to rally the nations to war against the wicked, was likely inspired by the Assyrians — the most powerful military force known during the time of Isaiah.¹⁹² Based on wall relief carvings in the palace of Sennacherib (ca. 705–681 BC), it seems that at least some Assyrian battle-standards contemporary to Isaiah (and within a hundred years of Nephi’s time) were actually serpents mounted on spears.¹⁹³ In Isaiah 11:10, 12 (2 Nephi 21:10, 12), the raising an ensign motif is reapplied, this time to the Davidic king in the messianic-age.¹⁹⁴ As already discussed, the Davidic monarchy was also associated with serpent symbolism in Isaiah’s day (something likely still known to some in Lehi’s time), and Isaiah 14:29 applies this messianic imagery to a flying seraph. Consequently, Nephi may very well have understood Isaiah’s raised up ensign to be serpentine in nature, and thus fused them with the brazen serpent on a “pole” in his interpretation of Numbers 21.¹⁹⁵

This would explain why Nephi spoke of “the serpent which [Moses] did raise up before them” (2 Nephi 25:20), even though the expression \(nś’\) does not appear in Numbers 21. Likewise, Alma also talked about “a type … raised up in the wilderness” (Alma 33:19), and Nephi son of Helaman says Moses “lifted up the brazen serpent in the wilderness” (Helaman 8:14). All of this would have made it quite natural for the original Nephi to interpret the deified serpent-standard as “the everlasting God” that he saw “lifted up upon the cross and slain for the sins of the world” (1 Nephi 11:33; cf. 19:10; 3 Nephi 27:14–15, 22). It was Nephi son of Helaman, however, who would directly connect the lifting up of both serpent and Savior: “And as he lifted up the brazen serpent in the wilderness, even so should he be lifted up which should come” (Helaman 8:14).
In Hebrew, *nšʾ* is a theologically potent term, with a broad semantic range. Not only could it mean “to be lifted or raised up,” and by extension, “exalted,” but it could also mean “to carry, bear, endure,” and even “to suffer.” It could specifically be used in the phrase *nšʾʿwn* to express bearing guilt, sin, or iniquity — including taking on the guilt, sins, or iniquities of others — and carried connotations related to forgiveness, reconciliation, and atonement. Of course, Nephi knew — as surely as his brother Jacob did — that by being “lifted up” onto the cross, Christ would “suffer his cross and bear the shame of the world” (Jacob 1:8; cf. 1 Nephi 19:9–10). After mentioning the “raised up” serpent, Nephi also explained that they wrote their record so that their posterity would “be reconciled to God” and know where to “look for a remission of their sins” (2 Nephi 25:23, 26). Alma said that the “raised up” serpent was a type for the Son of God who “shall suffer and die to atone for their sins” (Alma 33:22).

The Brazen Serpent in the Nephite Interpretive Tradition

As illustrated by the various references made throughout this paper, when later Nephite writers mentioned the brazen serpent narrative, in each instance, they generally interpret it along the same lines Nephi did, specifically using same name-titles (Messiah, Son of God) and talking about qualities and attributes of Christ (atonement, eternal life, rising from the dead, resurrection, judgment) that relate to ancient Near Eastern serpent symbolism. In many cases, these are features that are specifically associated with the seraph-serpent in pre-exilic Israelite texts (i.e., Numbers 21:4–9; Isaiah 6; 14:28) and iconography. Thus, with his two retellings of the brazen serpent narrative, Nephi evidently established a standard interpretation of the story that other Nephite writers adopted with minimal change.

It should be noted, however, that there are some key developments in how the story is used and interpreted within the text. They are modest, even subtle, developments that make sense as natural outgrowths of how Nephi used the story. Similar innovations of interpretation show up in the ancient Judeo-Christian tradition, and do so in response to similar circumstances and pressures. Thus, the Book of Mormon authentically reflects a living interpretative tradition.

Brazen Serpent Typology, Prophecy, and Apologetics in Nephite and Christian Sources

As noted earlier, both Nephi (2 Nephi 25:20) and the Gospel of John (3:14–15) use the “raised up” or “lifted up” serpent as a means of illustrating the
Lord’s saving power through Jesus Christ. In neither instance, however, was the brazen serpent taken to be a literal typological prediction — a prophecy in action — of the coming of Jesus Christ. This would quickly change in early Christian interpretations. In the *Epistle of Barnabas*, dated to between AD 70 and 135, it explicitly states that “Moses maketh a type of Jesus, how that He must suffer, and that He Himself … shall make alive in an emblem when Israel was falling” (*Epistle of Barnabas* 12:5). That type was the brazen serpent, and in *Barnabas*, Moses explains the symbol in a way that clearly alludes to the future crucifixion:

> Whencever, said he, one of you shall be bitten, let him come to the serpent which is placed on the tree, and let him believe and hope that the serpent being himself dead can make alive; and forthwith he shall be saved. … Here again thou hast in these things also the glory of Jesus, how that in Him and unto Him are all things. (*Epistle of Barnabas* 12:7)

Justin Martyr, another 2nd century Christian writer, also argued:

> the type and sign erected to counteract the effects of the serpents that bit Israel was clearly intended for the salvation of those who believe that this sign was to show that through the Crucified One death was to come to the serpent, but salvation to those who had been bitten by the serpent and had sought protection of Him who sent His Son into the world to be crucified (*Dialogue with Trypho* 91.4).

In these post-New Testament texts, the typology is *explicitly* stated, and it is assumed that the action of raising the serpent in the wilderness was *intended* as a prophetic prediction of Christ’s coming. According to Ullmann, who surveyed more than seventy references to the bronze serpent story in early and medieval Christian texts, this becomes the dominant interpretation of the story among Christian exegetes in antiquity, and it was adopted specifically “as an apologetic against the Jews for their disbelief in Christ as the Messiah.”

This is *exactly* what happens among Nephite exegetes as well. As S. Kent Brown noted, “This brass serpent was interpreted by later Book of Mormon prophets to typify the Savior.” When Alma the Younger first referenced the brazen serpent, he combined elements from Nephi’s two interpretations, using it both to teach of the coming Messiah and also mentioning those who would not look to the serpent and thus perished (Alma 33:18–22). Alma was appealing to the story while preaching amongst the Zoramites, who explicitly denied the
coming of Christ (Alma 31:16), and he thus included it as part of a larger argument to persuade them to believe in the Son of God (Alma 33:14–23). In this apologetic setting, Alma went beyond Nephi’s use of the brazen serpent simply as an appropriate symbol of the Lord’s healing and salvific power. For Alma, it was “a type raised up in the wilderness,” which illustrated that the Son of God “was spoken of by Moses” (Alma 33:18–19). In other words, Alma interprets it as a prophetic type, intended to represent and therefore predict the future coming of the Son of God.

Similarly, Nephi son of Helaman appealed to the story when preaching to a people who had rejected the Messiah (Helaman 6:34), and used it as part of a larger argument meant to persuade them to believe in the coming of Christ (Helaman 8:13–20). Nephi declared that Moses “hath spoken concerning the coming of the Messiah” and rhetorically asked, “did he not bear record that the Son of God should come?” He then cited Moses “lift[ing] up the brazen serpent in the wilderness” as evidence to support his claims (Helaman 8:13–15). Thus, as Nephite prophets engaged apologetically with those who rejected the Messiah, they came to appeal to the brazen serpent as a literal, prophetic prediction of Christ’s coming — a “prophetic metaphor for Jesus’s crucifixion,” as Brown puts it.

This subtle development from Nephi son of Lehi’s original use and interpretation of the brazen serpent is consistent with how interpretation of this symbol developed in early Christian sources, where in post-New Testament times it quickly came to be viewed as a literal prophetic type for Jesus, intended as a prediction of his death, and used in apologetic arguments with Jews to prove that Jesus was the Messiah. The allusions to Moses having “spoken” of Christ in connection with the raising up of the brazen serpent (Alma 33:19; Helaman 8:13) even hint at the possibility that, like in the Epistle of Barnabas, the Nephites had come to believe that Moses gave a speech prophesying of Christ when he first showed them the raised up serpent.

Later Christian and even Jewish interpreters would eventually develop ever more elaborate allegorical and metaphorical interpretations, which become increasingly more difficult to justify as having any meaningful grounding in the biblical account. Such novelties are lacking in the Book of Mormon. Consequently, the minimal interpretive developments that do occur among the Nephites are consistent with the more exegetically sound developments in the interpretation of Numbers 21:4–9 found in ancient Christian sources — and they are developments that emerge in response to the same kind of outside pressures. As such, not only are the foundational features of the Nephite
interpretation grounded in the pre-exilic setting from which Nephi established it, but it is also not stagnant, having a pattern of realistic (albeit, conservative) historical development.  

Looking to the Serpent and Beholding God in Jewish and Nephite Tradition

Ancient Jewish commentators developed another interpretation, which seems to have its seeds, at least, in the pre-exilic religion. In rationalizing why the brazen serpent episode did not constitute idol worship, Rabbinic interpreters reasoned that by looking upward to the serpent, the people were actually looking to God. Thus, one writer explained, “whenever Israel looked on high and subjected their heart to their Father in heaven were they healed” (M. Rosh Hashanah 3:8). Commenting on this tradition, Nili S. Fox notes, “it was the glance of the afflicted to their Father in heaven (which is why the seraph was placed on a standard), rather than the snake itself, which effected the cure.” Philo of Alexandria, writing in the 1st century AD, more explicitly reasoned that those who looked upon the serpent actually saw God. He claimed, “[When a person beholds] the serpent of Moses, and through beholding this, beholds God Himself, he shall live” (Legum Allegoria 2:81).

Philo’s expression that a person looking at the serpent “beholds God Himself,” but “shall live” is striking in light of Old Testament statements that that man cannot see God and live (Exodus 33:20; Leviticus 16:2, 13). This was a common belief in ancient Israel, and often those who see God or even angels are relieved to discover that they are still alive after the encounter (see Genesis 16:13; 32:30; Deuteronomy 5:22–27; Judges 6:22–23; 13:22–23). This fear is expressed in Isaiah’s vision of the Lord on his throne, and it was through the actions of one of the seraphim — winged, serpentine beings likely represented by the brazen serpent(s), as discussed above — that he was enabled to stand in the presence of the Lord and survive (see Isaiah 6:1–7).

What Isaiah’s vision suggests — which later Jewish sources appear to distantly echo — is that the brazen serpent’s healing and life-giving function aided not only those seeking to recover from some sort of ailment, but also those who were seeking to enter the presence of God and survive. As Nicolas Wyatt explained, in Isaiah’s vision the seraphim are “acting as intermediaries between the prophet and Yahweh,” enabling him to stand in the Lord’s presence unharmed. According to Lowell K. Handy, the brazen serpent was an “intermediary between God and the people,” a common role of snakes in ancient thought. At least
as understood by Isaiah and later Jewish exegetes (as discussed above), the brazen serpent was specifically seen as mediating an individual’s ability to look to and even see God and ultimately live through the experience.\footnote{216}

The Book of Mormon seems to allude to the concept of using the brazen serpent as a means by which one can see God and live. When counseling his son Helaman, Alma spoke of the “easiness of the way” prepared for their fathers, that “if they would look, they might live” (Alma 37:46). In the immediate context, Alma was referring to the Liahona, but Alma’s language clearly alludes back to the story in Numbers 21:4–9 as well.\footnote{217} Alma thus identified both the Liahona and brazen serpent as means by which “ye [can] look to God and live” (Alma 37:47).\footnote{218}

This interpretation is arguably more innovative than the first one offered by Alma when preaching to the Zoramites, as it is not clearly derivative of Nephi’s explicit references to the story in 1 Nephi 17:41 and 2 Nephi 25:20. Yet Alma’s interpretation here still seems to be a natural outgrowth of the interpretive seeds Nephi planted. As noted previously, Nephi casts the Liahona as a type for the brazen serpent. Nephi also linked the Liahona to seeing God in several subtle ways. First, when describing the discovery of the Liahona at the “tent door” (1 Nephi 16:10), Nephi echoed divine encounters of Abraham and Moses, wherein they saw the Lord (Genesis 18:1; Exodus 33:7–10).\footnote{219} Second, Don Bradley argues that when Nephi built a temple in the New World (2 Nephi 5:16), the Liahona was one of the sacred relics placed inside, and that it “function[ed] as a physical embodiment of God’s presence.”\footnote{220} If Bradley is correct, then Nephi was symbolically equating “look[ing] upon the ball” (1 Nephi 16:26) with beholding God’s presence. Lastly, Lehi or Nephi evidently coined the name “Liahona,”\footnote{221} which arguably means “Look to the Lord!” Therefore, the notion of seeing God may have been embedded into the very name of this brass divining instrument.

All of this suggests that while Nephi never explicitly equated looking upon the brazen serpent with being able to see God and live, he provides the foundation for such an interpretation to emerge by making the typological association between the brazen serpent and the Liahona—an object Nephi linked with seeing God in several ways. Alma’s interpretation thus naturally emerges out of Nephi’s earlier typology, just as the similar interpretations by later Jewish commentators are the natural outgrowth of the pre-exilic understanding of the brazen serpent as a life-preserving intermediary between God and man, as reflected by the actions of the seraph in Isaiah 6 — a text that Alma also had access to in the very records...
he was bestowing upon his son Helaman when he compared looking to the Liahona/brazen serpent with looking to God (Alma 37:1–5).

**Conclusion**

As the analysis above illustrates, the Book of Mormon’s commentary on the brazen serpent narrative resonates with serpent symbolism and iconography from the ancient Near East, and especially that of the seraph-serpent in pre-exilic Israel. While some of the observations made above rest on firmer ground, and others are more exploratory, all of them come together to make a persuasive case that the Book of Mormon’s use and interpretation of this symbol is an authentic strain of ancient Israelite tradition, one that shows realistic signs of historical development along lines that make sense given the context and circumstances upon which the tradition was expounded.

Contextualizing the Book of Mormon’s references to the brazen serpent narrative within ancient Near Eastern serpent symbolism also adds additional meaning and explanatory power. For instance, it makes sense that the brazen serpent story is alluded to more often in the Book of Mormon than any other book of scripture, since Lehi’s personal background dovetails remarkably well with the community which most strongly associated with the seraph-serpent as a symbol for Yahweh. The typological use of the brass ball (Liahona) as a substitute for the brazen serpent in Nephi’s Exodus typology is illuminated by knowledge of the homophony between “serpent” and “diviner” (both nḥṣ) and the common association between serpents, divination, and copper/bronze in antiquity. Similarly, details from the immediate narrative context of 1 Nephi 17, like Nephi’s making tools from ore, take on new significance when the ancient connections between metallurgy and serpent symbolism are known and the religious and ritual dimension of metalworking are recognized. Subtle differences in the story — such as the added reference to Israel being straightened with a rod and the serpents being *flying* seraphs — are explained by iconography and symbolism in pre-exilic Israel. Finally, awareness of the overlap between the geographic setting of 1 Nephi and the habitat of the seraph-serpent helps Nephi’s use of this story hit home in a way modern readers may not always appreciate.

Perhaps most impressive, however, is the way Nephi’s reference to the story in 1 Nephi 17:41 is effectively framed as a microcosm of the larger controversies of his time, which involved the legitimacy of the brazen serpent as a part of proper worship of the Lord. This framing brings together several of the other details just mentioned: Nephi’s metallurgy
in 1 Nephi 17:9–16 signals his status as one who has been in the presence of the Lord, received divine knowledge, and is commissioned as his messenger. The symbolism of Nephi’s actions was probably not lost on his brothers, and thus their accusations that follow (1 Nephi 17:17–18) make sense as a reaction to the symbolic implications of his forging tools from ore. The differences in how Nephi recounts the story also take on new meaning in this framing. The added reference to a “rod” that is paralleled with the “flying fiery serpents” evokes the imagery of the rod-to-serpent transformation given as a sign to the Israelites that Moses was commissioned by the Lord (Exodus 4:1–5, 30), and “flying fiery serpents” more strongly connects with the winged seraph iconography associated with the Davidic monarchy and often borne on the seals of officials commissioned by the king before being suppressed by the Deuteronomistic reformers. Combined with the added detail that some of the people would not look to the serpent for healing, and therefore perished, these differences seem to be reinforcing a singular message: the seraph-serpent is a legitimate symbol of the Lord and his emissaries, and thus rejecting it, as some had in Nephi’s day, was tantamount to rejecting the Lord; those who did so would perish from the bite of the seraph-serpent — a symbolic point, to be sure, but one made all the more real given that such could indeed be the fate of anyone in Lehi’s party during their time in the wilderness, including at Bountiful.

Nephi’s later use of the brazen serpent in 2 Nephi 25:20 as an illustration of the Lord’s power to deliver and save through the atoning Messiah — Jesus Christ — and subsequent Nephite writers’ adoption of the serpent of brass as a literal type of Christ is also illuminated through ancient Near Eastern serpent symbolism. This association with Christ needn’t be seen as a post-Christian anachronism. In the ancient Near East, the serpent symbolized healing, life, resurrection, salvation, atonement, and judgment; it was often used to symbolize divine beings, and even had messianic connotations. These are, of course, also attributes of Christ, each of which gets mentioned by Book of Mormon authors in close reference to the brazen serpent. Importantly, all of these symbolic associations are evident in Judaism in pre-Christian times, and in many cases are present in the seraph-serpent symbolism of pre-exilic Israel. Thus, it is not hard to see why Book of Mormon authors saw fit to connect this symbol with the Messiah, the preeminent Son of God, which they had seen and learned about through visions and revelations.

Since Nephi’s reference to the brazen serpent in 2 Nephi 25:20 comes as part of his prophetic commentary on Isaiah 2–14 (2 Nephi 12–24), it is
particularly noteworthy that many of the important associations between the seraph-serpent and Christ are manifest in Isaiah 6 and 14:28–32 / 2 Nephi 16; 24:28–32, though the connections would not be evident without knowing the meaning of *seraphim* in Hebrew and being able to recognize motifs in these passages that are illuminated by a broader knowledge of ancient Near Eastern serpent symbolism. More impressive still is how a knowledge of Hebrew and ancient Near Eastern culture creates a context in which Nephi could conceptually link the serpent on a “pole” with the “ensign” (both *ns*) that was “lifted up” to gather the nations (Isaiah 5:26; 11:12; 13:2 / 2 Nephi 15:26; 21:12; 23:2) — a symbol that would have been understood as representing a divine being, and based on Assyrian and Egyptian examples, may have been conceptualized as having serpentine form. Thus, in Nephite parlance, the brazen serpent was “raised up” or “lifted up” to “heal the nations” (2 Nephi 25:20; cf. Alma 33:18; Helaman 8:14), and very naturally linked to the “everlasting God” Nephi witnessed being “lifted up upon the cross and slain for the sins of the world” (1 Nephi 11:33). Significantly, the Hebrew expression for “lifted up” also has connotations of carrying, bearing, enduring, and suffering — including bearing the guilt, sin, or iniquity of others — and as such is an appropriate expression for Christ’s atoning act on the cross. Thus, Nephi’s interpretation of the brazen serpent narrative makes sense as a midrash of sorts, combining the story in Numbers 21:4–9 with key passages in Isaiah, read through the lens of Nephi’s own visions.224

Finally, a careful reading of Alma 33:18–22 and Helaman 8:13–15 shows that Nephi’s two interpretations of the brazen serpent account developed into a standard interpretation of that event among the Nephites; however, their interpretive tradition did not remain stagnant. Later Book of Mormon prophets echoed the same themes found in 1 Nephi 17:41 and especially 2 Nephi 25:20 but developed them within the context of their own, ongoing polemics with those who contested the reality and existence of the future Messiah. To counter such claims, Nephite prophets appealed to the brazen serpent as a literal type of Christ, raised up in deliberate, prophetic anticipation of Jesus Christ, accompanied by prophetic words about the Son of God, spoken by Moses (see Alma 33:18–22; Helaman 8:13–15). A similar development is documented in ancient Christian writings, which used the brazen serpent as a prophetic type for Jesus as evidence that the Messiah had come in apologetic arguments with Jewish commentators. Furthermore, Alma also pushes Nephi’s typological links between the brazen serpent and the Liahona further, and conceptually links both to the act of looking to God
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(Alma 37:38–47), an interpretation that is consistent with how post-exilic Jewish commentators came to understand the brazen serpent narrative.

Thus, the contextual background of the ancient world, while explored from a variety of different angles and sources, offers more than a disparate series of parallels that yields a random insight or two. Many of the various component parts unite together to create a cohesive context for understanding the Nephite interpretation of the brazen serpent as whole, both its origins and its (subtle) developments over the centuries. Taken as a whole, this cohesive context suggests that the Book of Mormon’s use of the brazen serpent narrative is not a literary fiction, but an authentic strain of ancient Israelite tradition.

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Endnotes


3. Throughout this article, unless otherwise indicated, all emphasis (italics) in quotations of scripture and other ancient writings is mine. Also note that all Book of Mormon quotations will follow Royal Skousen, ed., The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009). In this instance, this creates a subtle difference that may, nonetheless, be significant: Skousen, based on the earliest manuscripts, uses the word order “flying fiery serpents,” rather than the order used in the standard text today, “fiery flying serpents.” The original word order is likely more faithful to the possible underlying Hebrew. For discussion, see Royal Skousen, Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, 2nd ed. (Provo, UT: FARMS and BYU Studies, 2017), 1:380–81.


5. Clines, *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* 8:197. Cf. “poisonous serpents” in 2 Nephi 25:20, which is also an acceptable translation of either *nhšym šrpm* or *šrpm* on its own (see, e.g., popular translations like the NRSV or NIV of Numbers 21:6, 8 and Deuteronomy 8:15).


8. For the geographical setting of Numbers 21, see John D. Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker


seraphim are principally in anthropomorphic form (except in that they have wings) but “the symbol of the essence of the seraphim may have been serpents” (p. 113).


12. Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 96, 98; Roberts, “Visual Elements,” 205; Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 225. Aster, “Images of the Palace,” 20–22, 25–29, 37–42 (cf. Aster, *Reflections of Empire*, 52–64) argues that the seraphim of Isaiah’s vision represent the *apkallu* on the reliefs of the Assyrian throne room. Like the seraphim, the *apkallu* were multi-winged, part-animal, part-human creatures standing as guardians of the royal throne, and they performed a purifying function. However, the *apkallu* are not typically portrayed as serpents. The only winged serpent Aster identifies is depicted on the wall reliefs of Esarhaddon (p. 38 fig. 6). Aster is probably influenced by his Esarhaddon expedition to Palestine and Egypt (see n. 60), which occurred after Isaiah’s time. Furthermore, Esarhaddon’s winged serpent lacks all the details Aster considers distinctively Assyrian about seraphim of Isaiah 6: there is only one (not two), it has a single pair of wings
(instead of four), and it does not have a purifying function. Contra Aster, there are Judahite depictions of serpents flanking both sides of a royal symbol (see nn. 9, 14) and images of serpents with multiple pairs of wings (see n. 15). Perhaps these local innovations on the typically Egyptian iconography were Assyrian influenced, as Aster suggests for Isaiah 6 (cf. Williamson, “Temple and Worship,” 131n17), but the fact remains that Isaiah’s choice to represent the winged guardians as serpents—seraphim—is not likely inspired by Assyrian art; rather, that seems to be based on local iconography, including that found in the Jerusalem temple precincts.

1849), 2:469. For a more complete discussion of the “weapon of Ashur,” see Shawn Zelig Aster, “Transmission of Neo-Assyrian Claims of Empire to Judah in the Late Eighth Century B.C.E.,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 78 (2007): 26–29, esp. 27n86. Contra Aster, comparing the imagery on the bronze bowls with that of the Assyrian relief reveals little to suggest Assyrian influence. Furthermore, although the relief from Sennachrib’s palace in Layard clearly shows that some Assyrian battle-standards were indeed serpents, Morton Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion: Assyria, Judah, and Israel in the Eighth and Seventh Centuries B.C.E.* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, University of Montana, 1974), 53–55, 62 fig. 1, 63 fig. 2 proposes a different — and what seems to me a more likely — battle-standard as the “weapon of Ashur,” and it lacks any serpent iconography.

14. Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 98; Roberts, “Visual Elements,” 208. Williamson, “Temple and Worship,” 131–32 argues against this view, and instead suggests Isaiah is conflating the single, unwinged (see n. 13) brazen serpent with the pair of winged cherubim. Similarly, Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39*, 139 argues that the seraphim actually take the place of the cherubim in Isaiah’s vision. Cf. Wyatt, “Grasping the Griffin,” 31–32, who states that “the distinction normally assumed to exist between cherubim and seraphim was not as firm as we would like to think” (p. 31). Wyatt goes on to argue that the seraphim in Isaiah’s vision were actually griffins/sphinxes (Egyptian *srf* or *sfr*) which would essentially make them identical to the cherubim (see n. 4). Wyatt’s argument depends on his speculative assumption that the term used for *šp* in Isaiah 6 is actually a different word altogether than that used in other biblical passages, an assumption that I do not think is well founded. His other argument, that the “literary description precludes” a serpentine form (p. 32) is refuted in most treatments of seraphim as serpents (see, e.g., Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpents*, 426). Rüterswörden, “šārap,” 224 correctly notes, “Although the griffin designated by *sfr/srf* is indeed attested as a winged desert animal portrayed with great variety, any identity with the cobra or Uraeus serpent back to which Keel traces the seraphim is excluded.” The suggestion by E. Lacheman, “The Seraphim of Isaiah 6,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 59, no. 1 (1968): 71–72 that the seraphim are the cherubim with the sun glinting on them, causing them to appear “fiery,” strikes me as entirely unpersuasive.


17. According to Rollinger, “Herodot,” 936, 943, these seals and other artifacts generally date to the 9th–8th centuries BC. Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 97 generally dates these seals to a slightly later period, “the eighth and very early seventh century BCE.” For two examples of winged serpent seals used as part of the administrative apparatus during Hezekiah’s reign, see Robert Deutsch, “Six Hebrew Fiscal Bullae from the Time of Hezekiah,” in *New Inscriptions and Seals Relating to the Biblical World*, ed. Meir Lubetski and Edith Lubetski (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2012), 64 fig. 4, 65 fig. 5.

18. Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 97. Cf. Gee, “Cherubim and Seraphim,” 100: “Hezekiah lived at the end of the eighth century BC, and it may be more than coincidence that after the destruction of the bronze serpent, the winged serpent ceased to be an object adorning Israelite seals.” Koh, “Archaeological Investigation,” 107 reveals no Iron Age serpent artifacts later than the 8th century BC. According
to Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpent*, 345–46, no serpent imagery in Palestine post-dates the 7th century BC and pre-dates Roman times. Davies, “Serpent Imagery,” 34 argued that this was true of literary uses (in the biblical text) of the serpent symbol as well. Keel and Uehlinger, *Images of God*, 369, note that not only winged serpents, but all the various kinds of “winged, hybrid creatures, no longer play a significant role” in the iconography of the 7th century BC. For more on Hezekiah’s reforms, see n. 92.


21. Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpent*, 444–45, 602n187. Charlesworth opts for “winged-serpents” in order to distinguish it from the expression šrp m’pp, which indicates an actively flying seraph.

22. Ward, “Four-Winged Serpent,” 143, noted: “The chronological synchronism between the seals and Isaiah is especially significant. In the whole of western Asiatic art, the four-winged uraeus appears only on Hebrew seals of the ninth to seventh centuries [BC]; the only Hebrew reference to ‘flying serpents’ appears in the eighth century [BC] book of Isaiah.” Nephi falls around the outer edge of this same “chronological synchronism,” thus reinforcing the correlation between Nephi’s reference to “flying fiery serpents” and the winged serpents depicted on the seals.


28. Keel and Uehlinger, *Images of God*, 177–281 provides a thorough discussion and inventory of Egyptian iconography used in Israel and Judah; see esp. 251–53, 273–74 for the winged *uraeus*.


30. For a little more than a decade, Amzallag has been remarkably prolific in promoting ancient copper metallurgy as a whole new paradigm for understanding the religion of ancient Israel in
a variety of peer-reviewed venues, including some of the most respected journals in the fields of biblical studies, Semitic languages, and ancient Near Eastern studies (for a sampling of such, see the papers cited in nn. 32–33, 41, 47–49, 51–53, 65, 180). According to Ariel David, “Jewish God Yahweh Originated in Canaanite Vulcan, Says New Theory,” *Haaretz*, April 11, 2018, https://www.haaretz.com/archaeology/.premium.MAGAZINE-jewish-god-yahweh-originated-in-canaanite-vulcan-says-new-theory-1.5992072, Amzallag’s theory “is not exactly widely accepted, but has recently been gaining traction,” citing one scholar (Erez Ben-Yosef) who supports the theory and another (Thomas Römer) who is skeptical. Several other scholars have engaged with his work to some degree or another, both positively and negatively, as will occasionally be discussed in later footnotes. Personally, I am persuaded that there is some legitimate metallurgical imagery and symbolism in biblical texts which merits further exploration, even though I find some of Amzallag’s arguments to be overstated. In contrast to Amzallag’s insistence that this imagery be taken literally, I see it as more symbolic and metaphorical (cf. Morrison in n. 44, who discusses the metalworking and craftsmen metaphors in the Bible). In some cases, I see his explanations only as a plausible interpretation that Israelites with a metallurgical background may have held—a possibility that even one of Amzallag’s critics seems to grant (see n. 52). My reason for drawing on Amzallag’s work, therefore, is precisely because I see Lehi and his family as exactly the kind of Israelites who would have held the views and interpretations that Amzallag has advanced (see the main body of the text for this argument).

31. Cf. Koh, “Archaeological Investigation,” 120, who likewise argues that that while serpentine imagery is heavily influenced by Egyptian motifs in the Late Bronze Age and early Iron Age, this “does not imply that the Canaanite snake cult was brought from Egypt,” but rather that Egyptian iconography simply had an impact on the expression of a religious symbol native to the southern Levant.

also identified the “fiery flying serpent” as the saw-scaled viper from a Latter-day Saint perspective.


35. Hugh Nibley pointed out the affinity between Book of Mormon names (and especially those in Lehi’s family) and Arabian


38. See OCIANA: LP 1025, AAEK 384, AH 067, U 003, Müller 1889: 83–84, https://krc.web.ox.ac.uk/article/ociana. In recent years, most scholars and researchers (myself included) have accepted an Egyptian etymology, first proposed by John Gee, for Nephi, based


42. Amzallag, “Religious Dimension,” 2. Cf. Dunn, “A Land Whose Stones are Iron,” 42: “scholarly investigations into metallurgical guilds have shown that metal-smiths are often considered priests or magicians and that ore derived from the earth holds sacred
value for the ancient metallurgist.” Miller II, Yahweh, 165–67: “The technical expertise of the metalworker is considered to border on magic, rendering the smith a sort of wizard, a person of great power … the crafters of magical substances,” but also “ritual specialist[s] … [who could] perform sacrifices, for themselves, in service to others, and regularly on behalf of the chief and community” and “can even be intermediaries for you to God.”


the only kind of ore that could be brought to a molten state in antiquity. Nephi never specified the kind of ore he used, but there is an “absence of evidence … of suitable [copper] ore deposits in the region” of Bountiful, based on “available survey results,” according to Michele Degli Esposti and Alexia Pavan, “Some Reflections on the Ancient Metallurgy of Sumhuram (Sultanate of Oman),” *Annali, Sezione Orientale* 80 (2020): 191. Lynne S. Newton and Juris Zarins, *Dhofar Through the Ages: An Ecological, Archaeological and Historical Landscape* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2019), 22 similarly report, “Copper ore sources are largely lacking in Dhofar.” So Book of Mormon scholars have focused on the discovery of iron ore sources near Khor Kharfot and Khor Rori. See Wm. Revell Phillips, “Metals of the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9, no. 2 (2000): 37–38; Brown and Johnson, *Journey of Faith*, 63–64. Yet, as noted by Warren P. Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia: The Old World Setting of the Book of Mormon* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2015), 141–42, the description in the text, especially the mention of having brought the ore to a molten state, better fits the description of ancient copper smelting. The expression “molten out of the rock” is particularly interesting in this regard since, according to Amzallag, “Some Implications,” 18, smelting copper ore was perceived as “stone melting.” In Nissim Amzallag, “Beyond Prestige and Magnificence: The Theological Significance of Gold in the Israelite Tabernacle,” *Harvard Theological Review* 112, no. 3 (2019): 309, he further elaborates: “Copper was produced in the southern Levant by smelting a green sandstone (malachite) in which no ostensible traces of metal are visible.” Cf. ‘Uzi Avner, “The Desert’s Role in the Formation of Early Israel and the Origin of Yhwh,” *Entangled Religions* 12, no. 2 (2021): 47: “The smith appeared as a magician, turning rocks into metal and ‘creating’ a new substance.” Similarly, Matti Friedman, “An Archaeological Dig Reignites the Debate Over the Old Testament’s Historical Accuracy,” *Smithsonian*, December 2021, “copper smelters … transformed rock into precious metal using a technique that may have seemed like a kind of magic.” https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/archaeological-dig-reignites-debate-old-testament-historical-accuracy-180979011/. Thus, “molten out of the rock” is a particularly apt description of copper production from an ancient perspective. Phillips, “Metals,” 37, does say “minor traces of copper minerals have been reported
in the Dhofar” and acknowledges that copper cannot be ruled out as a possibility for Nephi’s smelting activities in Bountiful (pp. 42–43). On the other hand, the geologists who have surveyed the iron ore deposits in Dhofar have noted that certain impurities mixed into the ore would have a lower melting point, resulting in “a fluid molten slag” when working the iron bloom. Philips, “Metals,” 38, 41; cf. the comments by Jeffrey Keith and Ron Harris in Brown and Johnson, Journey of Faith, 64. This may have been the “molten” Nephi referred to, and he may have emphasized this detail, making it seem more like copper smelting, for theological reasons.


52. Amzallag, “Canaanite God of Metallurgy,” 395–96; Amzallag, “Copper Metallurgy,” 154–55; Amzallag, “Metallurgical Perspective,” 14. See also Nissim Amzallag, “Furnace Remelting as the Expression of YHWH’s Holiness: Evidence from the Meaning of qannaʾ (קנאה) in the Divine Context,” Journal of Biblical Literature 134, no. 2 (2015): 244. Note, however, the critique of Amzallag’s argument in Matthew Richard Schlimm, “Jealousy or Furnace Remelting?: A Response to Nissim Amzallag,” Journal of Biblical Literature 136, no. 3 (2017): 526–27. Cf. Miller II, Yahweh, 104–105n113, who says Amzallag “veers in tendentious directions” when arguing that “copper is a symbol of Yahweh.” I actually agree with Schlimm that, contra Amzallag, the “wonder” of Moses’s staff transforming into a serpent was not literally a simple act of metallurgy; however, I do think Amzallag’s interpretation plausibly elucidates the symbolism that an ancient metallurgist would have seen in this narrative. Even Schlimm grants that Amzallag’s metallurgical interpretations of Hebrew words may have “played some role with some users … at some points in time”
the most likely to use such connotations obviously would be ancient metallurgists, such as Lehi and his family.


54. Amzallag, “Canaanite God of Metallurgy,” 398–400. In fact, according to Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003), 1:748–49n658, at least one later Jewish commentator (R. Nathan) believed the brazen “serpent was nothing else but Moses’s rod which was turned into a serpent,” thus equating the process by which the serpents were created on both occasions.

55. Amzallag, “Metallurgical Perspective,” 14. Cf. Amzallag, “Copper Metallurgy,” 155: “This means that Moses and Aaron had to account for their metallurgical skill in order to convince the Israelites that they spoke in the name of YHWH.”

56. For more on metalworkers as messengers of the Lord, see Amzallag, “Copper Metallurgy,” 156; Amzallag, “Metallurgical Perspective,” 11–18.

57. For discussion of this symbolism specifically in the Exodus narratives, see Amzallag, “Serpent as a Symbol,” 217–23; Joines, *Serpent Symbolism*, 85. See also Golding, “Perceptions of the Serpent,” 168–71, 246–48. Cf. Isaiah 14:29, where the broken “rod” is equated with the “serpent’s root” from which a flying seraph would emerge to punish the Philistines, as discussed later in this paper.

58. This connection should be viewed in context with the broader use of Moses typology in reference to both Nephi and Lehi. See Noel B. Reynolds, “Nephite Kingship Reconsidered,” in *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World: Studies in Honor of John L.*


Dead Sea and then through the Arabah Valley. This area, too, is part of the traditional region associated with the seraph-serpents, but it would mean bypassing Makhtesh Ramon. Only George Potter and Richard Wellington, Lehi in the Wilderness: 81 New Documented Evidences That the Book of Mormon is a True History (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2003), 19–28 propose a route that falls outside the “seraph-serpent zone,” arguing that Lehi went east across the Jordan and then southward to the Red Sea, a proposal I personally find unlikely (see Chadwick for a critique).

67. Karen Radner, “The Winged Snakes of Arabia and the Fossil Site of Makhtesh Ramon in the Negev,” in Festschrift für Hermann Hunger zum 65: Geburtstag gewidmet von seinen Freunden, Kollegen und Schülern, ed. Markus Köhbach, et al. (Vienna: Institut für Orientalistik, 2007), 353–65. Adrienne Mayor, The First Fossil Hunters: Paleontology in Greek and Roman Times (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 135–36 also suggests that Herodotus was talking about fossilized remains, but suggests it was those from spinosaurs (or perhaps pterosaurs). Radner and Braun (see n. 79) have both critiqued this proposal, noting that these dinosaurs would be too large to fit with Herodotus’ description.

68. Most scholars identify the Valley of Lemuel with Wadi Tayyib al-Ism, which is about 85 miles (as the crow flies) from Timna. See Aston, “Into Arabia,” 110–26; George D. Potter, “A New Candidate in Arabia for the Valley of Lemuel,” Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 8, no. 1 (1999): 54–63; Potter and Wellington, Lehi in the Wilderness, 31–51; S. Kent Brown, “The Hunt for the Valley of Lemuel,” Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 16, no. 1 (2007): 64–73. Only Chadwick rejects this view (see “Wrong Place,” 209–15), but his alternative — the wadis around Bir Marsha — would be even closer to Timna. Given the constraint of a three-day journey from their point of arrival at the Red Sea (1 Nephi 2:6), wherever the Valley of Lemuel is, it could not be more than about 4 days from Timna. On Lehi’s familiarity with the Timna copper mines, see the sources in n. 40.

69. See Stenson, “Wherefore, for This Cause,” 296–99; Don Bradley, The Lost 116 Pages: Reconstructing the Book of Mormon’s Missing Stories (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2019), 151–53. Also see the sources in n. 217.
70. Krystal V. L. Pierce, “Divination versus Revelation: Divine Communication under Mosaic Law,” unpublished paper presented at the 2017 Sidney B. Sperry Symposium (copy in my possession), defines divination as a method “of consulting a god or supernatural force in order to obtain hidden knowledge about the present or future” (p. 1). Cf. Michael S. Heiser, The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 87: “Divination refers to communication with the supernatural world. A diviner in the ancient world was one who foretold omens or gave out divine information (oracles).” Hugh Nibley, Since Cumorah, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1988), 251–63 compares the Liahona specifically to arrow-divination as practiced by the Arabs as a means of determining which direction to travel.

71. See Charlesworth, Good and Evil Serpent, 244–45; Davies, “Serpent Imagery,” 60–73. On metallurgy and divination, see Amzallag, “Religious Dimension,” 2–4; Miller II, Yahweh, 166, 168. As a noun in Northwest Semitic inscriptions, the ēḥš root could mean “serpent,” “diviner,” or “bronze smith.” See J. Hoftijzer and K. Jongeling, Dictionary of the North-West Semitic Inscriptions, (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 2:726. Wilson, “Nachash and Asherah,” 70–74 argues that ēḥš more specifically refers to libations/drink offerings, rather than divination more generically, but grants that it may have had a more generalized meaning by the 7th century BC. Wilson also argues that the brazen serpent narrative provides a locus classicus for all three meanings — serpent, bronze, and divination — of the ēḥš root (see pp. 78–79). Heiser, Unseen Realm, 87–88 likewise argues that in Genesis 3, ēḥš is a “triple entende” alluding the meanings of serpent, diviner, and shiny copper/bronze.

72. Miller II, Yahweh, 166.

73. To be clear, I am not intending to suggest that the expression ēḥš ēḥšt could be literally translated as “diviner of brass,” or anything along those lines, but rather, like Michael Heiser, in his interpretation of Genesis 3 (see Unseen Realm, 87–88), I am suggesting that “to literate readers of the Hebrew Bible [as Nephi surely was], the lemma nachash would have (intentionally so) brought to mind other elements of the cognitive framework of the original readers” (p. 88n2). In this light, the suggestion in Bradley,
Lost 116 Pages, 151 that “the brass snake in Solomon’s temple was possibly employed (in some way) as an instrument for diving the will of God” is particularly interesting.


75. See Tracey Cian, “Snake Cults in Iron Age Southeastern Arabia: A Consideration on Autochthonous Developments and Possible Connections with Middle Eastern Traditions” (MA thesis; University College London Qatar, 2015), 46–51.

76. See Alessia Prioletta, Inscriptions from the Southern Highlands of Yemen (Rome: L’erma di Bretschneider, 2013), 303–304. See also DhM 352 in the online CSAI database, http://dasi.cnr.it/index.php?id=42&prjId=1&corId=0&collId=0id=42&prjId=1&corId=0&collId=0. For the association between Wadd and serpents, see Sabina Antonini, “Images: Gods, Humans, and Animals,” in Caravan Kingdoms: Yemen and the Ancient Incense Trade, ed. Ann C. Gunter (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 2005), 99. According to Wilson, “Nachash and Asherah,” 18, 53–54, 63–64, 186–87, Wadd was somehow linked or identified with a deity named Naḥṣṭāb (nḥṣḥṭb), which means either “good serpent” or “good fortune.” The CSAI database does not include any texts with a deity by that name, but Naḥṣṭāb does occur as a Minaic personal name in M 335, M 370, and M 350A. In each of these texts, Wadd is identified as the patron god of an individual named Naḥṣṭāb, suggesting there may indeed be a connection.


80. Following the translation of *The Geography of Strabo: An English Translation with Introduction and Notes*, trans. Duane W. Roller, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014). For additional discussion and citation of other classical writers who give similar descriptions, see Nigel Groom, *Frankincense and Myrrh: A Study*


82. See Amzallag, “Origin and Evolution,” 108, 112, 124 fig. 2. The reddish-brown snake that Harold Ingrams, “From Cana (Husn Ghorab) to Sabbatha (Shabwa): The South Arabian Incense Road,” Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 1945, no. 2 (October 1945): 178–79 refers to, which Groom, Frankincense and Myrrh, 241n8 called a “red viper,” may very well be the saw-scaled viper. According to Ingrams’ local guide, this snake would “jump” out at its target and its “bite caused instant death,” which reminded Ingrams of the accounts from Herodotus, Strabo, and other classical writers.

83. The saw-scaled viper can be found in areas throughout western Arabia. See Gergely Babocsay, “A New Species of Saw-Scaled Viper of the Echis coloratus Complex (Ophidia: Viperidae) from Oman, Eastern Arabia,” Systematics and Biodiversity 1, no. 4 (2004): 510 fig. 4. This is also true of the Egyptian cobra (see Provençal, “Regarding the Noun שרף,” 374), so even as they traveled from the Valley of Lemuel to Bountiful, Lehi’s family would have passed through the habitat of the seraph-serpent.

84. According to Amy Birkan, “The Bronze Serpent, a Perplexing Remedy: An Analysis of Numbers 21:4–9 in the Light of Near Eastern Serpent Emblems, Archaeology and Inner Biblical Exegesis” (MA thesis; McGill University, 2005), 65–67, the fiery serpents in Numbers were technically released by the Lord, rather than sent, with the implication of this being that the Lord was holding the serpents back throughout the rest of the Exodus journey. Thus, Lehi’s family likely attributed their avoidance of such dangers to the Lord’s protective power. Note, however, that Douglas W. Ullmann, “Moses’s Bronze Serpent (Numbers 21:4–9) in Early Jewish and Christian Exegesis” (PhD diss.; Dallas Theological Seminary, 1995), 29–30 argues against the “released” or “let go” interpretation.

85. See nn. 17–18 for sources. As noted, it does not seem to completely disappear in the 7th century bc, as there are at least two examples
that date to that era (see n. 19), but it is significantly diminished around that time.

86. Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpent*, 77, 346, suggests that the report about the destruction of the brazen serpent was meant to be symbolic or representative of Hezekiah’s more wide-scale elimination of a serpent-cult and attendant serpent images in Jerusalem. Likewise, Koh, “Archaeological Investigation,” 12, 142 reasons that there was a snake cult element at shrines and temples throughout Judah and that Hezekiah purged them all. Davies, “Serpent Imagery,” 197–204, 216 argues that Hezekiah was responsible for the destruction cultic artifacts with serpent iconography in Be’er Sheva.

87. See Jan Christian Gertz, “Hezekiah, Moses, and the Nehushtan: A Case Study for a Correlation between the History of Religion in the Monarchic Period and the History of the Formation of the Hebrew Bible,” in *The Formation of the Pentateuch*, ed. Jan C. Gertz et al. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 758–60. The implication of Gertz’s argument is that the brazen serpent — and indeed, the whole of the Mosaic and exodus tradition — was exclusive to the northern kingdom of Israel until refugees from that kingdom arrived in Jerusalem during Hezekiah’s reign; thus, the serpent’s status in the Jerusalem temple was short lived. While I do not completely buy this argument — and indeed, suspect that the brazen serpent tradition actually has its roots in the region to the south of Jerusalem (as previously discussed) within the geographic setting of Numbers 21:4–9 — there may, nonetheless, have been a stronger connection to the tradition in the northern kingdom, where (as noted previously) southern metallurgists had integrated themselves and diffused some of their traditions into Israel’s theology.

88. R. S. Hendel, “Nehushtan,” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons*, 615–16: “The bronze snake probably belonged to the traditional repertoire of Yahwistic symbols, this emblem signifying Yahweh’s power to heal (so Numbers 21).”


90. Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpent*, 345: “There is every reason to assume that this metal serpent had been revered in the Temple for centuries before the time of Hezekiah. There is no evidence that
it had appeared recently; in fact, the text assumes that it antedates the dedication of the Temple by Solomon—that is, it dates back to the time of Moses.” Ginzberg, Legends of the Jews, 2:1053n90, indicates that later Jewish traditions taught that the brazen serpent continued to be used as a source of healing by the sick of Jerusalem long after the Exodus: “The ‘hissing of the brazen serpent’ used to heal all sick people of Jerusalem, and the cure was so certain that in case of illness they never prayed to God. Hezekiah therefore broke the brazen serpent in pieces.”

91. Hurowitz, “Healing and Hissing Snakes,” 284. According to Ginzberg, Legends of the Jews, 1:748, later Jewish commentators believed, “Looking upon the serpent of brass brought healing not only to those who had been bitten by serpents, but also to those who had been bitten by dogs or other animals.” For the sources and background of these traditions, see Ullmann, “Moses’s Bronze Serpent,” 53–55, 62. Cf. the reference above (n. 90) noting that “all sick people of Jerusalem” — not just victims of animal bites — consulted the brazen serpent for healing, according to ancient and medieval Jewish sources.


93. See Rosenbaum, “Hezekiah’s Reform,” 36; Lowery, Reforming Kings, 147–48; Young, Hezekiah, 102; Gertz, “Hezekiah, Moses, and the Nehushtan,” 752–53. See also Hershel Shanks, “The Mystery Nekhushtan,” Biblical Archaeology Review 33, no. 2 (2007): 58, 60–63. Cf. Charlesworth, Good and Evil Serpents, 342: “There seems no reason to doubt that there was a metal serpent in the Temple, that sacrifices were being made to (or through) it by Israelites, and that King Hezekiah had it smashed.”


97. Amzallag, “Copper Metallurgy,” 156–57; Amzallag, “Serpent as a Symbol,” 208–10, 235–36. Cf. Koh, “Archaeological Investigation,” 142, who notes that “practitioners of the snake cult … most likely thought of themselves as Yahwists until Yahwism was reformed to exclude the snake imagery.” On the likely association with the northern kingdom of Israel, see n. 87.

98. For the serpent as a symbol of wisdom, see Joines, Serpent Symbolism, 21–26; Charlesworth, Good and Evil Serpents, 246–47; Lowell K. Handy, “Serpent (Religious Symbol),” in The Anchor Bible Dictionary, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:1115; H.-J. Fabry, “nāḥāš,” in Theological Dictionary of the O.T., 9:368–69; Golding, “Perceptions of the Serpent,” 2, 3, 96, 97, 103, 128–29, 131n137, 164, 174–75. According to Charlesworth, “In Aztec religion, the ‘feathered serpent,’ named Quetzalcoatl, was saluted as the source of wisdom” (p. 247), indicating that this symbolic association was found in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica as well (cf. n. 123 on Quetzalcoatl). For the connection between metallurgy and wisdom, see Barker, Older Testament, 22, 35, 95; Amzallag, “Forgotten Meaning,” 767, 775–77, 781; Morrison, “Renovating a Deity,” 110–15. On the relationship between wisdom and the Deuteronomistic reforms, see Barker, Older Testament, 81–103. See also Margaret Barker, “What Did King Josiah Reform?” in Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem, 523–42.

99. See Kevin Christensen, “Paradigms Regained: A Survey of Margaret Barker’s Scholarship and It’s Significance for Mormon Studies,” FARMS Occasional Papers 2 (2001); Kevin Christensen, “The Temple, the Monarchy, and Wisdom: Lehi’s World and the Scholarship of Margaret Barker,” in Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem, 449–
nephi-with-wisdom/ agrees that Nephi and Lehi are part of the wisdom tradition, but not in opposition to the Deuteronomists.


101. For sources discussing the Moses typology in Nephi’s record, see n. 58. As argued in Rappleye, “Deuteronomist Reforms,” 96–98, I believe Nephi employed Moses typology derivative of Deuteronomy in part to be persuasive to those (namely Laman and Lemuel) who had Deuteronomistic leanings. I wish, however, to nuance this point somewhat. In the ancient world, as competing traditions were in dialogue, it was not uncommon for writers to appropriate and adapt parts of the traditions they were ultimately seeking to replace. The Deuteronomistic authors themselves do this with parts of the older traditions they were supplanting, as discussed in Barker, Older Testament, 142–60. In fact, Barker argues that the Deuteronomic portrayal of Moses is actually based on the older royal typology it was attempting to supplant (pp. 145, 150–51), which may partially explain why Nephite kingship typology is similar to Moses typology, as Reynolds argues (see n. 58). The purpose of doing so was to establish a continuity between the new movement and older traditions, thus hoping to placate and persuade those who knew and believed the earlier sources. As such, I would argue that by incorporating Deuteronomistic typology into his record, Nephi was likewise seeking to reappropriate and adapt that typology toward the form of Israelite religion he believed was most authentic, and hoped that by doing so he could persuade Laman and Lemuel to embrace that theology.

102. Ginzberg, Legends of the Jews, 1:748, “whenever those who had been bitten by the serpents raised their eyes upward and subordinated their hearts to the will of the heavenly Father, they were healed; if they gave no thought to God, they perished,” closely paraphrasing M. Rosh Hashanah 3:8: “whenever Israel looked on high and
subjected their heart to their Father in heaven were they healed, but if not, they perished,” as cited in Ullmann, “Moses’s Bronze Serpent,” 52. Milgrom, *Numbers*, 174 (cf. p. 460): “[God] resorted to this means in order to test Israel’s obedience; only those who heeded His command to look at the snake would recover.” Milgrom notes, “This is precisely how Targum Jonathan understands it.” Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpent*, 331–32 offers a similar interpretation, contrasting the connections to obedience and life in Numbers 21 with Genesis 3, where the serpent is connected to disobedience and death.

107. Gardner, *Second Witness* 2:340. Gardner goes on to say, “Even though Nephi is bearing testimony with the purpose of declaring the Messiah, he does not use the incident of the serpent to develop or advance that argument” (p. 341). While I agree that the story is not used typologically, *per se*, but rather cited as an example of the Lord’s power, I think Gardner goes too far in suggesting it is not cited as part of Nephi’s argument for the coming Messiah; the very purpose in illustrating the Lord’s power here is to drive home the point that it is only through his power —as the coming Messiah — that salvation can be obtained.


110. Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpent*, 338. Also see p. 397: “It is likely, as many scholars have concluded … that John 3:14 develops
from an old Jewish tradition that has been expanded by the Fourth Evangelist.”

111. Ullmann, “Moses’s Bronze Serpent,” 76: “there seems to have been some flexibility in Jewish thinking as to what the bronze serpent symbolized.” Granted, Ullmann is discussing the Rabbinic period, but it seems likely that such was true of earlier periods as well.


114. See nn. 88–89. On the function of looking or gazing at the serpent as part of the healing ritual, see Levine, Numbers 21–36, 89. In later Jewish lore, persons could be healed from various ailments with just “a casual glance” at the brazen serpent, but healing from snake bites required “a long and insistent gaze.” See Ginzberg, Legends of the Jews, 1:748.


116. Charlesworth, Good and Evil Serpent, 336.


119. The language of the translation here is clearly influenced by Malachi 4:2: “shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings.” This passage itself is drawing on the winged sun-disk iconography that, in the 8th century bc, was part of the same royal iconography that included winged serpents, and in fact
sun disks and serpents (both sometimes winged and unwinged) often appear together on seals from this time period. See Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 226; Sass, “Pre-Exilic Seals,” 239, 241 figs. 150–52. According to Trevor D. Cochell, “An Interpretation of Isaiah 6:1–5 in Response to the Art and Ideology of the Achaemenid Empire” (PhD diss.; Baylor University, 2008), 115–73, the seraph/uraeus was commonly associated with solar symbolism and solar deities, including winged-sun disks, and even took on solar characteristics itself and was perhaps even conflated with the sun-disk in the minds of some ancient readers. It is interesting that, unlike the passage in Malachi, Nephi does not refer to the sun, and thus the healing wings to which he refers may instead be alluding to the wings of the seraph-serpent. I appreciate Matthew Roper discussing this insight with me. Cf. 1 Nephi 11:31; Mosiah 14:5; Alma 15:8; 3 Nephi 9:13 for other references to Christ as a spiritual healer.


Metamorphosis,” Sunstone 10, no. 11 (1986): 6–10. For background on Quetzalcoatl, see David Carrasco, Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire: Myths and Prophecies in the Aztec Tradition, rev. ed. (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2000). I personally doubt that the imagery of Quetzalcoatl as a feathered serpent is derivative of Nephite teachings about the brazen serpent (as Hunt argues), but it is not impossible that the Nephites adopted and used the feathered serpent iconography in their representations of the “flying fiery serpent” and its symbolic association with Christ (just as the Israelites adopted the winged uraeus from the Egyptians for their depictions of the seraph-serpent). Mesoamerican “vision serpent” iconography may also be relevant to the Nephite conceptions of positive serpent symbolism (see n. 218). Exploration of such possibilities, however, are beyond the scope of this paper.


127. Charlesworth, Good and Evil Serpent, 256.


130. Consistent with my use of the King James Bible throughout this paper (since it is the Bible translation Latter-day Saints are most familiar with), I have also used the KJV translation here. See King James Bible Online, “Wisdom of Solomon Chapter 16,” https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Wisdom-of-Solomon-Chapter-16.

131. Powery, “Wisdom of Solomon,” 994, parenthetical citation of Numbers 21:8–9 silently omitted. Cf. Davies, “Serpent Imagery,” 10: “The bronze or copper serpent upon the pole was a symbol of the ‘saving power’ of the God of Israel,” and 33: “the bronze serpent was a symbol or token of the saving powers of the God of Israel.”

132. Charlesworth, Good and Evil Serpent, 257–58, 336. Milgrom, Numbers, 460: “It is important to note that a seraph becomes an agent of healing and purification for Isaiah (Isa. 6:5–7), thereby providing a link between this snake-seraph of Isaiah and the therapeutic snake-seraph of Moses.”


In Isaiah’s vision the burning is not limited to destruction, but also has the purpose of purification and redemption. The prophet in Isaiah 6 appears before Yahweh as a representative and a representation of the people of Israel. Just as Israel, the prophet is impure and must experience a fiery purification. The fiery ones represent that purification in their form and bring that purification to the prophet with the burning coal just as Yahweh will bring purification through judgment. (p. 146) …
In the vision of Isaiah 6, the fiery ones surrounding Yahweh and purifying the impure one who encounters Yahweh capture in a single scene the theme in Isaiah of the judgment and purification through fire of Israel, the nations, and creation. (p. 147)


Furthermore, one of the seraphs in Isaiah 6 uses tongs to take a burning coal from the altar. This imagery picks up on the association of the Hebrew root šrp with burning or fire. It is striking, though, that these fiery creatures use (or perhaps even need) tongs to pick up a burning coal. Perhaps this detail underscores the efficacy of the coals as instruments of cleansing and judgment, both of which play a role in Isaiah’s commission.

135. Miscall, *Isaiah*, 46; also note that this evokes metallurgical imagery. Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpent*, 257, similarly suggests that the seraph-serpents of Numbers 21 performed a communal purification function.


147. I have silently modified the KJV here, substituting “viper” (used more commonly in modern translations) for the KJV “cockatrice.” I’ve done this for clarity, since most people today are not familiar with the mythological cockatrice — a serpent-like creature with a rooster’s head — and recognizing both the snake/serpentine nature of each of the animals mentioned, and the progressively more threatening nature of each is relevant to my argument. Thus, it is important to realize most translators regard the šp‘ not as a mythological serpent, but an ordinary venomous snake, usually the adder/viper.

148. Aster, *Reflections of Empire*, 144. Oswalt, *Book of Isaiah 1–39*, 332n18, however, thinks that “as a figure of speech” this imagery “need not apply so literally.” Thus, he reasons that the “statement is only an expanded synonym” and not necessarily a three-tiered reference to the past, present, and future.

149. There is some debate as to whether the ruler in question is a Judean or an Assyrian monarch. Oswalt, *Book of Isaiah 1–39*, 331–32 argues it simply refers to the Assyrian empire (but not necessarily a specific Assyrian ruler), while Aster, *Reflections of Empire*, 137–50 and Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 292–93 argue for specific Assyrian rulers, with part of the rationale (for Blenkinsopp, at least) being that “it is unlikely that the author would refer to Judean rulers
as snakes, adders, and flying serpents” (p. 292). Aster meanwhile argues that the snake imagery is “a reference to an Assyrian imperial symbol” (see n. 13 for background on this argument). As discussed by Roberts, “Rod that Smote Philistia,” 392–94 (cf. Roberts, First Isaiah, 226), the flying serpent is actually a very common symbol for the Judean monarchy during Isaiah’s period, and Roberts argues that Hezekiah is the intended reference (see pp. 381–95 for Roberts’ full argument). Sweeney, Isaiah 1–39, 234, 238 attempts to resolve the conflict by pointing out that under Ahaz (Isaiah 14:28), the Judean monarchy was a loyal vassal to Assyria, and thus both polities may be alluded to. Sweeney ultimately sees Isaiah 14:28–32 as looking forward to king Josiah’s reign (p. 217).

Davies, “Serpent Imagery,” 30–32 argues that it refers to Hezekiah, noting that he “smote the Philistines” according to 2 Kings 18:8.


151. According to John F. A. Sawyer, “Messiah,” in The Oxford Companion to the Bible, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 514, “messianic” texts are those where “royal language and imagery came to be applied primarily to a hoped-for future king, whose reign would be characterized by everlasting justice, security, and peace,” citing Isaiah 11:1–5 as one of the prime examples of a messianic text. If Isaiah 14:28–32 refers to a Judean king — as both the imagery and language would suggest (but see n. 149) — then this text certainly meets the criteria. Even if the original intent was to refer to an Assyrian monarch, however, the clear use of Judean royal motifs would still nonetheless lend itself to messianic interpretations, as we indeed find amongst later Jewish commentators (see the body of the text).

152. Oswalt, Book of Isaiah 1–39, 331. Note, however, that Oswalt does not personally favor this interpretation (see n. 149), even though he grants, “The most obvious interpretation of the broken staff
would be that it refers to Ahaz,” and from this it would follow that the rest of the passage is referring to the Judean monarchy (p. 331).


155. Chilton, *Isaiah Targum*, 33, note on 14:22–32. Chilton also mentions the similarity to Isaiah 11 and cites John 3:14 as further evidence of the Messiah-serpent connection. See Chilton, *Glory of Israel*, 86–96 for a discussion of the overall portrait of the Messiah figure in the Isaiah targum, which Chilton argues generally dates to an AD 70–135 context, although there are later interpolations.


157. Note that Christ is the Anglicized version of the Greek title *Christos*, a translation of the Hebrew title מְשַׁyָּה, which is rendered “Messiah” in English.


159. In addition to the discussion earlier in this paper, see also Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpents*, 392; Davies, “Serpent Imagery,” 6–9.


166. Amzallag, “Serpent as a Symbol,” 214: “Numbers 21,6–9 reports the mysterious episode of an attack on the Israelites by ‘burning serpents.’ That these creatures were sent by YHWH (v. 6) again confirms their closeness with the deity.” Also Davies, “Serpent Imagery,” 9: “these serpents [in Numbers 21] appear to symbolize the judgments of Jehovah against the spiritual evil of ‘the people.’” On the distinction between the serpents being sent or released, see n. 84.

167. See Birkan, “Bronze Serpent,” 13–15, 20–22, 72. Recall also the suggestion of Aster that Assyrians similarly used a mounted serpent as a battle-standard (see n. 13). Currid, Ancient Egypt, 152–55 likewise interprets the brazen serpent in light of Egyptian battle-standards (especially those with serpents on them), but rather than seeing the inversion of the meaning (as I have suggested), argues that it is entirely consistent with the Egyptian symbolism. Currid notes that while these standards “were viewed as the means of judgment against enemies” (p. 152), “Egyptians believed the standards to be edifying for Egypt,” as “agents of divine protection” (p. 154). Likewise, the brazen serpent was a standard created “in order to protect and heal the Israelites,” but “also served as an agent of judgment against the enemies of Yahweh, especially against Egypt and those who wanted to return there” (p. 154). Currid’s point about the positive connotations of the standard to Egyptians — as the ones protected by its judgments against Pharaoh’s enemies — is noteworthy, but there is little in the narrative of Numbers 21:4–9 to suggest the brazen serpent also served as a sign of judgment. It was the serpents themselves that did that, and the very “enemies” who wanted to return to Egypt are the ones who received the protective benefits of the serpent-standard; thus, as I noted, it is actually inverting the Egyptian symbolism.

168. Charlesworth, Good and Evil Serpent, 248.


171. Tabick, “Snake in the Grass,” 158. Skinner, “Serpent Symbols and Salvation,” 49, also noted this duality: “The agent of both harm and healing, death and life, is, in this instance, the serpent.” Likewise, commenting on this narrative, the Wisdom of Solomon 16:13 says, “For thou hast power of life and death: thou leadest to the gates of
hell, and bringest up again,” likely an allusion to 1 Samuel 2:6 (also see Deuteronomy 32:39).


174. Charlesworth, Good and Evil Serpent, 350. In the full quote, Charlesworth says they “most likely perceived the serpent as a celestial being either within God Yahweh’s heavenly court or a god other than Yahweh” (p. 350). Koh, “Archaeological Investigation,” 26, 38, 97, 131–33, 142 reasons from both archaeological and textual evidence (including the Old Testament) that snake deities (and their cults) are nearly always subservient to the main deity in the pantheon. As such, any deity ancient Judahites might have associated with the brazen serpent would have been perceived — by those participating in that form of worship, at the very least — as subservient to Yahweh, most likely as part of the heavenly court, or as Handy put it, “part of the Judean pantheon.” Thus, I have omitted the language that implies the possibility of a deity outside of that pantheon.

176. On the seraphim as members of the divine council, see Richard Lederman, “The Seraphim,” TheTorah.com, January 22, 2019 (updated December 28, 2021), https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-seraphim; Sumner, “Visions of the Divine Council,” 69–71, both of whom present the seraphim as both serpentine and as members of the divine council. See also Davies, “Serpent Imagery,” 108–109, who argues that the seraphim were members of the divine council but not serpentine in appearance, but rather that their essence was symbolized by the serpent (see n. 10). Similarly, De Hulster, “Angels and Iconography,” 149n1 proposes that “a conservative point of view” might reason that “angels were an accepted part of YHWH’s entourage in Isaiah’s day, [and] that Isaiah describes angels in the disguise of seraphs,” but ultimately rejects this view and accepts that the seraphim are indeed serpentine in nature and part of the heavenly hosts/entourage (pp. 154, 155).

177. Handy, “Serpent, Bronze,” briefly summarizes such efforts. Cf. Münnich, “Cult of Bronze Serpents,” 39*–56*, who argues that it was “a symbol of the divine Ruler of the Serpents, who heals” (p. 44*), and while acknowledging that this could be Yahweh or at least “one of YHWH’s attributes” (p. 45*), ultimately favors an identification with the Canaanite god Horon (p. 46*–49*).


180. See Barker, Great Angel and Boyarin, Jewish Gospels. Benjamin D. Sommer, The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009) provides a somewhat different view of the situation, arguing not that there were actually two divinities, but rather that in the ancient Israelite view, God could be manifest or present within multiple “bodies,” including inanimate objects and even within other persons who are semi-independent of, but nonetheless manifestations of, Yahweh. In this regard there could, in a sense, be “two Yahwehs” but both figures were ultimately believed to be the same God. Sommer still proposes that the Deuteronomists (and Priestly) school was opposed to this conception of God and that early Christian belief in Jesus as God incarnate (while God the Father remained in the heavens) is a later manifestation of this earlier understanding. Thus, under Sommer’s model, I might modify some details, i.e., consider the brazen serpent not as the “second god,” one of the heavenly hosts, but as a “manifestation” or “body” of Yahweh — but the basic thesis would remain the same, that is, this interpretation of the brazen serpent would still be opposed by the Deuteronomists while still being consonant with early Christian beliefs about Jesus.


186. Currid, Ancient Egypt, 151.


188. Currid, Ancient Egypt, 151.

190. Cf. Isaiah 59:19, where the similar verbal root nws is translated “shall lift up a standard.” Currid, *Ancient Egypt*, 149 suggests this root as an alternative possibility for the etymology of ns, “standard.” The root nws usually refers to fleeing, escaping, swinging, trembling, etc. (Clines, *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, 5:642–44). The root nss can similarly refer to swaying, waving, etc. (Clines, *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, 5:701). Daniel Vainstub, “Engraved Inscriptions,” in *Salvage Excavations at Tel Moza: The Bronze and Iron Age Settlements and Later Occupations*, ed. Zvi Greenhut and Alon de Groot (Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority, 2009), 140 noted Arabic (nws) and Akkadian (našāšu) cognates, suggesting that nws and nss are ultimately etymologically related, and the connection to ns, “standard, banner, etc.” may be more related to the way a flag or pole might wave, sway, swing, or tremble, etc. in the wind.


195. Stenson, “Wherefore, for This Cause,” 303–15 also makes this point, but with different application. This connection may have been reinforced by the fact that, per Hurowitz, “Healing and Hissing Snakes,” 278–87, the Hebrew of Numbers 21:4–9 has a high cluster of different /h/ and /s/ sounds, and thus when read aloud the words of the passage quite literally “hiss forth” like the standard of Isaiah 5:26 (cf. 2 Nephi 29:2–3). As Stenson noted, however, the Hebrew term translated as “hiss” (šrq) is not known to be used for the hissing of a snake, but Stenson argues that a similar, hissing-like onomatopoeia as suggested by Hurowitz in Numbers 21 may also be evident in the underlying Hebrew of 2 Nephi 29:2 (see pp. 311–15). Matthew L. Bowen, “We are a Remnant of the


198. Alma’s reference to the Son of God who would be “raised up” to *suffer* should be contrasted with Alma’s characterization of the Zoramites as a people who were “lifted up” in pride (Alma 31:25), an expression that more likely reflects the Hebrew term *rwm*, which is somewhat synonymous with *nsʾ* in its basic meaning, “be high, lofty, raised up, lifted up, exalted, etc.,” but whose semantic range did not include taking up suffering or bearing burdens, but rather haughtiness and arrogance (Clines, *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, 7:441–49). Matthew L. Bowen, “‘See That Ye Are Not Lifted Up’: The Name Zoram and Its Paronomastic Pejoration,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 19 (2016): 109–43, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/see-that-ye-are-not-lifted-up-the-name-zoram-and-its-paronomastic-pejoration/, argues that the *rwm* root is used in various ways throughout Alma 31–35, 38–39 as a pun off of the name Zoram, which he argues means “he who is lifted up.” Thus, for Alma, those who would not look upon the brazen serpent (Alma 33:20–21) are no longer Nephi’s recalcitrant brothers or the reformers in Jerusalem, but the Zoramite elites, who rather than looking to and believing in the raised up Son of God, instead lift *themselves* up as holy and chosen.


201. Cited in Ullmann, “Moses’s Bronze Serpent,” 107–108. I have slightly modified the translation and punctuation of the text; namely, I’ve omitted some commas and the Greek text that appears in brackets, and used “type” rather than “figure” for the Greek term typos.


204. Compare, also, Alma’s avoidance of explicitly referring to the serpent itself, simply calling it “a type” to Justin Martyr’s tendency to refer to it as the “sign,” “type,” or “figure” while generally avoiding any description of the form of the object (or completely obscuring it, by saying it was a cross). A similar tendency is seen in other early Christian sources. See Ullmann, “Moses’s Bronze Serpent,” 105–13.

205. Although this passage does not explicitly say that the people were rejecting or denying the coming of Christ/the Messiah, in stating that they began “to dwindle in unbelief” it employs a common idiom in the Book of Mormon used to refer to the opposite of believing in Christ. See Stenson, “Wherefore, for This Cause,” 310.


207. See Ullmann, “Moses’s Bronze Serpent.”

208. It may be worth considering the possibility that this conservativism is due to Mormon’s editorial hand. In selecting which materials to include (and exclude), Mormon was likely motivated by his sense of orthodoxy and a desire to present those teachings that had been fairly stable and consistent over the course of Nephite history. As such, if there were any sources providing a more elaborate or allegorical interpretation of this or other scriptural narratives, he likely would have sifted them out or edited them in such a way so as to emphasize their points of consistency with other Nephite interpreters. Since we do not have access to the rest of the Nephite archive, however, such can only be speculated; based on the records as we have them, the Nephite tradition was conservative in its interpretation of this scriptural narrative.

209. As cited in Ullmann, “Moses’s Bronze Serpent,” 52; cf. pp. 55–56, 84 for other sources using similar language to express this
same concept. Ullmann notes that this is the most common and consistent view expressed by Jewish interpreters when responding to the charge of idol worship.


211. As cited in Ullmann, “Moses’s Bronze Serpent,” 48, emphasis mine. Philo was allegorizing the serpent as “the beauty of self-mastery,” but nonetheless I think it remains relevant that he equated beholding the serpent with beholding God.


213. Wyatt, “Grasping the Griffin,” 32.


216. According to Barker, “What Did King Josiah Reform?” 528–29, visions of God were part of the older tradition that the Deuteronomists opposed. Thus, if looking upon the brazen serpent was somehow seen as enabling one to see God, this would have contributed to the Deuteronomistic perception that it had become some kind of idol (2 Kings 18:4).

218. The “vision serpent” played a similar role in pre-Columbian Mesoamerican iconography, often functioning as the conduit between the earthly and heavenly realms. In many cases, divine beings are shown in vision emerging from the serpent’s jaws (see, e.g., Yaxchilan 25), thereby facilitating the means of looking upon a deity. See Miller and Taube, *Illustrated Dictionary*, 181–82 (on serpent symbolism in Mesoamerica more generally, see pp. 148–51). Discussions of the serpent symbolism in the Book of Mormon from a Mesoamerican background have generally focused on the “feathered serpent” (see n. 123; cf. pp. 141–42 in Miller and Taube), but possible connections to other serpent iconography (including vision serpents) deserves greater attention. According to Miller and Taube, vision serpents “rarely appear on the ground, and they sometimes have feather crests,” and it “closely resembles the Postclassic Central Mexican Xiuhcoatl, or fire serpent” and thus “may appear in clouds, embodying lightning and fire” (p. 142). Vision serpents, then, link conceptually to both the “flying” and “fiery” aspects of the serpents referenced in 1 Nephi 17:41. Note that John Day, “Echoes of Baal’s Seven Thunders and Lightnings in Psalm XXIX and Habakkuk III 9 and the Identity of the Seraphim in Isaiah VI,” *Vetus Testamentum* 29, no. 2 (1979): 149–51, argues that, in addition to being serpent-like, the seraphim of Isaiah 6 are also personifications of lightening, just like the Mesoamerican vision serpent.


221. The name was given by the “fathers” (Alma 37:38), most likely meaning Lehi and Nephi, and as Bradley, *Lost 116 Pages*, 148 explains it was probably in Mormon’s abridgment of Nephi’s large plates.

I appreciate Bowen helping me think through parts of this paper during a conversation at the 2021 FAIR Conference.

223. Cf. Alan Goff, “A Hermeneutic of Sacred Texts: Historicism, Revisionism, Positivism, and the Bible and Book of Mormon” (MA thesis; Brigham Young University, 1989), 92–99, who similarly argues that Laman and Lemuel’s accusation that Nephi was trying to usurp authority at Nahom (1 Nephi 16:37) was in reaction to his having made himself a bow, which they recognized as a symbol of kingship.

“The Wind and the Fire to Be My Chariot”: The Anachronism that Wasn’t

John Gee

Abstract: In the Book of Abraham, God tells Abraham in Haran, “I cause the wind and the fire to be my chariot” (Abraham 2:7). While this initially might appear to be an anachronism, as the chariot is normally thought to have been introduced later, archaeological finds of chariots at the site of Harran predate Abraham by hundreds of years.

It has been said that “the Book of Mormon has not been universally considered by its critics as one of those books that must be read in order to have an opinion of it.”¹ The same could be said of the Book of Abraham. One indication that critics do not bother to read the book is that, to date, none have bothered to comment on an apparent anachronism in the text. To spot it as an anachronism, one would have to take the Book of Abraham seriously as an ancient text, which most critics are unwilling to do. The purpose of this article is to discuss the apparent anachronism and why it is not one.

The Standard View

The standard view of chariots in Egyptian history is that one of the most important innovations of the Hyksos in Egypt was “the introduction of the horse and of the horse-drawn chariot which played so large a part in the later history of the country.”² It is thought that “ironically, the Hyksos introduced the horse-drawn chariot and the more powerful compound bow into Egypt, both military innovations that enabled the Egyptians to compete more successfully in battle with their neighbors.”³ The “horse and horse-drawn chariot” are supposed to have appeared in Egypt “toward the very end of the Hyksos occupation.”⁴ Some think the first organized Egyptian “chariots division” was fought at the battle of Megiddo under the Eighteenth Dynasty pharaoh Thutmose III.⁵ Others
assign the first Egyptian chariot battle to either Thutmose III’s father, Thutmose II, or grandfather, Amenhotep I. Some have gone so far as to argue that the introduction of the chariot forms the transition from the Middle Bronze Age to the Late Bronze Age in the Ancient Near East.

The most famous conflict involving chariots was the battle of Qadesh where both sides, the Egyptians under Ramses II and Hittites under Muwatalis, used chariots to great effect. Ramses even set up a chariot depot at Joppa. By the reign of Ramses III, chariots were even in use in the Libyan army.

The chariot played a role in the basic organization of the army. The typical Egyptian chariot had a driver and a soldier. But even large towns could scarcely muster fifty chariots. Being a chariot driver was a path of upward mobility: “at least a third of the viceroy’s between the later Eighteenth and earlier Twentieth Dynasties were drawn from the royal chariotry or royal stable-administration, a fact that probably reflects their role in the desert campaigning typical of that period.”

By contrast, in the Middle Kingdom (and in what some would consider the beginning of the Second Intermediate Period), the army consisted of individuals with the following titles: soldier of the city regiment (nḫ n niwt), commander of the city regiment (ṯw n niwt), commander-in-chief of the city regiment (ṯw ḥn n niwt), soldier of the crew of the ruler (nḫ n ḥnt hp), commander of the crew of the ruler (ṯw n ḥnt hp), guard (šmsw), guard of the palace approach (šmsw ṣrryt), guard of the first battalion (šmsw n rmn ṭp), guard of the ruler (šmsw n ḥnt), controller of the guards (ḥḏ šmsw), bowmen (ḥḏ ṭḥ), warrior (ḥḏ ntw), general (imy-r ṭš), chief general (imy-r ṭš wr), overseer of soldiers (imy-r nnfš), and army scribe (š n ṭš). Chariots and chariotry are conspicuously absent.

Numerous indications exist that the chariot and horse were an Asiatic import into Egypt. Chariots were often depicted as a gift from Asiatics to Egyptian pharaohs. The Egyptian terms for “chariot officer,” (snny) and “charioteer” (ktm) were both imported from other languages. The Egyptian term for horse (ssmt) itself was borrowed from Akkadian (sisi mati). “Technical expressions describing the chariot, its parts and accoutrements, account for half of the military loanwords into Egypt in the New Kingdom.” The protective deities of Amenhotep II’s chariot were Astarte and Reshef, both foreign imports.

Archaeologically, the earliest horse remains from Egypt were “discovered in situ underneath a destruction layer dating to 1675 BC within the southern fortress of Buhen.” Three sites, however, in the southern
Levant “contain *E. caballus* remains that are largely contemporary with or closely predate the Buhen horse: Tel Aphek, Khirbet al-Batrawy, and Tel Michal.”\(^{36}\) Equid*\(^{37}\) burials in the Second Intermediate Period Egyptian capital are solely donkeys “but in the Middle Bronze Age in Egypt and the Levant no traces are known of chariots in connection with donkey burials.”\(^{38}\) Horses are not as common as donkeys “due to the expenses in keeping horses, the required knowledge in their breeding, training and harnessing, or the availability of other cheaper and more easily manageable draught animals.”\(^{39}\) Nevertheless, a Thirteenth Dynasty foundation deposit contained a horse bone, and two horse teeth and a horse bone have been found in Fifteenth Dynasty contexts as well as “the almost articulated skeleton of a five year old mare” was found at the so-called “Hyksos Palace.”\(^{40}\) Other Fifteenth Dynasty finds of horse skeletons have been excavated at Tell Hebwa I, Tell el-Kebir, and Tell el-Maskhuta.\(^{41}\)

The earliest archaeological finds of chariots from Egypt come from the tomb of Amenhotep II (KV 35). Thereafter, chariots find their way into many royal tombs.\(^{42}\) The earliest known textual evidence for the chariot comes from the early Eighteenth Dynasty in the reign of Ahmose I.\(^{43}\) The earliest iconographic evidence is found in fragmentary reliefs from Ahmose I.\(^{44}\) Thus the archaeological, artistic, and epigraphic evidence converges to full use of the horse and chariot by the beginning of the Eighteenth Dynasty and their introduction some time earlier.\(^{45}\)

Introduction of the horse-drawn chariot is said not to start much earlier in Mesopotamia than it did in Egypt. In Mesopotamia, “horse-drawn chariots are a feature of the new order in the later second millennium, and do not seem to have played an important role before then.”\(^{46}\) Later, however, their role changed. “The war chariot was the principal instrument of frontal attack in the Late Bronze Age, while in the Neo-Assyrian period it lost much of this role, acquiring instead a chiefly ceremonial character (clearly visible in the iconography). The king still makes use of a chariot, but mainly as a means of transportation. ... It is true that chariots are amply attested as part of both the Assyrian and enemy armies, in the same vein as cavalrymen (and camel drivers for the Arabs), but they do not appear to have any function in the descriptions of battle beyond the speedy transportation of select units.”\(^{47}\)

Thus, the standard point of view is that both horses and chariots came into Egypt from Asia during the Hyksos period.
The Problem
Abraham, however, lived before the Hyksos. The most probable time for Abraham’s life would range from the end of the Twelfth Dynasty through the beginning of the Fourteenth Dynasty. The Hyksos, on the other hand, ruled Egypt during the later Fifteenth Dynasty. Therefore the passage in the Book of Abraham where God tells Abraham, “I am the Lord thy God; I dwell in heaven; the earth is my footstool; I stretch my hand over the sea, and it obeys my voice; I cause the wind and the fire to be my chariot” (Abraham 2:7) would appear, at first glance, to be anachronistic. In fact, it is not. While this issue has not received noteworthy attention in works critical of the Book of Abraham, it is treated here to strengthen our understanding of a detail in the book.

The Missing Information
Of course, not everything that is claimed about the introduction of chariots is necessarily accurate. For example, some have claimed that Hurrians moving into the ancient Near East “from the Russian steppes during the sixteenth and fifteenth centuries B.C.” brought “the use of the horse and chariot,” although Hurrians were known in the ancient Near East at least six centuries earlier, and have been hypothesized to have entered over a millennium earlier bringing their Red-Black Burnished Ware with them from the Transcaucasian Kura-Araxes Region. “Though previously believed to be tied to a particular ethnic group, no direct link can be observed in the extant record.” But to focus on such matters misses a larger point. The general historical outline presented does not need to be disputed even if minor details can be. For example, “the true horse was well established in Northern Mesopotamia and Susa by the O[ld] Akk[adian] period, ca. 2400 BCE.”

The Book of Abraham, as we currently have it, ends before Abraham actually enters Egypt. It ends in the middle of a vision that God gave to Abraham before he went to Egypt to prepare him to enter Egypt (Abraham 3:15). The line about the chariot is given to Abraham when Abraham was living in Haran (Abraham 2:5–6).

So, instead of looking at when the chariot arrived in Egypt, we need to look at when it arrived in Haran.

The Early History of Chariots
While the chariot may not have entered Egypt until Hyksos times in the second millennium BC, it entered the Near East in the third millennium BC. The Sumerian term for chariot is written with a wheel and axle, and
this is the oldest form of the sign. The chariot was already known in Sumer during the reign of Entemena (ca. 2400 BC), who claimed to build a chariot house (ē-geš-gígir-ra) at Lagash. A chariot appears on a cylinder seal with a Sumerian inscription dating to the Early Dynastic III Period (2500–2350 BC) from Ur. About the same time, there is a record of a chariot house (ē-geš-gígir-ra) in Mari, where there are also records of chariots. Early records from Šuruppak “list military contingents and chariots.”

**Chariots at Haran**

Models of chariots have been found in early third-millennium contexts at Tell Brak, Tell Beydar, Tell Khuera, and Tell Arbid. Early third-millennium models (Early Jazirah II) have been found at Tell Brak, and Mari. Such “models became common in the northern Mesopotamian sites’ assemblages starting from the mid-3rd millennium BC, and are found at many sites, such as Tepe Gawra, Tell Arbid, Tell Barri, Tell Bi’a and Tell Selenkahiye.”

“Models dating to the third millennium BC have been found not only throughout the Jazirah region, along with some glyptic depictions on cylinder seals, but models have been found specifically at Harran. Thus, this was a feature of Harran for hundreds of years before God spoke to Abraham. The mention of chariots is thus no anachronism in the Book of Abraham.

Models from the Middle Bronze IA-II period, the time period of Abraham, have also been found; fourteen were found at Tell Tuqan, south of Ebla. Four others dating to the end of the third millennium or early second millennium were found in southeastern Anatolia and North Syria. So they were in the vicinity of Abraham in his day.

**The Old Babylonian Chariot**

An early Akkadian example of chariot (narkabtu) comes from the Old Assyrian correspondence. The Assyrian trading colonies were established by Erishum (1939–1900 BC). This means that it was known and used in the area where Abraham lived and during his lifetime.

In Babylonia during the Old Babylonian period (the time of Abraham), “chariots seem virtually to be confined to ceremonial
occasions or ritual use in the service of the gods (now with the recently introduced horse to tow them).”

This, in part, was due to location and the geographic features of the land. Babylon was a land of canals and waterways, “a flat alluvial plain laid down by the Tigris and the Euphrates,” whose “expanses of permanent swamp along rivers once formed a more prominent feature of the landscape than at present.”

Mari was further upstream where “the valley of the Euphrates forms only a narrow ribbon between the zones dominated by the steppe. … At the heart of the river system are the valley and its cliffs; to either side and to the north and south, steppes stretch to the horizon, undulating and stony, with wadis that are usually dry, a land of pasture and nomadism.”

Thus the famous king of Babylon, Hammurapi, writes to the king of Mari, Zimri-Lim: “The means (of transportation) of your land is donkeys and carts; the means of this land is boats.”

Even if boats were the main means of transportation in Babylonia, chariots were still used. For example, Ani-ešuḫ writes to Ibni-Šamaš and Sin-iddinam in Sippar that the Kassites have messengers and chariots and are going from Babylon to Sippar.

Chariots were used as special conveyances, meant for royalty or other privileged functionaries. They were normally pulled by donkeys; a supply list indicates that four donkeys were supplied for the chariot of a certain Zimri-Eraḫ, so it would appear that Mariote chariots used four equids. In earlier times, it appears that cattle were used to pull chariots. But at Mari, white horses and red horses (the former were preferable) were also used. Servants could also request chariots. Chariots could be used for long-distance travel but were also known to break down (iššebir). As reported in one account, “the chariot which I was riding is no more.”

Both chariots and express chariots are found in lists at Mari. They could be used to transport objects like straw (in.u) and clay (im).

Chariots were constructed by carpenters, and fancy ones were decorated with precious stones and gold. Chariots were used to get people places quickly. The Mariote official Ašqudum said that he would take his children in chariots and make it from Tillazibi (a place near Dur-Yahdun-Lim in the Saggaratum district at the confluence of the Habur and Euphrates rivers) to Emar (further up the Euphrates), a distance of about 200 kilometers, in three days.

Even in Mari, chariots were a symbol of royalty. The official Sammetar tells Zimri-Lim, “Yet my lord knows that the kings of this land where I am about to go — aside from Buna-Ištar (of Kurda) and Šarraya...
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(of Razama), who use a palanquin — they all ride a quality chariot. There are some who even ride an ordinary chariot.”

The architecture of towns in Middle Bronze Age IIB Palestine has been argued to reflect the introduction of the chariot into that part of the Levant. The fortifications were “vast rectangular enclosures … walled in by earthen ramps and surrounded by moats. Towered gates with multiple apertures on a single axis make their appearance at many sites.” The gates are viewed as having been rebuilt to accommodate chariots.

By the time of Suppiluliuma I (1344–1322 BC) chariots were standard in Qaṭna. So Hannutti writes to Idanda, king of Qaṭna, “You know that Mittanni is destroyed and you are afraid of these three chariots. You will see what they will do.” Ėarrupše also writes Idanda about the Hittite chariots and troops. A charioteer, Šeniya, is even mentioned.

Other Old Babylonian Means of Transportation

Chariots were not the only prestigious form of transportation. Palanquins or sedan chairs (nūbalum) were used as early as the fourth millennium BC, but textually are known, principally from Mari, and “all the dated or datable attestations come from the time of Zimri-Lim.” These elaborate conveyances were made of wood and decorated with gold, silver, and precious stones. They were carried around by men — designated ša nūbalim, “those of the palanquin” — and a large number of them, eleven to forty-eight, were employed by various places. Not just any form of transportation was considered appropriate for royalty; Bahdi-Lim, the governor of Mari, writes to Zimri-Lim on the occasion of his first entry into the city that “since you are (first) king of the nomads and you are, second, king of Akkad (land), my lord ought not ride horses; rather, it is upon a palanquin (nubālum) or on mules (anše. hā kūdani) that my lord ought to ride, and in this way he can pay honor to his majesty.” The palanquin or “nūbalum at Mari was the royal vehicle par excellence.” Palanquins could also be used to transport deities, such as Itur-Mer, Lagamal, and Ikšudum. They could also be used to transport members of the royal family, or important clergy like the high-priestess of Addu, and even those on diplomatic missions. Others in the region did not feel the same way. The Turukkean king, Zaziya, remarks sarcastically, “Where is Zimri-Lim, whom you seek to be your father and behind whom you walk as he rides in a palanquin?” When serving on a diplomatic mission, Sammetar writes back to Zimri-Lim: “Now I fear that were I to ride a palanquin and these kings see (it), they will make a big fuss saying, ‘(he [Zimri-Lim] is) like us — yet he sent
his servant [Sammetar] here by having him ride a palanquin!’ They will make a big fuss here.” So, “the kinglets of Upper Mesopotamian realms found the fact that an ambassador of Zimri-Lim traveled by palanquin scandalous, because some of them were not permitted such a luxury.”

Riding in a palanquin was seen as too prestigious for just anyone to ride; a commoner riding in one was seen as an act of sedition.

The wagon (*mar-gid-da, ereqqu*) had four wheels and was normally pulled by oxen. Wagons were especially used in northern Mesopotamia, where more of the ground was less swampy. It could be decorated as a luxury item. Because it was an expensive but useful item (it was used, for example, for hauling barley from the harvest, and for transportation of goods over long distances) that was not necessarily constantly in use by one individual or family, it could be rented out. Only exceptionally was it used to transport people. Wagons were fashioned and repaired by carpenters (*nagar*).

Horse riding was clearly something that Zimri-Lim was accustomed to, however much it may have been frowned upon by the people at Mari. But riding horses and other animals was extremely useful in times of war. Shepallu wrote to Mutiya, king of Shekhsna, that after a raid on his territories that took a number of people and livestock captive, “I mounted a horse and I went with sixty men to the town of Sabim in front of his encampment.” By Middle Babylonian times, when the Gilgamesh epic was composed, the use of the horse in battle was taken for granted. Conventional wisdom was that it could trot (*lasama*) for 7 *beru* (*danna*), about 76 kilometers or 47 miles, at a stretch.

**Chariots of the Gods**

Chariots were not only a royal means of transportation; they were particularly a divine means of transportation and associated with deities. They were used to transport statues of deities during processions. “The building of a processional chariot was such an important event for the religious sensibilities of the Sumerians and Akkadians that they would date events by it.” For example, one of the year names of Išme-Dagan is the “year a lofty chariot was fashioned.” One of the month names at Mari during earlier Shakanakku times was *iti d Nin.ki.gigir*, “the month of Ninki of the chariot,” who had her own temple at Mari at that time. “In Mesopotamian mythology the gods are frequently described as riding in wheeled vehicles.” The Sumerian myth of Ninurta describes the god Ninurta as being “on his shining chariot, which inspires terrible awe.” Chariots are also known for Adad, An, Baba, Bel, Belit-ile, Bunene, Ea,
Enlil, Ishtar, Nabu, Ninazu, Ningirsu, Ninlil, Satran, Sin, and Utu. In most of these cases, the references were to actual physical chariots made for cultic purposes. Wagons were also used for divine processions, and the trip of Nergal in his wagon was a major holiday in Mari.

**Chariots of Wind and Fire**

As noted earlier, it has been claimed that “horse-drawn chariots are a feature of the new order in the later second millennium, and do not seem to have played an important role before then” in Mesopotamia. But the Book of Abraham does not identify a horse-drawn chariot. It specifically identifies the chariot with “the wind and the fire” (Abraham 2:7). The equids drawing the war chariots in the famous Standard of Ur are not precisely identified, and both donkeys and onagers have been suggested. The use of a chariot does not necessarily entail the use of a horse. Still, horse-drawn chariots are mentioned at Mari in Old Babylonian times.

In one Old Babylonian account (thus contemporary with Abraham), the four winds (im.limmu.ba) are depicted as mules (parê) who provide the transportation of deities. In another Old Babylonian account, the wind, particularly “a hot, humid, violent wind,” is thought of as an animal with wings that brought “most of the rain to the lands of southern Mesopotamia.” So the idea that the winds provided the animals that pulled a divine chariot is a known idea from Abraham’s day.

The wind is also connected with fire. A fragmentary Old Babylonian text says that when “the storm wind of the land settled on the land … it brought the [standing] fire and [the wind] in its midst.” So the same storm-winds that bring the chariots of the gods, also bring fire. Multiple deities, such as Girra, Gibil, and Nusku, are deifications of fire.

**Conclusions**

While the wind and the fire being the chariot of God might at first seem out of place in the Book of Abraham, these concepts are attested both archaeologically and textually in times and locations relevant to Abraham. While the apparent anachronism that is treated here may not have been noticed in past criticism of the Book of Abraham, consideration of the external data related to Abraham 2:7 may help strengthen our understanding of the Book of Abraham and its background.

Endnotes


3 Douglas J. Brewer and Emily Teeter, Egypt and the Egyptians (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 40.


5 Brewer and Teeter, Egypt and the Egyptians, 74.


8 Redford, Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times, 184–85; Alan Gardiner, The Kadesh Inscriptions of Ramesses II (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1960), 54–56.

9 Redford, Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times, 207.


11 Redford, Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times, 219.

12 According to Redford, Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times, 268. Redford cites EA 290:20–25 as his source for this fact, but the passage EA 290:19–28 reads: “May the king listen to ‘Abdi-Heba, your servant, and may he send the regular army and may he return the land of the king to the king. But if there is no regular army, the land of the king is deserting to the ‘apīru men. This deed is a[t] the command of Milki[lu] [and a] the command of [Shuward]ata, [and(?) the ruler(!) of the city of Ga[th].” Translation from Anson F. Rainey, The El-Amarna Correspondence (Leiden, NDL: E.J. Brill, 2015), 1:1125. Compare the translation in William L. Moran, The Amarna Letters (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 334: “May the king give heed to ‘Abdi-Heba, your servant, and send archers to restore the land of the king to the king. If there are no archers, the land of the king will desert to the Ḫapiru. This deed against the land was a[t] the order of Milki[lu] and a[t] the order of [Suard]atu, [together] with Gint[i].”


15 Stefanović, Holders of Regular Military Titles in the Period of the Middle Kingdom, 58–60.
Ibid., 49–57.

17 Ibid., 61–71; Ward, *Index of Egyptian Administrative and Religious Titles of the Middle Kingdom*, 75.


Stefanović, Holders of Regular Military Titles in the Period of the Middle Kingdom, 209–12; Ward, Index of Egyptian Administrative and Religious Titles of the Middle Kingdom, 160.


Redford, Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times, 214–15 and n. 3.


Redford, Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times, 231.


Equids are a biological family of mammals consisting of horses, asses, zebras, and extinct related animals.


40 Ibid., 231–32.


43 Ibid., 236–37.

44 Ibid., 98, 238.

45 Ibid., 239–42.


Ibid., 178.

Ibid., 178–79.

Ibid., 179.


Salonen, *Die Landfahrzeuge des alten Mesopotamien*, 45.


77 Arkhipov, *Vocabulaire de la métallurgie*, 151.


79 ARM 9 149, in Maurice Birot, *Textes administratifs de la salle 5 du palis* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1960), 101. Unfortunately, there are a number of individuals named Zimri-Eraḫ; see Heimpel, *Letters to the King of Mari*, 569.


82 ARM 5 58, in Georges Dossin, Correspondance de Iasmaḫ-Addu, 82; ARM 26 324 in Charpin et al., Archives épistolaires de Mari I/2, 92; Heimpel, Letters to the King of Mari, 303.

83 ARM 5 66, in Dossin, Correspondance de Iasmaḫ-Addu, 90–92.

84 ARM 5 66, in Dossin, Correspondance de Iasmaḫ-Addu, 90–92, my translation.


86 ARM 19 381, in Limet, Textes administratifs de l’époque des Šakkanakku, 129.

87 Mari A.2453, in Durand, Archives épistolaires de Mari I/1, 383: lù-nagar e-pi-iš šígigir “a carpenter who can make a chariot.” ARM 26 285, in Charpin et al., Archives épistolaires de Mari I/2, 16; Heimpel, Letters to the King of Mari, 284–85.

88 ARM 19460, in Limet, Textes administratifs de l’époque des Šakkanakku, 148.

89 ARM 26 370 in Dossin, Correspondance de Iasmaḫ-Addu, 82; ARM 26 324 in Charpin et al., Archives épistolaires de Mari I/2, 175–76; Heimpel, Letters to the King of Mari, 324.

90 ARM 26 125, in Durand, Archives épistolaires de Mari I/1, 290; Heimpel, Letters to the King of Mari, 223.

91 Heimpel, Letters to the King of Mari, 609, 621, 626.

92 ARM 26 17, in Durand, Archives épistolaires de Mari I/1, 127; cf. Heimpel, Letters to the King of Mari, 184.

93 Arkhipov, Vocabulaire de la métallurgie, 151.

94 Mari A.868, in Sasson, From the Mari Archives, 71.

95 Redford, Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times, 95–96. Redford doubts this particular hypothesis, but more recent discoveries support it.

96 Date according to O. R. Gurney, The Hittites (London: Penguin, 1990), 181.


98 TT 4 34–39, in Richter and Lange, Das Archiv des Idadda, 59.

100 TT 24, in Richter and Lange, *Das Archiv des Idadda*, 104.


103 Ibid., 407, 411; Arkhipov, *Vocabulaire de la métallurgie*, 147.

104 Arkhipov, “Les véhicules terrestres dans les textes de Mari,” 408, citing ARM 26 512, which Heimpel (*Letters to the King of Mari*, 396) translates: “[They] attacked Yaduranum and the men who were with him carrying the litter between Arraphum [and] Kakmum [and] killed them.” Yaduranum was serving as a diplomatic representative of Zimri-Lim at the time; Arkhipov, “Les véhicules terrestres dans les textes de Mari,” 412.

105 Ibid., 409.

106 Ibid.

107 See Heimpel, *Letters to the King of Mari*, 531.


111 Ibid., 410 (citing ARMT 23 198), and 415; Arkhipov, *Vocabulaire de la métallurgie*, 149.


113 Ibid., 410. Of course, the high-priestess in question, Inibšina, was also the sister of the king, Zimri-Lim; Heipel, *Letters to the King of Mari*, 543; Arkhipov, “Les véhicules terrestres dans les textes de Mari,” 410. In this case, it is at least ambiguous whether Inibšina’s position as princess or priestess merited her use of the palanquin; it may not have mattered if either position provided the perk.

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115 Mari A.1025 15–17, in ibid., 411–12, esp. n. 34, my translation.

116 There are two individuals named Sametar in the Mari archives, the king of Ašnakkum, and the governor of Terqa; Heimpel, Letters to the King of Mari, 553–54.


119 Mari A.3892, in ibid., 414, 420; Sasson, From the Mari Archives, 319.


121 Salonen, Die Landfahrzeuge des alten Mesopotamien, 28–36.


123 Salonen, Die Landfahrzeuge des alten Mesopotamien, 31–32.


126 Arkhipov, Vocabulaire de la métallurgie, 145.

127 Laws of Eshnunna §3, in Roth, Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor, 59; Kitchen and Lawrence, Treaty, Law and Covenant in the Ancient Near East, 1:98–99; Salonen, Die Landfahrzeuge des alten Mesopotamien, 29–30; Codex Hammurapi §271–72, in Roth, Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor, 131; Kitchen and Lawrence, Treaty, Law and Covenant in

128 Arkhipov, Vocabulaire de la métallurgie, 145–46.
134 Arkhipov, Vocabulaire de la métallurgie, 151.
135 Salonen, Die Landfahrzeuge des alten Mesopotamien, 68.
138 ARM 19 433, in Limet, Textes administratifs de l’époque des Šakkanakku, 142.
140 Quoted in Postgate, Early Mesopotamia, 253; cf. Salonen, Die Landfahrzeuge des alten Mesopotamien, 74.
141 Salonen, Die Landfahrzeuge des alten Mesopotamien, 71–75.
142 Ibid.


146 Ibid., 245–46.

147 Ibid., 165–66.


151 Izre’el, *Adapa and the South Wind*, 68.


153 Izre’el, *Adapa and the South Wind*, 68.


