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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

1. Michael E. Stone, *Ancient Judaism: New Visions and Views* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 11–12.

2. James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), x.

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.[3] 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.[4] 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

3. See the updated version of this study in S. Kent Brown, "Recovering the Missing Record of Lehi," in *A Book of Mormon Treasury: Gospel Insights from General Authorities and Religious Educators* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2003): 144–72, https://rsc.byu.edu/book-mormon-treasury/recovering-missing-record-lehi.

4. See Karel van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 75–96, where he makes this case. For a helpful review of van der Toorn's book, see Robert L. Maxwell, "Karel van der Toorn, Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 51, no. 2 (2012): 181–85, https://byustudies.byu.edu/article/scribal-culture-and-the-making-of-the-hebrew-bible/.

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

5. See Cathy Lynne Costin, "Introduction: Craft and Social Identity," *Archaeological Papers of the American Anthropological Association* 8 (January 1998): 3.

scribal training regimen.[6] 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).[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

6. Brant A. Gardner, "Nephi as Scribe," *Mormon Studies Review* 23, no. 1 (2011): 45–55, https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1831&context=msr. Gardner's essay relies primarily on van der Toorn's excellent study of scribal culture in the Ancient Near East (van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*). An explosion of new studies now makes it possible to update and extend his observations.

7. See 1 Nephi 15:6–16:5, 22:1, and the discussion in Gardner, "Nephi as Scribe," 53–55.

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.[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.[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."[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.[11] As David Carr has argued that

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/.

9. See Ian M. Young, "Israelite Literacy: Interpreting the Evidence: Part I," *Vetus Testamentum* 48, no. 22 (April 1998): 239–53.

10. William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 13.

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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Environment," in *Writing and Ancient Near East Society: Essays in Honor of Alan Millard*, Piotr Bienkowski, C. B. Mee, and E. A. Slater, eds. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005), 49–118.

12. David M. Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 13.

13. Susan Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word* (London: SPCK, 1997), 10.

14. Albert B. Lord, in *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), provided the theory of oral composition and the anthropological data necessary to provoke the seismic shift in classical philological opinion about Homer and about the possibilities of oral composition in general. A third edition edited by David F. Elmer was published by Harvard University Press in 2018. John Miles Foley has documented and explained these developments and the consequent emergence of a new academic discipline in The Theory of Oral Composition: History and Methodology (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988). An excellent summary of this new discipline and its relevance for the Book of Mormon can now be found in Brian C. Hales, "Joseph Smith as a Book of Mormon Storyteller," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 46 (2021): 253–90. Hales argues that contrary to allegations from numerous critics, the Book of Mormon cannot be reasonably understood as a product of Joseph Smith's alleged storytelling expertise.

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.[15] 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.[16] 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

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.

16. An excellent and accessible description of scribal school excavations and the teaching materials discovered in ancient Nippur and Ur can be found in Steve Tinney, "Texts, Tablets, and Teaching," *Expedition* 40, no. 2(1998): 40–52, https://www.penn.museum/documents/publications/expedition/PDFs/40-2/Tinney.pdf.

text collections across a wide geographical and cultural area.[17] 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.[18] 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.[19]

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."[20]

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. [21]

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."[22] 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."[23]

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.[24]

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20. Carole R. Fontaine, "The Sage in Family and Tribe," in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. John G. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 158.

21. 1 Nephi 4:22.

22. Fontaine, "The Sage," 159.

23. Proverbs 4:1–4 (NIV).

24. See Lehi's instruction and blessings to Laman and Lemuel and their posterity, to Jacob and Joseph, and to others using this same language of "O my sons," "It is wisdom," and "Keep the commandments." For examples see 2 Nephi 1–3 and Alma 36–40. Taylor Halverson, "Reading 1 Nephi with Wisdom," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 22 (2016): 279–93 argues that Nephi's writings exhibit his scribal training in the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible.

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]

The emphasis on the kinship or even father-son basis of ANE scribal schooling unearthed by modern scholars throws invaluable new light on Nephi's opening verses. In the very first sentence he jars the modern reader with the announcement that he has been taught "in all the learning" of his father. He goes on to explain that he will make this record in the language of his father, "which consists of the *learning of the Jews* and the *language of the Egyptians*." While most commentators have been reluctant to accept the plain meaning of this claim to be writing in the Egyptian language, I will show below that only the Egyptian language could provide Lehi and Nephi with a connection through written records to their ancestors Joseph and Abraham. Scribal writing in the earliest attested Hebrew script occurred first in Israel in the early eighth century BCE and in Judah in the latter half of that century. And the only strong candidate for a distinctive "learning of the Jews" that has emerged from biblical scholarship is the recently discovered writing strategy of "Hebrew rhetoric," which is thought to be an achievement of late seventh-century scribal schools in Jerusalem, a unique rhetorical system of writing that we find on full display in Nephi's writing.

For Nephi to claim these two skills in the culture of 600 BCE Jerusalem would be taken by his contemporaries as a straightforward confession of scribal training at the very highest level. Nephi then goes on to claim that he makes the record with his own hand. The skill required to manufacture and engrave metal plates or other writing materials could only be learned in a scribal school and its workshop. Clearly, Nephi's

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.[26]

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."[27] 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."[28] 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.[29] 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.[30]

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."[31] Van der Toorn and others also

26. 1 Nephi 1:1–3. Egyptian language and Hebrew rhetoric will be discussed in detail below. Writing on metal plates is explored in detail in Noel B. Reynolds, "An Everlasting Witness: Ancient Writings on Metal," (2021), https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/5379/.

27. Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture,* 54.

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,
> [W]hen 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]

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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.

34. See W. W. Hallo, "New Viewpoints on Cuneiform Literature," *Israel Exploration Journal* 12, no. 1 (1962): 13–26 and "The Concept of Canonicity in Cuneiform and Biblical Literature: A Comparative Appraisal," in *The Biblical Canon in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Bernard F. Batto (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen Press, 1991): 1–12.

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.[35]

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.[36]

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.[37]

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.[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.[39] I refer to this richly detailed and documented study to demonstrate the possibility of multiple scribal schools or traditions

37. See C. J. Gadd, *Teachers and Students in the Oldest Schools* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1956).

38. Yoram Cohen, *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," *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.

39. The bulk of Cohen's study is devoted to specific documents and scribes. These summary observations are stated best at Cohen, *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.[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.[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."[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."[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

40. We also have now a similarly intensive study of cuneiform tablets found in ancient Ḫattuša, 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.

41. See Ronald J. Williams, "Scribal Training in Ancient Egypt," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 92 (1972): 214–21. Williams updated this earlier work and applied it to the discussion of ancient "sages" in Ronald J. Williams, "The Sage in Egyptian Literature," in *The Sage in Israel*, 19–30.

42. Williams, "The Sage," 19.

43. Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 67.

"geography, arithmetic, and geometry."[44] 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.[45] 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.[46] 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.[47]

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.[48] 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.[49] 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.
47. Williams, "Scribal Training," 220.
48. Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 72.
49. See Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, 88–89.

or bureaucratic activity and that only a tiny percentage were religious documents.[50]

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).[51]

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."[52]

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

50. John Gee, "The Scribes: Γραμματεύς," unpublished working paper, 2019.

51. Aaron A. Burke, "Left Behind: New Kingdom Specialists at the End of Egyptian Empire and the Emergence of Israelite Scribalism," in *"An Excellent Fortress for his Armies, a Refuge for the People": Egyptological, Archaeological, and Biblical Studies in Honor of James K. Hoffmeier*, ed. Richard E. Averbeck and K. Lawson Younger, Jr. (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2020), 60.

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 ʿAjrud "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]

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53. Richard G. Kratz, "The Growth of the Old Testament," *Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 1, DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199237777.003.0028.

54. William M. Schniedewind, *The Finger of the Scribe: How Scribes Learned to Write the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 8.

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.[56] 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."[57] 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.[58] 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.[59] 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

56. Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, *Solomonic State Officials: A Study of the Civil Government Officials of the Israelite Monarchy* (Lund: CWK Gleerups Förlag, 1971).

57. Ibid., 143–44, referring to Hans-Jurgen Hermisson, *Studien zur israelitischen Spruchweisheit* (Neukirchener, Germany: Verlag des Erziehungsvereins, 1968).

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

60. Mark Leuchter, ed., *Scribes and Scribalism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021), 1.

61. Carr, *Writing*, 12–13.

62. Schniedewind, *Finger of the Scribe*, 12, argues that the plaster inscriptions at Kuntillet ʿAjrud 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.[63]

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

63. A. R. George, "In Search of the e.dub.ba.a: The Ancient Mesopotamian School in Literature and Reality," in *An Experienced Scribe who Neglects Nothing: Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Honor of Jacob Klein*, ed. Yitschak Sefati et al. (Potomac, MD: CDL Press, 2005), 130–32, https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/2784969.pdf.

traditions were being captured in written form and standardized in various cultures.[64]

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).[65]

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.[66]

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

64. Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 55–69.

65. Ariel Feldman, "Patriarchs and Aramaic Traditions," in *T&T Clark Companion to the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. George J. Brooke and Charlotte Hempel (London: T&T Clark, 2018), 474.

66. See Philip Zhakevich, *Scribal Tools in Ancient Israel: A Study of Biblical Hebrew Terms for Writing Materials and Implements* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2020).

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]

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.

Encyclopedia, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 2:424–28.

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

71. See John A. Tvedtnes, "Books in the Treasury," in *The Book of Mormon and Other Hidden Books: "Out of Darkness Unto Light"* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2000), 155–56, https://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/sites/default/files/archive-files/pdf/tvedtnes/2016-08-01/09_books_in_the_treasury.pdf.

72. Gardner, "Nephi as Scribe," 45.

73. See Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert: The World of the Jaredites*; *There Were Jaredites* (Provo, UT: FARMS and Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 3–37; John A. Tvedtnes, *The Most Correct Book: Insights from a Book of Mormon Scholar* (Springville, UT: Horizon Publishers, 2003), 78–97; and *The Book of Mormon and Other Hidden Books: 'Out of Darkness Unto Light'* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2000), 155–66. Also see Jeffrey R. Chadwick, "Lehi's House at Jerusalem and the Land of His Inheritance," in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolfe Seely and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo: FARMS, 2004), 114–17.

74. Seth L. Sanders, *The Invention of Hebrew* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 107.

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."[75] 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."[76] 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,

75. K. A. Kitchen, "Some Egyptian Background to the Old Testament," *Tyndale Bulletin* 5–6 (April 1960): 14–15.

76. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, 225.

(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,[77] 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.[78] 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.[79]

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).[80] 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/.

78. Cyrus H. Gordon, "Abraham and the Merchants of Ura," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 17, no. 1 (January 1958): 30–31. Gordon has also argued that the mercantile character of Abraham's city goes back a millennium before his time." See Cyrus H. Gordon, "The Mediterranean Synthesis," in *The Crisis Years: The 12th Century B.C.: From Beyond the Danube to the Tigris*, ed. William A. Ward and Martha Sharp Joukowsky (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 1992), 194.

79. See Philip R. Davies, "From Moses to Abraham: Jewish Identities in the Second Temple Period," in *The Reception and Remembrance of Abraham*, ed. Pernille Carstens and Niels Peter Lemche (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011), 3.

80. See John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 2017), 98–101. This fits comfortably with the dating possibilities laid out by Kenneth Kitchen. But the additional information provided in the Book of Abraham clearly favors the Ur of Northwest Syria, contrary to the traditional interpretations of Genesis. See K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*

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.[81] 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."[82] 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 inscriptional 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

(Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 316, 318, and 347–48 and his encyclopedia article s. v., "Joseph," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 2:1126–30.

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.

81. See, e. g., Aaron A. Burke, "Amorites in the Eastern Nile Delta: The Identity of Asiatics at Avaris during the Early Middle Kingdom," in *The Enigma of the Hyksos: Volume I*, ed. Manfred Bietak and Silvia Prell (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2019), 69–93. See the archaeological documentation of the Asiatic settlements of this period in the eastern Nile delta in Manfred Bietak, *Avaris: The Capital of the Hyksos, Recent Excavations at Tell el-Daba* (London: British Museum Press, 1996).

82. John F. Healy, "Aramaean Heritage," in *The Aramaeans in Ancient Syria*, ed. Herbert Niehr (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 394.

Abraham, no publications as yet report those findings.[83] 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.[84]

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)."[85] 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."[86]

83. John Gee, "Has Olishem Been Discovered?" *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 2 (2013): 104–106.

84. Stephen O. Smoot, "'In the Land of the Chaldeans': The Search for Abraham's Homeland Revisited," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (2017): 36. See also the much earlier discussion of this question in Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt,* ed. Gary P. Gillum, 2nd ed. (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2000), 234–38.

85. Koert van Bekkum, "The 'Language of Canaan': Ancient Israel's History and the Origins of Hebrew," in *Biblical Hebrew in Context: Essays in Semitics and Old Testament Texts in Honour of Professor Jan P. Lettinga*, ed. Koert van Bekkum, Gert Kwakkel, and Wolter H. Rose (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 85, citing Holger Gzella, *A Cultural History of Aramaic: From the Beginnings to the Advent of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 56–57. Compare the discussion of this text in K. Lawson Younger, Jr., *A Political History of the Arameans: From Their Origins to the End of Their Polities* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature Press, 2016), 36–37. After reviewing current theories on the etymology of Aram, Younger concludes it is best "to admit that this still remains unknown." Ibid., 40.

86. Bekkum, "Language of Canaan."

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

87. Daniel Machiela, "Who Is the Aramean in 'Deut' 26:5 And What Is He Doing?: Evidence of a Minority View from Qumran Cave 1 ('1QapGen' 19:8)," *Revue de Qumran* 23, no.3 (91) (June 2008): 395–403.

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.[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 *Book of Abraham*, written in Egyptian,[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 9th-century spin-off from the newly developed Phoenician alphabet. As Holger Gzella explains,

> 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

91. Some of the most trustworthy and illuminating accounts of Abraham's reputation in the ancient Egyptian world are reviewed and documented in Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 49–55. See Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, 254–318, for a rich discussion of ancient texts linking Abraham to ancient Egypt.

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, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 59.

> 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. [93]

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.[94] "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."[95] 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."[96] 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

93. Holger Gzella, "Peoples and Languages of the Levant During the Bronze and Iron Ages," in *The Oxford Handbook of The Archaeology of the Levant c. 8000–332 BCE*, ed. Margreet L. Steiner and Ann E. Killebrew (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 31.

94. Gordon, "Abraham and the Merchants," 28–30.

95. Gzella, "Peoples and Languages," 29.

96. See the discussion in Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, 6, citing Jubilees 39:6. The newer translation quoted here is from James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1983), 2:129.

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.[97] 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.[98] 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

97. Genesis 28:13–15 and 35:9–13.

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/knowhy-otl11a-why-are-the-stories-of-joseph-and-judah-intertwined/.

> 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.

99. K. A. Kitchen, "Some Egyptian Background to the Old Testament," 18.
100. Ibid.
101. K. A. Kitchen, s.v., "Egypt," *The New Bible Dictionary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1965), 342.

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[a] 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.

103. David Rothstein, "Joseph as Pedagogue: Biblical Precedents for the Depiction of Joseph in *Aramaic Levi (4Q213)*," *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 14, no. 3 (2005): 223–29.

104. Ibid., 225.

105. Ronald J. Williams, "The Sage in Egyptian Literature," 29.

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

Mogens Trolle Larsen (Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1989), 93.

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.[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,[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 *ridge of land* than to your brothers, the *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 [*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

109. Baruch Halpern, "Jerusalem and the Lineages of the Seventh Century BCE: Kinship and the Rise of Individual Moral Liability," in *Law and Ideology in Monarchic Israel*, ed. Baruch Halpern and Deborah W. Hobson (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 52.

110. Israel Finkelstein and Lily Singer-Avitz, "Reevaluating Bethel," *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins* 125, no. 1 (2009): 44–45.

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

111. Israel Finkelstein, *The Archaeology of the Israelite Settlement* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1988), 81, quoting G. E. Wright, Shechem, *The Biography of a Biblical City* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), 9.

112. For more detail on this Canaanite period in Shechem from the archaeological perspective, see Israel Finkelstein, *The Archaeology of the Israelite Settlement*, 80–82; *The Forgotten Kingdom: The Archaeology and History of Northern Israel* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013), 13–22; and Lawrence E. Toombs, "Shechem: Problems of the Early Israelite Era," in *Symposia: Celebrating the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the Founding of the American Schools of Oriental Research (1900–1975)*, ed. Frank Moore Cross (Jerusalem: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1979), 69–83.

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.

114. Ralph K. Hawkins, *The Iron Age I Structure on Mount Ebal: Excavation and Interpretation* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012).

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]

116. For a helpful and multifaceted comparison of the northern and southern kingdoms see Israel Finkelstein, "State Formation in Israel and Judah: A Contrast in Context, A Contrast in Trajectory," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 62, no. 1 (March 1999): 35–52.

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.

118. Captain Alexander Hamilton, *A New Account of the East Indies I* (London: 1744), 321-22, https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.278509/page/n375/mode/2up.

119. See Edna Fernandes, *The Last Jews of Kerala: The 2,000 Year History of India's Forgotten Jewish Community* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2008).

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.[120] 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.[121] 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.[122] 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.

121. See Henryk Drawnel, "The Literary Form and Didactic Content of the Admonitions (Testament) of Qahat," in *From 4QMMT to Resurrection: Mélanges qumraniens en hommage à Émile Puech*, ed. Florentino García Martínez, Annette Steudel, and Eibert Tigchelaar (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 55–73.

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.[123] 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.[124]

123. W. F. Albright, "The List of Levitic Cities," in *Louis Ginzberg: Jubilee Volume on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday 1* (New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1945), 49–73. After fifteen years of additional discussion stimulated by Albright's essay, Menahem Haran summarized and extended the analysis of Levite cities, making a strong case for their historical reality and character in a two-article series. See Menahem Haran, "Studies in the Account of the Levitical Cities: I. Preliminary Considerations," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 80, no. 1 (March 1961): 45–54 and "Studies in the Account of the Levitical Cities: II. Utopia and Historical Reality," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 80, no. 2 (June 1961): 156–65.

124. Stephen L. Cook, "Those Stubborn Levites: Overcoming Levitical Disenfranchisement," in *Levites and Priests in History and Tradition*, ed. Mark A. Leuchter and Jeremy M. Hutton (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 156 and 158.

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]

125. Solomon Gandz, as an early explorer of the oral tradition in the Bible, noted how alternatives to written records are mentioned in stories of the patriarchs. See Solomon Gandz, "Oral Tradition in the Bible," in *Jewish Studies in Memory of George A. Kohut, 1874–1933*, ed. Salo W. Baron and Alexander Marx(New York: Bloch, 1935), 249.

126. For a helpful summary of scholarship on the history of writing worldwide, see Andrew Robinson, *Writing and Script* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). An excellent summary of contemporary research on the invention and spread of alphabetic writing in the ANE can be found in André Lemaire, "Alphabetic Writing in the Mediterranean World: Transmission and Appropriation," in *Cultural Contact and Appropriation in the Axial-Age Mediterranean World*, ed. Baruch Halpern and Kenneth S. Sacks (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 103–15. For a tighter focus on early Hebrew writing, see Ryan Byrne, "The Refuge of Scribalism in Iron I Palestine," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 345 (February 2007):1–31.

127. Finkelstein, *Forgotten Kingdom*, 162–63.

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.[128] Whybray concludes that both royal courts and the temples were "centers of intellectual activity" because of the inclusion of scribes on their staffs.[129] 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."[130] And Claudia Camp "has advanced the understanding of how the ongoing institution of the patriarchal family shaped wisdom thinking and traditions."[131]

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.[132]

128. See R. N. Whybray, "The Sage in the Israelite Royal Court," in *The Sage in Israel*, 133–39.

129. Ibid., 137.

130. Carole R. Fontaine, "The Sage in Family and Tribe," in *The Sage in Israel*, 155, citing earlier works by Claus Westermann and Erhard Gerstenberger.

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.

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]

133. Gary A. Rendsburg, "A Comprehensive Guide to Israelian Hebrew: Grammar and Lexicon," *Orient* 38 (2003): 5–35.

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. Naʾama Pat-El has also concluded that the evidence "is weak and does not support the dialectical hypothesis." "Israelian 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.

136. Gary A. Rendsburg, "Israelian Hebrew," in the compilation of his essays entitled *How the Bible Is Written* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2019), 498.

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

137. See the description of these developments in Noel B. Reynolds, "The Return of Rhetorical Analysis to Bible Studies," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 17 (2016): 91–98, which provides a summary review of the key writings of Jack R. Lundbom and Roland Meynet, two of the principal leaders of Hebrew rhetoric studies in America and Europe respectively. Lundbom's leading demonstrations of Hebrew rhetoric are represented in Lundbom, *Biblical Rhetoric*. Meynet's updated analysis can be found in Roland Meynet, *Treatise on Biblical Rhetoric*, trans. Leo Arnold (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

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

138. Schniedewind, *The Finger of the Scribe*, 167.

139. Ibid.

140. See Noel B. Reynolds, "The Gospel According to Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 29 (2018): 85–104, to see how this six-item list is used to structure the three principal presentations of the gospel by Nephi and by Jesus in the Book of Mormon.

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."[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.[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.[144] The principle that proved most frustrating for early translators of the Old Testament was *repetition*.[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

142. Schniedewind, *Finger of the Scribe*, 167.

143. John Gee, "Verbal Punctuation in the Book of Mormon I: (And) Now," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 50 (2022), 18–33.

144. More detailed discussion of these principles can be found in Noel B. Reynolds, "Chiastic Structuring of Large Texts: 2 Nephi as a Case Study," in *Chiasmus: The State of the Art*, ed. John W. Welch and Donald W. Parry (Provo: BYU Studies, 2020), 177–81, reprinted in *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 41 (2020): 193–210, and "Rethinking Alma 36," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 34 (2020): 3–6.

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.[146] *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.[147]

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."[148] 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.[149]

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.[150]

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.

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2 Nephi 11 provides a clear and simpler example with three levels of subordination. See Reynolds, "Chiastic Structuring," 184–89.

151. See Reynolds, "Chiastic Structuring," and Reynolds, "Nephi's Outline," *BYU Studies* 20 (Winter 1980): 131–49, republished in *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins, Religious Studies Monograph Series Vol. 7* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1982). In *Lehi's Dream: Nephi's Blueprint* I show how First and Second Nephi constitute a single composition organized with the principles of Hebrew rhetoric. Reynolds, "Lehi's Dream: Nephi's Blueprint" (2021), https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/5382.

152. See the rhetorical analyses of First and Second Nephi in Donald W. Parry, *Poetic Parallelisms in the Book of Mormon: The Complete Text Reformatted* (Provo: FARMS, 2007), 1–131, and Reynolds, "Nephi's Outline," and "Chiastic Structuring."

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.[153] 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.[154] 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.[155] 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.

155. Reynolds, "The Last Nephite Scribes."

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.[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

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.[157]

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157. Reynolds, "The Last Nephite Scribes."