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Antiquity of Silver Scrolls Confirmed

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both playful and profound, in a way reminiscent of the later tradition of Jewish midrash.²


From the time of Ezra through the first centuries AD, Jewish rabbis developed a method of scriptural interpretation that sought to explain sacred writ through creative reinterpretation, clever wordplay, metaphor, and allegory. They wanted to uncover meanings that were not apparent in a surface reading. In so doing they placed emphasis on particular phrases and juxtapositions of events, and they tried to fill in the gaps of scripture imaginatively. These rabbis were not especially concerned with discovering the import of the words in their original ancient contexts (a task claimed by most modern academic scholarship); rather, they were interested in updating the scriptures and reading their own circumstances and lives back into the text. The *Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion* defines *midrash* as “the discovery of meanings other than literal in the Bible; derived from the root *darash* (inquire), denotes the literature that interprets scripture in order to extract its full implications and meaning. These interpretations often formed a response to the need of a particular age or environment.”³

The process is not unlike Nephi’s desire to “liken all scriptures unto us” (1 Nephi 19:23–24; see 2 Nephi 11:2, 8). Nephi wanted to let his people know exactly where they fit into Isaiah’s predictions and, by extension, how the prophecies were related to the future history of the book he was writing. As he did so, he was able to bring to light meanings that other readers of Isaiah, in different situations and perhaps with less inspiration, had long missed.

Antiquity of Silver Scrolls Confirmed

A recent *New York Times* article reported new developments in the research on two ancient silver scrolls discovered in Jerusalem’s Hinnom Valley in 1979 and subsequently dated to the late seventh century BC. They were engraved with words that appeared to be text from Numbers 6:24–26. However, because of the aging of the metal, researchers were unable to read several of the inscriptions and thereby confirm the age of the scrolls.

Of course, Nephi’s revisions came with prophetic authority, and thus his commentaries and creative re-readings of Isaiah carry unusual weight.

Nephi’s literary sensibilities set him apart from other Book of Mormon authors. Indeed, his writings are never far from the prophetic tradition he knew and loved, but the remarkable way in which 2 Nephi 26 and 27 enter into a conversation with a sustained passage of scripture deserves special attention. The term *midrash*, somewhat loosely applied, conveys something of the unique methodology and spirit of these chapters. 

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Notes

1. It is true that Jacob also quotes two and a half chapters of Isaiah in 2 Nephi 6–8, but his explanatory comments do not reach the same level of literary polish and intertextuality as Nephi’s do; and in any event, Jacob states in 2 Nephi 6:4 that he is quoting Isaiah because his brother asked him to.
2. For an extensive discussion of Nephi’s midrashic interpretation of Isaiah 29, see Robert A. Cloward, “Isaiah 29 and the Book of Mormon,” in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998). In the same volume, John W. Welch demonstrates how Abinadi’s discourse in Mosiah 15–16 is grounded in Isaiah 53, following a clear midrashic pattern (“Isaiah 53, Mosiah 14, and the Book of Mormon,” 302–5).
3. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, ed. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky and Geoffrey Wigoder (New York: Oxford, 1997), s.v. “midrash.”

Thanks to new photographic techniques and computer imaging technology, researchers at the University of Southern California were able to greatly improve the legibility of the inscriptions, making it possible to confirm the antiquity of the scrolls. Those words from Numbers are now positively identified as the oldest known instance of quoted text from the Hebrew Bible. The article noted that “early Hebrew inscriptions were a rarity” and further stated that the scrolls were “a significant contribution to the understanding of the

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history of religion in ancient Israel, particularly the time of the Judean Monarchy 2,600 years ago.”

The scrolls were worn as amulets whose words were “intended to provide a blessing that will be used to protect the wearer from some manner of evil forces,” said the researchers. Of additional interest is the fact (not noted in the *Times* article) that this confirmed early date refutes the theories

of many biblical scholars that the Pentateuch was composed much later.

These findings were documented in the *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* and will be discussed in greater detail in *Near Eastern Archaeology*. The *New York Times* article, “Solving a Riddle Written in Silver,” can be found by searching the archives at <http://nytimes.com> [registration required]. 📖

The Mother’s Role in Teaching Religious Values—Jerusalem, 600 BC

In ancient Israel, the household was the center of a woman’s life and the place in which she held the most power. Even though a child was born into “the house of the father” (*bet ’ab*, the ancestral household), the mother was the first and most abiding influence upon the child’s life from the day of birth, instilling in the child the most basic sociocultural values, modes of behavior, and religious beliefs. In Proverbs, the mother is seen as both a nurturer and educator whose teachings are complementary to those of the father (1:8; 6:20).

Children learned the proper observance of important features of ancient Israelite religion by watching their mother’s daily ritual of washing herself, offering sacrifice with her husband, and praying. A good deal of this religious teaching would also have taken place on the Sabbath, when both women and men laid aside their daily chores to worship. The Sabbath was a day of rejoicing and rest, particularly for the labor-weary woman. Both she and her husband spent the day reading from the Torah, singing hymns of praise, and teaching their children the beliefs and rituals of their religion (see Deuteronomy 6:7; this requirement that children be taught the Mosaic law presumably applied to both parents, for the law was read to the entire population).

Children living in Jerusalem around 600 BC would probably have observed their mothers

attending local assemblies or gatherings to worship alongside their fathers. Women participated in religious festivals and national celebrations (Deuteronomy 16:9–15; 31:12), singing and dancing, and brought sacrifices of thanksgiving to the temple, teaching their children through their example.

Nephi makes it clear from the first verse of his account that he was grateful to both of his parents for his upbringing. “I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents, therefore I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father” (1 Nephi 1:1). Apparently his education was given to him by these “goodly parents,” righteous and devoted people who had taken the time to teach him reading, writing, the language of the scriptures, and the learning of his father. But the implication of Nephi’s statement is even deeper than that. He also refers to an inherited spiritual knowledge and a familiarity with religion and the God whom his parents worshipped.

In his account of obtaining the brass plates, Nephi recalls the powerful words of Sariah, who had been extremely troubled and anxious for her sons’ safety during their absence: “Now I know of a surety that the Lord hath commanded my husband to flee into the wilderness; yea, and I also know of a surety that the Lord hath protected my sons, and delivered them out of the hands of Laban, and given them power whereby they could accomplish the thing which the Lord hath commanded them” (1 Nephi 5:8).

Against all odds, Sariah’s sons had succeeded, and her testimony became a sure knowledge that

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