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Brant Gardner

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Section 2: Nephi the Writer

Chapter 7: Nephi Preparing

We have the Book of Mormon people because of Lehi. Nephi began the tradition that eventually allowed Mormon to create the Book of Mormon. Lehi led his family to the New World, but Nephi defined his descendants as a record-keeping people. The Nephites were a people of the Book both because Nephi (and his brothers) preserved a record-keeping tradition (the brass plates) and because he began a new one after arriving in the New World. Mormon may be most directly responsible for the Book of Mormon, but the records Mormon used (and many of the organizational structures that Mormon used) began with Nephi.

Our only absolute information about Nephi as a recordkeeper comes from records he created after arriving in the New World. Nevertheless, his story as a recordkeeper and creator began in the Old World. Nephi was born in Jerusalem, but we are not told when. Until the change of the year counts in the book of Alma, all dates depended upon the date when Lehi and his family left Jerusalem. The fixed dates that bracket the departure of Lehi's family are the first year of the reign of Zedekiah (1 Nephi 1:4), or 597 BC, and the destruction of Jerusalem Lehi predicted, which occurred in 587 BC.¹⁵⁹ Randall Spackman further clarifies:

This passage provides one of the most important clues for dating the time of Lehi's departure from Jerusalem. According to Nephi,

159. For the destruction of Jerusalem, see Frank Moore Cross Jr., "The Cave Inscriptions From Khirbet Beit Lei," in *Near Eastern Archaeology in the Twentieth Century: Essays in Honor of Nelson Glueck*, ed. James A. Sanders (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 304, quoted in Lamar C. Berrett, "The So-Called Lehi Cave," FARMS Reprint Series (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1982), 2–3.

the actions taken against Jeremiah and the other prophets were directly connected with the threats on Lehi's life. This argument was not an academic discussion between friendly brothers, but an intense debate involving life and death issues.... Thus, the knowledge of Lehi's sons concerning Jeremiah's imprisonment places the escape of Ishmael's family after the time when the Egyptians invaded the land of Judah [587 BCE].¹⁶⁰

We can therefore use 587 BC as the earliest departure date from Jerusalem, but we must guess how old Nephi might have been when they left. Early in the journey in the wilderness Nephi says of himself that he was exceedingly young, but large in stature (1 Nephi 2:16). Noel B. Reynolds suggests that he was born in 615 BC, but this date is derived from a departure date of 600 BC, which is thirteen years earlier than the best plausible date of departure.¹⁶¹ The date was likely based on a guess of how young he might have been. Fifteen is certainly young, but when Nephi says he was exceedingly young, it suggests something younger than fifteen. In the ancient world the responsibilities of maturity descended much earlier than in modern societies. Nevertheless, an age of fifteen can be used as an approximation in the absence of any specific evidence. Using the assumption of fifteen years when they left Jerusalem, Nephi would have been born about 602 BC

Nephi doesn't tell us when he began to write, but he does say he didn't receive the command to create his second record, the small plates, until thirty years after their departure from Jerusalem (2 Nephi 5:28–30), or 554 BC, Nephi would have been forty-five years old. He also noted the passing of the fortieth year in that same chapter (2 Nephi 34), so ten years passed from the beginning of the creation of the plates to the time he wrote that verse.¹⁶² By the time Nephi began to write Jacob's sermon on the plates of what we know as 2 Nephi, he would have been fifty-eight.

To guess when he began writing on the large plates, we need to eliminate all the time the family spent in the Old World. The command to create plates for a record of his people did not come until after they

160. Randall P. Spackman, "Introduction to Book of Mormon Chronology," FARMS Reprint Series (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1993), 10.

161. Noel B. Reynolds, s.v. "Nephi 1," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1003–5

162. Noel B. Reynolds, "Nephi's Outline," in *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, eds. Noel B. Reynolds and Charles D. Tate (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, Religious Studies Center 1982), 54–55. The analysis of the timing for the small plates I have listed comes from Reynolds.

had arrived in the New World (1 Nephi 18: 25–19:1).¹⁶³ The family’s journey from Jerusalem to Bountiful took some unknown time longer than the eight years they spent in the wilderness (1 Nephi 17:4). Perhaps this might add an extra year. Nephi doesn’t say how long their ocean voyage took, but certainly less than a year.

The departure from Bountiful and arrival in the New World therefore might have been about 578 BC. That would have been the earliest that Nephi began to write. However, it is unlikely that Nephi began writing immediately. The fact that he began with the record of the rulers of the people of Nephi declares that he began the record after he and his people had separated from Laman, Lemuel, and those who stayed with them. However, the pressures of creating a new community in a new land would certainly have required concentrated effort at the beginning of the new community. As a guess, I suggest that perhaps ten years passed before there was a sufficient community established not only to select Nephi as a king but also to have the time required to become stable enough for Nephi’s attention to turn to recordkeeping. That guess would have him start creating and writing on the large plates around 568 BC, when he would have been thirty-four years old.

Jacob tells us that Nephi gave him the small plates fifty-five years after their departure from Jerusalem, or 532 BC (Jacob 1:1). In Jacob 1:9 he tells us that “Nephi began to be old, and he saw that he must soon die; wherefore, he anointed a man to be a king and a ruler over his people now, according to the reigns of the kings.” There is no way to know how much time, if any, passed from the time Nephi charged Jacob with keeping the small plates and the time he appointed his successor as king (presumably a son, but the text never says). The only hint we have is that Nephi understood he was nearing death. If he knew he was dying, those two important actions were fulfilled before he was unable. It would not be unreasonable to assume they occurred in close succession, and that Nephi would have died relatively soon thereafter.

Perhaps Nephi died in the fifty-fifth year from their departure from Jerusalem, which would make Nephi seventy years old when he died. Depending on when in the year he was born, if he lived to the fifty-sixth year, he might still have been seventy, or he could have been seventy-one. Of course, these ages are dependent upon his being fifteen years old when the family left Jerusalem, and there is no firm evidence of his age upon departure.

163. It is important to remember that these verses were together in the same chapter in the 1830 edition. They were divided in 1879 and in all subsequent editions.

Upon Plates Which I Have Made (1 Nephi 1:17)

After Lehi established a camp three day's journey outside of Jerusalem, he received a dream-vision in which the Lord commanded him to send his sons back to Jerusalem to obtain "the record of the Jews and also a genealogy of my forefathers, and they are engraven upon plates of brass" (1 Nephi 3:3). Metal plates were certainly not the typical medium for creating records. Scrolls were much easier to make and to write upon. Pieces of broken pots often served as the ancient equivalent of a notepad. However, extremely important texts were, at times, engraved upon metal.¹⁶⁴ John A. Tvedtnes has collected examples of ancient records upon plates. The thread binding the examples is the importance of the text and therefore the desirability to have it on an imperishable medium. In Hittite tradition, an inscription on metal became a talismanic blessing on a house or a temple: "As this copper is firm and sound, so may the house (temple) be firm and sound."¹⁶⁵ Tvedtnes notes that: "Isaiah 8:1 speaks of writing on a polished metal plate with an engraving tool; the terms are mistranslated 'roll' and 'pen' in the King James Bible."¹⁶⁶

Perhaps most relevant for the brass plates are texts that describe records on bronze plates:

164. Roland Kenneth Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1969), 207–8:

Clay tablets were the commonest vehicles of written communications in Mesopotamia for many centuries, whereas in Egypt it was papyrus which claimed this distinction from about 3000 BC. Because of the abundance of stone in Egypt it was customary to carve hieroglyphic texts on *stelae* and on the walls of innumerable temples and tombs. Metal was much less commonly used as writing material than either stone or lay, although cuneiform inscriptions in Sumerian, Akkadian, and Old Persian have been discovered on objects made of gold, silver, copper, and bronze. Gold is mentioned in Exodus 28:36 as a writing-surface; stone is also referred to several times in the Old Testament in this connection (Exod. 24:12; 34:1; Deuteronomy 4:13; 27:sf.; Joshua 8:32; Job 19:24). The use of broken pottery as writing material was widespread throughout the ancient Near East, although potsherds were of limited value at the Mesopotamian, since they could only be utilized for a script like Aramaic, which was written with pen and ink rather than with a stylus. Wood in one form or another was employed as a means of receiving writing (Numbers 17:2f.; Ezekiel 37:16f.; cf. Isaiah 8:1; 30:8; Hab. 2:2), as were leather and parchment.

165. John A. Tvedtnes, *The Book of Mormon and Other Hidden Books: Out of Darkness Unto Light* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2000), 149.

166. *Ibid.*

The *Cologne Mani Codex* says that an angel appeared to Sethel (biblical Seth), son of Adam and told him secrets that he was to “write upon bronze tablets and store them up in the desert land.” A similar story is told in the *Apocalypse of Enosh*, cited in the *Cologne Mani Codex*. The angel instructed Seth’s son Enosh (Enos in the King James Bible) to write “hidden things upon bronze tablets and deposit (them) in the wilderness.”¹⁶⁷

Archaeology has not found examples of this kind of longer text on bronze plates, but a very important find was a biblical inscription on small rolled up strips of silver. These likely served as sacred talismans, preserving quotations from Numbers 6:24–26 which speak of protection from evil that Yahweh provides.¹⁶⁸ These small silver scrolls are the earliest attestations of a biblical text.¹⁶⁹

William J. Hamblin notes that there was apparently a tradition of important writing on bronze which remains attested only in linguistic references:

Walter Burkert, in his recent study of the cultural dependence of Greek civilization on the ancient Near East, refers to the transmission of the practice of writing on bronze plates (Semitic root *dlt*) from the Phoenician to the Greeks. “The reference to ‘bronze *deltoid* [plates, from *dlt*]’ as a term [among the Greeks] for ancient sacral laws should point back to the seventh or sixth century [BC]” as the period in which the terminology and the practice of writing on bronze plates was transmitted from the Phoenicians to the Greeks. Students of the Book of Mormon will note that this is precisely the time and place in which the Book of Mormon claims that there existed similar bronze plates which contained the “ancient sacred laws” of the Hebrews, the close cultural cousins of the Phoenicians.¹⁷⁰

Ironically, few examples of writing intentionally committed to an imperishable medium have survived. However, the texts that do survive

167. *Ibid.*, 149–50.

168. William J. Adams, “Lehi’s Jerusalem and Writing on Silver Plates,” in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon*, eds. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 24–25.

169. William J. Adams, “More on the Silver Plates from Lehi’s Jerusalem,” in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon*, eds., John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 28.

170. William J. Hamblin, “Metal Plates and the Book of Mormon,” in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon*, 21.

provide a time-appropriate cultural context for the brass plates. The brass plates became the physical and spiritual model of a sacred record that crossed the ocean with Nephi and became the model for Nephi's record creating and keeping.

The plates delivered to Joseph Smith consisted of the record Mormon created, but also included of a set of plates Nephi himself had made (1 Nephi 9:3, the small plates of Nephi). The modern witnesses who handled the plates describe them as a uniform set (not varying in their dimensions). Nevertheless, they contained plates physically created nearly a thousand years apart. The ancient world typically had no concept of standard sizes, yet the two sets of plates apparently fit together without noticeable division. I hypothesize that Nephi's original plates established a tradition followed by later historians, archivists, and plate-makers. When Nephi made plates for his new record I suspect he intentionally modeled his plates on the brass plates that had formed such an important part of his Old World life. The size would have become the Nephite standard size.

The material upon which Nephi wrote was not brass, but probably a New World alloy called *tumbaga*, which combines gold, silver, and sometimes other metals into a metal lighter than solid gold but retaining the golden color.¹⁷¹ An interesting concatenation of information occurs across one of the new chapters Orson Pratt created for the Book of Mormon — a concatenation that strengthens the possibility that some version of tumbaga was used to create Nephi's plates (and those which came after):

And it came to pass that we did find upon the land of promise, as we journeyed in the wilderness, that there were beasts in the forests of every kind, both the cow and the ox, and the ass and the horse, and the goat and the wild goat, and all manner of wild animals, which were for the use of men. And we did find all manner of ore, both of gold, and of silver, and of copper.

And it came to pass that the Lord commanded me, wherefore I did make plates of ore that I might engraven upon them the record of my people. And upon the plates which I made I did engraven the record of my father, and also our journeyings in the wilderness, and the prophecies of my father; and also many of mine own prophecies have I engraven upon them. (1 Nephi 18:25–19:1)

Nephi's mention that his people discovered both gold, silver, and copper leads directly to his making the plates. The two may have

171. Robert F. Smith, "The Golden Plates," in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1992), 276.

been related. Although we use the shorthand “gold plates” to refer to the plates Joseph received, they were likely not pure gold. Historian Matthew B. Brown notes:

Joseph Smith did not say that the plates of the Book of Mormon were made of pure gold, but rather that they “had the appearance of gold.” Oliver Cowdery is likewise reported as saying in 1830 that the Book of Mormon was “written on golden plates, or something resembling golden plates.” A secondhand statement by David Whitmer in 1831 says that “the leaves were plates of metal of a whitish yellow color.”¹⁷²

Another clue that we are not dealing with pure gold is the weight of the plates, according to witnesses. In addition to the descriptions of the material and color, there are various descriptions of the size and weight of the plates, as Robert F. Smith describes:

Joseph himself gave us the length, width, and thickness of the whole set of plates as 6” x 8” x 6” in his famous Wentworth Letter. On separate occasions, David Whitmer gave larger dimensions of 7” x 8”, and 6” x 9”, and 8” x 10”; Martin Harris claimed a smaller set at 7” x 8” x 4.” Following Joseph’s dimensions would amount to .1666 cubic foot (.005 cubic meter)...

As shown many years ago by metallurgist/blacksmith Reed H. Putnam, hammered plates of pure twentyfour karat gold would probably not weigh more than about 50 percent of the solid dimensions, i.e., 100.4 pounds (45.2 kilograms).¹⁷³

However, even one hundred pounds contradicts the testimony of those who handled them: “William Smith, a brother of the Prophet who had handled and hefted the plates in a pillowcase, claimed on several occasions that the set of plates weighed about sixty pounds, as did Willard Chase, while Martin Harris said that they weighed forty to fifty pounds.”¹⁷⁴

If not pure gold, then of what were they made? William Smith suggested that the plates were “a mixture of gold and copper,”¹⁷⁵ though how he might have known that cannot be determined. Nevertheless,

172. Brown, *Plates of Gold*, 148.

173. Smith, “The Golden Plates,” 275–76.

174. *Ibid.*, 276. The evidence that he handled them while in a pillowcase is not consistent with being able to describe the composition. The description of the composition comes either from a different occasion or from hearing Joseph describe them.

175. *Ibid.*

Nephi's suggestion that finding gold, silver, and copper might have led directly to the creation of the plates provides the hypothesis that an alloy of those metals was used.

Orson Pratt provides an interesting description of the characters on the plates. He says:

Eight other witnesses testify that Joseph Smith showed them the plates, and that they saw the engravings upon them, and that they had the appearance of ancient work and curious workmanship. They describe these plates as being about the thickness of common tin, about eight inches in length, and from six to seven in breadth. Upon each side of the leaves of these plates there were fine engravings, which were stained with a black, hard stain, so as to make the letters more legible and easier to be read.¹⁷⁶

Jerry Grover suggests that there are two possibilities that account for the black color of the engraved characters: it is the byproduct of corrosion, or there was a material purposely placed in the engraved character depressions.¹⁷⁷ After a discussion of the possible methods, he settled on depletion gilding. He had an experiment conducted to discover the alloy ratios and processes that might yield the blackening of the characters:

As part of a small research project that experimented with various New World depletion gilding techniques and parameters, one depletion gilding technique involved sequential washing and then heating with a torch. This technique was used on ternary alloy plates consisting of 37.5% gold, 57.5% silver, and 5% copper with various designs engraved on their surfaces. Areas where depletion gilding was not desired were covered with a resist, and to give variations in the color of the enriched surface the resist was

176. Orson Pratt, "Evidences of the Bible and Book of Mormon Compared," in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–86), 7:30–31. Orson did not see the plates, but certainly spoke with those who did. In 1844, William Ivins Appleby described the characters as being filled with "black cement." W. I. Appleby, "A Dissertation on Nebuchadnezzar's Dream," (Philadelphia: Brown, Bicking & Gilbert, 1844), 23. Appleby did not see the plates. As with Orson Pratt, his information must have come from conversations with the witnesses, or with others who had spoken with them. Both Pratt's and Appleby's comment about the black letters have no other known corroboration, but their separate witness without apparent copying suggests that it was a detail that had been under-reported.

177. Jerry Grover, *Ziff, Magic Goggles, and Golden Plates: Etymology of Zyf and a Metallurgical Analysis of the Book of Mormon Plates* (Provo, UT: Grover, 2015), 74.

applied in different stages of the heating and washing cycles. The surface was burnished and was finally heated in the presence of ammonium sulphide or sulfur to give a brown-black surface color or patina to the undepleted regions. [One] experimental plate ... [was found that] would most approximate the description given for the Book of Mormon gold plates with black filled engravings, and was produced using known pre-Columbian New World depletion gilding techniques. It was thought that the color was caused by the formation of silver and copper sulfides.¹⁷⁸

Although the known New World techniques post-date Nephi in the region posited for the Book of Mormon,¹⁷⁹ examples from the Old World suggest that such techniques were known, and therefore potentially available to Nephi.¹⁸⁰ Significant in Grover's experiment is the combination of gold, silver, and copper — the very metals Nephi mentioned just prior to discussing his creation of the original set of plates. Grover's research cannot tell us that the plates were made of just such an alloy, but the ability of that combination of metals to produce plates matching the description of not only the color and weight of the plates, but also the blackening of the characters, provides an important foundation of plausibility.

Nephi's Plausible Training as a Scribe

After leading those who would follow him to a new part of the land (2 Nephi 5:5–9), Nephi created plates and wrote upon them “a full account of the history of my people” (1 Nephi 9:2). We know very little of what was on those plates, save that it was an account of “the reign of the kings and the wars and contentions” (1 Nephi 9:4) of the Nephites. These were the plates that Mormon abridged and incorporated into his Book, but what Mormon chose from them vanished with the 116 manuscript pages that were lost (though I speculate on the lost pages in section “The Problem of the Lost Pages”). At some point after he had been recording the full account of the history of his people, the Lord instructed Nephi to create a second type of record (1 Nephi 9:4), which we know as the small plates of Nephi. As the founder of the recordkeeping tradition, understanding Nephi's contribution should set the trajectory that eventually arrives at Mormon's creative use of that tradition.

178. *Ibid.*, 81

179. There is a growing consensus among scholars with training in archaeology and anthropology that Mesoamerica best fits the textual requirements for geography, geology, and cultural complexity.

180. Grover, *Ziff, Magic Goggles, and Golden Plates*, 76–80.

How did Nephi come to be a record creator? Inspiration is too simple an answer. Inspiration had to act upon an existing ability to both create metal plates and write a complex, long text. How did Nephi come to have the basic skills necessary for each of those two tasks?

Creating the plates required skill in metalworking. There is abundant information in the text that attests to Nephi's familiarity with metal working, and the logical source of that knowledge was his father, Lehi. Lehi and his family were quite wealthy, as attested by the ability of the brothers to amass a substantial bribe, consisting of "our gold, and our silver, and our precious things" (1 Nephi 3:22). It was large enough to buy Laban's envy, even if not his cooperation.

John A. Tvedtnes was the first to suggest that Lehi's wealth was the result of metalsmithing.¹⁸¹ Interestingly, most of Tvedtnes's evidence concerns Nephi's familiarity with metalworking, not Lehi's. Nephi was given detailed instructions on how to build a ship, but there is no similar set of instructions on how to make the tools with which to build it. Nephi simply asks the Lord "whither shall I go that I may find ore to molten, that I may make tools to construct the ship after the manner which thou hast shown unto me?" (1 Nephi 17:9). He did not seem to need to ask how to create the tools once he knew a source for the ore. After he arrived in the New World, he listed useful animals and also "all manner of ore, both of gold, and of silver, and of copper" (1 Nephi 18:25) — presumably because the metals were also useful. He taught his New World people metalworking (2 Nephi 5:15–17).¹⁸²

Although the evidence for metalworking in the family is heavily based on information specific to Nephi, it still points to Lehi's occupation.¹⁸³ Jeffrey R. Chadwick, Associate professor of Church History at Brigham Young University, adds important information that more surely demonstrates Lehi's involvement:

Lehi left behind gold and silver, two precious metals likely to have been used in expert jewelry smithing. While the population at large often utilized silver as money, in the form of cut pieces and small jewelry (no coins were in use in Judah during Iron Age II), to possess gold was very rare — gold was not used as a medium of common monetary exchange. For

181. John A. Tvedtnes, *The Most Correct Book: Insights from a Book of Mormon Scholar* (Salt Lake City: Cornerstone, 1999), 94–95.

182. *Ibid.*, 94–95.

183. *Ibid.*, 88–98.

Lehi to possess both gold and silver suggests that he worked with gold, which in turn suggests gold smithing.¹⁸⁴

With evidence pointing to metal working as his father's profession, Nephi's knowledge would have come from his father and the family business. It is not surprising that a son would understand and have some training in his father's craft. However, while the family business explains how Nephi learned metal working, it may not be sufficient to understand Nephi's preparation. No matter how well Nephi learned the business, it was not going to be his. It would be earmarked for the first son, Laman. I believe that evidence also points to specific training in a different occupation: after Nephi used his experience with his father's occupation to create the golden plates, he used his education as a scribe to create the text.¹⁸⁵

The most important evidence that Nephi was trained as a scribe is so obvious that it is easily missed: Nephi could read and write. Even among those who could read, the nature of what they could read differed. Some might be able to read and write simple texts, but only a few were able to both read and write more complex, literary texts.¹⁸⁶ Perhaps more surprising for modern readers is that many could read, but not write.¹⁸⁷

It is difficult to ascertain the level and nature of literacy in ancient Israel. Some level of literacy may have been fairly extensive, with at least rudimentary reading and writing being taught in the villages.¹⁸⁸ Nevertheless, while Israel might be argued to have a slightly higher literacy rate than its neighbors, their rates were so low as to suggest

184. Jeffrey R. Chadwick, "Lehi's House at Jerusalem and the Land of His Inheritance," in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, eds. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 114. Chadwick proposes ten reasons to see Lehi as a metalsmith (114–17), all but the first of which deal with Nephi rather than Lehi. We simply have better information for Nephi and the best explanation for Nephi's expertise is that of his father.

185. Brant A. Gardner, "Nephi as Scribe," *Mormon Studies Review* 23, no. 1 (2011): 45–55.

186. Karel van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 11.

187. Rosalind Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece, Key Themes in Ancient History*, eds. P.A. Cartledge and D.A.S. Garnsey, rev. ed. (1992; repr., New York: University of Cambridge, 1999), 10.

188. Michael D. Coogan, "Literacy in Ancient Israel," in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, eds. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 438.

that we should be cautious in assuming widespread literacy in Israel. Karel van der Toorn notes:

The great civilizations of antiquity were oral cultures. Though the figures differ depending on place and period, literacy was always restricted to a small segment of society. The Mesopotamians were the first humans to write, but less than 5 percent of the population was actually literate. In Egypt the rate of literacy was slightly higher than in Mesopotamia, but even the most generous estimates put it at no more than 7 percent of the population. In the classical world the situation was not much different. Greece had an overall literacy rate of about 10 percent, yet it was still predominantly an oral culture, rhetoric being the foundation and eloquence the aim of education.¹⁸⁹

Hebrew culture was similarly heavily oral. In Hebrew as well as several other languages, the word for “to read” meant “to say aloud.”¹⁹⁰ An interesting example of the borders between literacy and orality is found in one of the Lachish Letters. The Lachish letters were ostraca (scraps of pottery used for writing) written to and from military leaders apparently preparing for Nebuchanezzar’s invasion (around 590 BC). That invasion eventually resulted in the fall of Jerusalem, the Babylonian exile, and of course, Lehi and his family’s departure for the New World. A military commander sent the following response to his superior:

Your servant Hoshayahu (hereby) reports to my lord Ya’ush. May YHWH give you good news And now, please explain to your servant the meaning of the letter which my lord sent to your servant yesterday evening. For your servant has been sick at heart ever since you sent (that letter) to your servant. In it my lord said: “Don’t you know how to read a letter?” As (Y)HWH lives, no one has ever tried to read *me* a letter! Moreover, whenever any letter comes to me and I have read it, I can repeat it down to the smallest detail.¹⁹¹

That letters were exchanged clearly points to some literacy. However, the commander’s expectation was that the recipient might not be able to read. Rather, it was assumed the letter would be read to the recipient. The subordinate’s reply reflected justifiable pride in his ability to read, but it

189. Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew*, 10.

190. Coogan, “Literacy in Ancient Israel,” 437.

191. J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* (Louisville, KY: The Westminster John Knox Press, 1986), 418.

also highlights the continuing emphasis on orality. The subordinate also declares that when “I have read it, I can repeat it down to the smallest detail.” There is no indication that the record itself would be referenced, but rather that the function of the writing was to provide the information that would then be remembered without the written copy.¹⁹²

Karel van der Toorn suggests for Israel that “even if basic reading skills were more common in certain places and periods than generally assumed, it is doubtful whether this constituted widespread literacy. The ability to decipher a letter, for instance, does not amount to an active command of the written tradition of a culture. ‘High Literacy’ was confined to a small group.”¹⁹³

This is precisely the point at which Nephi’s training becomes most obvious. Perhaps all of Lehi’s family could read and write at a basic level. However, even in our modern society with very high literacy rates, there is a gap between writing a short note and composing a longer, more complicated text. What we know as First Nephi¹⁹⁴ is much closer to van der Toorn’s “High Literacy” that a simple letter would be, not only for its length but because of the artistry in its construction.

Nephi’s writings are far beyond writing or deciphering a letter. At least in the text we know as 1 Nephi, we have a remarkably well-crafted document. We have in 1 Nephi the “high literacy” van der Toorn suggests

192. Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible*, 12: “In order for a written communication to reach its destination, however, the written text needed a voice. Texts were for the ears rather than the eyes Even such a mundane form of written communication as the letter usually required the intervention of someone who read its contents to the addressee. A messenger did not deliver the letter like a mailman; he announced its message, and the written letter served as aide-mémoire and means of verification.”

193. *Ibid.*, 10–11.

194. Skousen, *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*, 1:104; Robert F. Smith, *Book of Mormon Critical Text*, 3 vols. (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1987), 1:164, indicates that the break between First and Second Nephi must have been the same as what Joseph saw/understood as a chapter break. Prior to entering the text, the scribe wrote “Chapter VIII” (the previous chapter was chapter seven). When the dictation began, the first line is “The Book of Nephi An account of the death of Lehi” Later, in superscript, we have added “second” to give us “The Second Book of Nephi,” and also an addition of “Chapter 1.” It appears that in Nephi’s manuscript, the two books of Nephi were both named “The Book of Nephi,” with the distinction coming in the following text giving the basic outline of what the book would contain. This is the same naming that we see later for what we know as Third Nephi and Fourth Nephi. Both were originally simply “The Book of Nephi,” with the distinguishing information being the sentence indicating the author.

was confined to a small group. Untrained semi-literacy would not have been sufficient to attempt such a record.¹⁹⁵

Being a scribe was much more than simply learning to read and write. It was a specific type of education following similar lines in each of the Middle Eastern traditions. The great civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia had scribal schools.¹⁹⁶ Indirect evidence confirms the presence of scribal education in Israel and Judah.¹⁹⁷ Pragmatically, only the higher social classes were acceptable sources of scribes.¹⁹⁸ The combination of metalsmithing and rents from ancestral lands in Samaria would have Lehi and his family approaching Jerusalem's upper class, giving reason to believe that Nephi might have been accepted into one of those schools.¹⁹⁹

The scribal schools' curriculum covered a range of topics, from languages, classic texts, the interpretation of texts, to public speaking. Karel van der Toorn, President of the University of Amsterdam and scholar of religion and Ancient Near Eastern languages, describes the language component of such training:

Instruction in the idiom of particular professions and written genres could be seen as part of the larger program of language instruction. The linguistic skills of the scribes would normally have included the mastery of one or more foreign languages. Around 700, the officials of King Hezekiah were able to conduct a conversation in Aramaic, which to the common people was incomprehensible (2 Kings 18:26). In addition to Aramaic, the scribal program may have taught other languages as well, such as Egyptian and, later, Greek. In the words of Ben Sira, the accomplished scribe "will

195. Perhaps we see the result of less training near the end of the small plate record with the number of writers in the book of Omni. Perhaps as much as not having much to say, the brief entries may also indicate that the writers did not the training that would have provided them with more to say.

196. Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible*, 68–69.

197. *Ibid.*, 96–104.

198. *Ibid.*, 105: "In view of their social-economic situation, the Levitical scribes can be likened to civil servants with no financial worries. They could apparently afford to pay for the education of their children; for them, a tuition fee consisting of a large sum of silver was not prohibitive. While it is conceivable that mere copyists and lower clerks were drawn from the lower strata of society, scribes belonged to what we would call the upper middle class." Internal quotation silently removed.

199. Chadwick, "Lehi's House at Jerusalem and the Land of His Inheritance," 117.

travel through the lands of foreign nations” to increase his knowledge (Sir 39:4). Such exploits presume that training in foreign languages was part of the scribal education.²⁰⁰

That such skill in linguistics and writing systems existed in Israel receives confirmation through a number of artifacts exhibiting Egyptian hieratic writing which have been found in Canaan. One suggestion stemming from these findings is that there were Egyptian scribes in Canaan who were training local scribes in the art. John S. Thompson, a PhD student at the University of Pennsylvania quotes Orly Goldwasser, head of Egyptology at the Hebrew University Jerusalem:

[A]fter the decline of the Egyptian Empire ... many Egyptians, or Egyptian-trained Canaanite scribes lost their means of existence, and may have offered their scribal and administrative knowledge to the new powers rising in the area, first to the Philistines and then the Israelites We would like to suggest that these Egyptian or Egyptian-trained scribes, cut off from their homeland, well acquainted with Egyptian decorum as well as the Canaanite language, educated local scribes, who in turn passed on their knowledge to their successors.²⁰¹

The text on an artifact found at Lachish contains the Egyptian title “scribe.” This bolsters the idea that there was an Egyptian scribal tradition in Judah.²⁰²

The presence of a scribal tradition dealing with both the Egyptian language and one (or more) of its writing systems may provide a specific cultural background to explain the enigmatic references in Nephi’s introduction:

I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents, therefore I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father; and having seen many afflictions in the course of my days, nevertheless, having been highly favored of the Lord in all my days; yea, having had a great knowledge of the goodness and the mysteries of God, therefore I make a record of my proceedings in my days.

200. Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible*, 100.

201. Orly Goldwasser, “An Egyptian Scribe from Lachish and the Hieratic Tradition of the Hebrew Kingdoms,” *Tel Aviv* 18 (1991): 248–53, quoted in John S. Thompson, “Lehi and Egypt,” in *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, 266–67.

202. Thompson, “Lehi and Egypt,” 266.

Yea, I make a record in the language of my father, *which consists of the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians* (1 Nephi 1:1 – 2).

Hugh Nibley first noticed and highlighted that Nephi’s proficiency with Egyptian was the result of having been *taught*.²⁰³ Many LDS scholars have suggested that “a record in the language of my father, which consists of the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians” may have been an Egyptian script encoding Hebrew language.²⁰⁴ Evidence does exist to indicate that this kind of mixing of script and language did take place. John A. Tvedtnes and Stephen D. Ricks (professor of Hebrew at Brigham Young University) provide some examples:

[There] are Israelite documents from the ninth to sixth centuries BC, from which we learn that the Israelites adopted the Egyptian hieratic numerals and mingled them with Hebrew text. More important, however, are Hebrew and Aramaic texts — languages used by the Jews of Lehi’s time — that are written in Egyptian characters. One of these is *Papyrus Amherst 63*, a document written in Egyptian demotic and dating to the second century B.C. The document had, like the Dead Sea Scrolls, been preserved in an earthen jar and was discovered in Thebes, Egypt during the second half of the nineteenth century. For years Egyptologists struggled with the text but could make no sense of it. The letters were clear, but they did not form intelligible words. In 1944, Raymond Bowman of the

203. Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert and The World of the Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1952), 13. Nibley references Mosiah 1:4, which specifically speaks of Lehi having been taught. While the text has Lehi as the one receiving this education, I suggest that this is due to the late reference. Mosiah is using this example over 400 years later. It would not be surprising that the reference had been passed to the Old World patriarch rather than to the New World king, Nephi.

204. John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1985), 75–76. John L. Sorenson, “The Book of Mormon as a Mesoamerican Record,” in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997), 443. Sorenson does note (507n121) that both Hugh Nibley and Robert F. Smith see the language as Egyptian as well as the script. Daniel C. Peterson, “Is the Book of Mormon True? Notes on the Debate,” in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited*, 150–52. Tvedtnes, *The Most Correct Book*, 22–24. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert and The World of the Jaredites*, 15, however, does not follow that idea.

University of Chicago realized that, while the script is Egyptian, the underlying language is Aramaic.²⁰⁵

Although understanding that Nephi may have been trained as a scribe does not entirely clarify what he meant by the *learning of the Jews* and the *language of the Egyptians*, it does provide a context in which those two aspects of language fit naturally together in a written document, and where a single person might have the necessary linguistic skill to creatively use a script to represent the phonetics of a different language. One might expect one who was minimally literate to be able to write with their native language with their native script, but not to exhibit the learning necessary to combine the phonetics of one language with a symbolic representation typically used for a different language.

In addition to languages, the curriculum of a scribal school included studying important cultural texts. Essentially the same Mesopotamian list of texts has been found in diverse locations, suggesting that they formed a standard curriculum for different scribal schools.²⁰⁶ Egyptian scribes similarly worked with and often memorized many of their classic texts.²⁰⁷ For the Israelites, van der Toorn notes: “The scholars of Israel were no exception to the common pattern: they were scribes who had specialized in the classic texts, which in their case made them scholars of the Torah.”²⁰⁸

Perhaps Nephi’s love of and frequent citation of Isaiah was a direct result of a scribal school’s emphasis on Isaiah. Van der Toorn suggests that the presence of multiple copies of Deuteronomy, Isaiah, and the Psalms among the Dead Sea Scrolls is an “indication of their position in the scribal curriculum.”²⁰⁹ Everything Nephi wrote attests to his intimate familiarity with Isaiah, a familiarity that may have been the result of his study of Isaiah as a classic text.

It appears that the New World scribal training may have been even more limited to the social elites. While we do hear of writing, it is also clear that Nephtite culture remained predominantly oral. Nephi himself noted:

And now I, Nephi, cannot write all the things which were taught among my people; neither am I mighty in writing, like unto speaking; for when a man speaketh by the power of the

205. John A. Tvedtnes and Stephen D. Ricks, “Jewish and other Semitic Texts Written in Egyptian Characters,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5, no. 2 (1996): 159–60.

206. Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible*, 57–58.

207. *Ibid.*, 68.

208. *Ibid.*, 81.

209. *Ibid.*, 102.

Holy Ghost the power of the Holy Ghost carrieth it unto the hearts of the children of men (2 Nephi 33:1).

For Nephi, the power of the Spirit was more markedly present in oral discourse. Modern readers may perhaps have felt spiritual promptings as we read scripture, but Nephi expected that it would be more prevalent, more powerful, through oral communication.

At the end of the Book of Mormon, Moroni appears to underline that same primacy of oral communication when he declares: “The Gentiles will mock at these things, because of our weakness in writing; for Lord thou hast made us mighty in word by faith, but thou hast not made us mighty in writing; for thou hast made all this people that they could speak much, because of the Holy Ghost which thou hast given them” (Ether 12:23).

When Nephite writers wrote, they often followed conventions that came from oral literature rather than conventions dependent upon the written word.²¹⁰

210. See William G. Eggington “Our Weakness in Writing: Oral and Literate Culture in the Book of Mormon,” FARMS Reprint (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1992), 12–23, and Gardner, “Literacy and Orality in the Book of Mormon,” 29–85.