



Faculty Publications

2021-08-17

Lehi and Nephi as Trained Manassite Scribes

Noel B. Reynolds

Brigham Young University - Provo, nbr@byu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub>



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Reynolds, Noel B., "Lehi and Nephi as Trained Manassite Scribes" (2021). *Faculty Publications*. 5380.
<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/5380>

This Working Paper is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Lehi and Nephi as Trained Manassite Scribes

Noel B. Reynolds

Draft August 16, 2021

Abstract

This paper brings contemporary ANE scholarship in several fields together 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 7th century BCE Jerusalem and prominent bearers of the Josephite textual tradition.

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

¹ Michael E. Stone, *Ancient Judaism: New Visions and Views*, Eerdmans, 2011, p. 11.

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

Traditions of the ancestors

Like their contemporary Israelites, Lehi and Nephi exhibited a clear concern for

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

their heritage as descendants of Abraham through Joseph and as heirs of the covenants God gave to them anciently. They attached high importance to their descent through Joseph and his son Manasseh. But our modern Old Testament was produced primarily by the Judahite scribal schools and makes little effort to convey northern kingdom perspectives or traditions. Most of what we “know” about those ancient figures comes from traditions that cannot be verified by scientific means at this point in time. But it is also true that the scientific efforts of thousands of scholars over the past 150 years have produced an enormous increase in our understanding of the historical, linguistic, and cultural contexts in which those ancient Israelites lived and which inspired the traditions that have come down to modern times. In what follows, relevant findings of these recent studies will be harnessed to construct a context and a plausible backstory for the writings of Nephi and his successors.

While 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

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*, RSC, 2003, 144–172.

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 illuminating 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 connections as they mastered multiple languages and literatures and traveled to foreign scribal centers as part of their advanced training. The basic reality was

⁴ See Karel van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible*, Harvard University Press, 2007, 75–96 where he makes this case. Robert Maxwell has written a helpful review of van der Toorn’s book for LDS readers. See Robert L. Maxwell, “Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible,” *BYUSQ* 51, no.2 (2012): 181–185.

that all literacy in the ANE depended on these schools as they produced students with wide ranges of competence.

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 not yet been able to develop in much detail the ways in which the scribal craft developed and maintained social identities in that ancient world. This may not even be possible given the paucity of direct evidence and the great distance in time involved. But it

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

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.

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 scribal training regimen.⁶

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

⁶ Brant A. Gardner, "Nephi as Scribe," *Mormon Studies Review* 23/1 (2011): 45–55. Gardner's essay relies primarily on van der Toorn's excellent study of scribal culture in the Ancient Near East. An explosion of new studies now makes it possible to update and extend his observations.

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. It could have been 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 suspiciously like a

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

division along the lines of literacy competence.

Orality and Literacy in Ancient Israel

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 necessity of explaining 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 Young relies on the comparative methodology that begins with an identification of the social and economic conditions that promote increased literature, and concluded that "the classical world, even at its most advanced, was so lacking in the

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.

⁹ See Ian M. Young, "Israelite Literacy: Interpreting the Evidence: Part I," *Vetus Testamentum* 48:2 (April, 1998), 239–253 and Part II, *VT* 48:408–22.

characteristics which produce extensive literacy that we must suppose that the majority of people were always illiterate.”¹⁰

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 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

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

¹⁰ William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy*, 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 Environment,” *Writing and Ancient Near East Society: Essays in Honor of Alan Millard*, edited by Piotr Bienkowski, C. B. Mee, and E. A. Slater (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005), 49–118.

works. They belong somewhere in an ‘oral register’.”¹² 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.¹³ 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 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

¹² Susan Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word*, SPCK, 1997, p. 10.

¹³ Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, 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*, Indiana University Press, 1988.

definition of literacy, it is 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—placing him in a truly elite category of the literate. In this essay, I will both update and broaden the base of this discussion as I extend the reach of plausible conclusions regarding the character of writings by Nephi and his successors. Using Gardner's essays as a foundation, this study will collect and incorporate 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 scribal school. That case is further reinforced by the recent discovery of Hebrew rhetoric as developed and taught in pre-exilic Israel, which is also on full display in Nephi's works.

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.¹⁴ The accumulated findings of all that research finally made it possible to identify a system of scribal schooling in ancient Mesopotamia that shared similar teaching strategies and text collections across a wide geographical and cultural area.¹⁵ 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 study of such schools is the lack of original documents 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.¹⁶ Because advanced literacy was

¹⁴ 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* 40/2 (1998), pp. 40–52.

¹⁵ 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*, edited by Robert D. Biggs, Jennie Myers, and Martha T. Roth (Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2005): 57–67, at 60.

¹⁶ See van der Toorn, 62.

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 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 the son might also expect to inherit the father’s personal library.¹⁷

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 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,

¹⁷ Ibid., 62.

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.”¹⁸

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.¹⁹

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.”²⁰ 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.

¹⁸ Carole R. Fontaine, “The Sage in Family and Tribe,” *The Sage in Israel*, 158.

¹⁹ 1 Nephi 4:22.

²⁰ Fontaine, “The Sage,” 159.

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.”²¹

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.²²

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

²¹ Proverbs 4:1–4 (NIV)

²² 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): 279–293 argues that Nephi’s writings exhibit his scribal training in the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible.

taking into account the significant role played by sages and scribes functioning in schools.”²³

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.”²⁴ 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.”²⁵ 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,

²³ André Lemaire, “The Sage in School and Temple,” *The Sage in Israel*, 180–181. 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 University Press, 1999.

²⁴ Van der Toorn, 54.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 56.

exorcism, divinization, medicine, or cult singing.²⁶ 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 did meet all these requirements would receive a diploma recognizing their acquisition of “all the depths of wisdom” and certifying them for the professional practice of their specialization.²⁷

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.”²⁸ Van der Toorn and others also 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,

²⁶ Ibid., 57.

²⁷ Ibid., 59.

²⁸ Ibid., 60.

When you are a youngster, you suffer,

When you are mature, you [prosper].²⁹

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.³⁰

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 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 Samas temple in Sippar that was found essentially intact with more than 800

²⁹ 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.

³⁰ See Donald J. Treiman, *Occupational Prestige in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Academic Press, 1977), 223-226. 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 very confident that their causal explanations could be trusted to predict similar outcomes in earlier historical periods for which suitable data is not now available.

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.³¹ 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.³²

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

³¹ 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*, edited by Bernard F. Batto (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen Press, 1991): 1–12.

³² *Ibid.*, 64.

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.³³

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 could be acquired as one progressed.

³³ Ibid., 67.

The most accomplished would gain fame as the sages of their generations.³⁴

The scribes of Emar

The salvage excavations of the ancient 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.

Yoram Cohen was able to track sixty scribes through this period and to reconstruct their family and school affiliations.³⁵ 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

³⁴ See C. J. Gadd, "Teachers and Students in the Oldest Schools," *School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London, 1956, 1–45.

³⁵ Yoram Cohen, *The Scribes and Scholars of the City of Emar in the Late Bronze Age*, 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*, edited by W. S. van Egmond and W. H. van Soldt, (Leiden: Nederlands Instituut Voor Het Nabije Oosten, 2012), 115–127.

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 the dominant Semitic language, Akkadian. 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.³⁶ I refer to this richly detailed and documented study to demonstrate the possibility of multiple scribal schools or traditions existing side by side in Jerusalem during the seventh century after the Assyrian invasions forced northern elites to migrate south in search of refuge.

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

³⁶ The bulk of Cohen's study is devoted to specific documents and scribes. These summary observations are stated best at *ibid.*, 27–28 and 239–243.

scribal writings that contributed to Egyptian culture.³⁷ 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.”³⁸ 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.”³⁹

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

³⁷ See Ronald J. Williams, “Scribal Training in Ancient Egypt,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 92 (1972) 214-221. 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 and the Ancient Near East*, edited by John G. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue, Eisenbrauns, 1990, 19–30.

³⁸ Williams, “The Sage,” 19.

³⁹ Van der Toorn, *ibid.*

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 “geography, arithmetic, and geometry.”⁴⁰ The annual flooding of the Nile created extensive demand for geometrists who could accurately 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 learning hieroglyphics and studying wisdom texts and the specified curriculum for apprenticeship in the professions. Most of these would complete their studies by age twenty.⁴¹ 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 including rituals, cultic songs, myths, astrology, astronomy, exorcisms, medical handbooks, and funerary literature) and through interaction with other learned men.⁴² Williams concluded

⁴⁰ Ibid., 68–69.

⁴¹ Ibid., 69.

⁴² Ibid., 70.

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.⁴³

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.⁴⁴ These lectors are also the court magicians described in Genesis. As a dream interpreter, Joseph is implicitly linked with them in Genesis 40 and 41.⁴⁵ John Gee conducted a count of surviving scribally produced documents from Egypt and Israel in New Testament times and reported that overwhelmingly they reflected business or bureaucratic activity and that only a

⁴³ Williams, “Scribal Training,” (1972), 220.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 72.

⁴⁵ See Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, 88–89.

tiny percentage were religious documents.⁴⁶

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).⁴⁷

No employment was guaranteed, and many of these positions were political at some level. “Because their positions were always precarious, there was constant

⁴⁶ John Gee, “The Scribes: Γραμματεύς,” unpublished working paper, 2019.

⁴⁷ 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, edited by Richard E. Averbeck and K. Lawson Younger, Jr., Eisenbrauns, 2020, 60.

competition and rivalry among the scholars.”⁴⁸

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 were nothing more than small rooms in private homes that were dedicated to the scribal training of the sons of elite families.⁴⁹

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

⁴⁸ 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,” *The Sage in Israel*, 308–310 and 314–315.

⁴⁹ 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* edited by Yitschak Sefati, et. al., CDL Press, 2005, 130–132.

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 proves 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 elites in support of government, commercial, religious, and military organizations. Modern scholars variously estimate that between one and five percent of these various ANE populations could read at some level, and that a small fraction of these elites had the advanced skills necessary to produce significant texts during the transition periods in which oral traditions were being captured in written form and standardized in various cultures.⁵⁰ 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

⁵⁰ Toorn, 55–69.

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 are “searching for scribal knowledge, wisdom and truth” and as teaching from the book of the words of Enoch (1QapGen 19.25).⁵¹

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. This becomes particularly relevant when we realize that it had to have been a Jerusalem scribal school and workshop that had produced the plates of brass that play such a prominent role in Nephi’s story.⁵² The

⁵¹ Ariel Feldman, “Patriarchs and Aramaic Traditions,” in *T&T Clark Companion to the Dead Sea Scrolls*, edited by George J. Brooke and Charlotte Hempel, (London: T&T Clark, 2018), 474.

⁵² 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. See *Scribal Tools in Ancient Israel: A Study of Biblical Hebrew Terms for Writing Materials and Implements*, Eisenbrauns, 2020. While the extent and organization of 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 that the biblical writers repeatedly assumed would be understood without explanation by their

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.

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 in Laban's custody. And it may also provide some light on the fact that Lehi thought that he had a right to ask Laban for access to the plates. Our English translation calls it 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.

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*,

readers—who would also have been trained scribes.

denoting a repository for worn synagogue scrolls, and *gannaz*, meaning “archivist,” or one in charge of records.⁵³

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.⁵⁴ Wherever a scribe's life was not completely 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.⁵⁵ 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”

⁵³ See John A. Tvedtnes, “Books in the Treasury,” chapter 9 in *The Book of Mormon and Other Hidden Books: ‘Out of Darkness Unto Light,’* FARMS, 2000, pp. 155–156. Available online at https://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/sites/default/files/archive-files/pdf/tvedtnes/2016-08-01/09_books_in_the_treasury.pdf.

⁵⁴ “Nephi as Scribe,” 45.

⁵⁵ See Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert: The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites* FARMS and Deseret Book, 1988, 3–37, John A. Tvedtnes, *The Most Correct Book: Insights from a Book of Mormon Scholar*, Horizon, 2004, 78–97 and *The Book of Mormon and Other Hidden Books: ‘Out of Darkness Unto Light,’* FARMS, 2000, pp. 155–166. Also see Jeffrey R. Chadwick, “Lehi's House at Jerusalem and the Land of His Inheritance,” in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, edited by John W. Welch, David Rolfe Seely and Jo Ann H. Seely, FARMS, 2004, 114–117.

in the inscription of names on metal weapons in the early Iron Age.⁵⁶

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 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 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-Judaeen 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

⁵⁶ Seth L. Sanders, *The Invention of Hebrew*, University of Illinois Press, 2009, 107.

praxis of the scribes. From the scribes developed the scribal scholars, and from the Israelite-Judaeen scribal culture they developed the Jewish tradition in the Old Testament.⁵⁷

Early scribes in Israel

In his 1965 textbook on the social institutions of ancient Israel, Roland de Vaux recognized that the only textual information we have about Israel's scribes must be inferred from a small number of biblical references. From those few mentions, de Vaux inferred that the "royal secretary" listed with King David's staff occupied a position modeled after the "royal scribe" that served Egyptian pharaohs and had responsibilities for all royal communications, collections for the temple, and counsel regarding external relations. The few that are named were from one family. And it seemed there were many others unnamed performing lesser scribal duties.⁵⁸ Reviewing these same passages, Schniedewind recognizes the existence of individual scribes in the service of monarchies, but concludes that the development of independent writing traditions and "scribal schools . . . would

⁵⁷ Richard G. Kratz, "The Growth of the Old Testament," *Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 1?? Online Publication Date: Sep 2009 DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199237777.003.0028

⁵⁸ Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Social Institutions*, volume 1, McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1965, pp. 131-32.

await Israel's transition to a more urban state in the eighth century."⁵⁹

Michael Fishbane lamented the lack of historical descriptions of the training and organization of Israelite scribes, but went on to list a number of roles that scribes would have had to fill in support of the monarchy, the temple, the military, and others:

It may be assumed . . . that the skills taught in their various guild centres and schools . . . enabled these scribes to serve a variety of administrative and state functions. Some served the military and aided in conscription; . . . others, Levites by lineage, served as overseers of the priestly rotations, . . . or provided administrative services to the Temple and its upkeep; . . . and still other scribes served in the royal court, providing the king with diplomatic skill and sage wisdom. Trained in the forms and rhetoric of international diplomatic correspondence, and thus kept abreast of internal and external affairs, many of these court scribes—as individuals and as family guilds—were directly caught up in religious and political affairs affecting the nation as a whole.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ William M. Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book*, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 59. See the development of this idea, pp. 75–90.

⁶⁰ Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*, Clarendon Press, 1988, pp. 25–26. In this abbreviated excerpt, I have omitted Fishbane's references to supporting passages in HB.

Menahem Haran argued for the possibility of a few modest libraries in Jerusalem in the biblical period including certainly a library in the king's court and another in the Temple.⁶¹

Doubts about the need for and the existence of scribal schools

Doubts about the existence of scribal schools in ancient Israel have been raised on several grounds. In the 1970s many scholars assumed that the simplicity of the Old Hebrew alphabet that emerged at the end of the ninth century made reading and writing so much easier that the old-style scribal schools of Egypt and Mesopotamia would not have been necessary for teaching people to read and write.⁶² Others have pointed to the complete absence of mentions of schools in the Bible or to the failure of archaeologists to find archaeological evidence of such schools in Israel as have been found in other ANE locations. After a thorough and critical review of the available evidence and arguments in 1985, James Crenshaw

⁶¹ Menahem Haran, "Archives, Libraries, and the Order of the Biblical Books," *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Studies* 22 (1993): 554–57.

⁶² Summarizing the views of other specialists of the 1970s, Kenneth A. Kitchen wrote that "from 1100 BC (and probably rather earlier), writing in Canaan, then in Israel, Phoenicia and round about was clearly part of everyday life and not restricted solely to a special scribal elite." See K. A. Kitchen, *The Bible in its World: The Bible and Archaeology Today*, Intervarsity Press, 1977, 18. One writer concluded that "writing was theoretically within the competence of any ancient Israelite, not the prerogative of an elite professional class alone," and "it was, in fact, quite widely practiced." See A. R. Millard, "The Practice of Writing in Ancient Israel," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 35/4 (Dec.1972), 111.

concluded that the evidence for schools in Israel was weak and that “considerable diversity characterized education in ancient Israel.”⁶³ BYU scholar Paul Hoskisson has argued that the recurrence of the alphabet game *atbash* in Jeremiah’s writings demonstrates an assumption of widespread literacy in Jeremiah’s day.⁶⁴

Embedded in his 2015 paper on ancient abecedaries, Aaron Demsky provided arguments and evidence for his minority view that by the eighth century BCE Israel was a literate society with “wider access to writing and reading and a greater influence of the written word upon the general populace, especially when we look at both literary and epigraphic sources.”⁶⁵ Demsky’s optimism has been grounded partially in the Izbet Sartah inscription discovered in Ephraimite territory in 1976. The sherd contains 87 letters in five lines in the Proto-Canaanite script and has been dated to the 12th century. “The fifth line is incised with the

⁶³ James L. Crenshaw, “Education in Ancient Israel,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104 (1985): 601–615.

⁶⁴ Paul Y. Hoskisson, “Jeremiah’s Game,” *Insights* 30:1 (March 25, 2010). See Brant Gardner’s critique of Hoskisson’s argument in “Literacy and Orality,” note 22, pp. 40–41.

⁶⁵ Aaron Demsky, “The Interface of Oral and Written Traditions in Ancient Israel: The Case of Abecedaries,” in *Origins of the Alphabet: Proceedings of the first Polis Institute Interdisciplinary Conference*, edited by Christophe Rico and Claudia Attucci, 2015, p. 8. Like Hoskisson, Demsky also advances and explains the example of *atbash* in Jeremiah as evidence for assumed literacy in seventh century (p. 48). EBSCO Publishing : eBook Academic Collection (EBSCO host) - printed on 5/4/2021 7:14 PM via SETON HALL UNIV AN: 1077489. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/301349273_The_Interface_of_Oral_and_Written_Traditions_in_Ancient_Israel_The_Case_of_the_Abecedaries, accessed May 7, 2021.

earliest linear abecedary of 22 letters in the Proto-Canaanite script.” Its alphabet displays a slightly different order, and the entire inscription is written left to right.⁶⁶ Of particular interest for this paper is Demsky’s conclusion that this sherd provides clear evidence of “a wide distribution and use of writing during the period of the Judges, at least among the tribes of Joseph.”⁶⁷

Arie Shaus, a Tel Aviv University graduate student in archaeology and applied mathematics, assembled an interdisciplinary team for a forensic document examination and reassessment of the sixteen ostraca from the Judahite fort at Arad that are dated to about 600 BCE and concluded that a dozen different personnel had contributed to these writings—promoting the picture of widespread literacy in ancient Israel.⁶⁸ Richard Hess surveyed the full range of inscriptions found in Israelite territory from the Iron Age and concluded that these provided sufficient evidence of widespread literacy throughout those six centuries defined as the

⁶⁶ Aaron Demsky, “A Proto-Canaanite Abecedary Dating from the Period of the Judges and Its Implications for the History of the Alphabet,” *Tel Aviv* 4, nos. 1-2 (1977), 14. Epigraphers have not yet worked all their differences on theories for the origin of the Proto-Canaanite alphabet. See the widely accepted explanation of Orly Goldwasser of how it could have been invented in the turquoise mining community in the Sinai at about the same time Demsky’s Izbet Sartah inscription was written. Orly Goldwasser, “How the Alphabet was born from Hieroglyphs,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 36, no. 2 (2010): 1–25.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁶⁸ Arie Shaus, et. al., “Forensic document examination and algorithmic handwriting analysis of Judahite biblical period inscriptions reveal significant literacy level,” *PLOS ONE* 15(9): e0237962. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0237962>.

ability minimally to read or write these limited inscriptions.⁶⁹

The senior epigraphers studying inscriptions in ancient Israel have been less positive about literacy levels and have emphasized the need for scribal schools.

Christopher Rollston has assembled convincing rebuttals to those earlier doubts, relying principally on accumulating epigraphic evidence from the ninth through seventh centuries.⁷⁰ After reviewing empirical studies of writing education and the

experience of Israeli schools in teaching modern Hebrew, Rollston concludes that

“any suggestion that proficiency in one’s *first* alphabetic writing system (ancient or modern) can be achieved in a few days or weeks must be considered most

problematic.”⁷¹ Further, the earlier skeptics have insisted on looking for public

schools serving broad sectors of the population. Rollston looks instead for

evidence of standardized scribal education serving elites in ancient Israel,

⁶⁹ Richard S. Hess, “Literacy in Iron Age Israel,” in V. Philips Long, David W. Baker, and Gordon J. Wenham (editors), *Windows into Old Testament History: Evidence, Argument, and the Crisis of “Biblical Israel”* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 82–102.

⁷⁰ Christopher A. Rollston, “Scribal Education in Ancient Israel: The Old Hebrew Epigraphic Evidence,” *Bulletin of the American School for Oriental Research* 344, (2006), 47–74. For another report of this study see Christopher A. Rollston, *Writing and Literacy in the World of Ancient Israel: Epigraphic Evidence from the Iron Age*, SBL Press, 2010, pp. 127–135. A new generation of scholars with rapidly growing archaeological discoveries is raising new questions about scribal practices. See e.g., Andrew R. Burlingame, “Writing and Literacy in the World of Ancient Israel: Recent Developments and Future Directions,” *Bibliotheca Orientalis* LXXVI no. 1-2, (January-April 2019), pp. 46–74.

⁷¹ Rollston, “Scribal Education,” 49.

following patterns long established in Egypt and Mesopotamia.

In his 2010 study of writing and literacy in ancient Israel, Rollston acknowledges ongoing lack of consensus about “the evidence for ‘schools’ in ancient Israel” and concludes that

the Old Hebrew epigraphic record reflects depth, sophistication, and consistency in the production of written materials, and that the Old Hebrew data are most consistent with the presence of a mechanism for the formal, standardized education of scribal elites in ancient Israel.⁷²

Aaron Burke dates the final withdrawal of Egyptian empire installations from Jaffa between 1135 and 1125 BCE.⁷³ As already mentioned, Burke goes on from there to assemble the archaeological evidence for his conclusion that specialists, and especially professional scribes stayed behind, having already become embedded in the local economy, culture, and familial structures, becoming in effect the founders of a scribal culture that spread throughout Phoenicia, including ancient Israel.⁷⁴

After a careful review of three early ostraca from the Negev and the

⁷² Rollston, *Writing and Literacy*, 91–92.

⁷³ Aaron A. Burke, “Left Behind,” 51.

⁷⁴ Burke, “Left Behind,” 50–66.

associated scholarly literature, David Calabro argues for a “a tradition of hieratic writing in the southern Levant” that may have had “its ultimate roots in a period even before the New Kingdom”—the time frame most commonly cited by scholars.

On the question of the extent of the hieratic system used in this tradition, Arad 25, 34, and the ostrakon from Tell el-Qudeirat indicate that the hieratic tradition in Judah lasted in a fuller form than only the isolated use of numbers and unites of measurement. In particular, it included hieratic alphabetic signs, logographic signs for commodities like wine and barley, and Egyptian conventions of sign sequence. This means that the system overlapped in some ways with alphabetic script and could, at least potentially, have been put to use for purposes other than simple accounting; whether this potential was actually exploited is, of course, unknown in view of the lack of surviving documents.⁷⁵

In their more recent comprehensive review of the archaeological evidence, Finkelstein and Sass concluded that:

Hebrew letter shapes make their debut in the late Iron IIA1 or ca.

⁷⁵ David Calabro, “The Hieratic Scribal Tradition in Preexilic Judah,” in *Evolving Egypt: Innovation, Appropriation, and Reinterpretation in Ancient Egypt*, edited by Kerry Muhlestein and John Gee (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2012), 83.

800–840/830. They first appear on the periphery of Israel and Judah in Rehov and Gath, the former probably under Israelite domination. At that time, the days of the Omrides, there is no archaeological evidence for Hebrew writing (or any other) in Samaria, Jerusalem, or elsewhere in the heartland of Israel and Judah. . . .

Taking the above archaeological evidence and absence at face value would mean that Omride Israel was pre-alphabetic, and that the events of much of the ninth century described in the Book of Kings were transmitted orally and first put in writing some two generations later.

The archaeological evidence, some of it indirect, points to the late ninth century or late Iron IIA2 as the time when the Hebrew alphabet became visible in the Hebrew kingdoms.⁷⁶

In his study of scribal culture in the ANE, van der Toorn likewise recognized the absence of historical descriptions of scribal schools, but uses the Bible as the principle evidence for their existence: “The books of the Bible would not have seen the light in the oral culture of Israel if it were not for the professional scribes. They are the main figures behind biblical literature; we owe

⁷⁶ Israel Finkelstein and Benjamin Sass, “The West Semitic Alphabetic Inscriptions, Late Bronze II to Iron IIA: Archaeological Context, Distribution and Chronology,” *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* 2 (2013): 2201–202.

the Bible entirely to them.”⁷⁷ In the following section, I will suggest how a Josephite scribal school originating among the descendants of Ephraim and/or Manasseh in Egypt and maintaining its continuity down through the times of the northern kingdom and the seventh century as refugees in Jerusalem could fit well with what is now known and could have produced the Brass Plates that appear at the end of the seventh century.

Possible origins of scribal schools in Israel

Some of the most recent work based in archaeological evidence has produced two different theories about the origins of Hebrew scribal schools—one Mesopotamian and the other Egyptian. Schniedewind argues that the early Hebrew inscriptions (circa 800 BCE) found at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud “represent fragments of the entire range of an educational curriculum for an ancient Israelite scribe” and that “the outlines of this early scribal curriculum will correspond strikingly with the framework of the Mesopotamian scribal curriculum.” Using what is known about the Mesopotamian curriculum, he proposes that it can then be shown how that scribal education “shaped the composition of biblical literature.”⁷⁸ On the other hand,

⁷⁷ Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 75.

⁷⁸ William M. Schniedewind, *The Finger of the Scribe: How Scribes Learned to Write the Bible*, Oxford University Press, 2019, 8.

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 open to change and adventurous in their rewriting of traditional texts than were the Babylonians.⁷⁹

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.⁸⁰ 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.”⁸¹ He speculated that David may even have employed a native Egyptian as royal secretary with a support staff of bi-lingual scribes while

⁷⁹ He makes this argument in many ways in Seth L. Sanders, *From Adapa to Enoch: Scribal Culture and Religious Vision in Judea and Babylon*, Mohr Siebeck, 2007.

⁸⁰ Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, *Solomonic State Officials: A Study of the Civil Government Officials of the Israelite Monarchy*, CWK Gleerups Förlag, Lund, 1971.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 143–144, referring to Hans-Jurgen Hermisson, *Studien zur israelitischen Spruchweisheit*, Neukirchener Verlag des Erziehungsvereins, 1968.

borrowing the model for “royal secretary” from the Egyptians.⁸² 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.⁸³ 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.

Aaron Burke comes at the problem from the archaeological west as an authority on the closure of Egyptian imperial installations in Jaffa in 1125 BCE, including the administrative offices that employed Egyptian scribes. He then goes on to show archaeological evidences that many of these scribes, who were already integrated into the local culture and population with families and secondary businesses, must have been left behind providing the root that soon branched out to fill the needs of the rising Israelite monarchy not far to the east.⁸⁴ Manasseh

⁸² Ibid., 48–49.

⁸³ Ibid., 146–157.

⁸⁴ Burke, “Left Behind.” Burke’s analysis is consistent with Carolyn Higginbotham’s effort to integrate the findings of both textual studies and archaeological exploration to illuminate the nature and extent of the Egyptian influence in Palestine during the 13th and 12th centuries. She found that although the Egyptian empire did not practice “direct rule” in these northern provinces, there is considerable evidence that Palestinian elites chose to import and display a significant range of Egyptian cultural practices and materials during those centuries. See Carolyn R. Higginbotham, *Egyptianization and Elite Emulation in Ramesside Palestine: Governance and Accommodation on the Imperial Periphery*, Brill, 2000.

territory was only about 30 miles from the administrative center at Jaffa.

Scholars assume that the Israelites only had oral traditions which would be eventually transcribed by the emerging class of scribes and be eventually collected and edited into the Hebrew Bible. If the primarily Egyptian textual tradition of the Brass Plates had been handed down from Abraham's time in written form as hypothesized above, 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,⁸⁵ it is possible that all of these proposed origins for Israelite scribal activity contributed to the scribal schools that did leave clear traces in the eighth and seventh centuries.

The Abrahamic scribal tradition

Prominent Egyptologist Kenneth Kitchen has pointed to Egyptian evidences that would indirectly support the idea that “written family records concerning the Patriarchs may have been handed down from Joseph's time through four centuries of the Hebrew sojourn until Moses' day, and that such records were used by

⁸⁵ Schniedewind, *ibid.*, 12, argues that the plaster inscriptions at Kuntillet 'Ajrud show that “a scribal curriculum had already developed in early Israel” coincident with “*the very beginning of alphabetic writing* in the early Iron Age.”

Moses and so lie behind the present book of Genesis.”⁸⁶ 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.”⁸⁷ 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

All 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 perpetuate that record for his posterity:

But the records of the fathers, even the patriarchs, concerning the

⁸⁶ K. A. Kitchen, “Some Egyptian Background to the Old Testament,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 5-6 (April, 1960), 14–15.

⁸⁷ Hoffmeier, 225.

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, (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 are being transcribed using the new paleo Hebrew alphabet, and (5) an introduction to the system of Hebrew rhetoric that reached its heights in the late seventh century as evidenced in both

the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Mormon.

Abraham's 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.⁸⁸ Twelfth Dynasty Egypt ruled in that area 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).⁸⁹

⁸⁸ 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," William A. Ward and Martha Sharp Joukowsky, editors, *The Crisis Years: The 12th Century B.C.: From Beyond the Danube to the Tigris* (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt, 1992), 194.

⁸⁹ See John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, RSC, 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*, Eerdmans, 2006, 316, 318, and 347–8 and his encyclopedia article "Joseph," s. v., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* II (1982), edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *et. al.*, 1126-1130.

Contemporary archaeologists generally dismiss the biblical and other texts as valid

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.”⁹⁰ It served for centuries as an important center for multiple eastern Christian traditions. The region was significant in pre-historic times as well. DNA studies have led botanists to conclude it is the most likely region for the domestication of wheat. And not far away, German archaeologists have excavated Tell es-Sweyhat, which features ruins (Jebel Aruda) believed to be the world’s oldest temple structure being dated to 9000 BCE.

Traditionally, the statement in Deuteronomy 26:5 that “my father was a wandering Aramean” was interpreted as a reference to Abraham. But twentieth-century Bible scholars have taken 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 gentile

sources for dating or locating Abraham in antiquity. This leaves them with meager evidence of Abraham as an historical figure and reduces the biblical account to a compilation of late compositions. See, for example, Israel Finkelstein and Thomas Romer, “Comments on the Historical Background of the Abraham Narrative: Between ‘Realia’ and ‘Exegetica,’” in *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel*, edited by Gary N. Knoppers, Oded Lipschits, Carl A. Newsom, and Konrad Schmid (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014): 3–23.

⁹⁰ John F. Healy, “Aramaean Heritage,” in Herbert Niehr, ed., *The Aramaeans in Ancient Syria*, Brill, 2014, p. 394.

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).⁹¹ 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.”⁹²

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. The 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.’”⁹³

⁹¹ 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*, edited by Koert van Bekkum, Gert Kwakkel, and Wolter H. Rose, Brill, 2018, 85, citing Holger Gzella, *A Cultural History of Aramaic: From the Beginnings to the Advent of Islam*, 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*, SBL Press, 2016, pp. 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.

⁹² Bekkum, *ibid.*

⁹³ 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*, June 2008, Vol. 23, No. 3(91) (June 2008), pp. 395–403.

Abraham and writing

Most ancient references to Abraham link him to writing in some significant way.

Seth Sanders has helpfully pointed out that archaeological evidence for writing in private, non-state contexts is abundant from the centuries before Abraham.

The independence of the linear alphabet from the state until a relatively late period should not surprise us. The history of writing shows very different possible fits between scripts and states. First, a state is not a prerequisite of scribal production: you do not need a state to produce massive amounts of writing. In the Old Assyrian caravan archive of Kültepe we find tens of thousands of texts that merchants wrote (or perhaps had written) to each other; the texts refer to scribes not of the palace or temple but the *kārum*, the trading colony. A later ancient society in a different part of the world provides extensive further examples: Sanskrit was spread widely across south Asia and into China, ignoring numerous political boundaries, by Buddhist monasteries, not kings.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Seth L. Sanders, *The Invention of Hebrew*, University of Illinois Press, 2009, 120. Ryan Byrne has argued that between the collapse of Ugarit in the early twelfth century BCE and the disappearance of its linear alphabet and the later emergence of a standardized linear alphabet to meet the needs of the Israelite monarchies, alphabetic writing in the Levant continued on a commission basis as elites hired individual scribes to serve their needs. See Ryan Byrne, “The Refuge of Scribalism in Iron I Palestine,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 345 (February 2007):1–31.

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 of Chaldean and Canaanite kings. Even the accounts of his early life portray him as highly literate and involved routinely with learned and royal elites.⁹⁵ 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—receiving an elite education.⁹⁶ Unfortunately, there is no way that these traditions can be confirmed through more ancient texts or archaeology.⁹⁷

The perceived erudition and linguistic facility that landed Abraham in the highest social levels 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 a native speaker of

⁹⁵ 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 (editors and compilers), *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham*, FARMS, 2001.

⁹⁶ E. Douglas Clark, *The Blessings of Abraham: Becoming a Zion People*, Covenant Communications, 2005, 40–41. LDS readers with a strong 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.

⁹⁷ Some of the most trustworthy and illuminating accounts of Abraham’s reputation in the ancient Egyptian world are reviewed and documented in Gee, *Introduction*, 49–55.

Aramaic and a trained speaker and writer of Egyptian from an early age. 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 will become distinct national languages by 800 BCE—and which may have been the vernacular of his first descendants.

Joseph Smith's *Book of Abraham* was written in Egyptian⁹⁸ and 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 would have required additional linguistic competence on his part.

While the Aramaic language is presumed to go back to 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 of

⁹⁸ All three Egyptian scripts were in use by Abraham's day, and the Joseph Smith Papyri from a much later period also used hieroglyphic, hieratic, and demotic scripts. See Gee, *Introduction*, 59.

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 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.⁹⁹

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.¹⁰⁰ "Linguistic evidence, generally neglected by theologians, historians, and archaeologists, points to a strong continuity of peoples and cultures since the

⁹⁹ Holger Gzella, "Peoples and Languages of the Levant During the Bronze and Iron Ages," in Margreet L. Steiner and Ann E. Killebrew, editors, *The Oxford Handbook of The Archaeology of the Levant c. 8000–332 BCE*, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 31.

¹⁰⁰ Gordon, "Abraham and the Merchants," 28–30.

Late Bronze Age, as second-millennium material already exhibits several phonological and morphological features of later Canaanite varieties.”¹⁰¹ 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. 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 explicitly told of both his and his son Jacob’s direct interactions with the Lord including Yahweh’s renewal of his promises made to Abraham to be realized

¹⁰¹ Gzella, “Peoples and Languages,” 29.

through Jacob's posterity.¹⁰² Although his favored son Joseph—the one not involved in tending the flocks—was the obvious candidate to receive scribal training and inherit the records, that plan would have been severely interrupted 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.¹⁰³

Joseph, Manasseh, and Ephraim

Egyptologist Kenneth Kitchen surveyed examples of Egyptian genealogies and legal documents that were preserved and used over long periods of time and 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

¹⁰² Genesis 26:23, 28:13–15 and 35:9–13.

¹⁰³ 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/>, accessed February 23, 2021.

of state in Egypt would have every facility for recording patriarchal traditions of his forebears, and for transmitting them through the hands of his descendants until Moses' time.¹⁰⁴

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.¹⁰⁵ 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

¹⁰⁴ K. A. Kitchen, “Some Egyptian Background to the Old Testament,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 5–6 (April 1960), 18.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

elements blended together during the Hyksos period in ancient Egypt.¹⁰⁶

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.

A* Observe, my children, my brother Joseph

[who] taught reading and writing and the teaching of wisdom,

¹⁰⁶ K. H. Kitchen, “Egypt,” s.v., *The New Bible Dictionary*, InterVarsity Press, 1965, 342.

for glory and for majesty;

Ballast line: and kings <he advised>. ¹⁰⁷

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.¹⁰⁸ 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.¹⁰⁹

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

¹⁰⁷ I have reformatted these lines from 4QLevi^a 13:4–6 as translated in Greenfield, *et. al.*, *The Aramaic Levi Document*, 103, according to 7th century BCE Hebrew rhetoric to make their chiasmic structure even more obvious.

¹⁰⁸ 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):223–229.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 205.

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.¹¹⁰ 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."¹¹¹ In Egypt, 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 A.D., 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.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Ronald J. Williams, "The Sage in Egyptian Literature," in John G. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue, editors, *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, Eisenbrauns, 1990, 29.

¹¹¹ Christopher Eyre and John Baines, "Interactions between Orality and Literacy in Ancient Egypt," in *Literacy and Society*, edited by Karen Schousboe and Mogens Trolle Larsen (Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1989), 93.

¹¹² Ibid.

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 if 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 the tribe of Joseph resumed its place with the rest of the Israelites sometime before the exodus when there arose a pharaoh who "knew not Joseph."¹¹³ 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

¹¹³ Exodus 1:7–9.

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 26:28–34.¹¹⁴ We have no biblical or archaeological evidence that would show us how many of these clans might have maintained scribal schools. While 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. The efforts of some scholars to break these six clans into smaller units has no textual support.¹¹⁵

A hypothetical Manassite scribal school

To this point I have hypothesized the existence of a scribal school tracing its origins to Manasseh himself and 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,

¹¹⁴ See William F. Albright, “Joseph Tribes,” *Journal of the Palestinian Oriental Society* 11 (1931), pp. 241–151, to see how these ostraca helped Albright identify the geographical areas assigned to the Manassite clans and the location of Tirzah, the longtime Manassite capital before Omri moved it to Samaria.

¹¹⁵ Baruch Halpern, “Jerusalem and the Lineages of the Seventh Century BCE: Kinship and the Rise of Individual Moral Liability,” in Baruch Halpern and Deborah W. Hobson, eds., *Law and Ideology in Monarchic Israel*, Sheffield Academic Press, 1991, 52.

which scholars believe was a center of “strong scribal activity” before the Assyrian invasion,¹¹⁶ or some other town. This would most likely have been a separate school from those 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

The prestige of this hypothesized Manassite scribal school would have been highest at the time of the Exodus and the subsequent settlement in Israel. Shechem’s history with Abraham and Jacob and its provision of the final resting place for the bones of Joseph brought from Egypt, together with the fact that it was also a holy place for the Canaanites and their temple could have made it an obvious location for a Josephite shrine and a headquarters for this official Josephite scribal school. As Israeli archaeologist Israel Finkelstein explained:

The Bible gives pride of place to the traditions of the sanctity of Shechem

¹¹⁶ Israel Finkelstein and Lily Singer-Avitz, “Reevaluating Bethel,” *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins* 125, no. 1 (2009):44–45.

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.¹¹⁷

Further Shechem was the new Manassite capital as well as the oldest and most important city in the area for centuries. All evidence indicates that the Manassite immigrants joined peacefully with the existing Canaanite population.

In addition, Shechem was the resident population nearest to the site of the covenant altar prescribed by Moses and built by Joshua on Mt. Ebal. As will be explained in more detail below, archaeologist Adam Zertal found and excavated a large and perfectly preserved cultic altar site on the northeast slope of Mt. Ebal which may include Joshua’s actual altar and may have served annual renewals of the initial covenant ceremony described in Joshua. In his Andrews University

¹¹⁷ 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.

dissertation, Ralph Hawkins has examined Zertal's work and the alternative interpretations of archaeologists and has concluded that Zertal's initial connection of the site to the biblical account makes more sense than the alternatives.¹¹⁸

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) a unique mission to maintain scribal competence in the Egyptian language and script, (3) to preserve and perpetuate the records inherited from Abraham through Joseph, and (4) to maintain an ongoing historical record and collection of prophecies—probably in Hebrew using the new alphabetic script that may even have been developed by Manassites from the proto-Phoenician script that was shared throughout the Levant in the ninth century.¹¹⁹

The multiethnic character of the northern kingdom may have also contributed to the determination of a Manassite scribal school to maintain the

¹¹⁸ Ralph K. Hawkins, "The Iron Age I Structure on Mount Ebal: Excavation and Interpretation," (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012)

¹¹⁹ See the discussion in footnote 171 below.

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 their differences while living peacefully with competing cultural and religious systems.¹²⁰ 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.¹²¹ Only those who had escaped south to Jerusalem as refugees remained. Any remaining

¹²⁰ 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.

¹²¹ 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* 27:2, 2000, 159–188 and Na’aman’s earlier overview in Nadav Na’aman, “Population Changes in Palestine Following Assyrian Deportations,” *Tel Aviv* 20:1 1993, 104–124. 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), 168–194.

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.¹²²

A Levite appropriation?

There are no known ancient texts that provide direct evidence for the Manassite scribal school and textual collection 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

¹²² Captain Alexander Hamilton, *A New Account of the East Indies*, London, 1744, volume I: pages 323-4. This book is now available as a photographic reprint and online. I used the GALE reprint edition.

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.¹²³ 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.¹²⁴ 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.¹²⁵

Multiple scribal schools in Israel

There is no reason to doubt that the scribes of Judah might already have

¹²³ Michael E. Stone, *Ancient Judaism: New Visions and Views*, Eerdmans, 2011, pp. 31–58.

¹²⁴ 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*, edited by Florentino García Martínez, Annette Steudel, and Eibert Tigchelaar (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 55–73.

¹²⁵ James Kugel reviewed previous efforts to date the composition of the Aramaic Levi Document in 2007 and 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” as a date of composition. James Kugel, “How Old is the Aramaic Levi Document?” *Dead Sea Discoveries* 14, no. 3 (2007), 312.

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.¹²⁶

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. . . .

¹²⁶ W. F. Albright, "The List of Levite Cities," in *Louis Ginzberg: Jubilee Volume on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday* 1 (1945), American Academy for Jewish Research, New York, pp. 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): 156–165.

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.¹²⁷

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.”¹²⁸ The emergence of a Hebrew alphabet provided the opportunity to transcribe the oral traditions of Israel and to edit them in various

¹²⁷ Stephen L. Cook, “Those Stubborn Levites: Overcoming Levitical Disenfranchisement,” in *Levites and Priests in History and Tradition*, edited by Mark A. Leuchter and Jeremy M. Hutton, Society of Biblical Literature (2011), pp. 156 and 158.

¹²⁸ Solomon Gandz was an early explorer of the oral tradition in the Bible who noted how alternatives to written records are mentioned in stories of the patriarchs. See his “Oral Tradition in the Bible,” in *Jewish Studies in Memory of George A. Kohut, 1874–1933*, edited by Salo W. Baron and Alexander Marx (New York: Bloch, 1935): 249.

ways for posterity.¹²⁹ Scribal schools would presumably have developed significantly as part of that process.

The scribes in Iron Age West Semitic speaking regions provided the technology by which non-literate people could communicate complex messages or texts at a distance. The scribal class provided the means by which anyone in those oral cultures could take advantage of the power of literacy:

If Israelites did not see literature as confined to writing but as traveling through it, this has further implications for the historical nature of written Hebrew: it means that, first, we do not need to assume an earlier written literature to explain the complexity of Hebrew literary culture. What we have seen of earlier West Semitic literature shows that a highly developed culture of *poiesis*, cultural creation through text-making, must have existed in the early Iron Age and earlier, before there was any desire to set it down in standardized Hebrew. And this idea persists: in prophetic narratives from

¹²⁹ An excellent summary of contemporary research on the invention and spread of alphabetic writing in the ancient world can be found in André Lemaire, “Alphabetic Writing in the Mediterranean World: Transmission and Appropriation,” in Baruch Halpern and Kenneth S. Sacks (editors), *Cultural Contact and Appropriation in the Axial-Age Mediterranean World*, Brill, 2017, pp. 103–115. Although we now know that the less well-known Ugaritic culture that was destroyed shortly after 1200 BCE where it had prospered for centuries on the Mediterranean coast not far north of Israel also spoke a West Semitic language and had an even earlier linear alphabet that used a cuneiform script, there is no evidence of a direct influence on the development of literacy in Israel three or four centuries later. See the summary account in Robert Hawley, Dennis Pardee, and Carole Roche-Hawley, “The Scribal Culture of Ugarit,” *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern History* 2, no. 2 (2015): 229–267.

the late Iron Age, the decisive feature of a text was its communicative power, not its written nature. Texts like first Isaiah (29:18) concur in describing the deaf, not the blind, miraculously “hearing,” not “seeing,” the words of a book. “Reading” is fundamentally an acoustic performance, and text-reception is imagined as a process of hearing.¹³⁰

As these oral cultures made the transition to literacy with the sudden availability of the new northwest Semitic alphabets in the eighth century BCE, it would have been quite natural for them to continue using the terminology of oral performance for the newly enabled process of reading out of written texts by scribes to their non-literate audiences. Hebrew, Arabic, and Aramaic all use the root *qry* which in various verb and noun forms can refer to noise or crying as the crowing of a rooster or to reading and even specifically to scripture reading or to one who proclaims or reads.¹³¹

The history of writing

Current studies of the history of languages and writing do not lend ready support

¹³⁰ Sanders, *Invention of Hebrew*, 146–147.

¹³¹ See online The Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon Project, accessed 14 April 2021 at cal.huc.edu/index.html. I thank John S. Robertson for calling this dictionary information to my attention. See also the discussion in Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book*, 48–49.

for these claims in Restoration scriptures for a family record going all the way back to Abraham and Adam. While early forms of writing have been documented by archaeologists back as far as the middle of the fourth millennium BCE, the “full writing” that we take for granted as displayed in modern public discourse and in the Book of Abraham is not evident in either Mesopotamian or Egyptian texts for another thousand years—but still centuries before Abraham.¹³² But the absence of evidence cannot disprove the claims. And other findings may open at least a theoretical possibility for the kind of lineage histories described by Enoch, Moses, Abraham, the Brass Plates, and the Manassite scribal tradition hypothesized in this paper.

One particularly important new point of consensus corrects the mid-twentieth century assumption that writing was discovered once and then adapted to a variety of linguistic traditions.¹³³ Mesoamerican writing is universally acknowledged as proof of at least a second independent invention. Leading historical epigraphers now believe that there were at least four independent

¹³² See Jerrold S. Cooper, “Babylonian beginnings: the origin of the cuneiform writing system in comparative perspective,” and John Baines, “The earliest Egyptian writing: development, context, purpose,” both in Stephen D. Houston, editor, *The First Writing: Script Invention as History and Process*, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 93 and 150, 173–175 respectively.

¹³³ See, especially, chapter six of the classic text on writing: I. J. Gelb, *A Study of Writing*, revised edition, University of Chicago Press, (1963), 190–205.

inventions of writing: Sumerian, Egyptian, Chinese, and Mesoamerican.¹³⁴ And there could easily have been others not yet manifest in the archaeological record.

However limited the independent inventions of writing as such may have been, these have in turn spawned a vast array of scripts and writing systems, only about 100 of which are in use today. The motivations driving these developments seem to have been widely varied and often overlapping. While not confident of being able to provide full explanations for different script traditions, researchers point most frequently to the practical requirements of household and commercial accounting and to elite or religious display as motivations.

In the ANE writing was widespread for a millennium before being used routinely for sending complex messages, and writing literature or histories. Bruce Trigger has concluded that the civilizations that did invent writing first used it “to record economic transactions, convey messages, record ritual texts, celebrate the deeds of rulers, and preserve medical, calendrical, and divinatory knowledge.” As he goes on to observe, “specialized knowledge remained closely linked to oral traditions, and distinctive literary forms and devices for organizing and conveying knowledge did not develop to any considerable degree until a much later

¹³⁴ Piotr Michalowski, “Writing and Literacy in Early States: A Mesopotamian Perspective,” in *Literacy: Interdisciplinary Conversations*, edited by Deborah Keller Cohen, Hampton Press, 1994, 53. See also, Cooper, “Babylonian beginnings,” 71 and 92.

period.”¹³⁵ The inexpensive and durable clay tablets used primarily in cuneiform writing traditions give today’s scholars access to a wider range of uses than do the impermanent writing materials used in most other traditions and provide much of the evidence for these conclusions.

Another important development in the thinking of scholars who study the origins of writing is the rejection of their earlier evolutionary theories. While accommodating obvious evidence of improvements and revisions in writing systems over time, they no longer promote the ideal of gradual evolution from primitive efforts to sophisticated systems. Michalowski articulates this widespread view of his contemporaries in this way:

The earliest writing systems were invented *as systems*, not through gradual evolution, but in quantum leaps in the history of human communication. They coexisted with other systems of communication, with painting, sculpture, pottery, gestures, and natural language, to name but a few. They were not technologically inferior to the early alphabet; to the contrary, they were equally, if not better, suited for their tasks.¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Bruce C. Trigger, “Writing systems: a case study in cultural evolution,” in Stephen D. Houston (editor), *The First Writing: Script Invention as History and Process*, Cambridge University Press (2004), 39–68.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

Leading Mayan epigrapher Stephen Houston has recently instigated a collaborative effort to explore how writing systems dwindle into obsolescence.¹³⁷ While it may require tens of thousands of native speakers to keep a language from going extinct, a script only needs one reader.¹³⁸ But however large or small the script's competent readership may be, "its survival presupposes a social investment and relatively broad use." The scribal schools of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Mesoamerica, and Israel demonstrate how that can work. The biblical Genesis would seem to be a sketchy memory of what might have been a far more complete lineage history at one point in time, and the Book of Abraham may show how Abraham was attempting to extend or resurrect that tradition.

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

¹³⁷ See Stephen Houston, John Baines, and Jerrold Cooper, "Last Writing: Script Obsolescence in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Mesoamerica," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45, 2003, 430–479 in which three prominent epigraphers lay out a preliminary outline and defense of the need for study of script obsolescence. In John Baines, John Bennet, and Stephen Houston (editors), *The Disappearance of Writing Systems: Perspectives on Literacy and Communication*, Equinox Publishing, 2008, a widened circle of epigraphers joins in addressing the question to their studies of a selection of obsolete writing systems.

¹³⁸ "Last Writing," 433.

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.

The development of paleo Hebrew script

The alphabetic scripts of Phoenician, Aramaic, and Old (paleo) Hebrew developed together in the tenth through eighth centuries. The growing collection of archaeologically discovered inscriptions is now large enough and sufficiently representative of different time periods to allow analyses that can demonstrate the development of character morphology and other writing conventions over time as well as consistency across the geography occupied by Hebrew-speaking people. After detailed analysis of the available datable inscriptions, Rollston concludes that the demonstrable evolution in morphology, orthography, and other writing

conventions in those centuries is the same throughout Israel and Judah.

The Old Hebrew script was a distinct national script, differing from the Phoenician and Aramaic series and reflecting independent developments. There must have been . . . a mechanism for the development, use, and retention of a distinct Old Hebrew national script.¹³⁹

And that mechanism would obviously be a system of scribal schools in communication with each other and serving the elites of Israel and Judah. “Of necessity, it must be affirmed that the lion’s share of the Old Hebrew epigraphic record does not just reflect “functional knowledge” of the script. Rather, it “reflects the sophisticated knowledge of trained professionals.”¹⁴⁰ Rollston offers his opinion that the state “was the primary aegis for scribal education in Iron II Israel,” but recognizes that “even in Mesopotamia, much schooling occurred in domestic contexts.”¹⁴¹

Again, Sanders counters by reversing the logic, arguing that alphabetic scribalism more likely survived the transition to the Iron Age and was eventually co-opted by the state. “The distribution of Hebrew across space and time suggests

¹³⁹ Rollston, “Scribal Education,” 60.

¹⁴⁰ Rollston, “Scribal Education,” 60–61.

¹⁴¹ Rollston, “Scribal Education,” 68.

that skilled writers outside the palace perpetuated the standardization of writing in Israel. . . . We see one script for two kingdoms.”¹⁴² Borrowing examples from Rollston, Sanders concludes that “Hebrew scribal technique must have traveled along craft networks.”¹⁴³

Until recently, the absence of tenth-century inscriptions in Hebrew had led many scholars to question the development or even the existence of the Solomonic golden age as described in the Hebrew Bible. However, discovery of the Tel Zayit abecedary has provided the evidence necessary for some epigraphers to conclude that there was already a scribal system in place in Israel and Judah in the tenth century that was developing a substantially uniform version of “inland Phoenician script,” indicating in turn the hypothetical existence of a sufficiently developed political and social structure to support a system of scribal schools with a national character which would lead to the uniform script and Hebrew language that would dominate the eighth and seventh centuries.

A combination of evidence, including now the Tel Zayit Abecedary, suggests that late 10th-century Israel had an emergent state structure, one that included borrowing or adaptation of the Phoenician alphabetic scribal

¹⁴² Sanders, *Invention of Hebrew*, 125.

¹⁴³ *Ibid*, 127.

system in some administrative centers and the learning of this system by a limited number of officials.¹⁴⁴

Strong resistance to this hypothesized institutional approach comes from other leading epigraphers and historical linguists. Aramaic specialist Holger Gzella has suggested “that alphabetic writing was usually transmitted in the domestic sphere, or at least in non-professional environments, hence it circulated more widely and could survive socio-economic crises more easily.”¹⁴⁵ Hebrew historian Seth L. Sanders points out that the Tel Zayit Abecedary has some of the same ancestry as Hebrew script, but represents a branch of script development that died out before the rise of Hebrew script in the late ninth century. He also observes

¹⁴⁴ David M. Carr, “The Tel Zayit Abecedary in (Social) Context,” in *Literate Culture and Tenth-Century Canaan: The Tel Zayit Abecedary in Context*, edited by Ron E. Tappy and P. Kyle McCarter Jr., Eisenbrauns, 2008, 124. Over the last two decades epigrapher Benjamin Sass and archaeologist Israel Finkelstein have collaborated on multiple studies that argue for rethinking the dating of these early inscriptions to the early ninth century, which would imply that the Hebrew version of the alphabet may have emerged first, before the Phoenician and Aramaic versions. They specifically assemble a strong argument for lowering the dating of the Tel Zayit Abecedary by a century in Israel Finkelstein, Benjamin Sass, and Lily Singer-Avitz, “Writing in Iron IIA Philistia in the Light of the *Tēl Zayit/Zētā Abecedary*,” *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins (1953-)*, 2008 Bd. 124, H. 1 (2008), pp. 1–14. This has been contested strongly, and the resulting debate is carefully documented and explained by David Vanderhooft, who concludes that at least one artifact seems to refute the proposed later chronology. See David S. Vanderhooft, “The Final Phase of the Common ‘Proto-Semitic’ Alphabet in the Southern Levant: A Rejoinder to Sass and Finkelstein,” in *Rethinking Israel: Studies in the History and Archaeology of Ancient Israel in Honor of Israel Finkelstein*, edited by Oded Lipschits, Yuval Gadot, and Matthew J. Adams, Eisenbrauns, 2017, pp. 441–450.

¹⁴⁵ Holger Gzella, *A Cultural History of Aramaic: From the Beginnings to the Advent of Islam*, Brill, 2015, pp. 58–59.

that “the West Semitic evidence suggests that the linear alphabet lived for a thousand years or more, from its invention around 2000 B.C.E. to the 9th century, without a state patron.” He gives multiple examples of social complexity developing independently of states.¹⁴⁶ The Aramaic script derived from the Phoenician and/or Hebrew alphabets first shows up in monumental inscriptions beginning in the late 9th century.¹⁴⁷

Historical linguists generally agree that as the nations of Israel, Edom, Moab, Damascus, and Ammon emerged in the tenth and ninth centuries BCE, they established their own national versions of Northwest Semitic language and that they soon adopted national versions of the new alphabetic script. Benjamin Sass has identified the formation of new states in the early ninth century as the primary impetus for developing writing to serve the needs of royal bureaucracies.¹⁴⁸

While the coastal cities of Phoenicia have traditionally been assumed to have hosted the initial formulations of alphabetic script derived from Proto-

¹⁴⁶ Seth L. Sanders, “Writing and Early Iron Age Israel: Before National Scripts, Beyond Nations and States,” in *Literate Culture and Tenth-Century Canaan: The Tel Zayit Abecedary in Context*, edited by Ron E. Tappy and P. Kyle McCarter Jr., Eisenbrauns, 2008, 105 and 120. The long and fully documented version of Sanders’s argument can now be found in chapter 4 of his monograph, *The Invention of Hebrew*, University of Illinois Press, 2009.

¹⁴⁷ Benjamin Sass, “Aram and Israel during the 10th–9th centuries BCE, or Iron Age IIA,” in *In Search for Aram and Israel: Politics, Culture, and Identity*, edited by Omer Sergi, Manfred Oeming, and Izaak J. de Hulster, Mohr Siebeck, 2016, 199–227.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 213–224. See also A. Lemaire, “Alphabetic Writing,” pp. 110–115.

Canaanite, Sass points out that there is no artifactual evidence for that. He hypothesizes that Damascus may have started that with the Aramaic alphabet, but recognizes that it could also have been Israel that invented an alphabet derived from Proto-Canaanite. While there are no alphabetic inscriptions surviving from the first half of the ninth century in the entire area, the developments in each of the neighboring nations in the second half of the century came so quickly that it is not possible to say for sure which one may have been the primary instigator. The Hebrew script developed first in Samaria where “it would have answered the need created by the emerging Israelite state and its bureaucracy.”¹⁴⁹ The impressive standardization of Hebrew language and script is usually traced to the eighth and seventh centuries and is attributed to the cooperative efforts of scribal schools across Israelite territory.

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

¹⁴⁹ Benjamin Sass, *The Alphabet at the Turn of the Millennium*, Tel Aviv: Journal of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University Occasional Publications, No. 4, 2005, pp. 59–60. See also pp. 85–88.

Israel and Judah did have scribes in the councils that advised the kings.¹⁵⁰

Whybray concludes that both royal courts and the temples were “centers of intellectual activity” because of the inclusion of scribes on their staffs.¹⁵¹ 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.”¹⁵² And Claudia Camp “has advanced the understanding of how the ongoing institution of the patriarchal family shaped wisdom thinking and traditions.”¹⁵³

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 almost certainly were

¹⁵⁰ See R. N. Whybray, “The Sage in the Israelite Royal Court,” in *The Sage in Israel*, 133–139.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹⁵² Carole R. Fontaine, “The Sage in Family and Tribe,” in *The Sage in Israel*, 155, citing earlier works by Claus Westermann and Erhard Gerstenberger.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 156. See also, Claudia Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs*, Sheffield, 1985, especially pp. 79–97.

taken captive.

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 with their group. By Lehi's day, their traditional librarian was cozily ensconced socially 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.¹⁵⁴

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

¹⁵⁴ "The *elders* represent and maintain the community, and are thus the focal point of the community." They also often exercised judicial functions. See G. Henton Davies, "Elder in the OT," s.v., *Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*, 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*, volume 1, McGraw-Hill, 1965, p. 138.

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.

In recent decades, a small group of historical linguists has 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.¹⁵⁵ 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% of the Hebrew Bible, Rendsburg's research group has identified a set of dialectical features that turn out to be prominent in almost 30% of the standard text.¹⁵⁶ These

¹⁵⁵ Gary A. Rendsburg, "A Comprehensive Guide to Israelian Hebrew: Grammar and Lexicon," *Orient* 38 (2003), 5–35. .

¹⁵⁶ Rendsburg, 8–9.

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.¹⁵⁷ 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.”¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ 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 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*, edited by Koert van Bekkum, Gert Kwakkel, and Wolter H. Rose, Brill, 2018, 75–76. Na’ama 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), pp. 227–263. Rendsburg’s research group 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.

¹⁵⁸ Gary A. Rendsburg, “Israelian Hebrew,” in the compilation of his essays entitled *How the Bible Is Written*, 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 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.¹⁵⁹ 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?

¹⁵⁹ See the description of these developments in Noel B. Reynolds, “The Return of Rhetorical Analysis to Bible Studies,” *Interpreter* 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 Jack R. Lundbom, *Biblical Rhetoric and Rhetorical Criticism. Hebrew Bible Monographs* 45, Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013. Meynet’s updated analysis can be found in Roland Meynet, *Treatise on Biblical Rhetoric*, Leo Arnold translator, Brill, 2012.

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 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 able to create more complex and artistically perfect examples of Hebrew rhetoric in his writings than anything we can find in the Hebrew Bible?

Scribal school curricula

Schniedewind has perceptively pointed out how “scribal creativity had its foundation in the building blocks of the educational curriculum.”¹⁶⁰ 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.”¹⁶¹

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.¹⁶² 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

¹⁶⁰ Schniedewind, *Finger of the Scribe*, 167.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² 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.

figure of *merismus*.¹⁶³ 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 lists for a variety of purposes in the composition of biblical literature.”¹⁶⁴ 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. 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

¹⁶³ See Noel B. Reynolds, “Biblical Merismus in Book of Mormon Gospel References,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 26 (2017): 106–134 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.

¹⁶⁴ Schniedewind, 167.

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.¹⁶⁵ The principle that proved most frustrating for early translators of the Old Testament was *repetition*.¹⁶⁶ 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

¹⁶⁵ 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* edited by John W. Welch and Donald W. Parry, BYU Studies and Book of Mormon Central, 2020, 177–181, 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.

¹⁶⁶ 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*, edited by G. W. Anderson, et al, Brill 1953, pp. 97–111.

provided a variety of tools for demarcating and structuring texts.¹⁶⁷ *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.¹⁶⁸

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.”¹⁶⁹ 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

¹⁶⁷ There is some evidence for verbal punctuation conventions in ancient Hebrew writing. Schniedewind, *The 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 109–116 and 167–168. John Gee relates this and other Hebrew examples to Book of Mormon usage in an unpublished mss: “Verbal Punctuation in the Book of Mormon I.”

¹⁶⁸ 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.

¹⁶⁹ Schniedewind, 163.

and differences and the rhetorical structure itself as they explore the potential for additional unarticulated meanings in an author's composition.¹⁷⁰

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.¹⁷¹

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

¹⁷⁰ 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*, Basic Books, 1985.

¹⁷¹ The most impressive example of this that I have found in the Book of Mormon is in Alma 36. See the analysis in Noel B. Reynolds, "Rethinking Alma 36," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 34 (2020): 279–312, where it is shown that every word of the chapter is accounted for in the subordinated rhetorical structures which reach briefly to a fifth level at one point. 2 Nephi 11 provides a clear and simpler example with three levels of subordination. See Reynolds, "Chiastic Structuring," 184–89.

of an author. The authors and editors expect readers to read the piece multiple times and to examine it from several perspectives, like 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.

The majority of 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 only have learned in a seventh-century scribal school.¹⁷² 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.¹⁷³ Presumably, the Brass Plates would have served as

¹⁷² See Reynolds, “Chiastic Structuring,” and Noel B. Reynolds, “Nephi’s Outline,” *BYU Studies*, Vol. 20 (Winter 1980): 131–149, republished in Noel B. Reynolds, ed., *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, Religious Studies Monograph Series Vol. 7, Brigham Young University, 1982. In *Lehi’s Vision, Nephi’s Blueprint*, working paper (2020), I show how First and Second Nephi constitute a single composition organized with the principles of Hebrew rhetoric.

¹⁷³ See the rhetorical analyses of First and Second Nephi in Donald W. Parry, *Poetic Parallelisms in the Book of Mormon: The Complete Text Reformatted*, FARMS, 2007, pp.

Nephi's only handbook on Hebrew rhetoric once he left Jerusalem.

Conclusions

This paper brings contemporary findings of Bible scholars, and 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 that traced its origins to Joseph, the son of Jacob in ancient Egypt, and which would have included the records Joseph inherited from his great grandfather Abraham. The principal corpus of 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 scriptural tradition in the growing threat of

1–131, and Reynolds, “Nephi’s Outline,” and “Chiastic Structuring.”

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 have taken hold among members of their own group.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁴ In another background 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" could have alarmed the multi-century guardians of this Josephite version of Israelite history and prophecy.