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The Last Nephite Scribes

Noel B. Reynolds

December 20, 2021

The picture of the last Nephite prophet Moroni and his activities after the final battle that seems to prevail with contemporary readers of the Book of Mormon is both simple and straightforward. Still a relatively young man, Moroni is usually described as being completely alone, hiding from still vengeful Lamanites, and working to complete his father's abridgement of the Nephite records, which he would then hide up in the same hill where the great battle had occurred. But the ongoing accumulation of relevant scholarly discoveries about ancient scribalism and more careful readings of Moroni's own account now invite the construction of a significantly revised and enriched description of Moroni's last days.

As it turns out, the occasional references to the Nephite records in Mormon's abridgement and in Nephi's Small Plates constitute a complete record of the transmission of these records from one generation to another. When we read these accounts from the perspective of ancient near eastern history and record keeping, it becomes obvious that the Nephites from Nephi to Mormon have

maintained an official scribal school that keeps detailed records of the people, the prophecies and revelations given to the prophets, and the wars and contentions with the Lamanites. Even though the scribal responsibility is passed back and forth between kings, judges, prophets, scribes, and military leaders—all of whom are also trained scribes—it is always the same charge to maintain and preserve the same records set with a view to the same prophecy that in the last days the records of the Nephites will provide the key tool by which the descendants of Lehi, the Gentiles, and the house of Israel will be gathered in to the Lord as they receive the knowledge of the gospel originally revealed to the first Nephite prophets and taught to the Nephites by Jesus Christ in person. Further, that official scribal school will maintain competency in ancient Hebrew and Egyptian, the languages of their scriptures in the Brass Plates, even as their own Nephite language evolves in normal ways becoming unrecognizable to any other people.

A Nephite scribal tradition

The realization that Ammaron, Mormon, and Moroni were all key players in the Nephite scribal school that traced its origins and mission back to Lehi and Nephi, the prophetic founders of the Nephite dispensation, has influenced me the most in this undertaking. Students of literacy today have studied the rise and progress of a

multitude of writing systems over the last five millennia. They are in general agreement that widespread literacy, defined as the ability to read and compose complex texts, never existed until after the invention of the printing press. While the general public could use rudimentary writing in practical ways in their lives, the reading and writing of complex texts was left to specially trained scribes—the products of family-based scribal schools—that are estimated to have constituted between one and five percent of the general population in ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, Israel, Asia, Mesoamerica, and in Europe before Gutenberg.¹ All cultures were based in orality, and high level literacy was the province of small elites wherever it existed.

A Josephite scribal tradition

The Brass Plates of Lehi and Nephi are best explained as a product of a Manassite scribal school that persisted from the time of ancient Joseph in Egypt down to the last decades before the destruction of Jerusalem when Lehi and Nephi were trained as scribes.² That scribal school was defined by its preservation of an alternative

¹ For an in-depth exploration of the history of Israelite scribal schools from a Book of Mormon perspective, see Noel B. Reynolds, “Lehi and Nephi as Trained Manassite Scribes,” working paper available online at <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/5380>.

² See Noel B. Reynolds, “The Brass Plates in Context: A Book of Mormon Backstory,” working paper available online at <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/5378>.

Josephite history and prophetic record in the Egyptian language and of competency in that language and script for its scribes, who by Lehi's time were living as refugees in Jerusalem and were partially integrated into the Judahite scribal world, that featured writing in the relatively new Hebrew script and newly standardized Hebrew language, and that produced the Hebrew Bible in the seventh and sixth centuries BCE. That hypothesized scribal school then disappeared after Lehi, Nephi, and possibly others were driven out and after the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and took its remaining elites into captivity.³

Anyone from seventh-century Jerusalem who had written a book and explained that production saying he “had been taught somewhat in all the learning of [his] father” (1 Nephi 1:1), would have been readily identified as a highly trained scribe. That identification would be doubly confirmed when in reading the book, we find it has been carefully composed following the distinctive structuring principles of Hebrew rhetoric that reached their apogee of development in the

³ Intriguing potential corroborating evidence for this appears in the memoirs of a seventeenth-century British sea captain who worked the western coast of India for three decades. Alexander Hamilton wrote that in his many contacts with the ancient Jewish colony in Kerala, those people told him that they were descendants of Manasseh that had been deported from Jerusalem by the Babylonians, taken to the east end of the Babylonian empire, and then released at some later point and allowed to migrate south to India. They settled in Kerala, and they brought their records with them *written on brass plates*. See Captain Alexander Hamilton, *A New Account of the East Indies I* (London: 1744), 323–24. This book is now available as a photographic reprint and online. I consulted the GALE reprint edition.

scribal schools of late seventh-century Jerusalem—as has been argued by contemporary Bible scholars.⁴

A Nephite scribal school

The strongest evidence for a scribal school that played a significant role in Nephite society throughout its thousand-year history is Mormon’s abridgment of the extensive Nephite records as displayed in the Book of Mormon itself. On the whole, Mormon’s text simply assumes scribal teaching and competencies. But the text offers other clues of a scribal-school tradition as well. For example, we are repeatedly reminded of the very large body of Nephite records that had been preserved, with which Mormon had to work in producing his abridgment.

Mormon’s side comment made in the middle of his abridgment gives us a valuable perspective:

And now there are many records kept of the proceedings of this people, by many of this people, which are particular and very large, concerning them.

But behold, a hundredth part of the proceedings of this people, yea, the

⁴ See Noel B. Reynolds, “Chiastic Structuring of Large Texts: Second Nephi as a Case Study,” in *“To Seek the Law of the Lord”: Essays in Honor of John W. Welch*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson and Daniel C. Peterson (Orem, UT: The Interpreter Foundation, 2017), 333–50 and “Lehi’s Vision, Nephi’s Blueprint,” working paper available online at <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/5382>.

account of the Lamanites and of the Nephites, and their wars, and contentions, and dissensions, and their preaching, and their prophecies, and their shipping and their building of ships, and their building of temples, and of synagogues and their sanctuaries, and their righteousness, and their wickedness, and their murders, and their robbings, and their plundering, and all manner of abominations and whoredoms, cannot be contained in this work. But behold, *there are many books and many records of every kind, and they have been kept chiefly by the Nephites. And they have been handed down from one generation to another by the Nephites, even until they have fallen into transgression.*⁵ Helaman 3:13–16

Across all those centuries, a continuing scribal school is the only viable explanation for the continuation of the mission to write and preserve such records and for the continuation of the knowledge of the necessary technology for manufacturing metal plates and inscribing a written record upon them.

The Languages of the scribes

⁵ All quotations from the Book of Mormon, including spelling and punctuation, are taken from the Yale critical text. See Royal Skousen, *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2009). I have occasionally adjusted formatting and added italics for emphasis.

The richness of the linguistic options available to Mormon and Moroni in their late Nephite writings is another strong indicator of their participation in a scribal school that had kept those options alive for a millennium, in spite of the inevitable changes and transformations of the Nephite vernacular language across so many centuries.⁶ Nephi stated plainly at the beginning that he was writing his Small Plates in the language of the Egyptians⁷—a statement that illuminates the linguistic focus of his own Manassite scribal training. There is only fragmentary evidence of an Egyptian-language component in the training provided by seventh-century Judahite scribal schools.⁸

Centuries after Nephi, King Benjamin taught his own sons about the importance of the Brass Plates and explained that Lehi could read them because he had been instructed in the Egyptian language—just as Nephite scribal families were instructing their descendants in that language down to Mosiah’s day:

For it were not possible that our father Lehi could have remembered all

⁶ For an excellent account of these changes and the apparent impact of ancient Near Eastern languages on the Uto-Aztecan family of languages in ancient Mesoamerica from the perspective of historical linguistics, see Brian D. Stubbs, *Changes in Languages from Nephi to Now*, second edition, (2016).

⁷ 1 Nephi 1:2

⁸ The limited epigraphic evidence is summarized in Reynolds, “Brass Plates in Context,” xxx.

these things, to have taught them to his children, except it were for the help of these plates; for he having been taught in the language of the Egyptians, therefore *he could read these engravings and teach them to his children, that thereby they could teach them to their children*, and so fulfilling the commandments of God, *even down to this present time*. Mosiah 1:4

The predominantly Egyptian language character of the Brass Plates helps explain Nephi's claim that these plates contained a more reliable version of Israelite scripture and history than did the newly transcribed Judahite texts,⁹ because the Brass Plates were recorded and preserved in the original language and script (most likely hieratic) that was used by Moses, Lehi's ancestor Manasseh, his father Joseph, and his great-great grandfather Abraham. In contrast, the Hebrew Bible that took shape after 700 BCE is thought to be derived from transcriptions of competing oral traditions using the early Hebrew alphabetic script which made its appearance around 800 BCE and was only standardized in the paleo-Hebrew script during the following century. That early script was subsequently replaced by the Persian or square script after the exile in the sixth century, but was still occasionally manifest in some Samaritan and Jewish manuscripts as late as the

⁹ See Nephi's comparison of the Brass Plates with a future Judahite Bible in 1 Nephi 13:20–32.

first century BCE, as attested in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Because of the centrality of the Brass Plates and Lehi and Nephi's early writings for the Nephite tradition, we learn that the ability to read and write in Egyptian language and script was preserved by these Nephites down to the time of Mormon and Moroni and that they had also adapted the Egyptian script to the current version of their own language. They also claimed to have had the option of writing their record in Hebrew. The only Hebrew script that could have been known to them was the alphabetic paleo Hebrew of Lehi's day, which may have been easier to adapt to the vernacular Nephite in which their histories, prophecies, and preachings would have been recorded.

And now behold, we have written this record, according to our knowledge, in the characters which are called among us the reformed Egyptian, being handed down and altered by us according to our manner of speech. And if our plates had been sufficiently large, we should have written in the Hebrew; but the Hebrew hath been altered by us also. And if we could have written in the Hebrew, behold, ye would have had none imperfection in our record. But the Lord knoweth the things which we have written and also that none other people knoweth our language. And because that none other people knoweth our language, therefore he hath prepared means for the

interpretation thereof. Mormon 9:32–34

Ammaron as chief Nephite scribe

From the beginning of the Nephite dispensation as described in the great orienting vision given to Lehi and Nephi, their prophets knew the day would come that the Nephite civilization would completely abandon the ways of the Lord and would finally be destroyed as a people.¹⁰ That prophesied dark night was evidently falling in the opening decades of the tenth Nephite century when Ammaron, the apparent head of the Nephite scribal school and custodian of the entire collection of Nephite records, was inspired to secrete that collection in a secure northern location and to arrange for a final completion and abridgment of the main record, the Large Plates of Nephi, that would eventually become the primary means of launching the last dispensation and bringing the remnant of Joseph, the Gentiles, and scattered Israel to the Lord.¹¹

And it came to pass that after three hundred and five years had passed away—and the people did still remain in wickedness—and Amos died, and his brother Ammaron did keep the record in his stead.

¹⁰ See Reynolds, “Lehi’s Vision,”

¹¹ See Mormon 3:17–19 and 5:9–24.

And it came to pass that when three hundred and twenty years had passed away, Ammaron *being constrained by the Holy Ghost* did hide up the records which were sacred, yea, even all the sacred records which had been handed down from generation to generation, which were sacred, even until the three hundred and twentieth year from the coming of Christ. And he did hide them up unto the Lord, *that they might come again unto the remnant of the house of Jacob, according to the prophecies and the promises of the Lord.* 4 Nephi 1:47–49

And about the time that Ammaron hid up the records unto the Lord, he came unto me [Mormon], I being about ten years of age—and *I began to be learned somewhat after the manner of the learning of my people*—and Ammaron saith unto me: I perceive that thou art a sober child and art quick to observe. Therefore, when ye are about twenty and four years old, I would that ye should remember the things that ye have observed concerning this people; and when ye are of that age, go to the land of Antum unto a hill which shall be called Shim; and there have I deposited unto the Lord all the sacred engravings concerning this people. And behold, *ye shall take the plates of Nephi unto yourself, and the remainder shall ye leave in the place where they are.* And ye shall engrave upon the plates of Nephi all the things

that ye have observed concerning this people. And I Mormon being a descendant of Nephi—and my father’s name was Mormon—and I remembered the things which Ammaron commanded me. Mormon 1:1–5

Mormon as final head Nephite scribe and custodian of the Nephite records

In this transitional passage, Mormon provides an account of how at the tender age of ten he was chosen and charged to be the final custodian and abridger of the nine-century collection of Nephite records. So how, we might ask, is Ammaron, the distinguished apparent head of whatever remained of the Nephite scribal association, being made aware of one of their younger students who at age ten is only beginning “to be learned somewhat after the manner of the learning” of “his people” and that he is “a sober child” and “quick to observe?” We don’t know whether Mormon is here referring to the learning programs of his family scribal school or of the Nephites more generally. All ancient learning programs we know about were family-based. And that would be consistent with the details of the Nephite story as it unfolds in Mormon’s abridgment.

Ammaron is clearly in survival mode when he approaches the young Mormon. He has already hidden the Nephite record collection in their northern retreats, as far from the Lamanite borders as possible, and is on the lookout for a

talented successor. While Mormon has not thought to inform us in so many words that he was educated in a scribal school, anyone from an oral culture would have understood that implication immediately. And just like the scribal schools of the ancient Near East and Egypt were governed and supported by families over long periods of time, so does Mormon describe himself as “a pure descendant of Lehi” (3 Nephi 5:20) and as “a descendant of Nephi” (Mormon 1:5). Minimally, Mormon is telling his readers that he is not an Ishmaelite, a Zoramite, a Mulekite, a Jaredite, or descended from any of the other human populations that may have been associated with the Nephites. But he also may be identifying himself with a scribal school established by Nephi and perpetuated down to the times of Ammaron and Mormon.

A History of the Nephite Scribal School

The history of the Nephite scribal school is nowhere articulated explicitly, though there are clues that surface at multiple junctures in Nephi’s and Mormon’s accounts. Like so many other dimensions of ancient Nephite culture that we would love to know more about, Mormon seems to assume we will be able to fill in the blanks, not realizing how difficult that would be for modern peoples who have only experienced wide-spread literacy. Brant Gardner has published two articles

that argue persuasively that Nephi was a trained scribe and that the Book of Mormon was written by similarly educated elites to be read by literate elites. But he also shows numerous ways in which the text also indicates the influence of a predominantly oral Nephite culture.¹² \

Tracking scribal responsibility for maintaining and preserving the Nephite records

What I have not been able to find anywhere is an attempt to track the continuity of scribal training throughout the Nephite dispensation. The most significant efforts to track Nephite record keepers and their contributions as mentioned in the text itself took shape before the recent flowering of studies of ancient scribalism and so do not incorporate the understandings of scribal schools that are known today.¹³

¹² See Brant A. Gardner, “Nephi as Scribe,” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 23, no.1 (2011): 45–55 and “Literacy and Orality in the Book of Mormon,” *Interpreter* 9 (2014): 29–85. See also Gardner’s helpful discussion of the cultural challenges we face in reading and interpreting any ancient book like the Bible or the Book of Mormon. Brant A. Gardner, *Traditions of the Fathers: The Book of Mormon as History* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2015), especially 25–40.

¹³ See Sidney B. Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968), 13–24 and John L. Sorenson, *Mormon’s Codex: An Ancient American Book* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2013), 184–218—both of which bring together the decades of research and writing by these two path-breaking scholars in their respective approaches to Book of Mormon research. John A. Tvedtnes provided a minimalist summary in his essay, “Book of Mormon Tribal Affiliation and Military Castes,” in Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin, eds., *Warfare in the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and Provo: FARMS, 1990), 315–316. More recently, Anita Wells has reviewed Nephite

When he produced his comprehensive analysis of hereditary offices in the Nephite government, military, and priesthood, John Tvedtnes was able to conclude “that the most important offices in Nephite society—including military positions . . . —were de facto hereditary.”¹⁴ From the perspective of these newer studies on ancient scribalism, it becomes evident that the descendants of Nephi did maintain a scribal school that prepared the men who served as the Nephite leaders in all these areas of responsibility from the time of Nephi down to Mormon and Moroni. As will be shown below, Mormon’s abridgment reflects the perspective of a trained scribe as it carefully documents every transfer of responsibility for the Nephite records through the entire Nephite dispensation.

The track of responsibility for the scribal school is clear. As in ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Israel, it was the scribal schools that bore the responsibility for maintaining the libraries of earlier and current records and other sacred objects. While the Nephite record does not use the terminology of scribal schools that characterizes modern scholarly discourse, it clearly documents the

record keeping from the perspective of a trained librarian and archivist. She notes how so many scholarly interpreters are impressed with the frequent and repeated references to Nephite records and to their authors that establish a keen concern with provenance and textual relationships that would not have been a concern in early 19th century American culture. See Anita Wells, “Bare Record: The Nephite Archivist, the Record of Records, and the Book of Mormon Provenance,” *Interpreter* 24 (2017): 99–122, especially 103–104.

¹⁴ Tvedtnes, “Book of Mormon Tribal Affiliation,” 317.

passing of the responsibility for the records archives from one period to another. Unstated, but almost certainly included, was the responsibility of these schools to perpetuate education in the languages and scripts of their records, including specifically Egyptian and Hebrew. As the Nephite language evolved over the centuries, these arcane language skills were in danger of disappearing with each new generation.

Lehi and Nephi

Lehi and Nephi provide us with a strong starting point as obviously trained scribes coming out of Jerusalem at the end of the seventh century BCE. I have argued elsewhere that Nephi's literate attainments exceed almost all examples that have survived in the Hebrew Bible.¹⁵ But the story gets murky very quickly. Nephi produced two separate records written on metal plates—described respectively as his “Large Plates” and his “Small Plates”—each of which he gives the same title—*the plates of Nephi*. These are the two sets of plates that Mormon would later take from the hill Shim.

Mormon's abridgment that we know as the Book of Mormon was derived

¹⁵ See Reynolds, “Lehi and Nephi as Trained Manassite Scribes,” and “Lehi's Vision, Nephi's Blueprint.”

originally from Nephi's Large Plates.¹⁶ But he also discovered Nephi's Small Plates, was deeply impressed, and attached them whole to his abridgment. Joseph Smith would later use his translation of these Small Plates to replace the lost 116 pages of translation of Mormon's abridgment of the Large Plates.¹⁷ After the abridgment was completed, Mormon returned Nephi's Large Plates to the buried Nephite records archive.

Before his death, Nephi gave the "Large Plates" which contained a detailed account of the proceedings of his people to the kings to be maintained as an ongoing record and to be preserved *in futuro*. But the "Small Plates" he gave to his younger brother Jacob. Born after Lehi's departure from Jerusalem, Jacob was undoubtedly taught to read and write either by Nephi or by his father Lehi. Jacob added some valuable material to the Small Plates, and then passed it on to his own posterity who found little to add and who, after several generations, gave up on it entirely by turning it over to the monarchy to become part of the royal archive—where it was discovered by Mormon centuries later. Mormon then

¹⁶ See Mormon's explanation in Words of Mormon 1:3–11.

¹⁷ For a detailed and thoughtful analysis of that sequence of events and their implications for the resulting text, see Don Bradley, *The Lost 116 Pages: Reconstructing the Book of Mormon's Missing Stories* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2019), 3–119. Bradley shows convincingly that the actual number of pages lost likely far exceeded 116—which is the number of manuscript pages for the new material that replaced them.

attached it to the abridgment which he was making of the Large Plates.¹⁸

Transmitting the Small Plates of Nephi

Jacob reports how Nephi acceded to the request of his people to give them a king before he died.¹⁹ Like most other readers, I have assumed that the kings were descendants of Nephi. Because the first section of the translation of Mormon's gold plates was lost by Martin Harris, we do not have a record naming the kings or their scribes until the time of king Mosiah. Consequently, they can only be treated as an unnamed group in a study of how the Nephite records were kept and transmitted through those first four centuries. But at the end of that period it is evident that the kings have faithfully followed the direction given by Nephi to maintain his Large Plates as a record of the Nephite people. The kings themselves may even have retained the responsibility of leading the royal scribal school that kept and preserved the records and the languages of the scriptures. None of that is evident in the record kept by Jacob's descendants.

¹⁸ For a comprehensive literary and content analysis of the seven passages in which the respective profiles of the large and small plates are discussed by Nephi or Jacob, see Noel B. Reynolds, "Nephi's Small Plates: A Rhetorical Analysis," TBA.

¹⁹ I have reviewed this political history in detail and have advanced my reasons for doubting that Nephi ever accepted the office of king for himself in Noel B. Reynolds, "Nephite Kingship Reconsidered," in Davis Bitton, ed., *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World: Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 151–189.

The last of Jacob's line with responsibility for the Small Plates was Amaleki, who turned them over to king Benjamin about four and a half centuries after Lehi's departure from Jerusalem. It would appear that Amaleki, and possibly some of his predecessors had let their tradition of family literacy deteriorate and depended on trained scribes to record their very brief comments on the Small Plates. Amaleki explicitly concludes the record by saying that he "would speak" about one more historical development, after which he concludes: "I make an end of my speaking."²⁰ He seems to be dictating his last words to a scribe—unlike Nephi, who makes it clear that he was making the first parts of this record with his own hands.²¹

Amaleki also tells us about the very important merger of the Nephites with the illiterate descendants of Zedekiah the last king of Judah.²² These people brought no records with them from Jerusalem and rejoiced to learn that the Nephites had such a record in the Brass Plates. Their language was corrupted over the intervening centuries, and so "they were taught in the language of Mosiah" (Omni 1:18). It would seem that the high literacy of the Nephites and their

²⁰ See Omni 1:27 and 30.

²¹ 1 Nephi 1:3.

²² See Omni 1:14–22.

possession of the Brass Plates trumped the claims of Jewish royalty as the Mulekites and Nephites united their peoples and appointed Mosiah to be their king. John Tvedtnes has argued persuasively that this outcome may have provided the basis for the recurring rebellions of the king-men in coming decades that attempted to replace the Nephite government with a monarchy composed of those who “were . . . of high birth” (Alma 51:8).²³

Kings and scribes

That assumption would explain the fact that the kings , the chief judges, the prophets, and their relatives who succeeded them seem to have been the custodians of the growing collection of Nephite records and, by implication, leaders of the principal Nephite scribal school. We have already noted that Jacob’s descendants eventually took the Small Plates of Nephi to King Benjamin, thereby joining them with the archive containing Nephi’s Large Plates and all other Nephite records.²⁴ That royal archive is next mentioned when Benjamin’s son Mosiah, puts Alma in charge of it, just before he moves to replace the monarchy with an administration of judges. Mormon’s abridgment provides a clear summary

²³ Tvedtnes, “Tribal Affiliation,” 298–301.

²⁴ Omni 1:25

of the formal bestowal of the responsibility for the records on the successor to a king:

[Mosiah] took the plates of brass and all the things which he had kept and conferred them upon Alma, which was the son of Alma —yea, all the records and also the interpreters—and conferred them upon him, and commanding him that he should keep and preserve them and also keep a record of the people, handing them down from one generation to another, even as they had been handed down from the time that Lehi left Jerusalem.

Mosiah 28:20

Mormon first introduced Alma the Elder as a descendant of Nephi,²⁵ and his descendants became the chief scribes for the rest of Nephite history down to Mormon, who also declares himself to be a descendant of Nephi. This first Alma was one of the priests of King Noah serving the small colony of Nephites that had returned to the original city of Nephi as vassals to the Lamanite kings. We might speculate that those who took the risks involved in that return may have felt strong family connections to the area originally settled by Nephi, Jacob, and their followers. Before the establishment of the reign of the judges, the spiritual, political, scribal, and military authority of the Nephites was lodged in the office of

²⁵ Mosiah 17:2

the king. From that point on, the offices of chief high priest and of chief judge were distinguished. Though Alma's son Alma was appointed to hold both, he soon gave up the judgeship to another so that he could focus on the church. In the wars that would come, the generals acknowledged the authority of the chief judges over them. Alma was also a prophet, and the chief high priests and prophets following him were all his descendants.

After the monarchy

Although Alma would soon become the chief judge and head of state, he would later also turn that responsibility over to another and dedicate himself to the work of the church as its chief high priest. The conjunction of multiple roles in the Nephite monarchy was passed on to Alma as chief judge, but when he determined to separate the governing and priestly roles, it was not clear how the chief scribal role should be assigned. Apparently, Alma's intention was to leave that function with the head of government, but Nephihah, the new chief judge declined to accept it: "Nevertheless [Nephihah] had refused Alma to take possession of those records and those things which were esteemed by Alma and his fathers to be most sacred. Therefore, when it came time for Alma to pass these responsibilities on to a successor, he conferred them upon his son Helaman" (Alma 50:38).

Because of Nephiah's refusal, the record-keeping role continued with Alma and becomes a patrilineal charge that he passes on to his son Helaman at some point prior to the close of his own prophetic career. Mormon's record of the final instructions Alma gives to each of his three sons are specific to their needs, and half of the instruction to Helaman focuses on the records and "sacred things" that he must maintain as both the custodian and as the continuing recorder.

And now my son Helaman, I command you that ye take the records which have been entrusted with me. And I also command you that ye shall keep a record of this people, according as I have done, upon the plates of Nephi and keep all these things sacred which I have kept, even as I have kept them—for it is for a wise purpose that they are kept. Alma 37:1–2

The holy scriptures and the Brass Plates

It is also important to note that here at the midpoint of the Nephite dispensation Nephite discourse refers to the Brass Plates as "the holy scriptures" (Alma 37:3). They contain "the genealogy of our forefathers, even from the beginning," and they will "be kept and preserved by the hand of the Lord until they should go forth unto every nation, kindred, tongue, and people, that they shall know of the mysteries contained thereon" (Alma 37:3–4). The same prophesied future applies

as well to “all the plates which do contain that which is holy writ” (Alma 37:5)—likely a reference to the large and small plates of Nephi initiated at the very beginning of the Nephite dispensation as are included in the collection being passed on to Helaman. But in its prophetic mode, Alma’s statement may also be intended to include the plates of Mormon that would eventually come forth as the Book of Mormon and provide the key to the fulfillment of the ancient prophecy that the remnant of Joseph would become a blessing to all nations.²⁶

Three other passages in the Book of Alma refer to the Brass Plates as “the holy scriptures” in contexts that assume that paper copies of all or part of those scriptures, rather than the plates themselves, are the immediate referent. The horrendous scene in Ammonihah describing the burning of the believers specifies that “they also brought forth their records, which contained the holy scriptures, and cast them into the fire also, that they might be burned and destroyed by fire” (Alma 14:8). From the perspective of our modern literate society where individual members of a family might have personal printed copies of the scriptures, we might interpret this passage as an official attempt to get rid of those private libraries. But reading this passage in the context of an ancient oral culture, it

²⁶ For the full development of this theme, see Noel B. Reynolds, “Understanding the Abrahamic Covenant through the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2018): 39–74.

would make more sense to read “they also brought forth their records” as the scribal class publicly repudiating the scriptures (their paper copies of the Brass Plates) which in an earlier and more faithful day they had used to teach the people.

When Ammon teaches the Lamanite king Lamoni about the creation and the plan of redemption, he uses “the holy scriptures” in a context that can only refer to a copy that he and his fellow missionaries, themselves members of the Nephite scribal class, have brought with them.²⁷ When Amulek stood to teach the Zoramite poor, he referred repeatedly to prophets and teachings identified with the Brass Plates and observed “that it is impossible that ye should be ignorant” of the prophecies of Christ because “these things were taught unto you bountifully before your dissension from among us” (Alma 34:1–2)—presumably taught by priests and scribes who had access to copies of the written word at the local level.

Scribes and calendars

Like their contemporary Mayan scribes, Nephite scribes were tasked with the responsibility to keep track of the calendar.²⁸ The Book of Mormon tracks three successive calendar systems based on different start dates—(600 BCE) the year

²⁷ Alma 18:33–40.

²⁸ The calendrical responsibilities of Mayan scribes are described in Coe and Houston, “*The Maya*, 259–262.

that Lehi fled Jerusalem, the year the new system of judges replaced the monarchy, and the year the sign was given of the birth of Christ. The calendrical responsibility of the Nephite scribes rose to the surface of Mormon's abridgment at the time the prophecy of Christ's death was due for fulfillment:

And now it came to pass that according to our record—and we know our record to be true, for behold, it was a just man which did keep the record; for he truly did many miracles in the name of Jesus, and there was not any man which could do a miracle in the name of Jesus save he were cleansed every whit from his iniquity—and now it came to pass, if there was no mistake made by this man in the reckoning of our time, the thirty and third year had passed away. 3 Nephi 8:1–2

The Nephites and the Small Plates

It is possible that Nephi's Small Plates were not well known or even used by the Nephites. They were not part of the official record archive during the first three Nephite centuries while in possession of Jacob's descendants and before they transferred possession to King Mosiah. And Mormon's scribal training did not seem to have made him aware of their existence before he found them in the large deposit of records made by Ammaron. We only have one place in Mormon's

record where a later prophet quotes from the Small Plates, but that quotation would almost certainly have been derived from Nephi's Large Plates originally, and so would have been available there to Alma. When Alma told Helaman of his vision when he thought that like Father Lehi he saw "God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God," he was quoting Nephi's description of Lehi's vision exactly.²⁹ But again, the most likely source for Alma would have been Nephi's Large Plates, from which, he states, "I have taken all the account which I have written" (Helaman 3:14).

Nephi may well have understood that the target audience of the Small Plates would be the peoples of the last days—not only Lehi's descendants, but also the Gentiles and the house of Israel. Presumably, all the prophecies and revelations he included in the Small Plates had already been recorded in the Large Plates. And the Isaiah selections would have been taken from the Brass Plates. From Nephi's perspective, the Small Plates would have been a highly selective and carefully structured package aimed at these latter-day readers.

Three times the reader of the Small Plates is told that this second record made by Nephi at the Lord's command "for a wise purpose." "Wherefore the Lord

²⁹ Compare Alma 36:22 and 1 Nephi 1:8.

hath commanded me to make these plates for a wise purpose in him, which purpose I know not” (1 Nephi 9:5).³⁰ That wise purpose became evident when Martin Harris lost the first major portion of the translation and Joseph was directed to use the Small Plates as a replacement.³¹

Paper copies of scripture

Because access to the carefully guarded single copies of metallic records such as the plates of Nephi and the Brass Plates would have been severely limited in a growing Nephite population, the priests and teachers in the rapidly multiplying towns and cities would have needed minimally their own copies of excerpts of the Brass Plates for their own training and for teaching the people. It is clearly established that ancient Mesoamericans had a fairly easy way of making paper, which could have been learned and used by the Nephites. As John Sorenson has summarized:

Maya books were most often manufactured of long strips of bark paper folded back and forth in accordion fashion to form multiple pages. To make long sheets of paper, bark was stripped off fig trees, soaked, then pounded

³⁰ Compare 1 Nephi 19:3 and Words of Mormon 1:7.

³¹ See D&C 10. Also see the historical commentary in Bradley, *116 Lost Pages*, 81–82.

together with a wooden club. A thin coating of lime plaster was spread on dried strips cut from these sheets. The plaster stiffened the paper and provided a smooth, clean surface on which characters were painted. Such paper was relatively easy to manufacture.³²

Alma's scribal school updated the Large Plates with annual reports.

It seems that as Alma took charge of the main Nephite record—the Large Plates of Nephi—that he and his scribal school organized updates in the form of annual reports. Beginning with his abridgment of Alma's record, Mormon's record repeatedly notes the beginning and ending of years and summarizes what happened in particular years or groupings of years. The book of Alma explicitly notes over thirty of these transitions from one annual report to the next, depending on how one counts these, and some later passages emphasize them even more.³³

The official transition from Alma to Helaman as chief scribe and custodian

³² Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex*, 230. A more detailed description of the process and ingredients the Maya used to manufacture paper can be found in Michael D. Coe and Stephen Houston, *The Maya*, ninth edition (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2015), 239. Though the vast majority of ancient Mayan books have been destroyed, the Dresden Codex survives today as the most perfect example of this kind of paper and writing.

³³ The annual reports surface already in Alma's first verses and provide the principal structure for his closing chapter 63. The continuation of the pattern in Mormon's subsequent book abridgments can be easily seen, for example, in Helaman 2:12–3:3 and 4 Nephi 1, which bounces rapidly through the yearly reports from the 34th year all the way down to Mormon's time in the 320th year.

of the Nephi records is recorded in Alma chapter 37. But Mormon also makes it clear that these chapters containing the final instructions of Alma to his three sons were taken from Alma's record: "And we have an account of his commandments which he gave unto them according to his own record" (Alma 35:16). But the record of Alma did not end there. Mormon goes on to mention briefly that Alma and his sons "did go forth among the people to declare the word unto them" (Alma 43:1) before returning "to an account of the wars between the Nephites and the Lamanites in the eighteenth year of the reign of the judges" (Alma 43:3), focusing on the confrontations of Zerahemnah and Moroni as a conclusion to the record of Alma and of the eighteenth year.

The book of Alma seems to have been compiled in the Large Plates of Nephi in the form of accumulating annual records. Mormon's abridgment of the book of Helaman begins with a record of the nineteenth year. Helaman's record begins with an account of Alma's instructions on what to include and exclude from the record—just as Jacob began his section of Nephi's Small Plates with a summary of the instructions Nephi had given him about what to include.³⁴

Scribal specializations

³⁴ See Jacob 1:1–8 and the discussion in Reynolds, "Nephi's Small Plates," xxx.

The book of Mosiah does name the last three Nephite kings who had stewardship over the record-keeping process. But the accumulating records never mention the names of the scribes who may have managed these responsibilities for the kings on a daily basis. Mosiah passed these responsibilities to Alma upon discontinuing the monarchical government structure, and Alma soon separated off the responsibility of the chief judge and retained the scribal responsibilities under the office of chief high priest as explained above.

Scribal schools in the ancient near east functioned under a variety of patrons. Kings and emperors typically maintained their own palace schools to provide them with wise and learned men who could advise them, manage administrative activity, support official correspondence in multiple languages, and formulate official proclamations and statutes of law. Temples also were usually supported by scribal schools that educated new generations of priests and scribes in the literature, hymnology, and religious rites and mythology of their culture, as well as the arts of magic, divinization, and healing and the relevant arcane and foreign languages required for these traditional materials. The world of commerce generated much of the need for scribes who could read and write contracts and manage inventories and communications with distant businesses. This kind of training could sometimes be obtained in more specialized scribal schools that may

also have trained men with relevant skills for service on the staffs of military leaders. Nephite society may well have required scribes in all these areas. The degree of specialization characterizing scribal schools would likely have depended on the population sizes they served.

As already demonstrated, Mormons' account is derived from a tradition of official scribes who maintained a history of the Nephite people as a whole. We also have some indication of an educated lawyer class that Alma and Amulek had to deal with in Ammonihah.³⁵ Commercial activity facilitated by some minimal level of literacy is suggested in the account of the apostate priests led by Amulon, who at the request of the Lamanite king taught some of the Lamanites in the language of the Nephites and in reading and writing to the extent that they could “keep their record” and “write one to another. And thus the Lamanites began to increase in riches and began to trade one with another and wax great and began to be a cunning and a wise people as to the wisdom of the world” (Mosiah 24:6–7).

Local priestly scribal schools may have been at the core of scribal education for all these elements of Nephite society, and, as is evident in several stories, they were expected to have expert knowledge of the scriptures and the prophecies and religious laws and regulations included therein. They may also have been involved

³⁵ See Alma 10:13–15 and 10:24–11:3.

in maintaining the Nephite competence in Egyptian and Hebrew language and scripts that Mormon and Moroni claimed to have at the end of the Nephite dispensation. They would have been teaching Nephite and Lamanite peoples in their own languages while drawing on Egyptian- and Hebrew-language scriptures in the process.

Military leadership and the Nephite scribal schools

From the beginning to the end, the Book of Mormon seems to include the military arts with the training received in the principal Nephite scribal school. It all starts with Nephi, himself a highly trained scribe in the Josephite tradition, who becomes the ruler and teacher over his people. On the one hand, he makes very clear that he has begun an important history of his people, including the revelations received by their prophets and the wars and contentions with the Lamanites, that he leaves with the kings that succeed him to maintain and preserve. Almost a millennium later, Mormon abridges that record to produce the Book of Mormon. But Nephi was also the military leader of his people. Knowing of the hatred the Lamanites had toward him and his children, Nephi armed his people with swords and prepared them to be able to defend themselves. And by the time forty years had

passed away they “had already had wars and contentions” with the Lamanites.³⁶

Over the course of Nephite history, the people who clearly bear responsibility for maintaining the plates of Nephi are also called upon for major roles in military leadership. We don’t know the names or the stories of any of the early kings until we get to the time of king Mosiah and his son king Benjamin in whose days there was “a serious war and much bloodshed between the Nephites and the Lamanites.” But the Nephites prevailed and “king Benjamin did drive them out of the land of Zarahemla.”³⁷ In a second telling, Mormon describes how the Lamanites “came down . . . to battle against his people. But behold, king Benjamin gathered together his armies, and he did stand against them, and he did fight with the strength of his own arm with the sword of Laban” (The Words of Mormon 1:13).

Mormon’s account of this same king Benjamin goes on to describe how he led the prophets in teaching the people and establishing “peace in the land” (The Words of Mormon 1:17–18). Mormon then focuses at some length on Benjamin’s causing his sons to be taught “in all the language of his fathers, that thereby they might become men of understanding and that they might know concerning the

³⁶ 2 Nephi 5:14, 34. Cf 1 Nephi 9:4.

³⁷ Omni 1:24.

prophecies which had been spoken by the mouths of their fathers, which was delivered them by the hand of the Lord” (Mosiah 1:2). This sounds like Benjamin assigned this teaching to his scribal school that they might be able to read, understand, and teach from the Brass Plates and the Nephite records—witnessing to his sons that all these records “are true.”³⁸ The military arts and the scribal arts seemed to be co-located in the same hands.

A generation later, the monarchy was replaced by the reign of the judges with Alma as chief judge—he also being a highly trained scribe, as is evident in his writings.³⁹ And he has become the custodian of all the records Benjamin had entrusted to his sons. But he is also the top military authority, as is made clear in the Amlicite rebellion: “Now Alma, he being the chief judge and the governor of the people of Nephi, therefore he went up with his people, yea, with his captains and chief captains, yea, at the head of his armies, against the Amlicites to battle” (Alma 2:16). Then, in the second battle, Alma fought Amlici face to face and “slew Amlici with the sword” (Alma 2:29–31).

By the next generation, the Nephites have spread their growing population into a number of new cities. The roles of military, government, and priestly

³⁸ Mosiah 1:3–8.

³⁹ See Reynolds, “Rethinking Alma 36,” in which it is shown that Alma can employ the most intricate techniques of seventh-century Hebrew rhetoric in his speaking and writing.

leadership have been separated, but all seem to pass from father to son. Nephiah was replaced by his son Parhoron as chief judge.⁴⁰ Helaman replaces Alma as leader of the high priests and prophets and carries on with the scribal responsibilities for the records.⁴¹ And Moroni is appointed chief captain of the Nephite armies by the chief judges and the voice of the people.⁴²

The scribal responsibility for the Nephite records continues to be included with the priestly duties. But it also seems likely that all four lines of responsibility assume scribal training and high literacy for the occupants of these offices. This is never stated explicitly, but seems to be Mormon's assumption. There is repeated evidence of close personal friendship between them, and Mormon includes highly literate exchanges of letters across these lines of responsibility in his abridgment. All have good familiarity with the scriptures, and the military leaders particularly display deep understanding of the ideological grounding of the Nephite polity.

Alma as father of the scribes

Alma the Elder was a descendant of Nephi and a scribe trained in the priestly

⁴⁰ Alma 50:40.

⁴¹ Alma 45:21–22.

⁴² Alma 46:34.

tradition that accompanied the colony of Nephites that returned back to their homeland near the city of Nephi from Zarahemla. His son Alma and his successors had that same scribal training, which enabled them to draw heavily on the Brass Plates in their training and teaching. From Alma down to Ammaron, a four-century chain of his descendants served as chief of the Nephite scribal school and as chief high priests and prophets in the Nephite church first organized by Alma the Elder under the authorization of the last Nephite king Mosiah.

Some have speculated on how the first Alma received his authority to serve as a priest, to baptize, and to organize the church. It would seem doubtful that he drew on the authority he received as a priest of the wicked King Noah. But the text assures the reader three times that he had received authority from God to perform these priestly functions at those high levels.⁴³ And from Mosiah's last days to the coming of Christ to the Nephites, the priesthood authority and organization derives from that original authority claimed by Alma the Elder. Nephi had ordained the first priests and teachers for the Nephites, and his younger brother Jacob seems to have been its head. But we also see the priests serving under the superior authority of the kings in the case of Nephi, Mosiah, Benjamin, Mosiah, Zeniff, Noah, and Limhi.

⁴³ Compare Mosiah 18:13, 18, Mosiah 21:33, and Alma 5:3.

Mormon's abridgment omits major elements of the Nephite history, but faithfully preserves textual accounts of all the transitions between chief scribes and prophets. In passing that responsibility to his eldest son Helaman, Alma provides unparalleled detail about the records and sacred things, the sacred nature of the responsibility to preserve them and to extend the records, and the attendant responsibility to teach the people and call them to repentance and obedience.⁴⁴ Readers should assume that this package of responsibilities was passed in similar manner all the way down to Ammaron. Two decades later, Helaman died, and his brother "Shiblon took possession of those sacred things" (Alma 63:1). Four years later, Shiblon passed them back to Helaman's son Helaman, Alma's third son Corianton having emigrated previously to the north.⁴⁵

After the murder of the chief judge, the people chose this same Helaman to also take on the office of chief judge, bringing the responsibilities of the government, the scribal school, and the leadership of the church back into the hands of a single person.⁴⁶ About 13 years later, Helaman died, and without further textual explanation, we learn that "his eldest son Nephi *began to reign* in his

⁴⁴ See Alma 37:1–47.

⁴⁵ Alma 63:11–13.

⁴⁶ Helaman 2:1–2.

stead” (Helaman 3:37). That Nephi had inherited the full combination of roles held by his father becomes clear about eight years later when “Nephi delivered up the judgment seat up to a man whose name was Cezoram.” taking it upon himself “to preach the word of God all the remainder of his days” (Helaman 5:1,4)—choosing to follow the example of Alma, who had done the same thing when the growing corruption of the people required his full attention as their spiritual leader. Three decades later, continuation of the office of chief scribe is emphasized in Mormon’s description of the passing of Nephi’s responsibilities to his son Nephi:

And Nephi the son of Helaman had departed out of the land of Zarahemla, *giving charge unto his son Nephi*, which was his eldest son, *concerning the plates of brass and all the records* which had been kept, and all those things which had been kept sacred, from the departure of Lehi out of Jerusalem. Then he departed out of the land; and whither he went no man knoweth. *And his son Nephi did keep the record in his stead, yea, the record of this people.* 3 Nephi 1:2–3

This last Nephi, who kept the records during the first century after the birth of Christ, finally passed the record keeping to his son Amos, who kept the records for another 84 years during the peaceful years, before turning them over to his son, the last Amos.

And it came to pass that Nephi, he that kept this last record—and he kept it upon the plates of Nephi—died, and his son Amos kept it in his stead. And he kept it upon the plates of Nephi also; and he kept it eighty and four years. . . . And it came to pass that Amos died also. And it was an hundred and ninety and four years from the coming of Christ, and his son Amos kept the record in his stead. And he also kept it upon the plates of Nephi; and it was also written in the book of Nephi, which is this book. 4 Nephi 19–21

After this second Amos died, his brother Ammaron stepped up as heir of the Nephite scribal duties for fifteen years before being directed by the Holy Ghost to hide up all the accumulated sacred records before going to the ten-year old Mormon to arrange for their final disposition:

And it came to pass that after three hundred and five years had passed away . . . Amos died, and his brother Ammaron did keep the record in his stead. And it came to pass that when three hundred and twenty years had passed away, Ammaron *being constrained by the Holy Ghost* did hide up the records which were sacred, yea, even all the sacred records which had been handed down from generation to generation, which were sacred, even until the three hundred and twentieth year from the coming of Christ. And he did hide them up unto the Lord, that they might come again unto the

remnant of the house of Jacob, according to the prophecies and the promises of the Lord. And thus is the end of the record of Ammaron. 4 Nephi 1:47–49

Accumulated Nephite records

While Mormon made it clear that he used the Large Plates of Nephi as his primary source for the abridgment we have in the Book of Mormon, some descriptions of the accumulating Nephite records archive seem to indicate that the collection deposited by Ammaron was vast in extent. The clearest of these descriptions was reported by Mormon in Helaman 3:13–16:

And now there are many records kept of the proceedings of this people, by many of this people, which are particular and very large concerning them. But behold, a hundredth part of the proceedings of this people —yea, the account of the Lamanites and of the Nephites and their wars and contentions and dissensions and their preaching and their prophecies and their shipping and their building of ships and their building of temples and of synagogues and of sanctuaries and their righteousness and their wickedness and their murders and their robbings and their plunderings and all manner of abominations and whoredoms—cannot be contained in this work. But

behold, there are many books and many records of every kind, and they have been kept chiefly by the Nephites. And they have been handed down from one generation to another by the Nephites. Helaman 3:13–16

A modern vision of the Nephite archive?

We do not have a first-hand account of the vision reportedly given to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery in which they were shown a subterranean storage room filled with piles of books and metal plates that they understood to be Mormon's depository of Nephite records in the hill Cumorah. While there is considerable variation in the surviving second- and third-hand accounts describing that experience, it is clear that the contemporary associates of Joseph and Oliver believed it was a real event.⁴⁷ Joseph and Oliver thought they were returning the gold plates one last time to the stone box atop the New York drumlin from which Joseph had first taken them. But all reported versions of that vision seem to describe them returning the plates to the kind of storage room in the Nephite hill Cumorah in which Mormon left the full Nephite record collection in before giving

⁴⁷ A sampling and summary of these reports and documentation for each of them can be found in John W. Welch, ed., *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, second edition (Provo, UT: Brigham Young Univ. Press and Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 299–301.

his abridgment on the gold plates to Moroni to take away and to protect from Lamanite discovery.

Mormon as chief Nephite scribe and military leader

Before Mormon's day, the ancient social, religious, and political structures that had defined the Nephite nation for centuries were in disarray. The national agreements that made the reign of judges possible had evaporated as people turned to tribal government for support and protection. The church established by Christ was reduced to isolated tiny groups with no significant social influence. And the scribal school that had maintained a vast system of records and had educated the Nephite kings, prophets, judges, and military leaders for over nine centuries had also reached its end. Ammaron, the brother of the last prophet and chief scribe Amos, had been left to deal with the Nephite records collection after Amos died.

Ammaron's first move was to find a hiding place for the records as far from Lamanite territory as possible. We don't know if it was Ammaron or Mormon's own father also named Mormon that was teaching the young Mormon "after the manner of [his] people." But the precocious youngster caught Ammaron's attention: "I perceive that thou art a sober child and art quick to observe" (Mormon 1:2). Ammaron was inspired to charge this ten-year old student to

observe the events of his days and to make a final addition to the Large Plates of Nephi after about fifteen years.⁴⁸

Before the time when Mormon would take up his charge to extend the records, the great wars of the Lamanites and Nephites broke out, and at the age of 16, Mormon, like Captain Moroni some centuries earlier, was chosen to be the leader of the Nephite armies.⁴⁹ Unlike most Nephites of his day, Mormon was a devout Christian. But he “was large in stature,” educated, and likely a standout member of the military caste. The ensuing wars appear to have occupied Mormon for almost another 20 years. But at that point in the saga, the Nephite retreat had carried them to the land of Jashon which “was near the land where Ammaron had deposited the records unto the Lord.”

Either previously, or at this point in Mormon’s life, he discharged the obligation that Ammaron had placed upon him as a young boy to extend the record on the Large Plates of Nephi with his own observations on the last days of the Nephites: “I had gone according to the words of Ammaron and taken the plates of Nephi and did make a record. . . . And upon the plates of Nephi did I make a full account of all the wickedness and abominations” (Mormon 2:17–18). Although

⁴⁸ Mormon 1:3–4.

⁴⁹ Mormon 2:1–2.

Mormon will later move those plates along with all the records in Ammaron's depository to their final hiding place in the hill Cumorah, Mormon does not refer again to his own writing on those plates. Rather, at this point his full attention seems to have turned to his own great project—the abridgment of those plates of Nephi.

As it turned out, Ammaron's assignment to complete the Large Plates of Nephi was only the beginning for Mormon. From the time of Lehi and Nephi, the prophets had foreseen that in the last days the Nephite record would become the means by which the remnant of Joseph would become a great blessing to all nations according to the blessing given anciently to Abraham.⁵⁰ But this was not to be the full record begun by Nephi centuries before. At some point not specified in the text, Mormon received a commandment from the Lord to make a smaller record by abridging the Large Plates of Nephi, an abridgment that could become the direct means by which that promise to Abraham would be fulfilled:

But I knowing that these things must surely be made known and that all things which are hid must be revealed upon the housetops and also that a knowledge of these things must come unto the remnant of these people and

⁵⁰ See Reynolds, "Understanding the Abrahamic Covenant through the Book of Mormon."

also unto the Gentiles, which the Lord hath said should scatter this people—and this people should be counted as naught among them—therefore *I write a small abridgment*, daring not to give a full account of the things which I have seen because of *the commandment which I have received* And now behold, this I speak unto their seed and also to the Gentiles which hath care for the house of Israel, that realize and know from whence their blessings come. For I know that such will sorrow for the calamity of the house of Israel; yea, they will sorrow for the destruction of this people. They will sorrow that this people had not repented, that they might have been clasped in the arms of Jesus. Now these things are written unto the remnant of the house of Jacob. . . . And they are to be hid up unto the Lord, that they may come forth in his own due time. And *this is the commandment which I have received*. And behold, they shall come forth according to the commandment of the Lord when he shall see fit in his wisdom. Mormon 5:8–13

The abridgment of a thousand years of Nephite records would have been an enormous task. Mormon does mention some spaces in his adult life when he might have been able to accomplish that. But we can only speculate on that. After leading the Nephites in war for two decades, Mormon found himself near the place

where Ammaron had deposited all the Nephite records. As instructed in their previous meeting, Mormon took up the Large Plates of Nephi for the purpose of extending and completing that record. And within a few years, his forces were able to retake their lands and establish a boundary by treaty between the two peoples—a treaty that held for a full decade.⁵¹

When the Lamanites restarted their invasion, Mormon served as leader for two or three years, but because his own people had descended to such depths of wickedness, he gave up his role as leader and “utterly refused to go up against [his] enemies,” choosing instead to “stand as an idle witness” (Mormon 3:16). It would be another 13 years at least before he would accept once again the leadership of his people. As Mormon explains:

And it came to pass that I did go forth among the Nephites and did repent of the oath which I had made, that I would no more assist them. And they gave me command again of their armies, for they looked upon me as though I could deliver them from their afflictions. But behold, I was without hopes, for I knew the judgments of the Lord which should come upon them.

Mormon 5:1–2

This sequence leaves over twenty years that Mormon could have spent working on

⁵¹ See Mormon 2:27–3:1.

his completion of the Large Plates of Nephi, and then of his abridgment of that same Nephite record. It would also seem to have been a period in which he could have access to the materials and even whatever limited assistance these projects may have required.

Both of those large scribal efforts may have been essentially completed by the time Mormon returned to war. He would add another three chapters (as packaged in our modern edition of the Book of Mormon) before turning things over to his son Moroni. He knew the end was coming, so he “went to the hill Shim and did take up all the records which Ammaron had hid up unto the Lord” (Mormon 4:23). A few years later, as the Nephites awaited the coming of the Lamanites for what they expected to be their final battle, Mormon “hid up in the hill Cumorah all the records which had been entrusted to [him] by the hand of the Lord.” That would be the entire collection of Nephite records that Ammaron had hidden originally in the hill Shim, including the Large Plates of Nephi. But *it did not include his abridgment* of those records that was to become our modern Book of Mormon.

And when three hundred and eighty and four years had passed away, we had gathered in all the remainder of our people unto the land Cumorah. And it came to pass that when we had gathered in all our people in one to the land

of Cumorah, behold, I Mormon began to be old. And knowing it to be the last struggle of my people and having been commanded of the Lord that I should not suffer that the records which had been handed down by our fathers, which were sacred, to fall into the hands of the Lamanites—for the Lamanites would destroy them—therefore I made this record out of the plates of Nephi and *hid up in the hill Cumorah all the records which had been entrusted to me by the hand of the Lord, save it were these few plates* which I gave unto my son Moroni. Mormon 6:5–6

Having survived the great battle, Mormon was able to extend his own record to include a summary of his own final actions (Mormon 6:1–15), a mournful farewell to his own fallen people (Mormon 6:16–22), and an invitation to “the remnant of this people which are spared” that they might receive the gospel of Jesus Christ and be saved (Mormon 7:1–10). What that final account makes clear is that almost all the Nephite records previously hidden up by Ammaron in the hill Shim had now been hidden up by Mormon in the hill Cumorah before the great battle. However, Mormon’s abridgment was never buried in the Nephite hill Cumorah, but was given to Moroni for protection, further additions, and an eventual transmission to Joseph Smith. Generations of readers have assumed that Mormon’s gold plates were deposited in the Nephite hill Cumorah. But after

Mormon deposited all the inherited records into that hill, he says he gave the gold plates to Moroni to protect. We also know that Moroni would add considerably to Mormon's abridgment over the next 35 years that he had those plates in his possession.⁵²

Nephi's Small Plates

As noted earlier, there was one important exception to this account that Mormon did not mention here. But it had major impact on the text of the Book of Mormon that we have today. During the period when Mormon had access to all the Nephite records, he came across Nephi's Small Plates which pleased him "because of the prophecies of the coming of Christ" (Words of Mormon 1:4).

But behold, I shall take these plates which contain these prophesyings and revelations and put them with the remainder of my record, for they are choice unto me; and I know they will be choice unto my brethren. And I do

⁵² The great battle took place 385 years after the coming of Christ. Fifteen years later, Moroni makes his first entry on Mormon's plates, updating the reader on the fates of the last of the Nephites and adding his own impassioned plea to future readers that they repent and receive the gospel of Jesus Christ that they may be blessed forever (Mormon 8:1–9:37). Twenty years after that Moroni has added the books of Ether and Moroni and the sealed portion to Mormon's plates. Only then, 35 years after the great battle, does Moroni "seal up these records" without giving any hint about where that would be. But 1400 years later he would direct Joseph Smith to find them in a stone box buried near the top of a small glacial hill near the Smith home. In the decades that followed, the Latter-day Saints would begin referring to that hill by the name Cumorah.

this for a wise purpose, for thus it whispereth me according to the workings of the Spirit of the Lord which is in me. And now I do not know all things, but the Lord knoweth all things which is to come; wherefore he worketh in me to do according to his will. Words of Mormon 1:6–7

The last scribe

Some fifteen years after the last battle, Moroni undertook to “finish the record of [his] father Mormon,” saying that he had “but few things to write” as Mormon had instructed him.⁵³

And my father also was killed by them. And I, even I, remaineth alone to write the sad tale of the destruction of my people. But behold, they are gone, and I fulfill the commandment of my father. And whether they will slay me, I know not. Therefore *I will write and hide up the records in the earth*. And whither I go, it mattereth not. Behold, my father hath made this record, and he hath written the intent thereof. And behold, I would write it also if I had room upon the plates, but I have not. And *ore I have none, for I am alone*. My father hath been slain in battle, and all my kinsfolks. And I have not friends nor whither to go. And how long that the Lord will suffer that I may

⁵³ Mormon 8:1–3.

live, I know not. Behold, *four hundred years have passed away* since the coming of our Lord and Savior. Mormon 8:3–6

Before inscribing his own farewell to his future readers, Moroni actually gives us a little more information about his circumstances. He still has access to some kind of news network. He knows to tell us that “the Nephites which had escaped into the country southward were hunted by the Lamanites until they were all destroyed” and that his “father also was killed by them” (Mormon 8:2–3). He also knows that

the Lamanites have hunted my people the Nephites down from city to city and from place to place, even until they are no more. . . . And behold also, the Lamanites are at war one with another; and the whole face of this land is one continual round of murder and bloodshed, and *no one knoweth* the end of the war. And now behold, I say no more concerning them, for there are none save it be Lamanites and robbers that do exist upon the face of the land. Mormon 8:7–9

Moroni never mentions how he was able to provide for his own needs for food, clothing, and shelter across those 35 years between the last battle and the time he finally deposited the plates of Mormon near the future home of Joseph Smith. No doubt, he may have been able to survive in the short term by

scavenging from the enormous camp established by the Nephites during the months and years they had been preparing for the final battle. Knowing he would survive to fulfil the Lord’s purposes with the plates, he may even have hidden some supplies away for his own future needs. But 35 years is a long time in a semi-tropical climate or any where else for a single person to survive. The land northward from Cumorah was populated, but not by peoples that are described in the text of the Book of Mormon. Without textual evidence, we can only speculate that Moroni might have found friendly faces here and there that would accommodate him in some way during those years. He only tells us: “I wander whithersoever I can for the safety of mine own life” (Moroni 1:3).

One happy note Moroni shares with his readers is that the three disciples of Jesus “which did tarry in the land” had visited Moroni and Mormon, “and they have ministered unto us” (Mormon 8:10–11). He also anchors his own testimony of Christ and his gospel with the reassurance “that I have seen Jesus and that he hath talked with me face to face and that he told me in plain humility, even as a man telleth another *in mine own language* concerning these things” (Ether 12:39).⁵⁴

⁵⁴ It may be worth noting that both here and in his appearances to the Nephite people centuries earlier, Jesus seems to have spoken to people in their current version of the Nephite language.

But Moroni did not give Mormon's record a final burial at that time. He would survive another twenty years before taking that final step. In the meantime, he was able to produce a large number of additional metal plates and add extensively to the plates including his own abridgment of the record of Ether, his own book of Moroni, and the sealed portion containing the full account of the great vision given to the brother of Jared at the beginning of the Jaredite dispensation. We don't know whether he did find the ore needed to manufacture additional plates or if he was able to repurpose unused or lower priority leaves from the vast collection of records Mormon had buried in the hill Cumorah.

The Jaredite record

The book of Ether written by Moroni and appended to Mormon's abridgement bears witness to a much older scribal tradition among the Jaredites deriving from their own Mesopotamian origins in the time of "the great tower" and persisting successfully down to the time of Ether himself. While that scribal tradition and the sources it used do not play a central role in this paper, there was significant attention given to Ether's gold plates by the Nephite scribes that does require some mention here.

The historical background and sources of the book of Ether are much too

complex to be reviewed in a paper about Nephite scribalism.⁵⁵ I agree with Welch and others who have concluded that Moroni was using Mosiah's translation of Ether's record into the Nephite language including the great vision recorded by the brother of Jared, although Moroni's language in Mosiah 28: 11–19 and Ether 3:21–4:7 is open to other interpretations. Here, as in other passages, the Nephite prophets address their readers as if they were present, looking at the records being described, in which case their intended meanings would doubtless be perfectly clear.

Given the occurrence of some Jaredite names and cultural patterns in the Nephite record, and in spite of Ether's claim that all of the Jaredites were killed in the final war, we should keep open the possibility that some of those people escaped the final cataclysm and had descendants that gradually became part of the Nephite people. If that did happen, there is no evidence in the Nephite record that they ever identified themselves as a separate people or played a significant role in the Nephite saga as reported by Mormon.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ There are several published analyses and summaries available, but I find John W. Welch's online "Notes" on Ether 5 posted on Book of Mormon Central to be as comprehensive and reasonable as any available. <https://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/ether-1-5>.

⁵⁶ John Sorenson has also presented a view that sees surviving Jaredites merging with the Mulekites before their later merger with the Nephites. See John L. Sorenson, "The Mulekites," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (1990): 13–14 and *Mormon's Codex* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2013), 228–229.

But we do have Moroni's highly condensed abridgment of Ether's record as translated by Mosiah which he interspersed generously with his own commentary. Moroni also included, apparently without abridgment, Mosiah's translation of the great vision given to the brother of Jared at the very beginning of the Jaredite dispensation:

And when the Lord had said these words, the Lord shewed unto the brother of Jared all the inhabitants of the earth which had been and also all that would be. And the Lord withheld them not from his sight, even unto the ends of the earth. For the Lord had said unto him in times before that if he would believe in him that he could shew unto him all things, it should be shewn unto him. Therefore the Lord could not withhold any thing from him, for he knew that the Lord could shew him all things. And the Lord said unto him: Write these things and seal them up, and I will shew them in mine own due time unto the children of men. And it came to pass that the Lord commanded him that he should seal up the two stones which he had received and shew them not until the Lord should shew them unto the children of men. And the Lord commanded the brother of Jared to go down out of the mount from the presence of the Lord and write the things which he had seen. Ether 3:25–4:1

Moroni goes on to explain:

Behold, I have written upon these plates the very things which the brother of Jared saw. And there never was greater things made manifest than that which was made manifest unto the brother of Jared. Wherefore the Lord hath commanded me to write them and I have wrote them. And he commanded me that I should seal them up. And he also hath commanded that I should seal up the interpretation thereof; wherefore I have sealed up the interpreters according to the commandment of the Lord. Ether 4:4–5

Presumably, that sealed portion of the plates of Mormon was manufactured by Moroni using the translation into Nephite made centuries earlier by Mosiah.

Late additions

Moroni makes it sound like the collection of brief texts included in his book of Moroni were appended near the time when he finally deposited the plates where they would be accessible to the first prophet of the last dispensation, fourteen centuries into the future. He had not planned to write any more after completing his project of “abridging the account of the people of Jared.” But he still has time on his hands and has thought of “a few more things” that “may be of worth unto my brethren the Lamanites in some future day, according to the will of the Lord”

(Moroni 1:1, 4).

His first additions explained certain practices and ordinances, including set wordings, as observed in the Nephite church of Christ. Collected and recorded in one place, these were incorporated into the practices of the Restoration church from its beginning.⁵⁷ Moroni also added a sermon and two letters he had received from his father Mormon years earlier. In these we learn that Mormon had also served as a leader and teacher in the Nephite church.⁵⁸ All three of these items reveal the greatness of Mormon, his deep knowledge of scripture and his grasp of human life both at the level of individuals and of the nation, and his unwavering commitment to Jesus Christ in the face of the most discouraging deterioration of Nephite and Lamanite society. Through the eyes of his son, we can better appreciate in much richer detail how Mormon stood out in his generation as one of the most accomplished of the Nephite scribes, military leaders, and prophets and church leaders.

Moroni's spiritual message

For the third time, Moroni comes to an expected end of his writing. And again, he

⁵⁷ Compare Moroni 1–6 with D&C 20.

⁵⁸ Moroni 7–9.

pens an impassioned plea to his readers to turn to Jesus Christ and his gospel that the covenants of the Father may be fulfilled. For those who will accept his gospel and endure to the end, the Holy Ghost will fill them “with hope and perfect love” (Moroni 8:26). They will be “sanctified in Christ by the grace of God” and “become holy, without spot” (Moroni 10:33). For as Mormon had taught the believers, the whole point of the gospel and the plan of salvation is to help men and women in this world become like Jesus Christ and the Father, that they may be prepared to live with him in the next:

Wherefore, my beloved brethren, pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart that ye may be filled with this love which he hath bestowed upon all who are true followers of his Son Jesus Christ, that ye may become the sons of God, that when he shall appear, we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is—that we may have this hope, that we may be purified even as he is pure. Amen. (Moroni 7:48)

Conclusions

This paper leverages the insights of modern scholars on the scribal schools of the ancient near east to identify and track the Nephite scribal school across the ten centuries of the Nephite dispensation. Mormon tells us his abridgment only

includes a hundredth part of the Nephite history available to him on the Large Plates of Nephi. That being the case, it is especially impressive that his abridgment tracks the responsibility for maintaining and preserving the Nephite record and other sacred objects—the responsibility of the scribes—across that millennium without gaps.

Mormon and his son Moroni were themselves trained scribes who could create not only a highly literate text, but also the physical materials necessary to inscribe their writings on metal plates that would endure to modern times. Like their predecessors, they were also military and religious leaders—a combination of roles that characterized the chief scribes from the beginning with Nephi down to the end. Because their “holy scriptures,” the Brass Plates, were written in Egyptian and Hebrew, the Nephite scribal tradition had maintained fluency in those languages and scripts throughout their dispensation. And perhaps most impressively, they were still guided and motivated by the same prophecies and gospel teachings that had been given to their original prophets—Lehi and Nephi.