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THE LAST NEPHITE SCRIBES

Noel B. Reynolds

***Abstract:** In an earlier paper, I concluded that Lehi and Nephi were highly trained Josephite scribes and were associated with an official Jerusalem scribal school that preserved ancient Manassite traditions. There they acquired advanced writing skills and classical Hebrew and Egyptian, which would become the scriptural languages of the Nephite peoples. These they maintained in the new promised land and passed on from generation to generation through the entire thousand-year Nephite dispensation, even though the Nephite language itself would naturally evolve. Evidence of how they did this surfaces repeatedly throughout the Book of Mormon. The following paper documents how both Mormon and his son Moroni abridged and concluded the religious, military, and political records of Book of Mormon peoples, thus preserving key elements of the vast Nephite records collection for a later dispensation. That scribal process parallels the roles and schools of other cultures of the ancient Near East.*

The picture of Moroni, the last Nephite prophet, and his activities after the final battle which 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 while 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 do constitute a complete record of the transmission of the Nephite records from

one generation to another. When we read these accounts from the perspective of ancient Near Eastern (hereafter ANE) history and record keeping, it becomes obvious that the Nephites from Nephi to Mormon maintained an official scribal school that kept detailed records of the people, the prophecies and revelations given to the prophets, and the wars and contentions with the Lamanites.

Nephite society may have been tiny in comparison to the great empires of Assyria, Hatti, Egypt, and Babylon. Consequentially, its small governing elite seemed to share the leadership responsibilities of the government administration, the military, the priesthood, and the educational and record-keeping functions of scribes that would have belonged to more specialized peoples in those great ANE empires. In Nephite society, the scribal responsibilities passed back and forth among kings, judges, prophets, and military leaders, suggesting that they were also trained scribes (as will be discussed below). The scribal responsibility always centered in the same charge: to maintain and preserve the same sets of records and other sacred objects and to educate successor generations in high literacy and in the classic languages (Egyptian and Hebrew) of the Brass Plates, their “holy scriptures.” The Nephite experience with scribal training most likely followed the documented pattern of earlier ANE societies, in that students dropped out at different training levels. Many more students achieved minimal or functional literacy than persevered to the highest levels.

The larger scribal charge was always understood in the context of the same prophecy that had been given to Nephi, Lehi, and even to Abraham. These prophets had seen in vision that in the last days the records of the Nephites would become the key tool by which the descendants of Lehi, the Gentiles, and the house of Israel would be gathered in by the Lord as they received 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 would maintain competency in ancient Hebrew and Egyptian, the languages of their scriptures in the Brass Plates and the Small Plates of Nephi, even while their own Nephite vernacular would evolve in normal ways, becoming unrecognizable to any other people.¹

1. See Mosiah 1:2 and Mormon 9:32–33.

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 agree generally that widespread literacy, defined as the ability to read and compose complex texts, never existed anywhere 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 — who 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.²

All ancient cultures were based in orality, and a high-level literacy was the province of small elites wherever it existed. Scribal training and jobs varied widely in the level of competence achieved or required. While some were only trained to manage limited repetitive tasks, others might receive up to fifteen years of formal training, with continuing collegial activity beyond that, which enabled them to interact with colleagues and texts in creative and thoughtful ways.

Renowned Hebrew epigrapher Christopher Rollston has responded strongly to a variety of arguments other scholars have advanced against the assumption that the culture of Israel included a system of elite scribal schools like those known for centuries in Mesopotamia and Egypt:

I am convinced that the Old Hebrew [preexilic] epigraphic evidence demonstrates that there was formal, standardized scribal education in ancient Israel. . . . The Old Hebrew data are most consistent with the presence of a mechanism for the

2. 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,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 50 (2022): 161–215. The undefended generalizations about scribal schools and families that will occur throughout this paper are explained and documented in that previous paper. Where it has been possible to examine the membership in those ANE schools in detail, it appears that about half of the scribes are clearly related. Because scribal families usually maintained other businesses, not all family members would necessarily be trained as scribes.

formal, standardized education of scribal elites in ancient Israel.³

John Gee has demonstrated that the use of *and now* in the Book of Mormon is borrowed and used correctly from Hebrew writing as taught in pre-exilic scribal schools. Citing Rollston, he concludes that

As an offshoot of the tradition of Biblical Hebrew, the Book of Mormon seems to have kept this pre-exilic scribal convention when the main line of Hebrew abandoned it. This may be a function of the scribal education of Book of Mormon authors.⁴

A Josephite Scribal Tradition

The Brass Plates of Lehi and Nephi are best explained as a late 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.⁵ That scribal school was defined by its preservation of an alternative Josephite history and prophetic record in the Egyptian language and of competency in that language and script for its scribes. By Lehi's time, these northerners were living as refugees in Jerusalem and were partially integrated into the Judahite scribal world.

The Judahite scribal practice in the late seventh century BCE featured writing in the relatively new Hebrew script (now known as Old Hebrew or paleo Hebrew) and the newly standardized Hebrew language. Scholars believe that these Judahite scribal schools produced the Hebrew Bible in the seventh and sixth centuries BCE. The hypothesized Josephite scribal school disappeared after Lehi, Nephi, and possibly others were driven out and after the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and took its remaining elites into captivity.⁶

3. Christopher A. Rollston, *Writing and Literacy in the World of Ancient Israel: Epigraphic Evidence from the Iron Age* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 91–92.

4. John Gee, “Verbal Punctuation in the Book of Mormon I: (And) Now,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 50 (2022): 44.

5. See Noel B. Reynolds, “A Backstory for the Brass Plates,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* (2022), forthcoming.

6. 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

Anyone from seventh-century Jerusalem who had written a book and explained that production, while 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 which reached their apogee of development in the scribal schools of late seventh-century Jerusalem — as has been argued by contemporary Bible scholars.⁷

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, provides 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 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 Manasseh who had been deported from Jerusalem by the Babylonians, taken to the east end of the Babylonian empire, and then released at some later point when they determined 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* (London: 1744), 1:323–24, https://www.google.com/books/edition/A_New_Account_of_the_East_Indies/-jNagGDT-PsChl=en&gbpv=1&pg=PA323&printsec=frontcover.

7. A summary of the work of several Bible scholars on this topic can be found in Noel B. Reynolds, “Chiastic Structuring of Large Texts: Second Nephi as a Case Study,” in *Chiasmus: The State of the Art*, ed. John W. Welch and Donald W. Parry (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2020), 177–92 and in Noel B. Reynolds, “Lehi’s Vision, Nephi’s Blueprint,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 52 (2022): 231–78.

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.*⁸ (Helaman 3:13–16)

Across all those centuries, a continuing scribal school is the most viable explanation for the continuation of the mission to write and preserve such records, for the maintenance of fluency in two ancient languages of scripture and for the continuation of the knowledge of the necessary technology for manufacturing metal plates and inscribing a written record upon them.

While the evidence for an official scribal school with responsibility for maintaining the Large Plates of Nephi and preserving the Brass Plates and the Small Plates and other sacred materials or objects is quite clear, we cannot know how much additional schooling in literacy was provided in Nephite society. There may have been other scribal schools not mentioned in Mormon's abridgment. And functional literacy may have been more widespread than what today's scholars have found in similar ancient cultures. Cultural historians generally are convinced that before Gutenberg and the emergence of commercial markets for paper and other writing materials and the development of book distribution systems and libraries, all literate elites were based in oral cultures. While recognizing great literature that derives from ancient writers going back even into the third millennium BCE, no ancient cultures are believed to have enjoyed widespread literacy on more than a functional level. Trained scribes provided the services of literacy for large populations.

However, there are intriguing intimations in the Nephite record of high-level literacy outside the official scribal tradition. In the previous quotation from Mormon, he speaks of "many records kept ... by many of this people." On the one hand, Zarahemla's people, like the Lamanites and Ishmaelites, provide a stark example of how a people who once enjoyed the benefits of literacy could lose the ability to manage their

8. 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*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022). I have occasionally adjusted formatting and added italics for emphasis.

affairs with writing, record keeping, and education from one generation to another. But how do we account for educated outliers who show up almost randomly in the Nephite annals? Very early in Nephite history, Sherem came “among the people of Nephi” and tried to dissuade them from their belief in Christ by insisting on exclusive loyalty to the law of Moses (Jacob 7:1–23). Abinadi castigated the priests of King Noah for failure to understand the scriptures and failing to teach the people correctly (Mosiah 1:25). Amulon and the other apostate priests of King Noah were appointed by the Lamanite king to teach his people in the language of the Nephites. And they were taught to read, to write to one another, and to keep their records (Mosiah 24:4–6). The lawyers of Ammonihah were “learned in all the arts and cunning of the people” (Alma 10:14). And to demonstrate their rejection of the authority of the Nephite church, they ordered the burning of their copies of the holy scriptures — presumably extracts from the Brass Plates (Alma 14:8). In preaching to the Zoramite poor, Alma tells them they “ought to search the scriptures” and asks if they remember reading Zenos, Zenoch, and Moses (Alma 33:2–18). While these same passages reflect the kind of discourse that might be expected in oral cultures, these passages do seem to suggest some developed literacy and education outside the official Nephite scribal school. This paper will focus on the career of that official school.⁹

The Languages of the Scribes

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, despite the inevitable changes and transformations of the Nephite vernacular language across so many centuries.¹⁰ Nephi stated

9. The case for widespread literacy in Nephite society has been argued in Deanna Draper Buck, “Internal Evidence of Widespread Literacy in the Book of Mormon,” *Religious Educator* 10, no. 3 (2009):59–74. In reply, Brant A. Gardner, “Literacy and Orality in the Book of Mormon,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 9 (2014):29–85; advances a detailed explanation and documentation of the connections between orality and literacy in ancient Israel and Mesoamerican civilization, while arguing that the Nephites were a more typical oral culture.

10. 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*, 2nd ed. (Blanding, UT: Four Corners Digital Design, 2016). This volume applies the author’s findings as written for

plainly at the beginning that he was writing his Small Plates in the language of the Egyptians (1 Nephi 1:2) — 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.¹¹

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 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,¹² 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, Manasseh’s father Joseph, and Joseph’s great-great grandfather Abraham. In contrast, the Hebrew Bible that took shape after 700 BCE is thought by scholars to be derived from transcriptions of competing oral traditions using the early Hebrew

professional historical linguists to the Book of Mormon. For the technical report see Brian D. Stubbs, *Exploring the Explanatory Power of Semitic and Egyptian in Uto-Aztecan* (Provo, UT: Grover Publications, 2015).

Studies of the large numbers of Mayan dialects that developed in the relatively small Mesoamerican geographical area and of the ways in which these dialects affected Mayan epigraphy demonstrate how easy it may be to underestimate the complexity of development in vernacular languages, even in a relatively small area, and how scribal writing systems adjust to that complexity. See Sven Gronemeyer, “E pluribus unum: Embracing Vernacular Influences in Classic Mayan Scribal Tradition,” in *A Celebration of the Life and Work of Pierre Robert Colas*, ed. C. Helmke and F. Sachse (Markt Schwaben: Verlag Anton Saurwein, 2014), 147–62.

11. The limited epigraphic evidence is summarized in Reynolds, “A Backstory.”

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

script that made its appearance around 800 BCE as a derivation from the ancient alphabetic West Semitic script.¹³ It was standardized only in the paleo-Hebrew script during the following century.

In his comprehensive review of all available inscriptions from ancient Egypt, Gordon Hamilton has concluded that this first alphabetic script was invented about 1940 BCE by a Semite from the Levant who drew on Egyptian hieroglyphic and hieratic signs for the consonantal signs that were used in the Egyptian delta and the Levant for over a thousand years before being adapted as specific national alphabets for writing Hebrew and the related languages of Israel's geographical neighbors.¹⁴ 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 first century BCE, as attested in the Dead Sea Scrolls.¹⁵

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 to write their record in Hebrew (Mormon 9:33). 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 most likely 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*

13. See Gordon J. Hamilton, *The Origins of the West Semitic Alphabet in Egyptian Scripts*, The Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series 40 (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2006), 292.

14. Ibid.

15. See the discussion in Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 2nd rev. ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 218–19.

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 when the Nephite civilization would completely abandon the ways of the Lord and would finally be destroyed as a people.¹⁶ That prophesied dark night was evidently falling in the opening decades of the tenth Nephite century when Ammaron, the apparent custodian of the entire collection of official Nephite records and head of the official Nephite scribal school, 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, which abridgment 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 (see Mormon 3:17–19 and 5:9–24).

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.

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

16. See Reynolds, “Lehi’s Vision” and 1 Nephi 15:5.

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?”¹⁷ We don’t know whether Mormon here refers 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 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 in which he was educated in a scribal school, anyone from an oral culture would have understood that implication immediately. And just as 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,

17. Anciently, scribal training began around age five. If that were true for Mormon, it would explain why his personality and abilities were evident at age ten.

a Mulekite, or a Jaredite, or that he 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. It would seem likely that Mormon and his father Mormon were themselves associated with Ammaron's scribal school and would have come to his attention through that association.

A History of the Nephite Scribal School

The history of the Nephite scribal school is nowhere articulated explicitly, though clues do 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 which 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.¹⁸

A Side Glance at Mesoamerican Scribal Cultures

Because Mesoamerica has been suggested by so many Book of Mormon scholars as the most likely geographical home of the ancient Nephites, some reviewers have suggested that scholarly estimates of literacy in ancient Mayan cultures might shed some light on contemporary Nephite literacy. Mayan literacy rates were a hot topic for scholars in the 1980s and 1990s. My brief survey of that literature suggests that the 1994 review by Stephen Houston provides an especially helpful perspective and summary of the work done on that question in that time. Houston found overall agreement "that literacy must have been limited at all periods." But significant disagreement on the more subtle underlying questions of

18. 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." 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), 25–40.

method and the identification of relevant facts continues.¹⁹ Whatever the influence of the Mayan culture may have been on the Nephites, it would not have been a force for widespread literacy.

It should also be noted that the social dynamics of scribalism in an oral culture seem to exhibit certain universal features which also show up in Nephite scribal culture as identified and described in this paper. Karel van der Toorn found that throughout the ANE across two millennia, scribal functions were organized and perpetuated in kinship-based schools.²⁰ These scribal schools managed training in multiple classical and vernacular languages, scripts, and literary traditions. They also provided specialized training to meet the needs of ordinary commerce, imperial and royal bureaucracies, temple priesthoods, and judiciaries. The scribes who provided these essential and high-level services could wield unofficial, but significant social and political power in these roles. And because they were often wealthy, they were engaged in their own profitable enterprises. Further, the scribal schools managed their own libraries and manufactured the unique tools and materials required for writing in their various cultural contexts.

The dramatic 2008 discoveries at Xultun, Guatemala, the large and previously unexcavated Classic Mayan (AD 550-900) urban center located 40 km northeast of Tikal, have been interpreted by archaeologist William Saturno and his associates to feature a group of buildings, Los Sabios, which suggests an elite family scribal complex including residential and work areas that are richly decorated with thematic murals and inscriptions that “are distinctly akin to those found in codex books” and provide thereby “the closest artifact we currently have to

19. Stephen Houston, “Literacy Among the Pre-Columbian Maya: A Comparative Perspective,” in *Writing Without Words: Alternative Literacies in Mesoamerica and the Andes*, ed. Elizabeth Hill Boone and Walter D. Mignolo (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 40.

20. Karel van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004). It should also be noted that the huge collection of actual scribal products found at Qumran in the twentieth century has enabled detailed studies of scribal practices and habits in Israel many centuries after Lehi left Jerusalem but has not taught us as much about the anonymous scribes themselves, as we have learned about the more ancient scribal schools of the ANE as reported by van der Toorn and others. See Emanuel Tov, *Scribal Practices and Approaches Reflected in the Texts Found in the Judean Desert* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 7-12.

a Classic Period codex.”²¹ The building complex and the murals enabled their interpreters to extend and fill out an already-rich picture of Mayan scribalism before European contact. Without digressing to repeat the details of these new findings, it can be stated comfortably that Toorn’s description of ANE scribal schools could fit rather closely with what has been found in the Classical Mayan context. Without suggesting any connection between Mayan and Nephite cultures, it does seem possible that the Nephite scribal tradition described in this paper, based on the Book of Mormon text, exhibits most of the same features reported by Toorn and Saturno for scribalism in the ancient oral cultures they have studied.

Finally, it should be noted that important scholarly inquiry has focused on the broader issues of literacy that emerge when Mayan writing is compared to Aztec, Mixtec, and Nahuatl. These non-alphabetic modes of writing enabled different communication to upper and lower classes of a society and were somewhat effective in supporting communication among different cultural and language groups.²² While this paper is not the place to pursue the distinctive features of indigenous Mesoamerican literacy in more detail, one prominent strain in the stories preserved in these ancient texts will resonate loudly for readers of the Book of Mormon. For example, “the cartographic histories of the Nahuatl” commemorated “how their ancestors took possession of certain places.” In this way, “these ancient written texts were created and used to legitimize the presence and right of different groups to the territory they occupied.”²³

21. See Franco D. Rossi, William A Saturno, and Heather Hurst, “Maya Codex Book Production and the Politics of Expertise: Archaeology of a Classic Period Household at Xultun, Guatemala,” *American Anthropology* 117, no. 1 (2015): 117; and William Saturno, et al., “A Maya *Curia Regis*: Evidence for a Hierarchical Specialist Order at Xultun, Guatemala,” *Ancient America* 28, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 423-40.

22. One excellent explanation of how Mesoamerican literacy systems compare to those of Europe and the ANE can be found in Robert T. Jimenez and Patrick H. Smith, “Mesoamerican Literacies: Indigenous Writing Systems and Contemporary Possibilities,” *Reading Research Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (2008): 28-46.

23. *Ibid.*, 32.

Tracking Scribal Responsibility for Maintaining and Preserving the Nephite Records

I have been able to find only one other attempt to track the continuity of scribal training throughout the Nephite dispensation.²⁴ Earlier 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.²⁵ 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.”²⁶ From the perspective of these newer studies on ancient scribalism, it becomes evident that one line of the descendants of Nephi likely maintained an official 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. This echoes the recent scholarly discovery that “many members of the elite in the social, religious, and military classes appear to have had” some scribal training, as indicated by the inclusion of the title “scribe” on their official seals.²⁷

24. Brant A. Gardner, “Labor Diligently to Write: The Ancient Making of a Modern Scripture,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scripture* 35 (2020), 1–46.

25. 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, 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 *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 315–16. More recently, Anita Wells has reviewed Nephite record keeping from the perspective of a trained librarian and archivist. She notes how so many scholarly interpreters are impressed by the frequent and repeated references to Nephite records and to their authors, which 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: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 24 (2017): 103–104.

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

27. Shai Gordin, *Hittite Scribal Circles: Scholarly Tradition and Writing Habits* (Wiesbaden, DE: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2015), 5.

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. By comparison, the narrators in the Hebrew Bible are anonymous, omniscient, reticent, and unobtrusive. They speak from no particular time or place, reporting words, actions and secret thoughts. ... They rarely comment on the story, offer judgments, mention themselves, refer to their own editing, or address their audience directly.²⁸

But, as Grant Hardy goes on to explain in his excellent "reader's guide,"

Without exception, Book of Mormon narrators operate very differently. They reveal their identities from the beginning and exercise strict control over their material. They write from limited, human perspectives — that is, they give us their personal view of what happened and why it is important. ... They do not hesitate to address readers directly to explain their intentions, their writing processes, their editorial decisions, and their emotional responses to the events they recount. They demarcate textual units for our consideration. They interrupt the narrative to offer explicit judgments. They even admit the possibility of human error and ask indulgence for "their weakness in writing."²⁹

When the Nephite text refers to scribal activity, a family genealogical context is frequently invoked. That is one of the main features scholars have identified in scribal traditions in ancient Mesopotamian cultures and Egypt. One recent study of scribal circles in ancient Hittite traditions emphasizes this point:

Hittite scribes, much like their Mesopotamian counterparts, traced their patronyms back through the generations in their text colophons. ... It seems that the attested long patronymic lists actually had a firm basis in reality. They were not simply used to enhance a particular scribe's prestige by constructing a fictive scholarly pedigree. ... Such lineages ... represent the

28. Readers interested in this point will benefit from the full discussion in Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 15.

29. *Ibid.*, 16.

families of the Hittite *literati* and their awareness of their membership in a larger scholarly society.³⁰

Further, “these professionals did not think of themselves as mere scribes. Rather, they saw themselves as scholars with a keen awareness of the Babylonian heritage of their script and its versatile nature.”³¹

The track of responsibility for the Nephite 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 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 of the Nephites, as had happened earlier for the Mulekites and the Lamanites.³²

Lehi and Nephi

Lehi and Nephi provide us with a strong starting point as 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.³³ 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 originally from Nephi’s Large Plates.³⁴ But he also discovered Nephi’s Small Plates, was deeply impressed, and attached them whole

30. Gordin, *Hittite Scribal Circles*, 3.

31. *Ibid.*, 4.

32. These inferences are consistent with the history and dynamics of scribal schools in the ANE as understood by current scholars and as helpfully explained by van der Toorn in *Scribal Culture*.

33. See Reynolds, “Lehi and Nephi as Trained Manassite Scribes,” and “Lehi’s Vision.”

34. See Mormon’s explanation in Words of Mormon 1:3–11.

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.³⁵ 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*.³⁶ But he gave the "Small Plates" 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 (Omni 1:25 and Words of Mormon 1:3–7). Mormon then attached it whole to the abridgment which he was making of the Large Plates.³⁷

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.³⁸ Like most other readers, I have assumed

35. 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.

36. Against his own better judgment, Nephi had initiated a reign of kings to replace him as ruler over the Nephite people. His younger brother Jacob explains this in Jacob 1:9–14, but gives no names for these kings, only their royal titles as first and second Nephi, etc. That line emerges a few centuries later as the Book of Mormon picks up again with Mormon's abridgment with the last-named kings — Mosiah, Benjamin, and Mosiah. As will be shown below, these last kings were clearly aware of their responsibility to maintain the records and convey to the next generation that they had trained for the task.

37. 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," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 50 (2022): 99–122.

38. 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: see Noel B. Reynolds, "Nephite Kingship Reconsidered," in *Mormons, Scripture, and*

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 that names the early kings or their scribes until the time of king Mosiah. 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 (Mosiah 1:2–7, 15–16). One late descendant of Jacob excuses his own decision not to extend the Small Plates of Nephi that have come into his keeping by referring to the record being kept by the kings on the Large Plates:

And behold, the record of this people is engraven upon plates, which is had by the kings according to the generations. And I know of no revelation save that which has been written, neither prophecy. Wherefore that which is sufficient is written. And I make an end. (Omni 1:11)

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.

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. His grandfather Chemish and great uncle Amaron were the last contributors to the Small Plates who explicitly wrote their own words. Chemish records that he saw his brother Amaron write it "with his own hand" (Omni 1:9). Amaleki explicitly shifts to the language of orality and 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" (see Omni 1:27 and 30). He may have been dictating his last words to a scribe — unlike Nephi, who made it clear that he was making this record "with mine own hand" (1 Nephi 1:3).

Amaleki also tells us about the very important merger of the Nephites with the illiterate descendants of Zedekiah, the last king of

the Ancient World: Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson, ed. Davis Bitton (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 151–89.

Judah (see Omni 1:14–22). These people, having brought no records with them from Jerusalem, rejoiced to learn that the Nephites had such a record in the Brass Plates. Their language had been 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 possession of the Brass Plates trumped Zarahemla’s 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).³⁹

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 or sponsors of the principal Nephite scribal school. We have already noted that Jacob’s descendants eventually took the Small Plates of Nephi to King Benjamin, who presumably was a descendant of Nephi, thereby joining them with the archive that contained Nephi’s Large Plates and all other Nephite records (Omni 1:25). 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 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 (Mosiah 17:2), and his descendants bore primary responsibility for maintaining the records for the rest of Nephite history down to Mormon, who also declares himself to be a descendant of Nephi. This first Alma

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

was one of the priests of King Noah who served 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 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 positions, he later gave 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 Nephihah's refusal, the record-keeping role continued with Alma and became a patrilineal charge that he passed 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, which 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.⁴⁰

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 when 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 would make more sense to read “they also brought forth their records” as the scribal class publicly repudiating the scriptures

40. 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.

(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 as members of the Nephite scribal class had brought with them or had memorized.⁴¹ 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. We have one direct reference in the text to such copying: “All those engravings which were in the possession of Helaman were written and sent forth among the children of men throughout all the land, save it were those parts which had been commanded by Alma should not go forth” (Alma 63:12).

Scribes and Calendars

Like their contemporary Mayan scribes, Nephite scribes were tasked with the responsibility to keep track of the calendar.⁴² The Book of Mormon tracks three successive calendar systems based on different start dates — the year 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.⁴³ 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

41. Alma 18:33–40.

42. The calendrical responsibilities of Mayan scribes are described in Michael D. Coe and Stephen Houston, *The Maya*, 9th ed. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2015), 259–62.

43. For a thorough explanation of how the Nephite calendar shifted between these three starting events, see David Rolfe Seely, s.v., “Chronology, Book of Mormon,” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis R. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 197–98.

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. Only in one place in Mormon’s record does a later prophet quote from the Small Plates, but that quotation could almost certainly have been derived originally from Nephi’s Large Plates, 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.⁴⁴ 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 2:14).

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.

The reader of the Small Plates is told three times that this second record was made by Nephi at the Lord’s command “for a wise purpose.” “Wherefore the Lord hath commanded me to make these plates for a wise purpose in him, which purpose I know not” (1 Nephi 9:5).⁴⁵ That wise purpose became evident when Martin Harris lost the first major portion of the translation, and Joseph was directed to translate the Small Plates as a replacement.⁴⁶

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

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

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

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 necessarily 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 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.⁴⁷

Early sixteenth-century Spanish observers of Aztec tribute practices noted numerous bundles of paper being brought from distant communities. They also saw that paper was used for many purposes beyond writing.⁴⁸ “Because of the close relation between fig trees and paper, the words for these two objects became identical. The Aztec word *amatl* designated both paper and fig tree. The Tarascan word *siranda* is said to have the same two meanings.”⁴⁹

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

47. Sorenson, *Mormon’s Codex*, 230. A more detailed description of the process and ingredients the Maya used to manufacture paper can be found in Coe and Houston, *The Maya*, 239. Though most ancient Mayan books have been destroyed, the Dresden Codex survives today in the Saxon State Library as the most perfect example of this kind of paper and writing.

48. See Victor Wolfgang von Hagen, *The Aztec and Maya Papermakers* (New York: J. J. Augustin, 1944), 14-22.

49. Paul C. Standley, “The American Fig Tree,” in von Hagen, *The Aztec and Maya Papermakers*, 99.

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 specific 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.⁵⁰

The official transition from Alma to Helaman as chief scribe and custodian 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. 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.⁵¹

Scribal Specializations

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. Upon discontinuing the monarchical government structure, Mosiah passed these responsibilities to Alma; 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. This may suggest that this responsibility

50. 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.

51. See Jacob 1:1–8 and the discussion in Reynolds, "Nephi's Small Plates," 105–8.

for a continuing record of the Nephite people was viewed as a priestly responsibility — a record that would feature the religious or prophetic perspective more than the political or military perspectives.

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.⁵² 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 that characterized scribal schools would likely have depended on the population sizes they served.

As already demonstrated, Mormon's account derives 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 (see Alma 10:13–15 and 10:24–11:3). 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 in maintaining the Nephite competence in Egyptian and Hebrew language and scripts that Mormon

52. See generally Toorn, *Scribal Culture*.

and Moroni claimed to have at the end of the Nephite dispensation.⁵³ 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 which 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 the first Nephi may also have been the military leader of his people. Knowing of the hatred the Lamanites had toward him and his children, Nephi, as their ruler, 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 (2 Nephi 5:14, 34; cf. 1 Nephi 9:4).

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.”

We don’t know the extent to which the kings would have been involved as combatants or only as ceremonial leaders. The text indicates that Benjamin was a combatant. But the Nephites prevailed, and “king Benjamin did drive them out of the land of Zarahemla” (Omni 1:24). 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” (Words of Mormon 1:13). The original sword of Laban was traditionally kept with

53. Compare Mosiah 1:2–4 and Mormon 9:32–34.

the Brass Plates and the Plates of Nephi and was wielded in battle by Nephite leaders.⁵⁴

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 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 as if 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" (Mosiah 1:3–8). 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.⁵⁵ 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).

Scribes and Priests

By the next generation, the Nephites have spread their growing population into several new cities. The roles of military, government, and priestly leadership have been separated, but all seem to pass from father to son. Nephihah was replaced by his son Parhoron as chief judge.⁵⁶ Helaman replaces Alma as leader of the high priests and prophets and carries on

54. These same men served as teachers, scribes, rulers, and military leaders. Compare 2 Nephi 5:14, Jacob 1:10, Words of Mormon 1:13, and Mosiah 1:16.

55. 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.

56. Alma 50:40. Skousen documents the variation of spellings of this original *Parhoron* that Oliver Cowdery introduced into the original manuscript and then in the printer's copy that led to the current official spelling *Pahoran*. See Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon: Part 4* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2007), 2737–39.

with the scribal responsibilities for the records (Alma 45:21–22). And Moroni is appointed chief captain of the Nephite armies by the chief judges and the voice of the people (Mormon 2:1–2).⁵⁷

After Alma, the scribal responsibility for the Nephite records continues to be included with the priestly duties. But it also seems likely that all these lines of responsibility (ruler and teacher, military leader, religious leader, and records keeper) 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.

As previously noted, Mormon never makes the Nephite scribal school or its history an explicit topic in his abridgment. What would be obvious to people from his oral culture is far less obvious to modern readers, who tend to assume universal literacy. But his text does include details that make the reconstruction of that scribal history possible.

Alma as Father of the Scribes

Alma the Elder was a descendant of Nephi and a scribe trained in the priestly tradition that accompanied the colony of Nephites that returned from Zarahemla to their homeland near the city of Nephi. 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 Alma's 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.

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. He also emphasizes the attendant responsibility to teach the people and call them to repentance and

57. While Mormon never mentions how Captain Moroni might fit into the family, he obviously admires him greatly as a predecessor, and he does name his own son after him, suggesting at least the possibility of a blood relationship.

obedience (see Alma 37:1–47). 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 (Alma 63:11–13).

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 (Helaman 2:1–2). About 13 years later, Helaman died, and without further textual explanation, we learn that “his eldest son Nephi *began to reign* in his 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 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 period, 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. The clearest of these descriptions was reported by Mormon in Helaman 3:13–16 and is quoted above. But one sentence merits repetition here: “there are many books and many records of every kind, and they have been kept chiefly by the Nephites.”

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 (see 3 Nephi 7:2–4). 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, who 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 (Mormon 1:3–4).

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 (see Mormon 2:1–2). 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" (Mormon 2:17).

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 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 Large Plates of Nephi.

Mormon's Last Project — the Plates of Mormon

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.⁵⁸ But this was not to be the full record begun by Nephi centuries earlier. 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 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 took up the Large Plates of Nephi for the purpose of extending

58. See Reynolds, “Understanding the Abrahamic Covenant.” The first clear reference to this prophecy in the Book of Mormon comes from Nephi’s description of the great vision given to him and Lehi. See 1 Nephi 13:33–41. That the Nephites saw themselves as “the remnant of Joseph” is documented and explained in Reynolds, “A Backstory.”

and completing that record. 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 (see Mormon 2:27–3:1).

When the Lamanites restarted their invasion, Mormon served as the military 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 focused on 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 to whatever limited assistance these projects may have required.⁵⁹

Both of those large scribal efforts may have been essentially completed by the time Mormon returned to war. He would add another three chapters (Mormon 5, 6, and 7 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.

59. See Brant A. Gardner, “Mormon the Writer,” in *Labor Diligently to Write: The Ancient Making of a Modern Scripture* 35 (2020), 6–12, for a careful and detailed analysis of Mormon’s possible writing timeline that offers a somewhat different interpretation.

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)

Later, 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, now including the Small Plates of Nephi, to Moroni to protect. We also know that Moroni would add considerably to Mormon’s abridgment over the next 35 years when he had those plates in his possession.

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* (Joseph Smith History 1:27–54).

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 discovery 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 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 Nephite 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 (Mormon 8:1–3).

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 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 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 anywhere else for a single person to survive. The land northward from Cumorah was populated, but not by peoples who 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).⁶⁰

60. 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

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 many 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 which derived from their own Mesopotamian origins at 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, some significant attention given to Ether's gold plates by the Nephite scribes 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.⁶¹ I agree with John 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 despite Ether's claim that all the Jaredites were killed in the final war, we should keep open the possibility that some of those people escaped their final cataclysm and had descendants that

version of the Nephite language.

61. There are several published analyses and summaries available, but I find John W. Welch's online "Notes" on Ether 5 to be as comprehensive and reasonable as any available. See Welch, "Ether 1-5," in *John W. Welch Notes* (Springville, UT: Book of Mormon Central, 2020), 1087-112, <https://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/ether-1-5>.

gradually became part of the Mulekites and then the Nephite people. If that did happen, there is no evidence in Mormon's abridgment that they ever identified themselves as a separate people or played a significant role in the Nephite saga.⁶²

However, 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

62. 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 Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex*, 228–29.

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, who used the translation into Nephite that had been made centuries earlier by Mosiah (see Mosiah 28:10–19).

Late Additions

Moroni makes it sound as if 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). These last additions may have required access to the Nephite records in Cumorah or at least his own memory of church ordinances and practices.

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.⁶³ 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 (Moroni 7–9). 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 a most discouraging deterioration of Nephite and Lamanite society. Through the eyes of his son, we can 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 church leaders.

Moroni’s Spiritual Message

For the third time, Moroni comes to an expected end of his writing. Invoking letters received years earlier from his father Mormon, he 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

63. Compare Moroni 1–6 with D&C 20.

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 them 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 includes only a hundredth part of the Nephite history available to him on the Large Plates of Nephi and other records. 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 must have maintained a significant level of fluency in those classical 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.

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