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A Backstory for the Brass Plates

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Abstract. *This paper brings contemporary Ancient Near East (ANE) scholarship in several fields together with the ancient scriptures restored through Joseph Smith to construct a new starting point for interpretation of the teachings of the Book of Mormon. It assembles findings from studies of ancient scribal culture, historical linguistics and epigraphy, and the history and archaeology of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Levant, together with the traditions of ancient Israel and the ancient scriptures restored to Joseph Smith, to construct a contextualized perspective for understanding Lehi, Nephi, and the Brass Plates as they would have been understood by their contemporaries — as prominent bearers of the Josephite textual tradition. This essay offers a hypothetical, but comprehensive backstory for the Brass Plates. Because of its hypothetical character, it cannot be claimed that it is the true account. Rather it is an attempt to build a plausible backstory given the current state of knowledge in the relevant fields of academic research and the facts provided in the ancient scriptures restored through Joseph Smith.*

Contemporary achievements in scholarship regarding both the Bible and the Book of Mormon can provide a much-expanded platform for understanding the Brass Plates that Nephi obtained from the treasury of Laban and that served the Nephite people for a thousand years as "holy scripture." Advances in ANE studies of ancient epigraphy, archaeology, ethnography, languages, history, scribal cultures, and the texts of the Hebrew Bible over the last century now make it possible to propose a comprehensive backstory for the Brass Plates that addresses questions of their origins, language, contents, production, and purpose.

Supporting Papers from the Larger Project

This topic is too broad for a single paper. This paper draws on six others that have been part of the same project, that develop separate pieces of the overall picture, and that are either recently published or available online as working papers. The first of these draws on the recent outpouring of studies of scribal schools in the ancient oral cultures of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Israel to show why the Book of Mormon description of the Brass Plates presumes the existence of a Manassite scribal school that could trace its origins to Joseph, the great grandson of Abraham, if not to Abraham himself. It also shows why the high literacy displayed by both Lehi and Nephi can only make sense in the oral culture of ancient Israel if they were trained in such a seventh-century scribal school in Jerusalem.[1] They were both fluent in multiple languages; could read and write at the highest level; were masters of the distinctive, seventh-century BCE Hebrew rhetoric; and could fabricate and use metal plates and other writing tools and materials.

A second paper updates and expands the continually growing literature on writing on metal in Lehi's time.[2] Two others identify and explain Nephi's comprehensive and artistic application of the principles of seventh-century Hebrew rhetoric to his writings in 1 and 2 Nephi.[3] A fifth traces the continuation of a Nephite scribal school from the time of Nephi down to Mormon and Moroni — the last scribes of the

1. See Noel B. Reynolds, "Lehi and Nephi as Trained Manassite Scribes," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 50 (2022): 161–216, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/lehi-and-nephi-as-trained-manassite-scribes/. That paper documents the growing scholarly consensus about the existence of scribal schools in seventh-century Judah and my extended argument for seeing the Brass Plates as evidence for an ancient and highly developed Manassite scribal school that had found refuge from the Assyrian conquest in Jerusalem before 722 BCE, but that did not survive the Babylonian conquest.

2. See Noel B. Reynolds, "An Everlasting Witness: Ancient Writings on Metal," *Faculty Publications* 5379 (2021): https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/5379.

3. Noel B. Reynolds, "Nephi's Small Plates: A Rhetorical Analysis," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 50 (2022):99–122, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/nephis-small-plates-a-rhetorical-analysis/. Noel B. Reynolds, "Lehi's Dream, Nephi's Blueprint: How Nephi Uses the Vision of the Tree of Life as an Outline for 1 and 2 Nephi," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 52 (2022):231–77, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/lehis-dream-nephis-blueprint-how-nephi-uses-the-vision-of-the-tree-of-life-as-an-outline-for-1-and-2-nephi/. These papers also point to a few others in which I have developed the application of insights from Hebrew rhetoric to the Book of Mormon.

Nephite dispensation.[4] Finally, a sixth paper uses the perspective of the Brass Plates to look at some of the problems for Old Testament history that have been raised by modern archaeologists.[5] In particular, the Brass Plates would seem to resolve the main quandary in Old Testament studies — the lack of a written record for the Hebrew scriptures before 700 BCE. Many of the questions the present paper might raise may be addressed more fully in one of these others.

The Organization of the Paper

Because of the wide variety of materials relevant to an understanding of the Brass Plates that are presented herein, this paper will advance a long series of sub-theses to make their contributions clear. After dealing with several introductory issues, the paper proper begins with an explanation of the central role played by the Egyptian language and script in the Brass Plates and consequently in the Nephite scribal tradition. This gave the Nephites a written record in an unchanging classical language that extended without intervening translations or dependence on oral traditions all the way back to Joseph of Egypt and possibly even to Abraham. That provides a foundation for a review of the contents of the Brass Plates that explains the Josephite character of the plates.

The following section explains why it is reasonable to conclude that the other ancient scriptures revealed to Joseph Smith may also have been included in the Brass Plates. Strong traces of the Book of Moses and the Book of Abraham can be detected in the language and the teachings of the Nephite record as the Brass Plates provided a constant resource for Lehi, Nephi, and their successors.

The next three sections of the paper draw upon the insights and findings of modern biblical scholarship that identify and hypothesize a number of scribal traditions that have contributed to the modern Bible. Enormous scholarly effort has been devoted to the late nineteenth-century hypothesis that the Pentateuch was the creation of unnamed scribes who were harmonizing seventh-century transcriptions of competing oral traditions of Israelite history and scripture — all of

4. Noel B. Reynolds, "The Last Nephite Scribes," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 53 (2022):95–138, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-last-nephite-scribes/.

5. Noel B. Reynolds, "Modern Near East Archaeology and the Brass Plates," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 52 (2022):111–44, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/modern-near-east-archaeology-and-the-brass-plates/.

which was made possible by contemporary developments in Hebrew language and script. Later translations and versions of the Pentateuch give witness to an even wider range of early scribal traditions. Since the 1980s, it has become evident to most Bible scholars that all of the Bible down through 2 Kings has been redacted to fit the political and religious agenda of the Judahite regime of the late seventh century. All these studies are built on the recognition that our Old Testament in its various versions is not just one original and reliable composition. This in turn points to the importance of the ancient and continuous record preserved in the Brass Plates, written from the perspective of Josephite scribes.

Finally, the concluding sections of the paper briefly examine the possible circumstances that may have motivated the Josephite scribes to take on the extraordinary task of manufacturing a metallic version of their distinctive textual tradition written principally in Egyptian and containing extensive Josephite prophetic materials that were not part of the Judahite tradition. A brief look at the historical process of establishing canonical versions of scripture allows readers to rethink the Brass Plates and the Book of Mormon from the broader perspective of how scriptural traditions are generally formed.

Book of Mormon Foundations

The opening chapters of the Book of Mormon lay the foundations for everything that follows those chapters. Nephi begins by sharing the experiences through which he and his father Lehi were brought into personal and direct prophetic communication with the Lord. All that follows will stand on the revelations they received as the founding prophets of the Nephite dispensation. And they are not left to be lone witnesses. The very next episode relates how they acquired a durable copy of their family's lineage history going back to the creation through their ancestor Manasseh to Abraham and Adam — that was complete with histories, prophecies, and genealogy. The Brass Plates contained the invaluable record of the prophecies and covenants that defined Israel and its future and that would guide and govern Lehi's posterity as "a remnant of Joseph" until the final judgment. At the moment these plates came into his possession, Lehi

> was filled with the Spirit and began to prophesy concerning his seed, that these plates of brass should go forth unto all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people which were of his seed. Wherefore he said that these plates of brass should

> never perish, neither should they be dimmed any more by time. (1 Nephi 5:17–19)[6]

Even though the bulk of the Book of Mormon text is an abridgment by Mormon that preserves but a tiny share of the history and teachings of the Nephites and their prophets, it does report in some detail exchanges in which the Brass Plates are entrusted to a new generation's custodian when the prophecies of Lehi regarding the plates are confirmed or repeated. At one such transition point, King Benjamin told his sons that

> were it not for these plates which contain these records and these commandments, we must have suffered in ignorance, even at this present time, not knowing the mysteries of God. For … were it not for these things which have been kept and preserved by the hand of God, that we might read and understand of his mysteries and have his commandments always before our eyes, that even our fathers would have dwindled in unbelief. (Mosiah 1:3, 5)

King Mosiah next conferred the Brass Plates upon Alma along with the Nephite records and commanded him to "keep and preserve them" (Mosiah 28:20). Alma conveyed them to his son Helaman, noting that they contained "the holy scriptures" and "the genealogy of our forefathers, even from the beginning." He also reminded Helaman that

> it hath been prophesied by our fathers that they should be kept and handed down from one generation to another, and 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. And now behold, if they are kept, they must retain their brightness. Yea, and they will retain their brightness. (Alma 37:4–5)

Alma then went on to explain the key role the Brass Plates had played in bringing their own people to salvation:

> And now it hath hitherto been wisdom in God that these things should be preserved. For behold, they have enlarged the memory of this people, yea, and convinced many of the

6. All quotations from the Book of Mormon are taken from the Yale critical text. See Royal Skousen, *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text,* 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022). I sometimes add italics in quotations to facilitate reader focus on key terms.

> error of their ways and brought them to the knowledge of their God, unto the salvation of their souls. (Alma 37:8)

Caveats and Confessions

The ambitious task set out for this paper draws on many specialist fields of study of the ANE and Hebrew Bible studies. Huge progress has been made in all these specialties over the last century as thousands of linguists, historians, and archaeologists have labored to provide ever more complete and accurate understanding of the biblical text in its ancient context. But this same academic progress has produced a great increase in disciplinary specialization that poses constant challenges for interdisciplinary thinking. As one important symposium acknowledged:

> Given the explosion of data during the second half of the twentieth century and the vast increase in the number of publications, scholars must specialize out of necessity. Thus, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find scholars with broad expertise in theology, biblical history, philology, form criticism, literary analysis, comparative religions, and archaeology, though such expertise was deemed to be requisite for any biblical scholar during the first half of the twentieth century.[7]

Fortunately, for interdisciplinary interlopers like me, all of these disciplines have gradually adopted plain English as their standard, making it possible for non-specialists to read their research publications with reasonable effort. I have also benefitted greatly from the help of many friends and associates who are specialists in these fields and who have been willing to explain technical language and concepts.

Joseph Smith's claim to divine aid in the restoration of lost ancient scriptures — the Book of Mormon, the Book of Moses, and the Book of Abraham — has led many scholars to treat them skeptically as products of the early nineteenth-century culture of frontier America. This paper takes the opposite approach by accepting the factual claims of these Restoration scriptures at face value. The whole point of this paper is to explore the ways and extent to which those claims might fit in with the findings of contemporary ANE studies. In the process, those findings may help us understand the Restoration scriptures in new ways.

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7. Ann E. Killebrew and Andrew G. Vaughn, eds., *Jerusalem in Bible and Archaeology: The First Temple Period* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 2.

In an apologetic mode, Hugh Nibley liked to refer to the dictum of classical philologist Friedrich Blass and his advice for detecting forgeries masquerading as ancient texts or manuscripts:

> According to Blass, the first thing to do in examining any ancient text is to consider it in the light of the origin and background that is claimed for it. If it fits into that background there is no need to look further, since historical forgery is virtually impossible. Five hundred years of textual criticism have shown the futility of trying to judge ancient writings by the standards of modern taste, or of assuming that any ancient document is a forgery before it has been tested.[8]

While my approach in this paper is exploratory, rather than apologetic, Blass's dictum is still relevant. Do the factual descriptions in these Restoration scriptures fit into a coherent account in the light of our modern understanding of the ANE? Can we formulate a plausible backstory for Lehi's Brass Plates in late seventh-century BCE Jerusalem? As the historical and scientific knowledge of ancient Israel and the ANE have grown since 1830, does the Book of Mormon account of the Brass Plates make more sense or less?

The Languages of the Brass Plates

Most of the scholarly discussion of languages and the Book of Mormon is focused on the question of Nephite language and the language Mormon used in writing the Book of Mormon. But we do have one direct reference in the text to the language or at least the script of the Brass Plates.

> 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)

Here Benjamin clearly says that Lehi was "taught in the language of the Egyptians," which enabled him to read the engravings on the

8. Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 7.

Brass Plates and teach them (the engravings or the teachings) to his descendants. This also suggests that when Nephi was explaining to his brothers how important it was to obtain the Brass Plates that would enable them to "preserve unto our children the language of our fathers" (1 Nephi 3:19), he was likely referring to Egyptian rather than Hebrew, as is commonly supposed.

Ancient Egyptian as the Featured Language and Script

Hugh Nibley interpreted this to mean that the Brass Plates were written in both the language and the script of the Egyptians.[9] Most Book of Mormon scholars are not convinced of that and have assumed that the Brass Plates were written in Hebrew with an Egyptian script — probably some form of hieratic, although demotic had been developed by Lehi's time.[10] Benjamin's statement leaves both possibilities open, and I will explain below why it may be reasonable to think that the Brass Plates included early texts written originally in Egyptian language and script, as well as some later ones written in Hebrew language using the recently developed alphabetic paleo-Hebrew script. Because the Brass Plates included more recent Hebrew texts like Isaiah and Jeremiah, it seems likely that these would have been written in the Hebrew language and in paleo-Hebrew script.

A side note on ancient scripts may be helpful to some readers. Hebrew alphabetic writing first appears in documented inscriptions around 800 BCE. That is when the Israelites, like several of their small neighbor nations, developed their own national version of the West Semitic alphabet and script, which had been in use for limited applications since

9. See Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and Provo: FARMS, 1988), 13–17.

10. See e.g., Sidney B. Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968), 31–39; and John L. Sorenson, "The Brass Plates and Biblical Scholarship," *Nephite Culture and Society: Collected Papers* (Salt Lake City: New Sage Books, 1997), 30–31. The original publication was "The 'Brass Plates' and Biblical Scholarship," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 10 (Autumn, 1977): 31–39. Also John A. Tvedtnes, "Reformed Egyptian," *The Most Correct Book* (Salt Lake City: Cornerstone Publishing,1999), 31–33; and "Hebrew Background of the Book of Mormon," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1991): 77–91; Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), I:130–31. Tvedtnes explains where he thinks Nibley went wrong on this in "Was Lehi a Caravaneer?" *Most Correct Book*, 80–81.

its invention in the Egyptian delta area as early as 1940 BCE.[11] While there is no evidence of this first invention of alphabetic writing being taken up by scribal schools or others for use in extended texts, it seems to have been widely available through northern Egypt and the Levant for monumental, commercial, military, personal, and other uses for a millennium before it was adapted by the Hebrews for the writing of sacred or historical texts.[12]

The Late Invention of Hebrew Scripts

The square Hebrew script used today is thought to be a Persian invention that the returning Jews brought back with them from the Babylonian and then Persian captivity during the sixth century BCE. A small group of Dead Sea Scrolls and the Samaritan Pentateuch are written in the Old Hebrew or paleo-Hebrew script used before the exile that was adapted to the Hebrew language from the West Semitic (Phoenician) alphabetic script used throughout the Levant in the eighth and earlier centuries. Lehi, Nephi, and the contributors to the Brass Plates — as well as later Nephite writers — would not recognize the square script used in post-exilic Israel. It is not likely that the Josephite scribes of the eighth and seventh centuries as native Hebrew speakers would have thought it necessary to translate the writings of contemporary prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah back into Egyptian just because their older inherited materials were in Egyptian.

The Josephite Legacy of Egyptian Language and Script

Nephi clarified at the very beginning of his Small Plates that he was writing that record in the language of his father, "which consists of the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians" (1 Nephi 1:2). While students of the Book of Mormon continue to puzzle about the meaning of that statement and others like it that surface across the full text,[13] there are several background facts that could explain why the

11. Gordon J. Hamilton, *The Origins of the West Semitic Alphabet in Egyptian Scripts* (Washington, D. C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2006), 292, provides the most comprehensive and fine-grained analysis of the full collection of inscriptions from ancient Egypt.

12. See Israel Finkelstein and Benjamin Sass, "Epigraphic Evidence from Jerusalem and its Environs at the Dawn of Biblical History: Facts First," in *New Studies in the Archaeology of Jerusalem and its Region* 11, ed. Yuval Gadot et al. (Jerusalem: n.p., 2017).

13. For example, see the discussion in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism,* s.v. "Book of Mormon Language," by Brian D. Stubbs, (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 179–81.

Nephites acknowledged a deep, long-term involvement with Egyptian language and script:

1. The Brass Plates may have included writings in Egyptian language or script, given the likely inclusion of Abraham's and Joseph's original writings as passed down through Joseph's line.
2. Joseph, Manasseh, and Ephraim and their families may have been fluent or even native speakers of Egyptian over three centuries or more. Asenath, the high-born Egyptian mother of that family probably only spoke Egyptian. Other Egyptians may have married her children and later generations of descendants so long as Joseph's family retained a privileged status. That world would likely have been staffed by other speakers of Egyptian.[14]
3. The elite education available to Joseph's and Asenath's offspring and descendants may not have included any Canaanite (Phoenician/West Semitic) language. Any scribal school that formed in the Josephite clans during the long sojourn in Egypt would have been expert in both the language and the writing systems of Egypt and may even have favored Egyptian as their native tongue over the likely vernacular Canaanite of their relatives, who were not part of the Egyptian elite.
4. Expertise in the Egyptian language and scripts and possession of important ancient manuscripts written in Egyptian may have provided a consequential distinction between Josephite scribal schools and those that emerged in other Israelite tribes that may have depended on competing versions of recently transcribed oral traditions. Traditional reliance on authoritative written texts would presumably be far less vulnerable to the syncretistic tendencies that seem to have contributed to the formation of the Hebrew Bible under the leadership of Judahite scribal schools. It should be noted that the scribal schools of the ANE typically

14. Rabbinic traditions have attempted to reduce this ethnic distance by postulating Asenath's conversion to Judaism before this marriage or describing her as a descendant of Jacob's daughter Dinah through a bizarre story that brought her to Egypt. See, for example, *The Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*, s.v. "Asenath: Midrash and Aggadah," by Tamar Kadari, https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/asenath-midrash-and-aggadah.

maintained and duplicated texts in ancient languages and scripts not related to their own current vernaculars.[15]

5. Moses was reared and educated in a royal Egyptian household and would almost certainly have been a beneficiary of the educational system that had been developed for the elite families of Egypt. The Brass Plates included the five books of Moses, which may likely have been written first in Egyptian as well.
6. The Egyptian empire that controlled the Levant including Israel in the thirteenth and twelfth centuries maintained an administration center with professional scribes in the Jaffa area that became integrated into the local economy and society of Palestine after Egypt pulled out in 1125, becoming an influence in the formation of local scribal culture after that.[16] Orly Goldwasser has assembled a slowly growing collection of examples of hieratic writing from various locations in Israel after the Egyptian withdrawal, adding support to Burke's claims for the influence of the Egyptian scribes left behind.[17] John Thompson has shown how Goldwasser documents the existence of an Egyptian scribal tradition in Israel in Lehi's time.[18] David Carr has identified several characteristics of Israelite writing systems and scribal practices that are best explained as borrowings from Egypt in this general time period.[19] Book of Mormon Central staff have helpfully provided online a documented

15. See Karel van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 65–69.

16. Aaron A. Burke, "Left Behind: New Kingdom Specialists at the End of Egyptian Empire and the Emergence of Israelite Scribalism," in *"An Excellent Fortress for his Armies, a Refuge for the People": Egyptological, Archaeological, and Biblical Studies in Honor of James K. Hoffmeier*, ed. Richard E. Averbeck and K. Lawson Younger, Jr. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2020).

17. Orly Goldwasser, "An Egyptian Scribe from Lachish and the Hieratic Tradition of the Hebrew Kingdoms," *Tel Aviv* 18 (1991): 248–53.

18. John S. Thompson, "Lehi and Egypt," *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann Seely (Provo: FARMS, 2004), 259–76.

19. David M. Carr, *The Formation of the Hebrew Bible: A New Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 385.

summary of Egyptian language and script occurrences in Israel in the eighth, seventh, and sixth centuries.[20]

7. Growing up in Jerusalem in the seventh century, Lehi lived in a world that was once again in Egyptian control. Assyrian administration faded before mid-century, and the Babylonians did not take over until after Lehi's flight into the southern desert. During this interim, Egypt seized the opportunity to exploit Israel once again as a vassal and as a buffer against Mesopotamian powers.[21]
8. Many leading epigraphers now believe that paleo-Hebrew script first distinguished itself from other West Semitic scripts in the late ninth and early eighth centuries and that the oral traditions recorded in the Hebrew Bible were first transcribed after 800 BCE.[22] If Josephite scribes were maintaining an ancient textual tradition preserved in Egyptian language and/or script, they may well have felt protective of that tradition in the face of the Hebrew variants deriving from the oral traditions of the other tribes in the eighth and seventh centuries. It would also be possible that the various oral versions in the Hebrew vernacular derived in some way from the same Egyptian source that was maintained and perpetuated by the Manassites.

The Contents of the Brass Plates

Nephi reports his father's initial examination of the newly acquired Brass Plates by emphasizing three kinds of writings they contained — genealogies, prophetic writings, and a history of Israel and of the patriarchs going back to Adam and Eve.

A And he beheld that they did contain the five books of Moses,
  1 which gave an account
    a of the creation of the world

20. "Book of Mormon Evidence: Egyptian Writing," *Evidence Central*, Sept. 19, 2020, https://evidencecentral.org/recency/evidence/egyptian-writing.

21. An excellent summary of the historical events that provide the background for Lehi and Nephi's story can be found in Aaron P. Schade, "The Kingdom of Judah: Politics, Prophets, and Scribes," *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann Seely (Provo: FARMS, 2004), 299–336.

22. Seth L. Sanders, *The Invention of Hebrew* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 136–55.

b and also of Adam and Eve, which was our first parents,
B and also a record of the Jews (Israelites)
a from the beginning,
b even down to the commencement of the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah,
B* and also the prophecies of the holy prophets
a from the beginning,
b even down to the commencement of the reign of Zedekiah,
A* and also many prophecies which have been spoken by the mouth of Jeremiah.
A And it came to pass that my father Lehi also found upon the plates of brass a genealogy of his fathers;
B wherefore he knew that he was a descendant of Joseph,
C yea, even that Joseph
1 which was the son of Jacob,
2 which was sold into Egypt
D and which was preserved by the hand of the Lord
D* that he might preserve his father Jacob and all his household from perishing with famine.
C* And they were also led
1 out of captivity and
2 out of the land of Egypt
a by that same God who had preserved them.
A* And thus my father Lehi did discover the genealogy of his fathers.
B* And Laban also was a descendant of Joseph;
Ballast:[23] wherefore he and his fathers had kept the records. (1 Nephi 5:10–16)[24]

23. Following earlier authors, Jack Lundbom distinguishes "ballast lines" that bring balance or resolution at the conclusion of small rhetorical structures in biblical writing and illustrates this phenomenon with examples from Isaiah. See Jack R. Lundbom, *Biblical Rhetoric and Rhetorical Criticism* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2013), 133–35.

24. While I have preferred the chiastic option to display Nephi's rhetorical structures for this passage, it does require reversing the order of the A* and B* elements of the final sentence in the second chiasm — which is not without

References to the Brass Plates and the teachings they contained occur throughout the text of the Book of Mormon, adding considerably to the reader's knowledge of their specific contents. But in this initial account, Nephi specifies these general claims about those contents:

1. The record contains a genealogy of Lehi's ancestors back to Joseph and Jacob.
2. The record contains something like the Book of Genesis that gives an account of the creation and our first parents, which is presumably part of the five books of Moses Nephi mentioned. Given that all of these were in their late seventh-century BCE form, we cannot be sure how closely they would correspond to our modern text. This issue will be discussed below in connection with the Documentary Hypothesis.
3. It also contains a history of Israel from the times of Jacob and Joseph and the Egyptian captivity down to the reign of Zedekiah contemporary with Lehi. Again, we might expect that history to be quite different coming from the northern kingdom. As will be documented below, Bible scholars today generally believe the history in our Hebrew Bible has been heavily doctored by "the Deuteronomist" — one or more Judahite editors who reshaped Genesis through 2 Kings to discredit Israel and imbue Judah with superior political and religious authority.
4. It contains the writings of the prophets down to Lehi's time, including some of the prophecies of his contemporary Jeremiah. While persuading his brothers to persist in getting the Brass Plates from Laban, Nephi stated that these plates contained "the words which have been spoken by the mouth of all the holy prophets, which have been delivered unto them by the Spirit and power of God since the world began, even down unto this present time" (1 Nephi 3:20).
5. Readers will find out later that Lehi and his relative Laban are descendants of Joseph's eldest son Manasseh (Alma 10:3). Laban's branch of that family had been responsible for

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precedent in Nephi's writings or in the Bible. See Gary A. Rendsburg, "Chiasmus in the Book of Genesis," in *Chiasmus: The State of the Art*, ed. John W. Welch and Donald W. Parry (Provo, UT: BYU Studies and Book of Mormon Central, 2020), 30. See also Donald W. Parry, *Poetic Parallelisms in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Maxwell Institute, 2007), 11–12, for an alternate and possibly superior analysis of this rhetorical structure.

> keeping the records, wherefore Lehi had to send his sons to Laban to obtain these brass plates. Applying what we know about ANE scribal schools, we can see that Laban's library or treasury may have been the central depository for all the scribal records created and maintained by one branch of Joseph's Manassite posterity.[25] The scribal school of Manassites associated with this library would have been responsible for preserving and extending the papyrus scrolls and keeping them up to date and in good condition through periodic replacement.

The Brass Plates in the Context of Ancient Jerusalem

Considering the dramatic expansion of scholarly understanding of the scribal culture of the ANE in recent decades, it may be illuminating to ask ourselves how informed people in Lehi's day would have interpreted Nephi's story about the Brass Plates. The ability of Lehi and Nephi to immediately grasp both the Egyptian and Hebrew language content of the Brass Plates, to compose comparable accounts of their own lives and their own revelations, and to manufacture their own writing materials clearly indicates that they both had advanced training as scribes.[26]

Scribal schools tended to be family affairs and would have included a curriculum providing instruction from beginner levels all the way up to very advanced instruction in relevant languages and literatures. Established scribal schools also would have included a workshop to produce writing materials and a library for preserving copies of important texts and for lending copies to the members of the scribal community for their own study and further copying. Laban's "treasury" could easily have been that library for Lehi, Nephi, and other trained Manassite scribes in their school.

Because the Brass Plates contained current materials such as prophecies of Jeremiah (Lehi's contemporary), this unusual collection of Israelite writings may have been a very recent production drawing on this Manassite scribal school's collection of ancient papyri, rather than a growing record inscribed on metal plates and handed down across numerous generations as has been generally assumed.[27] That

25. For a more complete explanation of the connection between libraries and treasuries in this context, see Reynolds, "Lehi and Nephi," 184–86.

26. Ibid, 161–216.

27. Following suggestions of Sidney B. Sperry, *A Book of Mormon Compendium* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968), 104–108. See John W. Welch, "Authorship of the

traditional core of texts would have been maintained on periodically renewed papyrus scrolls. Any such recent production as the Brass Plates would likely have come from this scribal school and could very well have included Nephi and even Lehi in the production process — which would provide a much-needed explanation for Nephi's ability to make and engrave metal plates for his own records after their arrival in a new promised land.

The Brass Plates and "the Remnant of Joseph"

Given the specific contents of the Brass Plates, they would presumably preserve a unique tradition of genealogy and prophecy that was valued by one family line of Manasseh back through his father Joseph to Jacob himself. This ancestral connection was important to Nephite prophets across a thousand years. It has consequently been significant in Latter-day Saint teaching, which justifies a review of scholarly understanding of "the remnant of Joseph."

One of the most distinctive Book of Mormon prophecies repeatedly identified the descendants of Lehi in the last days as the referent for the "remnant" prophecies in the Bible. Mormon cites the Brass Plates to teach that "our father Jacob also testified concerning a remnant of the seed of Joseph" and to show that ancient Jacob had prophesied about the Nephites as that remnant (3 Nephi 10:17).[28] In the Hebrew Bible, only Amos mentions the possibility "that the Lord God Almighty will have mercy on *the remnant of Joseph*" (*NIV*, Amos 5:15). But the Genesis story of Joseph has him introduce the theme himself in its material sense of saving lives:

A Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me."
B When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt!
C And now, … for selling me here
1 do not be distressed
2 and do not be angry with yourselves,

Book of Isaiah in Light of the Book of Mormon," in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 430–31, for a discussion of the dating of the Brass Plates in which he suggests that the Brass Plates may have been manufactured between 620 and 610 BCE as part of the Josianic reforms and not as a product of a competing scribal tradition.

28. The remnant of Joseph will play a central role in the Lord's work in the last days.

D because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you.
E For two years now there has been famine in the land,
E* and for the next five years there will be no plowing and reaping.
D* But God sent me ahead of you
1 *to preserve for you a remnant on earth*
2 and to save your lives by a great deliverance.
C* So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God.
B* He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt.
A* Now hurry back to my father and say to him, 'This is what your son Joseph says:
1 God has made me lord of all Egypt.
2 Come down to me; don't delay.'"[29]

Bible Scholarship and the Remnant Idea

In the 1970s publication of his Vanderbilt University dissertation on this "major theological motif," Gerhard Hasel recognized that multiple attempts by biblical scholars to make sense of the remnant prophecy and its origin had produced a wide variety of theories and no persuasive consensus.[30] In 1988, Lester Meyer also concluded that "no consensus

29. *NIV*, Genesis 45:4–9. See Gerhard P. Hasel, *The Remnant: The History and Theology of the Remnant Idea from Genesis to Isaiah*, 2nd ed. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1974), 154–59 for his discussion of this Joseph story. This second edition includes the results of his updated and extended analysis of all the Hebrew terms used to refer to the *remnant* in *Hebrew Bible*; see Gerhard P. Hasel, "Semantic Values of Derivatives of the Hebrew Root Š'R," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 11 (1973): 152–69, wherein the high frequency of applications of remnant terminology to humans in the Hebrew Bible and the signal case of Joseph are emphasized.

30. See Hasel, *Remnant*, vii, 40–44 and 465–66. As can be seen in Hasel's summary of the main scholarly findings in his contribution to the undated (1975?) Supplementary Volume of *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, none of the scholarly interpretations focus on Jacob, Joseph, or his descendants. See *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible,* s.v. "Remnant," 735–36. Also see his latest and

has emerged concerning the origin of the concept of a remnant."[31] Commenting on the scene of destruction in Nephite lands at the time of Christ's crucifixion, Mormon cited the prophecies of Zenos and Zenoch in the Brass Plates about Christ and about their Manassite descendants as the remnant. Mormon's formulation specifies that the remnant will be of the seed of Joseph as first prophesied by his father Jacob:

> Yea, the prophet Zenos did testify of these things, and also Zenoch spake concerning these things — because they testified particular *concerning us, which is the remnant of their seed*.
>
> Behold, our father Jacob also testified concerning a remnant of the seed of Joseph. And behold, are not we a remnant of the seed of Joseph? And these things which testifies of us, are they not written upon the plates of brass which our father Lehi brought out of Jerusalem? (3 Nephi 10:16–17)

Welsh scholar G. Henton Davies's broad, philosophical approach to the remnant idea in the Hebrew Bible is quite helpful for a comparison of the idea as represented in the Book of Mormon with the Old Testament meanings.[32] After reviewing the four Hebrew roots from which most Hebrew Bible remnant terminology derives and their principal occurrences, Davies surveys the key stories that exemplify the remnant idea — starting with Noah. "The little group in the Ark maintain life through the crisis, and they become the founders of the new humanity." Of all Noah's descendants, Abram is selected to be the new head of God's people, and then the Exodus story produces another remnant with a new start for Israel in a promised land. Davies also points out that "the idea of election contains the idea of a remnant." "The prophets [e.g., Noah, Isaiah, Jeremiah] are called to proclaim the doom of their contemporaries," but believers possessing Jehovah's word "will not

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more comprehensive review in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia,* s.v. "Remnant" (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 130–34.

31. *The Anchor Bible Dictionary,* s.v. "Remnant," by Lester V. Meyer (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:671.

32. *A Theological Wordbook of the Bible,* s.v. "Remnant," by G. Henton Davies, ed. Alan Richardson (London: SCM Press, 1957), 188–91. For a detailed analysis of how the remnant concept shaped Nephite prophecy, see Noel B. Reynolds, "Understanding the Abrahamic Covenant through the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2018): 55–66.

perish, but form part of the remnant. … [T]he remnant survives and is therefore saved just as it also seeks to save others."[33]

Based on his linguistic and textual analyses, Davies abstracts five characteristics of the "biblical remnants":

1. Remnants are composed of "survivors from a great catastrophe" that is usually understood "as a punishment for sin."
2. The remnant are noted for righteousness and faith and may be described as "the poor of the land."
3. Through the surviving remnant, the life of their people can continue, as in the Joseph story cited above. "The connexion of the idea of the remnant with the idea of life is fundamental."
4. Jehovah is the Deliverer who leaves a remnant.
5. The remnant is marked by its separation from the wickedness of its people in the past, its own righteousness, and the presence of God in its new life.

These characteristics stand out in the stories of Noah, Abraham, and Moses, and finally in the survival of Judah as God's elect — leading to the coming of Christ, in whose resurrection the idea of a remnant meets its end.[34]

The Remnant Idea and the Book of Mormon

The Nephite prophecies put a very different twist on this last point by featuring the remnant of Joseph as the ones who will provide a principal instrument, the Book of Mormon itself, by which all Israel will be gathered in the last days, including scattered Judah.[35] Matthew Bowen has shown how the famous incident of Captain Moroni gathering his people by writing on a title of liberty evokes the same image.[36] Hasel recognized how the prophet Amos undermined the standard Israelite

33. Davies, s.v. "Remnant," 189.

34. Ibid., 189–91.

35. See references on the Nephite interpretation of the Abrahamic covenant in note 60, below.

36. Matthew L. Bowen, "We are a Remnant of the Seed of Joseph": Moroni's Interpretive Use of Joseph's Coat and the Martial *nēs*-Imagery of Isaiah 11:11–12," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 41 (2020):169–92, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/we-are-a-remnant-of-the-seed-of-joseph-moronis-interpretive-use-of-josephs-coat-and-the-martial-nes-imagery-of-isaiah-1111-12/.

idea that because they were the chosen people, they would finally be forgiven for their sins and be saved.[37] It is Amos who uniquely identifies the Israelite remnant as a remnant of Joseph. "Hate evil and love good and set out justice in the gate. Perhaps the *Lord God of Israel may grant grace to Joseph's remnant*."[38]

The Josephite family line could easily have seen itself as the true standard bearer and heir of the Abrahamic tradition, with Joseph as Jacob's favored son and family savior and Manasseh as Joseph's firstborn. Jacob designated Ephraim, Joseph's second son, to receive the first blessing.[39] There are scattered evidences, however, that Manasseh was the much stronger tribe and that it was given priority over Ephraim in various ways in the early history of Israel.[40]

It is also quite possible that as brothers and next-door neighbors, these two tribes could have supported and shared scribal schools. Because of the northern kingdom's large administrative need for scribes and its religious waywardness, there may have been multiple schools devoted variously to serving the palace, the Omride dynasty's Baalist temple, and the commercial and international trade enterprises in Samaria or to maintaining the prophetic record inherited from Abraham and Joseph.

Writing on Two Sticks in Ezekiel 37:15–17

Latter-day Saints have long interpreted Ezekiel's prophecy about the two sticks with writing for Judah and Joseph being eventually brought together as a reference to the Bible and the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon version of that prophecy comes from ancient Joseph as quoted by Lehi to his own son Joseph, presumably from the Brass Plates (2 Nephi 3:12). Once we recognize that the Brass Plates are also a record of the Josephite branch of Israel, it is apparent that the stick of Joseph might be interpreted to include them with Mormon's gold plates and other Nephite records in explanations of Ezekiel 37:15–17.[41] Hugh Nibley's exhaustive exploration of this prophecy from a Latter-day Saint perspective examines the frustrations of Bible scholars who have tried

37. Hasel, *Remnant*, 178 and 197–99.

38. Amos 5:15, Robert Alter, trans., *The Hebrew Bible,* vol. 2, *Prophets, Nevi'im. A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019), 2:1268.

39. Also, compare D&C 133:32–34, where Ephraim is given priority. But in the history of Israel and in the Old Testament, Manasseh often stands out.

40. Aapeli A. Saarisalo, "Manasseh," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 3:233–34.

41. See Thompson, "Brass Plates," 13, where he develops the same point.

to make sense of this passage and the ancient context that makes it reasonable to interpret the two sticks as prophetic writings.[42] Apparently, none of these realized that there was an even older scribal tradition of writing on sticks in South Arabia, that might be directly related.[43]

Nephi cited an expanded version of this prophecy, which makes it clear that the Book of Mormon, the Bible, and other similar books would come forth in the last days to convince both Jew and Gentile that they must come unto the Lamb if they would be saved.

> For behold, saith the Lamb, I will manifest myself unto thy seed that they shall write many things which I shall minister unto them, which shall be plain and precious. … Behold, these things shall be hid up to come forth unto the Gentiles by the gift and power of the Lamb. And in them shall be written my gospel, saith the Lamb, and my rock and my salvation.
>
> And … I beheld *other books* which came forth by the power of the Lamb from the Gentiles unto them, unto the convincing of the Gentiles and *the remnant of the seed of my brethren* and also to the Jews, which were scattered upon all the face of the earth — that the records of the prophets and of the twelve apostles of the Lamb are true.
>
> And the angel spake unto me, saying: These last records … shall establish the truth of the first … and shall make known to all kindreds, tongues, and people that the Lamb of God is the Eternal Father and the Savior of the world and that all men must come unto him or they cannot be saved. …

42. Nibley's 1953 essay still stands as the most thorough scholarly treatment of this topic. It has been reprinted as chapter 1: "The Stick of Judah" in Hugh Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*, vol. 8 of *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley,* ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 1–48. While Nibley did not think to include the Brass Plates in his analysis of the Stick of Joseph, he does point out that it could include other Restoration scriptures such as the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price. See p. 36.

43. In ancient South Arabia, writing on wooden sticks represented for centuries a scribal tradition preceding the first monumental inscriptions of the 8th century BCE. Peter Stein, *Die altsüdarabischen Minuskelinschriften auf Holzstäbchen aus der Bayerischen Staatsbibliothek in München* (EFAH, Band 5) (Tübingen, Germany: Wasmuth Verlag, 2010), 1:46n196. For a review in English see Alessandra Avanzini, *Journal of Semitic Studies* 57, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 191–93, https://doi.org/10.1093/jss/fgr050.

> And the words of the Lamb shall be made known in the records of thy seed as well as in the records of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. Wherefore they both shall be established in one, for there is one God and one Shepherd over all the earth.[44]

Presumably, the Brass Plates would be one of these books that would come forth at that day in accordance with Lehi's prophecy. As Nephi reported, Lehi "was filled with the Spirit and began to prophesy … that these plates of brass should go forth unto all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people" and that "these plates of brass should never perish, neither should they be dimmed any more by time" (1 Nephi 5:17–19).

A Josephite Tradition of Prophecy

It should also be kept in mind that Lehi and Laban were both descendants of Manasseh (Alma 10:3) and that the Brass Plates preserved not only their genealogy but a distinctive prophetic tradition that may have been identified with their lineage through Joseph, the son of Israel. Book of Mormon writers cite several prophets whose writings are included in the Brass Plates but who are not known to the Judahite tradition preserved in the Old Testament. In his teaching, Sidney Sperry would emphasize this point by referring to the Brass Plates as "the official scripture of the ten tribes."[45] Non-biblical prophecies of Joseph of Egypt from the Brass Plates are cited at length by Lehi in his blessing to his own son named Joseph (2 Nephi 3:5–22), which led Nephi to comment:

> And now I Nephi speak concerning the prophecies of which my father hath spoken concerning Joseph, who was carried into Egypt. For behold, he truly prophesied concerning all his seed. And the prophecies which he wrote, there are not many greater. And he prophesied concerning us and our future generations, and *they are written upon the plates of brass*. (2 Nephi 4:1–2)

Nephi also cited Zenoch, Neum, and Zenos, who had recorded important details about the prophesied crucifixion and burial of the God of Israel (1 Nephi 19:10). Later, Nephi's younger brother and

44. Excerpted from 1 Nephi 13:23–41.

45. See Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium*, p. 107. A more comprehensive discussion of these other prophets is found in Robert L. Millet, "The Influence of the Brass Plates on the Teachings of Nephi," in *The Book of Mormon: Second Nephi, the Doctrinal Structure*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate, Jr. (Provo: Religious Studies Center, 1989), 207–25.

successor Jacob turned to the writings of Zenos for the full allegory of the olive tree, which was mentioned in Nephi's account but would not have been familiar to their readers (1 Nephi 10:12; 1 Nephi 15:7, 12–18; and Jacob 5:1–77). Amulek and Alma turned to the words of Zenos, Zenoch, and Moses to explain how redemption comes through the Son of God (Alma 34:6–7).

Restoration Scriptures and the Brass Plates

It may surprise some readers to learn that the other ancient scriptures revealed to Joseph Smith — the Book of Moses (1867)[46] and the Book of Abraham (1842), after he translated the Book of Mormon (1830) "by the gift and power of God" — may have an important role to play in our investigation of the Brass Plates. But as will be explained here, important features and claims of the Book of Mormon and the Brass Plates are best understood by reference to those additional restored records and to the teachings and histories they contain that are not fully formulated or reported in the Bible.

1. While academic study of the ancient scriptures restored by Joseph Smith tends to take these three books separately, there are some important themes that run through all three and that together provide and reinforce important doctrinal grounding for the Restoration project.[47] For present purposes, three of their shared themes require special mention. Each provides important grounding for Joseph Smith and his work and teachings:
2. All three mention or even explicate the great plan of salvation, including the gospel, which God presented before

46. The first full printing of the first eight chapters of Joseph Smith's "inspired version" of Genesis were published in 1867 by the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Various excerpts had been printed previously, and the printing history overall has been complex and imperfect in various ways. See the detailed explanations in Kent P. Jackson, *The Book of Moses and the Joseph Smith Translation Manuscripts* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2005), 1–52, https://rsc.byu.edu/book-moses-joseph-smith-translation-manuscripts/history-book-moses.

47. One study includes a review of the historical environment in which these ancient scriptures were published and provides an important discussion of how their teachings combine with each other and with the Book of Mormon to educate and support Joseph Smith with lost ancient foundations for the Restoration project. See Terryl Givens, *The Pearl of Greatest Price: Mormonism's Most Controversial Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 121–34.

the foundation of this world and which provides meaningful structure to the mortal experience of all mankind.

3. Each confirms or even elaborates on the importance of the sacred records begun by Adam and continuing through subsequent dispensations.
4. Among the three are many accounts of the divine calling of key prophets — usually at the initiation of new dispensations — who enter the presence of God in a divine council or other setting and are shown the big picture of the past, present, and future of this earth and its inhabitants.

The Brass Plates as a Key Resource for Lehi and Nephi

While these restored ancient scriptures have provided invaluable guidance and vision for Joseph Smith and his followers in connection with these three themes, the Brass Plates seem to have contained some of the same Abrahamic and Mosaic material — thereby providing the same support to the Nephite dispensation. When Lehi taught his children about the creation of Adam and Eve and their subsequent temptation by the devil with all its implications for all peoples, he referred to "the things which I have read" that provided him with an extensive understanding of that fallen angel, who seeks "the misery of all mankind" (2 Nephi 2:17–18). When explaining the future of the house of Israel and the Gentiles and of the Nephites themselves, Nephi invoked the prophecies of Isaiah, Zenock, Neum, and Zenos, that he had read in the Brass Plates, to supplement his own.[48] And as will be shown below, the Brass Plates apparently provided Nephi and Lehi with other examples of earlier prophets who, like themselves, were called by God in face-to-face encounters to launch a new dispensation — including Adam, Enoch, Abraham, Moses, and Isaiah.[49]

The Book of Moses

These eight chapters are usually understood as having been given to Joseph Smith as a replacement for the first chapters of Genesis in his new translation of the Bible. These include an extensive opening vision in which Moses is shown the extent and magnitude of the Lord's creations

48. Nephi quotes the Brass Plates prophecies of Zenock, Neum and Zenos in 1 Nephi 19 and of Isaiah extensively in 1 Nephi 20–21 and 2 Nephi 7–8, 12–24.

49. See the discussion in Hugh Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, ed. Gary P. Gillum, 2nd ed. (Provo: FARMS, 2000), 29, which links Enoch, Abraham, and Moses to this same initiation into the "heavenly mysteries."

and receives a prophetic call, an extended account of the instruction given to Adam and Eve after leaving the garden, and a 117-verse Book of Enoch (Moses 6:20–7:69), which also includes Enoch's theophany and prophetic call. These provided important comparison accounts for Lehi and Nephi and their own visionary experiences when called as prophets.[50]

There is strong evidence that the version of Genesis contained in the Brass Plates was the same or similar to the Book of Moses as given to Joseph Smith. In other papers, Jeff Lindsay and I have identified almost 100 distinctive, non-biblical phrasings or word groupings that occur in the Book of Mormon and appear to be drawn from the Book of Moses — which Joseph Smith received not long after the publication of the Book of Mormon.[51]

The Book of Moses also confirms the keeping of a record from the time of Adam and a tradition among the believers of perpetuating that literacy:

> And a book of remembrance was kept, in the which was recorded, in the language of Adam, for it was given unto as many as called upon God to write by the spirit of inspiration; And by them their children were taught to read and write. (Moses 6:5–6)

The great vision of God and all his works is the focus of the first chapter as Moses is "caught up into an exceedingly high mountain" and "saw God face to face" and "talked with him." There he experienced the "glory of God" and was shown the creation of the world and "all the children of men which are, and which were created" (Moses 1:1, 8). He learned firsthand of the opposition of Satan and of the role of the

50. As reported in 1 Nephi 1 and 8–15. See Reynolds, "Lehi's Vision," wherein I explain how Nephi includes these three themes in his presentation of the vision received by him and Lehi.

51. See Noel B. Reynolds, "The Brass Plates Version of Genesis," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 34 (2019):63–96, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-brass-plates-version-of-genesis/; and Jeff Lindsay and Noel B. Reynolds, "'Strong Like unto Moses': The Case for Ancient Roots in the Book of Moses Based on Book of Mormon Usage of Related Content Apparently from the Brass Plates," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 44 (2021):1–92, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/strong-like-unto-moses-the-case-for-ancient-roots-in-the-book-of-moses-based-on-book-of-mormon-usage-of-related-content-apparently-from-the-brass-plates/.

Only Begotten who would lead God's great work — "to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man" (Moses 1:39).

Subsequently Moses was told of the instruction of Adam by the voice of the Lord, by his angels, and by the Holy Ghost. He learned of the plan of salvation and the gospel of the Son (Moses 5:4–15, 57–59). In chapter 6, we learn that a record was kept from the beginning "in the language of Adam" by those who followed the Lord. For "it was given unto as many as called upon God to write by the spirit of inspiration; and by them their children were taught to read and write, having a language which was pure and undefiled" (Moses 6:5–6).

The Book of Moses reports the experience of one more prophet who was called by the Lord from heaven as Enoch was shown "the spirits that God had created" and "all things which were not visible to the natural eye" (Moses 6:27–36). The "Book of Enoch" inserted here reports Enoch teaching the plan of salvation and the gospel of Jesus Christ, drawing on his own revelations and the "book of remembrance" that they had, "written among us, according to the pattern given by the finger of God … in our own language" (Moses 6:46).

In its eight chapters, the Book of Moses as given to Joseph Smith relates God's threefold teaching and revelation to three prophets — Moses, Adam, and Enoch — with a fullness that goes well beyond what the Judahite tradition has preserved in its version of Genesis. It should be remembered that scholars believe that the Hebrew Bible versions of the earliest texts would have been recovered from the oral traditions and transcribed in the newly available paleo-Hebrew script during the eighth and seventh centuries by Jewish scribal schools.

The Book of Abraham

The Book of Abraham confirms the continuation of that same tradition many centuries later. Soon after acquiring the four Egyptian mummies and the papyrus scrolls that came with them, Joseph Smith reportedly told people that these scrolls included an original record preserved by Joseph in Egypt that contained teachings of Abraham — presumably in Egyptian language and script:

> On the last of June four Egyptian mummies were brought here. With them were two papyrus rolls, besides some other ancient Egyptian writings. As no one could translate these writings they were presented to President Smith. He soon knew what they were and said that the rolls of papyrus

> contained a sacred record kept by Joseph in Pharaoh's court in Egypt and the teachings of Father Abraham.[52]

One important theme of Abraham's autobiography focuses on this same written tradition and his plans to extend it for his posterity:

> But I shall endeavor, hereafter, to delineate the chronology running back from myself to the beginning of the creation, for *the records have come into my hands, which I hold unto this present time*. …
>
> But *the records of the fathers, even the patriarchs*, concerning the right of Priesthood, the Lord my God preserved in mine own hands; therefore a knowledge of the beginning of the creation, and also of the planets, and of the stars, as they were made known unto the fathers, have I kept even unto this day, and *I shall endeavor to write some of these things upon this record, for the benefit of my posterity* that shall come after me. (Abraham 1:28, 31)

The kinds of records described by both Moses and Abraham would be labeled "lineage histories" by anthropologists today and do not assume widespread literacy or shared writing systems beyond what can be maintained within a family from one generation to another.[53]

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52. W. W. Phelps, letter to Sally Phelps, July 20, 1835, quoted in Bruce van Orden, "Writing to Zion: The William W. Phelps Kirtland Letters (1835–1836)," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (1993): 554, https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol33/iss3/9/.

53. John L. Sorenson developed this concept of lineage histories in his *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 50–56. His final and much expanded explanation of lineage histories in Mesoamerica, in other ancient cultures, and in the Nephite writings can be found in John L. Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex: An Ancient American Book* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013), 198–218. Sorenson borrowed the basic idea from Robert Carmack's description of pre-Hispanic codices from the Guatemalan highlands as histories of "political-descent groups." See Robert M. Carmack, "Toltec Influence on the Postclassic Culture History of Highland Guatemala," in *Archaeological Studies in Middle America* (New Orleans: Tulane University, 1970), 49–92; and *Quichean Civilization: The Ethnohistoric, Ethnographic, and Archaeological Sources* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1973), 11–19.

Abraham and "the Right of Priesthood"

Another salient theme for Abraham featured his successful quest to receive and preserve the "right of priesthood." As he explains in the opening lines,

> I sought for the blessings of the fathers, and the right whereunto I should be ordained to administer the same; having been myself a follower of righteousness, desiring also to be one who possessed great knowledge, and to be a greater follower of righteousness. (Abraham 1:2)

And so he "became a rightful heir, a *High Priest*, holding the right belonging to the fathers," which was conferred upon him "from the fathers." This priesthood had come "down from the fathers, from the beginning of time, yea, even from the beginning, or before *the foundation of the earth*, down to the present time" (Abraham 1:3).

Abraham's discussion of priesthood in this text as given to Joseph Smith connects repeatedly with the principal discussion of priesthood that seems to come almost out of nowhere in the Book of Mormon in Alma's preaching to the apostate people at Ammonihah. Alma speaks of those who have been "called and prepared from *the foundation of the world* according to the foreknowledge of God" and "who were *ordained* and became *high priests* of God on account of their exceeding faith and repentance, and *their righteousness* before God" (Alma 13:10). This single passage goes far beyond other discussions of priesthood in the Book of Mormon and clearly has an air of being drawn from another source both in its terminology and doctrine — both of which would find a comfortable home in the Book of Abraham. The resemblance is sufficient to at least raise the possibility that the Brass Plates may have included some version of Abraham's record.

Recognizing the probable Abrahamic or Josephite origins of the Brass Plates record may resolve a problem that has bothered some Book of Mormon readers. Numerous similarities have been noted between Alma chapters 12–13 and Hebrews 7:1–4. One scholar cites this as an anachronism that proves the Book of Mormon was "composed in the nineteenth century by Joseph Smith."[54] But if Alma had access to Abraham's original autobiography in the Brass Plates, that would explain why he and the author of Hebrews — who appears to have had access to the same text, which does not show up in any other Jewish or

54. David P. Wright, "Historical Criticism: A Necessary Element in the Search for Religious Truth," *Sunstone* 16, no. 2 (September 1992): 34.

Christian text — could have cited the same facts about Abraham while using those facts to frame completely different theological arguments.[55]

Joseph Smith's Book of Abraham provides us with the most complete description of Abraham's life and activities and is the only text that is written from Abraham's own perspective. We note for present purposes that Abraham sought and received the priesthood from the fathers along with their records going back to Adam and that he intended to pass both down to his posterity.[56] In a similar way, the third-century BCE *Aramaic Levi Document* cites the Book of Noah and "sets the Levitical priesthood in the sacerdotal line reaching back to Adam."[57]

Abraham's Theophanies

Not only was Abraham intimately connected to the educated elites of his day, like Enoch, Joseph, Moses, Lehi, and Nephi in their days, he was also brought repeatedly into the society of the gods.[58] While praying for deliverance from the priest of Pharaoh, "the Lord hearkened and heard, and he filled me with *the vision of the Almighty*, and *the angel of his presence stood by me*" (Abraham 1:15). "And *his voice was unto me*: Abraham, Abraham, behold my name is Jehovah, and I have heard thee, and have come down to deliver thee" (1:16).

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55. In his commentary on Hebrews, Harold Attridge noted that "numerous attempts have been made to discover traditional sources for this chapter [7]" but that the results of these efforts "have been ambiguous at best." See Harold W. Attridge, *Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1989), 187.

56. Book of Abraham 1:2–3, 28, 31. Bill Arnold's rhetorical inquiry into the debate on whether "the fathers" should be read as referring to the patriarchs or to the generation of the exodus has shown that even the Deuteronomistic redactors are appealing to the land of promise associated with the patriarchs when they include the exodus generation in the meaning of "the fathers." See Bill T. Arnold, "Re-examining the Fathers," in *Torah and Tradition, Old Testament Studies* 70, ed. Klas Spronk and Hans Barstad, (2017): 10–14. See also Ariel Feldman, "Patriarchs and Aramaic Traditions," in *T&T Clark Companion to the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. George J. Brooke and Charlotte Hempel (London: T&T Clark, 2018), 469–80.

57. Jonas C. Greenfield, Michael E. Stone, and Esther Eshel, *The Aramaic Levi Document: Edition, Translation, Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 36. The authors see this tendency "to establish Levi as an ideal priest from the past" as an echo of Malachi 2:4–9.

58. See the discussion of these similar theophanies as prophetic calls in Reynolds, "Lehi's Dream, Nephi's Blueprint," 242–45.

The Lord appeared to Abraham again after he moved to Haran and explained the role his posterity would play in the future in bringing the gospel and blessings of salvation to the people on the earth:

> For I am the Lord thy God; I dwell in heaven; the earth is my footstool; … My name is Jehovah, and I know the end from the beginning; therefore my hand shall be over thee. And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee above measure, and make thy name great among all nations, and thou shalt be a blessing unto thy seed after thee, that in their hands they shall bear this ministry and Priesthood unto all nations. And I will bless them through thy name; for as many as receive this Gospel shall be called after thy name, and shall be accounted thy seed, and shall rise up and bless thee, as their father; … and in thy seed after thee … shall all the families of the earth be blessed, even with the blessings of the Gospel, which are the blessings of salvation, even of life eternal. (Abraham 2:7–11)[59]

The accounts of this covenant in Genesis as given to Abraham and then to Isaac and Jacob have been interpreted in Jewish tradition primarily as promises of land and posterity — with an unexplained and often forgotten reference to being a blessing to the nations. But in Abraham's autobiographical account his posterity is redefined as those who receive the Gospel and land is not mentioned at all. The repeated focus is on the Gospel that his seed will bear to "all the families of the earth." The fact that multiple references to this covenant in the Nephite record make this same point repeatedly might indicate that the Nephites were reading about the Abrahamic covenant in a Book of Abraham from the Brass Plates.[60]

The Lord subsequently spoke to Abraham on occasion to give him instructions as he arrived in Egypt, to instruct him in sacred astronomy,

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59. Compare the biblical versions of these promises as given to Abraham in Genesis 12:2–3, 18:18, and 22:17–18, to Isaac in Genesis 26:3–4, and to Jacob in Genesis 35:11–12.

60. For an extended discussion and comparison of Nephite, Jewish, and Christian interpretations of the Abrahamic covenant, see Reynolds, "Understanding the Abrahamic Covenant," 39–74, and Noel B. Reynolds, "All Kindreds Shall Be Blessed: Nephite, Jewish, and Christian Interpretations of the Abrahamic Covenant," in *Seek Ye Words of Wisdom: Studies of the Book of Mormon, Bible, and Temple in Honor of Stephen D. Ricks*, ed. Donald W. Parry, Gaye Strathearn, and Shon D. Hopkin (Provo, UT: Interpreter Foundation, 2020), 115–39.

and to show him how God had organized all the intelligences "before the world was," and how in a great pre-earth council the Lord was chosen to lead in the organization and formation of "the heavens and the earth" (Abraham 3:18–4:1). Abraham then describes the creation of the earth and the first man and woman as he witnessed it in this vision (Abraham 4–5).[61] Clearly, the Book of Abraham constitutes another record that throws increased light on the three themes and that could well have been included in the Josephite records collected and preserved in the Brass Plates.[62]

Abraham in History

Possibly the most important take-away from this discussion of Abraham and his writings in the Brass Plates is that it rescues the biblical and other accounts of Abraham from the realms of folklore, myth, and legend, where most modern scholarship has assigned him, and places him firmly in recorded history with a written autobiographical account passed down conscientiously by one scribal school among his descendants. The canons and methodologies of contemporary Bible scholarship recognize that the biblical traditions about Abraham have no verifiable historical sources but were drawn at some point from oral traditions that were not transmitted into written tradition for a millennium after the eighteenth century BCE, when he is usually thought to have lived.[63]

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61. The published Book of Abraham ends abruptly at this point in the creation account, though there is reason to believe Joseph Smith had translated a good deal more of that record. See John Gee, *The Role of the Book of Abraham in the Restoration* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997), https://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/role-book-abraham-restoration.

62. As detailed earlier (see under the heading "Restoration Scriptures and the Brass Plates"), those three themes are (1) God's plan of salvation, (2) the importance of keeping sacred records, and (3) the calling of prophets who are heads of new dispensations. For a documented account of the limited impact of the Book of Abraham on early Latter-day Saint teachings see Gee, *The Role of the Book of Abraham in the Restoration*, 14–15.

63. See, for example, the careful discussion of this problem in John Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (Brattleboro, VT: Echo Point Books, 2014), 158–66. In his 1973 German dissertation, Thomas Thompson marched systematically through the history of efforts to that point in time to find historical support for the biblical patriarchs in ANE studies and concluded that all of them were based in unacceptable logical leaps or methodological confusion. See the 2002 English version in Thomas L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives: The Quest for the Historical Abraham* (Horsham, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002).

The Brass Plates as described in the Book of Mormon and as interpreted in association with other Restoration scriptures above would have given the Nephite dispensation an actual historical record of Abraham as the source for their recurrent appeals to him and his promised blessings in the construction of their own identity. While the Jews maintained a firm belief in their Abrahamic origins, their scribal schools could not claim documentary connections like those contained in the Brass Plates and were forced to rely instead on potentially suspect oral traditions that were not transcribed until the eighth or seventh century BCE.

The Harmonizing Efforts of the Judahite Scribal Schools

The companion paper on scribal practices in ancient Israel reviews how these Judahite scribal practices were standardized on many dimensions across geography and scribal traditions.[64] Some of these were linguistic standardizations as the Hebrew alphabet, script, and orthography were developing. The Hebrew Bible also reflects a harmonizing inclusiveness as texts written with northern dialects were incorporated into the overwhelmingly southern tradition. In addition, a developed Hebrew rhetoric, whether imported from the north or developed primarily in the south, flowered in the late seventh century in Jerusalem and was particularly evident in the writings of Nephi and his successors.

That harmonizing spirit was most dramatically evidenced in the editing and redacting processes that scholars have now identified in the Hebrew Bible. It will be suggested below that the Manassite scribal school decision to create a brass-plates version of their traditional writings can be seen as a strategic move to protect their lineage histories and prophetic writings from the rampant syncretism and redactioning being promoted in the Judahite schools — especially considering the ideology of an ongoing Davidic dynasty that these efforts promoted.

The Documentary Hypothesis

Far and away the most significant harmonizing endeavor that twentieth-century Bible scholars have attributed to the Jerusalem scribal schools is the hypothesized merger of multiple scribal traditions in the creation of the Pentateuch. The Documentary Hypothesis (hereafter DH) as propounded by Julius Wellhausen and others in the late nineteenth century won nearly universal support and still holds great sway among

64. Reynolds, "Lehi and Nephi."

some Bible scholars, though it is also widely challenged and modified today. DH enjoyed enormous success among Bible scholars through much of the twentieth century and provided an assumed background for new forms of biblical criticism that emerged in the second half of the century.[65] As Rendsburg has recently summarized,

> Most modern biblical scholars remain wedded to the classic DH, which seeks to explain the so-called duplications and contradictions in the Torah by assigning different portions to different authors or schools.[66]

The Documentary Hypothesis Today

Yale professor Joel Baden has recently published a much simplified and refocused presentation and defense of the DH, sweeping away mountains of DH elaborations that he sees as poorly grounded and confusing. As an interpretive hypothesis, he sees the DH as "a proposed literary solution to the literary problems of the Pentateuch, no more, no less."[67] Over the last century and a half, Hebrew Bible scholars have struggled to explain duplicate and contradictory versions of stories, divine revelations, and official rules and practices as reported in the

65. For an even-handed and comprehensive review of the wide range of Latter-day Saint thought and responses to the DH, see Kevin L. Barney, "Reflections on the Documentary Hypothesis," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 33 no. 1 (Spring 2000): 57–99. In his defense of the Book of Mormon's account of a journey through the Arabian Peninsula, Jeff Lindsay included an insightful excursus on DH that adapts it for support of the Brass Plates story as well. See Jeff Lindsay, "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream Map: Part 2 of 2," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 19 (2016), 294–305, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/joseph-and-the-amazing-technicolor-dream-map-part-2-of-2/.

66. Gary A. Rendsburg, "The Literary Unity of the Exodus Narrative," in "*Did I Not Bring Israel Out of Egypt,*" ed. James K. Hoffmeier, Alan R. Millard, and Gary A. Rendsburg (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2016), 113.

67. See Yale professor Joel S. Baden's *The Composition of the Pentateuch: Renewing the DH* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 32. This book has won widespread admiration for being an attractive, clear, and well-written reassessment and restatement of that position, while being severely criticized for failure to exploit important theoretical and methodological developments in the field. See Angela Roskop Erisman, "Review of Baden, Joel S., *The Composition of the Pentateuch: Renewing the DH*," *H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews* (December 2012), https://networks.h-net.org/node/28655/reviews/31018/roskop-erisman-baden-composition-pentateuch-renewing-documentary. But it is not yet obvious that it will reclaim the spirited support the DH enjoyed three generations ago.

standard text. The original solution proposed in the DH consists in the hypothesization of four or more source documents that were blended together by Judahite scribes to create the Pentateuch that we have in the Bible today.[68] That harmonizing project is usually assumed to have been undertaken in the eighth or seventh century and possibly completed in post-exilic times.[69]

It has often been observed that the project tended to include and preserve repetitive and sometimes contradictory texts rather than reconciling them.[70] The growing dissatisfaction with the DH today does not dispute the assumption that various scribal traditions are blended together in our modern Pentateuch. Rather, it grows out of doubts about the value of focusing current and future Bible study on those hypothesized scribal variants when we have before us whole texts that were finalized by someone much closer to the originals than we are today. In his comprehensive review of the main threads of the debate about Pentateuchal sources over the last century, David Carr explains the wide range and varieties of scholarly disagreement, and ironically, how the European scholars have now largely rejected the DH, while a new generation of Americans have taken up its defense.[71] A huge literature

68. Wellhausen's principal work is currently available as an American reprint of the 1885 English translation. See Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994). Richard Friedman has been a tireless defender of the DH in recent decades. In an appendix to his principal work on the topic, he provides a chart showing to which of the four hypothesized sources of the Pentateuch he would assign each verse of the Hebrew text. See Richard Elliott Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2019), 229–37.

69. A helpful summary statement of the classical view today that describes probable redactors and their likely dates of contribution can be found in Richard Elliott Friedman, "Three Major Redactors of the Torah," in *Birkat Shalom: Studies in the Bible, Ancient Near Eastern Literature, and Postbiblical Judaism Presented to Shalom M. Paul on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Chaim Cohen et al. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 31–44.

70. It should be recognized as a caution not often noted in DH studies that field studies by anthropologists studying orality and literacy have turned up the same kinds of variations in oral performance in real time. One of these has asked "whether or not similar doublets and repetitions in OT texts have sometimes resulted from the dynamics of oral performance, rather than literary processes." See Burke O. Long, "Recent Field Studies in Oral Literature and Their Bearing on OT Criticism," *Vetus Testamentum* 26, Fasc. 2 (April 1976): 195.

71. David M. Carr, "Changes in Pentateuchal Criticism," in *Hebrew Bible/ Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation, Volume III, From Modernism*

has grown up criticizing the endless attempts to identify the original source documents hypothesized by Wellhausen and his successors.

> Thus, while a few are attempting a return to source criticism as it was before tradition history, the bulk of contemporary pentateuchal scholarship ultimately has followed Rendtorff in undertaking a tradition-historical reinvestigation of the formation of the Pentateuch/Hexateuch — reconstructing the formation of the Pentateuch from its smaller units to its broader extent.[72]

Joel Baden's simplified reformulation of the DH lists four hypothetical documents from which the text in the Pentateuch is derived through an eighth and seventh century scribal process in Jerusalem that interwove these documents and preserved them all in that combined form. Though not usually featured in the discussion, it must be assumed that each of these hypothetical documents was available to the redactors of the final Pentateuch because of its origins and preservation in its own scribal tradition.

Multiple Scribal School Traditions Hypothesized

The larger Jahwist document (J) was assumed to be the contribution of the Judahite scribes centered in Jerusalem. The much smaller Elohist document (E) is usually assumed to come from northern Israel, possibly from an Ephraimite or Manassite scribal school. The Priestly document (P) would presumably derive from the scribal schools of the Levites, who did not have their own territory but were scattered among assigned cities throughout Judah and Israel. Deuteronomy (D) is usually thought to be of northern origin as well and is often equated with the Book of the Law discovered in the Jerusalem temple by priests in 622 during the reign of King Josiah with the implicit claim that it was more ancient than any of the contemporary scribal school products. As Carr explained, none of these hypothesized original documents has escaped severe criticism and rejection over the last half century.

The Book of Mormon and the Documentary Hypothesis

In 1977, the eminent Book of Mormon scholar, John L. Sorenson, took a close look at the then-current state of the DH literature and argued

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to Post-Modernism (The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries), ed. Magne Sæbø (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2015), 433–66.

72. Ibid., 466.

that the Brass Plates may have included the Elohist E document.[73] The strongest part of his argument focuses on the scholars' widely shared conviction that E is a northern source, which dovetails perfectly with Lehi's Manassite genealogy.[74] Sorenson was writing before the explosion of scholarly explorations of the scribal schools in the ANE, so the extensive personal connections between Lehi and Nephi and the scribal schools of Jerusalem were not so evident to him in 1977 as they are today. Even then, Sorenson notes that the Small Plates "could plausibly be considered a manifestation of that scribal tradition."[75]

Others have expanded on Sorenson's insight. Richley Crapo observed that "Lehi had clearly been socialized in the imagery of the northern kingdom" as is evidenced in his featured involvement with "the ministry of angels, the role of visionary dreams, [and] the imagery in these dream visions of the Tree of Life," among other elements of characteristically northern imagery.[76] Keith Thompson's essay expands considerably on Sorenson's case for seeing Israel as the homeland of the Brass Plates.[77] While the present article differs in many ways from the analyses offered previously by Sorenson and Thompson, they stand

73. Sorenson, "The Brass Plates." Another early attempt to relate the Book of Mormon to Deuteronomy can be seen in an online presentation by BYU student Allen Kendall. See Allen Kendall, "The Deuteronomic Contribution to the Brass Plates," (Student Symposium, Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, February 19, 2016).

74. The 2021 publication of what appears to be a proto-Deuteronomy text presents itself straightforwardly as an Elohist document, referring to Elohim repeatedly with the attachment of a beginning and an ending verse each referencing Yahweh. See Idan Dershowitz, *The Valediction of Moses: A Proto-Biblical Book* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021). It is not yet obvious that Dershowitz's analysis will change the long-held opinion of Hebrew epigraphers that this text is most likely a nineteenth-century forgery. Dershowitz has provided a summary of his argument and evidence in Dershowitz, Idan. "The Valediction of Moses: New Evidence on the Shapira Deuteronomy Fragments" *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 133, no. 1 (2021): 1–22, https://doi.org/10.1515/zaw-2021-0001://doi.org/10.1515/zaw-2021-0001.

75. Sorenson, "Brass Plates," 33.

76. Richley Crapo, "Lehi, Joseph, and the Kingdom of Israel," *Interpreter: A Latter-day Saint Journal of Faith and Scholarship* 33 (2019):302, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/lehi-joseph-and-the-kingdom-of-israel/.

77. Keith Thompson, "The Brass Plates: Can Modern Scholarship Help Identify Their Contents?" *Interpreter: A Latter-day Saint Journal of Faith and Scholarship* 45 (2021):81–113, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-brass-plates-can-modern-scholarship-help-identify-their-contents/. After an extended exploration of the possibility that biblical Micah might have been included in the Brass Plates,

out among the few substantial and plausible backstories for the Brass Plates that have been proposed to this date. They should be considered carefully by anyone doing further research on this topic.[78]

Current Doubts About DH Still Assume Multiple Scribal Traditions Behind the Hebrew Bible

The arguments for the hypothesized J and E documents came under severe criticism after 1970 — and particularly in Europe where the DH is considered by many to be dead. Even though the primary criticisms were directed at the Yahwist, it was the hypothesized Elohist tradition that was essentially obliterated by these attacks on the DH. Robert Gnuse has attempted to resurrect E more recently.[79] And Michael Goulder has shown how an ancient selection of twelve psalms should be interpreted as the missing Elohist tradition. The "Asaph psalms" (50, 73–83) repeatedly refer to the people of God as *Joseph*, invoke the word *covenant*, and provide numerous other indications of a possible northern origin.[80]

While no documents have been found that correspond to these hypothesized DH sources, many scholars today do agree with Baden at some level that hypothesizing the merger of previously existing scribal traditions is "the most economical, clearest, and most complete solution currently available for the literary complexities of the canonical text."[81]

Prominent Bible scholar David Noel Freedman has also pointed out that there must also have been an original narrative source from which these four documentary traditions could have been drawn. Such a source would have

> dealt in connected fashion with the principal themes of Israel's early history and prehistory — including the primeval

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Thompson concludes that this eighth-century prophet who did focus on the remnant prophecy was not likely included. See pp. 98–102.

78. Kevin Christensen has explored the implications of Sorenson's argument for the Book of Mormon by integrating this analysis with the perspective of Old Testament scholar Margaret Barker. See his *Paradigms Regained: A Survey of Margaret Barker's Scholarship and Its Significance for Mormon Studies* (Provo: FARMS, 2001), 28–32, https://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/paradigms-regained-survey-margaret-barkers-scholarship-and-its-significance-mormon-studies.

79. Robert K. Gnuse, "Redefining the Elohist," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 119, no. 2 (2000): 201–20.

80. Michael Goulder, "Asaph's *History of Israel* (Elohist Press, Bethel, 725 BCE), *Journal for Study of the Old Testament* 65 (1995): 71–81.

81. Baden, *The Composition of the Pentateuch*, 32.

> history, patriarchal sagas, the exodus and wanderings, and presumably the settlement in the Promised Land. [It] is no longer extant, but what remains of its contents is scattered through the books from Genesis to Joshua.[82]

From that perspective, the DH assumes at least five additional scribal traditions that would lie behind our modern Pentateuch. It must be wondered if the version of that history preserved by the Manassites might have been something like the original tradition Freedman was hypothesizing. It could even have been the source of the various oral traditions that were gathered and transcribed in Jerusalem during the seventh century.

Additional Insights From Documentary Hypothesis Studies

We should not assume that the textual harmonizing that the ancient Judahite scribes accomplished in bringing a variety of traditions into the Pentateuch was necessarily a peaceful and amicable process. Mark Smith has provided both evidence and analysis to argue that the process would be better described as a culture war. As he summarizes, "The Bible constitutes more than the representations of collective memory about cultural conflicts; it became the very site, the battlefield for playing out these cultural conflicts, followed by later compromises."[83]

Sanders has asked how the weaving of multiple scribal traditions together in the Pentateuch compares with the scribal policies of other ANE traditions. His finding, using the Flood narrative as the sample for comparison, was that the Mesopotamian scribes kept the text *coherent* and basically unchanged over a thousand-year period, but that the Hebrews wove multiple traditions together to maintain *comprehensiveness*. This comparative study is not only supported by the DH, but it also fits well with the growing view that the Pentateuch is the product of many layers of interpretation — so much so that it is best understood as Midrash from the beginning. Sanders argued that the Mesopotamian scholarly text-making was always additive, but never

82. David Noel Freedman, *Divine Commitment and Human Obligation: Selected Writings of David Noel Freedman*, vol. 1: History and Religion, ed. John R. Huddlestun (Winona Lake: Eerdmans, 1997), 103–104.

83. Mark S. Smith, "Recent Study of the Israelite Religion in Light of Ugaritic Texts," in *Ugarit at Seventy-Five,* ed. K. Lawson Younger (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 11.

allowed the weaving in of alternative traditions — the approach that defines the Pentateuch.[84]

In a subsequent work, Sanders compared Mesopotamian accounts of the scribe Adapa and post-exilic accounts of Enoch, each a patron saint of his scribal tradition, to reveal "the distinctive patterns: a Babylonian scribal culture of continuity and a Judean scribal culture of reinvention."[85]

Ongoing historical and socio-linguistic studies of the Pentateuch continue to recognize the usefulness of the DH. The assumption of most promoters of the DH that the contributing oral traditions were transcribed or produced sometime in the ninth to seventh centuries fits reasonably well with analyses of the artifacts collected so far by epigraphers. But ongoing studies now question the assumption that these hypothesized sources would all be that late — both on epigraphical and historical methodological grounds. And traditional assumptions about the transmission from oral to written traditions are being questioned in light of empirical studies. As van Bekkum warns, "It is important to be cautious in creating sources, because they more often reflect scholarly assumptions than historical reality," and "it is dangerous to posit too many stages of transmission."[86]

Finkelstein and Sass have also challenged the dominant tradition of Hebrew epigraphers by pointing out that there are no securely dated inscriptions that support the biblical account of a flourishing, literate regime in Jerusalem in the tenth or ninth centuries. Rather, "the

84. Seth L. Sanders, "What if there Aren't any Empirical Models for Pentateuchal Criticism?" in *Contextualizing Israel's Sacred Writings: Ancient Literacy, Orality, and Literary Production*, Ancient Israel and its Literature 22, ed. Brian Schmidt (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature Press, 2015), 295.

85. Seth L. Sanders, *From Adapa to Enoch* (Tübingen, DE: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 3.

86. Koert van Bekkum, "The 'Language of Canaan': Ancient Israel's History and the Origins of Hebrew," in *Biblical Hebrew in Context: Essays in Semitics and Old Testament Texts in Honour of Professor Jan P. Lettinga*, ed. Koert van Bekkum, Gert Kwakkel, and Wolter H. Rose (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 66. Rolf Rendtorff, a leading Bible scholar at the University of Heidelberg, once summarized the state of DH studies by showing how wildly they varied in their conclusions and recommended the canonical approach that just takes the final document as the proper text for scholarly study. See Rolf Rendtorff, "Directions in Pentateuchal Studies," *Current Research: Biblical Studies* 5 (1997): 43–65. This "canonical" approach continues to attract a growing segment of Bible scholars today.

9th century was a period of transition from Proto-Canaanite to cursive Hebrew and other regional West Semitic alphabets."[87]

The recension of the standard Pentateuch that came out of seventh-century Israel was incorporated into the Masoretic Text (MT), which became the standard version of the Hebrew Bible in the following centuries — another harmonizing product of the post-exilic Jerusalem scribal schools — which eventually became the canonical Hebrew Bible that would provide the standard text for both the Jewish and the Christian worlds. The fact that none of the hypothesized source texts for the Pentateuch is extant continues to invite new proposals and controversies from Bible scholars.[88]

For purposes of this paper, the point is that the thousands of Bible scholars who have accepted the DH over the decades have necessarily accepted the reality of multiple hypothetical textual traditions contributed by unidentified scribal schools to a common project during the seventh century. The dominance of the DH in biblical studies over the last century and a half has clearly planted the concept of multiple undocumented scribal traditions contributing to the Hebrew Bible as it has come down to the modern world. While Bible scholars continue to propose competing theories about dating and origins of various textual traditions, there has been continuing resistance to the recurring suggestion that the Pentateuch itself is a post-exilic composition.[89]

Post-exilic Scribal Traditions

With the rise of the Greek and then Roman empires, Greek became the *lingua franca* of the Mediterranean world. Even in Israel, Greek and Aramaic dialects were replacing Hebrew for most people. The infiltration of Aramaic language through invasions by Aramaic

87. Finkelstein and Sass, "Epigraphic Evidence from Jerusalem," 25. The principal target of this critique is Christopher Rollston. A more technical and expansive summary of the new generation of epigraphical studies as they address older approaches, including a current bibliography, can be found in Andrew R. Burlingame, "Writing and Literacy in the World of Ancient Israel: Recent Developments and Future Directions," *Bibliotheca Orientalis* LXXVI, nos. 1–2 (January–April 2019): 46–74.

88. For an illuminating analytical history of the canonization processes that developed in connection with Mesopotamian, Jewish, Christian, and even Muslim literatures, see William W. Hallo, "The Concept of Canonicity in Cuneiform and Biblical Literature: A Comparative Appraisal," in *The Biblical Canon in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Bernard F. Batto (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen Press, 1991): 1–12.

89. Freedman, *Divine Commitment and Human Obligation*, 344.

speakers from nearby Damascus and Syria generally is detectable but not sharply defined as early as the tenth century in northern Israel.[90] While archaeologists can confirm the ninth-century conquest of Dan by the Damascenes, the nature and extent of their rule in the north are currently major questions for archaeologists working in that area.[91]

The Septuagint

In the third and second centuries BCE a new Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible known as the Septuagint (LXX) provided critical access to the Hebrew scriptures for the Greek-speaking Jewish world in diaspora in the Roman Empire.

No one has identified a single, clear, original Hebrew source (*Vorlage*) for the LXX. This should not be surprising given that the collection of texts in the LXX does not match up perfectly with the Hebrew Bible, and the different books of the LXX have different translators using different translation styles. These translators were working at different times and places — though third-century Alexandria is regarded as the principal origin for the translations. What is clear is that the LXX translations do not derive from the canonical Hebrew proto MT and are "often at variance with the MT."[92] They do, therefore, attest to at least one or more Hebrew recensions that were available in the third century BCE that are not derived from any scribal school known today.

Different examples illustrate ways in which the LXX can point to independent Hebrew language sources, some of which also circulated at Qumran. Unlike the various scribal schools hypothesized by modern Hebrew Bible scholars, the Qumran scribes were more interested in collecting and preserving the ancient texts than in harmonizing or revising them. Possibly the most famous example of this disposition would be the two Qumran versions of Jeremiah, which differ by about

90. Benjamin Sass, "Aram and Israel during the 10th–9th centuries BCE, or Iron Age IIA," *In Search for Aram and Israel: Politics, Culture, and Identity*, ed. Omer Sergi, Manfred Oeming, and Izaak J. de Hulster (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 199–227.

91. Yifat Thareani, "Enemy at the Gates? The Archeological Visibility of the Aramaeans at Dan," in *In Search for Aram and Israel*, 169–97.

92. *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible,* s.v., "Septuagint," by J. W. Wevers, 4:277. See also *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation,* s.v., "Septuagint," by Wevers, 2:462. A more complete account of the background supporting these conclusions can be found in Emanuel Tov, "Septuagint," in *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. Martin Jan Mulder (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1988), 161–88.

15 per cent or 2700 words in length and are arranged differently. Both versions were in use at Qumran. The longer 4QJer[a] is now preserved in the Hebrew Bible, while the shorter 4QJer[b] was used for the translation in the LXX. In his Harvard dissertation, Gerald Janzen found that detailed comparisons of the double readings, parallel contexts, human names, haplographies, and supposed abridgments that distinguished the two versions all pointed to the conclusion that the LXX version of Jeremiah was much closer to the shared, hypothetical, original Hebrew *Vorlage*, while the longer MT version resulted from a much longer series of redactions and harmonizing expansions.[93]

Literary Improvements

Zipora Talshir has argued persuasively for a hypothetical version of the Book of Kings in Hebrew that was chosen for the LXX translation and that explains the differences in the short section explaining the division of Solomon's kingdom as artistic rewritings that seek to elevate the literary quality of a key passage without ideological or political motivation and that cannot be explained as a byproduct of textual transmission or of the translation into Greek.[94]

The growing recognition of the ancient interaction between oral cultures and their literate elites has introduced another important dynamic into the discussion of multiple versions of specific texts. As Susan Niditch concluded:

> We do well even in working with written manuscripts of ancient Israelite literature to allow ourselves to think in an oral mode. An "orally" informed worldview provides a context for the writing and receiving of versions of the compositions now housed in particular forms in the Hebrew Bible.[95]

The Samaritan Pentateuch Also Suggests Additional Scribal Traditions

An Exodus scroll found at Qumran provides evidence of a class of efforts to harmonize connected units of the Torah, which also showed

93. J. Gerald Janzen, *Studies in the Text of Jeremiah*, Harvard Semitic Monographs 6 (1973), 32–33, 67–68, 69, 86, 114–15, and 127–35.

94. Zipora Talshir, *The Alternative Story of the Division of the Kingdom: 3 Kingdoms 12:24a–z*, (Jerusalem: Simor Ltd., 1993), 11–18.

95. Susan Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word: Orality and Literacy in Ancient Israel* (London: SPCK, 1997), 76.

up in a further modified form in the Samaritan Pentateuch (see below).[96] All of these examples show how Hebrew Bible scholars move quickly to posit hypothetical alternative scribal traditions to explain differences in later manuscripts.

While the origins of the Samaritan people are unclear, they are the geographical heirs of the Josephite tribes and are concentrated today in Nablus (ancient Samaria). Since the seventeenth century, the Samaritan scriptures have attracted the attention of European scholars. These writings have been studied thoroughly in relationship to the Jewish traditions. They feature a Samaritan version of the Pentateuch and a historical work that parallels the biblical books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, and 2 Chronicles. For the purposes of this paper, that background raises the question of whether there might be a distinctive Josephite element in the Samaritan tradition, which is believed by some to go back to exilic times or possibly even earlier.[97] But most scholars today believe the Samaritan people gained their identity as separated from the Jews after the destruction of their temple in Shechem by John Hyrcanus in 128 BCE, centuries after the disappearance of any Josephite scribal traditions that may have existed before destructions and deportations of the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests.

The Samaritan scribal traditions intriguingly claim origins with Abisha, son of the priest Phineas who was contemporary with Joshua at the very beginning of the Israelite nation and that "they preserve the authentic Israelite tradition."[98] This claim to Levitical origins is consistent with the biblical assignment of Levites to cities within the boundaries of both Manasseh and Ephraim. However, as Emmanuel Tov and others have demonstrated, the texts differ from the Jewish traditions only marginally — and not in ways that would signal a Josephite bias. The more obvious differences are the substitution of *Shechem* and *Mount Gerizim*, written as one word, in all textual references to Jerusalem — and certain phonological differences. The oldest Samaritan texts are written in the paleo-Hebrew script found at Qumran, but, nevertheless, seem to be quite late.

96. Judith E. Sanderson, *An Exodus Scroll from Qumran; 4QpaleoExodm and the Samaritan Tradition*, Harvard Semitic Studies 30 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1986).

97. See the discussion in Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 80–83.

98. Tov, *Textual Criticism*, 82.

A Samaritan version of the Pentateuch also appeared in the second century BCE.[99] And a few copies of a non-canonical (different than the MT) version of Hebrew Bible texts found at Qumran seem to have been written at about the same time. Over the years, many theories have been put forth describing possible sources and time frames for the origins of these late texts.[100] The surprise consensus of the most recent studies is that both the Samaritan Pentateuch and some variant Dead Sea Scrolls (e.g., 4QpaleoExod^{m}) were using the same alternative Hebrew source in the third or second century BCE — an Old Palestinian tradition, possibly from the fifth century, which itself has not been found and must still remain hypothetical. At this point in time, scholars do not know to which scribal school it should be linked. So these late studies add one more candidate to the growing list of potential alternative scribal traditions containing Pentateuchal material. The most recent comprehensive re-examination of issues related to the Samaritan Pentateuch confirms the prevailing explanations for variations from the MT as scribal adjustments introduced in the Second Temple period or later.[101]

The Deuteronomistic History

The harmonizing spirit displayed in the foregoing examples of scribal traditions being brought together is marked principally by a willingness to be inclusive and to preserve all extant versions of Hebrew scripture. Unmentioned to this point is a second major movement in Bible

99. While some have argued on epigraphical grounds that the Samaritan Pentateuch may have an ancient origin going back even to the eighth century, leading scholars on this topic today seem to be have agreed on the second century as its most likely date of composition. One good explanation of this view can be found in James D. Purvis, *The Samaritan Pentateuch and the Origin of the Samaritan Sect* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 16–28.

100. See the comprehensive discussion in Tov, *Textual Criticism*, 80–100. Other helpful treatments can be found int R. J. Coggins, *Samaritans and Jews: The Origins of Samaritanism Reconsidered* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1975), 148–55; Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, 345–46; and Purvis, *The Samaritan Pentateuch*, 16–87. In her detailed analysis of *4QpaleoExodm*, Sanderson reviewed the scholarly efforts to locate the origins of the Samaritan Pentateuch in time and in textual traditions and finally found the Qumran Exodus variant to be supportive of the original positions taken by Purvis and Coggins. See Sanderson, *An Exodus Scroll from Qumran*, 28–35 and 317–20.

101. Robert T. Anderson and Terry Giles, *The Samaritan Pentateuch: An Introduction to its Origin, History, and Significance for Biblical Study* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012).

scholarship over much of the last century to explain systematic revisions in the developing canonical text, changes that would mandate centralized control of worship in Jerusalem and that would glorify the Davidic monarchy and dynasty as divinely favored in the person of Josiah, the righteous seventh-century heir and reformer. These revisions are attributed by scholars to the *Deuteronomist*, who is thought by many to have been a single writer but might well have been a series of two or three scribes or even a scribal school with shared political and religious objectives that could be promoted through intentional revision of scripture. While formulated most fully by Martin Noth, principal inspiration for American scholars that promoted this theme seems to have come earlier from Harvard professor Frank M. Cross:

> The two themes in the Deuteronomistic Book of Kings appear to reflect two theological stances, one stemming from the old Deuteronomic covenant theology which regarded destruction of dynasty and people as tied necessarily to apostasy, and a second, drawn from the royal ideology in Judah: the eternal promises to David. …
>
> In fact, the juxtaposition of the two themes of threat and promise provide the platform of the Josianic reform. The Deuteronomistic history, insofar as these themes reflect its central concerns may be described as a propaganda work of the Josianic reformation and imperial program. In particular, the document speaks to the North, calling Israel to return to Judah and to Yahweh's sole legitimate shrine in Jerusalem, asserting the claims of the ancient Davidic monarchy upon all Israel. Even the destruction of Bethel and the cults of the high places was predicted by the prophets, pointing to the centrality of Josiah's role for northern Israel.[102]

Both the details and the structure of the Deuteronomistic History continue to be the subject of competing scholarly explanations,[103] but

102. Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 284. See also Martin Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History* (Sheffield: University of Sheffield Academic Press, 1981).

103. For example, see the pointed dissent of Lowell K. Handy in his essay "Historical Probability and the Narrative of Josiah's Reform in 2 Kings," in *The Pitcher is Broken: Memorial Essays for Gösta W. Ahlström*, ed. Lowell K. Handy and Steven Winford Holloway (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 252–75. Handy advances reasons to reject most of the assumptions of this scholarly debate,

most agree that the text of the Bible from Genesis through 2 Kings underwent significant redaction that included both modification and supplementation of the standard text. The summary provided by David Noel Freedman is a good example. He sees the Deuteronomistic History as the product of a series of editors beginning with northern Levite priests fleeing the 722 BCE Assyrian invasion and bringing with them the anti-monarchical and anti-idolatry attitude of the northern priests and prophets. Generations later in Jerusalem, the second and third redactions first promoted the Josianic agenda for worship reform and subsequently recognized Israel's failure to keep covenant with Yahweh and the resulting inevitable punishment in the Babylonian exile.[104]

The distinguished Hebrew Bible scholar Thomas Römer published his review of the competing theories scholars had advanced to explain the Deuteronomistic History. Taking all the evidence for these theories together, he proposed a compromise view in which the Deuteronomistic History began as a propagandistic effort of scribes in the royal court of Josiah "in order to reinforce the legitimacy of Josiah, presenting him as the true successor of David." Later additions and revisions introduced the exilic perspective as well. Römer's book attempts to bring all the evidence together in support of that compromise approach.[105]

Independent support for this approach has been found in a study of the relevant Assyrian documents and historical events. Karl Haugberg has shown that the Assyrian records confirm the historicity of the Hebrew Bible on one hand but also show that 1 and 2 Kings "have been created with a specific theological goal, emphasizing historical events according to the importance they held as stories of reward or reprisal in accordance with the religious guidelines of the author or authors,"

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including identification of the document found in the temple as Deuteronomy, the linking of that find to the Josianic reforms, and the historical reliability of the Kings history on that reform.

104. There is a vast and still-growing literature on the Deuteronomistic History. The example mentioned here is found in Freedman, *Divine Commitment*, 1:279–85. See also Joseph Blenkinsopp, "The Sage, The Scribe, and Scribalism in the Chronicler's Work," in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. John G. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 310–11, for an account of Levites serving in teaching and scribal functions in the time of Josiah and in the Persian period.

105. Thomas Römer, *The So-called Deuteronomistic History: A Sociological, Historical and Literary Introduction* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 43.

rendering Kings "a dubious material source" when used by itself as a history.[106]

The Deuteronomistic History and Archaeology

Israeli archaeologist Israel Finkelstein seized on this theory of the textual scholars to resolve several persistent contradictions between the archaeological record and traditional readings of Israelite history. For example, he and others have concluded that the biblical "account of a great United Monarchy is a late-monarchic ideological construct" designed to justify and promote the political and religious agenda of King Josiah and others. This history was vulnerable to ideological manipulation because of the lack of historical writings. "Archaeology has shown that significant scribal activity did not appear in Judah prior to the 8th century B.C.E." Combining the petrographic record with archaeological findings, he concluded "that northern Saul traditions reached Judah with Israelite refugees in the late 8th century B.C.E., after the fall of the Northern Kingdom."[107]

Most recently, Finkelstein has mobilized newer archaeological and textual studies to argue that what later became the "northern kingdom" was in fact the first united kingdom identified as Israel. He sees two territorial entities established in the late Bronze Age and the early Iron Age and controlled from Shechem that were eventually destroyed by Sheshonq I, thereby opening the way for the rise of the Gibeon-Gibeah entity in the late eleventh century BCE. The first fifty years of the northern kingdom would then correspond to the emergence of the "Tirzah polity" in the middle of the tenth century, which was replaced by the rise of the Omride Dynasty in the early ninth century, which soon moved its capital to nearby Samaria. By this time, the name of the former Shechemite polity had become Israel. During this period the Omrides expanded into new areas they had not previously governed,

106. Karl Kristine Haugberg, *Assyrian Foreign Policy in the Levant Before Sennacherib* (Sunnyvale, CA: LAP Lambert Academic Publishing, 2016).

107. Israel Finkelstein, "The Last Labayu: King Saul and the Expansion of the First North Israelite Territorial Entity," in *Essays on Ancient Israel in its Near Eastern Context*: *A Tribute to Nadav Naʾaman*, ed. Yairah Amit et al. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 177. Finkelstein brought his lifetime of rich archaeological knowledge together with a comprehensive historical account in Israel Finkelstein, *The Forgotten Kingdom: The Archaeology and History of Northern Israel* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013). See Daniel Pioske's review of this book in *Review of Biblical Literature* (October 2014) for an excellent summary and critique of Finkelstein's paradigm-changing theory.

including "the mountainous Galilee, the northern Jordan Valley, and areas in Transjordan beyond the western slopes of the Gilead."[108]

Finkelstein says that scholarly reflections on the Deuteronomistic History helped him resolve the puzzles that had accumulated with archaeological studies that showed ancient Israel being the kind of powerful political and economic entity the Hebrew Bible attributes to Solomon, and that show Judah was never more than an agricultural backwater before the arrival of the northern refugees fleeing the Assyrian conquest before 722 BCE. He even points out the lamentable absence of a Manassite version of Israel's history:

> It is only natural to assume that there were northern prophets … who were closer to the royal institutions in Samaria. … Had Israel survived, we might have received a parallel, competing, and very different history. But with the Assyrian destruction of Samaria and the dismantling of its institutions of royal power, any such competing histories were silenced. Though prophets and priests from the north very likely joined the flow of refugees to find shelter in the cities and towns of Judah, biblical history would henceforth be written by the winners — or at least the survivors — and it would be fashioned exclusively according to the late Judahite Deuteronomistic beliefs.[109]

The developed Omride dynasty of the ninth century that established itself in Samaria would necessarily have maintained its own scribal schools (possibly Ephraimite in origin) to produce the scribes needed by the palace and the temple for bureaucratic, military, diplomatic, religious, and commercial activities. Any such schools would in all likelihood have persisted through time to support subsequent northern regimes and as presumed by Finkelstein, would have been carried into exile with the other officers of the late eighth-century regime. The Brass Plates as described in the Book of Mormon would more likely have been the product of an independent and competing scribal tradition in Manasseh that was devoted to preserving Egyptian-language facility

108. Israel Finkelstein, "First Israel, Core Israel, United (Northern) Israel," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 82 (2019): 9–12.

109. Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 223. For an expanded discussion of this issue, see Noel B. Reynolds, "Modern Archaeology and the Brass Plates."

and their inheritance of Josephite records and religion and that found refuge in Jerusalem in time to avoid the Assyrian deportations.[110]

Editorial Redactions

While some scholars deny the concept of a Deuteronomistic redaction completely, and a few others see that redaction as post-exilic in its entirety, the majority would agree with Freedman and Finkelstein that our modern Bible was shaped by redactions made both before and after the Babylonian exile.[111] By the end of the century, it seemed that most scholars were persuaded by Frank Cross's 1968 essay that argued for these two editions of the Deuteronomistic History.[112]

Clear examples of editorial additions, deletions, relocations, and revisions have recently been assembled to show empirical evidence for the theory that the Hebrew Bible contains many kinds of editorial changes that accumulated in the history of various texts before the point that the texts were frozen in the versions we have today.[113] Scholars have drawn on "textual witnesses that differ from the MT" and on "parallel passages within one textual tradition" to "show that substantial editing took place in the literary history of the Hebrew Bible."[114] The prevalence and significance of these editorial interventions in the text lead many scholars "to question the viability and validity of any theory that is based on the use of the final texts to reconstruct the culture, history, and religion of ancient Israel and Judaism."[115]

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110. See Reynolds, "Lehi and Nephi."

111. For an excellent review and categorization of the full range of scholarly theories see Erik Eynikel, *The Reform of King Josiah and the Composition of the Deuteronomistic History* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 7–31. The case for sixth-century composition is made in R. N. Whybray, *The Making of the Pentateuch: A Methodological Study* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), 221–42.

112. See Eynikel, *The Reform of King Josiah*, 31 and F. M. Cross, "The Themes of the Books of Kings and the Structure of the Deuteronomistic History," *Annual of the College of Jewish Studies* 3 (1968), 9–24, republished in Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 274–89.

113. See Reinhard Müller, Juha Pakkala, and Bas ter Haar Romeny, *Evidence of Editing: Growth and Change of Texts in the Hebrew Bible*, Society of Biblical Literature Resources for Biblical Study 75 (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014). The authors present and discuss fifteen leading examples that may illuminate innumerable others that may no longer be discoverable through the limited methods available to textual and literary critics.

114. Ibid., 219.

115. Ibid., 220.

A Scholar's Warning for Students of the Old Testament

Israeli Hebrew Bible and Dead Sea Scrolls scholar Shemaryahu Talmon offers the following as a blunt caveat to Jews and Christians reading the Old Testament who may assume too close a connection between the prophets who wrote the original versions of those books and their final editors and redactors:

> There is probably no other extant text … which is witnessed to by so many diverse types of sources, and the history of which is so difficult to elucidate as that of the text of the Old Testament.
>
> The Old Testament books were handed down … not only in their original Hebrew or … Aramaic tongue, but also in a variety of translations. … The scholar who takes a synoptic view of all the sources at his disposal is confronted with a bewildering plethora of *variae lectiones* in the extant versions of the Old Testament books. … The printed editions represent the end of a long chain of textual development and of editorial activities which were aimed at unifying the sacred texts. These late editions can in no way be taken to exhibit faithfully the autographs of the biblical authors. In fact not one single verse of this ancient literature has come to us in an original manuscript, written by a biblical author or by a contemporary of his, or even by a scribe who lived immediately after the time of the author. Even the very earliest manuscripts at our disposal … are removed by hundreds of years from the date of origin of the literature recorded in them.
>
> Not one tradition and not one manuscript is without fault. Each and every one patently exhibits errors which crept into it during the long period of its transmission, in the oral state, when written by hand, and even … when handed down in the form of printed books.[116]

116. Shemaryahu Talmon, "The Old Testament Text," in *Qumran and the History of the Biblical Text,* ed. Frank Moore Cross and Shemaryahu Talmon (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 3–4.

A Book of Mormon Perspective

Being himself a great devotee and scholar of the Bible, Professor Talmon obviously is responding to the uncritical approach of so many of his fellow Jews and Christians who steadfastly avoid recognition of the numerous problems presented by the biblical text. A better-informed recognition of those challenges can help readers of the Book of Mormon to appreciate more fully the detailed story embedded in that text that informs the reader at every step about the identity, the purposes, and the circumstances of the authors. That information is crucial for the reader's interpretation and assessment of the text and its message. But that same information is rarely reliably available in the biblical texts that have emerged from unmeasured, undocumented, and unexplained scribal processes over lengthy periods of time. In short, the Book of Mormon reader is constantly in direct contact with the prophet writer.[117] This is far less true for the Bible reader.

If our contemporary Bible scholars are correct, Lehi and Nephi would most likely have been aware of the ongoing editing projects in the Judahite scribal schools of their generation and of the political and religious ideologies — possibly in support of the Josianic reform movement — that were driving them. Not all traces of the anti-monarchical ideology of the North were expunged from the redacted history, some of which appears to show up in Nephite discourse.[118] But one can easily speculate that the refugee families from the North, including Lehi and Nephi, might well have been alarmed by the propaganda embedded in the new redactions promoting Josiah's imperial program by "calling Israel to return to Judah and to Yahweh's sole legitimate shrine in Jerusalem, asserting the claims of the ancient Davidic monarchy upon Israel."[119]

Resisting the Drive to Harmonize Competing Textual Traditions

All these hypothesized scribal projects inhabit a universe of discourse that can instantly make sense of the Book of Mormon claim to represent another scriptural tradition deriving from yet another scribal school.

117. For a full account of this phenomenon of scribal tracking in the Book of Mormon, see Reynolds, "The Last Nephite Scribes."

118. Note, e.g., Nephi's reluctance to serve as a king (2 Nephi 5:18) and Mosiah's explanations of the dangers of monarchical rule (Mosiah 29:4–44). For a full discussion, see Noel B. Reynolds, "Nephite Kingship Reconsidered," in *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World: Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson*, ed. Davis Bitton (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 151–89.

119. Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 284.

The Nephite descriptions of their Brass Plates clearly point to a Josephite scribal tradition. There is little in the history or surviving texts of ancient Israel that would document a Josephite scribal school or scriptural tradition. But as Lehi and his successors read and quoted from the Brass Plates over time, a composite picture emerges of a separate tradition. The Nephite "holy scriptures" featured a genealogy of ancient Joseph and Manasseh's descendants, some prophets that appear in the Hebrew Bible and several others that do not, minor variations on Isaiah's writings, a Genesis tradition that clearly varies from the Hebrew Bible in some ways, and even extended prophecies of Enoch, Abraham, and Joseph for which there are no traces in the Hebrew Bible. From the beginning to the end, the Nephite prophets emphasize the Abrahamic covenant in their teachings and prophecies while offering a noticeably different interpretation of that covenant from those proffered in Jewish and Christian traditions.[120] Neither the Hebrew Bible nor other later traditions make mention of a Josephite scribal tradition before we are confronted with the Book of Mormon's account of the Brass Plates at the very end of the seventh century.

Why Manufacture the Brass Plates at the End of the Seventh Century BCE?

Susan Niditch has speculated that the two books of Chronicles may have been written "at the time of the imminent Babylonian threat and hidden for safekeeping by Levitical groups." The motivation would not have been to preserve an objective history in the modern sense. Rather, the Chronicler was "a preeminent transmitter of essential story … to provide his view of the truly true, his concept of Israelite myth, his vision of the workings of God in the human cosmos, his version of the underlying frameworks of Israelite identity."[121] It may be that a different, but analogous theory of motivation can provide the best explanation for the creation of the Brass Plates in that same late seventh-century time period.

The foregoing pages document and explain the shared belief of most Bible scholars today in an ongoing effort among the scribal schools of Jerusalem in the last half of the seventh century to harmonize the variety of textual traditions scribes from different tribes had brought to Jerusalem as they fled the Assyrian invasion. Scholars also believe the

120. See Reynolds, "Understanding the Abrahamic Covenant," 39–74, and Reynolds, "All Kindreds Shall Be Blessed," 115–39.

121. Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word*, 129.

seventh century Judahite scribal schools then massaged the resulting collection of texts to fit shifting political and theological interpretations of Israelite history and futures. But if there had also been a now-forgotten Josephite scribal tradition in that mix, the Josephite scribes may have had any or all of the following reasons for manufacturing the Brass Plates that Lehi sent his sons back to Jerusalem to retrieve.

1. The Josephites would have been the most likely custodians of the records gathered and maintained by Abraham and may have been alarmed by the ever more evident danger that their authentic Abrahamic tradition would be revised or replaced by the royally favored and evolving Judahite scribal products. As mentioned above, Joseph Smith believed that the Book of Abraham was a record in the possession of Joseph of Egypt at one point.[122]
2. It was commonly assumed in the seventh-century scribal schools and the ANE generally that writing important texts on metal was the best way to preserve them unchanged forever.[123]
3. The Brass Plates include numerous prophetic writings that had not been included in the Judahite tradition. Lehi and presumably his Josephite scribal colleagues deemed these records to be of inestimable value for future generations, even though they apparently were not accepted by the Judahite scribes in their harmonizing project. The fact that some of the unique ancient writings most closely identified with the Josephite scribal tradition were recorded and preserved in the Egyptian language and/or script might have made them look even more endangered in a scribal world being taken over by the Judahites, whose records are thought to have originated in eighth- and seventh-century transcriptions of older oral traditions — all in the evolving vernacular Hebrew.
4. Jeremiah, Uriah, Lehi, and other prophets in late seventh-century Jerusalem foresaw an immediate future in which the crumbling Assyrian imperial administration would be replaced by the increasingly aggressive Babylonians — despite the continuing reliance of the Judahite regime on

122. See Reynolds, "The Brass Plates Version of Genesis," 63–96; and Lindsay and Reynolds, "'Strong Like unto Moses,'" 1–92.

123. See Reynolds, "An Everlasting Witness," 15–17.

the Egyptians. If Jerusalem were to fall to the upsurging Babylonians, there would be nowhere for these prophets and scribes to hide. Another captivity could easily lead to more deportations of elites and to the final disintegration of their own scribal schools and libraries.

5. All the intellectual, financial, and material resources necessary for manufacturing the Brass Plates would have been available in such a seventh-century Josephite school. Whether driven by these concerns or by divine inspiration, the Josephite scribes in Jerusalem as a team with their own workshop would have had the ability to divide up their collection of papyrus scrolls and manufacture a combined metallic version of their scriptural tradition in relatively short order once that decision was made.
6. For the time being, the Josephite "treasury" or library maintained by Lehi's Manassite cousin Laban would seem to be the most secure depository for the Brass Plates, along with the traditional scroll collection of the Josephite scribal school. Laban's cohort of fifty guards likely provided as much security as could be mustered in late seventh-century Jerusalem (see 1 Nephi 3:31, 4:1).

Establishing Canonical Versions of Scripture

Scholars have tried to make sense of the idea of canon and the processes by which canonical versions of scripture or other literature take shape over time. While there is clearly plenty of disagreement on this subject, it may be significant for present purposes to note that the motivations and strategies scholars have suggested for the canon-formation process of the Hebrew Bible reflect some of the motivations hypothesized above for the creation of the Brass Plates in the last decade of the seventh century in Jerusalem. Some scholars point to conflict between scribal schools that led to efforts to establish one preferred tradition or to merge and accommodate several traditions into a single acceptable version for future generations.[124] It is likely that after a century of refugee status in Jerusalem, influential members of this proposed Josephite scribal school were being assimilated into the society and culture of the politically and socially favored Judahite schools.

124. See Philip R. Davies, *Scribes and Schools: The Canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 42–54, for a categorization and critique of these proposed explanations.

The resulting culture wars may have motivated more conservative Josephite scribes to render their tradition permanent in brass plates.[125]

Conclusions

This paper brings contemporary findings of Bible scholars, and Ancient Near Eastern archaeologists, linguists, epigraphers, and historians together with the modern restoration of lost ancient scriptures by the American prophet Joseph Smith to explore how the Book of Mormon account of its first prophets, Lehi and Nephi, and their Brass Plates, would have been understood in ancient Jerusalem at the end of the seventh century BCE. In that setting, it appears that both Lehi and Nephi would have been seen as highly trained scribes positioned in a conservative scribal tradition that traced its origins to Joseph, the son of Jacob in ancient Egypt and that would have included the records inherited from his great grandfather Abraham. Because most of these records were written in Egyptian, this unique Josephite scribal school included and perpetuated thorough training in the writing and reading of that ancient language, giving these Josephite scribes the ability and responsibility to maintain a continuous written record from the time of Abraham — unlike the other scribal schools that may only have had recent Hebrew transcriptions of their orally transmitted ancient scripture traditions.

There are good reasons to conclude that the Brass Plates also contained the same texts of Abraham and Moses that were restored through Joseph Smith. In that way, the Brass Plates provided Lehi and Nephi in their times with the corroborating testimonies of Adam, Enoch, Abraham, and Moses who had also been shown the great vision of all things that came to both Lehi and Nephi as they were prepared to be the founding prophets of the Nephite dispensation. All of these were provided to Joseph Smith as part of his preparation to lead the final dispensation.

As a refugee group in Jerusalem, where the Judahite scribal schools enjoyed the patrimony of the monarchy and the temple administration, the members of this hypothesized Josephite scribal school may well have seen the looming possibility of extinction for themselves and their scriptural tradition in the growing threats of assimilation with Judahite traditions in Jerusalem and deportation to an expanding Mesopotamian empire — the fate their ancestors had avoided over a century earlier by seeking refuge in Jerusalem.

125. See the documentation of this ancient strategy in Reynolds, "An Everlasting Witness," 15–17.

Bible scholars today have advanced two principal theories, the Documentary Hypothesis and the Deuteronomistic History, to explain the extensive scribal efforts that produced the Hebrew Bible in the form it has come down to us today. The initial motivation for manufacturing the Brass Plates may have been to preserve the Josephite tradition — including its invaluable and mostly ancient Egyptian-language components — intact for future generations in view of the significant trends toward syncretism and politically motivated redaction that were evident in the Judahite scribal schools of the time. As members of a refugee seventh-century Josephite or Manassite scribal school in Jerusalem, Lehi and Nephi may have been involved in manufacturing the Brass Plates or even in financing their production. Lehi apparently believed he had a right to withdraw those plates from the library of his scribal school. And so he sent his sons to Laban with that request.

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