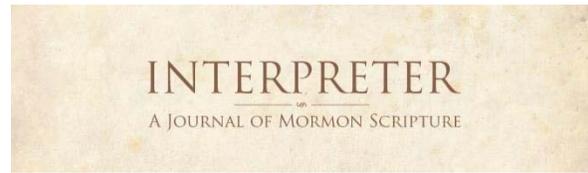




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## Literacy and Orality in the Book of Mormon

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## Literacy and Orality in the Book of Mormon

Brant A. Gardner

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# LITERACY AND ORALITY IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

*Brant A. Gardner*

*Abstract: The Book of Mormon is a literate product of a literate culture. It references written texts. Nevertheless, behind the obvious literacy, there are clues to a primary orality in Nephite culture. The instances of text creation and most instances of reading texts suggest that documents were written by and for an elite class who were able to read and write. Even among the elite, reading and writing are best seen as a secondary method of communication to be called upon to archive information, to communicate with future readers (who would have been assumed to be elite and therefore able to read), and to communicate when direct oral communication was not possible (letters and the case of Korihor). As we approach the text, we may gain new insights into the art with which it was constructed by examining it as the literate result of a primarily oral culture.*

**H**umankind spoke before we wrote. In the early stages of the movement from exclusively oral to heavily literate communication, writing was an adjunct to oral transmission rather than a replacement for it. Stephen Houston, Dupee Family Professor of Social Science and Professor of Anthropology and Archaeology at Brown University, notes that “The earliest Greek writing is likely to have functioned at first as a mnemonic device, a means of stabilizing memory. But at the same time

feats of memorization continued to be highly prized.”<sup>1</sup> From those early beginnings, the burden of preserving information has moved toward written texts, though not as steadily or inexorably as our modern sensibilities might suggest. Joyce Marcus, Professor in the Department of Anthropology and College of Literature, Science, and the Arts at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, reminds us:

Some ancient states, like the Incas and Tarascans, were extremely powerful and efficient without writing. Their success suggests that we may have overemphasized the role of writing and underestimated the roles of mnemonic devices, oral tradition, and memorization. Inventions such as the Andean *kipu* were used for accounting and record-keeping and are alternatives to writing. Some civilizations used monumental sculpture and mural painting to convey political propaganda. Even states whose neighbors had long-established writing systems did not always borrow them. Not only are there alternatives to writing; many ancient states even saw literacy as undesirable.<sup>2</sup>

Particularly when studying ancient cultures, the study of orality is equally as important as studying literacy. Both means of encoding and transmitting information existed in a complicated relationship.<sup>3</sup> Although the Book of Mormon stands as a firm witness of Nephite literacy, it was produced in

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1 Stephen Houston, “Literacy Among the Pre-Columbian Maya: A Comparative Perspective,” in *Writing Without Words: Alternative Literacies in Mesoamerica and the Andes*, ed. Elizabeth Hill Boone and Walter D. Mignolo (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University, 1996), 30.

2 Joyce Marcus, “Writing,” in *Archaeology of Ancient Mexico and Central America: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Susan Toby Evans and David L. Webster (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2001), 826.

3 Rosalind Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece*, Key Themes in Ancient History, series ed. P. A. Cartledge and P. D. A. Garnsey (New York: University of Cambridge, 1992, rpt. 1999, 6–11). Thomas discusses definitions

an age where evidence suggests that for most cultures orality remained an important part of the storage and transmission of cultural information. The nature of Nephite literacy and its interaction with orality requires a careful examination, especially since any indication of the role of orality is transmitted through a literary source.

Nephite society unquestionably produced literate men.<sup>4</sup> Only men are associated with the named books that compose the Book of Mormon. Only men are ever listed as writing letters. Only men can be seen as the authors of implied records that must have been referenced, but which are not explicitly identified.<sup>5</sup> The absence of women as writers parallels the general absence of women as actors in the text. Clearly, the absence of women in most of the recorded events does not indicate that there were no women and cannot indicate that the women had no important part in those events. The absence of named women was an authorial choice that unconsciously repeated the prejudices of a very patriarchal Nephite culture. Just as the absence of named women should not suggest that they were unimportant in the actual events portrayed in the text, their absence as writers should not suggest that women could not read or write.

There were women who both read and wrote, but they must have done so in contexts that did not result in the official records that served as Mormon's sources for his opus. The patriarchal

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for orality and literacy, indicating that for both there are complexities beyond the simplistic division between writing and not writing.

4 The Book of Mormon period is certainly earlier in time than early Christian practice, but the social forces for patriarchy were similar. Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 223: "It is not surprising then that lectors were always male. They were chosen from among the faithful, and generally not from the catechumenate. Literacy naturally remained a prerequisite."

5 The detailed accounts of the ministry of the sons of Mosiah presume a record that was kept and then entered into the official plates of Nephi record, from which Mormon took the account that he wrote.

dominance of Nephite culture mirrors that of the Old World milieu from which it descended. In that case, however, the large number of available documents provides enough information to see past the patriarchal dominance in literacy to a role for at least some women. In the Old World, there were female scribes whose function was to be secretaries for palace women.<sup>6</sup> The New World Maya (the only group for which a translatable writing system is known) were also a patriarchal culture. Dorie Reents-Budet, Consulting Curator of Ancient American Art at the Mint Museum, notes: “In at least two artist’s signatures, the *ts’ib* glyph is prefixed with the male pronoun *ah*, reading ‘he the painter/writer,’ and all known Classic Period representations of artists are male. There is no known artist’s signature that begins with the female pronoun *na’*, although there is one instance where a woman carries the title of *Na’ ts’ib*, or ‘Lady Scribe.’”<sup>7</sup> In other patriarchal cultures, there were literate women even though the majority of recorded information speaks only of the literate men.<sup>8</sup> It is reasonable to assume that there were also Nephite women who both read and wrote, even though we have no explicit documentation for that assertion.

Asserting that Nephite women could be literate is a microcosm of the problem of discussing literacy for the entire Nephite population. We have indisputable evidence that there

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6 Karel Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2007), 285n5: “In the Old Babylonian period there were female scribes in Mari and Sippar, where they served mostly as secretaries to palace women (Mari) and female devotees of Šamaš (Sippar).”

7 Dorie Reents-Budet, *Painting the Maya Universe: Royal Ceramics of the Classic Period* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994), 48.

8 Nevertheless, the fact that some women were literate should not suggest that a large percentage of women were literate. Thomas states that for ancient Greece (*Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece*, 10): “Women had no part in public life, and were probably almost all illiterate unless they kept domestic accounts, but their male counterparts in Athens were surrounded by the written records of democratic business.”

were Nephites who could read and write. The plates delivered to Joseph stand as firm evidence of Nephite literacy. The text on those plates frequently refers to other written documents.<sup>9</sup> What becomes the question for Nephite culture is the extent of literacy among the general population. Of course, this question is complicated by the obvious fact that we depend upon a text to understand Nephite orality. Alan K. Bowman, Principal of Brasenose College at Oxford and Greg Woolf, Professor of Ancient History at the University of St. Andrews, remind us that this is a common problem for the study of antiquity: “Our understanding of the ancient world is overwhelmingly dependent on texts. Our use of these texts, whether they are literary or documentary, depends on the assumptions we make about how they were originally produced, read and understood.”<sup>10</sup> Those questions will not only lead us into discussions of Nephite literacy, but also into the Nephite intertwining of literacy and orality. Nephites wrote, but to whom, for whom, and at what point during the process of communicating information?

Our information about the Nephites is limited to that found in the Book of Mormon. The possible meanings of the data extracted from that single source may be elucidated by understanding the relationship between orality and literacy in the ancient world. There is no reason to believe that Nephites were significantly different from the Old World populations from which they descended, from their New World counterparts, or from any other known ancient population. Understanding the relationship between orality and literacy in the ancient world

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9 Nephi indicates that he consulted a document that Lehi wrote. Nephi himself wrote at least two records. When Mormon creates his book, he uses a library of documents from which he often quoted.

10 Alan K. Bowman and Greg Woolf, *Literacy and Power in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, England and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994, reprint 2001), 1.

provides a necessary foundation for understanding the Book of Mormon. If the general experience of comparable peoples during the same time period cannot be accepted as the plausible interpretive environment, we have placed the Nephites as a people utterly unique in the entire world during the time in which they lived.

### Orality and Literacy in Antiquity

Rosalind Thomas, Lecturer in Ancient History at Royal Holloway and Bedford New College at the University of London, urges: “The tendency to see a society (or individual) as either literate or oral is over-simple and misleading. The habits of relying on oral communication (or orality) and literacy are not mutually exclusive.”<sup>11</sup> Even within the realm of literacy there can be a broad range of capabilities that might be described as literate.<sup>12</sup> Thomas provides a fascinating example of the complications in

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece*, 4.

<sup>12</sup> Rosalind Thomas, “Writing, Reading, Public and Private ‘Literacies’: Functional Literacy and Democratic Literacy in Greece,” in *Ancient Literacies: The Culture of Reading in Greece and Rome*, ed. William A. Johnson and Holt N. Parker (Oxford, England and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 14: “It is misleading to talk simply... of percentages of ‘literate,’ for that presupposes a certain definition of literacy, one that irons out variety and complexity. The percentages of “literate” in modern Britain changes depending on whether you define literacy as being able to read three words on a page, an Inland Revenue form, or a work of literature (we see ancient equivalents of these [in ancient Greece]). It thus seems more useful to talk of the uses writing is put to, and of different types of literacy.” See also Bowman and Woolf, *Literacy and Power in the Ancient World*, 2–3: The dominant theme of all [general introductions to literacy] is an account of what cannot be held to be generally true about literacy. This negative credo can be briefly summarized. Literacy is not a single phenomenon but a highly variable package of skills in using texts: it may or may not include writing as well as reading and is generally geared only to particular genres of texts, particular registers of language and often to only some of the languages used within multilingual societies. Moreover, literacy does not operate as an autonomous force in history, whether for change, progress and emancipation or for repression. Literacy does not of itself promote economic growth, rationality or social success. Literates do not necessarily behave or think differently from illiterates, and no Great Divide separates societies with writing

understanding ancient literacy: “When a prosperous freedman, Hermeros, in ‘Petronius’ *Satyricon* says he knows only ‘lapidary writing’ (*lapidariae litterae*, *Satyricon*.58.7), by which he must mean the capitals of inscriptions, we gain a rare glimpse of differentiated reading skills in the ancient world which may have been quite regular.”<sup>13</sup> The letters carved into stone were all capitals and well proportioned. The limitation suggests that he could not read handwriting.

The Book of Mormon is clearly representative of the highest levels of literacy and is demonstrably highly literate from the beginning. The earliest text in our Book of Mormon is Nephi’s first eponymous book. Internal evidence indicates that he was already writing the book we know as First Nephi within thirty years of his family’s arrival in the New World (2 Ne. 5:28). Nephi also indicates that he had already been writing prior to the time he recorded that date: “I, Nephi, had kept the records upon my plates, which I had made, of my people thus far” (2 Ne. 5:29). Nephite literacy, therefore, can be directly traced from Nephi back to Jerusalem. Not only Nephi, but his father Lehi could both read and write.<sup>14</sup> Nephite literacy flowed from Old World literacy. The assumptions Nephi might have made about his people’s need for literacy might reasonably reflect the understanding of literacy in the culture from which he derived his own education in reading and writing.

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from those without it. The invention of writing did not promote a social or intellectual revolution, and reports of the death of orality have been exaggerated.

13 Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece*, 9.

14 1 Ne. 5:10 has Lehi reading the brass plates and 1 Ne. 6:1 mentions “the record which has been kept by my father.” Mosiah 1:4 tells us: “For it were not possible that our father, Lehi, could have remembered all these things, to have taught them to his children, except it were for the help of these plates; for he having been taught in the language of the Egyptians therefore he could read these engravings, and teach them to his children, that thereby they could teach them to their children, and so fulfilling the commandments of God, even down to this present time” (Mosiah 1:4).

The ancient Near East was certainly literate, but not universally literate. The literacy rate has been estimated at only five percent of the population in ancient Mesopotamia and perhaps slightly higher in Egypt.<sup>15</sup> Christopher Rollston, Visiting Professor of Northwest Semitic Languages and Literatures at George Washington University, provides the probable comparative information for ancient Israel:

Mesopotamian cuneiform and Egyptian (hieroglyphic, hieratic, or demotic) were difficult to master. For this reason, it is also plausible to posit that the rates of literacy among the populace were higher in ancient Levantine societies with an alphabetic writing system than in Mesopotamia or Egypt. I will concede this point. Of course, literacy rates in ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt are estimated to be very low, with some studies suggesting that the rate is in the low single digits. Therefore, even if it is plausible to posit higher rates of literacy for those living in ancient Israel than for those living in Mesopotamia or Egypt, this does not lead to the conclusion that the non-elite populace was literate. Ultimately, I would contend that the Old Hebrew epigraphic data and the biblical data align and reveal that trained elites were literate and there is a distinct dearth of evidence suggesting that non-elites could write and read. Those wishing to argue for substantial amounts of non-elite literacy can do so, but it is a perilous argument without much ancient or modern support.<sup>16</sup>

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

16 Christopher A. Rollston, *Writing and Literacy in the World of Ancient Israel: Epigraphic Evidence from the Iron Age* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 134. Van der Toorn (*Scribal Culture*, 11) also states: “The evidence suggests that the role of writing in Israel was about the same as elsewhere in the ancient Near East; the literacy rate was presumably similar to that in

The evidence suggesting that the division between literate and illiterate replicated the division between elite and non-elite does not suggest that there was an absence of writing among the non-elites. Because concepts of literacy can cover a wide range of abilities, it is quite likely that there was some ability to read present among at least some of the non-elite. Nevertheless, Roland De Vaux suggests a rather widespread literacy in ancient Israel: “Writing was in common use at an early date. Besides the professional scribes, like those employed at the court for administration, and private secretaries like Baruch, members of the ruling class could write, judging by the stories of Jezebel and of Isaiah. But these were not the only ones: a young man of Sukkoth was able to give Gideon, in writing, the names of all the chiefs of his clan, and the commandment of Deuteronomy 6: 9; 11:20 [to place a written phrase on the doorposts] presumed that every head of family could write.”<sup>17</sup>

Unfortunately, De Vaux’s evidence for widespread literacy is questionable. Writing as a talisman was a widespread practice in antiquity, but the possession of a text does not require the ability to personally create it or even necessarily to read it.<sup>18</sup>

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surrounding civilizations as well.” David M. Carr (“In Conversation with W. M. Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book: The Textualization of Ancient Israel*,” in *Perspectives on Hebrew Scriptures II: Papers from the Journal of Hebrew Scriptures. Comprising the Contents of Journal of Hebrew Scriptures*, Volume 5., ed. Ehud Ben Zvi [Piscataway, New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2007], 330) also states: “Following Harris and other scholars who have studied ancient literacy levels, I think that it is highly unlikely that even “basic literacy” was “commonplace” across all of ancient Israel.”

17 Roland De Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, First published in French in two volumes under the title *Les Institutions de l’Ancien Testament* in 1958. First English translation 1961 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 49. Internal references silently removed.

18 Marvin Meyer and Richard Smith, eds., *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1994). Meyer and Smith present a published corpus of Christian magical texts. These range from curses to protective amulets to portable prayers. The wide range and anonymous authors make it impossible to definitively declare that many were commissioned rather than created by the owner. However, the magical nature of many of the

Thomas documents the hazards of presuming that the magical functions of texts imply literacy in those who employed them:

When literacy was taken over by Buddhist monks in Tibet they used it for what to them was its obvious and necessary function, to print prayers on the water. Writing is often used for magical purposes and this is not confined to the semi-literate or (vicariously) to the illiterate who might be expected to treat writing with awe. In the Old Testament a woman who has committed adultery is made to swallow water into which a curse written out “in a book” has been diluted. She is literally drinking the curse (Numbers 5:23–24). Diluted writing is also widely used for medical remedy: in Somali for instance, powerful passages from the Koran are written out, then washed into the cup of water and the water is then drunk.<sup>19</sup>

Although posting a text on the doorposts cannot suggest widespread literacy, it is certain that the assumed division between elite and non-elite was not absolute. Nevertheless, the social expectation presumed an inability to read and write. The Lachish letters were ostraca (scraps of pottery used for writing) written to and from military leaders apparently preparing for

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texts strongly suggests that there was a ritual specialist whose power with the other world was encoded in text and provided to the bearer of the paper or amulet. Edmund Meltzer, in the introduction to “Old Coptic Texts of Ritual Power,” (in *Ancient Christian Magic*, 17–18) notes: “The identification or self-predication of identity of the ritualist with the divine being or power remains a feature of Coptic texts of ritual power, and is quite likely one of the reasons why the popular or everyday use of ritual power was proscribed by the church authorities.” It is highly unlikely that all those using such written ritual power texts would have been ritual specialists or had the temerity to presume self-identification with a divine being. It is therefore most likely that most who possessed and used such texts acquired them from a ritual specialist, even when the text is written as a first-person invocation.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece*, 19–20.

Nebuchadnezzar's invasion (around 590 BC). That invasion eventually resulted in the fall of Jerusalem, the Babylonian exile, and of course, the departure of Lehi and his family for the New World. A military commander sent the following response to his superior:

Your servant Hoshayahu (hereby) reports to my lord Ya'ush. May YHWH give you good news.... And now, please explain to your servant the meaning of the letter which my lord sent to your servant yesterday evening. For your servant has been sick at heart ever since you sent (that letter) to your servant. In it my lord said: "Don't you know how to read a letter?" As (Y)HWH lives, no one has ever tried to read me a letter! Moreover, whenever any letter comes to me and I have read it, I can repeat it down to the smallest detail.<sup>20</sup>

The fact that letters were exchanged clearly points to some literacy. However, the commander's expectation was that the recipient would have the letter read to him. The subordinate's reply reflected justifiable pride in his ability to read. Literacy outside of the elites existed, but was sufficiently unusual that it was an unexpected exception. In addition to highlighting the typical expectations of literacy, however, this letter writer also tells us that even in a culture with some literacy it was essentially only an adjunct to orality, not a replacement for it. The subordinate also declares that when "I have read it, I can repeat it down to the smallest detail." There is no indication that the record itself would be referenced, but rather that the

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20 J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* (Louisville, Kentucky: The Westminster John Knox Press, 1986), 418. See also "Lachish Letters," *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, accessed September 2010, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lachish\\_letters#cite\\_note-1](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lachish_letters#cite_note-1).

function of the writing was to provide the information that would then be remembered without the written copy.<sup>21</sup>

This early division between elite and non-elites gradually changed for later Israelite society.<sup>22</sup> In the first century,

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

22 Paul Y. Hoskisson, “Jeremiah’s Game,” *Insights* 30/1 (2010), 4. Hoskisson suggests that coding game in Jeremiah might suggest a fairly widespread literacy in Israel during the time when Lehi’s family left and therefore might explain the apparent widespread Nephite literacy. There are two problems with that suggestion.

The first issue is whether or not this literary code/game (called *atbash*) suggests literacy. In *atbash*, the Hebrew letters are arranged in two rows where the first half is in typical order, and in the second row that letters are in a reversed order. Then a work is created by selecting the character in the opposite row of that of the actual letter of the word. Hoskisson (pp. 3–4) indicates that “any use of an atbash works only if his audience were somewhat literate.” Unfortunately, what it tells us is that it requires not simple literacy but a trained form of literacy. One needed not only to be able to read, but to know that a written word was not actually a word and then know to apply *atbash* as a means to translate it. Even the most literate might require the time to stop and translate. Thus, it requires much more than literacy to understand the game.

Nevertheless, Hoskisson is correct that the message is lost if the intended audience doesn’t get the reference. That does not require textual literacy, but more of cultural literacy. One who read or heard Jeremiah would have to know that the word being used was code for the other language. Once the knowledge was available, the game no longer came into play but simply the meaning derived from using it. The level or training required to create and understand *atbash* exceeds typical literacy. It therefore argues that understanding was more likely based on a usage that supplied the meaning (directly by instruction or indirectly through context). See the discussion of recognizing the word STOP in a stop sign and the phrase *e pluribus unum* in the body of this discussion.

The second problem is whether or not this hint at literacy has any meaning for the Nephite population long after their departure from Israel. I can easily agree that Nephi’s training suggests a literate family who would intend to keep that literacy alive. However, it doesn’t necessarily tell us how literacy collided with the inmixture of the native New World population who were

reading the Torah was taught in both schools and homes.<sup>23</sup> Deanna Draper Buck, a support specialist for Seminaries and Institutes of Religion in Louisville, Kentucky, argues that a similar widespread literacy would have existed in Israel prior to the time Lehi and his family left for the New World.<sup>24</sup> She cites De Vaux's assertion of the meaning of the texts on the doorposts. She also suggests that "Reading and writing have been distinguishing characteristics of God's people from the Creation. God gave a commandment to Adam to keep records and teach his children to read and write so that they could be able to read, remember and keep the commandments."<sup>25</sup> While true, evidence suggests that not all of Adam's descendants (and perhaps only few) were able to read. The scriptures were unmistakably valuable in ancient Israel, but most of Adam's children would have heard them read rather than personally read them. Harry Y. Gamble, Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Virginia, reminds us that even in early Christianity, "This [lack of general literacy] is true in spite of the importance the early church accorded to religious texts, for acquaintance with the scriptures did not require that all or even most Christians be individually capable of reading them and does not imply that they were."<sup>26</sup>

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not likely to have been literate (and if they were, certainly not in the Hebrew language or however Egyptian was used).

23 Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church*, 7: "Instruction in reading Hebrew was more widely given among Jews than instruction in Greek or Latin was among Gentiles and with less regard to social status. According to Josephus, in first-century Judaism it was a duty, indeed a religious commandment, that Jewish children be taught to read. Such training may often have been given at home by parents, but rabbinic sources suggest that by the first century schools were common in towns and were heavily enrolled."

24 Deanna Draper Buck, "Internal Evidence of Widespread Literacy in the Book of Mormon," *The Religious Educator* 10, no 3 (2009): 62–63.

25 Buck, "Internal Evidence": 60.

26 Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church*, 5.

Although literacy was clearly present and important in the ancient Near East, texts most often served in support of a primarily oral means of communication.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps the easiest way to understand the relationship between the written and spoken word is that even the written word became comprehensible only after its conversion into oral form. Gamble notes: “In the Greco-Roman world virtually all reading was reading aloud; even when reading privately the reader gave audible voice to the text. Thus, apart from the context, the difference between private and public reading was not in a contrast between silent reading and reading aloud, but in levels of projection.”<sup>28</sup> Karel Van der Toorn adds: “Written documents were read aloud, either to an audience or to oneself. Silent reading was highly unusual. Even the student who read in solitude ‘muttered’ his text.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, even the most literate used the text to generate an oral message. The fact of a text did not diminish the uses or importance of oral transmission. In fact, it can be argued that Greek books were created by dictation, creating the fascinating cycle of oral transmission to written text and back to oral when the dictated text was read aloud.<sup>30</sup> The ancient world was literate, but the message of their literacy typically reached the majority of the people orally.<sup>31</sup>

### **The Primacy of Orality in Nephite Culture**

Most ironically for a culture where our entire body of evidence consists of a text, I suggest that Nephite culture depended first upon oral communication and only secondarily upon written. It is an idea William Eggington, chair of the Department of Linguistics at Brigham Young University, proposed in 1992:

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27 Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece*, 4.

28 Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 203.

29 Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 12.

30 Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece*, 91.

31 Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 13.

“The major hypothesis I wish to develop in this paper is that Lehi and his descendants functioned in a society which exhibited strong oral residual culture characteristics: they had access to print as a technology, but retained many features of a nonprint culture.”<sup>32</sup> He examined aspects of the Book of Mormon that arguably retain characteristics of oral texts rather than texts more dependent upon literate tradition. To his examination I will add a further examination of plausible oral elements within Nephite literate production as well as an examination of the functions and audiences for Nephite written texts.

Nephi, who I suggest was a trained scribe, lamented: “neither am I mighty in writing, like unto speaking” (2 Nephi 33:1). At the end of the Book of Mormon, Moroni appears to underline the primacy of oral communication when he declares: “The Gentiles will mock at these things, because of our weakness in writing; for Lord thou hast made us mighty in word by faith, but thou hast not made us mighty in writing; for thou hast made all this people that they could speak much, because of the Holy Ghost which thou hast given them” (Ether 12:23).

Although it is possible to read this verse only as an affirmation of the power of the Holy Ghost, it still supposes that Nephites at this late date considered their oral performance more powerful than the written record.<sup>33</sup> Reading Moroni’s declaration as an indication of the primacy of oral communication might be strengthened by the Nephite prophecy of Joseph Smith’s role,

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32 William G. Eggington “‘Our Weakness in Writing:’ Oral and Literate Culture in the Book of Mormon,” FARMS Reprint (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1992), 2.

33 Eggington (“Our weakness in Writing,” 5–6) suggests: “Some authors of the Book of Mormon knew the linguistic constraints and difficulties they faced as they constructed their texts. The oft quoted scripture of Ether 12:27, “and if men come unto me, I will show unto them their weakness,” derives from counsel given to Moroni because Moroni was disturbed by his and other writers’ weaknesses in writing. They admit ‘stumbling because of the placing of [their written] words’ (Ether 12:26), even though they acknowledge that their spoken words were powerful.”

which declares that for Joseph it will be the text rather than the oral communication that is more spiritually powerful: “And the Lord hath said: I will raise up a Moses; and I will give power unto him in a rod; and I will give judgment unto him in writing. Yet I will not loose his tongue, that he shall speak much, for I will not make him mighty in speaking. But I will write unto him my law, by the finger of mine own hand; and I will make a spokesman for him” (2 Nephi 3:17).<sup>34</sup>

Discovering whether or not Moroni’s statement truly describes a culture that was primarily oral and only secondarily literate will be difficult given that our only evidence of that putative orality will come from a written text. Thomas notes that: “The historian Herodotus is also analysed as an ‘oral writer’, on the grounds of his style. Fluent and leisurely, it has certain archaic features (like ring composition [another term for chiasmus]) which some have seen as specifically ‘oral.’”<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, she concludes: “But what seems to deserve more critical questioning is whether these stylistic features can simply be attributed to ‘orality’, the ‘oral context’, the prevalence of performance—all fairly vague terms—or to the literary and stylistic tradition then dominant.”<sup>36</sup>

We face the same challenge is discerning orality from Nephite literate production.<sup>37</sup> Fortunately, we have a long

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34 The shift from powerful speaking to the lesser medium of writing may be further emphasized as Joseph translated the Book of Mormon. Moroni indicates that “the Lord knoweth the things which we have written, and also that none other people knoweth our language; and because that none other people knoweth our language, therefore he hath prepared means for the interpretation thereof” (Mormon 9:34). Only through divine preparation and direct influence would the meaning of the Book of Mormon be known to a future audience.

35 Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece*, 102.

36 Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece*, 102.

37 Eggington (“Our Weakness in Writing,” 2) lists the specific weaknesses in such a study:

First, we do not know everything about oral societies. Because oral societies, by definition, do not keep written, and thus preservable, records one can only deduce certain generalities from

text. Nevertheless, I must underline the fact that this analysis of orality begins with the presumption of a primary orality. Declaring that the Nephites are best seen within the known range of human populations in antiquity, I look for orality assuming that it ought to be found. An initial assumption of universal literacy would likely see the evidence differently.

Perhaps this difference in initial assumptions lies behind the very different conclusions I propose than those suggested in Deanna Draper Buck's "Internal Evidence of Widespread Literacy in the Book of Mormon." One sample of her evidence comes for the repeated injunction to search the scriptures:

The following references show examples of people, both elite and common, being commanded to *search* the scriptures. King Benjamin commanded his sons to "*search* them diligently, that ye may profit thereby" (Mosiah 1:7; emphasis added). While Jesus was speaking to the multitude in Bountiful following his resurrection, he spoke of the prophecies of Isaiah and said, "Behold they are written, ye have them before you, therefore *search* them" (3 Nephi 20:11; emphasis added). A little later, Jesus again admonished the multitude to search the scriptures relating to Isaiah: "And now, behold, I say unto you, that ye ought to *search* these things. Yea, a commandment I give unto

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myths, legends, and a few oral societies that exist today, such as some Australian Aboriginal communities. Second, we don't know much about the cultures of Book of Mormon peoples. The Book of Mormon is a translated document. Thus when this paper examines textual evidence, we must realize that many syntactical structures could have been filtered through the English language. Although these gaps are significant, I believe that sufficient evidence warrants consideration of my conclusions.

Of his cautions, I see the problem of translation as perhaps the greatest. Some evidence depends upon the kind of vocabulary that is subject to alteration through the translator and therefore may only be used with appropriate caution.

you that ye search these things diligently; for great are the words of Isaiah” (3 Nephi 23:1; emphasis added).<sup>38</sup>

The way Buck and I understand these verses differs based upon the assumptions we bring to them. Beginning with the assumption of widespread literacy, these verses suggest that each person hearing this commandment has an available copy of the scriptures and should therefore spend significant time searching in that text, specifically the Isaiah portions. Beginning with the assumption of limited literacy, this is a command to those who have access to do the searching. In defense of the more limited reading, it is similar to what Rollston suggests for a parallel issue in understanding the Bible: “Sometimes scholars will refer to the number of times ‘reading’ and ‘writing’ is mentioned in the Hebrew Bible and assume that this demonstrates that elites and non-elites could read and write. However, I would contend that the Hebrew Bible was primarily a corpus written by elites to elites. That is, it would be difficult to suggest that statements in the Hebrew Bible could be used as a basis for assuming the literacy of non-elites.”<sup>39</sup>

Rollston’s caution is important because it reminds us that the very fact that our evidence comes from a literate production skews the information about what the culture was like outside of a written text. In antiquity, orality and literacy coexisted in some culturally-determined balance. When our evidence for orality comes only through a literate text, it will be difficult to discern the precise nature of that balance.

Nevertheless, understanding that the beginning assumption will significantly influence the conclusion, I posit that, like other ancient populations, the Nephites were likely primarily oral and only secondarily literate. The cross-cultural

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38 Buck, “Internal Evidence of Widespread Literacy in the Book of Mormon,” 67.

39 Rollston, *Writing and Literacy in the World of Ancient Israel*, 133.

information about how such cultures worked will provide an interpretive context in which we may best judge the type of evidence for orality that can be deduced from Nephite literate production.

### **Textual Suggestions of Oral Primacy**

Although modern readers and writers are able to silently understand or produce a text, I suggest that it is still very common that texts are connected to orality. When we read silently, we often silently produce the words rather than simply understanding them directly from the symbols on the pages. When we write, we record words that we have constructed silently. Thus, even modern writing can be conversational and replicate manners of speaking. The training of literacy constrains those more casual oral tendencies by stylistic devices that are more appropriate to the written rather than spoken language. Where an oral presentation might use repetition of concepts in different words to help the audience understand the concepts, a written text can be more concise precisely because the text is available for repeated consultation.

In the absence of training in producing the written word, written texts easily replicate speech with all of its repetitions, asides, and imprecision. The modern proliferation of electronic social media provides ample evidence of the replication of speech into written communication. For modern published texts, those natural tendencies are constrained by training, cultural dictates, and editors who encourage writers into more concise and precise presentations of ideas. Without the benefit of editors, the Nephites should have reproduced evidence not only of their oral style but also of their primary dependence upon oral communication—even as they wrote.

The fact that the Book of Mormon is a translated text makes evidence derived from vocabulary particularly problematic as it is difficult to know how much of the presence of a particular

word derives from the plate text and how much is the result of the translator's vocabulary and understanding.<sup>40</sup> Even if it cannot be conclusive, there are, nevertheless, some anomalous mixtures of verbs for writing and speaking that are worth noting as possible evidence of a primary orality. For example, Nephi is physically writing on the plates, but the words he uses to express what he intends to communicate are oral: "And now, I would prophesy somewhat more concerning the Jews and the Gentiles. For after the book *of which I have spoken* shall come forth, *and be written* unto the Gentiles, and sealed up again unto the Lord, there shall be many which shall *believe the words which are written*; and they shall carry them forth unto the remnant of our seed" (2 Nephi 30:3, emphasis added). The statement "of which I have spoken" could easily and more accurately have been "of which I have written."

The same mix of oral and written occurs as Nephi transitions from transcribing his own oral sermon to transcribing Jacob's:

And now I, Nephi, make an end of my prophesying unto you, my beloved brethren. And I cannot write but a few things, which I know must surely come to pass; neither can I write but a few of the words of my brother Jacob.

Wherefore, *the things which I have written* sufficeth me, save it be a few words which *I must speak* concerning the doctrine of Christ; wherefore, *I shall speak unto you plainly*, according to the plainness of my prophesying.  
(2 Nephi 31:1–2)

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40 I have discussed these issues and cautions in Brant A. Gardner, *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Kofford Books, 2011), 233–39.

Nephi is not the only one to mix words indicating written and oral communication. Mormon records: “And now, *I speak somewhat concerning that which I have written*” (Words of Mormon 1:3); and again: “*Hearken, O ye Gentiles, and hear the words of Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, which he hath commanded me that I should speak concerning you, for, behold he commandeth me that I should write, saying: (3 Nephi 30:1).*”

In these cases, Nephi and Mormon are quite clearly writing. They both slip into a vocabulary that suggests that they most often expect their communication to be oral. Thus they write, but write as they might speak—using the vocabulary of an oral presentation.

Of course, this kind of evidence is highly circumstantial as it is not unusual to use oral vocabulary even when referring to writing. We often cite what someone has written by indicating that he or she *said* that information. Conventions are strong enough that even the blind might respond, “yes, I see.”<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, the fact that texts were read out loud in antiquity may be seen to underlie this juxtaposition of orality and textuality in the same way that we see it in Isaiah 29:8: “And in that day shall the deaf hear the words of the book.” The deaf could *read* the book if they were literate, but would not understand it properly unless it was read aloud; thus, the importance of *hearing* the words written in the book.

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41 Carnoldi, Cesare and Rosanna DeBeni. “Imagery and Blindness,” in *Tall Tales About the Mind and Brain: Separating Fact from Fiction*, ed. Sergio Della Sala (Oxford, England and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 370. “There have also been reports showing that blind people tend to use linguistic expressions referring to a visual experience (e.g., ‘I lost sight of you’ or ‘See you tomorrow’) more often than sighted people do, including expressions which directly refer to a visual act (e.g., ‘Let’s go and watch TV.’”

There is one very clear case where a text is read aloud (the most common method of textual communication of antiquity). The peoples of Limhi and Alma were both descendants of people of Zarahemla who had left for the land of Nephi. They had recently split into two groups in the land of Nephi and both had returned to Zarahemla. They were literate and produced a written record. As part of the public occasion welcoming them into Zarahemlaite society, their documents were read:

And now all the people of Nephi were assembled together, and also all the people of Zarahemla, and they were gathered together in two bodies.

And it came to pass that Mosiah did read, and caused to be read, the records of Zeniff to his people; yea, he read the records of the people of Zeniff, from the time they left the land of Zarahemla until they returned again.<sup>42</sup>

And he also read the account of Alma and his brethren, and all their afflictions, from the time they left the land of Zarahemla until the time they returned again.  
(Mosiah 25:4–6)

This was certainly more pragmatic than copying and disseminating the records, but based on the abridgement that we have from Mormon, the original reading would have required a fair amount of time. This suggests two things. The first is the reverence for that which was written, and the second is the expectation of an oral performance of the text in a public

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42 We have the rare opportunity to have one of the documents that was read to the population at this time. Mosiah 9–10 reproduce the first-person record of Zeniff, Limhi's grandfather. Mormon entered that document into the record without editing. Mormon provides his edited version of the remainder of the record.

setting. The ability of an audience to participate in very long oral presentations continued through the 19th century in the United States where both political and religious speeches from a single speaker could last multiple hours.

On the other hand, there are also texts that appear to support widespread literacy. The first of these is the conversion of an oral event into a written event. King Benjamin's discourse held critical information for all his people. Consequently, we learn: "And it came to pass that he began to speak to his people from the tower; and they could not all hear his words because of the greatness of the multitude; therefore he caused that the words which he spake should be written and sent forth among those that were not under the sound of his voice, that they might also receive his words" (Mosiah 2:8).

Understanding of this event relies upon our interpretive assumption. From the assumption of widespread literacy, this can easily be read as distributing a large number of written copies, so that people could read them for themselves. However, from the cross-cultural assumption of limited literacy, there is another explanation. Van der Toorn notes: "Decrees were produced in numerous copies to be displayed in public places throughout the land, at city gates and temple gates, so as to inform the population. However, this alone would not have reached the general public. Dissemination was achieved through formal oral proclamation of these texts by appointed readers. Thus, in Israel, the royal decision to prohibit sacrifice in local temples in order to centralize worship in Jerusalem was communicated to the population through copies of the decree that were posted at the gates and read out loud by public readers."<sup>43</sup>

In a culture with limited literacy, King Benjamin's written text would be carried to separate communities and read to them.

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43 Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 12–13.

Given the logical difficulties of preparing sufficient written texts for popular distribution and individual consultation, economic considerations strongly support an oral presentation of a few texts as opposed to a literate population consuming a large number of texts. Mesoamerican living patterns suggest that there were clan compounds for related families. In that setting, a written copy is taken to the clan compound and read to a more locally gathered people who would then be close enough to hear clearly. When Mosiah<sub>2</sub> declared the change from kings to judges, he also “sent again among the people; yea, even a written word sent he among the people” (Mosiah 29:4). This passage also shows the ambivalent language or orality in literacy: “And these were *the words that were written, saying*” (Mosiah 29:4).

The most intriguing passage in the Book of Mormon with respect to literacy comes as Alma<sub>2</sub> is preaching to the rural population supporting the Zoramites in Antionum:

And now Alma said unto them: Do ye believe those scriptures which have been written by them of old?

Behold, if ye do, ye must believe what Zenos said; for, behold he said: Thou hast turned away thy judgments because of thy Son.

Now behold, my brethren, *I would ask if ye have read the scriptures?* If ye have, how can ye disbelieve on the Son of God? (Alma 33:12–14)

The plain sense of this verse is that Alma<sub>2</sub> has an expectation that these people had access to and were able to read the scriptures, which would suggest a very widespread literacy by the very nature of this group of people. These are the people who were “not permitted to enter into their synagogues to worship God, being esteemed as filthiness; therefore they

were poor; yea, they were esteemed by their brethren as dross; therefore they were poor as to things of the world; and also they were poor in heart.” (Alma 32:3). This is precisely the class of people who should not be literate in the ancient world.<sup>44</sup>

There are only two possible ways to understand this verse. Either, contrary to all known human experience in the ancient world, the Nephites were literate on a very broad scale, or the text doesn't mean what it appears to mean. With trepidation, I suggest the latter. As a text in translation, there is always the possibility that the translation does not accurately reflect the source language. In this case, we have no way to know what the plate text said. We have only the translation. I suggest that in this verse, the verb “read” is either a reversal of the anomalous conflation of verbs of reading and speaking as noted above, or it is an artifact of a translation assumption that scriptures are to be read. Joseph Smith, as translator, would certainly be familiar with and be able to readily produce, a phrase asking if someone had read their scriptures.<sup>45</sup> For the translator, it had none of the striking anomaly that the phrase does when set in antiquity. Although my analysis leans heavily upon what is known of the ancient world, there are passages in the Book of

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44 Werner H. Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q.* 1993; rpt. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 17. “In antiquity, writing was essentially a product of urbanization and compact settlements; in rural areas language was almost entirely confined to face-to-face communication.” Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 6: “We must assume, then, that the large majority of Christians in the early centuries of the church were illiterate, not because they were unique but because they were in this respect typical. The ancient world had virtually no system of education. What structures were did not suffice to cultivate general literacy at even a basic level, indeed, no such aim was ever envisioned. The opportunity for formal schooling even at the primary level was a luxury although it occasionally existed for slaves and freedmen. Thus, access to education was not closed to Christians but was limited by social class.”

45 The phrase has a ready model for Joseph as translator in the New Testament. Matt. 21:42 “Jesus saith unto them, Did you never read in the scriptures.” Also Mark 12:10 “And have ye not read this scripture.”

Mormon that further suggest that the vocabulary surrounding accessing the scriptures is problematic.

When Aaron, one of the sons of Mosiah<sub>2</sub>, is preaching before the king of the Lamanites, Mormon records:

And it came to pass that when Aaron saw that the king would believe his words, he began from the creation of Adam, reading the scriptures unto the king—how God created man after his own image, and that God gave him commandments, and that because of transgression, man had fallen.

And Aaron did expound unto him the scriptures from the creation of Adam, laying the fall of man before him, and their carnal state and also the plan of redemption, which was prepared from the foundation of the world, through Christ, for all whosoever would believe on his name. (Alma 22:12–13)

Aaron is relating scriptural stories from the brass plates. He certainly doesn't have the brass plates with him, and even carrying a perishable copy of the brass plates' text would constitute a rather large volume of material considering anciently available media. As he is in the court of the Lamanite king, it is also certain that he is not reading from the king's copy. The whole point is that this is new information for the king. Thus, we have another anomalous use of the verb "read." Aaron is reading when there is nothing before him to read. This same issue occurs with Abinadi.

Abinadi the prophet was apprehended in a public place and brought before Noah's court, consisting of the king and his priest-advisors. Those priests interrogated Abinadi. They attempted to find fault in Abinadi's understanding of scripture and therefore pose questions of exegesis to him. Abinadi stood before the court and presented his defense. At one point, he said:

“And now I *read* unto you the remainder of the commandments of God, for I perceive that they are not written in your hearts; I perceive that ye have studied and taught iniquity the most part of your lives” (Mosiah 13:11).

As with Aaron before the king of the Lamanites, it is highly unlikely that Abinadi had a scriptural text before him. In Abinadi’s case, he was taken captive to the court of the king and even if he had carried some form of scripture into the city, it would likely have been taken from him before he entered the court. The priests certainly had access to a copy of the scriptures and had themselves read and studied them, but nothing suggests that they were consulted during the proceedings. Nevertheless, Abinadi indicated that he would “read.” In this case, if nothing else, it is a beautiful turn of the phrase because his “reading” of the commandments contrasts with an inability of Noah’s priests to “read” because they do not have the scriptures “written in your hearts.”

However, the metaphorical reading of scriptures written in their hearts may have had a more direct reference. Van der Toorn provides the key: “The scroll served as a deposit box for the text; for daily use, people consulted their memory.”<sup>46</sup> Even though Nephite scriptures clearly existed in a written form; even though Aaron and Abinadi could and did read and study them in the written form; their typical use of the scriptures would have relied upon memory. Aaron and Abinadi were “reading” the scriptures “written in their hearts.” In more literal terms, they recited from memory. The existence of a text did not diminish the need for or use of memory as a primary means of storing information. Even in the Middle Ages, memorization and training the memory was emphasized as an important part of becoming learned and literate.<sup>47</sup>

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46 Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 23.

47 Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece*, 23. She explains: “Memorization was not made redundant by the presence of books, but on the

Louis C. Midgley, retired professor of political science at Brigham Young University, suggested:

Careful attention to one particular word used in the Book of Mormon yields some surprising dividends. For example, Lehi pled with his sons to remember his words: “My sons, I would that ye would remember; yea, I would that ye would hearken unto my words” (2 Nephi 1:12; italics added here and in subsequent scriptures). Such language may go unnoticed, or it may seem to be merely a request to recall some teachings. The word remember seems rather plain and straightforward. But when looked at more closely, the language about remembrance in the Book of Mormon turns out to be rich and complex—conveying important, hidden meaning.

The Book of Mormon uses terms related to remembering and forgetting well over two hundred times. The ideas intended with these words must be significant. By looking carefully at what the Book of Mormon says about “the ways of remembrance” (1 Nephi 2:24), we can better understand the book’s overall message.

The first thing to note is that “ways of remembrance” does not mean simply inner reflections, or merely awareness of or curiosity about the past, or even detailed information to be recalled. True, in a number of places the idea of remembrance in the Book of Mormon seems to carry the meaning of recalling information about the past (see, for example, Ether 4:16; Alma 33:3). More commonly, however, remembrance refers to action.

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contrary, books were regarded as only one way to remember and therefore to attain knowledge.”

This action springs from realizing the meaning of past events. Thus, in the Book of Mormon, remembrance results in action.<sup>48</sup>

Although it is certain that *remembering* was a call to action, it may also represent the reality of the way in which the message of scripture was most effectively manifest in both Old Testament and Book of Mormon scripture. *Remember* may have signaled the same injunction as *search the scriptures*. The assumption of the primacy of orality would strongly suggest that remembering was the most important way in which most people interacted with the message of the scriptures.<sup>49</sup>

### Structural Suggestions of Oral Primacy

When a text is encoded from a primarily oral culture, it might be expected that some of the structural devices used to assist in memorization or in the oral impact of the text might be encoded in the written version. For many Near Eastern texts, Van der Toorn explains: “Oral cultures dictate a particular style in

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48 Louis C. Midgley, “The Ways of Remembrance,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon. Insights You May Have Missed Before*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City and Provo: Deseret Book Company and Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1991), 168. These ideas were reprised in a shorter note the following year. See also Louis C. Midgley, “‘O Man, Remember and Perish Not’ (Mosiah 4:30)” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City and Provo: Deseret Book Company and Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1992), 127–29.

49 In the Bible, “search the scriptures” is unique to the New Testament (John 5:39 and Acts 17:11). It occurs with greater frequency in the Book of Mormon (Jacob 7:23; Alma 14:1, 17:2, 33:2; 3 Ne. 10:14). The translation method I have proposed for Joseph Smith would allow his English translation of the Book of Mormon plate text to borrow the phrase “search the scriptures” from the Bible, making it difficult to know whether the presence of that phrase is due to meaning on the plates or to Joseph’s translation. The 3 Nephi example is suggestive of limited literacy even as it suggests literacy: “And now, whoso readeth, let him understand; *he that hath the scriptures*, let him search them.” (3 Nephi 10:14). This appears to be a recognition of limited access to scriptures in their physical form.

written texts, In Israel and Babylonia, texts were an extension, so to speak, of the oral performers. This is not to say that all texts were in origin oral artifacts, but that the oral delivery of the texts determined their style, even if they had originated in writing. The traditional texts from Israel and Mesopotamia are full of the stylistic devices of oral performance such as rhythm, repetition, stock epithets, standard phrases, and plots consisting of interrelated by relatively independent episodes.”<sup>50</sup> This strongly suggests that if the Book of Mormon comes from a primarily oral culture, that it too would show signs of oral techniques. However, the Book of Mormon differs from the types of texts that Van der Toorn describes in that there is no indication that the Book of Mormon was ever meant to be read to an ancient audience. It was a sacred record, but one that presupposed a future literate audience. Therefore, some of the features of orality, such as the relatively independent short narratives, are not as clearly present in the Book of Mormon.

Eggington’s discussion of orality in the Book of Mormon focused on structural evidence of an oral primacy. Following studies of oral poetry, Eggington suggests memory-aiding techniques such as repetition and formulaic phrases demonstrate that underlying oral primacy in the Book of Mormon text.

The Book of Mormon contains numerous examples of topic development through repetition. Topics are also developed through the oral, culturally-influenced parallel balanced patterns, such as chiasmus. In addition, there are many examples of other balanced discourse styles. Eggington states:

Formulaic expressions occur frequently including such expressions as “and it came to pass”, “and now”, “but/and/or behold.” As an aid to memory, oral societies tend to develop meaning through reference

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50 Van Der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 14.

to aggregative noun phrases, or word chunks. Thus... oral societies seldom refer to a soldier, rather “a brave soldier.” Likewise, in the Book of Mormon account of Lehi’s dream, it is never just a “rod,” but a “rod of iron.” Two examples of this word chunk occur in the same verse (1 Ne. 8:24, 1 Ne. 8:30), and six uses of this mnemonic chunk of language in eleven verses (1 Ne. 8:19–30). Likewise, in the same account it is never a “building” but always a “great (or large) and spacious building.”<sup>51</sup>

Eggington also understands the inherent difficulty of using the vocabulary of a translated document to infer the nature of the underlying text. He concludes the above paragraph by noting: “However, I need to qualify this last point. It could be that the plates had single words for ‘rod of iron’ and ‘large and spacious building.’ Joseph Smith would then have had to translate them into English as aggregates or chunks.”<sup>52</sup>

The process of oral or written textual creation by chunking is the best explanation behind some similar phrases found in widely separate locations in the Book of Mormon. John W.

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51 Eggington, “Our Weakness in Writing,” 13–14. (Internal references to tables silently removed). Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece*, 29–51 provides an overview of the work on oral poetry and its manifestation through written texts. Importantly, she cautions (p. 49): “Formulae lie at the heart of the discovery that the Homeric poems were composed orally, and the idea that the composition of oral poetry is mechanically traditional. It is the formulaic system that helps an oral poet improvise in performance. It is still commonly thought—but incorrectly—that the presence of formulae shows that poem has been composed orally.”

Thomas underscores Eggington’s appropriate cautions. The presence of these structural elements do not indicate a prior oral composition. They rather represent the continuation of oral elements as the text is being created. For the Book of Mormon, it is unlikely that anything but the recorded speeches were first orally composed. Nevertheless, the primary orality of the culture would have, and I believe demonstrably did, influence the ways in which the text is presented in writing.

52 Eggington, “Our Weakness in Writing,” 14.

Welch sees these as examples of intertextual quotation. The first case is the repetition of the phrase “saw God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God.” Welch notes: “These words in Alma 36 are not merely a loose recollection of the scriptural record of Lehi’s vision. There are twenty-one words here that are quoted verbatim from 1 Nephi 1.”<sup>53</sup>

The second example comes from Helaman 14:12 where Samuel the Lamanite uses the same description of the Savior as is found in Mosiah 3:8: “Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Father of heaven and of earth, the Creator of all things from the beginning.” Welch notes: “The twenty-one words...appear to be standard Nephite religious terminology derived from the words given to Benjamin by an angel from God (Mosiah 3:8).”<sup>54</sup>

The appearance of the same phrases in the same order certainly argues for a common source. But was that source

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53 John W. Welch, “Textual Consistency,” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon: The FARMS Updates*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1992), 21–22. Welch does not deal with the problem created by the assumption that the text was copied from 1 Nephi. 1 Nephi and Alma were on different sets of plates, 1 Nephi being on the small plates and Alma on the large. Mormon tells us that he was unaware of the small plates at all until he discovered them during his editing of the book of Mosiah (W of M 1:3). There is no clear indication that the large plate writers were aware of the small plates or otherwise copied from them. Welch’s suggestion of copying would therefore require that Mormon do the copying, but Mormon never indicates that he uses the small plates in any part of his editing of the large plates and would not have had any reason to consult the small plates while editing the book of Alma, which had no counterpart on the small plates.

It is possible, however, that it was Alma who made the copy from the small plates and then Mormon replicated the text precisely. While that is certainly possible since Alma<sub>2</sub> was only perhaps two generations away from the time the small plates were given to Mosiah<sub>1</sub>, Mosiah<sub>2</sub>’s grandfather (who was contemporaneous with Alma<sub>2</sub>’s father, Alma<sub>1</sub>). Nevertheless, the selection of only that phrase as well the necessity of both the original precise copy and the subsequent precise translation suggest that it is not the most parsimonious explanation of the presence of that particular phrase in the text.

54 John W. Welch, “Textual Consistency,” 22.

the plates or the translator? Although it is tempting to use the length of the passages as an indicator of a complexity that relies on a written original, both of these examples comprise a set of phrases that would not be unusual or necessarily uncomfortable in Joseph Smith's language culture.<sup>55</sup> They represent linguistic chunks that would have been common in Joseph's language environment.

We must therefore heed Eggington's caution that it is possible that some of the evidence we see for word chunks could be the result of the translator rather than the plate text. Nevertheless, there are some word chunks that do appear to be related to the plate text. The phrase "father of heaven and of earth" appears multiple times in the Book of Mormon (see 2 Ne. 25:12; Mosiah 15:5; Alma 11:39; Hel. 14:12, 16:18). This particular phrase appears to be related to an ancient name/title for God. This specific phrase does not appear in the King James Bible but occurs seven times in the Book of Mormon.<sup>56</sup>

While the precise phrase does not exist in our current Bible, it may be related to the concept that may underlie the passages in the KJV's rendition of Genesis 14:19, 22 where God

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<sup>55</sup> An important parallel to the proposal that these were commonly understood phrases comes from the important analysis of oral songs. Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, ed. Stephen Mitchell and Gregory Nagy (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988, 2nd ed.), 4: "Stated briefly, oral epic song is narrative poetry composed in a manner evolved over many generations by singers of tales who did not know how to write; it consists of the building of metrical lines and half lines by means of formulas and formulaic expressions and of the building of songs by the use of themes." The singers have sets of stock phrases that can be easily inserted and require much less effort than the production of new material. In a similar way, the common phrases Joseph Smith employed would not require the same amount of mental effort as producing new material. Hence, a string of twenty-one newly conceived words in phrases would be significant, but a string of twenty-one words in common phrases could be more easily retrieved and even combined from shorter, but related, phrases.

<sup>56</sup> 2 Ne. 25:12; Mosiah 3:8, 15:4; Alma 11:39; Hel. 14:2, 16:18; Ether 4:7.

is a “possessor” of heaven and earth.<sup>57</sup> Daniel O. McClellan, while engaged in Jewish studies at the University of Oxford as a master’s candidate, examined the linguistic history of the Hebrew word *qoneh* (variously translated as *purchaser*, *begetter*, *creator*, or *lord*) and concluded that “Gen. 14:19, 22 most likely represents an early expansion on the Syro-Palestinian formula ‘El, begetter of the Earth.’”<sup>58</sup> The Book of Mormon phrase could not have borrowed from the KJV model but nevertheless appropriately translates a pre-exilic title that only later lost its procreative implications.<sup>59</sup>

Beginning with John W. Welch’s discovery of chiasmic passages in the Book of Mormon,<sup>60</sup> there has been an increasing attention to parallel structures in the Book of Mormon.<sup>61</sup>

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57 Gen. 14:19, 22: “And he blessed him, and said, Blessed *be* Abram of the most high God, *possessor* of heaven and earth.”

“And Abram said to the king of Sodom, I have lift up mine hand unto the Lord, the most high God, the *possessor* of heaven and earth” (emphasis mine).

58 Daniel O. McClellan, “*qonehshamayimwa’arez*, Genesis 14:19, 22: ‘Begetter of Heaven and Earth,’” (unpublished manuscript, copy in my possession, used by permission), 16.

59 McClellan, “Begetter of Heaven and Earth,” 16.

60 John W. Welch, “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 10, no. 1 (1969): 69–84.

61 Some examples, arranged by date:

Wade Brown, *The God-Inspired Language of the Book of Mormon: Structuring and Commentary* (Clackamas, Oregon: Rainbow Press, 1988).

Richard Dilworth Rust, “Poetry in the Book of Mormon,” *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City and Provo: Deseret Book Company and Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1991), 100–113.

Kevin L. Barney, “Poetic Diction and Parallel Word Pairs in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4, no. 2 (1995): 15–81.

Donald W. Parry, “Power Through Repetition: The Dynamics of Book of Mormon Parallelism,” in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1997), 295–309.

Hugh W. Pinnock, *Finding Biblical Hebrew and Other Ancient Literary Forms in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1999).

Eggington looked at even smaller repetitions. For example, 1 Ne. 1:3 is unnecessarily repetitious for modern literary standards:

And I know that the record which  
*I make* is true;  
*and I make it* with my own hand;  
*and I make it* according to my knowledge. (1 Nephi 1:3)<sup>62</sup>

In oral presentations, the repetitions reinforce and clarify the message. In wholly literary/written texts, such repetition is unnecessary because the presence of the text allows the reader to reread a passage if he or she requires further understanding. Both as remnants of the mnemonic devices of an oral culture and as a remnant of the nature of oral presentation, the repeated words, phrases, and patterns in the Book of Mormon point to a primarily oral culture whose written production mimics the more common orality. Eggington also reformats 2 Ne. 33:8:

For if ye would hearken unto  
*the spirit* which  
                                   *teacheth a man to pray*  
 ye would know  
                                   *that ye must pray;*  
 for the *evil spirit*  
                                   *teacheth not a man to pray,*  
 but teacheth him  
                                   *that he must not pray.*<sup>63</sup>

In this short verse, there is an antithetical parallel between the spirit and the evil spirit.<sup>64</sup> The effects of the good and

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Donald W. Parry, *Poetic Parallelisms in the Book of Mormon: The Complete Text Reformatted* (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2007).

62 Eggington, "Our Weakness in Writing," 15.

63 Eggington, "Our Weakness in Writing," 15. I have slightly modified the indenting to make the parallels clearer.

64 For more examples of this type of inverse parallel, see Donald W. Parry, "Antithetical Parallelism in the Book of Mormon," in *Reexploring the Book of*

evil spirit are laid out in two phrases about prayer, where the positive effects of the spirit are directly reversed by adding the negative to the evil spirit's parallel effects. What is most interesting about such parallels is that we might assume that such nice parallelisms occur only with the careful creation and editing of a written text. Nevertheless, such structures are part of the production of oral poetry. While some might have been memorized, oral presentations are often adapted to a particular audience, and the parallels are part of what assist in the creation of the oral experience. Oral poetry can create elegant structural patterns without relying upon the written editing process.<sup>65</sup>

I believe that we can see this process in action in the Book of Mormon in the poetic lament that has become known as the Psalm of Nephi. Richard Dilworth Rust, Professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, notes: "The dominant poetic feature of the Psalm of Nephi is parallelism."<sup>66</sup> My examination of the parallels confirms his declaration of their importance, although we parse the text differently.<sup>67</sup> I have suggested that there is some evidence that the plate text version may have been even more parallel than what we have in

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*Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City and Provo: Deseret Book Company and Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1992), 167–69.

<sup>65</sup> Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece*, 39: "If we accept that oral poets are capable of premeditation and reflection, of developing an idea without the aid of writing, then I see no reason to doubt that the final Homeric poet of the Iliad could have worked on the grand structure over a period of many years."

<sup>66</sup> Richard Dilworth Rust, "Poetry in the Book of Mormon," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon. Insights You May Have Missed Before*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City and Provo: Deseret Book Company and Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1991), 101.

<sup>67</sup> Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 2:77–79.

translation, as there are implied parallels that I strongly suspect were explicit in the original.<sup>68</sup>

Even though there are very clear parallel structures in the Psalm of Nephi, there is no overarching structure. The parallels appear to have been created in smaller sections, which suggest that they are the result of spontaneous creation through the use of the literary form rather than a premeditated and edited text. This is further indicated by the contrast between the style of the text leading to the poem.

And it came to pass after my father, Lehi, had spoken unto all his household, according to the feelings of his heart and the Spirit of the Lord which was in him, he waxed old. And it came to pass that he died, and was buried.

And it came to pass that not many days after his death, Laman and Lemuel and the sons of Ishmael were angry with me because of the admonitions of the Lord.

For I, Nephi, was constrained to speak unto them, according to his word; for I had spoken many things unto them, and also my father, before his death; many of which sayings are written upon mine other plates; for a more history part are written upon mine other plates.

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68 Although examining a different type of evidence, Royal Skousen also suggests that the first dictated text was more parallel than our current one. Royal Skousen, "The Systematic Text of the Book of Mormon," in *Uncovering the Original Text of the Book of Mormon: History and Findings of the Critical Text Project*, ed. M. Gerald Bradford and Alison V. P. Coutts (Provo, Utah: The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2002), 52: "Frequently the original text shows a higher degree of parallelism between its linguistic elements."

And upon these I write the things of my soul, and many of the scriptures which are engraven upon the plates of brass. For my soul delighteth in the scriptures, and my heart pondereth them, and writeth them for the learning and the profit of my children.

Behold, my soul delighteth in the things of the Lord; and my heart pondereth continually upon the things which I have seen and heard. (2 Nephi 4:12–16)

Nephi has been describing events in prose. However, two things he has written appear to trigger this expansive inclusion of his lament. First, he notes Lehi's passing. Certainly that death had occurred some time before writing, but having written of it made it newly present in Nephi's mind.<sup>69</sup> The transition comes in verse 14 where Nephi links his thoughts about his father to recording his father's words on other plates. That combination appears to engender the need to discuss his feelings and reflect upon both his father and the purpose he is occupying so much time in writing on plates. The Psalm of Nephi appears to be a written expansion that occurred as he was writing. Although it is written, it is the result of the process he might have used in an oral presentation. The written text captured what he would have said, and what he would have said uses the parallel structures that Nephi was certainly familiar with from the Hebrew scriptures if not his own scribal training.<sup>70</sup>

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69 John W. Welch, "The Psalm of Nephi as a Post-Lehi Document," in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon. The FARMS Updates of the 1990s*, ed. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1999), 73: "Most of all, Nephi's heartfelt psalm reflects the deep sorrow he felt at the time he composed it (2 Nephi 4:17, 19). While he redirected this grief by speaking of his own 'iniquities' (2 Nephi 4:17), it would have been the death of his father that would have made him feel his own mortality and inadequacies so keenly."

70 I have suggested that Nephi was trained as a scribe in the Old World. See Brant A. Gardner, "Nephi as Scribe," *Mormon Studies Review* vol. 23, no. 1

Another structural element found in the Book of Mormon is one that is also found in the Old World scriptures. David Bokovoy, Associate Instructor of Languages and Literature at the University of Utah, describes this structural technique as it is known from the Old Testament: “Repetitive resumption refers to an editor’s return to an original narrative following a deliberate interlude. Old Testament writers accomplished this by repeating a key word or phrase that immediately preceded the textual interruption.”<sup>71</sup>

One example from Mormon is found in Alma chapter 17. In verse 13, Mormon tells us that when the sons of Mosiah came to the “borders of the land of the Lamanites, that they separated themselves and departed one from another.” Then

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(2011): 45–55.

71 David E. Bokovoy, “Repetitive Resumption in the Book of Mormon,” *Insights: A Window on the Ancient World* 27, no. 1 (2007): 2.

A careful survey of editorial activity in the Book of Mormon shows that Nephite editors used repetitive resumption in a similar manner. For example, the editor of the book of Alma (in this case apparently Mormon) interrupts the account of Alma’s confrontation with Zeezrom by interjecting an outline of the Nephite monetary system (see Alma 11:1–19). Prior to this insertion, the account reads, “Now the object of these lawyers was to get gain; and they got gain according to their employ” (10:32). However, after the editorial interruption that breaks the flow of the primary narrative, the editor returns to the original account by using repetitive resumption: “Now, it was for the sole purpose to get gain, because they received their wages according to their employ” (11:20).

Another example of repetitive resumption in the Book of Mormon occurs in Helaman 5:5–14. In this section the compiler inserts a direct report of Helaman’s powerful discourse to his sons Nephi and Lehi (see vv. 6–12). This insertion is intentionally prefaced by the editorial introduction, “For they remembered the words which their father Helaman spake unto them” (v. 5). The compiler’s choice of words in this passage proves especially significant. The word remember serves as the Leitwort (key word) recurring throughout Helaman’s discourse. In these few short verses, Helaman intentionally emphasizes the word remember by repeating it a total of 12 times. With great editorial skill, therefore, the compiler of this account used repetitive resumption to bracket Helaman’s discourse with a return to the original introduction, “And they did remember his words” (v. 14).

Mormon diverts into a diatribe against the Lamanites and why the sons of Mosiah really needed to preach to them. When Mormon returns to his outlined narrative in verse 17, he says, “Therefore they separated themselves one from another, and went forth among them.”

Also in Alma, we find a repetition that is much closer together:

And it came to pass that the curse was not taken off of Korihor; but he was cast out, *and went about from house to house begging for his food.*

Now the knowledge of what had happened unto Korihor was immediately published throughout all the land; yea, the proclamation was sent forth by the chief judge to all the people in the land, declaring unto those who had believed in the words of Korihor that they must speedily repent, lest the same judgments would come unto them.

And it came to pass that they were all convinced of the wickedness of Korihor; therefore they were all converted again unto the Lord; and this put an end to the iniquity after the manner of Korihor.

*And Korihor did go about from house to house, begging food for his support. (Alma 30:56–58)*

I intentionally recut the verses so the process would be clearer. Mormon followed his outline, which requires that we understand that Korihor is begging for food. This is the textual idea that will move the narrative from the story of Korihor to the story of the Zoramites. Mormon then decides to cover the repentance which follows the cursing, which is apparently an aside written during the transcription/writing on the plates. In

order to return to his planned narrative, Mormon repeats the information about Korihor begging for his food, even though the original phrase wasn't that far away in the text.

Where the Old Testament editors used this method to return to an original narrative after a deliberate interruption, Mormon used the technique to return to his outline after a spontaneous interruption. It is a technique well suited to oral presentations: the original line of thought being refreshed by the repetition of words that were used prior to the aside. As the Old Testament is known to have been a written document from a primarily oral culture, it suggests that this is a structural technique developed in oral presentations to make it easier for a listener to return from the aside to the original thread.

Another textual indication of Book of Mormon's authors' stream of consciousness interaction with the text they were engraving is the subject of an interesting article written by Mary Lee Treat of the Zarahemla Foundation (associated with the Church of Christ and dedicated to promoting Book of Mormon scholarship). She describes an important aspect of Book of Mormon textual creation:

Some time ago while researching a certain topic In the Book of Mormon, I spent several hours a day in a concentrated search. In the course of this study, the frequent use of a certain phrase began to surface in my consciousness. Finally, one day the significance of this phrase dawned upon me.

The configuration I had been noticing was "... or rather..." The context in which I first become aware of its use was in clarifying a preceding thought. For example:

“Now if a man desired to serve God, it was his privilege; or rather, if he believed in God it was his privilege to serve him...” (Alma 30:9)

‘And they stood before the king, and were permitted, or rather commanded that they should answer the questions which he should ask them.’ (Mosiah 7:8)

I had just read that Mormon said they engraved upon plates in a form of Egyptian because it took less space than Hebrew, their spoken language (Mormon 9: 32– 33).

I also knew that Jacob had commented upon the difficulty of engraving on the plates:

“... and I can not write but little of my words, because of the difficulty of engraving our words upon plates ...” (Jacob 4:1)

“... and we labor diligently to engraven their words upon plates ...” (Jacob 4:3)

All of these thoughts finally jelled together to the point where I could ask, “What happens when an engraver makes a mistake?” It seemed logical that a clarifying phrase could correct an unclear sentence. Hence the phrase “or rather” or something similar would be utilized.

But what did the engraver do if an actual error was made? Did he have a means to erase? Did he throw away the entire plate and start over?

We know from countless references that the answer to the last question is “no.” Metal was precious and evidently not easily acquired. When Nephi’s small plates were full the writers didn’t add more blank plates. The manufacture of metal plates was evidently difficult and the work of engraving laborious.

Eagerly I began to search for phrases correcting actual errors. I began to find places where errors were corrected by a connecting phrase in direct opposition to the preceding thought. Probably the two clearest examples found so far are these:

“And thus we see that they buried the weapons of peace, or they buried the weapons of war for peace.”  
(Alma 24:19)

“Now behold, the people who were in the land Bountiful, or rather Moroni, feared that they would hearken to the words of Morianton ...” (Alma 50: 32)

Here the phrase, “people who were in the land Bountiful” should have been erased and “Moroni” inserted. With no erasers and scarcity of metal, the engraver simply inserted the qualifying phrase plus the correction.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Mary Lee Treat, “No Erasers,” in *Recent Book of Mormon Developments*, ed. Raymond C. Treat (Independence, Missouri: Zarahemla Research Foundation, 1984), 54. I have changed the references to the Community of Christ chapter and verse numbers to those found in the LDS scriptures. I have also slightly regularized some formatting. A very similar argument is Gary C. Lawrence, “Smell of the Lamp, Smell of Engraving,” *Meridian Magazine*, November 2, 2010, accessed June 2013, <http://www.ldsmag.com/article/1/6585>.

Treat is looking at a very important aspect of the Book of Mormon. The process is one of self-correction. While agreeing entirely with her analysis that these verses indicate a corrected error, I don't see them as related to the difficulty of writing on plates but rather to the habits of the underlying primacy of orality. Self-correction occurs all of the time in both spoken and written texts. However, in written texts we attempt to remove the evidence of our errors. One of the methods employed is the one Treat suggests, which is that we erase. However, the problem of engravers is only slightly different from that of those writing in ink. There are numerous documents that attest to the practice of striking out a word or a phrase. There is no reason to believe that a strikeout or some other method could not have been used on the plates. Nevertheless, we have these examples of self-correction.

Ruth Scodel, D. R. Shackleton Bailey Collegiate Professor of Greek and Latin at the University of Michigan, underscores the oral underpinnings of self-correction: "In genuinely spontaneous speech, self-correction and shifts of direction happen all the time. (Avoiding too much self-correction is an important measure of competence in such everyday oral narration as telling jokes.)"<sup>73</sup> It is also found in written texts. In that context, she notes:

Self-correction presents very different issues, depending on whether it occurs within a single text or between texts. For a speaker to change his mind, stop himself, or announce that he has spoken inappropriately, generally implies an extemporaneous situation, since with preparation the speaker could presumably have gotten it right the first time (there

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<sup>73</sup> Ruth Scodel, "Self-Correction, Spontaneity, and Orality in Archaic Poetry," in *Voice Into Text: Orality and Literacy in Ancient Greece*, ed. Ian Worthington (Leiden, The Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1996), 64.

is, of course, the special rhetoric of abandoning a prepared text in favour of spontaneous speech, but that is not at issue here). Pindar, of course, often engages in self-correction of this kind. On the other hand, when a speaker corrects what he has said before, on another occasion, the situation is somewhat different. There is no necessary implication of spontaneity, but there must be a previous relationship with the audience, since they must understand what is being corrected.<sup>74</sup>

What we have in the Book of Mormon is representative of extemporaneous self-correction. When the extemporaneous trait intentionally appears in a written text, Scodel suggests that “self-correction is the extreme example of pseudo-spontaneity.”<sup>75</sup> In the Book of Mormon, it presumes too heavy a burden on literary sensibilities to assume that the self-correction was stylistic. When it occurs, it occurs just as it would in spontaneous speech and I suggest that it is an artifact of the oral style that is replicated in writing precisely because the oral style informs the literary. It becomes pseudo-spontaneity only in literature that is subject to revision and editing before being committed to final written form. As with the repetitive resumption, self-correction in the Book of Mormon is an indication that there was some spontaneous writing on the plates, even though there is also evidence that there was at least an overall outline.<sup>76</sup>

In spite of the difficulties of engraving, it appears that Mormon did not have a full copy of his text composed on

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74 Ruth Scodel, “Self-Correction,” 62.

75 Ruth Scodel, “Self-Correction,” 64.

76 Gardner, “Mormon’s Editorial Method,” 84–97. Noel B. Reynolds (“Nephi’s Outline,” in *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds [Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1982], 53–74) examines intentional structuring in 1 Nephi. Also suggesting that Nephi had an outline is Frederick W. Axelgard, “1 and 2 Nephi: An Inspiring Whole,” *BYU Studies* 26, no. 4 (Fall 1986): 53–65.

perishable form and then simply copied to the plates. Although the elements of oral primacy might still have informed his draft, the presence of these self-corrections point to changes made as he composed. They would have been easily caught in the copying process and we would have copy errors in the text rather than self-corrections.

A possible confirmation of oral primacy comes from Christ's teachings at Bountiful:

Therefore give heed to my words; write the things which I have told you; and according to the time and the will of the Father they shall go forth unto the Gentiles.

And whosoever will hearken unto my words and repenteth and is baptized, the same shall be saved. Search the prophets, for many there be that testify of these things.

And now it came to pass that when Jesus had said these words he said unto them again, after he had expounded all the scriptures unto them which they had received, he said unto them: Behold, other scriptures I would that ye should write, that ye have not. (3 Nephi 23:4–6)

Christ commands that they write his teachings, but not for their own benefit. They are to “go forth unto the Gentiles.” For the present audience, the oral presentation was intended as the primary means of transmitting the message. Note that in verse 6 he repeats what he had taught. In the oral setting, the repetition allowed them to better remember what had been said. The implication is that they are to remember what was said, but the written text was for a different audience. Further understanding of the role of literacy in Nephite society will come from understanding both who is writing and to whom.

### Function of Writing in the Book of Mormon

Rosalind Thomas reminds us that “throughout history many more people have been able to read than write.”<sup>77</sup> This does not suggest that they would not be able to reproduce a letter or word that they could read, but that they were unable to translate their thoughts (or oral presentations) in a written form. The greater training required to produce a document suggests that we can understand some of the functions of literacy in a culture by examining what is written and who its audience might have been. The nature of the limited data source we have in the Book of Mormon is a caution that conclusions based upon that limited data may not represent the complete picture. We can only reconstruct a full picture of Nephite written production from the evidence at hand.<sup>78</sup>

We have explicit indications that three members of Lehi’s family, Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob, wrote. From Nephi we have the two books he created that form our current beginning to the Book of Mormon, as well as the record he entitled the book of Lehi (which Mormon abridged and which was translated but lost in the 116 pages given to Martin Harris). Lehi also wrote a record (1 Ne. 6:1). While not conclusive, it is not unreasonable to assume that the social status of the family allowed for literacy for all of its members. Once established as a family trait, it is also likely that literacy would have continued among Nephi’s and

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<sup>77</sup> Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece*, 10.

<sup>78</sup> Seeing Nephites as participants in greater Mesoamerican culture, and given the plausible location of their lands, it is plausible to assume that they also participated in the Maya text-producing culture. We can be certain that they were aware of it based on Mosiah<sub>1</sub>’s translation of the stone with the Coriantumr’s history (Omni 1: 20–21). That is expressly a stone brought in from another location, so although we are certain that they were aware of the written culture surrounding them, there is no internal evidence that they also participated in monumental texts such as are found in other Mesoamerican sites.

Jacob's descendants, at least for a few generations.<sup>79</sup> Jacob was not raised in Jerusalem and certainly learned to read and write from his family. Enos, son of Jacob, also writes as do others in that line (Jarom, Omni, Ammoron, Chemish, Abinadom, and Amaleki). Unlike Jacob, who clearly had an important role in Nephite society, we know nothing of the social status of his descendants. Omni and Abinadom specifically mention that they fought to defend their people. Perhaps they were military leaders and were both, therefore, of a lineage and caste that might write.<sup>80</sup> We know that at least some military leaders were literate. Both Captain Moroni<sub>1</sub> (Alma 54:5–14, 60:1–36) and Helaman<sub>1</sub> (Alma 56:2–58:41) wrote letters while in the field.<sup>81</sup>

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79 Rollston, *Writing and Literacy in the World of Ancient Israel*, 124:

Based on a substantial amount of empirical data it has been argued in a cogent manner that “home experiences” have a formative impact upon such fundamental aspects of literacy as phonological awareness and knowledge of letters. There are a number of variables, but among the most important contributors is the practice of reading in the home, parental attempts at instruction in reading and writing, parental emphasis on the importance of literacy, and even the nature of general conversations in the home.... There is, therefore, a “generational component” to literacy in a family: literacy begets literacy. Conversely, illiteracy begets illiteracy. Nevertheless, there are exceptions.

80 John A. Tvedtnes (“Book of Mormon Tribal Affiliation and Military Caste,” in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin [Salt Lake City and Provo: Deseret Book Company and Foundation for Ancient research and Mormon Studies, 1990], 313) notes that “other evidence for the importance of tribal/family descent in the Book of Mormon is found in the fact that some of the offices seem to be hereditary.” He then discusses a possible military caste among the Nephites (pp. 317–22).

If this were part of earlier Nephite society, then some of Jacob's descendants could have been in positions of military leadership and retained literacy to better function in that position. We also see the continuation of literacy in a family rather than just individuals in the fact that Amaron and Chemish are brothers and Chemish receives the records and charge to write from his brother (Omni 1:8).

81 Other letters are written by Pahoran, Chief Judge of the Nephites (Alma 61:2–21), and Giddianhi, the leader of the Gadiantons (3 Ne. 3:2–10). Ammoron, the Lamanite king, received and sent letters to Moroni<sub>1</sub> (Alma 54:16–24).

When we return to the portion of the Book of Mormon based on the large plates of Nephi, we are clearly in the top tiers of Nephite society. Nephi had established that plate tradition to be “an account of the reign of the kings, and the wars and contentions of my people” (1 Ne. 9:4). As a record of the reigns of kings, it is clearly associated with the highest social tiers. Those listed as the writers are the kings, or the High Priests.

Who read what these people wrote? Of course, the reader depends directly upon the purpose for writing. Korihor (of unknown social status) could clearly both read and write (Alma 30:50–52). His writing clearly provided for immediate communication when he no longer had access to hearing or speaking. A similar function of relatively rapid communication is seen in the exchange of military letters that we see at the end of the book of Alma. Although it is possible that some might be sent with the expectation that they be read to the recipient, there is no textual indication that they were. It is best to assume that both those who sent them and those who received them had the ability to read and write. Benjamin and Mosiah<sub>2</sub> both created written versions of important political declarations and circulated them. In this case, the ultimate audience was the entire population, but pragmatism suggests that they were read to the final audience rather than the audience reading them directly. Still, there is clearly a function of relatively immediate communication in some of the writing attested in the Book of Mormon.

There were other records, however, that appear to have an archival function more than one of direct communication. In one case, Alma<sub>1</sub> receives a revelation and records it specifically, so that it becomes a reference against which his people might

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It is possible, however, that the text simply glosses over the use of scribes. However, if the leadership were among the upper class of society, as is probably in an ancient society, they would be those more likely to be literate.

be judged: “And it came to pass when Alma had heard these words he wrote them down that he might have them, and that he might judge the people of that church according to the commandments of God” (Mosiah 26:33). The function of the writing in this case appears to be the creation of a referenceable law, which might be consulted when needed.

The most important case is the non-perishable records kept on metal. There were three sets: the brass plates, the large plates of Nephi, and the small plates of Nephi.<sup>82</sup> The very act of inscribing the text on this material declares an assumption that they have a future audience for which they are being preserved. The fact that they were recorded for the millennia does not necessarily preclude their use in the living community. In fact, the brass plates are the source of the vast majority of identifiable quotations in both the small plates of Nephi and in Mormon’s book which used the large plates of Nephi as a source. John Hilton III, an assistant professor of Ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University, points out a time when information that we know must have been on the large plates of Nephi (through Mormon’s redaction) are referenced in such a way that it is both likely that they had not only been consulted but also distributed, so that others might understand them. He notes:

Later textual evidence suggests that words from Alma, Amulek, and Zeezrom had been circulated among the people generally. When speaking to a group of Lamanites and apostate Nephites, Aminadab said, “You must repent, and cry unto the voice, even until ye

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<sup>82</sup> The designation “large plates of Nephi” and “small plates of Nephi” are modern conventions to help us distinguish the records that had two different transmission paths in Nephite history. Nephi simply called both of them “plates of Nephi.” The “large” and “small” refer to the quantity rather than the physical size of the plates.

shall have faith in Christ, who was taught unto you by Alma, and Amulek, and Zeezrom” (Hel. 5:41).<sup>83</sup>

The fact that later Nephite prophets had access to the words of earlier ones opens the possibility for intentional intertextual quotations and allusions within the Book of Mormon.

He also cautions in his footnote to this incident:

These words had been spoken forty-five years previously, indicating a reliance on oral or written traditions, as opposed to the people in Helaman 5 having recently heard these words. It is also clear that a wide variety of people had access to the words on the brass plates, including both the wealthy priests of King Noah and the poor Zoramites (see Mosiah 12:20–21 and Alma 33:15). However, the fact that these words were circulated does not necessarily indicate widespread literacy among the Nephites. It is possible that the words were given to literate individuals in the community who then read them to others. Either way, it is clear that many people in the Book of Mormon were expected to be familiar with the teachings of earlier Nephite prophets.<sup>84</sup>

It is certain that the audience was being reminded of teachings that they should remember having been taught, even if they had forgotten to live according to those teachings. It is less clear what the source of their remembrance would have been. Certainly in the incident as described, there is an expectation of memory rather than the consultation of a source. Nevertheless, it is yet possible that there were sermons that were circulated

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83 John Hilton III, “Textual Similarities in the Words of Abinadi and Alma’s Counsel to Corianton,” *BYU Studies* 51, no. 2 (2012): 39–41.

84 Hilton, “Textual Similarities”: 40n2.

just as royal decrees were, and parallel to instructive letters that were circulated among the early Christian church.

It is problematic to discover clear cases when those recorded on the large or small plates provide quotations from earlier writings on the large or small plates (obviously excepting Mormon who quotes often). Just as early Christian writers considered the Old Testament to be the scripture one quoted, so Book of Mormon writers overwhelmingly quote from the brass plates. There have been studies suggesting times when the Book of Mormon writers consulted the records.<sup>85</sup> The value of such studies has a direct correlation to one's understanding of the type of translation represented by the Book of Mormon, because they necessarily depend upon the repetition of phrases in English because the original language text is unavailable to us.

The explicit reader for both the small plates of Nephi and Mormon's book is in the distant future. The material from Words of Mormon through Moroni (including Ether) as well as the text from Jacob to Omni is clearly written to a future

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85 John W. Welch, "Textual Consistency," 21–22. John A. Tvedtnes and Kevin L. Barney ("Word Groups in the Book of Mormon," in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon: The FARMS Updates of the 1990s*, ed. Melvin J. Thorne and John W. Welch [Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1999], 213) illustrate the problem of this type of analysis. It is suggested:

I first noted the possible presence of word groups in the Book of Mormon in connection with 3 Nephi 6:14. It struck me, when reading that passage, that the words "firm, and steadfast, and immovable" seemed to be a quote from Lehi's words to his son Lemuel in 1 Nephi 2:10. It seemed beyond coincidence that Mormon, who abridged the record in 3 Nephi, should have used the same three words employed by Lehi. Either Mormon was quoting Lehi's words or the combined use of these words was common among the Nephites.

Unfortunately, there is another more probable cause. The pairing "stedfast, unmoveable" appears in 1 Corinthians 15:58. Joseph's vocabulary included a facility for paralleling New Testament language and phrases. More importantly, Mormon tells us that he did not find the small plates until he was well into writing (Words of Mormon 1:3). There is little indication that he consulted that set of records as he continued to write, since he found those plates only after he had already written his account for the time period they covered.

audience. It is only Nephi's writing that gives us perhaps mixed signals about whom he believed his audience to be. Nephi specifically writes:

Wherefore, for this cause hath the Lord God promised unto me that these things which I write shall be kept and preserved, and handed down unto my seed, from generation to generation, that the promise may be fulfilled unto Joseph, that his seed should never perish as long as the earth should stand.

Wherefore, these things shall go from generation to generation as long as the earth shall stand; and they shall go according to the will and pleasure of God; and the nations who shall possess them shall be judged of them according to the words which are written.

For we labor diligently to write, to persuade our children, and also our brethren, to believe in Christ, and to be reconciled to God; for we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do.

And, notwithstanding we believe in Christ, we keep the law of Moses, and look forward with steadfastness unto Christ, until the law shall be fulfilled.

For, for this end was the law given; wherefore the law hath become dead unto us, and we are made alive in Christ because of our faith; yet we keep the law because of the commandments.

And we talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ, and we write according to our prophecies, that our children may know to what

source they may look for a remission of their sins. (2 Nephi 25:21–26)

Verses 21 and 22 make it explicit that Nephi’s writings would be seen in distant generations. While Nephi slips into the present when he writes that they “talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ,” he still points out that “we write according to our prophecies, that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins.” It is probable that *children* is used to represent lineal descendants in the future rather than their immediate progeny. Nephi clearly preached to a living audience, but he wrote for a distant one.<sup>86</sup>

In one special case, the audience was clearly and intentionally broad:

And when Moroni had said these words, he went forth among the people, waving the rent part of his garment in the air, that all might see the writing which he had written upon the rent part, and crying with a loud voice, saying:

Behold, whosoever will maintain this title upon the land, let them come forth in the strength of the Lord,

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<sup>86</sup> There is a possibility that Nephi did intend something of what he wrote in the small plates to be read to his current population. He writes:

And now I write some of the words of Isaiah, that whoso of my people shall see these words may lift up their hearts and rejoice for all men. Now these are the words, and ye may liken them unto you and unto all men. (2 Nephi 11:8)

Wherefore, I write unto my people, unto all those that shall receive hereafter these things which I write, that they may know the judgments of God, that they come upon all nations, according to the word which he hath spoken. (2 Nephi 25:3)

In both of these cases, Nephi writes to “his people.” However, it is unclear whether that people consisted of the current population or his descendants. With other statements indicating the future purpose, the reading of his descendant population may be the better.

and enter into a covenant that they will maintain their rights, and their religion, that the Lord God may bless them. (Alma 46:19–20)

The Title of Liberty was intentionally a visible symbol, and an important part of that visual symbol was the writing it contained: “And it came to pass that he rent his coat; and he took a piece thereof, and wrote upon it—In memory of our God, our religion, and freedom, and our peace, our wives, and our children—and he fastened it upon the end of a pole” (Alma 46:12). It is the only occasion in which the intended audience for writing included all who would see the banner. Does that mean that everyone who saw it was literate?

Answering that question requires that we remember that literacy is seldom an all or nothing proposition. We saw the example of the man whose knowledge of letters extended only to that which was carved in stone. Recognizing the word *STOP* on a stop sign does not require the same level of literacy as does reading a novel. Similarly, there are many who can understand *e pluribus unim*, which appears on money in the United States, even though they cannot read or understand any other Latin phrase.

The ability to recognize some words, then, provides some level of literacy. It does not represent the ability to read (and especially not to create) complex documents. For the Maya, Stephen Houston suggests: “I believe Maya writing developed in ways that reflected increased literacy, particularly for the Early Classic on, although from various clues it seems that writing and perhaps reading were still restricted to relatively few people.”<sup>87</sup> Much of what remains of Maya writing is explicitly public. However, that does not necessarily mean that all could read all of the text. Houston notes: “I agree with Thompson and Kubler that the pictorial features of the writing were

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87 Houston, “Literacy Among the Pre-Columbian Maya,” 40.

maintained—that is, prevented from achieving the abstraction that characterizes Chinese logographs—by the need to preserve superficial reading ability among a larger group of people.”<sup>88</sup> The Title of Liberty, by its visibility and repetition, likely became a recognizable symbol that most could “read” because they already knew what it said.

### Conclusion

The Book of Mormon is a literate product of a literate culture. It references written texts. Nevertheless, behind the obvious literacy, there are clues to a primary orality in Nephite culture. The instances of text creation and most instances of reading texts suggest that documents were written by and for an elite class who were able to read and write. Even among the elite, reading and writing are best seen as a secondary method of communication to be called upon to archive information, to communicate with future readers (who would have been assumed to be elite and therefore able to read), and to communicate when direct oral communication was not possible (letters and the case of Korihor). Even as Mormon and Moroni wrote, they wrote as though speaking, using techniques appropriate to oral performance adapted to the written text.

None of this changes the essential message of the Book of Mormon, but it does suggest that as we approach the text, the primacy of oral presentation may influence how we see the creation of the text. For example, there are numerous speeches recorded in the Book of Mormon. They exist in written form, but there is no indication that they were first written and then presented orally. Thus, the recording of the oral presentation is secondary and probably an incomplete and a post hoc edited version of what was originally presented. As we approach the text, we may gain new insights into the art with which it was

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<sup>88</sup> Houston, “Literacy Among the Pre-Columbian Maya,” 40.

constructed by examining it as the literate result of a primarily oral culture.

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