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Title Nephi as Scribe

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Abstract As a younger son who might not inherit his wealthy father's business, the Book of Mormon prophet Nephi may have been trained for another profession. One of the high-status professions open to him would have been that of scribe. The evidences of his scribal training are reviewed. His early professional training may have been important preparation for his later role in establishing the Nephites as a true "people of the book."

Nephi as Scribe

Abstract: Nephi was a younger son of a wealthy family. As one who might not inherit his father's business, it is possible that he was trained for another profession. One of the high-status professions open to him would have been a scribe. Beyond the fact that Nephi produced at least three written works (1 Nephi, 2 Nephi, and the nonextant large-plate book of Lehi), there are other evidences in his writing that betray the kind of training scribes received. His early professional training may have been an important preparation for his later role in establishing his people as a true people of the book.

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Nephi was a man of the New World, but he was shaped by his upbringing in the Old World, where he was the youngest son in a wealthy Jerusalem family. We understand that he was raised in a wealthy family because he and his brothers were able to amass what appears to have been a substantial fortune consisting of "our gold, and our silver, and our precious things" (1 Nephi 3:22). It was large enough to fuel Laban's greed, if not his cooperation. It is probable that, as part of Joseph's lineage (5:14), Lehi's grandparents or perhaps great-grandparents had been among the refugees who fled the kingdom when it was conquered by the Assyrians in 722 BC.[1] Lehi appears to have retained his ancestral lands in Israel and likely collected rent on them.[2]

In addition to probably receiving income from his ancestral lands, Lehi was likely employed in some form of commerce that increased his wealth. Hugh Nibley suggested that Lehi gained his wealth as a caravaneer, trading in wine, oil, figs, and honey,[3] but John Tvedtnes challenged that hypothesis and suggested there was better evidence that Lehi was involved in metalsmithing. Most of Tvedtnes's evidence concerns Nephi's familiarity with metalworking, not his father's. For example, Nephi was given detailed instructions on how to build a ship but apparently not on how to make the needed tools. Nephi simply asks the Lord, "Whither shall I go that I may find ore to molten, that I may make tools to construct the ship after the manner which thou hast shown unto me?" (1 Nephi 17:9). After arriving in the New World, he listed in his record useful

1. Jeffrey R. Chadwick, "Lehi's House at Jerusalem and the Land of His Inheritance," in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 87.
2. Chadwick, "Lehi's House at Jerusalem," 117.
3. Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 35–37.

animals and also "all manner of ore, both of gold, and of silver, and of copper" (18:25)—presumably because the metals were also useful. He taught his New World people metalworking (2 Nephi 5:15–17).[4]

Although the evidence for metalworking in the family is heavily based on information specific to Nephi, it still points to Lehi's occupation.[5] Jeffrey Chadwick adds important information that more surely demonstrates Lehi's involvement:

> Lehi left behind gold and silver, two precious metals likely to have been used in expert jewelry smithing. While the population at large often utilized silver as money, in the form of cut pieces and small jewelry (no coins were in use in Judah during Iron Age II), to possess gold was very rare—gold was not used as a medium of common monetary exchange. For Lehi to possess both gold and silver suggests that he worked with gold, which in turn suggests gold smithing.[6]

The combination of metalsmithing and collecting rent from ancestral lands in Samaria would have enabled Lehi and his family to approach Jerusalem's upper class.[7]

It is no surprise that Nephi would have learned something from his father's trade, but that may not be the most important defining aspect of his personal education. Nephi was a fourth son, not a first son. The family business was destined for Laman, the eldest. Although Nephi may have learned metalsmithing from his father, I suggest that he formally trained for a different profession.

The most important evidence that Nephi was trained for a different profession is so obvious that it is easily missed: Nephi could read and write. Unlike our modern expectation of literacy, illiteracy (or, perhaps better stated, nonliteracy) was the norm in ancient Israel. Although it is difficult to ascertain the extent of literacy in ancient Israel, an interesting letter gives us a glimpse of the situation. The Lachish letters were ostraca (scraps of pottery used for writing) written to and from military leaders apparently preparing for Nebuchadnezzar's invasion (around 590 BC). That invasion eventually resulted in the fall of Jerusalem, the Babylonian exile, and of course, Lehi and his family's departure 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.[8]

The fact that letters were exchanged clearly points to some literacy. However, the superior's

4. John A. Tvedtnes, *The Most Correct Book: Insights from a Book of Mormon Scholar* (Salt Lake City: Cornerstone, 1999), 94–95.
5. Tvedtnes, *Most Correct Book*, 94–98.
6. Chadwick, "Lehi's House at Jerusalem," 114. Chadwick proposes ten reasons to see Lehi as a metalsmith (114–17), all but the first of which deal with Nephi rather than Lehi. We simply have better information for Nephi and the best explanation for Nephi's expertise is that of his father.
7. Chadwick, "Lehi's House at Jerusalem," 117.
8. J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986), 418. See also Wikipedia, s.v. "Lachish Letters," last modified 27 November 2010, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lachish_letters#cite_note-1.

expectation was that the recipient might not be able to read. Rather, it was assumed that the letter would be read to the recipient. The subordinate's reply reflected justifiable pride in his ability to read. In addition to highlighting the typical expectations of illiteracy, however, this letter 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 function of the writing was to provide the information that would then be remembered without the written copy.[9]

Nephi's writings have no such parallel expectation of orality. They are documents that were meant to be read rather than memorized. They were to be preserved and perhaps consulted by his descendants. They were open-ended in the sense that future writers would continue to add to the text. The plates of Nephi were a continually aggregated cultural memory. The length and complexity of Nephi's two texts point to the work of a trained scribe. An untrained, semiliterate person would not have been sufficiently competent to attempt such a record.[10]

Being a scribe entailed much more than simply learning to read and write. It was a specific type of education following similar lines in each of the Middle Eastern traditions. The great civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia had scribal schools.[11] Indirect evidence confirms the presence of scribal education in Israel and Judah.[12] Only the higher social classes were acceptable sources of scribes.[13] Nephi's social status would have allowed him the opportunity to be trained as a scribe.

The scribal schools' curriculum covered a range of topics, from languages, classic texts, and the interpretation of texts, to public speaking. Karel van der Toorn describes the language component of such training:

> Instruction in the idiom of particular professions and written genres could be seen as part of the larger program of language instruction. The linguistic skills of the scribes would normally have included the mastery of one or more foreign languages. Around 700, the officials of King Hezekiah were able to conduct a conversation in Aramaic, which to the common people was incomprehensible (2 Kings 18:26). In addition to Aramaic, the scribal program may have taught other languages as well, such as Egyptian and, later, Greek. In the words of Ben Sira, the accomplished scribe "will travel through the lands of foreign nations"

9. Karel van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 12: "In order for the message 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."

10. The result of less scribal training seems apparent near the end of the small plates record, where a number of writers add brief entries to the book of Omni. Perhaps this brevity indicates that, as much as having little to say, the writers did not have the training that would have provided them with more to say.

11. Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 68–69.

12. Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 96–104.

13. Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 105: "In view of their social-economic situation, the Levitical scribes can be likened to civil servants with no financial worries. They could apparently afford to pay for the education of their children; for them, a tuition fee consisting of a large sum of silver was not prohibitive. While it is conceivable that mere copyists and lower clerks were drawn from the lower strata of society, scribes belonged to what we would call the upper middle class" (internal quotation omitted).

> to increase his knowledge (Sir 39:4). Such exploits presume that training in foreign languages was part of the scribal education.[14]

That such skill in linguistics and writing systems existed in Israel receives confirmation from a number of artifacts from Canaan that exhibit Egyptian hieratic writing. In light of these findings, Orly Goldwasser, head of Egyptology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, suggests that Egyptian scribes in Canaan trained local scribes in the art:

> After the decline of the Egyptian Empire . . . many Egyptians, or Egyptian-trained Canaanite scribes lost their means of existence, and may have offered their scribal and administrative knowledge to the new powers rising in the area, first the Philistines and then the Israelites. . . . We would like to suggest that these Egyptian or Egyptian-trained scribes, cut off from their homeland, well acquainted with Egyptian decorum as well as the Canaanite language, educated local scribes, who in their turn passed on their knowledge to their successors.[15]

The text on an artifact found at Lachish contains the Egyptian title "scribe." This bolsters the idea that there was an Egyptian scribal tradition in Judah.[16]

The presence of a scribal tradition that dealt with both the Egyptian language and one (or more) of its writing systems may provide a specific cultural background to explain the enigmatic references in Nephi's introduction:

> I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents, therefore I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father. . . . Yea, I make a record in the language of my father, which consists of *the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians*. (1 Nephi 1:1–2)

Hugh Nibley first noticed and highlighted that Nephi's proficiency with Egyptian was the result of having been *taught*.[17] Many Latter-day Saint scholars have suggested that "a record in the language of [Nephi's] father, which consists of the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians" may have been an Egyptian script encoding Hebrew language.[18] Evidence does exist to indicate that this kind of mixing of script and language took place. John Tvedtnes and Stephen Ricks provide some examples:

> [There] are Israelite documents from the ninth to sixth centuries B.C., from which we learn that the Israelites adopted the Egyptian hieratic numerals and mingled

14. Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 100.

15. John S. Thompson, "Lehi and Egypt," in Welch, Seely, and Seely, *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, 267. The quotation is from Orly Goldwasser, "An Egyptian Scribe from Lachish and the Hieratic Tradition of the Hebrew Kingdoms," *Tel Aviv* 18 (1991): 248–53.

16. Thompson, "Lehi and Egypt," 266.

17. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites*, 13. Nibley references Mosiah 1:4, which specifically speaks of Lehi "having been taught in the language of the Egyptians." While the text has Lehi as the one receiving this education, I suggest that this is due to the late reference. Mosiah is using this example over four hundred years later. It would not be surprising that after so much time the reference to the learned one might have been reassigned to the Old World patriarch rather than to Nephi, the New World king.

18. John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985), 74–76; Sorenson, "The Book of Mormon as a Mesoamerican Record," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997), 443 (however, Sorenson notes that Hugh Nibley and Robert F. Smith see both the language and the script as Egyptian, 507 n. 121); Daniel C. Peterson, "Is the Book of Mormon True? Notes on the Debate," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997), 150–52; and Tvedtnes, *Most Correct Book*, 22–24. However, Nibley, in *Lehi in the Desert*; *The World of the Jaredites*; *There Were Jaredites*, 15, disagrees that Nephi was referring to Hebrew language written with Egyptian characters.

> them with Hebrew text. More important, however, are Hebrew and Aramaic texts—languages used by the Jews of Lehi's time—that are written in Egyptian characters. One of these is *Papyrus Amherst* 63, a document written in Egyptian demotic and dating to the second century B.C. The document had, like the Dead Sea Scrolls, been preserved in an earthen jar and was discovered in Thebes, Egypt, during the second half of the nineteenth century. For years, Egyptologists struggled with the text but could make no sense of it. The letters were clear, but they did not form intelligible words. In 1944, Raymond Bowman of the University of Chicago realized that, while the script is Egyptian, the underlying language is Aramaic.[19]

Although understanding that Nephi may have been trained as a scribe does not entirely clarify what he meant by "the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians," it does provide a context in which those two aspects of language fit naturally together in a written document, and a single person might have the necessary linguistic skill to creatively use a script to represent the phonetics of a different language. We might expect one who was minimally literate to be able to write his native language with his native script, but not to exhibit the learning necessary to combine the phonetics of one language with a symbolic representation typically used for a different language.

In addition to languages, the curriculum of a scribal school included studying important cultural texts. Essentially the same Mesopotamian list of texts has been found in diverse locations, suggesting that these texts formed a standard curriculum for different scribal schools.[20] Egyptian scribes similarly worked with and often memorized many of their classic texts.[21] For the Israelites, van der Toorn notes, "The scholars of Israel were no exception to the common pattern: they were scribes who had specialized in the classic texts, which in their case made them scholars of the Torah."[22]

Perhaps Nephi's respect for and frequent citation of Isaiah were a direct result of a scribal school's emphasis on Isaiah. Van der Toorn suggests that the presence of multiple copies of Deuteronomy, Isaiah, and the Psalms among the Dead Sea Scrolls is an "indication of their position in the scribal curriculum."[23] Everything Nephi wrote attests to his intimate familiarity with Isaiah, a familiarity that may have been the result of his study of Isaiah as a classic text.

Positing scribal training for Nephi gives a new context and explanation for many of the features of 1 Nephi (and to a lesser degree 2 Nephi). Particularly in 1 Nephi, Nephi constructs his text for a purpose greater than simply telling his story. This function is an important qualifier for the text since an autobiographical text would have been a very unusual document for a scribe to produce in the ancient Near East.[24] As will be shown,

19. John A. Tvedtnes and Stephen D. Ricks, "Jewish and Other Semitic Texts Written in Egyptian Characters," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5/2 (1996): 159–60.

20. Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 57–58.

21. Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 68.

22. Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 81.

23. Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 102.

24. Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 101–2: "The secondary phase of the scribal program was devoted to the study of the classics. . . . To find out which classics had the greatest place in the scribal curriculum, we may look at the library of Qumran. About 25 percent of the Dead Sea Scrolls are scriptural. Except for the book of Esther, all books of the Hebrew Bible are represented by at least one copy. The three books represented by the most manuscripts are Psalms, Deuteronomy, and Isaiah" (the technical nomenclature of the scrolls has been omitted). See van der Toorn's discussion on p. 189.

Nephi created a text that made a point in a form that followed scribal traditions.

The book of 1 Nephi is argument for ethnogenesis; that is, it is a document designed to establish and legitimize a new people. In creating this text, Nephi followed the Near Eastern tradition for the content of such texts. Ann Killebrew lays out the basic form:

> Following Hedwig Wolfram's definition, the process of ethnogenesis that forms the core ideology of a group often comprises three characteristic features: (1) a story or stories of a primordial deep, which can include the crossing of a sea or river, an impressive victory against all odds over an enemy, or combinations of similar "miraculous" stories (e.g., the exodus); (2) a group that undergoes a religious experience or change in cult as a result of the primordial deed (e.g., reception of the Ten Commandments and worship of Yahweh); and (3) the existence of an ancestral enemy or enemies that cement group cohesion (e.g., most notably the Canaanites and Philistines). These basic elements form the key themes in the biblical narrative about the emergence of early Israel.[25]

Although it is possible that this was a subconscious model,[26] the skill with which Nephi crafts his story to communicate these acceptable justifications for ethnogenesis points to an educated background that at least taught the texts that exemplified these ideas. Nephi identified and justified himself as the prophet (and also king) of the new people by providing an accepted *mythos* for a new people. It was no longer an Old World Israel but a New World Israel. The departure of his family from a destroyed Jerusalem included crossing an ocean, the quintessential primordial deep. This new people received their scriptural record through the conflict with and defeat of Laban. Once in the New World, this New Israel is defined against a specific "ancestral" enemy in the Lamanites. The cultural requirements of establishing a new people are completely and rather directly defined.

Creating a new people was not Nephi's only problem. Although his kingly role had been thrust upon him by the people (2 Nephi 5:18), Nephi had to justify the necessity for a new king apart from the king of Old World Judah. Moreover, he had to establish himself as a legitimate king. Traditionally, the king should have been a first son. Nephi should not have been king according to typical expectations.

Nephi resolved that potential issue with a precedent from the Torah.[27] He painted himself as the literary parallel to Joseph of Egypt, who was similarly a younger son that rose to rule over his brothers. Joseph of Egypt had a dream in which Yahweh confirmed Joseph's future as the ruler over his brothers (Genesis 37:5–10). Nephi's authorization came in a revelation that he would rule over his brethren (1 Nephi 2:19–22).[28] When Joseph told his brothers of his dream, they were

25. Ann E. Killebrew, *Biblical Peoples and Ethnicity: An Archaeological Study of Egyptians, Canaanites, Philistines, and Early Israel, 1300–1100 B.C.E.*, Society of Biblical Literature Archaeology and Biblical Studies, ed. Andrew G. Vaughn (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 9:149.

26. Alan Dundes, "The Hero Pattern and the Life of Jesus," in *In Quest of the Hero* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 190, discusses how common patterned expectations molded the biography of Abraham Lincoln to the "hero" pattern. See also Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977), for the socially defined structure that underlies Russian folktales.

27. Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 137–41, discusses the way that scribes used the established texts in the creation of new ones.

28. Although Joseph had a dream and Nephi a revelation, there was only the slightest conceptual difference between the two, both being communications of Yahweh's will to man.

Parallels between Exodus and 1 Nephi		
Incident	**Exodus**	**1 Nephi**
The call to the responsible leader through a revelation accompanied by fire	3:2–4	1:6
The despoiling of the Egyptians and the taking of some of Laban's possessions	12:35–36	4:38
Deliverance on the other side of a water barrier	14:22–30	17:8; 18:8–23
An extended period of wandering	16:35	17:4
Complaints along the way	15:24	2:11–12; 5:2–3; 16:20, 25, 35–38; 17:17–22
Outright rebellion	(see Numbers 16:1–35; 25:1–3)	7:6–16; 18:9–21
New law that was to govern the Lord's people	20:2–17	2:20–24*

* S. Kent Brown, "The Exodus Pattern in the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 30/3 (Summer 1990): 112. I have reorganized his insights into table form. This table also appears in Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormo*n (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007–08), 1:45.

angry with him and attempted to kill him (Genesis 37:5, 18). When Nephi told his brothers, they too were angry (1 Nephi 16:38), and eventually they attempted to kill him (2 Nephi 5:2).[29] Nephi not only had to know the story of Joseph well, but he had to have the literary training to effectively apply it to the new situation recorded in his text.

Unlike the ethnogenetic parallels or his justification for his kingship, Nephi had no cultural pressure that required him to select the story of Israel's exodus as a model for his family's exodus from Jerusalem. Nevertheless, he described his family's journey in a way that made the literary parallel unmistakable to one who understood the scriptural account.

A more subtle use of a scriptural model is Nephi's application of the David and Goliath story as a backdrop and perhaps justification for his encounter with Laban. Ben McGuire

29. In paralleling his story with that of Joseph of Egypt, Nephi was still constrained by the specific events. He was not inventing history but simply telling history in a way that used the scriptural model to enhance his purpose in creating the record.

sees Nephi and Laban as antagonists paralleling David and Goliath:

> Both protagonists cite miracles as the basis for their faith. David cites instances from his own life, and Nephi cites one from the history of Israel and one from his own life. They each then conclude by remarking that just as God performed those miracles, God will deliver them from the hand of their antagonists. . . .
>
> A second thematic parallel also occurs in David's suggestion that "thy servant slew both the lion and the bear: and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be as one of them." This suggests (prophetically) that what happened to the lion and the bear will also happen to the Philistine. In Nephi's parallel account, he speaks of a similar fate awaiting Laban: "The Lord is able to deliver us, even as our fathers, and to destroy Laban, even as the Egyptians." . . .
>
> Another thematic parallel here is that David claims to be killing Goliath so that "all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel." In Nephi's account, Laban is killed so that Nephi's posterity will know the God of Israel. . . .
>
> Both narrative units then end with the death of the antagonist and the subsequent removal and keeping of his armor.[30]

Thus we see that Nephi's mastery of scriptural texts was sufficient that he could recast them as models for a new historical event.

Once scribal students mastered the fundamental texts, they were trained in the exegesis of those texts.[31] This tradition is evidenced in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Robert Eisenman explains how this attribute of the scribal industry functioned in the Dead Sea Scrolls:

> A *pesher* is a commentary—at Qumran, a commentary on a well-known biblical passage, usually from the Prophets, but also from Psalms and sometimes even other biblical books like Genesis, Leviticus, or Deuteronomy. The important thing is that the underlying biblical passage being interpreted should be seen as fraught with significance in relation to the ideology or history of the Scroll Community. Often this takes the form of citing a biblical passage or quotation out of context or even sometimes slightly altered, followed by the words, "*peshero*" or "*pesher ha-davar*", meaning "its interpretation" or "the interpretation of the passage is". The text then proceeds to give an idiosyncratic interpretation having to do with the history or ideology of the group, with particular reference to contemporary events.[32]

Nephi not only includes passages from Isaiah but also uses Isaiah as a foundation and springboard for his own revelation. As with the *pesharim*, the scripture served as the springboard for a text that applied that scripture to a current situation. In his final farewell revelation in 2 Nephi 25-30, Nephi wrote his prophecy using the previously inserted Isaiah texts as a thematic foundation. What Nephi begins in chapter 25 is not an expla-

30. Ben McGuire, "Nephi and Goliath: A Case Study of Literary Allusion in the Book of Mormon," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 18/1 (2009): 20–22.

31. Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 58.

32. Robert Eisenman, *James the Brother of Jesus: The Key to Unlocking the Secrets of Early Christianity and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 80–81.

nation of Isaiah[33] but rather an expansion of Isaiah. Nephi tells us, "I proceed with mine own prophecy, according to my plainness" (v. 7). His purpose in writing is to discuss his vision, not Isaiah's meaning. The elements of this vision are so closely aligned with those of Nephi's vision of the tree of life that it is virtually certain that it is that vision he is referring to. However, whereas his earlier recounting of that vision was placed in the context of his family's exodus, the version in chapters 25–30 is grounded more deeply in revered prophecy. Isaiah becomes the conceptual framework for Nephi's new explanation of his seminal vision. Thus Nephi's talent with exegesis was such that he could view the same vision from two different perspectives. In the latter he used scriptural text to continually support his visionary understanding.

Nephi underscores his position as explicator of scripture and revelation in other ways. When occasion warrants, he easily turns to scripture to support his position. When his brothers' resolve fails them in the quest for the brass plates, Nephi turns to a scriptural text that he likens to their task. He recounts the Lord's destruction of Pharaoh's army during Israel's exodus (1 Nephi 4:2–3). Scribes often incorporated previous texts into their new works. Rather than copying, however, they relied on their memory of the texts.[34] Although Nephi was writing this long after the actual event, there is every reason to believe that he was capable of such extemporaneous citation and explication of scriptural texts.

If the Mesoamerican cultural context behind the Book of Mormon is correct, then when King Nephi desires to enhance the integration of the indigenous population into his new Israelite city, he has Jacob preach a sermon based on a text from Isaiah that indicates that Gentiles will come to the aid of Israel.[35] Jacob specifically notes that he speaks at Nephi's direction and tells his audience: "I would speak unto you concerning things which are, and which are to come; wherefore, I will read you the words of Isaiah. And they are the words which my brother has desired that I should speak unto you. And I speak unto you for your sakes, that ye may learn and glorify the name of your God" (2 Nephi 6:2, 4). Nephi intended that the words of Isaiah, a prophet who prophesied more than one hundred years earlier about an event in Israel's future, should be "for [the Nephites'] sakes." It was a pointed lesson taken from scripture and applied to a living situation. It was something that one might have expected from one with scribal training.

It is in the light of such training that we might reconsider 1 Nephi 15:21–28:

> And it came to pass that they did speak unto me again, saying: What meaneth this thing which our father saw in a dream? What meaneth the tree which he saw?

33. Typical LDS language describing what Nephi does with Isaiah is found in Daniel H. Ludlow, *A Companion to Your Study of the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 283: "Nephi then provides an inspired commentary for six chapters (2 Ne. 25–30) on the meaning of the teachings of Isaiah." See also Victor L. Ludlow, *Unlocking Isaiah in the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 199: "Nephi then adds his own prophetic commentary on Isaiah's words (2 Nephi 25–32). Nephi's inspired commentary provides wonderful insights as we study the words of Isaiah in the Book of Mormon." While Nephi is certainly commenting and using Isaiah as the basis for those comments, he is not giving us a commentary on Isaiah. He is using Isaiah's writings as "likened" texts to support the meaning of the vision that is his real intent in writing.

34. Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 117.

35. Gardner, *Second Witness*, 2:130–31. John Gee and Matthew Roper presented virtually the same argument at the thirty-second Sidney B. Sperry Symposium, "'I Did Liken All Scriptures unto Us': Early Nephite Understandings of Isaiah and Implications for 'Others' in the Land," in *The Fulness of the Gospel: Foundational Teachings from the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 55–56.

> And I said unto them: It was a representation of the tree of life. And they said unto me: What meaneth the rod of iron which our father saw, that led to the tree? And I said unto them that it was the word of God; and whoso would hearken unto the word of God, and would hold fast unto it, they would never perish; neither could the temptations and the fiery darts of the adversary overpower them unto blindness, to lead them away to destruction. Wherefore, I, Nephi, did exhort them to give heed unto the word of the Lord; yea, I did exhort them with all the energies of my soul, and with all the faculty which I possessed, that they would give heed to the word of God and remember to keep his commandments always in all things. And they said unto me: What meaneth the river of water which our father saw? And I said unto them that the water which my father saw was filthiness; and so much was his mind swallowed up in other things that he beheld not the filthiness of the water. And I said unto them that it was an awful gulf, which separated the wicked from the tree of life, and also from the saints of God.

In these verses our typical reading has a clueless Laman and Lemuel coming to their spiritual younger brother who understands and explains the dream to them. But this reading misses an important cultural perspective that colors the nature of the event. Why didn't Laman and Lemuel understand? The most likely answer is not that they were simply spiritually blind.[36] The answer is more likely to be found in the symbolic nature of the vision. Laman and Lemuel had no training in the interpretation of the symbolic content of dreams.[37] Therefore they heard but did not understand.

Nevertheless, in spite of their culturally assigned superiority over a younger brother, and in spite of particular animosities, they did not feel uncomfortable coming to Nephi for an explanation. The logical but undeclared reason that Laman and Lemuel would think to approach Nephi (as perhaps opposed to their father) would be Nephi's training. If Nephi had been trained as a scribe, then they would naturally come to him for an explication. In van der Toorn's words: "The true scribe . . . has learned to see what others could not see even if they were given the ability to read."[38]

If we posit some scribal training as part of Nephi's background, the nature of his text takes on new depths and fresh perspectives. First Nephi in particular demonstrates a significant number of features that are best explained as the result of formal scribal training. Even in 2 Nephi, which I have suggested was less planned and structured than 1 Nephi,[39] Nephi's training provides connections between Isaiah and his own experience as he writes. Both the very presence and the nature of the two books we have from Nephi point to

36. In the New Testament, the apostles and others constantly ask Jesus for the meaning of his parables (Matthew 13:36; 15:15; Mark 4:10–13, 34; Luke 8:9; John 10:6). The intent of these New Testament passages is to demonstrate not that there were those who didn't understand, but rather that these were lessons that had to be explained by the Master (Matthew 13:11–17; 15:15; Mark 4:2, 11–13, 33; Luke 8:10). This practice is aptly summed up in Mark 4:34: "But without a parable spake he not unto them: and when they were alone, he expounded all things to his disciples." Allegorical or symbolic themes were expected to be interpreted by one who was better able to understand them.

37. Lehi may not have had scribal training, but he was the one receiving the symbolic visions. This presumes that they were given in terms that he understood. Nephi does not initially understand them either, and his comprehension is the direct result of being taught—this time by an angel (1 Nephi 11).

38. Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 106.

39. Gardner, *Second Witness*, 2:324–25.

his formal training as a scribe prior to his family's departure from Jerusalem.Ω

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