

ENGRAVEN
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Textual and Narrative Structures
of the Book of Mormon

BRANT A. GARDNER

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For Mark A. Wright and his inspiration on so many fronts.

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INTRODUCTION

For Latter-day Saints in the last hundred years, the official story of Joseph Smith's prophetic ministry begins with what is called the First Vision, a vision of the Father and Jesus Christ who forbade him joining any of the churches in his region. However, in the decade from 1820 to 1830, he only told one person, a minister. The experience was sufficiently negative that Joseph declined to tell the story again until a decade or more later.¹

Instead, the story the earliest Saints heard, and for whom it formed the foundation of their belief in the new religion, was the story of golden plates:

When I was seventeen years of age I called again upon the Lord and he shewed unto me a heavenly vision for behold an angel of the Lord came and stood before me and it was by night and he called me by name and he said the Lord had forgiven me my sins and he revealed unto me that in the Town of Manchester Ontario County N.Y. there was plates of gold upon which there was engravings which was engraven by Maroni & his fathers the servants of the living God in ancient days and deposited by th[e] commandments of God and kept by the power thereof and that I should go and get them and he revealed unto me many things concerning the inhabitants of the earth which since have been revealed in commandments & revelations and it was on the 22d day of Sept. AD 1822.²

Joseph declared that his personal failings prevented him from receiving those plates for four years. After that time, he recounted:

I was chastened and sought diligently to obtain the plates and obtained them not untill I was twenty one years of age and in this year I was married to Emma Hale Daughtr of Isaach [Isaac] Hale who lived in Harmony Susquehan[n]a County Pennsylvania on the 18th January AD, 1827, on the 22^d day of Sept of this same year I obtained the plat[e]s.³

In between that visit where the angel declared that ancient writers had engraven on plates and the printing of the Book of Mormon in 1830 is

1. Steven C. Harper, *First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins*, 9–11.

2. "History, circa Summer 1832," The Joseph Smith Papers, 4. This version is the only one of Joseph's histories that contains some of his own handwriting. One minor repetition and a cross-out silently removed.

3. "History, circa Summer 1832," 5.

the story of the translation itself and the production of the Original and Printer's manuscripts. This book focuses on what may be learned from the manuscripts about the translation, and what may be discerned from the translation of how those ancient writers composed their intended stories. This book examines the English translation for information about which elements of the text correspond to the act of translation, and which elements were present in the Nephite original prior to its translation.

The analysis covers three compositional layers that are explicit and implicit in the text of the Book of Mormon.

1. The Nineteenth-Century Text

The modern historical record makes it clear that Joseph Smith and various scribes were involved in producing the 1829 English language text that became known as the "Original Manuscript." Because the first 116 dictated pages by Martin Harris were lost, a copy of the subsequent translation was made for the compositor to avoid a similar fate.⁴ That manuscript is known as the "Printer's Manuscript," the majority of which was used to typeset the first printing of the Book of Mormon. Were it complete, the Original Manuscript would have been the most important source for understanding the dictated text prior to the compositor's paratextual additions, but much more is missing than remains.⁵ Fortunately, the Printer's Manuscript remains mostly intact, missing only three lines of text.⁶

A comparison of the Printer's Manuscript with the extant portions of the Original Manuscript shows that while there were some scribal errors introduced in the creation of the Printer's Manuscript, there are no signs of editing.⁷ This means that while we cannot compare the Printer's

4. According to research done by Don Bradley, the number of pages dictated to and lost by Martin Harris may have actually been as high as 300 pages, with the number 116 being instead the page count of the small plates translation contained in the Printer's Manuscript. See Don Bradley, *The Lost 116 Pages: Reconstructing the Book of Mormon's Missing Stories*, 92–103.

5. In the introduction to the Joseph Smith Papers' publication of the remaining Original manuscript, the editors note: "Of the nearly 500 pages that were placed in the Nauvoo House cornerstone, portions of 232 pages survive, amounting to roughly 28 percent of the text. Some of what remains is badly faded, obscured, or otherwise damaged." Royal Skousen and Robin Scott Jensen, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 5: Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*, xi.

6. Royal Skousen and Robin Scott Jensen, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 3: Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*, xii.

7. Skousen and Jensen, *Original Manuscript*, xxv.

Manuscript to the Original, there is yet confidence that the Printer's Manuscript is reasonably faithful to the Original.

These two manuscripts were unquestionably produced in the nineteenth century and dictated in an English translation. They establish the most recent composition layer of the Book of Mormon. Section I examines the question of whether Joseph's mind was an active presence in the creation of the English text and explores elements that may be ascribed to its nineteenth-century composition.

2. The Nephite Book of Mormon

Section II begins to look at the text that was engraved on the plates. As the only way to examine this earlier composition layer is through the analysis of the translation layer, this section examines the evidence for a written text that underlies the dictated English text; it also explores elements of the text that fit better with the ancient compositional layer.

3. Nephite Writers and Their Sources

Section III looks to an even earlier compositional layer. The Nephite writers Nephi, Jacob, Mormon, and Moroni all indicate that they used previously written sources as they crafted their own stories. This section looks to understand those sources, how they were constructed, what they contained, and how they were used.

The perspective of this book is that of a believer in the claims the Book of Mormon makes to its provenance. Nevertheless, it should not be seen as an apologetic work, at least in the sense of an apologetic defense of the truth claims of the text. Those claims are simply accepted so that the analysis of the different compositional layers can be made to see which elements reasonably belong to each of the three creative layers claimed by the final publication. It is hoped that even those not of the faith might gain insight into the multiple dimensions represented by those compositional categories.

Much of the analyses of ancient textual flow elements resulted from a project where I took the bare, punctuation-free Printer's Manuscript and, just as John H. Gilbert did for the 1830 edition, added my own punctuation and paragraphing to format the text into a readable published version. Although the sentence and paragraph structure often parallel those of Gilbert's, the logic for the creation of paragraphs differs significantly from all other publications. This text is available as *The Plates of Mormon:*

A Book of Mormon Study Edition Based on Textual and Narrative Structures in the English Translation, also available from Greg Kofford Books. In some ways, this book serves as an introduction to the editing decisions made in that work. Nevertheless, the two can stand on their own. I express my thanks to Loyd Ericson of Kofford Books for his hard work in making these books happen. A very different book entered his editing grinder. It fought both of us, but through his efforts a much better book emerged from the process.

Finally, a note on the use of subscripts with some Book of Mormon names: There are often two or more people who share the same name. These are designated as, for example, Nephi₁, Nephi₂, and Nephi₃. There are more duplicated names than are indicated in this book. The only Book of Mormon names receiving subscripts are those where at least two different men (and they are always men) have the same name and both are mentioned in this book. For example, Captain Moroni and Moroni the son of Mormon share the same name, but Moroni is not indicated with a subscript as Captain Moroni does not appear in this book.

The following is a short biography of the men carrying the same name who appear in this book:

Alma₁, father of Alma₂

Alma₁ was a descendant of Nephi₁ and lived in the land of Nephi after the people of Zeniff returned to that land from Zarahemla (born ca. 173 BC). He was a priest of the wicked king Noah and is described as “a young man” (Mosiah 17:2). He was sitting in the king Noah’s court when Abinadi was brought to trial and became Abinadi’s only convert.

As an exile, Alma₁ began to gather those who were willing to listen to the gospel as Abinadi had preached it. So many people believed Alma₁’s preaching of the gospel that they began to form a large enough body that king Noah became aware of their meetings and meeting place. Warned to flee, Alma₁ and his followers left the land of Nephi and headed north, where they found a place to live which they called Helam (Mosiah 23:19–20). Eventually, they made their way to Zarahemla (Mosiah 25:5–6).

Alma₁ himself does not appear to have held any particular named position, although he was clearly influential. His son, also named Alma, became the first chief judge as well as the designated leader of all of the Nephite churches.

Alma₂, son of Alma₁

While Alma₁ was a confidant of king Mosiah₂, Alma₂ (ca. 100–73 BC) and his close friends, king Mosiah₂'s sons, rebelled against their fathers' religious teachings. In an event with some parallels to Saul's vision of Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9), Alma₂ was traveling with the sons of Mosiah₂, "going about rebelling against God" (Mosiah 27:11), when an angel appeared to them. Alma₂ was the focus of the angel's message, and the spiritual power of that event was "so great that [Alma] became dumb, that he could not open his mouth; yea, and he became weak, even that he could not move his hands" (Mosiah 27:19).

When Mosiah₂ dissolved the monarchy, Alma₂ was made the first chief judge, as well as the leader of the churches in the land of Zarahemla. In addition to keeping the large-plate record of the Nephites, Alma₂ kept a personal record that was available to Mormon, of which Mormon used to enter most of the material from Alma 7 through 42. Those chapters contain some of the most important sermons recorded in the Book of Mormon.

Helaman₁, son of Alma₂

Nephite recordkeeper and military leader (ca. 74–52 BC). After his father's passing, he also became the chief High Priest of the church, building it up (Alma 45:22–23). His military career was intertwined with the story of the two thousand stripling warriors. It was Helaman who convinced their parents (formerly known as the Anti-Nephi-Lehies) not to pick up arms and therefore break their oath (Alma 53:13).

Helaman₂, son of Helaman₂

He became the Nephite record keeper. His father, Helaman, had given charge of the records to Helaman's brother Shiblon, and Shiblon passed that responsibility to Helaman's son (Alma 63:11; 53 BC). In 50 BC he was elevated to chief judge, and the book of Helaman is named for him.

He ruled at a time when the ancient secret combinations were reborn. Kishkumen, leader of the group that would become known as the Gadianton robbers, attempted to assassinate Helaman, but was himself killed before he could succeed.

Helaman ruled righteously (Hel. 3:20) and died in 39 B.C. (Hel. 3:37).

Lehi₁ of Jerusalem

Lehi₁ was called as a prophet of the coming Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem around 600 BC and was contemporary with Jeremiah,

Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Obadiah, and Ezekiel. He faithfully fulfilled his call as a prophet to Jerusalem but was rejected by the people there. The Lord commanded that he take his family and flee. He was to be guided to a new land of promise for his family.

Lehi₁ continued to be the family prophet as well as patriarch in the Old World. In the New World, he is known for his blessings to his sons in 2 Nephi, and particularly his powerful teachings about agency found in 2 Nephi 2. The separation of his children into two groups appears to have occurred after his death.

Lehi₂, son of Helaman₂

Lehi₂ is known as the missionary companion to his brother Nephi (ca. 45 BC). He and his brother served among the Lamanites and converted eight thousand (Alma 5:16–20). Mormon was more interested in his brother Nephi, and we know of Lehi only as part of Nephi's missionary labors.

Mosiah₁, father of Benjamin

Born and raised in the land of Nephi, the Lord told Mosiah₁ to flee the land of Nephi with all those who would go with him (ca. 200 BC; Omni 1:12). They were led to the city of Zarahemla where they met the people who were descended from Mulek of Jerusalem. Mosiah₁ was made king over the united peoples, perhaps due to the brass plates which lent authority to his claim to divinely sanctioned rulership.

He used the interpreters to translate a large stone that the people of Zarahemla brought to him (Omni 1:20). That stone recorded some of the history of the Jaredites. Much of what might have been known of his reign was lost with the 116 pages.

Mosiah₂, son of Benjamin

Mosiah₂ was installed as king when his father, Benjamin, called a special gathering of the combined peoples of Zarahemla following a terrible civil war. He was king from about 124 to 91 BC. At the end of his reign, his sons refused to become king. Therefore, to forestall potential political divisions, Mosiah₂ altered the nature of Nephite government, moving from a king to the reign of judges (Mosiah 29:6–11). Part of that change included the establishment of laws that would be used to judge rather than simply follow the will of the king.

Nephi₁, son of Lehi₁

Nephi₁ was the youngest of the four sons of Lehi₁, born in Jerusalem (ca. 615–544 BC). He was favored of the Lord and prophesied to be a leader and teacher over his brothers (1 Ne. 2:22). After Lehi₁'s death, the Lord told Nephi₁ to flee as his brothers desired to kill him (2 Ne. 5:4–6). Nephi₁ became the leader of a new people who eventually took his name and elevated him as king. This fulfilled the prophecy of becoming a ruler, although it was over his brothers Sam, Jacob, and Joseph. Nephi₁ never ruled over Laman and Lemuel.

Nephi₁ was the original Nephite recordkeeper, creating two sets of plates on which different types of history was to be recorded. The official record has been called the large plates of Nephi, and the second set, which the Lord commanded Nephi₁ to create, has been called the small plates of Nephi. The adjectives large and small refer to quantity of plates rather than size.

Nephi₁ ruled righteously, although not without difficulty. In his farewell words he noted that there were “many that harden their hearts against the Holy Spirit, that it hath no place in them” (2 Ne. 33:2).

Nephi₂, son of Helaman₂

Nephi₂ was an important prophet and leader, filling the role of chief judge after his father's death (Hel. 3:37). He eventually abdicated to concentrate on the ministry (Hel. 5:1–5). His ministry spanned from approximately 39 BC to AD 1. He was joined in his missionary service by his brother, Lehi₂, and they had much success. First, they went to the people of Nephi in the land southward (Hel. 5:16) and then on to the Lamanites. There they were imprisoned but miraculously freed (Hel. 5:49). They were successful among the Lamanites, sufficiently so that eventually the Lamanites would send Samuel as a prophet to declare repentance to the Nephites (Hel. 13:1–2).

During Nephi₂'s lifetime, the Gadiantons gained control of the Nephite government (Hel. 7:4). Nephi₂ called upon God to seal the heavens, which resulted in a drought. Eventually, enough people repented that the drought was lifted.

Nephi₃, son of Nephi₂

Nephi₃ was the prophet who received the knowledge that the Savior would be born on the very night before the believers would be put to death should the signs not be given (ca. BC 90; 3 Ne. 1:9–14). He was

one of the twelve disciples that the resurrected Christ chose when he appeared in Bountiful (3 Ne. 19:4). It is probable that it was Nephi₃'s short account of the Savior's visit that Mormon used as the basis for much of 3 Nephi (3 Ne. 5:9).

There is some confusion over the relationship between this Nephi₃ and the one for whom the book of 4 Nephi is named. Evidence suggests, however, that it was this very Nephi₃.

SECTION I:
THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY TEXT

CHAPTER ONE

JOSEPH AND TRANSLATION

An important foundation to any discussion of the nineteenth-century elements in the Book of Mormon is to understand the role Joseph Smith played in the production of the text. For those who do not believe in its ancient provenance, the answer is simple: Joseph did not translate anything, and the entirety of the text is from the nineteenth century.

On the other hand, belief in the declarations the text makes about its ancient historicity, as well as what later revelations say of Joseph's relation to the text, affirm that it is not merely a nineteenth-century production; instead, it is "an account written by the hand of Mormon upon plates. Taken from the plates of Nephi. Wherefore, it is an abridgment of the record of the people of Nephi, and also of the Lamanites—Written to the Lamanites, who are a remnant of the house of Israel; and also to Jew and Gentile" (Title Page).

That ancient text is declared to have been translated into English by some process that involved both Joseph and the "gift and power of God."¹ From this perspective, it is abundantly clear that Joseph is considered the text's translator:

- July 1828: "& when thou deliveredst up that Which that which God had given thee right to Translate."²
- Spring 1829: "It is wisdom in me that ye should translate this first part of the engravings of Nephi."³
- April 1830: "& gave unto him power by the means of which was before prepared that he should translate a Book which Book contained a record of a fallen People."⁴

Importantly, the same language was applied in March 1831 to the work Joseph did with the Bible: "I say unto you it shall not be given unto you to know any farther then this until the New Testament be translated."⁵

Joseph saw himself, and was therefore seen by his community, as a translator. The issue that remains difficult to understand is precisely what

1. Joseph Smith, "Preface," 1.

2. "Revelation Book 1," 2 [Doctrine and Covenants 3:12].

3. "Revelation Book 1," 11 [Doctrine and Covenants 10:45].

4. "Revelation Book 1," 53 [Doctrine and Covenants 20: 8–9].

5. "Revelation Book 1," 75 [Doctrine and Covenants 45:60].

is meant by the term “translate.” On a macro level, Samuel M. Brown has produced an important examination of the way the word *translation* may explain the widest context of the Joseph’s theology. He writes: “Translation was about more than words and sentences. Translation was also concerned with the transformation of human beings and the worlds they were capable of inhabiting.”⁶ That may be the best and most inclusive definition, but it is not helpful for understanding how the Book of Mormon’s Nephite language was recreated in English. This is a topic that has long been discussed in Latter-day Saint scholarly literature.

One attempt to describe Joseph’s own influence on the English text is Royal Skousen’s triple delineation of iron-clad, tight, and loose control during Joseph’s translation efforts.⁷ However, Skousen’s schema primarily relates to the controlled transmission of the text and not necessarily the process of translation itself.⁸ Thus, Skousen would allow for a perhaps *loose* translation that was created prior to the time it was given to Joseph, who then *tightly* dictated what he saw through a seer stone.

To attempt to provide a different perspective to unravel the threads of the translation tangle, we may instead delineate the various stages of the movement of the ancient Nephite text into a modern English text. There are four that can be examined:

1. The ancient composition and its intended audience.
2. The agent of translation and the intended audience.
3. Joseph Smith’s oral dictation.
4. The transcription of the dictated text.

Because it is only the fourth step—the translated dictation—that can be directly examined, it is there that this study will begin, working in reverse to induce what can be learned of each stage. They are further defined as follows:

Stage 4: The Transcription of the Dictated Text

An analysis of what was transcribed as Joseph spoke is thoroughly examined in Skousen’s *Analysis of the Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*.

6. Samuel Morris Brown, *Joseph Smith’s Translation: The Words and Worlds of Early Mormonism*, 4.

7. Royal Skousen, “Translating the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript,” 64–65. A revised version is Royal Skousen, “How Joseph Smith Translated the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript,” 24.

8. Skousen, “Translating the Book of Mormon,” 64–65.

That is unquestionably the work that should be consulted on this aspect of the creation of the modern text. This book has nothing to add.

Stage 3: Joseph Smith's Oral Dictation

When Joseph dictated to his scribes, he spoke English. This may seem too obvious to point out. However, an examination of the nature of the English text necessarily focuses on Joseph and the language of his time, environment, and culture. This stage explores if and how the early nineteenth century is reflected in the English text as dictated.

Stage 2: The Agent of Translation and the Intended Audience

The declaration that Joseph was the translator conflates stages 2 and 3. If Joseph is the agent of translation, then modern elements of the text may be attributed to him. If a divine being created the translation, and Joseph simply read it to his scribes, then modern elements must be assigned to that divine agent of translation. Thus, Section I spends time examining the arguments for Joseph being the agent.

Stage 1: The Ancient Composition and Its Intended Audience

The Book of Mormon declares that there are multiple compositional tasks behind this stage, with authors such as Nephi₁, Jacob, Mormon, and Moroni all writing of their own experiences and utilizing available records in the creation of their texts. The original, assumed audience for those writers would have driven some of their organization, literary structures, and selected events. Furthermore, these writers wrote in a different language, in a different culture, and from a much earlier time than the production of the English text. The examination of the creation of this stage is discussed in Sections II and III.

With that conceptual background of the process, we may examine Joseph's English dictation to identify elements that support him being the agent of translation and illustrate the way in which his nineteenth century cultural milieu appears in the dictated text.

Because the Book of Mormon is declared to have been translated by the gift and power of God, the invocation of the divine draws implicit assumptions about God into the discussion of its creation. There have been at least three basic assumptions about the nature of God's participation in the creation of the English text. The earliest was that God's involvement produced an infallible text. (Skousen calls this an "iron-clad" translation.)

A more recent development is that the divine influence occurred prior to Joseph consulting the translation instruments. Thus, there is a divine translation attributable to an entity from the heavenly realm rather than Joseph Smith. (This is Skousen’s “tight control” position.)

Finally, the position this book recommends is that Joseph Smith was, indeed, the translator. When the English text is examined and elements are found that can be attributed to the nineteenth century, they are to be laid at his feet rather than at the feet of the ancient writers—or of God. (This is Skousen’s “loose control” position.)

A Divinely Infallible Translation?

Because Joseph Smith gave little indication of his process of translation, we must turn to the many accounts given by those who were associated with him at the time. Joseph Knight’s recollection is subtly more informative of the nature of the witnesses’ recollection:

Now, the way he translated was he put the urim and thummim into his hat and Darkned his Eyes then he would take a sentence and it would apper in Brite Roman Letters then he would tell the writer and he would write it[.] then <that would go away> the next sentence would Come and so on But if it was not Spelt rite it would not go away till it was rite [,] so we see it was marvelous.⁹

Royal Skousen lists four more people who supported the idea that the translation process was so accurate that even spelling errors were caught and corrected—Emma Smith, Martin Harris, David Whitmer, and Samuel W. Richards¹⁰—implying that God played a role in the very wording of the text, down to the spelling. However, other evidence suggests that their agreement is likely due to the communal refining of their understanding rather than an accurate description of what happened.¹¹

The actual data from the Book of Mormon original manuscript is more nuanced.¹² While there is support for statements that Joseph spelled names, there is no corresponding datum to support the correction of the spelling of basic English words.¹³ According to Skousen,

Frequently the first occurrence of a Book of Mormon name is first spelled phonetically, then that spelling is corrected; in some instances, the incorrect

9. Joseph Knight Sr., “Reminiscence, Circa 1835–1847,” 4:17–18.

10. Skousen, “Translating the Book of Mormon,” 65–66.

11. Brant A. Gardner, *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon*, 119–34.

12. For an explanation of why the witness statements might agree on something that can be demonstrated to be incorrect, see Gardner, 109–18.

13. Skousen, “Translating the Book of Mormon,” 76.

spelling is crossed out and followed on the same line by the correct spelling, thus indicating that the correction is an immediate one.¹⁴

Whatever process led to the spelling of names did not extend to the spelling of long words, which were often misspelled in the manuscript.¹⁵ Furthermore, despite the control over (usually initial) spellings of names, there is no evidence demonstrating that this control continued for the spelling of those same names. Skousen notes: “[Joseph,] having learned to pronounce the difficult words, . . . would have simply relied on the scribe to correctly spell the words he dictated, except for unfamiliar names.”¹⁶ Thus, instead of the dictation being divinely spell-checked throughout, it seems more likely that these witnesses observed initial or occasional corrections and simply assumed consistent divine intervention. Given what the manuscripts show us, we should see these witness statements for their intention rather than their specific information. For example, Knight made his intention very clear when he declared that because of the spelling corrections, one could see that it was “marvelous.” Knight was more interested in testifying of the miraculous process than defining the nature of it.

Perhaps the best indication that the words themselves were not seen as divinely perfect and therefore unchangeable was Joseph Smith’s own willingness to alter some of the words, which he personally did for the 1837 edition of the Book of Mormon. Here, the only person who had actually experienced the process did not feel that the words themselves were divinely perfected and could not be improved.

A Divine, or Divine-adjacent, Translator?

There is no question that Joseph Smith was involved in the production of the modern text of the Book of Mormon. Numerous witnesses heard him dictating the text, and those who scribed for him confirm that they wrote what he said. In the model of the process of translation, stage 3 (the oral dictation of the text) is so well established that there is no need for examination of who transmitted the text to the scribes.

As for who translated the text, Joseph insisted: “Here then the subject is put to silence, for ‘none other people knoweth our language’ (Morm.

14. Skousen, 75.

15. Skousen, 76–77. That spelling errors would exist in the original manuscript is hardly surprising, as witnessed by the frequency with which modern spell checkers fail to do their job. Spelling was still in the process of stabilization in the early nineteenth century.

16. Skousen, 79.

9:34), therefore the Lord, and not man, had to interpret the Nephite record.”¹⁷ This statement leaves open the possibility that Joseph could have been the agent of transmission without being the agent of translation. That is, he could have simply been reading an existing text. If so, he would have had no input in the translation.

This is the position that some Latter-day Saint scholars have proposed. For example, Royal Skousen has long favored the idea of Joseph merely dictating an existing translation that he read from the interpreters or the seer stone.¹⁸ More recently, that concept has been bolstered by research into the Book of Mormon’s English. From such, Skousen concludes: “Based on the linguistic evidence, the [translator] . . . was not Joseph Smith.”¹⁹

This conclusion is based on a comparison of vocabulary and grammatical forms found in the Book of Mormon (and other of Joseph’s translation projects) that were supposedly archaic in 1830 and not part of Joseph’s normal speech. Another scholar, Stanford Carmack, similarly declares:

Smith himself—out of a presumed idiosyncratic, quasi-biblical style—would not have translated and could not have translated the text into the *form* of the earliest text. Had his own language often found its way into the wording of the earliest text, its form would be very different from what we encounter.²⁰

This hypothesis is countered by the evidence of Joseph’s mind in play during the translation process.

Joseph Smith as the Agent of Translation?

Born in 1805, Joseph Smith was unavoidably a man of the early nineteenth century, and the Book of Mormon, published in 1830, carries elements of the nineteenth century that have long been recognized in the text. Such modern elements should, however, be expected if Joseph had an involved role in the translation. One of the ways to understand how Joseph may be responsible for these more modern intrusions into the ancient content is to examine the ways that we can discern his mind in his other translation projects.

17. John W. Welch and Erick B. Carlson, eds., “Joseph Smith to the *Times and Seasons* (1843),” 127.

18. Skousen, “Translating the Book of Mormon,” 64–65.

19. Royal Skousen, with Stanford Carmack, *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon: The King James Quotations in the Book of Mormon*, 6.

20. Stanford Carmack, “Joseph Smith Read the Words,” 41 (emphasis in original).

Presence of Joseph in the Translation of the Bible

The Joseph Smith Translation contains changes to the King James Bible that range from revelatory expansion, to editorial changes, to a more mundane modernization of vocabulary. The process of translation was markedly different from that of the Book of Mormon. Unlike the translation of the Book of Mormon, Joseph rarely used a seer stone or similar instruments of translation.²¹ Indeed, the “original” text that was *translated* was a King James Bible that he and Oliver Cowdery purchased from E. B. Grandin on October 8, 1829.²² It was a Bible similar to the that used by most Latter-day Saints today, but some words had been modernized and some punctuation and italicized words were different.²³ Looking at his translation, we can observe two main ways in which changes were made to the Bible. The first involves Joseph interacting with the printed text and making relatively small changes; the second involves a revelatory process well exceeding the existing canon.

The physical Bible Joseph used in the translation process contains markings that clearly show him interacting with the text, but it rarely includes textual changes written into the margins or between the lines.²⁴ However, there are check marks, crosses, circles, dots, and other characters in ink or pencil.²⁵ The marks appear to be related to the two processes that Joseph used. In the shorter method directly involving the biblical text, the markings would indicate particular words or verses that were to be changed; he would then dictate the changes rather than provide an entire new text.²⁶ In the longer, revelatory method, Joseph would dictate an entire chapter or more. As he worked through his translation, Joseph eventually moved away from the long method of revealing completely new passages to the shorter method of marking up the text to indicate smaller changes to be made. From that point on, then, the first phase of

21. Kent P. Jackson, *Understanding Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible*, 15.

22. Robert J. Matthews, “A Plainer Translation”: *Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible: A History and Commentary*, 26.

23. Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews, eds., *Joseph Smith's New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts*, 5.

24. Matthews, “Plainer Translation,” 56.

25. Matthews comments that the marks may have been the result of more than one person's work (59). He suggests the possibility that some of the marks might have been entered after the Prophet's use of the Bible, perhaps by committees preparing the text for publication.

26. Matthews, 59–60.

translation involved reading the Bible text, deciding what type of changes needed to be made, and marking the text with the appropriate symbol.

One of the important similarities between the translation of the Bible and the Isaiah sections of the Book of Mormon is that both pay statistically significant attention to the King James Bible's italicized words. According to David P. Wright, "Many of the variants in the [Book of Mormon] Isaiah over against the King James Version occur precisely at these words."²⁷ Additionally, Wright found that the changes at those locations showed the same pattern as the later changes at italicized words in the translation of the Bible, though he did not explicitly make that comparison:

The words omitted are those that translators would normally insert during translation for smooth conceptual and idiomatic flow in English. That these italicized words are missing is an indication that Smith was working from the KJV and at times made such modifications rather mechanically. This is more transparent in cases where the want of italicized words yields an ungrammatical and even incomprehensible reading. A recurring phrase in Isa. 5:25; 9:12, 17, 21; 10:4 is that God's "anger is not turned away, but his hand *is* stretched out still." In the [Book of Mormon] parallel passages, the verb "*is*" is absent, producing the syntactically incomplete phrase "his hand stretched out still" (2 Ne. 15:25; 2 Ne. 19:12, 17, 21; 20:4). The difficulty had to be remedied in later editions of the [Book of Mormon] by restoring the verb.²⁸

In addition to simply excising italicized words, the Book of Mormon Isaiah passages also show the tendency to add or modify the text around them. Sometimes these changes removed the italicized word, yielding a complete sentence but supplying a slightly different reading. This pattern is simi-

27. David P. Wright, "Isaiah in the Book of Mormon: Or Joseph Smith in Isaiah," 159.

28. Wright, 164. Stan Spencer, "Missing Words: King James Bible Italics, the Translation of the Book of Mormon, and Joseph Smith as an Unlearned Reader and Editor of a Visioned Text," suggests: "In making these changes, Joseph Smith would not have been intending (or pretending) to restore ancient understanding, but rather to correct perceived errors of transmission of the English text. His focus during this process would not have been on italicized words per se, nor on intentionally revising the biblical text, but rather on supplying words where he thought they had been mistakenly (in his view) dropped" (64).

I agree that Joseph made changes in locations other than italicized words, but the only indication that he thought there was a "dropped" word is the removal of the italicized word that required a revision. He was not consistent, but the indication is that he was paying attention to the text in front of him and interacting. There is no good evidence that there were missing words that he had to supply.

larly found in the Joseph Smith Translation, where Joseph at times simply removed italicized words, but more often found new text to replace them.²⁹

The similarity in process and the clear interaction with the physical Bible during the biblical revisions strongly suggest that the underlying relationship of Joseph to the Book of Mormon is similar. In both cases, Joseph was interacting with a text that included italicized words, which became an intermittent focus of his translation efforts. It is also very clear that Joseph was involved in that process as he *translated* the Bible.

The Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible makes clear that there was no divine pre-translated text from which Joseph read. In addition to the evidence of his interaction with the printed text, there are two instances where he translated the same text twice at different times during the translation of the Bible. Kent P. Jackson and Peter M. Jasinski provide the background for this interesting case:

In light of what we know now about the creation of the New Translation, it is interesting to observe that, in two places in the Bible, Joseph Smith provided two original translations that vary from each other. The passages, one quite long (Matt. 26:1–71) and the other very short (2 Pet. 3:4–6), were translated twice, most likely because Joseph Smith had forgotten that he had produced the original translations and thus translated the material anew.³⁰

As they conclude their comparison of the two translations, they note:

The duplicate translation of [Joseph Smith Translation] material provides a unique opportunity to examine how Joseph Smith prepared his translation of the Bible. To a certain extent, we have in this situation the necessary components of a controlled test on how this kind of revelation worked—two independently produced prophetic revisions of the same texts.³¹

In addition to the interactive changes, there was also a significant revelatory process for parts of the text. Joseph created large sections of text that follow from the content of the Bible but are not directly dependent upon it. Kathleen Flake describes this extra-textual method of receiving the information to be written into the text:

Smith is quoted as saying: “After I got through translating the Book of Mormon, I took up the Bible to read with the Urim and Thummim. I read the first chapter of Genesis, and I saw the things as they were done, I turned

29. Wright, “Isaiah in the Book of Mormon,” 167–68.

30. Kent P. Jackson and Peter M. Jasinski, “The Process of Inspired Translation: Two Passages Translated Twice in the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible,” 36.

31. Jackson and Jasinski, 58.

over the next and the next, and the whole passed before me like a grand panorama; and so on chapter after chapter until I read the whole of it. I saw it all!" A more authoritative account is provided by Smith himself in February 1832. "Upon my return from Amherst [Massachusetts] conference, I resumed the translation of the Scriptures. . . . While translating St. John's Gospel, myself and Elder Rigdon saw the following vision" of the resurrection of the dead. Finally, in an 1843 funeral sermon, probably alluding to the account in Matt. 27:52 of graves opening at the death of Jesus, Smith spoke of "the visions that roll like an overflowing surge, before my mind." More specifically, he said, "I saw the graves open & the saints as they arose took each other by the hand . . . while setting up." Thus, although many emendations are editorial, the more radical of Smith's changes to the Bible were understood by him as a function of what he saw when reading it.

At least with respect to the [Joseph Smith Translation], it appears that when he read he saw events, not words. What he saw, he verbalized to a scribe.³²

Flake concludes from this type of revelatory translation:

Arguably, then, 'translate' expressed Smith's experience of 'study[ing] it out in [his] mind' or his sense of agency in front of the text. Smith did not think of himself as God's stenographer. Rather, he was an interpreting reader, and God the confirming authority. He did not experience revelation "as dictated, as something whispered in someone's ear."³³

Presence of Joseph in the Translation of the Book of Abraham

The Book of Abraham provides the most obvious evidence of Joseph's personal involvement in a translation project: the presence of Hebrew words that occur in the text after Joseph studied Hebrew with Joshua Seixas.³⁴ Matthew Grey explains:

This suggests once again that Smith felt free as a translator to incorporate words he learned from his academic studies into the translated content he derived from the papyri. In these instances, the Hebrew does not greatly alter the substance of the text; Smith easily could have conveyed the same ideas by simply translate the words as "star," "stars," or "eternal." Instead, his choice to articulate these concepts with Hebrew vocabulary seems to reflect his convictions that the

32. Kathleen Flake, "Translating Time: The Nature and Function of Joseph Smith's Narrative Canon," 505–6.

33. Flake, 507.

34. Matthew J. Grey, "Approaching Egyptian Papyri through Biblical Language: Joseph Smith's Use of Hebrew in His Translation of the Book of Abraham," 417–18.

Hebrew language was somehow represented on the papyri and that Hebrew vocabulary could be efficaciously used to illuminate the Egyptian text.³⁵

It is important to note that Joseph used a vocabulary expanded by words he did not know and could not have known prior to learning Hebrew. However, once those words were part of his available vocabulary, he felt free to use them in the translation. This evidence strongly indicates that Joseph's available vocabulary was involved in the translation process, at least for the Book of Abraham. Grey further notes:

This confluence of sources suggests that Smith's translation of the Book of Abraham was a dynamic and complex process involving a creative synthesis of his academic efforts and prophetic voice, which included his examination of characters and vignettes on the Egyptian papyri, attempts to create an Egyptian lexicon, interaction with the King James Version of the Bible, and claims to divine inspiration. In addition, the published text of the Book of Abraham shows that Joseph Smith incorporated into the translation process his knowledge of Biblical Hebrew—which he concurrently acquired through textbooks and formal study with a Hebrew Instructor—thus marking the first (and perhaps only) time Smith conscientiously used a conventional ancient language in his production of scripture.³⁶

Like the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham also claims to be a *translation*, and in this case the resulting text shows an obvious interaction with Joseph's own vocabulary at the time of production.

Presence of Joseph in the Text of the Revelations

The Doctrine and Covenants, with the exception of Section 7, makes no claim to translation. Nevertheless, descriptions of how Joseph Smith received and dictated revelations bear a significant similarity to the description of the translation process. For example, Parley P. Pratt described Joseph giving a revelation in May 1831:

After we had joined in prayer in his translating room, he dictated in our presence the following revelation:—Each sentence was uttered slowly and very distinctly, and with a pause between each, sufficiently long for it to be recorded, by an ordinary writer, in long hand. This was the manner in which all his written revelations were dictated and written. There was never any hesitation, reviewing, or reading back, in order to keep the run of the subject; neither did any of these communications undergo revisions, interlinings, or corrections. As he dictated them so they stood, so far as I have

35. Grey, 431.

36. Grey, 390.

witnessed; and I was present to witness the dictation of several communications of several pages each.³⁷

As with his translating, Joseph pronounced revelation without hesitation and without the need to repeat or be reminded of what he had already said. The similarity suggests that there might be at least a conceptual similarity between some of what was translated in the Book of Mormon and Joseph's editorial process for many of his revelations. According to Grant Underwood,

Scholars who have closely compared the wording of the revelation texts in the Doctrine and Covenants with that of earlier printings in the Star and the Book of Commandments have noticed that some passages read differently. It might be thought that this is because the Doctrine and Covenants corrected earlier errors and restored the pure, original text, but such is not the case. Actually the revised wording was designed to more fully and perfectly communicate the Word of God. Literally hundreds of these revisions, usually involving only a word or two but sometimes comprising an entire phrase or more, were made to the revelation texts between initial dictation and final publication in the Doctrine and Covenants.

He adds:

Examination of the [Book of Commandments and Revelations] and the history of the D&C revelation texts from dictation to final form lead us to a richer, more nuanced view, one that sees Joseph as more than a mere human fax machine through whom God communicated finished revelation texts composed in heaven. Joseph had a role to play in the revelatory process.³⁸

37. Parley P. Pratt, *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt*, 62.

38. Grant Underwood, "Relishing the Revisions: Joseph Smith and the Revelatory Process." Karl F. Best, "Changes in the Revelations, 1833 to 1835," gives a similar explanation:

Another possible explanation for changes in the revelations is that Joseph Smith had to interpret or transcribe the ideas that God placed in his mind; the words that he wrote or dictated were only his imperfect interpretation of what God intended. Joseph could then later rewrite or change the revelation to make it better fit what he remembered. . . This concept could be likened to transcribing a vision, a nonword event: any written account could be edited later to clarify the prophet's memory or interpretation of the experience, or to change the emphasis for a particular audience or purpose. (105–6)

Allowing for Joseph's Presence in the Translation of the Book of Mormon

Joseph Smith's revelations and other translations all involved his mind in some way without denying or diminishing any divine influence. The translation of the Book of Mormon need not be any different. In fact, the idea that Joseph's mind was also involved in the translation of the Book of Mormon was proposed in 1862 by Brigham Young, where he speculated: "Should the Lord Almighty send an angel to re-write the Bible, it would in many places be very different from what it now is. And I will even venture to say that if the Book of Mormon were now to be re-written, in many instances it would materially differ from the present translation."³⁹

Many modern Latter-day Saint scholars have followed Brigham's idea and have suggested that the translation consisted of some conceptual connection to the plates that did not extend to precision in the selection of words or grammar. One of the most vocal and careful proponents of this view was B. H. Roberts:

The view of the manner of translating the Book of Mormon here set forth furnishes the basis of justification for those verbal changes and grammatical corrections which have been made since the first edition issued from the press; and would furnish justification for making many more verbal and grammatical corrections in the book; for if, as here set forth, the meaning of the Nephite characters was given to Joseph Smith in such faulty English as he, an uneducated man, could command, while every detail and shade of thought should be strictly preserved, there can be no reasonable ground for objection to the correction of mere verbal errors and grammatical construction. There can be no reasonable doubt that had Joseph Smith been a finished English scholar and the facts and ideas represented by the Nephite characters upon the plates had been given him by the inspiration of God through the Urim and Thummim, those ideas would have been expressed in correct English; but as he was not a finished English scholar, he had to give expression to those facts and ideas in such language as he could command, and that was faulty English, which the Prophet himself and those who have succeeded him as custodians of the word of God have had, and now have, a perfect right to correct.⁴⁰

39. Brigham Young, July 13, 1862, *Journal of Discourses*, 9:311.

40. Brigham H. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God, Volume 2: The Book of Mormon*, 145–46. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, gives a similar explanation for the language used in the revelations contained in the Doctrine and Covenants: "The revelations were not God's diction, dialect, or native language. They were couched in language suitable to Joseph's time.

Roberts's explanation does not discount the Book of Mormon as a translation; instead, it posits that, just like any other translation, the vocabulary and syntax were artifacts of the translator. This perspective of Joseph being an active participant in the translation will inform the discussion of the next two chapters.

The idioms, the grammar, even the tone had to be comprehensible to 1830s Americans" (174).

CHAPTER NINE

PRESERVED ORALITY IN NEPHITE LITERATURE

The Book of Mormon is undeniably and adamantly literate. Where the Bible shows evidence of an oral stage behind many of the books of the Old Testament (and parts of the New), the Book of Mormon declares that it was founded in written texts. There is no indication that any book in the Book of Mormon was oral before it was written down. Indeed, the book of Omni's multiple writers make it clear that they are dealing with a physical record and the need to write upon it. Nevertheless, there is evidence that the Book of Mormon is a written artifact that came from a primarily oral culture and that its "oral world often pervades . . . written expression."¹

The New World had few literate cultures. All of them were concentrated in the area known as Mesoamerica. Among those, literacy was concentrated in the ranks of the elite.² The majority of people in the New World literate societies would have relied upon the oral transmission of information rather than texts. This situation mirrors most ancient literate cultures in the Old World. Thus, William Eggington suggests: "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."³ Without the benefit of editors, the Nephites should have produced evidence not only of their oral style but of their primary dependence upon oral communication—even as they wrote.⁴

The presence of Nephite literacy in an environment that continued to be highly oral provides the context for understanding why elements

1. William M. Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book*, 13. Schniedewind is speaking of the Bible here and makes no mention of the Book of Mormon.

2. Don S. Rice, "Historical Contexts and Interpretive Themes," 5, notes that the extant examples of writing concentrate on the concerns of the elite. See also Allen J. Christenson, "The Use of Chiasmus by the Ancient K'iche' Maya," 333.

3. William G. Eggington, "*Our Weakness in Writing*": *Oral and Literate Culture in the Book of Mormon*, 2.

4. Hugh W. Pinnock, *Finding Biblical Hebrew and Other Ancient Literary Forms in the Book of Mormon*, 1, indicates his belief that the written forms were based on earlier oral forms.

of oral literature persisted in the written text.⁵ That persistence contrasts with the general absence of those forms in nineteenth-century literature. Where vocabulary and King James–style language can be explained by the influence of the publication era of the Book of Mormon, these oral elements point to the persistence of a very different type of literature.

The following sections do not intend to exhaustively present the cases representing each oral form. The intent is to establish the category and provide sufficient examples for understanding. More exhaustive work can, and probably should, be done.

Privileging Orality within Texts

An artifact of cultures transitioning from oral to written traditions can be found in the writer’s apparent distrust of writing as a means of effective communication. This is typically not explained but is implicit in statements that writers make about their own writing. For example, William M. Schniedewind found that “early Christian writers were often apologetic about their own writing.”⁶ He further notes that “Pliny the Elder emphasized the importance of the oral transmission as opposed to books: ‘the living word (*viva vox*), as the common saying has it, is much more effective.’”⁷

The reason for this hesitation to trust writing came from the recognition that it is divorced from any real-time audience or the ability of the communicator to assure that the message is correctly understood. (This

5. “In societies today that are characterized by a vibrant, ‘persistent’ orality, that is, those which have been exposed to, but have not fully accepted, adapted to, or adopted writing and print, many functionally effective verbal modes and manners of expression commonly found in strictly oral discourse will find their way also into dynamic literary compositions of all types.” Ernst R. Wendland, “Orality and its Implications for the Analysis, Translation, and Transmission of Scripture,” 16–17.

6. Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book*, 15.

7. Schniedewind, 14. He provides a further example:

Writing is not necessarily considered a universal good. For example, in an interesting vignette involving Pharaoh and the god Thoth, Plato criticized the Egyptian god and inventor of writing: “You have invented an elixir not of memory, but of reminding; and you offer your pupils the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom, for they will read many things without instruction and will therefore seem to know many things, when they are for the most part ignorant and hard to get along with, since they are not wise, but only appear wise.” (p. 114)

should be easy to understand by anyone today who has had their attempt at sarcasm in a text message or social media post be misunderstood.) In turning to the issue that Schniedewind noted for the early church Fathers, Werner Kelber highlights that there was a documented

reluctance and anxiety even expressed by the early church Fathers with regard to their own writing. Their seemingly awkward apologies arose out of fear that writing might compromise the Christian gospel. Far from taking writing for granted, they did not perceive it as a process of stabilizing oral impermanence, but rather as a more or less questionable means of releasing words from their normative, oral management. As long as words transpired in the oral medium, speakers remained in charge of the seed they had sown. But language divorced from human contexts and transposed into textuality has fallen outside the control of speakers. It is entirely up to readers, devoid of speaking contacts, to determine the meaning of worlds.⁸

William Eggington notes this tendency in the Book of Mormon:

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 to “stumbling because of the placing of [their written] words” (Ether 12:26), even though they acknowledge that their spoken words were powerful.⁹

It is an attitude we see as early as Nephi₁: “And now I, Nephi, cannot write all the things which were taught among my people; neither am I mighty in writing, like unto speaking; for when a man speaketh by the power of the Holy Ghost the power of the Holy Ghost carrieth it unto the hearts of the children of men” (2 Ne. 33:1). That is a classic statement of a person who is literate but still living in a primarily oral culture. It is easily missed in a modern culture so deeply imbued with texts.

The difference for Nephi₁ was the presence of his audience. When physically present, the Holy Ghost communicated above and beyond words. Although we believe the same to be available through texts, that was not the ancient perception. Walter Ong explains why this lack of an audience was such an issue for those coming from a highly oral society: “Extratextual context is missing not only for readers but also for the

8. Werner H. Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q*, 92–93.

9. Eggington, *Weakness in Writing*, 5–6.

writer. Lack of verifiable context is what makes writing normally so much more agonizing an activity than oral presentation to a real audience.”¹⁰

Perhaps the difficulty in understanding what a non-present audience might need to know underlies the complaint we see that a Book of Mormon writer cannot write everything. Jacob cannot write “a hundredth part of the proceedings of this people” (Jacob 3:13). Mormon also bemoans that he cannot write “the hundredth part” (W of M 1:5; Hel. 3:14; 3 Ne. 5:8, 26:6). While it is very true that any written text cannot tell everything that occurs, the complaints about the efficacy of writing place these sentiments in a culture that is still heavily oral. (In the Bible it occurs only once, at Nehemiah 5:11, where the context is items to be restored and not information that cannot be written.¹¹)

During Moroni’s day, Nephites apparently still considered their oral performance more powerful than the written record:

And I said unto him: Lord, 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;

And thou hast made us that we could write but little, because of the awkwardness of our hands. Behold, thou hast not made us mighty in writing like unto the brother of Jared, for thou madest him that the things which he wrote were mighty even as thou art, unto the overpowering of man to read them. (Ether 12:23–24)

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, 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 Ne. 3:17)

Nephi₁’s vision of the future prophecies is an inversion of his contemporary expectations. Nephi₁ was mighty in speaking but weak in writing.

10. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 100.

11. “Restore, I pray you, to them, even this day, their lands, their vineyards, their oliveyards, and their houses, also the hundredth *part* of the money, and of the corn, the wine, and the oil, that ye exact of them” (Nehemiah 5:11).

The one who would come would not be important for his speaking but rather for what was written.

It is not surprising to discover elements of orality in written culture. There is no firm dividing line between oral cultures and literate ones. Orality and literacy can, and do, co-exist and co-evolve.¹² Rosalind Thomas notes, “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.’”¹³ 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.”¹⁴

There are two things to be noted in the oral elements of the Book of Mormon discussed below. First, although many of these oral elements are found in the Bible, they are not exclusively Hebrew.¹⁵ Second, the persistence of those forms required a continued emphasis and appreciation of them. Moroni wrote around a thousand years after Nephi. A thousand years is a long time to preserve a tradition if it is no longer valued. We continue to see orally influenced techniques throughout the Book of Mormon because orality continued to be a dominant cultural force tying the text to those forms, rather than evolving away from them as modern literature has done.

Evidence of Memorized Texts

One of the effects of a reliance on texts is that there is less stress on memory. Referring to a text takes the place of consulting memory.¹⁶ The ability to consult libraries not only frees memory, it provides access to even more information than one person could remember. As memory is off-loaded onto a written medium, one need no longer remember *what* if

12. Cynthia L. Miller-Naudé and Jacobus A. Naudé, “The Intersection of Orality and Style in Biblical Hebrew: Metapragmatic Representations of Dialogue in Genesis 34,” 60. Also Paul S. Evans, “Creating a New ‘Great Divide’: The Exoticization of Ancient Culture in Some Recent Applications of Orality Studies to the Bible,” 751–53.

13. Rosalind Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece*, 102.

14. Thomas, 102.

15. Robert F. Smith, *Egyptianisms in the Book of Mormon and Other Studies*, 76.

16. Raymond F. Person, Jr., “The Role of Memory in the Tradition Represented by the Deuteronomic History and the Book of Chronicles,” 348.

one can remember *where*. (For this same reason it is not uncommon for a person today to not know the phone number of their spouse, as they just need to know it is on the contact list of their smart phone.)

According to Rosalind Thomas, for cultures that were literate but heavily oral, “the written word was more often used in the service of the spoken.”¹⁷ For example, there was an “immense importance of memorization and the trained memory to the learned and literate in the Middle Ages; memorization was not made redundant by the presence of books, but on the contrary, books were regarded as only one way to remember and therefore to retain knowledge.”¹⁸ It was the same for Hebrew texts.¹⁹

The Book of Mormon does not explicitly speak of memorized scriptures. It simply records instances where scripture is quoted where it would be highly unusual (if not impossible) for a physical written text to have been consulted. As translator, Joseph Smith’s cultural assumption that a text would be *read* tends to camouflage some of these occasions.

When Aaron, one of the sons of Mosiah₂, 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. Even carrying a perishable copy of the brass plates’ text would constitute a rather large volume of material. It is also highly doubtful that he is reading from the Lamanite king’s copy (in the unlikely case he had one). Indeed, the whole point is that this is new information for the king. Aaron is likely “reading” from memory.

This same issue occurs with Abinadi, who was apprehended in a public place and brought before King Noah’s court, consisting of the king and his priest-advisors. While interrogating Abinadi the priests attempted to

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

18. Thomas, 23.

19. “Given the rather awkward nature of using the scrolls of lengthy Hebrew biblical texts for reading, memorization became a very important practice of the literate religious elite.” Wendland, “Orality and its Implications,” 40.

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, even though these priests certainly had access to a copy of the scriptures and had themselves read and studied them. 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 did not have the scriptures "written in your hearts."

Karl van der Toorn reminds us that in biblical culture "the scroll served as a deposit box for the text; for daily use, people consulted their memory."²⁰ Even though Nephite scriptures clearly existed in a written form, and even though Aaron and Abinadi probably could read them in the written form, their typical use of the scriptures would have relied upon memory. Aaron and Abinadi were "reading" the scriptures that had already been "written in their hearts."

Discourse as Retention of Oral Sensibilities

In societies without written texts, complex arguments were often worked out in dialogue, with another person being required to assist in remembering and developing a complex theme. According to Robert Alter,

A general trait of biblical narrative [is] the primacy of dialogue . . . so pronounced that many pieces of third-person narration prove on inspection to be dialogue-bound, verbally mirroring elements of dialogue that precede them or that they introduce. Narration is thus often relegated to the role of confirming assertions made in dialogue—occasionally . . . with an explanatory gloss.²¹

Walter Ong explains one of the reasons for the dependence upon dialogue:

In the total absence of any writing, there is nothing outside the thinker, no text, to enable him or her to produce the same line of thought again or even to verify whether he or she has done so or not. *Aides-mémoire* such as notched sticks or a series of carefully arranged objects will not of themselves retrieve a complicated series of assertions. How, in fact, could lengthy, analytic solution ever be assembled in the first place? An interlocutor is virtually

20. Karel Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible*, 23.

21. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 81–82.

essential: it is hard to talk to yourself for hours on end. Sustained thought in an oral culture is tied to communication.²²

There is an interesting difference between doctrinal exposition in Nephi₁ and Jacob and in Mormon's later writings. Both Nephi₁ and Jacob cite scripture and then provide explanations. Mormon, however, does not cite scripture (the brass plates). Instead, what he provides is narrative. When Mormon wants to teach a doctrinal point, he either provides a sermon or (as seen with Alma₂ and Amulek in Ammonihah) presents a dialogue that contains the doctrinal explanation.²³

The influence of the dialogue form is so strong that even thoughts are expressed in speech as a quoted monologue.²⁴ Our modern habit of silent, internal prayer might see Nephi₃'s prayer as an internal monologue. It was not. It was said aloud and witnessed by passersby:

And it came to pass that in this year Nephi did cry unto the Lord, saying:

O Lord, do not suffer that this people shall be destroyed by the sword; but O Lord, rather let there be a famine in the land, to stir them up in remembrance of the Lord their God, and perhaps they will repent and turn unto thee.

And it came to pass that the judges did say unto Nephi, according to the words which had been desired. And it came to pass that when Nephi saw that the people had repented and did humble themselves in sackcloth, he cried again unto the Lord, saying:

O Lord, behold this people repenteth; and they have swept away the band of Gadianton from amongst them insomuch that they have become extinct, and they have concealed their secret plans in the earth.

Now, O Lord, because of this their humility wilt thou turn away thine anger, and let thine anger be appeased in the destruction of those wicked men whom thou hast already destroyed.

O Lord, wilt thou turn away thine anger, yea, thy fierce anger, and cause that this famine may cease in this land.

O Lord, wilt thou hearken unto me, and cause that it may be done according to my words, and send forth rain upon the face of the earth, that she may bring forth her fruit, and her grain in the season of grain.

22. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 34.

23. The fact that Mormon represents more of an orally influenced written text, where Nephi₁ and Jacob provide a more textually based exposition, is probably related to Nephi₁ and Jacob being closer to the Judahite scribal tradition. Mormon lived about a thousand years later and that method of textual exposition may not have survived on the large plates, which were more dedicated to the political sphere.

24. Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 84.

O Lord, thou didst hearken unto my words when I said, Let there be a famine, that the pestilence of the sword might cease; and I know that thou wilt, even at this time, hearken unto my words, for thou saidst that: If this people repent I will spare them.

Yea, O Lord, and thou seest that they have repented, because of the famine and the pestilence and destruction which has come unto them.

And now, O Lord, wilt thou turn away thine anger, and try again if they will serve thee? And if so, O Lord, thou canst bless them according to thy words which thou hast said. (Hel. 11:3–4, 9–16)

When Nephi₁ had a vision, that vision encoded the information as a dialogue with an angel:

And it came to pass that I saw the heavens open; and an angel came down and stood before me; and he said unto me: Nephi, what beholdest thou?

And I said unto him: A virgin, most beautiful and fair above all other virgins.

And he said unto me: Knowest thou the condescension of God?

And I said unto him: I know that he loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things.

And he said unto me: Behold, the virgin whom thou seest is the mother of the Son of God, after the manner of the flesh. (1 Ne. 11:14–18)

This is a short sample of an instructive dialogue that continues for much longer in that chapter. It might be argued that this text is in dialogue because that is just the way it happened. However, the contrast between Nephi₁'s recounting of his father's dream strongly points to the literary effect of the dialogue. Nephi₁ could have simply described what he saw. Indeed, that is what he does with his father's vision. Nephi₁'s recount-

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