



Some Mayan writings were composed of pictographs and phonetic or syllabic elements and were recorded as inscriptions on stone and used within the architecture. Mayan carvings have survived quite well in places like Tulum, Mexico (pictured here).

Photo courtesy of Brent R. Nordgren.

Internal Evidence of Widespread Literacy in the Book of Mormon

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Some Latter-day Saint scholars argue that literacy in the Book of Mormon was limited to elite classes and that the Book of Mormon people as a whole functioned as an oral society.¹ In addition, for years Mesoamerican scholars held that the ancient Mayans (a civilization concurrent with that of the Book of Mormon) did not even have a written language before the Classic period (about AD 300–900). The lack of evidence of Mayan writing during the Preclassic period (600 BC–AD 200, which corresponds to Book of Mormon dates) may have influenced some Latter-day Saint scholars' opinions about the extent of literacy during that era.

An examination of the Book of Mormon, however, shows evidence that the ability to read may have been more widespread than sometimes perceived and that it transcended class distinctions. As we read the Book of Mormon and find multiple commands to search the scriptures, we see clear evidence of the ability to read, write, and keep records among the Book of Mormon people, common and privileged alike.

Previous Arguments for an Oral Society

The following examples represent those who feel that literacy was limited and that Book of Mormon society was largely oral. John L. Sorenson, a Latter-day Saint sociocultural anthropologist, has argued that literacy was very limited in the Nephite culture. He wrote:

Another thing is important about the nature of the Nephite record. All those who kept it were from the powerful and wealthy level of society. We must keep in mind that in archaic civilizations like those of Egypt or the Nephites in America, most people were not literate. The difficulty of becoming competent in the difficult writing system employed on the plates is emphasized. King Benjamin pointedly “caused that [his princely sons] should be taught in all the language of his fathers, that thereby they might become men of understanding” (Mosiah 1:3). It was clearly a notable, uncommon accomplishment to master the system of writing.²

William G. Eggington, a Latter-day Saint scholar in linguistics and English language, has analyzed language in the Book of Mormon that seems to support Sorenson’s theory and contrast the oral and literate dimensions of Nephite and Lamanite cultures. He argues that orality was predominant and that writing was reserved for specific kinds of activities, which custom was typical throughout the world in similar social and historical situations.³

However, coupled with the most recent scholarship concerning literacy among concurrent civilizations, both in Mesoamerica and pre-600 BC Jerusalem, the Book of Mormon provides substantial internal evidence that these conclusions may be too restrictive.

Spiritual Context of Literacy

Reading and writing have been distinguishing characteristics of God’s people from the Creation. God gave a commandment to Adam to keep records and teach his children to read and write so that they would be able to read, remember, and keep the commandments. “And a book of remembrance was kept, in the which was recorded, in the language of Adam, for it was given unto as many as called upon God to write by the spirit of inspiration; And by them their children were taught to *read* and *write*” (Moses 6:5–6; emphasis added). We do not know what technology Adam had at his disposal, but we do know that he was obedient to the Lord by keeping a book of remembrance and teaching his children to read and write.

God commanded Adam and Eve to teach their children to read and write so that they could learn and remember the commandments. The Old Testament and scholarship on ancient Israel indicate that, as a result, literacy continued with Adam’s posterity. It stands to reason that God would want the Book of Mormon people to read too.

Clearly, the ability to read the scriptures helps create righteous societies. The people in 4 Nephi maintained a righteous society for more than two hundred years. To bring this about, they had the

Savior's personal teaching and, as will be shown later, a directive from him to search the scriptures.

Furthermore, there is a direct connection between reading the scriptures and personal conversion. Having the scriptures available to read enhances conversion. King Benjamin pointed out to his sons that it was necessary to *read* the scriptures and not merely be taught about them. His words show the power of being able to read the word of God for oneself: "I say unto you, my sons, were it not for these things, which have been kept and preserved by the hand of God, that we might *read and understand* of his mysteries, and have his *commandments always before our eyes*, that even our fathers would have dwindled in unbelief, and we should have been like unto our brethren, the Lamanites, who know nothing concerning these things, or even do not believe them when they are *taught* them, because of the traditions of their fathers, which are not correct" (Mosiah 1:5; emphasis added). Apparently, the Lamanites mentioned by King Benjamin had been taught, but not from written records.

By contrast, after Amulon and his brethren had introduced literacy into the society of the Lamanites (see Mosiah 24:4–6), the written records played a vital role in the conversion of the people that the sons of Mosiah taught (see Alma 22:12–13; 23:5). Alma commented to his son Helaman on the importance of the scriptures in bringing about this miracle: "Were it not for these things that these records do contain, which are on these plates, Ammon and his brethren could not have convinced so many thousands of the Lamanites of the incorrect tradition of their fathers; yea, these *records* and their *words* brought them unto repentance" (Alma 37:9; emphasis added). It required both the written records and the missionaries' words working together to bring about change and conversion among the Lamanites.

In perhaps the starkest illustration of the spiritual danger of illiteracy, the Book of Mormon includes information about the people of Zarahemla. These descendants of Mulek did not have scriptures; all they had were their oral traditions. When Mosiah first came to Zarahemla, he was unable to communicate with them because they had not brought written records with them when they left Jerusalem. The people of Zarahemla had to be taught the language of Mosiah before they could converse with Mosiah's people. Even though the people of Zarahemla had oral traditions and were able to give a history of leaving Jerusalem as well as a genealogy of their leader, they had lost their religion and denied the being of their Creator. Without written records,

they had not been able to maintain their language or their religion (see Omni 1:17–18).

In contrast, when Zeniff led his expedition out of the land of Zarahemla to inherit the land of Nephi, it is evident from the many references made to the scriptures that they took the scriptures with them (see Mosiah 7:19–20, 29–32; 12:20–37; 13:11). They may have remembered the fate of the Mulekites in Zarahemla who did not have the scriptures with them when they left Jerusalem. Zeniff would have known that they would need the scriptures to maintain their language and teach their families about God.

Many of the illustrations that have been referred to in this section will be more fully discussed throughout this paper. Their brief inclusion at this point introduces the idea that literacy has always been a defining characteristic of God’s people, regardless of the time period in which they lived. Lack of modern technological sophistication did not prevent Adam from establishing literacy among his posterity. The Book of Mormon provides ample internal evidence that the society it chronicles also achieved a significant level of literacy.

Literacy in Israel Prior to 600 BC

As was mentioned earlier, literacy continued from the time of Adam through the Old Testament. One scholar has noted, “The commandment of Dt 6:9 [to write scripture on their door posts] . . . presumed that every head of a family could write.”⁴ Having the words of the scriptures written on the door would remind everyone who entered the house of the importance of recorded scriptures.

Furthermore, on the subject of literacy in pre-exilic Israel and Judah, the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* says:

The majority of the people would have encountered writing on some occasion and would be aware of the power and possibilities it possessed. . . .

In the light of the evidence from all sources it appears that literacy reached beyond the palaces and temples of Israel and Judah to quite small settlements. This means prophetic oracles, hymns, laws could have circulated in written form from an early time to offer an authority and a control on oral tradition. In discussion of the history of the books of the OT the role of Israelite literacy deserves to be given greater prominence.⁵

Having a written form of the scriptures available in the small settlements would help ensure that the oral traditions were taught correctly.

Aaron P. Schade, a Latter-day Saint scholar, found evidence of a tradition of writing in early Israelite history, especially in the tribe of Joseph.⁶

In addition, reporting on the level of literacy in ancient Israel, Brigham Young University scholar Dana M. Pike stated,

Clearly, the evidence of inscriptions indicates that people could write and read. The evidence also indicates that Israelites, like other West Semites, utilized a twenty-two-character alphabet developed by Canaanites about eight hundred years before Jeremiah and Lehi, which made literacy a seemingly simple attainment in contrast to the complex and cumbersome writing systems of the Egyptians, Babylonians, Assyrians, and Hittites; their systems required years to master and essentially limited literacy to professional scribes.⁷

John W. Welch and Robert D. Hunt of Brigham Young University agreed that the people of Jerusalem at the time Lehi and his family left spoke an archaic form of Hebrew and that many Israelites, not just the wealthy, knew how to write.⁸ The educational values of the society Lehi's family had left—in which literacy was the norm—would have undoubtedly influenced their newly created society in the Americas.

Literacy in Concurrent Civilizations of the Preclassic Mayan Era

Some scholars, like Sorenson, believe that the Book of Mormon civilization was in Mesoamerica: “Nearly all qualified scholars who have dealt with that question have come to agree on Mesoamerica, that is, the area of high civilization in central and southern Mexico and northern Central America.”⁹

Although we cannot identify a specific location for the Book of Mormon, from historical and archaeological evidence we do know that the ancient Mayans were a civilization living during the same time frame as the Book of Mormon people. Consequently, research done on literacy among the Mayans becomes a useful resource in studying Book of Mormon literacy during a comparable time period.

Mesoamerica is the land the ancient Mayans inhabited. While there is evidence of high levels of literacy during the classic era in this area, many researchers did not include the Preclassic Maya among the literate until 2003, when writing was discovered in a newly excavated temple in San Bartolo, Guatemala. The discoverers were surprised to find writing in San Bartolo since it is in a small, remote area of Guatemala. This discovery of early Maya writing provides evidence that writing was more widespread and began much earlier than had been thought previously.¹⁰

Referring to four codices that survived the Spanish Conquest, Mayan scholar Michael Coe stated, “Our knowledge of ancient Maya thought must represent only a tiny fraction of the whole picture, for of the thousands of books in which the full extent of their learning and ritual was recorded, only four have survived to modern times.”¹¹ There is evidence that many more written records existed. Coe further commented:

How widespread was literacy among the ancient Maya? Although this question is very difficult to answer, it is usually assumed that this was confined to a very select few. However, one should keep in mind that in all known writing systems, especially those with a logophonetic basis (based on both meaning signs and sound signs, as is the case with the Mayan, Egyptian, and Chinese), it is far easier to read such a script than to write it. In fact, most of the great Classic carved monuments were displayed in public places, and were obviously meant to be read by more than a narrow group of elite scribes and bureaucrats. And, finally, as the success of various Maya workshops held in recent years in several American cities has proved, a rough-and-ready reading knowledge of the script may be gained by relative neophytes within the space of a single week!¹²

This observation opens up new avenues in regard to literacy for the ancient inhabitants of America.

Continuity of Written Language from Nephi to Moroni

The Book of Mormon begins with Nephi declaring that he understood the writing of both the Jews and the Egyptians. He declared, “Therefore I make a record of my proceedings in my days. 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). Moroni ended his portion of the gold plates by explaining, “We have written this record according to our knowledge, in the characters which are called among us the reformed Egyptian, being handed down and altered by us, according to our manner of speech. And if our plates had been sufficiently large we should have written in Hebrew; but the Hebrew hath been altered by us also; and if we could have written in Hebrew, behold, ye would have had no imperfection in our record” (Mormon 9:32–33). Consequently, it appears that their modified Hebrew was the easier of the two languages to write. During the thousand years that transpired between these two statements, both reformed Egyptian and Hebrew were available to Mormon and Moroni as they finished their record.

The Pattern for Keeping Records

From the outset of the Book of Mormon, Lehi encouraged his family to read and search the scriptures. Nephi and his brothers were sent back to Jerusalem to get the brass plates because they would need to have the scriptures available to them in the promised land. As soon as Lehi had the plates in his possession, he thanked God and then immediately started reading (see 1 Nephi 5:10–21).

Both Lehi and Nephi set an example to their posterity as they read and studied the brass plates while they were still in the wilderness. Nephi explained, “We talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ, and we *write* according to our prophecies, that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins” (2 Nephi 25:26; emphasis added). This passage references oral communication, but in the end, Nephi and Lehi wrote their teachings. Nephi produced a written record so that his children, including his unborn posterity, would be able to read the scriptures. Knowing that he would not always be there to teach his posterity, Nephi wrote his words and created an expectation for keeping records so that everyone would be able to read of Christ (see 1 Nephi 6:6). The written record would help keep their oral teachings correct.

When Jacob took possession of the plates of Nephi, he mentioned the difficulty of writing on the plates. He then explained that even though it was very time consuming, they had a good reason to take the time and put forth the effort required to write on metal: “Now in this thing we do rejoice; and we labor diligently to engraven these words upon plates, hoping that our beloved brethren and our children will receive them with thankful hearts” (Jacob 4:3). Jacob had previously said that if they wrote on other material, it would perish (see vv. 1–2). He evidently intended that his brethren, his children, and his posterity would have his testimony of Christ for generations to come, which is why he chose to use metal plates. Lehi and Nephi would have been familiar with other writing media, such as papyrus, wood, or leather, all of which were in use in Jerusalem at the time Lehi’s family left.¹³

Mesoamerican anthropologist William L. Fash noted that in addition to thousands of inscriptions carved in stone, there were “countless other texts and images painted or carved on more perishable media (e.g. cloth, wood, stucco, or bark-paper books).”¹⁴

The Nephites might have already written on other materials but knew that if they wanted their record to be permanent, they would need to write on metal. This strategy would give them a record as

permanent as the brass plates. In order for the scriptures to be searched and pondered, they would need to be accessible to others, not just the keeper of the records. Perhaps copies of the scriptures at this time were written on other media that would ultimately perish, making it possible for more than one person at a time to read and search the scriptures. As early as Jacob 5:1, Jacob asked his listeners if they remembered to have *read* the words of Zenos, a prophet mentioned in the brass plates. He asked the question as a way of prompting their memory, as though he expected his audience to have read Zenos.

Following Nephi and Jacob, many of Jacob's descendants kept the record—beginning with Enos, Jarom, and Omni, and ending with Amaleki. These writers faithfully, though briefly, kept the record from generation to generation. We learn little doctrine or history in the books of Jarom and Omni; nevertheless, they do provide proof that the ability to read and write, along with knowledge of the scriptures, continued unbroken during this time. The fact that the small plates of Nephi exist indicates that the writers valued and were dedicated to preserving the records. If they had not continued writing and handing down the record from generation to generation, they would not have been able to give the plates ultimately to Mosiah. In that case, neither we nor they would have had the important teachings that were recorded on the small plates of Nephi.

The people of Limhi kept records when they left Zarahemla to go to the land of Nephi. When Ammon found the people of Limhi, he was able to read the record they had kept, presumably with no difficulty, even though the people in Nephi and the people in Zarahemla had been separated for about eighty years. King Mosiah was also able to read the record of the people of Limhi when they reunited in the land of Zarahemla (see Mosiah 7:19–33; 8:6; 25:5–7). Perhaps their language did not change after being apart for so many years because they had taken the scriptures with them.

When Jesus was among the Nephites, he commanded them to “write these sayings after [he was] gone” so that a record would be kept to bring the Gentiles to the “knowledge of [him], their Redeemer” (3 Nephi 16:4). Jesus also commanded them to bring their records to him. After reading them, he identified other prophecies that should be added to their written record, including words of Malachi that compare to Malachi 3–4 in the Bible (see 3 Nephi 24–25). Jesus explained the importance of adding these verses: “These scriptures, which ye had not with you, the Father commanded that I should give unto you; for it was wisdom in him that they should be given unto future generations. . . .

And now there cannot be written in this book even a hundredth part of the things which Jesus did truly teach unto the people; but behold the plates of Nephi do contain the more part of the things which he taught the people” (3 Nephi 26:2, 6–7). Jesus knew that the writings of Malachi would be in our Bible and gave the Malachi chapters to the Nephites for their own benefit. We have a condensed version of Christ’s teachings in the Book of Mormon, while the Nephites had a more complete record. Some of the scripture kept by the Nephites was intended for them, and some for future readers. For example, Nephi expected his written words to reach his people as well as later readers as he said, “Wherefore, I write unto my people, unto all those that shall receive hereafter these things which I write” (2 Nephi 25:3).

Searching the Scriptures

The following references show examples of people, both elite and common, being commanded to search the scriptures. King Benjamin commanded his sons to “*search* them diligently, that ye may profit thereby” (Mosiah 1:7; emphasis added). While Jesus was speaking to the multitude in Bountiful following his resurrection, he spoke of the prophecies of Isaiah and said, “Behold they are written, ye have them before you, therefore *search* them” (3 Nephi 20:11; emphasis added). A little later, Jesus again admonished the multitude to search the scriptures relating to Isaiah: “And now, behold, I say unto you, that ye ought to *search* these things. Yea, a commandment I give unto you that ye *search* these things diligently; for great are the words of Isaiah” (3 Nephi 23:1; emphasis added).

From these statements, we know Jesus expected the Nephites to take the time to search the scriptures to learn more of the prophecies. As Jesus finished his visit with the Nephites, he commanded the people to write his words, and then he admonished them again to search the prophets: “Therefore give heed to my words; write the things which I have told you. . . . *Search* the prophets, for many there be that testify of these things” (3 Nephi 23:4–5; emphasis added). The multitude he was teaching would need to have the scriptures available in order to search them. In order to fulfill this commandment to search the scriptures, the ability to read and the possession of copies of scriptures needed to extend into their communities, as not all of the Nephites could gather around the prophet in one single location to be taught.

The commandment to search the scriptures and keep records was given to Lehi and Nephi and continued through Jacob, Benjamin, and Alma. Even the Savior himself commanded the members of his Church

to search the scriptures. It is easy to think that this command to search the scriptures was addressed to us, forgetting that the command was initially addressed to the Nephites.

Literacy throughout Book of Mormon Society

From the following examples, which include the poor, the Lamanites, apostates, and just ordinary people, we can see that the ability and the expectation to read transcended time, place, and class distinctions. There might never have been a period of time in the Book of Mormon when the people were not expected to be able to read and obey the scriptures. It seems that the records were primarily kept by the leaders of either the government or the Church. It is also possible, however, that many, if not most, of the people could read them.

When Alma and Amulek were on their mission to the Zoramites, some of the poor people who had been cast out of the synagogues because of their poverty and coarse apparel came to Alma with the question of how they could worship. Alma started teaching and then asked them, “Do ye remember to have *read* what Zenos, the prophet of old, has said concerning prayer . . . ?” He then reminded them of the teachings of Zenock and Moses, asking if they remembered having *read* their words also: “Behold, if ye do, ye must believe what Zenos said. . . . Now behold, my brethren, I would ask if ye have *read* the scriptures? If ye have, how can ye disbelieve on the Son of God?” (Alma 33:3, 13–14; emphasis added). Even though they were poor, Alma not only expected them to know how to read, but he also expected them to have the scriptures available and to have studied them.

Zeniff did not mention any difficulty communicating with the Lamanites in the land of Nephi when the group of Nephites he led from Zarahemla arrived there; apparently the spoken language was the same. However, the written aspect of the language was missing. Years later, Amulon and the other priests of King Noah were invited to teach the “language” of the Nephites to the Lamanites under the rule of King Laman. Evidently it was the written, not the spoken, language of the Nephites that they were assigned to teach. “They taught them that they should keep their record, and that they might write one to another” (Mosiah 24:6). When the Lamanites learned to read and write, they began writing to each other and prospering through the increase of commerce that resulted from their ability to correspond (see Mosiah 24:7). While the priests were willing to teach the language, they did not teach the Lamanites about God or the scriptures (see Mosiah 24:1–7). Even though they did not teach the scriptures,

they unwittingly did a great service to the Church, because the ability to read and write proved to be a blessing. Later, when Ammon and his brethren entered the land of Nephi, they were able to teach the gospel to a literate people.

While Ammon was teaching King Lamoni, he “laid before [the king] the records and the holy scriptures of the people, which had been spoken by the prophets, even down to the time that their father, Lehi, left Jerusalem” (Alma 18:36). Apparently Ammon brought scriptures with him on his mission to the Lamanites, and Lamoni was able to read them. Some converted Lamanites, who were friendly with the Nephites, opened a correspondence with the Nephites (see Alma 23:18; 24:8–9).

Other examples that illustrate literacy throughout Book of Mormon society include the accounts of Alma’s experiences with the people in Ammonihah and with Korihor. After the wicked people in the city of Ammonihah cast out the men who believed the teachings of Alma and Amulek, they threw believing women and children into the fire. Then they collected all of the “records which contained the holy scriptures, and cast them into the fire also” (Alma 14:8). These flammable scriptures could have been in the synagogues or perhaps even the homes of the inhabitants of Ammonihah.

Korihor, who had been teaching false doctrine throughout the land, was ultimately brought before Alma. Korihor was a skilled speaker, but there is no evidence that he was a lawyer or a government leader. It is evident, however, that Alma expected Korihor to be familiar with the scriptures. In spite of the testimony Alma bore of the reality of God, Korihor continued to deny his existence. Finally Alma offered Korihor irrefutable evidence from the scriptures: “Will ye say, Show unto me a sign, when ye have the testimony of all these thy brethren, and also all the holy prophets? The scriptures are laid before thee” (Alma 30:44). When Korihor insisted on a sign, one was finally given, and Korihor was struck dumb. “And now when the chief judge saw this, he put forth his hand and *wrote* unto Korihor, saying: Art thou convinced of the power of God? . . . And Korihor put forth his hand and *wrote*” (Alma 30:51–52; emphasis added). That both of them put forth their hands to write provides evidence that Korihor was literate and that writing material was readily available to them. Korihor’s fate was immediately published, and a proclamation was sent throughout the land informing those who had believed Korihor’s words that they must speedily repent. The people were convinced by reading or having the proclamation read to them, and they repented (see Alma 30:44–57).

In 3 Nephi, there is a change in the society: it is the first time literacy or learning has a definite connection with the wealth of the people. “And the people began to be distinguished by ranks, according to their riches and their chances for learning; yea, some were ignorant because of their poverty, and others did receive great learning because of their riches” (3 Nephi 6:12). There was great inequality and wickedness among the people of the land and in the Church at this point; in fact, the Church was on the verge of collapse because of the pride of its members. During this time of wickedness, it appears that class distinctions were made according to their riches, which affected the amount of education and learning some people were able to achieve. Nonetheless, when Christ appeared after his resurrection, he expected the multitude to be able to read and search the scriptures.

Geographical Distribution of Scriptures

There is evidence that the scriptures were available in places other than just the large population centers like Zarahemla and Bountiful. For example, the people of Zeniff in the land of Nephi had the scriptures with them. From the many references made to the scriptures, it is apparent that Zeniff’s people took the scriptures with them when they left the land of Zarahemla to inherit the land of Nephi. Because of the experience of the people of Zarahemla, Zeniff would have known that they would need to have the scriptures if they were to maintain their language and their religion in their new land. A generation later, under King Noah, the people of Zeniff seemed to have forgotten the importance of the scriptures, and they needed to be called to repentance.

When Abinadi came among the people of King Noah to call them to repentance, there is no indication that he was either a priest or royal; however, he was well versed in the scriptures. The priests of King Noah knew the scriptures well enough to find a passage they could use to challenge Abinadi. “And it came to pass that one of them said unto him: What meaneth the words which are written, and which have been taught by our fathers” (Mosiah 12:20). Abinadi easily answered their question and challenged their effectiveness as priests since they had not applied themselves to understand the scriptures (see Mosiah 12:20–36). While he was being questioned, Abinadi taught the priests by *reading* directly from the scriptures, saying, “And now I *read* unto you the remainder of the commandments of God, for I perceive that they are not written in your hearts” (Mosiah 13:11; emphasis added). During his exchange with King Noah’s court, Abinadi taught from the law of Moses and Isaiah (see Mosiah 12–14).

When Helaman, the son of Helaman, took possession of the sacred records and commissioned “all those engravings [to be] written and sent forth among the children of men throughout all the land,” he made a point of saying that he did not include any of “those parts which had been commanded by Alma should not go forth” (Alma 63:12). Helaman did not want to take the chance that those reading the scriptures would read the parts that were forbidden. This distribution made the scriptures more accessible to the general population.

Following the distribution of the scriptures, two interesting things took place in their society. First, over the next fourteen years, the Church grew at such a phenomenal rate that even the Church leaders were amazed. This growth could be a direct result of having scriptures more available. Second, an exceedingly large number of people moved northward. This migration included many of the people of Ammon, who were Lamanites by birth. In addition to building homes, these emigrants built temples, sanctuaries, and synagogues.

Those who moved north had a literate society in their new land. Many records were kept by these people, not just Church or government records. They embraced the pattern of literacy that existed while living in the land of Zarahemla. These records were handed down from generation to generation, perhaps so that individual families would have a record of their particular family. In addition to the Church and government records, they included records of their shipping and building. “But behold, there are many books and many records of every kind, and they have been kept chiefly by the Nephites” (Helaman 3:15). The fact that the records were kept *chiefly* by the Nephites indicates that at least some of the records were kept by the Lamanites who were living among them.

Availability of Writing Materials

Another area to consider is the availability of writing materials for everyday writing. As mentioned earlier, Jacob made it clear that writing on metal was difficult. In order for reading and writing to become widespread, a more convenient way to write was needed. There are at least three instances in the Book of Mormon where evidence suggests that other writing materials were used.

When Alma the Elder fled from King Noah’s servants, he “hid himself that they found him not. And he being concealed for many days did write all the words which Abinadi had spoken” (Mosiah 17:4). Even though Alma was a fugitive in hiding, he apparently had ready access to writing materials and recorded Abinadi’s teachings. The other

instances were discussed earlier in this paper—the ability of Korihor and the judge to simply put forth their hands and write, and the records that were burned in Ammonihah.

Use of Scriptures in Gospel Teaching

King Benjamin, while teaching from his tower, caused his words to be written (see Mosiah 2:8) and sent to the people who were unable to hear his speech. He desired that the people “receive” his words. King Benjamin said, “There are not any among you, except it be your little children that have not been taught concerning these things . . . and also have been taught concerning the *records* which contain the prophecies which have been spoken by the holy prophets, even down to the time our father, Lehi, left Jerusalem; and also, all that has been spoken by our fathers until now” (Mosiah 2:34–35; emphasis added). King Benjamin also taught his sons, saying, “My sons, I would that ye should remember that were it not for these plates, which contain these records and these commandments, we must have suffered in ignorance, even at this present time, not knowing the mysteries of God” (Mosiah 1:3). In both cases, he gave credit to the written record rather than their oral traditions for their knowledge of God and the commandments.

King Benjamin pointed out that without the written scriptures, it was “not possible that our father, Lehi, could have remembered all these things, to have taught them to his children, except it were for the help of these plates; for he having been taught in the language of the Egyptians therefore he could *read* these engravings, and teach them to his children, that thereby they could teach them to their children, and so fulfilling the commandments of God, even down to this present time” (Mosiah 1:4; emphasis added). Here again the written record helped to preserve the purity of oral teaching.

Alma and Amulek were good examples of using the scriptures as they taught the people in Ammonihah. Alma capably used the scriptures in his teaching and then turned the responsibility of learning back to the people: “Now I need not rehearse the matter; what I have said may suffice. Behold, *the scriptures are before you*; if ye will wrest them it shall be to your own destruction” (Alma 13:20; emphasis added). Many people accepted this invitation to read the scriptures for themselves: “And it came to pass after he had made an end of speaking unto the people many of them did believe on his words, and began to repent, and to *search the scriptures*” (Alma 14:1; emphasis added).

Jesus expected the people to be able to answer doctrinal questions from their study of the scriptures. After Christ’s Church was

established, the disciples prayed for guidance to know what the name of the Church should be. In response, the Lord said to them, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, why is it that the people should murmur and dispute because of this thing? Have they not *read* the scriptures?” (3 Nephi 27:4–5; emphasis added). While the disciples were the ones who prayed for guidance, Jesus expected all the people to have read the scriptures.

Conclusion

It seems evident that literacy was widespread among the Book of Mormon people. These people had the scriptures available, and many could read them; thus they were able to keep the commandments. Whether they were able to read for themselves or had a reader share the written word, they were blessed as they took the time to search, ponder, and implement the words of the prophets and the Savior.

Knowing more about the Book of Mormon people and how they depended upon the written word to learn of God helps us understand them better and feel closer to them as we search and ponder the scriptures and liken the scriptures unto ourselves.

President Ezra Taft Benson said, “We must make the Book of Mormon a center focus of study. . . . It was written for our day. The Nephites never had the book; neither did the Lamanites of ancient times. It was meant for us.”¹⁵ Even though the ancient inhabitants of America did not have the Book of Mormon as we have it, the people who lived in Book of Mormon times did have scriptures of the ancient prophets recorded on the brass plates and the writings of their own prophets. The scriptures were widely available for people to read, search, and ponder to bring them to their own testimonies of Jesus Christ.

When we teach our classes, it behooves us to heed King Benjamin’s counsel to have the scriptures “before our students’ eyes” (see Mosiah 1:5). This counsel was critical for the conversion of the Lamanites, and it is also critically important for our students as they read for themselves directly out of the scriptures so the Holy Ghost can testify of the truthfulness of what they read. They too will be able to recognize the false teachings that surround them and will have the blessing of receiving pure doctrine directly from the source. Just as in the days of Adam, God’s people are still commanded to learn to read and write as a safeguard against personal and collective apostasy. Those who cannot read cannot receive the blessings associated with reading the scriptures; therefore gospel literacy materials, entitled *Ye Shall Have My Words*, address the problem of illiteracy in the Church today. God

wants his children to read his words so they can “begin to learn and feel the power of his words.”¹⁶ When people are able to read, they can immerse themselves in the scriptures and prayerfully receive personal revelation to know the meaning of the scriptures for themselves. **RE**

Notes

1. See John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 53; William G. Eggington, “‘Our Weakness in Writing’: Oral and Literate Culture in the Book of Mormon” (Provo, UT: FARMS, Brigham Young University, 1992), 11.

2. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*, 53.

3. Eggington, “Our Weakness in Writing,” 11.

4. Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 49.

5. A. R. Millard, “Literacy (Israel),” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 4, K–N, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 340.

6. See Aaron P. Schade, “The Kingdom of Judah: Politics, Prophets, and Scribes” in *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and JoAnn H. Seely (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 320.

7. Dana M. Pike, “Israelite Inscriptions from the Time of Jeremiah and Lehi” in Welch, *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, 199.

8. See John W. Welch and Robert D. Hunt, “Culturegram: Jerusalem 600 B.C.” in Welch, *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, 7–8, 19.

9. John L. Sorenson, *Images of Ancient America Visualizing Book of Mormon Life* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 2.

10. See William A. Saturno, David Stuart, and Boris Beltrán, “Early Maya Writing at San Bartolo, Guatemala,” *Science* 311 (March 3, 2006): 1281.

11. Michael D. Coe, *The Maya*, 7th ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 2005), 211.

12. Michael D. Coe and Mark Van Stone, *Reading the Maya Glyphs*, 2nd ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 2005), 14.

13. See Phillip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 304, 309.

14. William L. Fash, “Changing Perspectives on Maya Civilization,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 23 (1994): 182.

15. Ezra Taft Benson, “The Book of Mormon—Keystone of Our Religion,” *Ensign*, November 1986, 6.

16. *Ye Shall Have My Words: Teacher’s Guide, Part I* (Salt Lake City: Church Educational System, 1993), vi.