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“Our Weakness in Writing”: Oral and Literate Culture in the Book of Mormon

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Abstract: “Investigates aspects of the socio-cultural structure of the Nephite, Lamanite, and Mulekite people of the Book of Mormon from the point of view of those who study the nature of oral and literate societies.” Lehi and his descendants functioned in an “Oral residual culture,” a culture that writes to accomplish some very narrow functions, but acts, to a large extent, like an oral culture. “If we somehow can begin to understand the discourse and socio-cultural structures of the Book of Mormon authors, and the natures of their text production constraints and our text perception constraints, we may more clearly comprehend the text and its vital messages.”



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"OUR WEAKNESS IN WRITING":

ORAL AND LITERATE CULTURES IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

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Introduction

This paper investigates aspects of the socio-cultural structure of the Nephite, Lamanite and Mulekite people of the Book of Mormon from the point of view of those who study the nature of oral and literate societies. The term "oral society" relates to a society in which literacy or print of any kind is absent; such a society can be called a "primary oral society" (Ong 1988:28). The term "literate society" refers to a society that depends heavily on literacy or print as one of its cohesive elements.

Linguists and anthropological linguists have begun to understand that the adoption of print introduces a new technology into society which can dramatically affect important social structures (Goody and Watt 1988, Ong 1988). However, oral cultures do not change into literate cultures immediately after the introduction of print technology. In some instances, a transitional process can take hundreds of years as society undergoes slow cross-generational change with print gradually assuming more and more communicative functions, until it becomes the major means of communication in vital social domains such as education, government, technological development and information storage and retrieval systems (Winterowd 1989:13; Ong 1988). These intermediate cultures are labelled, in Ong's terms (1988:33), "oral residual cultures" -- namely cultures that write to accomplish some very narrow functions, but act, to a large extent, like oral cultures.

The major hypothesis I wish to develop in this paper is that Lehi and his descendants functioned in a society which exhibited strong oral residual culture characteristics: they had access to print as a technology, but retained many features of a nonprint culture. First, I briefly discuss a number of inherent weaknesses that temper my conclusions. I then attempt to explain why this study has implications far more important than that of a simple exercise of extending my academic interests into an area of religious convictions. Next, I examine certain aspects of literacy within the cultures of the Book of Mormon peoples by focusing on the graphemic systems they may have used. Finally, I explore the relationship between their literacy and both their socio-cultural and discourse structures, and the implications of these relationships to our understanding of the Book of Mormon.

Inherent weaknesses in the study

There are a number of inherent weaknesses in this study. First, we do not know everything about oral societies. Because oral societies, by definition, do not keep written, and thus preservable, records one can only deduce certain generalities from myths, legends, and a few oral societies that exist today, such as some Australian Aboriginal communities. Second, we don't know much about the cultures of Book of Mormon peoples. The Book of Mormon is not primarily a historical record; rather it is a very selective account of a few families' dealings with God over a 1,000 - year period. Third, the Book of Mormon is a translated document. Thus when this paper examines textual evidence, we must realize that many syntactical structures could have been filtered through the English language. Although these gaps are significant, I believe that sufficient evidence warrants consideration of my conclusions.

Rationale for conducting this study

Some people whose lives are recorded in the Book of Mormon were under a God-given charge to communicate important information to us—information with eternal consequences. We come to an understanding of that information through a process of negotiating meaning with the Book of Mormon text. My experiences with communication and miscommunication between the predominantly oral Australian Aboriginal culture and the high literate non-Aboriginal Australian culture has led me to a number of conclusions. The first is that oral and literate cultures are different in the way each typically structures society and in the way each typically structures text. The second conclusion is that those from oral societies and those from literate societies can make headway in understanding each other, and each other's texts, only when they understand how each culture influences individual and collective communicative acts (Eggington 1992; Eggington 1990).

In addition, Kaplan (1991) suggests that optimal textual negotiation requires us to see text as "a multidimensional structure, and that the understanding of it requires awareness of the reticulation of its several dimensions" (1991:202). He further claims that the dimensions involved in text comprehension include an understanding of the syntactical and lexical features of the text, the rhetorical intent of the text, the structural coherence of the text, and the separate and shared world views which the author and the receptor bring to the text. Kaplan summarizes these claims in the form of a model which describes the interactive factors in text construction and text interpretation, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Model for Interacting Factors in Text Construction/Interpretation

Occurring within a defined phenomenological reality

Author <—————> Text <—————> Receptor

Constrained by
author's intent
and performative
ability

Constrained by
the shared pheno-
menological world
and further con-
strained by the
4 kinds of difficulty

Constrained by
receptor's intent
and performative
ability and ability
to perceive the
author's intent

From Kaplan (1991:203)

As Figure 1 indicates, a full understanding of the Book of Mormon text is not possible until we as receptors of the text consider what each author within the text sought to accomplish, as well as the ability each author had to achieve those goals. We are further constrained in our understanding when we realize that the perceptual experiences (the phenomenological world) of the Book of Mormon people were probably vastly different from the way we experience and perceive reality. In addition, as Figure 1 indicates, we may have additional difficulties understanding the Book of Mormon because of

1. contingent difficulties, such as context dependent references (is their "narrow neck of land" our "narrow neck of land"?);

2. modal difficulties, such as the challenge to imagine a human condition devoid of our present-day medical and technological scientific structures;
3. tactical difficulties, such as those arising because Book of Mormon authors and editors (e.g., Mormon, Moroni) often admit withholding information superfluous to their spiritual purposes;
4. ontological difficulties caused by language constraints resulting from the nature of the text as a translated document and by problems associated with the actual writing and abridging of the text.

Thus to read the Book of Mormon as a modern novel, or even as a general conference talk, means that we probably miss essential elements of the text. Worse still, imposing our culturally and linguistically determined structures onto the text could lead to significant misinterpretations of the text. On the other hand, if we somehow can begin to understand the discourse and socio-cultural structures of the Book of Mormon authors, and the natures of their text production constraints and our text perception constraints, we may more clearly comprehend the text and its vital messages. The remainder of this paper focuses on interpretive difficulties arising from the technology involved in the writing of the text, and on a narrow aspect of the phenomenological world view of the Book of Mormon peoples--namely the oral nature of their society.

The graphic system of the Book of Mormon peoples

Some authors of the Book of Mormon knew the linguistic constraints and difficulties they faced as they constructed their texts. The oft quoted scripture of Ether 12:27, "and if men come unto me, I will show unto them their weakness," derives from counsel given to Moroni because

Moroni was disturbed by his and other writers' weaknesses in writing. They admit "stumbling because of the placing of [their written] words" (Ether 12:26), even though they acknowledge that their spoken words were powerful. In addition, it seems as if they were aware of the difficulties we would face as we read their writings. They frequently admonish us for us to call upon the power of God through the Holy Ghost so we can more fully comprehend their messages.

One explanation for their concern may have been the difficulty they experienced in writing in a complex script or graphemic system. To better understand the nature of the graphic systems used by the Lehi and his descendants, we need to examine briefly the development of the technology of writing. Presumably, the first steps away from a primary oral culture began when ancient people began to use images or pictures systematically for communicative purposes. Because these early pictograms represented ideas rather than words, they were extremely inefficient at syntactic communication and were thus used primarily as aids to spoken discourse.

Approximately 3,000 years B.C., however, the Egyptians and Chinese began to use abstract symbols to stand for words. These logograms were more efficient, but obviously still too complex for effective communication, since each separate symbol stood for only one word. This complexity created a stratified social structure in both ancient Egypt and China. At the top of the scale were the ruling literate elite who, partially because of their literacy, had access to past and present recorded knowledge. They guarded their power, often resisting any moves to simplify their logographic scripts for fear that the masses would gain access to knowledge and force a weakening of hierarchical centralized power structures (Goody and Watt 1988).

However, scholars in Egypt's and China's neighboring vassal states had more freedom to reform the respective logographic systems. The most dramatic simplification occurred when they began to apply the "phonetic principle"--the use of graphic symbols to represent groups of sounds. Since in any given language, the total number of meaningful sound groups or syllables is much less than the total number of words or ideas, the application of the phonetic principle significantly simplifies the process of writing. Neighboring societies to both China and Egypt developed "syllabaries" of this type. The Koreans developed *Hangul*; the Japanese developed *Hiragana* and *Katagana*; and Egypt's neighbors developed various Semitic syllabaries.

The proto-semitic syllabic system formed the basis for the Phoenician syllabary which Hebrew writers began to use around 1,000 B.C. Even though these new systems were more efficient than either Chinese characters or Egyptian hieroglyphs, the immense historical and political power of the logograms made a knowledge of logographic systems essential for the educated. Historical and sacred texts were written and preserved in logograms much the same as historical and sacred texts were written and preserved in Latin and Greek in Medieval and Renaissance Western Europe. In a sense, the Chinese characters and Egyptian hieroglyphs formed a "high code." Even today, to be fully educated in Korea, one must be literate in the "high code" Chinese characters, as well as the more efficient *hangul*, or people's writing system. Likewise, up until the early twentieth century in Western European society, one would need to be fully literate in Latin to be "educated"--a remarkable influence, considering that the Roman Empire collapsed 1,500 years ago. To carry this concept further, it is highly probable that a well educated Hebrew merchant living in Jerusalem around 600 B.C. would be literate not only

in the syllabic Hebrew script, but also in a reformed hieroglyphic Egyptian script which enabled one to read ancient texts written in "high code."

Consequently, Lehi, who was educated in the "learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians" (1 Nephi 1:2), "could read these engravings (meaning the brass plates), and teach them to his children, that thereby they could teach them to their children, . . . even down to this present time" (Mosiah 1:4). I suggest that the brass plates were written in the "high code" Egyptian and that this "high code" was used by Nephite prophets, starting with Nephi and concluding 1,000 years later with Moroni, to record their history. Interestingly, the Book of Mormon implies that this code was altered in accordance with the above mentioned "phonetic principle." Thus, we have Moroni concluding the record by stating that:

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.*" [Mormon 9:32, emphasis mine]

Reforming the characters "according to our [their] manner of speech" would not have been difficult for the Nephites to do since they were probably familiar with the syllabic system and its phonetic principle through the semitic Hebrew script that had entered Israel at least 400 years before Lehi's time. Assuming that Lehi and his heirs had access to these two scripts--Reformed Egyptian characters and the syllabic semitic Hebrew--the Nephites probably used these scripts for different purposes, similar to the situation in Korea and Japan. I suggest that Reformed Egyptian served as a "high code" for recording their secular and spiritual history, much as Chinese characters have been used in Japan and Korea. In addition, Hebrew would have been a more functional, utilitarian code, much like *hiragana* in Japan and *hangul* in Korea.

This assumption is further supported by two pieces of evidence. First, it is difficult to imagine an Israelite schooled in the Egyptian script who would not be familiar with Hebrew. Lehi and his family would have been able to write in Hebrew and would have passed that knowledge onto their descendants. Second, Moroni, in his first farewell to readers of the Book of Mormon, pleads for forgiveness for any imperfections in the record and explains that

if our plates had been sufficiently large we could 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 9:34]

Moroni implies that there was a choice between Hebrew and reformed Egyptian; but because of space, reformed Egyptian was chosen. Nibley (1988:15) initially suggests that "in Lehi's day (Egyptian) demotic was actually a shorthand, extremely cramped and abbreviated." This could explain the reason for writing the record in "reformed Egyptian." Nibley discounts that theory and suggests that the early writers of the plates did not have a space problem: the reason for writing in reformed Egyptian was "that the language of Lehi's descendants was not Hebrew or Egyptian but a mixture of both, both being corrupted in the process" (Nibley 1988:13). However, there is no reason to think of the language of Lehi's descendants as a corruption or mixture of Hebrew or Egyptian. Instead, the Nephites probably spoke a variety of Hebrew and wrote in both Hebrew and reformed Egyptian. And their Hebrew would have undergone normal linguistic changes that happen to all languages through time.

This concept of normal language change suggests another reason for writing the text in reformed Egyptian. One outstanding quality of logographic systems is that a symbol can represent a meaning that becomes attached to a word. It matters little if the sound of the word

changes; the meaning of the word remains constant because it is sound independent. For example, even though spoken Mandarin Chinese and Cantonese Chinese are mutually unintelligible, Cantonese and Mandarin speakers, as well as Korean and Japanese speakers, can read the same Chinese symbols and derive the same message from the text. The words they use to express that meaning may be different, but the meaning is the same. Applying the same sound independent principle, Chinese scholars can also communicate across time with little difficulty. These scholars can read a manuscript that may be 1,000 years old and understand the message of the text because they are reading direct meaning rather than meaning through sounds. On the other hand, English scholars must struggle to reconstruct the phonetic rules of spoken Old English before they can fully comprehend the meaning of a text written in Old English.

Mormon's and Moroni's stewardship was to abridge a set of records recorded over a 1,000 year period. If these plates had been written in syllabic Hebrew, they would have had great difficulty understanding the writings of Nephi, Jacob and the other older prophets, since their language sounds would have undergone significant natural change over that period. But, since the plates were recorded in logographic symbols, albeit with some phonetic influence, Mormon and Moroni read direct meaning, and either translated that meaning into their contemporary Hebrew, or reformulated that meaning into their logographic variations for plate transcription purposes. This would make the abridging process far more accurate.

Yet, being accurate is not always easy. Mormon and Moroni struggled with the creation of this special text. I believe they faced the challenge of expressing Hebrew semantic and syntactical features into an Egyptian based "high code" script which they used for only a narrow set of secular and religious purposes, and which had not developed as a natural part of their

language. This same difficulty motivated Korean Emperor Se Jong to commission a search for a more efficient way to write since Koreans had difficulty expressing their meaning through Chinese characters. Mormon, Moroni and other prophets were obviously frustrated at the commandment to write in reformed Egyptian, but there was a purpose for that commandment.

Literacy and the socio-cultural structure of Lehi's descendants

Because the Book of Mormon peoples had access to these two scripts, it appears that they were a highly literate culture. In addition, the Book of Mormon record supports this conclusion, and within the book itself there is a strong emphasis on the value of written texts. For example, the Book of Mormon exists because of the commandment to Nephi to make "a record of my proceedings in my days" (1 Nephi 1:1). Also, the exodus of Lehi would never have happened were it not for an angel who appeared to Lehi "and gave unto him a book, and bade him that he should read" (1 Nephi 1:11). The first major challenge Lehi and his family faced involved risking their lives to possess the brass plates, and another early test of faith involved believing written directions that mysteriously appeared on a strange ball. However, we cannot expect that the Nephites developed a print culture similar to our own present-day high literate societies. Obviously, they did not have access to modern print technology, and to an educated infrastructure which maintains and expands print within the society. Based upon what we know about similar societies, it is likely that the Nephites used print for a narrow set of socially communicative functions and for an even more narrow set of religious and record keeping functions.

An analysis of the way print functioned in the Book of Mormon record suggests that print was used mostly in the preservation of religious records. There are a few mentions of writing for religious persuasion, writing for economic record keeping and writing for personal communication. However, many of the religious record keeping and religious persuasion examples are transcriptions of oral discourse which suggests that spoken communication was still the major mode of communication within their culture.

Gandz (1935) supports this concept of narrow functional space for print; he explains that, for biblical peoples, the introduction of writing

did not at once change the habits of the people and displace the old method of oral tradition. We must first distinguish between the first introduction of writing and its general diffusion. It often takes several centuries, and sometimes even a millennium or more, until this invention becomes the common property of the people at large. In the beginning, the written book is not intended for practical use at all. It is a divine instrument, placed in the temple "by the side of the ark of the covenant that it may be there for a witness" (Deuteronomy xxxi. 26) and remains there as a holy relic. For the people at large, oral instruction still remained the only way of learning, and the memory--the only means of preservation. Writing was practiced, if at all, only as an additional support for the memory [Gandz 1935:253-254, emphasis original].

Thus it is likely that, even though the people of Jerusalem in Lehi's time had the technology to write, they had not fully adopted literate culture values.

Ong (1988) contends that, since an oral culture knows only that which can be recalled, communal memory is highly valued. Social and mystical power rests with those who know; the repeaters of the past, the knowers of the ancient law; and those who have the right to speak of both the past, present and future. Since knowledge of the past is so fragile, it is also priceless, and every effort is made to preserve it. Often past knowledge and past ways become sacred with considerable social energy devoted to their preservation through various forms of ritual.

This emphasis on the past can create a homeostatic society whose focus is on social stability, the maintenance of the past, rather than on a future oriented focus on social change.

In oral residual cultures, the past is preserved through a record that becomes a central social and power icon, as in the above example of the divine instrument placed in the temple "by the side of the ark of the covenant that it may be there for a witness" (Deuteronomy 31:26). Thus, it is easy to understand the importance of the Brass Plates of Laban and their centrality to the people in the Book of Mormon. They were a tie to the past, and those who could read them became the equivalent of oral society repeaters of the past and knowers of the ancient law.

Those in oral societies know only what can be recalled--and no more. Thus important thoughts must be memorably shaped for oral recurrence. For this reason, mnemonic, or memory aiding devices are built into discourse structure. These devices include frequent repetition, balanced patterns, formulaic expressions, aggregative expressions and additive discourse blocks (Ong 1988). Oral residual societies tend to develop topics in writing in much the same way.

The Book of Mormon contains numerous examples of topic development through repetition, one of which is given in Figure 2. Topics are also developed through the oral, culturally influenced parallel balanced patterns, such as chiasmus. In addition there are many examples of other balanced discourse styles. Figure 3 shows one type of memory-aiding balanced pattern.

Formulaic expressions occur frequently including such expressions as "and it came to pass", "and now", "but/and/or behold." As an aid to memory, oral societies tend to develop meaning through reference to aggregative noun phrases, or word chunks. Thus, as Ong (1988)

points out, oral societies seldom refer to a soldier, rather "a brave soldier." Likewise, in the Book of Mormon account of Lehi's dream, it is never just a "rod," but a "rod of iron." Two examples of this word chunk occur in the same verse (1 Nephi 8:24, 1 Nephi 8:30), and six uses of this mnemonic chunk of language in eleven verses (1 Nephi 8:19 - 8:30). Likewise, in the same account it is never a "building" but always a "great (or large) and spacious building." However, I need to qualify this last point. It could be that the plates had single words for "rod of iron" and "large and spacious building." Joseph Smith would then have had to translate them into English as aggregates or chunks.

Some of these memory-aiding discourse features have been labelled as Hebraisms and support the notion of the Book of Mormon as an Hebraic text. I do not discount that conclusion; however, I suggest that these Hebraisms are, in addition, reflections of oral cultures. Similar structures are found in my analyses of Australian Aboriginal oral and written discourse (Eggington 1992, 1990) and Korean written discourse (Eggington 1987). For example, in a discourse analysis of an Aboriginal oral narrative, I show that the expression "he was making spears" is repeated seven times in a text that, when translated into English, consists of only sixteen short sentences. As such, the expression acts as a formulaic cohesive device which ties the narrative together, advances the development of topic, and emphasizes the main purpose of the narrative (Eggington 1990).

In extended discourse, oral societies prefer to develop topics in terms of additive relationships, rather than the more syntactically complex subordinate relationships. Consequently in an oral residual society, the preferred style of topic development appears to be additive. This can be seen in the King James Version of the Bible, which even in seventeenth

century England attempted to reflect the oral residual cultural values in the ancient biblical texts. On the other hand, the 1970 New American Bible uses subordination, a discourse pattern preferred by highly literate cultures. Figure 4 contrasts the additive and subordinative styles of these two versions. Another interesting contrast is shown in Figure 5, displaying two accounts of a similar experience: Lehi's vision in 1 Nephi 1 and Joseph Smith's vision in 1820. The Book of Mormon account prefers additive relationships whereas Joseph Smith's is entirely subordinative. This contrast can be explained by the fact that the Book of Mormon was written in a style influenced by oral residual writing norms, while Joseph Smith's account was influenced by literate culture norms.

These examples support the notion that the Nephites were an oral residual culture; that is, they had access to literacy but retained many oral culture values. In addition, the Book of Mormon narrative provides additional information that allows us to determine the types of oral or literate social structures found among the Mulekites, Lamanites, and Nephites.

One feature of the Book of Mormon that reflects oral values is the agonistic tone of many of the narrative events in the book. Ong (1988) observed that "many, if not all, oral or residually oral cultures strike literates as extraordinarily agonistic in their verbal performance and indeed in their lifestyle" (Ong 1988:30). Oral cultures, he contends, focus on the struggle and the battles of the culture, preferring enthusiastic descriptions of physical violence (Ong 1988:30). It is unnecessary to recount the many Book of Mormon battles or other types of conflicts given to us with intensely detailed descriptions of heroic events. The book is filled with personal exploits of war heroes, such as Moroni, Teancum, Helaman and Mormon, and

Figure 4

From Oral to Literate Style: The Old Testament

King James Version: (1611) Genesis 1:1-5

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.
And the earth was without form, and void; [additive]
And darkness was upon the face of the deep. [additive]
And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. [additive]
And God said, Let there be light: [additive]
and there was light. [additive]
And God saw the light, [additive]
that it was good [additive]
And God divided the light from the darkness. [additive]
And God called the light day, [additive]
and the darkness he called night [additive]
And the evening and the morning were the first day. [additive]

(11 additive, 0 subordinative)

New American Bible (1970): Genesis 1:1-5

In the beginning,
when God created the heavens and the earth, [subordinative]
the earth was a formless wasteland,
and darkness covered the abyss, [additive]
while a mighty wind swept over the waters. [subordinative]
Then God said, "Let there be light," [subordinative]
and there was light [additive]
God saw how good the light was.
God then separated the light from the darkness. [subordinative]
God called the night day
and the darkness he called night [additive]
Thus evening came, [subordinative]
and the morning followed - the first day [additive]

(5 additive, 4 subordinative)

Figure 5

From Oral to Literate Style: the Translator and the Author

1 Nephi 1: 7-10

And it came to pass that he returned to his own house at Jerusalem; [additive]

And he cast himself upon his bed, [additive]
being overcome with the spirit [subordinative]
and the things which he had seen [additive]

And being thus overcome with the Spirit, [additive]
he was carried away with a vision,
even that he saw the heavens open, ... [subordinative]

And it came to pass that he saw One descending out of the midst of heaven, [additive]
and he beheld that his luster was above that of the sun at noon-day. [additive]

And he also saw twelve others following him, [additive]
and their brightness did exceed that of the stars in the firmament [additive]

[8 additive, 2 subordinative]

Joseph Smith History 1:14-19

---- just at this moment of great alarm [subordinative]
I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head,
above the brightness of the sun [subordinative]
which descended gradually until it fell upon me [subordinative]

It no sooner appeared
than I found myself delivered from the enemy [subordinative]
which held me bound. [subordinative]

When the light rested upon me, [subordinative]
I saw two personages,
whose brightness and glory defy all description [subordinative]
standing above me in the air. [subordinative]

(0 additive, 8 subordinative)

personal conflicts involving Nephi and Laman, Jacob and Sherem, Alma and Amlici, Abinadi and Noah, and many others.

Another oral residual feature involves the relationship between the Nephites and the Mulekites. We know that when the Nephites found the Mulekites, the people of Zarahemla, they encountered a large group whose "language had become corrupted; and they had brought no records with them, . . . and it came to pass that after they were taught in the language of Mosiah, Zarahemla gave a genealogy of his fathers, *according to his memory*" (Omni 1:17-18, emphasis mine). The fact that 400 years before this meeting, Zarahemla's ancestors had brought no written records, and that he had to give his genealogy "according to his memory," suggests that the people of Zarahemla were of a primary oral culture with no literate structures. This would explain the ease with which "the people of Zarahemla and of Mosiah, did unite together; and Mosiah was appointed to be their king" (Omni 1:19): Considering that the people of Zarahemla were far more numerous than the people of Mosiah, such a merger, with the minority leader taking control, could have occurred only if the minority group had a superior technology--either literacy, or a demonstratable claim to leadership, such as the brass plates and the ability to read them. Both would be symbols of divine authority to a primary oral culture, and in this case, the Nephites had both.

The Book of Mormon provides little evidence of the nature of literacy among the Lamanite people. They appear to have a strong oral tradition with considerable resentment toward Nephi's descendants because, among other things, Nephi had "departed into the wilderness as the Lord had commanded him, and took the records which were engraved on the plates of brass, for they said that he robbed them" (Mosiah 10:16). We also know that Amulon

appointed teachers so that "the language of Nephi began to be taught among all the people of the Lamanites, . . . and they taught them that they should keep their record, and that they might write one to another" (Mosiah 24:4-6). This evidence suggests that the Lamanites had periods of declining literacy in their history and thus developed primary oral culture values; but at other times they developed aspects of an oral residual culture.

On the other hand, the Nephites appear to have retained their initial literacy levels. After King Benjamin's address, the King "caused that the words which he spake should be written and sent forth among those that were not under the sound of his voice, that they might also receive his words" (Mosiah 2:8). Since means of reproducing written texts were still primitive, it is possible that only a few copies of his address were made and then read to groups of people by special "readers" (cf. Mosiah 6:3). This same process probably also occurred when Mosiah obtained Zeniff's record. We are told that "it came to pass that Mosiah did read and cause to be read, the records of Zeniff" (Mosiah 25:5). The "cause to be read" phrase could indicate some public reading of the record.¹

The emphasis on the brass plates, the coded or written messages inside the Liahona, the frequent direction to study the scriptures, the need to make and preserve records for the spiritual salvation of future generations, the finding and translation of other records, and the final advice from Moroni on what the reader should do "when ye shall read these things" (Moroni 10:3-5) suggest that the Nephites held writing, record keeping, and literacy as central religious and

¹ Similar examples of public readings occur in the Old Testament. In fact, the majority of references to reading in the Old Testament refer to reading aloud to a listening audience (see Deuteronomy 31:11, Joshua 8:35, Kings 22:10, Nehemiah 8:3).

cultural values. Thus at certain times in their history, they had developed at least a rudimentary literate culture among their population in general.

Implications

Goody and Watt (1988) suggest that, with the development of literacy, the "world of knowledge" transcends political and temporal units. They quote Spengler's proclamation that "writing is the grand symbol of the Far" (Goody and Watt 1988:19). In literate cultures, the world's past and present literate knowledge is within reach to any individual. Information, thought and philosophies can be gathered from beyond the immediate society and the present time, threatening a homeostatic outlook and destroying cultural bonds. Rather than past knowledge dropping off the edge of recallable memory, it is preserved and layered, creating an incredibly complex society. Because it is impossible to absorb all this accumulated knowledge, one must be selective; and this selectivity eventually results in individual or small group cultures contributing to the sense of alienation so often discussed with reference to our present culture.

What happens when individuals immersed in modern high literate culture values confront the people and values of the Book of Mormon? First, we need to recognize that the Book of Mormon peoples and the Book of Mormon text do not reflect twentieth century white, western, middle class cultural values and high literate culture linguistic expectations. We need to examine the constraints placed on our ability to understand the full meaning of this remarkable text and study and research the text, rather than simply read it. And perhaps we need to develop more effective strategies for studying the Book of Mormon that all come to an understanding of the different discourse structures, cohesive devices, rhetorical patterns and world views used by its authors and ultimately develop a greater appreciation of each author's rhetorical intent.

Considering who these authors were and who was inspiring them, this challenge is definitely worthwhile.

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