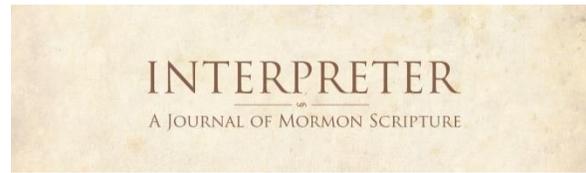




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Reading 1 Nephi With Wisdom

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Abstract: Nephi is the prototypical wise son of the Wisdom tradition. As Proverbs advocates that a wise man cherishes the word of God, so Nephi cherishes the words of the wise. Nephi's record begins with a declaration of his upbringing in the Wisdom tradition and his authenticity and reliability as a wise son and scribe (1 Nephi 1:1-3). His is a record of the learning of the Jews — a record of wisdom. If the Wisdom tradition is a foundation for Nephi's scribal capabilities and outlook, perhaps the principles and literary skills represented by the scribal Wisdom tradition constitute the "learning of the Jews" that Nephi references so early in his account. Thus, if Nephi's is a record of the learning of the Jews — a record of wisdom — we would be wise to read it with Wisdom — that is, through the lens of ancient Israelite and Middle Eastern Wisdom traditions.



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Taylor Halverson

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READING 1 NEPHI WITH WISDOM

Taylor Halverson

Abstract: Nephi is the prototypical wise son of the Wisdom tradition. As Proverbs advocates that a wise man cherishes the word of God, so Nephi cherishes the words of the wise. Nephi's record begins with a declaration of his upbringing in the Wisdom tradition and his authenticity and reliability as a wise son and scribe (1 Nephi 1:1–3). His is a record of the learning of the Jews — a record of wisdom. If the Wisdom tradition is a foundation for Nephi's scribal capabilities and outlook, perhaps the principles and literary skills represented by the scribal Wisdom tradition constitute the "learning of the Jews" that Nephi references so early in his account. Thus, if Nephi's is a record of the learning of the Jews — a record of wisdom — we would be wise to read it with Wisdom — that is, through the lens of ancient Israelite and Middle Eastern Wisdom traditions.

"Wisdom cries out [from the dust] "

(Proverbs 1:20)

As he opens his account, Nephi states that his record is founded on the learning of the Jews:

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. And I know that the record which I make is true; and I make it with mine own hand; and I make it according to my knowledge. (1 Nephi 1:2–3, emphasis added)

And what might the learning of the Jews be? This paper explores the ancient Near Eastern scribal Wisdom tradition¹ and its related literature and themes as a potential backdrop for Nephi's scribal skills, literary capabilities, and thematic outlook.

When interpreting the phrase "learning of the Jews," scholars of the Book of Mormon typically focus on either Nephi's writing ability or on his formal training² in some type of ancient Israelite educational system.³ Given his writing abilities, it seems that Nephi received training as a scribe,⁴ a viable and worthy professional occupation for a fourth son

1 Useful secondary readings on the ancient Near Eastern Wisdom tradition and literature with specific emphasis on the Hebrew Bible include: Bernard Lang, *Wisdom and the Book of Proverbs: A Hebrew Goddess Redefined* (New York: Pilgrim, 1986); Stuart Weeks, *Early Israelite Wisdom* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994); Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation: The Theology of Wisdom Literature* (Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1994); Claus Westermann, *The Roots of Wisdom: The Oldest Proverbs of Israel and Other Peoples*, trans. J. Daryl Charles (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1995); G.I. Davies, "Were There Schools in Ancient Israel?" *Wisdom in Ancient Israel: Essays in Honour of J. A. Emerton*, eds. John Day, Robert Gordon, and H. G. M. Williamson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 199--211; Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000); Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1996); James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction*, 1st ed. (Louisville KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1981).

2 Joshua Michael Sears, "'We Came Out from Jerusalem': The Holy City's Influence on Book of Mormon Peoples," *Selections from the Religious Education Student Symposium 2007* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2007), 130-146, see footnote 3; Steven L. Olsen, "The Centrality of Nephi's Vision" in *Religious Educator* 11, no. 2 (2010): 51-66, see footnote 1.

3 James L. Crenshaw, *Education in Ancient Israel: Across the Deadening Silence*, The Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1998); Noel B. Reynolds, "Nephi's Teachings in the Book of Mormon" (Transcript, n.d.), available at <http://publications.maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=943&index=1&keyword=learning%20of%20the%20jews>. Reynolds acknowledges that "Nephi brought all that Jewish education and culture with him to the Promised Land" and later qualifies that as Hebrew literary devices.

4 If, as some scholars suggest, the Bible were the product of scribal schools, then we should look more carefully at what role scribal training and the Wisdom tradition (which often went hand in hand) had in the production of the Book of Mormon. See K. van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2007) although van der Toorn's work has been criticized by John Van Seters, "The Role of the Scribe in the Making of the Hebrew Bible," *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 8/1 (2008), 99-129; for a useful introductory piece exploring Nephi's potential skill and training as a scribe,

with few prospects for receiving the family inheritance.⁵ Ancient Near Eastern scribal schools trained students both in practical arts (the skill of reading and writing) as well as in cultural values, typically expressed through pithy, proverbial statements that students repeatedly copied as writing exercises.⁶ That is to say, scribes who were trained in reading and writing were fully immersed in the preserved texts of the Wisdom tradition.⁷ To be a scribe was at the very least to have intellectually mastered the Wisdom tradition and, more likely, have come to accept, live, and espouse the principles and ideas of the Wisdom tradition.

For Nephi, the learning of the Jews may also have meant a mastery of Hebraic learning that included chiasmus⁸ and other scribal literary

including implications for interpreting Nephi's writings, see Brant A. Gardner, "Nephi as Scribe," *Mormon Studies Review* 23/1 (2011), 44–55.

5 Even Neo-Assyrian King Ashurbanipal, whose name means "the god Ashur is the creator of the heir," was not originally intended for the throne, being the third son. Instead of being groomed for the throne, he was trained in the scribal arts, within which he appears to have flourished. Indeed, the greatest library of ancient Mesopotamia was assembled at the Assyrian capital of Nineveh by Ashurbanipal due to his love of learning. Incidentally, Ashurbanipal's older brother, Shamash-shum-ukin, was so resentful that his younger brother became the king that he rebelled against him — a rebellion that divided the kingdom in war. Shamash-shum-ukin perished in the fire that destroyed his Babylonian palace, ending the war around 646 BC. Might Laman and Lemuel, not so far historically removed from the significant international events of the Assyrian civil war, have seen Nephi as an Ashurbanipal character — a younger brother trained as a scribe but chosen by the father to be the king — who displaces the legitimate older brothers as rulers and as king wages ruthless war on them? For an article arguing for the scribal training and capabilities of Ashurbanipal, a younger son, see Alasdair Livingstone, "Ashurbanipal: Literate or Not?" *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und Vorderasiatische Archäologie* 97/1 (2007), 98–118.

6 Laurie E. Pearce, "The Scribes and Scholars of Ancient Mesopotamia," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East, Volume IV*, ed. Jack M. Sasson (London: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), 2265–2278 (esp. 2270).

7 Books of the Old Testament that are classed as Wisdom literature typically include Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, and, depending upon the scholar, also the Song of Solomon and Psalms. It is unlikely that the books we have today would be identical to what Nephi had access to during his scribal training in the Wisdom tradition.

8 John W. Welch, "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon," in *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1982), 33–52; Matthew Nickerson, "Nephi's Psalm: 2 Nephi 4:16–35 in the Light of Form-Critical Analysis," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6/2 (1997), 2642.

devices such as paronomasia (word-play and punning),⁹ whether expressed in Egyptian or Hebrew characters or a mixture of those languages and scripts.¹⁰ Accordingly, one intriguing possibility is that the learning of the Jews constituted the principles and themes expressed in the ancient Israelite sapiential or Wisdom tradition.¹¹ This tradition was passed down from a father or a king to a son or a prince or from

9 Immanuel M. Casanowicz, *Paronomasia in the Old Testament* (Boston: Norwood Press, 1894); Frank Zimmermann, "Folk Etymology of Biblical Names," in *Volume du Congrès: Genève, 1965 (Vetus Testamentum Supplement 15; Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1966)*, 311–326; Herbert Marks, "Biblical Naming and Poetic Etymology," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114/1 (1995), 21–42; Russell T. Cherry III, *Paronomasia and Proper Names in the Old Testament: Rhetorical Function and Literary Effect*, Dissertation (Louisville, KY: The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1988); Moshe Garsiel, *Biblical Names: A Literary Study of Midrashic Derivations and Puns*, (Ramat Gan, Israel: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1991); Moshe Garsiel, "Puns upon Names as a Literary Device in 1 Kings 1–2," *Biblica* 72 (1991), 379–386; Edward L. Greenstein, "Wordplays, Hebrew," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 6:968–971; Moshe Garsiel, "Homiletic Name-Derivations as a Literary Device in the Gideon Narrative: Judges VI–VIII," *Vetus Testamentum* 43 (1993), 302–317; paronomasia also appears throughout the Book of Mormon; Matthew L. Bowen has written a number of articles for *Interpreter* on paronomasia and word-play in the Book of Mormon.

10 John A. Tvedtnes, "The Hebrew Background of the Book of Mormon," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, eds. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 77–91; S. Kent Brown and Terrence L. Szink, "Lehi," *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York: Macmillan, 1992); Sidney B. Sperry, "The Book of Mormon as Translation English," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4/1 (1995), 209–217; John A. Tvedtnes and Stephen D. Ricks, "Notes and Communications: Jewish and Other Semitic Texts Written in Egyptian Characters," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5/2 (1996), 156–163; John Gee, "The Wrong Type of Book," in *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon*, eds. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002), 307–329; Stephen D. Ricks, "Converging Paths: Language and Cultural Notes on the Ancient Near East," in *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon*, eds. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002), 389–419; D. Jeffrey Meldrum and Trent D. Stephens, "Who Are the Children of Lehi?" *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12/1 (2003), 38–51, 116; John S. Thompson, "Lehi and Egypt," in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, eds. John W. Welch, David R. Seely, Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 259–276.

11 Although this article focuses primarily on a few themes found in the Book of Proverbs and their relevance to the interpretation of the Book of Mormon, other Wisdom literature may be relevant and fruitful for interpreting Nephi's writings.

a scribal teacher to a new scribe.¹² Thus Nephi’s scribal training would make him competent in the ancient Israelite Wisdom tradition. Another connection between Nephi’s record and the Old Testament¹³ Wisdom tradition is Nephi’s assertion that he has drawn upon “knowledge” in making his record (1 Nephi 1:3). The word “knowledge,” or *daat* in Hebrew, is tied up in the Wisdom tradition. In fact, of the 89 instances of *daat* in the Old Testament, 61 are found in Wisdom literature, nearly 70% of the total instances of this word in the Old Testament. And of that total, 39 of 89 are found in the Book of Proverbs, constituting 44% of the overall total usages of the word *daat* in the Old Testament.¹⁴ While Nephi upholds the *learning* of the Jews, which may be represented by the Wisdom tradition, he rejects the *manner* of the Jews, perhaps represented by their culture and behaviors:

For I, Nephi, have not taught them many things concerning the manner of the Jews; for their works were works of darkness, and their doings were doings of abominations. (2 Nephi 25:2)

If Nephi is influenced by the Wisdom tradition, then reading 1 Nephi 1:2–3¹⁵ — indeed reading all of Nephi’s writings — through the lens of ancient Near Eastern Wisdom literature may open the records

12 Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, “Liminality and Worldview in Proverbs 1–9,” *Semeia* 50 (1990), 111–144; Carole R. Fontaine, “The Sage in Family and Tribe,” in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. John G. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 158–163; Michael V. Fox, “The Social Location of the Book of Proverbs,” in *Texts, Temple, and Traditions: A Tribute to Menahem Haran*, eds. Michael V. Fox, et al. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 227–239; Richard J. Clifford, “The Community of the Book of Proverbs,” in *Constituting the Community: Studies on the Polity of Ancient Israel in Honor of S. Dean McBride, Jr.*, eds. John T. Strong and Steven S. Tuell (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 281–293; Stuart Weeks, *An Introduction to the Study of Wisdom Literature* (London: T&T Clark, 2010).

13 What protestant Christians call the Old Testament, scholars often call the Hebrew Bible.

14 The Wisdom tradition word “knowledge” appears in these Proverbs passages: 1:4; 1:7; 1:22; 1:29; 2:5–6; 2:10; 3:20; 5:2; 8:9–10; 8:12; 9:10; 10:14; 11:9; 12:1; 12:23; 13:16; 14:6–7; 14:18; 15:2; 15:7; 15:14; 17:27; 18:15; 19:2; 19:25; 19:27; 20:15; 21:11; 22:12; 22:17; 22:20; 23:12; 24:4–5; 29:7; 30:3.

15 For other examples of how deeply interpretable 1 Nephi 1 can be, see the forthcoming volume from the 2014 Mormon Theology Seminar titled “A Dream, A Rock, and a Pillar of Fire: Reading 1 Nephi 1”; see also Brant Gardner, “Another Suggestion for Reading 1 Nephi 1:1–3,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* (2014) at <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/another-suggestion-for-reading-1-nephi-1-1-3/> as well as Neal Rappleye “Nephi the Good: A Commentary

of the Book of Mormon in new and fruitful ways.¹⁶ This article briefly discusses five ways in which Nephi's writing may reflect the wider Wisdom literature tradition and thus may be a lens for understanding what Nephi meant by *learning of the Jews*.

Nephi reflects the wider Wisdom literature tradition by

1. Listening to and recording the words of his wise father,
2. Valuing learning and education,
3. Embracing hard work,
4. Seeking understanding from the Lord despite suffering and trials, and
5. Demonstrating the difference between the wise man and the fool.

The Wisdom Tradition Advocates Listening to and Recording the Words of a Wise Father

Proverbs, a representative repository of Wisdom literature in the Old Testament, advocates that a wise son cherish the words of the father:

My son, keep my words, and lay up my commandments with thee. Keep my commandments, and live; and my law as the apple of thine eye. Bind them upon thy fingers, write them upon the table of thine heart. (Proverbs 7:1–3)

1 Nephi 1:1–3," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* (2014) at <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/nephi-the-good-a-commentary-on-1-nephi-11-3/>.

16 It is not new to read Wisdom themes in the Book of Mormon. Still, there is much more yet to be discovered. Some of the scholars who have previously mined portions of the Book of Mormon for Wisdom themes include: Hugh Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989); Daniel C. Peterson, "Nephi and His Asherah: A Note on 1 Nephi 11:8–23," in *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World: Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson*, ed. Davis Bitton (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 191–243; Kevin Christensen, "Nephi, Wisdom, and the Deuteronomist Reform," *Insights* 23/2 (2003): 2–3; Kevin Christensen, "Jacob's Connections to First Temple Traditions," *Insights* 23/4 (2003): 2–3; Kevin Christensen, "The Temple, the Monarchy, and Wisdom: Lehi's World and the Scholarship of Margaret Barker," in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, eds. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 449–522; Alyson Skabelund Von Feldt, "Does God Have a Wife?" *FARMS Review* 19/1 (Provo, UT: Maxwell Institute, 2007), 81–118; Alyson Skabelund Von Feldt, "His Secret Is with the Righteous: Instructional Wisdom in the Book of Mormon," *Occasional Papers: Number 5* (Provo, UT: Maxwell Institute, 2007): this particular piece by Skabelund may currently be the most focused investigation of the Book of Mormon through the lens of Wisdom.

Nephi's record begins with what may be a declaration of his upbringing in the Wisdom tradition and his authenticity and reliability as a wise son and scribe:

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. And I know that the record which I make is true; and I make it with mine own hand; and I make it according to my knowledge. (1 Nephi 1:2–3)

Nephi appears to be the prototypical wise son of the Wisdom tradition and focuses much of his writing on preserving the words of his father Lehi — the wise father, leader, or king:

But I shall make an account of my proceedings in my days. Behold, I make an abridgment of the record of my father, upon plates which I have made with mine own hands; wherefore, after I have abridged the record of my father then will I make an account of mine own life. (1 Nephi 1:17)

That Nephi's original record consisted of the Book of Lehi demonstrates how deeply Nephi imbibed the sapiential tradition that advocates that the wise son hear the words of his father, preserve those words, and share those words with others:

My son, if thou wilt receive my words, and hide my commandments with thee; so that thou incline thine ear unto wisdom, and apply thine heart to understanding; yea, if thou criest after knowledge, and liftest up thy voice for understanding; if thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures; then shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord giveth wisdom: out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding. (Proverbs 2:1–6)

Nephi fulfilled these proverbial expectations in several ways. First, as he explained, “having great desires to know of the mysteries of God, wherefore, I did cry unto the Lord; and behold he did visit me, and did soften my heart that I did believe all the words which had been spoken by my father” (1 Nephi 2:16). Furthermore, Nephi sought to preserve and transmit the wisdom of his father across the generations:

And we had obtained the records which the Lord had commanded us, and searched them and found that they were desirable; yea, even of great worth unto us, insomuch

that we could preserve the commandments of the Lord unto our children. Wherefore, it was wisdom in the Lord that we should carry them with us, as we journeyed in the wilderness towards the land of promise. (1 Nephi 5:21–22)

The fact that the Book of Mormon is with us today is, in part, a fulfillment of the Wisdom tradition to preserve the sayings of the wise:

Wherefore, the things which are pleasing unto the world I do not write, but the things which are pleasing unto God and unto those who are not of the world. Wherefore, I shall give commandment unto my seed, that they shall not occupy these plates with things which are not of worth unto the children of men. (1 Nephi 6:5–6)

The Wisdom Tradition Values Learning and Education

Proverbs' opening statement declares that to be wise is "To know wisdom and instruction; to perceive the words of understanding" (Proverbs 1:2). Nephi states that he makes the record "according to [his] knowledge" (1 Nephi 1:3). This aligns with Proverb's thesis that "the fear [i.e., trust in and respect] of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (Proverbs 1:7; 9:10).

Soon after Lehi's vision, departure from Jerusalem, and wise counsel to Laman and Lemuel, these older brothers rejected the words of their father, labeling them "foolish imaginations" (1 Nephi 2:11). Nephi, on the other hand, sought after learning and knowledge.

And it came to pass that I, Nephi, being exceedingly young, nevertheless being large in stature, and also having great desires to know of the mysteries of God, wherefore, I did cry unto the Lord; and behold he did visit me, and did soften my heart that I did believe all the words which had been spoken by my father; wherefore, I did not rebel against him like unto my brothers. And I spake unto Sam, making known unto him the things which the Lord had manifested unto me by his Holy Spirit. And it came to pass that he believed in my words. (1 Nephi 2:16–17)

Nephi understood the value of the education and learning that written records could provide. It was this logic, including a reference to wisdom, that Nephi used as he attempted to encourage his brothers to return to Laban a second time to request the Brass Plates.

And behold, it is *wisdom* in God that we should obtain these records, that we may preserve unto our children the language of our fathers; and also that we may preserve unto them the words which have been spoken by the mouth of all the holy prophets, which have been delivered unto them by the Spirit and power of God, since the world began, even down unto this present time. And it came to pass that after this manner of language did I persuade my brethren, that they might be faithful in keeping the commandments of God. (1 Nephi 3:19–21, emphasis added)

Without the records of the wise, learning and wisdom would wither, and the potential for a righteous civilization would be jeopardized.

Behold the Lord slayeth the wicked to bring forth his righteous purposes. It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief. And now, when I, Nephi, had heard these words, I remembered the words of the Lord which he spake unto me in the wilderness, saying that: Inasmuch as thy seed shall keep my commandments, they shall prosper in the land of promise. Yea, and I also thought that they could not keep the commandments of the Lord according to the law of Moses, save they should have the law. And I also knew that the law was engraven upon the plates of brass. And again, I knew that the Lord had delivered Laban into my hands for this cause — that I might obtain the records according to his commandments. (1 Nephi 4:13–17)

The Wisdom Tradition Teaches Hard Work

Similarly, just as the wise should labor to learn, they should also find benefit in hard work and avoid idle talk for “in all toil there is profit: but mere talk leads only to poverty” (Proverbs 14:23, NRSV). We see this in the Book of Mormon when Nephi immediately engages in the seemingly impossible and arduous task of building a boat:

And it came to pass that the Lord spake unto me, saying: Thou shalt construct a ship, after the manner which I shall show thee, that I may carry thy people across these waters. And I said: Lord, whither shall I go that I may find ore to molten, that I may make tools to construct the ship after the manner which thou hast shown unto me? And it came to pass that the Lord told me whither I should go to find ore, that I

might make tools. And it came to pass that I, Nephi, did make a bellows wherewith to blow the fire, of the skins of beasts; and after I had made a bellows, that I might have wherewith to blow the fire, I did smite two stones together that I might make fire. (1 Nephi 17:8–11)

Even though Nephi is willing to labor with all his might, lazy Laman and Lemuel taunt Nephi for his lack of wisdom (judgment); they speak of Lehi and Nephi, the wise men in the family, as *fools*:

And now it came to pass that I, Nephi, was exceedingly sorrowful because of the hardness of their hearts; and now when they saw that I began to be sorrowful they were glad in their hearts, insomuch that they did rejoice over me, saying: We knew that ye could not construct a ship, for we knew that ye were lacking in judgment; wherefore, thou canst not accomplish so great a work. And thou art like unto our father, led away by the foolish imaginations of his heart; yea, he hath led us out of the land of Jerusalem, and we have wandered in the wilderness for these many years; and our women have toiled, being big with child; and they have borne children in the wilderness and suffered all things, save it were death; and it would have been better that they had died before they came out of Jerusalem than to have suffered these afflictions. Behold, these many years we have suffered in the wilderness, which time we might have enjoyed our possessions and the land of our inheritance; yea, and we might have been happy. (1 Nephi 17:19–21)

The Wisdom tradition typically concluded that the righteous prosper and are happy; the wicked are fools who suffer. In that light, Nephi repeats Wisdom-tradition-influenced statements to his brothers, saying that “he that is righteous is favored of God” (1 Nephi 17:35). Considering the difficulties and suffering of the journey, Laman and Lemuel might have felt justified in calling Nephi and Lehi fools who lacked judgment.

But just as Proverb describes “the talk of the lips *tendeth* only to penury” (Proverbs 14:23), Laman and Lemuel’s foolish words and threats nearly brought down God’s wrath:

In the name of the Almighty God, I command you that ye touch me not, for I am filled with the power of God, even unto the consuming of my flesh; and whoso shall lay his hands upon me shall wither even as a dried reed; and he shall be

as naught before the power of God, for God shall smite him.
(1 Nephi 17:48)

Nephi's reference to "a dried reed" likely came from his experience in the scribal tradition where clay tablets were inscribed using dry reeds. Significantly, cane reeds were often equated in Mesopotamian Wisdom literature with humans. For example, just as a cane reed will eventually fall and die, so too will humans.¹⁷ Once again, Nephi appears to be invoking contextually appropriate themes from the ancient Near Eastern Wisdom tradition to address his circumstances.

The Wisdom Tradition Instructs One to Seek Knowledge from the Lord Despite Suffering

Like other prominent figures in Wisdom literature, Nephi seeks knowledge from the Lord despite the suffering he personally experiences. Indeed, Nephi describes himself as "having seen many afflictions in the course of [his] days" (1 Nephi 1:1). Like righteous Job, Nephi declares that notwithstanding his trials he still trusts (i.e., fears)¹⁸ the Lord. Thereby, Nephi considers himself "highly favored of the Lord in all [his] days" (1 Nephi 1:1) and affirms that his afflictions led him to gain "a great knowledge of the goodness and the mysteries of God" (1 Nephi 1:1), similar to Job.

For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: and though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God: whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another; though my reins be consumed within me. (Job 19:25–27)

This knowledge leads Nephi to trust in (fear) the Lord, a trust summarized in 1 Nephi 1:20 that likely serves as a thesis statement for the rest of 1 Nephi:

I, Nephi, will show unto you that the tender mercies of the Lord are over all those whom he hath chosen, because of

¹⁷ See Michael P. Streck and Nathan Wasserman, "Mankind's Bitter Fate: The Wisdom Dialog Bm 79111+," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies*, 66 (2014), 39–47, especially p. 40; Michael P. Streck, "Schilf" [= "Reed"] in *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie*, Bd. 12/3–4 (2009) 182–89, especially p. 188.

¹⁸ I put *fear* in parentheses to remind readers that these terms are interchangeable in the Wisdom tradition. Proverbs states, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (Proverbs 1:7).

their faith, to make them mighty even unto the power of deliverance.¹⁹

The Wisdom Tradition Clarifies the Difference Between the Wise Man and the Fool

Proverbs contrasts the wise man with the fool, “A wise son maketh a glad father: but a foolish son is the heaviness of his mother” (Proverbs 10:1). Nephi’s record provides characters that align with that proverbial contrast. Immediately obvious are Laman and Lemuel, who never truly “hear” the wise words of their father. In the Book of Mormon, they play the role of the fool,²⁰ the foil to the wise Nephi. Unfortunately, the rebellious brothers may have enacted, or attempted to enact, the seven abominations listed in Proverbs 6:16–19,

These six things doth the Lord hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him: a proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, an heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief, a false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren.

Another foolish figure in Nephi’s record, who beautifully plays into the sapiential drama expected of Wisdom literature, is Laban. Likely by literary and paronomastic design, Laban’s name is an anagram of the Hebrew word *nabal*,²¹ meaning “fool.”²² Like a true fool, Laban despises

19 Noel B. Reynolds, “Nephi’s Outline,” in *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1982), 53–74.

20 Unfortunately, Lemuel was one of the great fools of the Book of Mormon because he chose to hearken to the words of another fool, Laman, rather than the words of the wise, Nephi or Lehi. “It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise, than for a man to hear the song of fools” (Ecclesiastes 7:5). “And it came to pass that Laman was angry with me, and also with my father; and also was Lemuel, for he hearkened unto the words of Laman. Wherefore Laman and Lemuel did speak many hard words unto us, their younger brothers, and they did smite us even with a rod (1 Nephi 3:28).” In condemning Laman and Lemuel as fools, who spoke “many hard words,” we remember that the Wisdom tradition teaches that “a fool’s voice is known by multitude of words” (Ecclesiastes 5:3).

21 For a Biblical story of paronomasia involving the name Nabal, see the story of David, Abigail, and Nabal in 1 Samuel 25.

22 See for example, Alan Goff, “Scratching the Surface of Book of Mormon Narratives,” *FARMS Review of Books* 12/2 (2000), esp. 18–19.

the word of God and fails to value the Brass Plates in his possession, a direct contrast to Nephi:

Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding. For the merchandise of it is better than the merchandise of silver, and the gain thereof than fine gold. She is more precious than rubies: and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her. (Proverbs 3:13–15)

Like a fool who lusts for spoil, Laban seeks the property of Nephi's family even though "the getting of treasures by a lying tongue is a vanity tossed to and fro of them that seek death" (Proverbs 21:6). In contrast, wise Nephi is willing to give away his most "valuable" earthly possessions in order to gain the pearl of great price — the wise sayings of the Lord and his prophets as recorded on the Brass Plates.

A foolish man utters nonsense or speaks without thinking — with dire consequences for himself: "Rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing" (NRSV Proverbs 12:18; see also Proverbs 6:12–15). Laban is the thoughtless fool when he bears false witness against Laman, saying, "Thou art a robber, and I will slay thee" (1 Nephi 3:13). Significantly, for the outsized influence that Laban seems to exert in the early narrative of the Book of Mormon, this is the *only* direct statement uttered by him that Nephi records. With this false statement, foolish Laban breaks the Mosaic Law to "not bear false witness against thy neighbour" (Exodus 20:16). Consequently, according to Mosaic Law, whatever punishment the slanderer uttered against the slandered would turn back against him:

If a false witness rise up against any man to testify against him that which is wrong; then both the men, between whom the controversy is, shall stand before the Lord, before the priests and the judges, which shall be in those days; and the judges shall make diligent inquisition: and, behold, if the witness be a false witness, and hath testified falsely against his brother; then shall ye do unto him, as he had thought to have done unto his brother: so shalt thou put the evil away from among you. (Deuteronomy 19:16–19)

Hence, the killing of Laban may have been lawfully justified.²³ In literary and legal irony, foolish Laban had spoken his own demise. And

²³ For another literary interpretation of Laban's death, see Steven L. Olsen, "The Death of Laban: A Literary Interpretation," *The FARMS Review* 21/1 (2009), 179–195.

in this utterance, he had confirmed what the Wisdom tradition says about fools: they speak without thinking as “A false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren” (Proverbs 6:19), their mouths utter slander like “He that hideth hatred with lying lips, and he that uttereth a slander is a fool. . . . Excellent speech becometh not a fool: much less do lying lips a prince” (Proverbs 10:18; 17:7).

The greatest obstacle to the wise is the fool. And the greatest obstacle for the preservation of wise sayings is the fool who does not understand the word of God or despises the word of God. Laban is the *nabal*, the fool who stands in the way of God’s wisdom being transmitted through the ages. Hence, the wise man must kill the fool in order for wisdom to thrive.²⁴ And this is no ordinary death. The very head of the fool is removed so that his foolish thoughts can no longer sprout, his foolish words can no longer be uttered, and his foolish plans can no longer be devised. For Nephi and the Book of Mormon, this is but “the beginning of knowledge” (Proverbs 1:7).

And this is simply the beginning of the many ways that reading Nephi, indeed the entire Book of Mormon record, through the lens of Wisdom literature can lead to expansive and fruitful new insights and meaning.

This article attempts to demonstrate that Nephi’s writings appear to be deeply influenced by Wisdom tradition themes. There are many Wisdom themes connecting the Book of Mormon to the Old Testament, though this article has only focused on five of those Wisdom themes that appear in 1 Nephi. Additional study will reveal many more connections between the Book of Mormon and the Wisdom literature tradition of ancient Israel.²⁵ If the Wisdom tradition is a foundation for Nephi’s

24 1 Nephi 4:13–17 provides a justification for killing Laban that may evoke themes from the Wisdom tradition (remember that Nephi is the wise man and Laban is the fool). See for example, Proverbs 1:24–32; 2:12–15, 22; 3:33–35; 4:19; 5:22–23; 6:12–15; 8:36; 11:3, 8, 19, 21, 28, 31; 12:6–7, 21; 13:9; 14:11; 15:10–11; 16:6; 19:9; 21:25, 28; 24:17–18; 28:10, 18.

25 Though what follows is a very limited list, Wisdom themes seem to prevail throughout the Book of Mormon. A cursory review of the Book of Mormon seems to connect in these ways. Theme 1, listening to and recording the words of his wise father; some potential passages to explore include: Jacob 1; Enos 1; Jarom 1; Omni 1; Mosiah 6; Helaman 5; Alma 36–42; Mormon 1, Moroni 7. Theme 2, valuing learning and education: Enos 1; Mosiah 1; Mosiah 2; Mormon 1. Theme 3, embracing hard work: Jacob 1; Enos 1; Jarom 1; Alma 43; Moroni 9. Theme 4, seeking understanding from the Lord despite suffering and trials: Jacob 3, Enos 1; Record of Zeniff (Mosiah 9–22); Alma 14; Moroni 9. Theme 5, demonstrating the difference between the wise man and the fool: Jacob 2–3; Mosiah 2–5; Alma 46 & 48. Or, following the pattern

scribal capabilities and outlook, perhaps the principles and literary skills represented by the scribal Wisdom tradition constitute the “learning of the Jews” that Nephi references so early in his record. Hence, if Nephi’s record is a record of the learning of the Jews — a record of wisdom — we would be wise to read it with *Wisdom*.

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we saw with Nephi and Laban, one might also ask “How does Jacob represent the wise man and Sherem the fool?”; “How does Alma the Younger represent the wise man and Korihor the fool?”; “How does Noah and the priests of Noah represent the fool and Abinadi the wise man?”; “How does Alma the Younger represent the wise man and Nehor the fool?”; “How does Amalickiah, or Ammoron, represent the fool and Captain Moroni the wise man?” Another theme in Wisdom literature is the advice for the wise man to avoid alluring women. How does Corianton represent the foolish son and his father the wise father? These and many other Wisdom themes and questions should prove fruitful for Book of Mormon scholarship.

