My intention in this chapter is to address directly Nephi’s two discussions of typology. In light of the preceding chapter, it is clear that this task is complicated by the complex structure of Nephi’s record. Because the relevant passages are positioned at either end of the “Isaiah chapters” of 2 Nephi 12–24, they (2 Nephi 11:4 and 2 Nephi 25:24–27) cannot be investigated independent of the role they play in helping structurally to set off Nephi’s quotation of Isaiah 2–14. This in turn implies that they cannot be interpreted without an eye to the larger role that Isaiah plays in Nephi’s record, preliminarily identified in chapter 2.

Consequently, what follows first in the present chapter is a discussion of the place of Second Isaiah in First Nephi, a discussion focused principally on determining exactly what Nephi means by “likening,” since evidence suggests that Nephi draws a crucial distinction between likening and typological interpretation. Likening is, for Nephi, a way of reading Isaiah, one that takes the prophet’s words to Israel as a template for making sense of Israel’s historical experience—wherever Israel finds herself, the New World apparently included. This discussion is followed by a detailed analysis of how Nephi might have likened one Isaianic text in particular: Isaiah 51:9–10. Included in this analysis is a study of the famous story of Nephi’s obtaining the brass plates from Laban. Nephi’s relationship to the Law (in part worked out in the course of his likening of the Prophets) is thus preliminarily investigated. Finally, the chapter concludes with an examination of both passages directly focused on typology. It is only in the course of this last discussion that the difference, for Nephi, between typology and likening becomes fully clear:
while likening is, for Nephi, a strategy for reading the Prophets, typology is a strategy for interpreting the Law. But whereas likening is a question of taking the prophetic text to provide a template for making sense of Israel’s historical experience, typology is a question of understanding the Law through its structurally implied fulfillment. The real stakes of this approach to typology will not, unfortunately, be clarified until Abinadi’s approach has also been discussed.

**First Nephi, Second Isaiah**

Several commentators have suggested that 1 Nephi 10 has a privileged role in First Nephi, both at the exegetical and theological levels. First, 1 Nephi 10 marks the transition from Nephi’s abridgment of his father’s record (1 Nephi 1–9) to his own account (1 Nephi 10–22). Second, 1 Nephi 10 provides the earliest account of the Nephite understanding of the history of Israel, as well as the earliest version of Nephite Christology. This curious chapter thus lays out in almost maddening brevity the basic contours of Nephite theology. And, crucially, it turns on the interpretation of a vital passage from Second Isaiah.

According to Nephi, Lehi delivered the sermon recorded in 1 Nephi 10 just after he recounted his dream of the tree of life: “For behold, it came to pass after my father had made an end of speaking the words of his dream, and also of exhorting [Laman and Lemuel] to all diligence, he spake unto them concerning the Jews” (1 Nephi 10:2). Lehi begins his remarks by pointing out Jerusalem’s wickedness and announcing anew the imminent exile to Babylon. The Jews are to “be destroyed, even that great city Jerusalem, and many should be carried away captive into Babylon” (1 Nephi 10:3). Interested in moving past the sad destruction of the city to later events, Lehi then explains that after the exile, the Jews will “return again, yea, even be brought back out of captivity” so as to “possess again the land of their inheritance”—all this “according to the own due time of the Lord” (1 Nephi 10:3).

Having set the postexilic stage, Lehi populates it with two characters: (1) “a prophet” identified as the “Messiah” or the “Savior of the world” (1 Nephi 10:4), and (2) “a prophet who should come before the Messiah, to
prepare the way of the Lord” (1 Nephi 10:7). These two characters meet in what proves to be for Nephi a central scene. The second-mentioned but first-arriving prophet (the preparer) would baptize the first-mentioned but second-arriving prophet (the Messiah) with water (1 Nephi 10:9). Nephi twice returns to this scene in his writings—first in describing his own vision of the same event (1 Nephi 11); second in the last chapters of his record (2 Nephi 31). Significantly, in 1 Nephi 11 an angelic guide heavily emphasizes the importance of the baptismal sequence, identifying it as the event marking “the condescension of God” (1 Nephi 11:26–27). 1 2 Nephi 31 in turn takes the same scene as the starting point for developing a full-blown “doctrine of Christ” (2 Nephi 31:4). It is thus clear that this postexilic encounter at Bethabara is both historically and doctrinally important for Nephi.

What might be missed, though, is the fact that the description of this event in 1 Nephi 10 draws on a passage from Second Isaiah. When Lehi says that the “prophet who should come before the Messiah” will come specifically “to prepare the way of the Lord” (1 Nephi 10:7), he alludes (if not directly refers) to Isaiah 40:3. The text from Isaiah: “The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” The Isaianic tie becomes even clearer in 1 Nephi 10:8: “Yea, even he should go forth and cry in the wilderness: Prepare ye the way of the Lord, and make his paths straight.” Some conscious connection is at work here.

One might object that 1 Nephi 10:7–8 seems more directly to draw from the New Testament, from a passage that in turn draws on Isaiah 40:3. But such an approach would have to take 1 Nephi 10 to be drawing on both the synoptic tradition (that is, on Matthew, Mark, and/or Luke) and the Johannine tradition (that is, on John). On the one hand, the rendering of Isaiah 40:3 in 1 Nephi 10:7–8 is identical to that of Matthew 3:3, Mark 1:3, and Luke 3:4 (and different, significantly, from that of John 1:23). But, on the other hand, the remainder of 1 Nephi 10:8 (“for there standeth one among you whom ye know not; and he is mightier than I, whose shoe’s latchet I am not worthy to unloose”) is identical to John 1:26–27 (but different, significantly, from Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:7; and Luke 3:16). A comparison of the passages makes this clear (italics marking synoptic sources and bold marking Johannine sources):
This interweaving of distinct sources into a single “quotation” is complex enough to problematize any direct tracing to the New Testament sources. And even if the language of 1 Nephi 10:7–8 ultimately derives from New Testament texts, it cannot be doubted that the source behind Lehi’s words is ultimately Isaiah 40:3. However one approaches the problem of translation (or of anachronistic language), the fact that 1 Nephi 10:8 draws on Isaiah 40:3 cannot be controverted—even if the reference to Isaiah passes through the linguistic medium of the New Testament idiom.⁵
What, then, of Lehi’s interest in Second Isaiah? And in particular, what of the allusion’s being placed at the point of transition from abridged narrative to Nephi’s account of his own experiences and his first words regarding Christology? Interestingly, Isaiah 40:3 is situated at a point of transition not only in First Nephi, but also in Isaiah. Following four chapters (Isaiah 36–39) that were, according to Brevard Childs, “intentionally inserted between First and Second Isaiah” and then “edited in such a way as to [make First Isaiah] anticipate the Babylonian exile,” the first verses of Isaiah 40 are the transition from the devastating prophecies of First Isaiah to the comforting words of Second Isaiah.

Moreover, Isaiah 40—beginning particularly with verse 3—transitions from First to Second Isaiah specifically by restaging the prophet’s encounter with the divine council portrayed in Isaiah 6. As Frank Moore Cross summarily puts it, the “parallel” between Isaiah 6 and Isaiah 40 “is remarkable.” Childs clarifies: “Chapter 40 does not offer a new independent call narrative, but rather provides a reappraisal of [Isaiah 6]. . . . [T]he point of the prologue [in Isaiah 40] is the announcement of a divine decision that now reverses the commission of judgment assigned to Isaiah [in Isaiah 6:9–12].” All of this means that the plainest reading of Isaiah 40:3—as the passage stands in the canonical setting of Isaiah 2–55—presents the figure Lehi identifies with the Messiah’s baptizer as a kind of “Isaiah reconfigured,” as an Isaiah turned from announcing destruction to the people of one era to announcing redemption to the people of a later era. Lehi, like the evangelists, takes the passage as referring to the work of John the Baptist, whom Lehi seems to have seen in vision. But Lehi is more explicit than the New Testament authors in that he does not see the passage simply as an isolated prophecy of a New Testament event. Instead, placing the appearance of the Baptist—and the Messiah—within the context of the exile and the return, he makes clear that he sees the New Testament events as being particularly poignant fulfillments of exactly what (Second) Isaiah had predicted about the overcoming of the Babylonian exile.

This approach to Second Isaiah, attributed to Lehi in 1 Nephi 10, is mirrored later in 1 Nephi 15. Here, in the course of reporting his attempt to explain to his brothers the meaning of their father’s sermon from 1 Nephi 10, Nephi makes another passing reference to (presumably Second) Isaiah. Effectively dividing the discussion concerning Lehi’s sermon in two, Nephi steps away from direct dialogue to note editorially: “I did rehearse unto them the words
of Isaiah, who spake concerning the restoration of the Jews, or of the house of Israel” (1 Nephi 15:20). Though he provides his readers with no details, Nephi suggests here that he found it easiest to clarify Lehi’s words concerning Israel’s future by, like Lehi, quoting and expositing Isaiah’s writings.

This return to Second Isaiah in 1 Nephi 15 sets up what exegetes call an *inclusio* that frames the whole of 1 Nephi 10–15. Opening and closing these collective chapters are the references to Second Isaiah. And Latter-day Saint scholars have not entirely overlooked the importance of the centralization, as early as 1 Nephi 10–15, of Nephi’s emphasis on Isaiah. Garold Davis, for instance, reads 1 Nephi 10—Lehi’s exposition of Isaiah 40:3—as laying out the basic pattern for all of Nephi’s subsequent commentaries on (Second) Isaiah. At any rate, it seems clear that 1 Nephi 10 and 1 Nephi 15 provide early if only sketchy formulations of the Lehite/Nephite understanding of Israel’s covenantal history, always mediated through Second Isaiah. And, of course, more expansive—but similar—formulations follow in 1 Nephi 19–22 and 2 Nephi 6–8.

1 Nephi 19–22 deserves particular attention. In chapter 2, I raised the possibility that Nephi originally intended only to write what is now 1 Nephi 1–18. On that reading, Nephi’s original project would have made only two brief references to Isaiah’s writings, those in 1 Nephi 10 and 15. Given that 1 Nephi 19–22—the first chapters added to the apparently original project—are so heavily focused on Isaiah, it is possible that part of what motivated Nephi’s change in direction after 1 Nephi 18 was guided by his recognition that he needed to give Isaiah’s writings a more prominent role, expanding on the references of 1 Nephi 10 and 15. In short, it is possible that Nephi’s original project only passingly footnoted Isaiah, and had reference only to Second Isaiah, while Nephi’s expanded project, first envisioned about the time he completed 1 Nephi 1–18, was meant to make Isaiah—and eventually First Isaiah as much as Second Isaiah—absolutely central to the record he was producing. At any rate, it is only with the concluding chapters of First Nephi that Isaiah begins to take center stage.

**Likening**

The emergence of Second Isaiah into the limelight is curious. Immediately following 1 Nephi 19:1–6—the passage that details the basic structure of Nephi’s perhaps newly revamped project—Nephi fills out the remainder
of 1 Nephi 19 by weaving together a whole series of quotations from the brass plates in a kind of systematization of Nephite Christology. Though Isaiah’s name goes unmentioned, he is quoted (1 Nephi 19:17 quotes Isaiah 52:10). More importantly, when Nephi comes to the end of his Christology, he explicitly mentions Isaiah: “that I might more fully persuade [my brothers] to believe in the Lord their Redeemer I did read unto them that which was written by the prophet Isaiah; for I did liken all scriptures unto us, that it might be for our profit and learning” (1 Nephi 19:23). Here, not only does Nephi identify Isaiah as his source for the development of a full-blown doctrine of the Redeemer, but he provides what is his first and by far most-cited account of how he reads Isaiah. The passage deserves detailed discussion.

The passage serves as an introduction to chapters 20–22. A transition to Nephi’s quotation of and commentary on Isaiah 48–49 (1 Nephi 20–22) follows immediately. The transition is worth quoting in full, especially because it repeats what Nephi says about how he reads Isaiah:

Wherefore I spake unto them, saying: Hear ye the words of the prophet, ye who are a remnant of the house of Israel, a branch who have been broken off; hear ye the words of the prophet, which were written unto all the house of Israel, and liken them unto yourselves, that ye may have hope as well as your brethren from whom ye have been broken off; for after this manner has the prophet written. (1 Nephi 19:24)

Obviously, the operative methodological term here is “liken.” It is one of the most commented-on words in the Book of Mormon. But little rigorous analysis has been given to it. Instead, the methodology it describes (or prescribes) is always assumed, as if it were perfectly obvious what it means to “liken” a text to oneself. The term, however, is hardly self-explanatory.

The word “liken” appears often enough in the King James Bible. Jesus himself frequently uses it in the Gospels, generally when beginning a parable. More immediately relevant, though, and for obvious reasons, is the fact that the word appears several times in the King James Version of Second Isaiah. In all three instances (Isaiah 40:18, 25; 46:5), the word appears in rhetorical questions asked by the Lord to underscore the incomparability of God: “To whom then will ye liken me?” Interestingly, though, the Hebrew word here translated as “liken” can also be translated as “think” or “project.” The root of the word nonetheless denotes likeness or similarity in appearance, but—indicating an act of sketching out or projecting—the verb is more creative than receptive.
Assuming some continuity between Second Isaiah’s and Nephi’s usage of the word “liken” (given that Second Isaiah is precisely what Nephi likens), to liken would be to give shape to something through a predetermined likeness. Thus, to liken Isaiah would be to take Isaiah’s writings as a template for creatively interpreting something non-Isaianic, to employ an “Isaianic framework.”

Also important is the fact that in both verses 23 and 24 of 1 Nephi 19, Nephi speaks only of likening Isaiah’s writings to a group of people, not to individual persons: “I did liken all scriptures unto us”; “liken them unto yourselves.” This focus on likening a text to a whole people (rather than to individuals) is confirmed in every other instance of the word in Nephi’s writings: “the Lord God will proceed to do a marvelous work . . . which shall be of great worth unto our seed; wherefore, it is likened unto their being nourished by the Gentiles” (1 Nephi 22:8); “The words which I shall read are they which Isaiah spake concerning all the house of Israel; wherefore, they may be likened unto you, for ye are of the house of Israel” (2 Nephi 6:5); “I, Nephi, write more of the words of Isaiah, for . . . I will liken his words unto my people, and I will send them forth unto all my children” (2 Nephi 11:2); “I write some of the words of Isaiah. . . . Now these are the words, and ye may liken them unto you and unto all men” (2 Nephi 11:8). All these examples—striking in their consistency—make clear that likening is for Nephi an interpretive approach founded on collective rather than individual experience. In other words, Isaiah’s writings can be likened to Nephi’s people less because everyone can find meaning in “applying them to everyday life” than because (1) Isaiah was writing about Israel as a people, and (2) the Nephites were collectively an Israelite people.

What, though, of typology? Indeed, in all this analysis of Nephi’s manner of reading Isaiah, nothing has yet been said about typology—unless, that is, one presumes that likening is Nephi’s typological method. But it is important to step carefully here. There is, as yet, no reason to conflate likening with typology. Indeed, I will argue later that there is an essential distinction for Nephi between likening and typology. For the moment, though, it is necessary—in order to put a finer point on what Nephi means by “likening”—to take up in more detail actual examples of Nephi’s work of likening.

The Culmination of First Nephi

Returning, then, to Nephi’s quotation of Isaiah 48–49, it should be noted that, in light of a basic consensus of interpretation among Isaiah scholars,
Nephi’s launching of the Second Isaiah trajectory in the Book of Mormon specifically with Isaiah 48 is peculiar, and for two reasons. First, as Joseph Blenkinsopp explains, Isaiah 48 “is beset by more problems and subject to more diverse interpretations than any of the eight [chapters] that precede it,” in part because it is characterized by a “denunciation of a severity encountered nowhere else in chs. 40–55.” That is, in the words of Claus Westermann, “These words harshly accusing Israel occur in an utterance in which they seem to have no place—this is the real difficulty.” Second, as Blenkinsopp again explains:

Most commentators agree that chs. 40–48, which are bracketed with their own inclusive passage (48:20–22 cf. 40:3–5), form a section that is quite different in theme and tone from 49–55 in which we hear no more about Cyrus and the fall of Babylon, and no more satire is directed against foreign deities and their devotees. In 40–48 the focus is on Jacob/Israel, while in 49–55 Jerusalem/Zion is in the foreground.

Consequently, Nephi’s choice to begin his quotation of Second Isaiah with Isaiah 48 rather than, say, Isaiah 49 is odd—particularly because he clearly pairs Isaiah 48 (the strange end of the first half of Second Isaiah, chapters 40–48) with Isaiah 49 (the obvious beginning of the second half of Second Isaiah, chapters 49–55) by quoting them together in 1 Nephi 20–21. What sense can be made of this?

Nephi’s selection may have its own crucial logic. Blenkinsopp himself frames the division between Isaiah 40–48 and Isaiah 49–55 by pointing to the textual connection between Isaiah 40:3–5 and Isaiah 48:20–22. And not only does the second of these two passages appear in 1 Nephi 20, the first appears in 1 Nephi 10, as discussed above. In other words, the very two passages that set up the inclusive boundaries of the first half of Second Isaiah are to be found in First Nephi, with no quotation of Isaiah to be found between them. One might therefore suggest that Nephi employs Isaiah 48 in 1 Nephi 20 precisely in order to echo the quotation of Isaiah 40:3 in 1 Nephi 10, almost as if by this move Nephi intended to include the whole of Isaiah 40–48—though with a major ellipsis—in 1 Nephi 10–20.

What, though, of the harsh denunciations of Isaiah 48, mentioned by both Blenkinsopp and Westermann? As it turns out, Nephi uses them to good effect, even if they seem “out of place” in Second Isaiah. Quoting the chapter in a discourse to his rebellious brothers and likely in order to critique harshly the people of Jerusalem, Nephi seems to find that Isaiah 48 fits his concerns. As Brevard Childs points out, whereas Isaiah 40–47 “focuse[s] on
the promised deliverance of Israel, announced in prophecy and about to be fulfilled,” Isaiah 48 “addresses the issue of Israel’s unfaithful response to the promises, and challenges Israel to obedience in order to share in the promised salvation.” Nephi might well have drawn on Isaiah 48 without Isaiah 40–47 precisely to isolate for his own purposes the chapter’s harsh message. At any rate, it is easy to see the last verses of Isaiah 48 as echoing the Lehite experience:

Go ye forth of Babylon [Jerusalem?], flee ye from the Chaldeans, with a voice of singing declare ye, tell this, utter to the end of the earth; say ye: The Lord hath redeemed his servant Jacob [Lehi?]. And they thirsted not; he led them through the deserts [to Bountiful?]; he caused the waters to flow out of the rock for them; he clave the rock also and the waters gushed out. (1 Nephi 20:20–21)

Moreover, a still more negative word—one that, as Childs puts it, “casts a shadow on the celebration of deliverance” immediately follows these two verses that so clearly echo the deliverance of the Lehite exodus. It perfectly addresses, in Nephi’s deft handling, his brothers’ continued rebellion: “And notwithstanding [the Lord] hath done all this [for the Lehites as much as for Israel?], and greater also, there is no peace, saith the Lord, unto the wicked [Laman and Lemuel?]” (1 Nephi 20:22).

As it turns out, it may be significant that these verses (along with Isaiah 40:3–5) appear to be connected with the Lehite exodus. Kent Brown has analyzed the possibility that Nephi cited Isaiah 48–49 in 1 Nephi 20–21 precisely because of how the Isaiah text reflects the family’s passage through the desert. In fact, Brown lists sixteen connections between the Lehite wilderness journey and the text of Isaiah 48–49, some connections stronger than others:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Passage</th>
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<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 20:1–2</td>
<td>Hearken and hear this, O house of Jacob, who are called by the name of Israel, and are come forth out of the waters of Judah, or out of the waters of baptism, who swear by the name of the Lord, and make mention of the God of Israel, yet they swear not in truth nor in righteousness. Nevertheless, they call themselves of the holy city, but they do not stay themselves upon the God of Israel, who is the Lord of Hosts; yea, the Lord of Hosts is his name.</td>
<td>The Lehites leave Jerusalem because of the wickedness prevailing there.</td>
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<td>Passage</td>
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<td>1 Nephi 20:8–9</td>
<td>Yea, and thou hearest not; yea, thou knowest not; yea, from that time thine ear was not opened; for I knew that thou wouldst deal very treacherously, and wast called a transgressor from the womb. Nevertheless, for my name's sake will I defer mine anger, and for my praise will I refrain from thee, that I cut thee not off.</td>
<td>The Lord forgives Laman and Lemuel on the journey for his own reasons.</td>
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<td>1 Nephi 20:10–11</td>
<td>For, behold, I have refined thee, I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction. For mine own sake, yea, for mine own sake will I do this, for I will not suffer my name to be polluted, and I will not give my glory unto another.</td>
<td>The desert experience refined Nephi.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 20:14</td>
<td>All ye, assemble yourselves, and hear; who among them hath declared these things unto them? The Lord hath loved him; yea, and he will fulfill his word which he hath declared by them; and he will do his pleasure on Babylon, and his arm shall come upon the Chaldeans.</td>
<td>Jerusalem would be destroyed by Babylon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 20:17</td>
<td>And thus saith the Lord, thy Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel; I have sent him, the Lord thy God who teacheth thee to profit, who leadeth thee by the way thou shouldst go, hath done it.</td>
<td>The Lehites were led in their desert travels.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 20:18</td>
<td>O that thou hadst hearkened to my commandments—then had thy peace been as a river, and thy righteousness as the waves of the sea.</td>
<td>Lehi composed poems making similar comparisons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 20:19</td>
<td>Thy seed also had been as the sand; the offspring of thy bowels like the gravel thereof; his name should not have been cut off nor destroyed from before me.</td>
<td>Nephi received promises concerning his seed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 20:20</td>
<td>Go ye forth of Babylon, flee ye from the Chaldeans, with a voice of singing declare ye, tell this, utter to the end of the earth; say ye: The Lord hath redeemed his servant Jacob.</td>
<td>Again, Jerusalem would be destroyed by Babylon.</td>
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<td>Passage</td>
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<td>1 Nephi 20:21</td>
<td>And they thirsted not; he led them through the deserts; he caused the waters to flow out of the rock for them; he clave the rock also and the waters gushed out.</td>
<td>The Lehites were guided/protected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 21:1</td>
<td>And again: Hearken, O ye house of Israel, all ye that are broken off and are driven out because of the wickedness of the pastors of my people; yea, all ye that are broken off, that are scattered abroad, who are of my people, O house of Israel. Listen, O isles, unto me, and hearken ye people from far; the Lord hath called me from the womb; from the bowels of my mother hath he made mention of my name.</td>
<td>The Lehites were driven out of Jerusalem because of the wickedness of its leaders.</td>
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<td>1 Nephi 21:10</td>
<td>They shall not hunger nor thirst, neither shall the heat nor the sun smite them; for he that hath mercy on them shall lead them, even by the springs of water shall he guide them.</td>
<td>Again, the Lehites were guided/protected.</td>
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<td>1 Nephi 21:13</td>
<td>Sing, O heavens; and be joyful, O earth; for the feet of those who are in the east shall be established; and break forth into singing, O mountains; for they shall be smitten no more; for the Lord hath comforted his people, and will have mercy upon his afflicted.</td>
<td>The Lehites traveled eastward on their way to the promised land.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 21:17</td>
<td>Thy children shall make haste against thy destroyers; and they that made thee waste shall go forth of thee.</td>
<td>The Lehites were protected from robbers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 21:19–21</td>
<td>For thy waste and thy desolate places, and the land of thy destruction, shall even now be too narrow by reason of the inhabitants; and they that swallowed thee up shall be far away. The children whom thou shalt have, after thou hast lost the first, shall again in thine ears say: The place is too strait for me; give place to me that I may dwell. Then shalt Brown explores the possibility that the Lehites served in captivity for a time during their travels. He even</td>
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These connections are not surprising, since Second Isaiah “used the imagery of a new exodus to present the coming of a new eschatological age that would occur simultaneously with the deliverance of Israel from Babylon.” Thus any use of Second Isaiah in First Nephi might be tied to a larger attempt on Nephi’s part to compare his family’s journey to the ancient Israelite exodus.

Here it might be productive to turn to George Tate’s study, mentioned in chapter 1, on the exodus pattern in the Book of Mormon. After citing studies of the importance of the exodus traditions to authors of biblical texts, Tate states his first point bluntly: “The Book of Mormon opens with an exodus.” And this fact, according to Tate, is not accidental: “Nephi is keenly aware...
of his distinct moment in history,” and he “senses that he and his family are reenacting a sacred and symbolic pattern that looks back to Israel and forward to Christ—the pattern of Exodus.” Tate then carefully compares the exodus traditions and the story of First Nephi:

Notice how many details of the early narrative conform to this pattern. Nephi and his family depart out of Jerusalem into the wilderness, “deliver[ed] . . . from destruction” (1 Ne. 17:14). In what might be called a paschal vision—referring fifty-six times to the Lamb (Lamb of God, blood of the Lamb, etc.)—Nephi’s interpretive revelation on his father’s dream recalls the Passover lamb of Exodus as it figures Christ (chs. 11–15). While a pillar of light rested upon a rock, Lehi had been warned to flee; and the Lord now provides miraculous guidance in the form of a compass-ball, the Liahona, and assures them, “I will also be your light in the wilderness; and I will prepare the way before you” (1 Ne. 1:6; 16:10; 17:13). When the family begins to murmur from hunger as had the Israelites before receiving manna, Nephi obtains food miraculously at the Lord’s direction (see 1 Ne. 16:23, 31). He repeatedly receives instruction from the Lord on a mountain (see 1 Ne. 16:30; 17:7) and builds a ship not “after the manner of men; but . . . after the manner which the Lord had shown unto me”; just as Moses had received the design for the tabernacle (see 1 Ne. 18:1–3; Exod. 26). . . . Nephi and his family bear with them a sacred text, the plates of Laban, containing the law of Moses in the Pentateuch, and other prophets including Isaiah (see 1 Ne. 5:11, 13, 23). The Lord had promised them: “Inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments ye shall be led towards the promised land; and ye shall know that it is by me that ye are led” (1 Ne. 17:13). And indeed the party crosses the ocean and reaches this land of promise, learning after their arrival that Jerusalem has been destroyed (see 2 Ne. 6:8).  

Tate goes on, however, to explain: “Though the correspondences between the exodus of the Israelites and this exodus are compelling, Nephi’s conscious sense of reenacting the pattern is even more striking.” On Tate’s reading, Nephi purposefully sets up the parallel between Laman and Lemuel and the “recalcitrant Israelites before them.” And it is striking that, “after describing the prosperity of the people in the new land, [Nephi] ends his account by noting that forty years have passed since their departure from Jerusalem (see 2 Ne. 5:34).”

But here an unanticipated, subtle difficulty has crept in. Kent Brown’s interpretation of Nephi’s likening of Second Isaiah—strengthened by Tate’s account of Nephi’s interest in the exodus theme—turns from what Nephi himself identifies as his focus on eschatological (future) covenantal history to a
focus on current (present) experiential history. In other words, rather than taking Nephi to be employing Isaiah in an attempt to look out onto the future gathering of Israel, Brown takes him to be reading Isaiah to make sense of the experiences of his own life. It is tempting simply to take Nephi’s word against Brown’s, especially because the latter’s interpretations are, in the end, speculative—that is, Brown guesses about what interests Nephi in Second Isaiah. But one should not be so quick to abandon Brown’s speculative insight. He makes, in the end, a strong case, especially in light of Tate’s (and others’) studies of exodus themes in Nephi’s record.

How, then, might this tangle between Brown and Nephi be sorted out? To clarify this point, I will take up Brown’s speculative point of view and look at another example of a Second Isaiah text quoted in Nephi’s record. This example will, I believe, show that Nephi and Brown are actually reconcilable and, further, it will also make it possible to distinguish likening from typology, as Nephi understood these terms.

**Nephi and the Law**

The text I want to take up is Isaiah 51:9–10 (quoted in 2 Nephi 8:9–10):

Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord; awake, as in the ancient days, in the generations of old. Art thou not it that hath cut Rahab, and wounded the dragon? Art thou not it which hath dried the sea, the waters of the great deep; that hath made the depths of the sea a way for the ransomed to pass over?

Westermann notes by way of commentary: “God’s act in creation” (the slaying of the dragon) is “put together with his salvation at the Red Sea” (making the waters a pathway), which suggests that in Second Isaiah “the way of the redeemed” is, for Israel, “now not only in the far past, but also in the immediate future.” But precisely because this passage roots the exodus experience (escape into the desert) in “an ancient creation myth in which the dragon who was the primeval waters was defeated” (decapitation of the primeval foe), Nephi might have seen here an echo of his own most harrowing experience: the encounter with Laban.

Nephi’s killing of Laban is justly famous. Immediately after his conversion to Lehi’s prophetic claims, Nephi is commanded to retrieve the brass plates from the apparently wealthy and unquestionably powerful Laban—a
task he only accomplishes, in the end, by decapitating Laban in a Jerusalem street. The story has raised serious ethical questions for many readers, and a number of able scholars have ventured their interpretations of the experience, ranging from John Welch’s legal defense of Nephi’s actions to Eugene England’s theological wrestle with the story. However, I will suspend ethical questions while reading the narrative in order to highlight its relevance to Nephi’s relationship to Isaiah. My approach is thus akin to readings offered by Steve Olsen, Gordon Thomasson, Brett Holbrook, and Ben McGuire, all of whom have set aside ethical questions to focus on a more strictly narratological interpretation. However, instead of Mosaic ritual (Thomasson), ancient Near Eastern culture (Holbrook), or Hebrew royal narratives (McGuire), I will look at how the story Nephi tells plays into and complicates the relationship between First Nephi and Second Isaiah.

The basic connection is simple: Laban echoes the dragon of Isaiah 51:9–10, the figure of Rahab who is cut to allow the ransomed to escape into the desert. Interestingly, in both the Lehite and the ancient Israelite exodus stories, this cutting makes possible the reception of the Law (of Moses). Indeed, both the Lehites and the Israelites are described as having traveled “three days” in the wilderness (see Exodus 3:18; 5:3; 8:27; 1 Nephi 2:6) before camping at the place from which their leading figure would have to “go up” to retrieve the Law (see Exodus 19:3, 20; 1 Nephi 3:9, 29). These parallels are striking and, in the end, more important than all other parallels between the two exoduses: front and center is the Law of Moses.

### Commandments and Covenant

The story of Laban’s death begins, not in 1 Nephi 3 when the commandment to return to Jerusalem is first issued, but rather in 1 Nephi 2 when Nephi—feeling “great desires to know of the mysteries of God”—receives in response to his prayers a full-blown revelation from God. It is in this first conversation with the Lord that Nephi learns of the crucial Lehitic covenant that undergirds the entirety of Nephi’s record: “inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments, ye shall prosper, and shall be led to a land of promise” (1 Nephi 2:20). With this communication, the central theme of the subsequent narrative is set. It will be a question, from start to finish, of commandment.

Crucially, though, Nephi could not have even guessed what commandments were indicated by the covenant at first. In the beginning, he seems naturally
to have taken the covenant to refer abstractly to whatever God happened to command at any particular moment. A crucial anxiety thus inevitably attended Nephi’s earliest divine encounter, and Nephi’s subsequent zeal—the constant source of tension between Nephi and his brothers—seems largely to have been a reflection of this anxiety.

This is clear from the moment Nephi receives word that he would be returning to Jerusalem. The anxiety associated with the vagueness of the covenant’s conditions is suddenly transformed into an intense release of energy when Nephi returns from his revelatory experience to be confronted with a specified commandment to retrieve the brass plates. Importantly, Nephi portrays Lehi as using the word “commandment” three times in his commission:

Behold I have dreamed a dream, in the which the Lord hath commanded me that thou and thy brethren shall return to Jerusalem. For behold, Laban hath the record of the Jews and also a genealogy of my forefathers, and they are engraven upon plates of brass. Wherefore, the Lord hath commanded me that thou and thy brothers should go unto the house of Laban, and seek the records, and bring them down hither into the wilderness. And now, behold thy brothers murmur, saying it is a hard thing which I have required of them; but behold I have not required it of them, but it is a commandment of the Lord. Therefore go, my son, and thou shalt be favored of the Lord, because thou hast not murmured. (1 Nephi 3:2–6)

Nephi then, in his exuberant response, matches Lehi’s triple use of the word “commandment”:

And it came to pass that I, Nephi, said unto my father: I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded, for I know that the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth them. (1 Nephi 3:7)

This matching up of threefold mentions of “commandments” in commission and response cannot be accidental, especially after the covenantal privileging of the word in 1 Nephi 2:20. It marks a kind of zealous fixation from the beginning of the narrative: the whole story of the return to Jerusalem will be about the question of the commandments.

Unsurprisingly, the narrative itself is punctuated by consistently repeated references to “the commandments.” When the first, relatively naïve attempt at retrieving the brass plates fails (Laman simply asks for them) and most of
the group is ready to return to camp, Nephi “commits” his brothers to their task by delivering a sermon on, precisely, commandments: “But behold I said unto them that: As the Lord liveth, and as we live, we will not go down unto our father in the wilderness until we have accomplished the thing which the Lord hath commanded us” (1 Nephi 3:15). Anxious that the commandment be kept because of the covenant, Nephi here employs what Hugh Nibley long ago described as “the one oath that no [Eastern] man would dream of breaking, the most solemn of all oaths to the Semite,” namely, the oath on the life of the Lord (“as the Lord liveth”). Making failure an act of blasphemy (punishable by death under the Law of Moses), Nephi binds his brothers to pursue their quest until they have fulfilled the commandment.

In the speech that follows the oath, Nephi again triply employs the word “commandment”:

Wherefore, let us be faithful in keeping the commandments of the Lord; therefore let us go down to the land of our father’s inheritance, for behold he left gold and silver, and all manner of riches. And all this he hath done because of the commandments of the Lord. For he knew that Jerusalem must be destroyed, because of the wickedness of the people. For behold, they have rejected the words of the prophets. Wherefore, if my father should dwell in the land after he hath been commanded to flee out of the land, behold, he would also perish. Wherefore, it must needs be that he flee out of the land. 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. (1 Nephi 3:16–20)

Nephi adds, narratively: “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 3:21).

Though this little scene seems to portray Nephi as infinitely faithful, the end of the story will make clear that it is not without a sense of irony. Nephi retroactively reveals this speech—as well as the zealous response of 1 Nephi 3:7—as uncomprehending, though obedient. In particular, the reasons Nephi attributes to God for wanting them to have the brass plates are not what God actually has in mind. At this point in the story, Nephi sees the plates only as preserving (1) “the language of [their] fathers” and (2) “the words which have been spoken by the mouth of all the holy
prophets.” Only with the slaying of Laban will Nephi come to see what the plates are really for.

The second failed attempt to get the plates from Laban lands Lehi’s sons in a cave outside Jerusalem, where Laman and Lemuel take to beating Nephi and Sam, only to be interrupted by an angel. Vitally, the angel, in his brief message, uses language drawn directly from the Lehitic covenant (see 1 Nephi 3:29), which could only have increased Nephi’s sense of anxiety. After the angel departs, the theme of commandments again emerges, though now with a curious twist. Nephi describes his brothers as idolatrously displacing the power to command from God to Laban: “And after the angel had departed, Laman and Lemuel again began to murmur, saying: How is it possible that the Lord will deliver Laban into our hands? Behold, he is a mighty man, and he can command fifty, yea, even he can slay fifty; then why not us?” (1 Nephi 3:31). Thus Nephi presents his older brothers as completely missing what he took to be the whole meaning of the return to Jerusalem: the fulfillment of God’s commandment. And of course, he responds by speaking of the commandments yet again: “Let us go up again unto Jerusalem, and let us be faithful in keeping the commandments of the Lord; for behold he is mightier than all the earth, then why not mightier than Laban and his fifty, yea, or even than his tens of thousands?” (1 Nephi 4:1).

It is at this point that Nephi explicitly draws on the Israelite exodus: “Therefore let us go up; let us be strong like unto Moses; for he truly spake unto the waters of the Red Sea and they divided hither and thither, and our fathers came through, out of captivity, on dry ground, and the armies of Pharaoh did follow and were drowned in the waters of the Red Sea” (1 Nephi 4:2). The connection here with Isaiah 51:9–10 is at its most explicit. Nephi here compares deliverance from Laban to God’s dividing the Red Sea, but it will be he himself only a moment later who has to cut Rahab and wound the dragon. It is thus significant that Nephi concludes his speech by affirming that “the Lord is able to deliver us, even as our fathers, and to destroy Laban, even as the Egyptians” (1 Nephi 4:3).

The portion of the narrative that follows is complex. Leaving his brothers outside the city, Nephi creeps into Jerusalem alone. When he discovers Laban drunk and passed out in the street, he finds himself “constrained”—by the Spirit—to kill Laban (1 Nephi 4:10). And there the climax of the narrative—in the shape of a discussion about the meaning of the word “commandments”—takes place.
The scene begins, oddly enough, with Nephi pulling Laban’s sword from its sheath. Nephi says nothing about his motivations for doing this, focusing his narrative efforts instead on making clear how surprised he was at the injunction from the Spirit: “But I said in my heart: Never at any time have I shed the blood of man. And I shrunk and would that I might not slay him” (1 Nephi 4:10).

Nephi’s repulsion initiates a long conversation between him and the Spirit. But one must not pass too quickly to that conversation, since at a point where—especially given all that has already been said—the reader naturally expects to find the word “commanded,” Nephi instead employs the word “constrained”: “I was constrained [not commanded] by the Spirit that I should kill Laban” (1 Nephi 4:10). Given Nephi’s consistency and precision with the word “commandment,” this substitution should not be treated lightly. But what does it imply? First, it may be that Nephi wants to make clear that he was not flouting a commandment, and so that he did not falter at the most crucial moment. On this reading, Nephi’s hesitation is justified, but less because of the injunction’s extremity than because it comes as a constraint rather than as a commandment—a spiritual impression rather than as a direct, spoken word. Second, because Nephi goes on to use the word “commandment” four more times in the immediately following verses, the use of the word “constrained” serves to distinguish the Spirit’s injunction from the commandments implied in the covenant, perhaps precisely so that the actual identification of those commandments can finally emerge. Whereas to this point in the story, Nephi has taken “commandments” to refer simply to whatever the Lord happens to command at any given moment—through Lehi, through the Spirit, or whatever—it is precisely as the Spirit’s injunction is labeled a constraint rather than a commandment that Nephi’s original understanding begins to crumble.

The constraint of the Spirit appears therefore to serve primarily to get Nephi talking. The Spirit speaks first: “And the Spirit said unto me again: Behold the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands” (1 Nephi 4:11). These words hark back to the angel’s words in the cave—to the angel’s message that made mention also of the Lehitic covenant—thus directing Nephi’s attention to the misunderstood covenant. And Nephi’s response makes clear that he indeed begins to reflect on the terms of the covenant, though confusedly at
first: “Yea, and I also knew that he had sought to take away mine own life; yea, and he would not hearken unto the commandments of the Lord; and he also had taken away our property” (1 Nephi 4:11). In this first mention of commandments in his conversation with the Spirit, Nephi is concerned only with Laban’s relationship to the commandments; he does not yet see what relationship he himself sustains to the commandments—nor what commandments are implicated in the covenant. But this first, misguided response quickly summons a further word from the Spirit.

The Spirit next says: “Slay him, for the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands; Behold the Lord slayeth the wicked to bring forth his righteous purposes. It is better than one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief” (1 Nephi 4:12–13). Though modern sensibilities naturally balk at the idea that the Spirit would have cited “a classic statement of the scapegoating rationale” (and especially though one feels sickened—as one should—by the fact that, as Eugene England points out, two fundamentalists “even used [this] passage in court to defend their ‘inspired’ slaying of their sister-in-law and her baby”), the role these words play in the narrative should not be missed. They emphatically do not serve immediately as the (ethical) “justification” for Laban’s death. Rather, they serve only to point Nephi again to the Lehitic covenant: “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” (1 Nephi 4:14). Rather than justifying a murderous scapegoating, the Spirit’s words—however they might otherwise (unfortunately) be used under other (unfortunate) circumstances—immediately serve the purpose in the narrative of drawing Nephi’s attention to the meaning of the return to Jerusalem. What mattered was not the immediate fulfillment of an arbitrary commandment, but the future history of the “nation” of Nephi’s seed. The Spirit forces Nephi to see, oddly enough, that his reluctance to follow the constraint may well be simple selfishness.

The next four verses trace a drastic shift in Nephi’s understanding of the commandments:

Yea, and I also thought that that they [his seed] 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.
Therefore I did obey the voice of the Spirit, and took Laban by the hair of the head, and I smote off his head with his own sword. (1 Nephi 4:15–18)

Though Nephi still asserts that he had the task of retrieving the record “according to [God’s] commandments,” he also comes to recognize that the anxiety-inducing covenant has reference not to those commandments, but to “the commandments of the Lord according to the law of Moses.” Nephi only recognizes quite late in the game the conditions of the Lehitic covenant—and his many missteps on the way to actually obtaining the brass plates are suddenly revealed. And it is only with this much larger picture and clarification that Nephi finally has the courage to follow the Spirit’s constraint.

So much for the narrative itself, but what of Isaiah 51:9–10? It is not difficult to see how Kent Brown might read the connection: Nephi’s interest in the Isaiah passage is in part driven by his own harrowing encounter with Laban. But the connection, I think, turns out to be more complex.

**Isaiah 51:9–10**

In the Isaiah passage, the image of the decapitated dragon reflects—unlike most of Second Isaiah’s message—something that happened *anciently*, rather than something happening in the (eschatological) *present*, that is, in what Nephi usually appropriates as the projected *future* of Israel:

Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord; awake, *as in the ancient days, in the generations of old*. Art thou not it that *hath* cut Rahab, and wounded the dragon? Art thou not it which *hath* dried the sea, the waters of the great deep; that *hath* made the depths of the sea a way for the ransomed to pass over?

Here Israel, during its eschatological exodus and restoration, calls on the Lord who anciently delivered Israel. Thus, one aspect of the “new exodus” of Second Isaiah is the community’s explicit recognition that the Lord had once *before* decapitated the primordial enemy and so allowed the original exodus to take place. In other words, Second Isaiah enacts a new exodus, but a new exodus intertwined with an earlier, anticipatory exodus.

Thus, if Nephi did see his own experience reflected in Isaiah 51:9–10, he would likely have associated his own experiences only with what the eschatological community of Second Isaiah projected back into the primordial
past—namely, the cutting/wounding that allowed anciently for escape. In other words, because Second Isaiah describes an eschatological exodus that keeps its eye on an earlier, essentially primordial exodus, Nephi could read himself into Second Isaiah as the embodiment of the earlier exodus to which the eschatological exodus—which Nephi consistently associates with the eventual gathering of Israel—would look back. The Lord’s fidelity to Nephi in delivering him from Laban (ancient exodus) is meant to serve as a narrative source of strength to Israel struggling to trust the Lord in the eschatological events outlined in Book of Mormon prophecy (new exodus).

It might then be said that the Lehite task of likening Second Isaiah requires a kind of double “application” of the text. First, it recognizes in Second Isaiah the pattern to be followed in the future restoration of Israel (of the Lehites in particular)—a pattern similarly outlined in Lehi’s and Nephi’s visions. Second, it recognizes in Second Isaiah’s occasional references to the ancient exodus the pattern through which the ancient Lehite exodus from Jerusalem should be interpreted.

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**Second Isaiah**

Original Exodus (from Egypt) \(\downarrow\) Refers occasionally to . . . \(\uparrow\) New Exodus (from Babylon)

Lehite Exodus (the Slaying of Laban) \(\downarrow\) Harks back to . . . \(\uparrow\) Israeliite Exodus (Ultimate Restoration)

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**The Nephite “Likening” of Second Isaiah**
Whatever light this sheds on Nephi’s notion of *likening*, it clarifies in a preliminary way Nephi’s notion of *typology*. Because the Lehites looked out from the circumstances of their own exodus to an eschatological exodus, and particularly because their own exodus was predicated on an event through which they received the Law, *it seems quite natural that the Lehites should have anticipated from the very beginning that the Law of Moses would eventually be “fulfilled.”* Indeed, the fact that Israelite eschatology is first mentioned in Nephi’s record (1 Nephi 10) in connection with *both* the first Nephite Christology and the first word concerning interpreting Isaiah suggests that the Lehites should have seen from the very start that the Law’s normative force was only temporary—*that what was received in the first, anticipatory exodus would be fulfilled in the second, eschatological exodus.* The Lehites’ reading of Isaiah gave them to understand from the beginning that the Law of Moses implied a Messiah.

But this preliminary sketch, grounded for the moment only in a close reading of First Nephi, needs to be spelled out by a close reading of Second Nephi.
This discussion of Second Isaiah in First Nephi has come at last—and with some surprise—to address the crucial relationship between the Lehites and the Law of Moses. In effect, it appears that Nephi's likening of Second Isaiah helps to recast the Laban episode as an event that not only provided the Lehites with the Law of Moses, but also—through its connection to Isaiah 51:9–10—helped them to see from the beginning that the Law would someday be fulfilled. The logic here is complicated but crucial, and it is only worked out at any length and with any real precision in Second Nephi. There, in connection with extensive quotations from First Isaiah, Nephi explains the Lehite relationship to the Law of Moses.

I have already pointed out that one of the most important structural indications of the privileged place of the Isaiah chapters in Second Nephi is the parallel between Nephi's two discussions of grace and typology (2 Nephi 10:24–11:7 and 2 Nephi 25:23–27). But why does Nephi mark the heart of his record by taking up, specifically, grace and typology? That is, what do grace and typology have to do with each other, and what do they have to do with First Isaiah?

The first of the two passages makes clear that typology and grace have everything to do with each other because grace is a question of the gift: “Behold, my soul delighteth in proving unto my people the truth of the coming of Christ; for, for this end hath the law of Moses been given; and all things which have been given of God from the beginning of the world, unto man, are the typifying of him” (2 Nephi 11:4). Nephi here claims that typology is connected with or follows from a certain kind of giving. Three questions, then, need to be addressed. First, what is grace/the gift? Second, what can be said about the role of the gift in typology? Finally, what has all this to do with First Isaiah?
First, then, grace or the gift. Two relevant passages, 2 Nephi 10:24 and 2 Nephi 25:23, should be placed side by side:
The similarity between the two texts is obvious, though they come, according to Nephi, from two different hands. The first comes at the end of Jacob’s sermon recorded in 2 Nephi 6–10. The second, however, comes directly from Nephi—though apparently only after he had heard (and recorded) his brother’s sermon. What do these two passages say about grace? The question, I believe, is especially important today, given the somewhat controversial status of 2 Nephi 25:23 in the wake of writers like Stephen Robinson and Robert Millet. What, then, do Jacob and Nephi claim regarding salvation?

First, with the two passages side by side, the parallel between Jacob’s and Nephi’s uses of the word “after” can dispel the most common interpretation of 2 Nephi 25:23. Nephi cannot be saying that grace is only what makes up for what goes beyond an individual’s “best efforts.” Inasmuch as the phrase “all we can do” (in 2 Nephi 25:23) is structurally parallel to and clearly meant to echo the phrase “ye are reconciled unto God” (in 2 Nephi 10:24), it seems all one can do, in the end, is be reconciled to God. There is no reason to assume that “all we can do” refers to a laundry list of works to be accomplished before one becomes worthy of grace, nor does it appear to mean that salvation comes only to those who have consistently done the best they theoretically could given their circumstances.

A minimalist reading of the two passages would likely ignore such questions entirely, pointing out instead—and much more straightforwardly—that both passages distinguish two operations: that of salvation (the work entirely and only of grace), and that of reconciliation (something the individual apparently does). In the end, this distinction is the most important aspect of these texts. Nephi and Jacob are more concerned with explaining what humans refuse than with outlining what humans need to do. And because what humans refuse is, straightforwardly, “the will of God”—the will of God being precisely that to which they must reconcile themselves—it is clear that it is the will of God to save them. Neither Jacob nor Nephi suggests that some identifiable list—whether large or small—of prerequisite steps to grace is to be sought. Rather, both state frankly that grace and its salvation remain distant because humans pretend that grace is to be earned. In other words, while God’s will is precisely to save human beings from death (see 2 Nephi 10:23), they do not want to be delivered from death. Thus Jacob and Nephi call upon their hearers
to be reconciled to the will of God—that is, to be reconciled to God’s desire to deliver them from death.

To be saved by grace is thus neither to obtain grace through earning it, nor to be raptured by some irresistible sovereign God. It is—quite simply—to stop fighting against grace. This is implied in the word “reconciliation.” To be reconciled is to cease holding a meaningless, purposeless grudge. If all that must “be done” to be “saved” is to be reconciled to the will of God, then it suffices to stop working against grace—to stop trying to save oneself (by works), to stop refusing to see that one can do nothing without God’s love. In short, grace, as grace, is always a gift. Reconciliation is “all” that must be done to avail oneself of grace because one has refused, in advance, the gift of God’s graceful will. Reconciliation depends on coming to see that grace has been given—and should be received—without cause. It was given in love and, therefore, without (compelling) reason.

God’s gift, though, comes in the surprising shape of a law (in Jacob’s terminology: God’s will). A law, in order to be law, must be given without reason (“because I said so”), as self-justifying, as a gift. A law is only received as law when one ceases to seek an explanation for it, when one receives the law as a gift and no longer as something to be resented, rebelled against, or guilty before. The gift is the “without reason,” the “without cause,” the thing given in love—and love always betrays a kind of madness, a lack of reason. Saved by grace: deliverance comes when one ceases to regard the law as sovereignly guaranteed by something extralegal, when one finally regards the law as a gift in and of itself.50

So much, for the moment, for grace. But this leads immediately into the parallel passages dealing with typology, passages that speak not only of giving, but also—and at length—of the Law. In the end, Nephi’s discussions of typology clarify what he says of grace.

Typology

In 2 Nephi 11:4, Nephi frames his discussion of typology within a discussion of proof or of proving—specifically of “proving . . . the truth of the coming of Christ.”51 Nephi’s perhaps surprising but straightforward claim is that it is “for this end”—that is, for the purpose of proving the truth of Christ’s coming—that “the law of Moses [was] given.” What can this mean? A conventional approach might understand Nephi simply to mean that, because
the elements of the Law of Moses can serve as so many symbols pointing to Christ—as so many embodiments of events in the life of Christ—the Law is meant to be used to prove Christ’s coming. But this approach actually goes beyond what Nephi himself says. In fact, it goes beyond Nephi by drawing, specifically, on Abinadi’s account of typology. While Abinadi explicitly argues that individual elements of the Law typologically anticipate Christic events, Nephi never claims this much.

Of course, one might object that while Nephi never explicitly affirms such a model of typology, he also never explicitly denies it either. True, but there is nonetheless an irreducible—and perhaps surprising—difference between Nephi’s and Abinadi’s models of typology. While Nephi asserts that the Law of Moses can be—indeed, is meant to be—employed to prove Christ’s coming, Abinadi straightforwardly states that it was the Law specifically that got in the way, for Israel, of recognizing that Christ would come! For Abinadi, the Law was given, not for the “end” of proving Christ’s coming, but simply “to keep [Israel] in remembrance of God and their duty towards him” (Mosiah 13:30). Abinadi does not therefore deny the typological Law, but he associates typological regard with faith, while Nephi associates it with proof.

From this it follows that either: (1) though Nephi was more optimistic than Abinadi about the force of the typological connections between the Law and Christ, the two nonetheless had a shared typological model; or (2) the difference between Nephi and Abinadi in terms of optimism is actually rooted in a structural difference between their models of typology. The first of these two options seems unlikely, given Nephi’s frequently expressed pessimism regarding his people’s ability to understand spiritual things. In the end, it seems most likely that the difference between Nephi’s and Abinadi’s understandings of the purpose of the Law betrays a difference between their understandings of the typological nature itself of the Law. What is this difference? Actually, I will only come to the specifics of this difference at the end of chapter 5. For the moment, it is enough to recognize that Nephi’s comments on typology need not be read through Abinadi’s, as is perhaps common.

Coming back to Nephi alone, then, what should be said about the gift in 2 Nephi 11:4? The preceding discussion of grace sheds some light on this question. If a law is only fully a law when it is received as a gift, then the Law of Moses—particularly in that it was given—orient itself, by its very nature, to its messianic fulfillment. Unless it remains within the order of
economy, within which its status as gift is obscured, the Law must come to fulfillment. Put another way, for the Law to have any genuine force, it must be bound to its end (“for this end . . .”), or to the messianic possibility of its suspension. The giving of the Law necessarily pointed to the coming of a Messiah—to the coming of Christ. 

In the remainder of 2 Nephi 11:4, Nephi broadens his claim and finally ties it to typology: “and all things which have been given of God from the beginning of the world, unto man, are the typifying of him.” Here it becomes clear that, if the Law is typological, it is so only because it came as a gift since it is the givenness of the given that makes it typological. In general, everything given—that is, the given as such—is oriented to the coming of Christ. For Nephi, typology cannot be disentangled from the gift. Whatever is given and received as a gift inevitably points to messianic fulfillment.

This is further clarified in the parallel text of 2 Nephi 25:24–27, where Nephi attempts to address a problem issuing from the nature of grace as he articulates it. If the gift, as gift, formally points to messianic fulfillment, does the gift not materially disappear? That is, how can a messianic orientation not simply amount to an abandonment of the Law? Nephi, in response, gives this thesis statement: “Notwithstanding we believe in Christ, we keep the law of Moses” (2 Nephi 25:24). To explain this, Nephi comes back to his claim in 2 Nephi 11:4, stating that it was precisely “for this end”—namely, to help Israel “look forward with steadfastness unto Christ, until the law shall be fulfilled”—that “the law [was] given” (2 Nephi 25:24–25). For Nephi there is no law but the given-and-therefore-typological-law; there is no Law without the Messiah. Or rather, for Nephi, if there is a messiah-less law, it can only be “dead,” a mere set of social constraints to be kept “because of the commandments” (2 Nephi 25:25). According to Nephi, “the right way is to believe in Christ and deny him not; for by denying him ye also deny the prophets and the law” (2 Nephi 25:28).

Thus, to keep the Law—and so to receive it as a gift—is to live in light of its fulfillment. To teach “the law of Moses, and the intent for which it was given” is, in the words of a slightly later Book of Mormon author, to persuade others “to look forward unto the Messiah, and believe in him to come as though he already was” (Jarom 1:11). The Law itself is nothing without grace, but grace is not therefore something added to the Law. Rather, grace is given with the Law or as the Law itself—if it is received in the right way.
First Isaiah

What, though, is to be made of the fact that Nephi employs the two passages just exposited—each dealing in turn with grace and typology—to frame the Isaiah chapters of 2 Nephi 12–24? I have already argued that, in light of a possible likening of Isaiah 51:9–10, the Nephites would have anticipated the Law’s fulfillment through the eschatological intervention of the Redeemer. But that is a question of Second Isaiah (in First Nephi), while the Isaiah chapters (of Second Nephi) come from First Isaiah. Why is there a link in Nephi’s text between, on the one hand, the twin themes of grace and typology and, on the other hand, the task of reading First Isaiah?

Actually, the link is not difficult to explain. I have already borrowed heavily, in chapter 2, from the work of Gerhard von Rad in interpreting Isaiah 6:9–12. But what I have not yet mentioned is that von Rad’s interest in that passage—in Isaiah’s turn to the future and the task of writing and sealing prophetic texts—was driven by his interest in the question of typology. Indeed, according to von Rad, typological thought was effectively invented in the course of Isaiah’s production of Isaiah 6–8. Whether von Rad is right that typology only began with First Isaiah, it seems to me that he is certainly right that its basic mechanisms are on display there and in the very chapters of First Isaiah that Nephi quotes between his two discussions of grace and typology. Indeed, in Isaiah 8:16 (2 Nephi 18:16), it is precisely “the law” that is to be bound up and sealed for a later time.

One must be careful here. While the fact that Nephi places his discussions of typology on either end of the Isaiah chapters might incline one to believe that he thought Isaiah should be read typologically, things are not so simple. Nephi consistently associates likening with the task of reading Isaiah, and typology with the task of understanding the Law. (Note, for example, that in 2 Nephi 11, Nephi describes the Law as “typifying” of the Messiah, but invites his readers to “liken” First Isaiah to themselves.) But likening and typology are nonetheless entangled in an interesting way. Because the model for typological reading is itself developed within Isaiah—in fact, within the complex entanglement between First and Second Isaiah, between Isaiah as writing for a future people and Isaiah as speaking for that future people—the Lehite assumption of a typological relationship to the Law would have been a consequence of their likening Isaiah. Nephi seems not to have read Isaiah typologically, but to have likened Isaiah, and in likening him, to have assumed the typological regard
for the Law that Isaiah himself had developed. In likening the Prophets, Nephi developed a typological interpretation of the Law.

In the end, then, these two interpretive operations of likening and typology are, for Nephi, distinct, and he seems to have developed them at different times. Given that he borrowed the typological understanding of the Law—that is, his theology of grace—from Isaiah, Nephi could not have discovered typology without first having taken up the work of likening Isaiah’s writings. In the work of likening the Prophets, Nephi developed the possibility of typologically living the Law. Thus likening is, for Nephi, what one does with the book of Isaiah, while typology is what one learns from the book of Isaiah. One can only begin to live typologically, like Isaiah, if one positions oneself within the writings of Isaiah by likening him.

What, then, does it mean to read scripture? Complete answers can only be given after the other typological model—that of Abinadi—has been examined. For the moment, though, it is possible to distinguish in Nephi two distinct ways of approaching scripture, one Nephi associated with reading the Prophets (likening), and one Nephi associated with reading the Law (typology). And it is possible to suggest that Nephi understood the latter to have been discoverable only through the former. It can, moreover, be said that typology was for Nephi a question of recognizing the givenness of the Law, such that one recognized the inherent connection between the Law and its fulfillment.

But more needs to be said about all of this. It will prove easiest, however, to recognize the full stakes of Nephi’s approach to typology only when it can be set against a rival model. For that reason, I would like to leave off direct discussion of Nephi’s approach and turn instead to that of Abinadi. As is already clear, approaching Abinadi will involve sorting out his relationship to Isaiah.

Notes


2. The dream of the tree of life perhaps set the stage of Lehi’s criticisms of Jerusalem. It seems to me most natural to see in the image of the “great and spacious
building” a reflection of the corrupt temple of Lehi’s day, from which the wealthy Jerusalem elite would have mocked the wild-eyed prophets who dared to retreat into the wilderness to eat of the fruit of the tree of life. On such an interpretation, it seems clear that Lehi’s dream of the tree of life was at least in part meant to be understood as a critique of the self-satisfied Jerusalem establishment.

3. No interpreter of the Book of Mormon has yet pointed out that the simplest and most straightforward way of understanding the angel’s words in 1 Nephi 11 concerning “the condescension of God” is to take them as referring to the baptism of Christ.


5. It might also be pointed out that in 1 Nephi 10:4, Nephi portrays Lehi as drawing also on Deuteronomy 18:15–19, the prophecy of the prophet like unto Moses who would be raised up to redeem the Jews. Von Rad, importantly, connected this same prophecy from Deuteronomy to the “servant songs” of Second Isaiah. Von Rad, Old Testament Theology, 2:276.


9. One presumes, given Nephi’s pattern elsewhere, that Second Isaiah was his basic source here. However, it should be noted that Eldin Ricks, in his selection of an exemplary Isaiah passage Nephi might have used, chose to cite Isaiah 11:11–12. Ricks, Book of Mormon Commentary, 179. Gardner more straightforwardly states: “Nephi does not give enough detail about what he cited from Isaiah to allow identification of the relevant passages.” Gardner, Second Witness, 1:259.

10. The reference to Nephi’s having read from Isaiah to his brothers marks a transition, in 1 Nephi 15, from discussion of Lehi’s discourse about the olive tree (in 1 Nephi 10) to discussion of Lehi’s dream of the tree of life (in 1 Nephi 8). 1 Nephi 15 thus reproduces the transitional markers found in the first verses of 1 Nephi 10.


12. Among the commentators, this is only pointed out by Brant Gardner. See Gardner, Second Witness, 1:370. Noel Reynolds, interestingly, suggests that Nephi is actually quoting the prophet Zenos. See Noel B. Reynolds, “Nephite Uses and Interpretations of Zenos,” in Stephen D. Ricks and John W. Welch, eds., The Alle-
Unfortunately, Latter-day Saints have generally understood Nephi to be saying here that Isaiah’s words should be read as so many (highly specific!) prophecies of Jesus Christ’s life, ministry, death, and resurrection. This is, however, to misread the word “Redeemer.” Everywhere he deals with Isaiah, Nephi finds in him the basic contours of the historical redemption of Israel, not of the events of the life of Christ. Nephi 19:23 thus straightforwardly explains that Nephi read Isaiah with his brothers in order to persuade them more fully to believe that the Lord would fulfill His promises to Israel, rather than simply to believe in Christ or his atonement.

14. In the 1830 (original) edition of the Book of Mormon, there was no chapter break between what are now chapters 19 and 20, marking the continuity between Nephi’s words regarding Isaiah and his actual quotation.

15. The word “liken” is almost always equated, in commentary, to the word “apply,” from as early as Reynolds and Sjodahl (“This I take to mean that Nephi, in his sermons explained the Scriptures and applied their teachings to their own needs and circumstances”) and Eldin Ricks (“Nephi applied the lessons of scripture to his own people”) to as recently as Brant Gardner (“For Nephi, the principle of likening scriptures meant that, although a text was written for another time and place, it still has applicability to the present and to future events”). Reynolds and Sjodahl, Commentary on the Book of Mormon, 1:206; Ricks, Book of Mormon Commentary, 234; Gardner, Second Witness, 1:373.

16. It thus appears as “thought”—and in parallel with “purposed”—in Isaiah 14:24, quoted by Nephi in 2 Nephi 24:24: “The Lord of hosts hath sworn, saying, Surely as I have thought, so shall it come to pass; and as I have purposed, so shall it stand.”

17. Thus a derivative of the word famously appears as “likeness” in Genesis 1:26–27, where it is distinguished from but set in parallel to “image.”

18. It is at least of some interest that the English word “liken” derives from an Indo-European root (lik-) that means “body”—such that to liken is literally to give a body to, to embody. Here again it would seem that to liken Isaiah would be to allow his writings to function as a kind of spirit on which to hang the flesh of something else.


23. Ibid., 378–379.

24. Grant Hardy suggests a reading similar to mine. See Hardy, Understanding the Book of Mormon, 71–76.
25. Blenkinsopp summarizes: “The final injunction to leave Babylon and the Chaldeans behind while inviting the whole world to join in the celebration of the redemptive intervention of God on their behalf (vv 20–21) serves to round off chs. 40–48” precisely “by referring back to the motif of the trek through the wilderness at the beginning of this section (40:3–4). Blenkinsopp, Isaiah 40–55, 295.


27. Childs, Isaiah, 479, emphasis added.


29. Ibid., 249–250.

30. Ibid., 249–250. Terry Szink lists (and explores in greater detail) several other parallels between Nephi’s exodus and the Old Testament exodus, the most unique of which is his setting in parallel of Laman and Lemuel’s “rude” dancing on the ship and the Israelites’ worship before the golden calf. Terrence L. Szink, “Nephi and the Exodus,” in Sorenson and Thorne, Rediscovering the Book of Mormon, 38–50. See also the list of twenty-one correspondences between the Moses story and First Nephi provided in Reynolds, “Nephite Kingship Reconsidered,” 172–177.


32. Ibid., 250–251.

33. Ibid., 251.


41. It is perhaps worth noting that Nephi here quite explicitly attributes the might—and hence the “murder”—to the Lord, not to himself. Something similar seems to be at work in Isaiah 51:9–10.

42. The most interesting speculation on this point, it seems to me, is that of Jeffrey R. Chadwick, “Lehi’s House at Jerusalem and the Land of His Inheritance,” in John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann Seely, eds., *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 114.

43. Nephi bears a curious relationship to the Spirit. Whereas the Hebrew tradition Nephi inherited—which is reflected at important points in Nephi’s record—understood the Spirit to be an influence that ecstatically carried the individual beyond her or his control, Nephi appears to have some ability, however limited, to resist that constraint. The consequence, it seems, is Nephi’s strange ability to converse with the Spirit as a person, both in this narrative and, more strikingly perhaps, in 1 Nephi 11. More attention needs to be devoted to this curious pattern.


Gardner’s own demythologizing interpretation is that by “all we can do” Nephi referred to the centuries during which the Nephites would have to keep the Law of Moses, after which grace—through the finally enacted atonement—would come. Gardner, Second Witness, 1:343–344.

47. See Alma 24:11: “And now behold, my brethren, since it has been all that we could do, (as we were the most lost of all mankind) to repent of all our sins and the many murders which we have committed, and to get God to take them away from our hearts, for it was all we could do to repent sufficiently before God that he would take away our stain.”

48. Indeed, if this were the meaning of the phrase, it would actually be completely inappropriate to speak of grace, since it would be, strictly speaking, earnable.

49. If this were the meaning of the passage, no one would be saved, because no one ultimately does one’s theoretical best, even one’s adjusted theoretical best.

50. Abinadi, by contrast with Nephi, claims that “it was expedient that there should be a law given” (Mosiah 13:29).

51. This is the second of three “proofs” Nephi offers in 2 Nephi 11. In verse 3, he speaks of adding Jacob’s and Isaiah’s words to his own in order “to prove unto [his children] that [his] words are true.” And then in verse 6 he announces the delight he takes in “proving unto [his] people that save Christ should come all men must perish.”

52. Perhaps a third way of approaching this would be actually to assert that there is no difference between Nephi and Abinadi, even in terms of “optimism.” This approach would have to be undertaken through a reinterpretation of what Nephi means by “proof.”


54. This, of course, is Sherem’s question in Jacob 7.

55. The Book of Mormon—and Mormonism with it—thus wagers an importantly unique messianic theology, one that has been, for the most part, overlooked. This messianism of the Messiah who has always already come deserves full exposition elsewhere.

56. Thus, as von Rad explains, “Typological thinking has come under discussion again as one of the essential presuppositions of the origin of prophetic prediction.” Von Rad, Old Testament Theology, 2:367, emphasis added.

57. It is doubtful that Isaiah meant by “the law” anything like “the Law of Moses,” but Nephi might well have likened the text that way.