Summary Report

1. How does Nephi adapt Isaiah’s text, and what do his methods tell us about what it means to read a scriptural text?

To make sense of Nephi’s use of Isaiah 29 in 2 Nephi 26–27, it is important to assume that Nephi, as a careful, conscientious author, incorporated Isaiah’s text into his own with purpose and precision. Working from this assumption, we see that Isaiah 29 appears to function as the structural and thematic framework on which Nephi then hangs his own prophecies about the eventual destruction of his people, the emergence of the Book of Mormon, and the relationship between the Gentiles and the Lamanites.

The way Nephi handles Isaiah in 2 Nephi 26–27 differs, however, from the way he handles him elsewhere. A first indication of this uniqueness is the fact that Nephi in this case does not identify his Isaianic source. Elsewhere, extended quotations from Isaiah are prefaced and identified as such (e.g., 2 Nephi 11:2), but here no such textual markers are to be found. Further, while Isaiah quotations present elsewhere in Nephi’s writings consist of entire chapters taken directly from Isaiah without added asides or commentary inserted by Nephi, 2 Nephi 26–27 not only divides up what it draws from Isaiah into distinct sections, it also contains a substantial amount of text written by Nephi himself. Indeed, Nephi’s method here is one not of duplication but adaptation. In these chapters, Nephi deliberately and systematically repurposes Isaiah 29 to his own prophetic ends.

This adaptive methodology is illustrated in verses 16–17 from 2 Nephi 26. In what follows, the sections adapted from Isaiah 29 are italicized.

16 For those who shall be destroyed shall speak unto them out of the ground, and their speech shall be low out of the dust, and their voice shall be as one that hath a familiar spirit [Isaiah 29:4]; for the Lord God will give unto him power, that he may whisper concerning them, even as it were out of the ground; and their speech shall whisper out of the dust. [Isaiah 29:4]

17 For thus saith the Lord God: They shall write the things which shall be done among them, and they shall be written and sealed up in a book. . . .

Notice, here, how Nephi copies but cuts into Isaiah’s text, working his own comments into Isaiah 29:4, and then adapts the text even further by framing 29:4 with his own prophecy in verse 17. Nephi weaves Isaiah’s words into his own prophetic cloth. These textual weavings by Nephi are not straightforwardly an attempt to elucidate Isaiah’s original intent and meaning. Instead, Nephi is explicitly recontextualizing and appropriating the language and imagery of Isaiah 29 in order to explain his own visions regarding the fate of Lehi’s descendants. (For example, the verses just cited occur within the context of Nephi’s prophecy regarding his own descendants, the Nephites.)

In a perhaps still more striking illustration of Nephi’s freedom in adapting the text of Isaiah 29 to his own purposes, he transforms into two distinct events what in Isaiah 29 is clearly only one historical event. Language originally describing just the singular fall of Jerusalem is thus employed to describe both the ancient fall of the Nephite nation and the latter-day fall of the Gentile nations. Nephi accomplishes this curious appropriation by inserting into the middle of his quotation of Isaiah 29:5–6 a lengthy aside that contains no actual Isaiah text (verses 19–33 of 2 Nephi 26 and verse 1 of 2 Nephi 27). The aside thus serves as a textual break that traces the major temporal shift from the end of the Nephites (around 400 ce) to the arrival of the Gentiles in the New World (around 1500 ce). Though verses 5 and 6 of Isaiah 29 both refer to the same event, in Nephi’s account the two verses are distributed among references to two intertwined but temporally distinct events.
As we observe Nephi’s authorial methodology in action throughout 2 Nephi 26–27, we are given possible insight into Nephi’s affection for Isaiah. Nephi views Isaiah’s text as immensely rich. Rather than looking at the Isaiah text as the product of problematic and possibly multiple redactions—most modern scholars see Isaiah 29 as being composed of two separate texts and possibly by two separate authors—Nephi reads Isaiah prophetically, imposing unity, looking for patterns, and trying to see how the accidental tensions introduced through redaction might be theologically productive. Nephi allows the shape of Isaiah’s text to give form and meaning to his own spirit of prophecy. Likening, in this sense, is a question of taking the material letter of the text as a kind of template for making sense of one’s own experience and vision. This process is neither exegetical nor hermeneutic; rather, reading in this sense involves taking a past text as a guide for faithfully recasting the present.

Nephi’s interactions with Isaiah model an important aspect of what it means to read scripture. For Nephi, to read scripture is to take up the text as a text and then rework it so that it reflects one’s current understanding and vision as revealed through the spirit of prophecy. Reading scripture then becomes active rather than passive as each reader takes up the burden of his or her own prophetic responsibility.

2. What does 2 Nephi 26–27 tell us about the nature of prophecy and scriptural application?

Though Nephi often turns to Isaiah in his writings, it is only in 2 Nephi 26–27 that he does so in a way that allows the reader to closely analyze how he reads scripture. Elsewhere, Nephi tends to either quote Isaiah at length without providing any substantive commentary (see 1 Nephi 20–21; 2 Nephi 7–8; 12–24) or weave snippets from Isaiah’s writings into his own prophecies (see 1 Nephi 22; 2 Nephi 6; 10; 25; 28–30). In 2 Nephi 26–27, however, Nephi inverts the latter of his two usual approaches to Isaiah: there, rather than weaving snippets of Isaiah into his own prophecy, he weaves snippets of his own prophecy into a substantive text from Isaiah (specifically, Isaiah 29). Further distinguishing his work in 2 Nephi 26–27, in these chapters Nephi never acknowledges that a text from Isaiah serves as his framework. The reader is left to discover that through his or her own study.

Because Nephi draws so heavily on and so intricately interprets an Isaianic text in 2 Nephi 26–27, these two chapters are an immensely useful resource for examining how scriptural authors understand the nature of prophecy and scriptural “application.” As Nephi—however discreetly—displays his readerly strategies while he works on Isaiah, he makes it possible to recognize the process he has in mind when he speaks of “likening” scripture to oneself, as well as, somewhat more implicitly, what he takes to be the nature of the written scriptural texts to which he addresses himself in study. Because Nephi encourages his readers to liken scripture as he himself does, careful analysis of Nephi’s approach to interpreting Isaiah should be of great profit to every reader of the Book of Mormon.

That Nephi feels comfortable weaving his own prophecies into the text of Isaiah is itself a telling thing. That he not only adds his own statements to the Isaianic text but also adjusts the “quoted” scripture freely is still more telling. It appears that Nephi’s work of likening implies at least two things about the nature of scripture and its application: (1) The work of likening allows what might otherwise become the “dead letter” of a scriptural text to come back to life. Likening thus appears to be a kind of scriptural resurrection, a way of giving new life to scripture. (2) The work of likening a text may only be able to breathe life into a text through a prophetic editing process in which the text may be adjusted, recontextualized, and intentionally appropriated. It is not entirely inappropriate, therefore, to say that the work of likening can give new life to a scriptural text only by first “killing it.” As Paul says concerning resurrection generally: “that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die” (1 Corinthians 15:36).

Two caveats must be mentioned regarding these two implications.
First, it should be noted that likening a text is, for Nephi, a question of weaving into the scriptural text not the banalities of everyday life (an application of the scriptures to everyday life), but rather truths one has learned regarding the meaning and importance of the Abrahamic covenant through some kind of revelatory or prophetic experience. It might thus be said that it is only a prophet—though that word must be taken in its broadest definition as referring to anyone who has “the spirit of prophecy” (see 2 Nephi 25:4)—who can authoritatively give new life to a scriptural text. (This first caveat is not meant to discourage the work of likening, but to encourage recognition that likening seems, for Nephi, only to be likening when it is undertaken with the spirit of prophecy.)

Second, it should be recognized that Nephi does not introduce likening into the Isaianic text as a foreign element. Rather, careful reading of scripture reveals that the prophetic texts present within themselves a kind of proto-likening or a preliminary “metaphorizing” of what they have to say. In 2 Nephi 26–27 and its appropriation of Isaiah 29, not only does Nephi creatively adapt Isaianic images into new, prophetically projected contexts, but Isaiah himself consistently employs images, metaphors, and symbols that are already open to multiple interpretations and readily available for future adaptation. Likening scripture is, then, not a way of misappropriating scripture but of giving attention to the multiple (but unrealized) prophetic possibilities already at work in the text.

Nephi’s use of the Isaianic image of a “book that is sealed” (Isaiah 29:11) aptly illustrates these points. In Isaiah’s original prophecy, this image is clearly presented as a metaphor (“the vision of all is become unto you as the words of a book that is sealed”) in a two-verse prose excursus in the middle of a longer poetic text. Nephi seems to have picked up on the richness inherent in this image, and he expands much more dramatically on verses 11–12 than on other parts of Isaiah 29. Recognizing that even Isaiah employs the image only as a symbol, Nephi repurposes that symbol to stand for something whose emergence he had witnessed in his own apocalyptic revelation (in 1 Nephi 11–14): the Book of Mormon. He thus weaves his own prophetic anticipations of what modern Latter-day Saints easily recognize as the “Charles Anthon incident” into the text of Isaiah, resurrecting the Isaianic text at the same moment that he, as it were, partially “kills” the text’s original intentions.

3. How do these chapters provide a clearer understanding of what Nephi is trying to accomplish in his small plates?

Relatively obvious structural markers break Nephi’s two books into four major parts:

1. 1 Nephi 1–18 (the story of the founding of the Lehites)
2. 1 Nephi 19–2 Nephi 5 (the division of the Lehites into Nephites and Lamanites)
3. 2 Nephi 6–30 (prophecies concerning the eventual reconciliation of the Nephites and Lamanites)
4. 2 Nephi 31–33 (concluding thoughts)

Chapters 26–27 of 2 Nephi are thus part of a much larger section of Nephi’s record (2 Nephi 6–30) that comprises what Nephi himself described as the “more sacred” part of his writings (1 Nephi 19:5). In fact, these two chapters are part of a six-chapter sequence (2 Nephi 25–30) within that larger section in which Nephi not only joins his brother Jacob in offering commentary on Isaiah (see 2 Nephi 6–10), but also returns to the central apocalyptic vision of his first book, popularly known as the vision of the tree of life (1 Nephi 11–14). This last connection is of particular interpretive significance: it helps to make clear that 2 Nephi 26–27 is to be read not only according to the context provided for it in 2 Nephi, but also according to its thematic connections to the privileged vision of 1 Nephi.

This return to the apocalyptic vision of 1 Nephi 11–14 in 2 Nephi 25–30 emphatically marks the way that Nephi’s record privileges the earlier vision. Indeed, it might be taken as a kind of justification for offering a speculative (but reasoned) reconstruction of the stages in which Nephi’s record took shape.
Stage 1: First, a number of details might be culled from Nephi’s record to suggest that he originally planned only to write what is now 1 Nephi 1–18. This is not only suggested by the obvious textual break between 1 Nephi 18 and 1 Nephi 19 (the latter of which opens with Nephi’s detailed description of his textual project), but also by the three earliest descriptions Nephi offers of what he is writing, found in the heading for First Nephi (immediately before 1 Nephi 1), in 1 Nephi 6, and in 1 Nephi 9. These, taken together with 2 Nephi 5:30–33, which appears to report the original commandment Nephi was given concerning the writing of his record, support the possibility that Nephi initially intended only to write a shorter record that detailed the journey from Jerusalem to the New World.

If this position has any merit, it in turn would suggest that Nephi’s earliest project in writing the small plates was to use the narrative of the journey from Jerusalem to the New World to foreground and contextualize the visions of Nephi and his father in 1 Nephi 8–15. That is, if Nephi originally intended to write just the first eighteen chapters of First Nephi (and nothing of Second Nephi), then Nephi’s small plates were first and foremost a setting forth of the apocalyptic vision of the eventual emergence of the Nephite record, the very theme to which Nephi eventually returns in 2 Nephi 25–30.

Stage 2: Nephi’s purposes would seem eventually to have changed, something he attempts to explain in the first verses of 1 Nephi 19 (and the final verses of 2 Nephi 5). In this second understanding of his project, Nephi recasts the whole of his initial project (1 Nephi 1–18) as a kind of prologue to the much more comprehensive story he now intends to tell. After laying out the difficulties that followed after the journey to the New World (in 1 Nephi 19 – 2 Nephi 5), Nephi begins to write what he describes as the actual core of his record, the mandated “plain and precious parts” of “the ministry and the prophecies” (1 Nephi 19: 3). At this point, he apparently understood his record as falling into three major parts—1 Nephi 1–18; 1 Nephi 19 – 2 Nephi 5; and 2 Nephi 6–30—the last section returning to the themes of the first in order to show how the difficulties of the second section might eventually be overcome.

In Nephi’s second understanding of his textual project (especially taking 2 Nephi 25–27 as a guide), it seems Nephi understood his purpose to be to create a text that would (1) be retained and carefully read by his people so that it would (2) serve as a kind of impetus or at least inspiration for his people to begin to write the record of which he had prophesied. In essence, he saw his record as a systematic injunction to his people to pay attention to their divine task to compile a record that would eventually serve as the means of salvation for both scattered Israel and the Gentiles.

Stage 3: Finally, at some point, Nephi seems to have decided to add a conclusion to his record (note both the finality of the last verses of 2 Nephi 30 and the hesitation to begin again in the first verses of 2 Nephi 31).

Whatever else might be said about Nephi’s concluding words, it is very clear that they are characterized by an important advance in Nephi’s understanding of the purpose of his small plates record. Whereas he earlier understood his record first as a contextualized prophecy of the writing and eventual emergence of the Nephite record and second as a kind of systematic injunction to the Nephites to write and then to bury that Nephite record, he seems in his last words to have recognized that he was, in the small plates themselves, writing part of that record. The key passage is 2 Nephi 33: 13, in which Nephi adopts the crucial language of Isaiah 29—which forms the backbone of his earlier understanding in 2 Nephi 25–30—in order to identify his own record with the one whose emergence in the last days he has announced. At long last, it appears Nephi realized that he had already begun to construct the record that would be central to the unfolding of God’s plan for history in the last days.
In the end, chapters 26–27 of 2 Nephi provide an essential background against which Nephi’s ultimate understanding of the role of the small plates as an integral part of the latter-day record emerges. As Nephi works through Isaiah 29, he comes to grasp prophetically the necessity of such a record, and in doing so, it can be argued, he initiates the thoughts and prayers that will eventually lead him to a reconsideration of his own record’s future role.

4. What does 2 Nephi 26–27 teach us about the nature, role, and place of the Book of Mormon?

One of the first things that ought to strike the reader of the Book of Mormon is its profound self-awareness. The Book of Mormon repeatedly prophesies of itself (see 1 Nephi 13: 25, 35; 3 Nephi 21:1–7; 25: 21–22; 26: 8–10; Mormon 5: 12; Moroni 10:3–4), and its own authors consciously proclaim its weakness (see 1 Nephi 13:39; 2 Nephi 29: 10–11; Ether 12: 23–25). It should come as no surprise, then, that a crucial part of the Book of Mormon’s prophetic self-awareness involves an explication of its own role in the latter-day fulfillment of what might be called the “Lehitic covenant.”

The Lehitic covenant consists of four basic elements:

1. A promised land is given to the children of Lehi (2 Nephi 1:5).
2. Prosperity in the land is predicated on obedience to the commandments (Jarom 1:9).
3. Lehi’s seed will never perish (2 Nephi 25:21).
4. A record will bring Lehi’s seed to a knowledge of their covenant (Enos 1:13, 16; Ether 4:17).

While the Book of Mormon makes frequent reference to each element, consistent theological attention is paid to the fourth element in particular. As early as the title page one finds the announcement that the writings of Nephi and his descendants will eventually be taken “to the Lamanites,. . . that they may know the covenants of the Lord.” Nephi is by far the most theologically interested Book of Mormon writer on this point. He further informs readers of the book that it “shall come forth, and . . . there shall be many [among the Gentiles] which shall believe the words . . . and they shall carry them forth unto the remnant of our seed” (2 Nephi 30:3).

Nephi’s writings most directly manifest this awareness of the Book of Mormon’s latter-day emergence in the incorporation of Isaianic prophecy found in 2 Nephi 26–27: “The Lord God shall bring forth unto you the words of a book, and they shall be the words of them which have slumbered” (2 Nephi 27:6). Accordingly, these two chapters proceed to outline the purpose, composition, and emergence of the Book of Mormon in striking detail.

In 2 Nephi 26–27, Nephi prophesies of two destructions and their relationship to the future record. The first destruction is that of the Nephites (2 Nephi 26:4–6, 9–11) and the second is that of the Gentiles in the latter days (2 Nephi 27:2). For Nephi, these destructions are inseparably linked by his concern for the prophesied record: the Nephite destruction necessitates the writing of the record (2 Nephi 26:17), while the Gentile destruction calls for its emergence (2 Nephi 27:6). Interspersed among the various parts of this broad outline in 2 Nephi 26–27 are references to the prayers of the fathers (2 Nephi 26:15), warnings regarding the obstacles to covenant fulfillment (secret combinations, for example; see 2 Nephi 26:22; 2 Nephi 27:27), and a detailed prophecy about the unlearned man to whom the sealed record is given (2 Nephi 27:15–26).

Above and beyond simply announcing the record’s relationship to the covenant, 2 Nephi 26–27 outlines the actual mechanics of the covenant’s fulfillment. In the very center of the prophecy, sandwiched between the two separate destructions and their concern with the one record, we find the following statement: “the Lord . . . denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are
alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile” (2 Nephi 27:33; see also vv. 24–28). Nephi here sets up a series of polar opposites, each one a political distinction imposed by the world, in order to demonstrate the gospel’s essential indifference to worldly categorization. Nephi sees the latter-day world as politically structured in particular by the question of Jew and Gentile (2 Nephi 27:1).

This errant gospel, announced via the Book of Mormon, attempts to distract the Jewish-Gentile polemic by creating a genuinely generic kingdom: the house of Israel. Indeed, the title page makes this particularly clear by announcing its intention to convince both “Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ,” while still maintaining the entirely separate category of “the House of Israel.”

In light of these details, one might argue that 2 Nephi 26–27 provides the most comprehensive and detailed self-analysis in the Book of Mormon. Despite the fact that there are two destructions in question, for Nephi, there remains only one record. He builds on this intimation of unity to ensure that readers understand that the work of the gospel will outstrip categorization. These chapters prophesy of the role of the record across both temporal (old world vs. latter-day) and ethnic (Jew vs. Gentile) gaps, declaring its intention to distract the artificial divisions between peoples and generations into the working out of a unified covenant.