How Nephi Shapes His Readers’ Perceptions of Isaiah

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We spent our time during this seminar not only thinking about Nephi’s use of the prophecies of Isaiah, but also listening to our eleven-year-old son work his way through Mozart’s variations on “Ah! vous dirai-je, Maman.” It is hard to say which task has been the more challenging, especially given that this charming French title is attached to the rather tedious melody of “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star.” Mozart, of course, does not disappoint. In his twelve variations on this very well known theme, he is inevitably clever, engaging, and joyful. But after several weeks of practice, we readily agreed with Elliot’s piano teacher that polishing just six variations would probably be sufficient. At any rate, somewhere in the flow of days, it occurred to us that Mozart’s compositional project might, in fact, have something to tell us about Nephi’s.

On the next page is the opening of Mozart’s “Twinkle” piece (fig. 1, click to enlarge).
Even someone unable to read music can see the clear delineation of the initial theme and its first variation. Note that the bass line in the variation begins as an exact replica of the bass line in the initial theme—a quotation, if you will. The melody line has a lot of added notes, but if one looks carefully (it starts out as the second note in each of the sixteenth-note clusters) he or she can also see the persistence of the original tune within Mozart’s adaptation. He plays a bit with both rhythm and key—note the occasional syncopation and accidentals—but the theme remains recognizable throughout.

Isaiah’s prophecies also have a theme, at least in those passages Nephi includes in his own composition. Nephi identifies his understanding of this theme when he tells us that, in response to queries from Laman and Lemuel regarding their father’s prophecies, he rehearsed the words of Isaiah as an explanation because Isaiah, too, had spoken “concerning the restoration of the house of Israel” (1 Nephi 15:20). Later, when he is trying yet again to persuade his siblings to faithfulness, Nephi emphasizes the particular value of Isaiah’s words for them, just before he quotes two entire chapters verbatim:
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 . . . for after this manner hath the prophet written. (1 Nephi 19:23–24)

We as Latter-day Saints sometimes forget that more than two-thirds of Nephi’s writings are devoted specifically to connecting his family’s history with Isaiah’s theme of God’s plan for the salvation of Israel. It is in Nephi’s nonnarrative chapters of doctrinal discourse, scriptural quotation, and original prophecy that we come to know his concerns most intimately. Nephi’s primary persona here is as a reader, poring over passages included on the brass plates, offering alternative explanations of their meaning, interweaving his own prophecies with them, and envisioning himself as the author of still future scripture. He professes a love for these writings, and he structures his writings in such a way as to suggest that he is carefully reworking original documents—something we will see in 1 Nephi 22 and 2 Nephi 26–27 in particular.

1 Nephi 22
Nephi’s interpretive concerns seem to have been rooted first and foremost in the fact that he had foreseen, in a remarkable, angelically guided vision (reported in 1 Nephi 11–14), the future of his family and the grand sweep of Book of Mormon history. On at least three separate occasions in his record, he connects this revelation to the broader context of God’s plan for Israel by tying his own revelation to the written prophecies of others. Not surprisingly, it is always to Isaiah that he first turns for corroboration. He refers to Isaiah’s writings as he attempts to explain God’s providential plan to Laman and Lemuel (1 Nephi 19:22; see also 15:20), and then he quotes Isaiah 48–49 as evidence (1 Nephi 20–21). When his brothers, like many modern readers, admit that they do not quite understand his point, Nephi responds with a prophecy of his own in 1 Nephi 22 that reiterates the familiar scenario of the house of Israel first being scattered among all nations and then eventually restored to both the lands of their inheritance and the knowledge of Jesus Christ through the instrumentality of latter-day Gentiles.

What makes 1 Nephi 22 striking from a literary perspective is the almost musical way in which Nephi interlaces his own prophecy with phrases from the scriptural chapters he has just quoted. A page from the Reader’s Edition of the Book of Mormon shows the quotations from Isaiah in italics, highlighting—as it were—the melody line that Nephi is embellishing (see fig. 2, click to enlarge).
Notice that not only does Nephi provide explicit interpretations for expressions like “lift up mine hand to the Gentiles,” the “mighty” from whom the Lord will one day deliver captives, and “carried . . . upon their shoulders” (1 Nephi 22:6–8; cf. 21:22, 26), but he also inserts distinct, just-quoted phrases in less obtrusive ways, as when he indicates that latter-day Israel shall “know that the Lord is their Savior and their Redeemer, the Mighty One of Israel” in verse 12, or that wicked latter-day Gentiles shall “be drunken with their own blood” in verse 13 (cf. 1 Nephi 21:26).

Isaiah’s prophecies here were originally about the restoration of the Jews to the lands of their inheritance after the Babylonian captivity (something still in the future when Nephi was writing), but Nephi sees these words as also being applicable to the situation of the Lamanites and the Jews in the last days. In order to convey his message, he pulls Isaiah’s words from their original context and gives them a new one, much as Mozart spun his own variation...
from a familiar tune. After we see Isaiah’s prophecies in the new setting that Nephi has provided, we understand them differently. The words have not changed, though we now perceive fresh and fuller meanings.

2 Nephi 25–30
But as effective as the variation of a new context can be in expanding an original theme, it is still a pretty simple technique; both of our composers are capable of much more dexterity as the situation warrants. In Mozart’s case, consider, for example, the remarkable finale of the first act of the opera Don Giovanni. Giovanni here is hosting a feast for everyone who lives in his domain, including the nobility, the bourgeoisie, and the peasants. Mozart represents this moment, amazingly, with the simultaneous performance of three independent dance ensembles—one for each of the social classes (see fig. 3).

Figure 3. Mozart’s score for Don Giovanni incorporates musical themes for three different dance movements.
Again for those who can read music, the score displays his truly ingenious interweaving of three orchestras—each playing in a different time signature. As music critic Robert Harris describes it:

“The minuet we heard before begins again, introducing a section where all the characters comment on what they see and hear. On stage two other orchestras first tune up, then play their own dances—a country dance and a waltz—an incredible moment. Here is Mozart at his most complex, playful, and dramatic all at the same time. He has three different dances going, one in the orchestra proper and two on stage, as well as interweaving the thoughts of the six characters as they comment on the action unfolding before them.”

Similarly, Isaiah 48–49 is not the only source Nephi draws upon in 1 Nephi 22. In explaining to Laman and Lemuel the role that latter-day Gentiles will play in bringing their (Laman’s and Lemuel’s) posterity to salvation, Nephi simultaneously incorporates phrases from several additional brass plates texts, including in verse 8, Joseph of Egypt’s prophecy about a Gentile work "of great worth," recorded in 2 Nephi 3:7; in verse 9, the Lord’s promise to Abraham that one day all nations would participate in his blessing, from Genesis 22:18; in verses 15, 23, and 24, Zenos’ prophecies regarding the latter-day gathering of scattered Israel; and in verse 20, the identification of the Holy One of Israel as the new prophet whose coming Moses anticipated in Deuteronomy 18:18–19. Also interwoven are several distinct phrases from Isaiah’s prophecy in Isaiah 29 regarding the sealed book, including “proceed to do a marvelous work,” “out of obscurity and darkness,” “fight against Zion,” and “brought low in the dust” (1 Nephi 22:8, 12, 14, 19, 23). Much as Mozart brings together three separate musical genres in a complicated interweaving of voices, Nephi here reworks phrases from multiple sources into a kind of bravura prophetic performance.

In 2 Nephi, following his quotation of five chapters from Jacob’s writings and thirteen from Isaiah’s, Nephi employs a similar interpretive strategy in his commentary in chapters 25–30. He justifies the inclusion of these lengthy prophecies by appealing to the principle of multiple witnesses:

“For verily [Isaiah] saw my Redeemer, even as I have seen him. And my brother Jacob has also seen him as I have seen him; wherefore, I will send their words forth unto my children to prove unto them that my words are true. Wherefore, ‘by the words of three,’ God hath said, ‘I will establish my word.’ Nevertheless, God sendeth more witnesses, and he proveth all his words.” (2 Nephi 11:2–3)

In keeping with this explanation, Nephi has included, in his interpretive commentary in 2 Nephi 25–30, multiple quotations of, allusions to, and echoes of three distinct primary sources: his own vision in 1 Nephi 11–14; Jacob’s interpretations of Isaiah in 2 Nephi 6–10; and Isaiah’s prophecies concerning the house of Israel, quoted in 2 Nephi 12–24. Here, too, he integrates at least a dozen other brass plates passages into the new context of his own prophecies. Obvious citations are again indicated with italics and footnotes in the Readers Edition, but less explicit allusions can be seen as well. Zenos, Moses, Joseph of Egypt, and other Isaiah passages continue to be numbered among Nephi’s other witnesses, but the focus of his interpretation remains on the monumental vision he had previously seen of the future of Israel’s Lehite branch (1 Nephi 11–14), which he now presents in terms of the themes of Isaiah 2–14.

This extended quotation from Isaiah originally dealt with Israel’s unfaithfulness to her covenants and God’s resulting judgments upon her during both the Syro-Ephraimite War of 734 bc and the invasion of Judah by Sennacherib in 701. As Nephi well knew, Isaiah’s predictions of Assyria’s invasion had been fulfilled a century before, and despite the destruction, a remnant of Judah and a few fleeing Ephraimites had been saved. One of
Nephi’s purposes, then, in this lengthy excerpt is to affirm the validity of prophecy itself, namely, that everything the Lord has revealed will indeed come to pass.

In Nephi’s reading, however, Isaiah’s prophecies are not just predicting specific events regarding the fall of Samaria. Now that Judah has likewise become corrupt, Nephi has seen that God will again mete out righteous judgment, this time via Babylon, and will once again preserve a remnant—including his own family. In Isaiah’s prophecies, Nephi recognizes a typological pattern for God’s dealings with the house of Israel throughout the duration of human history, a pattern of judgment and salvation to be repeated over and over:

“I write unto ... all those that shall receive hereafter these things ... that they may know the judgments of God, that they come upon all nations, according to the word which he hath spoken. ... And as one generation hath been destroyed among the Jews because of iniquity, even so have they been destroyed from generation to generation according to their iniquities, and never hath any of them been destroyed save it were foretold them by the prophets of the Lord.” (2 Nephi 25:3, 9)

In 2 Nephi 25–30, Nephi interprets “plainly” this pattern of judgment at the heart of Israel’s story, likening the oppression of the Egyptians to the subsequent destructions wrought against Israel in the Old World by the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and eventually the Romans; and against an Israeliite remnant in the New World first by God himself at the time of the “great and terrible storm” of Jesus’s crucifixion, then by the Lamanites about ad 400, and finally by the Gentile nations in the latter days. But central to Nephi’s argument is that, at every iteration, Isaiah’s pattern also includes the salvation of a remnant. And he prophesies here that in the case of the Lehites, this remnant will include a text as well as a people. Someday, the very record that Nephi is composing—with its emphatic testimony of Jesus Christ—will be instrumental in bringing both unity and salvation to latter-day Israel.

We can discern Nephi’s general methodology for interpreting scripture from these two great prophetic discourses (that is, from 1 Nephi 22 and 2 Nephi 25–30). In each, he follows the direct quotation of an extended passage from Isaiah with an interpretive discussion that incorporates both themes and key phrases but does not provide a comprehensive or detailed commentary on Isaiah’s words. Instead, he works the phrases into a fresh prophecy that recontextualizes and expands the meaning of the Isaianic original with particular reference to the future of his own people. Nephi uses the words of Isaiah as a medium through which to communicate his own prophetic understanding of the future, and also as a way to demonstrate that he is in harmony with what the Lord’s servants have said before.

2 Nephi 26–27
At this point, it is perhaps necessary to complicate the comparison between Nephi and Mozart because Nephi is at times more a performer than a composer of scripture. It is always a pleasure to hear a fine musician play one of Mozart’s piano concertos. Of course, the notes themselves are virtually identical from performance to performance, but each soloist is able to put an individual stamp on the work through phrasing, timing, and attack. In fact, there is a sense in which the same piece can convey different meaning over time. It is odd to think that Mozart was once considered difficult music—avant-garde and hard to listen to—but those first audiences had never heard Beethoven, let alone Bartok or Schoenberg. Different contexts can dramatically shift the way that music is understood, just as putting Isaiah into Nephi’s hands can greatly expand our appreciation of his foresight.

The most significant example of Nephi’s reworking of biblical prophecy comes in such a moment of scriptural performance (rather than composition), at a point in 2 Nephi 25–30 where he follows a slightly different rhetorical approach than what we saw in 1 Nephi 22. Instead of first quoting Isaiah and then borrowing themes and occasional phrases for a fresh prophetic elaboration, here Nephi incorporates the entirety of Isaiah 29:3–24 into
his own predictions of forthcoming judgment and salvation. In 2 Nephi 26–27 Nephi is performing Isaiah's score, weaving his own interpretation into his predecessor's framework rather than other way around. And only here is his appropriation of Isaiah's writings complete, suggesting perhaps that unlike other Isaianic prophecies that anticipate multiple fulfillments, Nephi understood this prediction to be aimed at a singular, particular fulfillment in the future, one whose previously obscure interpretation is clarified by Nephi's revelation and plainness in prophesying.

In these chapters, Nephi's commentary on Isaiah is interlinear—he writes, as it were, between the borrowed lines. This can be seen by comparing the text of 2 Nephi 26:14–19, again taken from the Reader's Edition with its italicization of the words of Isaiah, with Isaiah 29:3–5 (as found in the King James Version):

> "I will camp against thee round about, and will lay siege against thee with a mount, and I will raise forts against thee. And thou shalt be brought down, and shalt speak out of the ground, and thy speech shall be low out of the dust, and thy voice shall be, as of one that hath a familiar spirit, out of the ground, and thy speech shall whisper out of the dust. Moreover the multitude of thy strangers shall be like small dust, and the multitude of the terrible ones shall be as chaff that passeth away: yea, it shall be at an instant suddenly."

Notice that nearly all the key phrases from Isaiah 29 have been integrated here, in the order in which they originally appeared. The correspondence is clearly deliberate on Nephi's part.

The rest of Isaiah 29:6–12 keeps coming piece by piece, through the rest of this chapter and the next, with an increasing amount of commentary. But then suddenly, at 2 Nephi 27:24, Nephi is back on script, this time quoting Isaiah (now from 29:13–24) so closely that we can arrange the passage into the poetic lines appropriate to Isaiah's

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Figure 4. This passage from 2 Nephi 26 shows Nephi's interlinear commentary on Isaiah 29.

From Hardy, Reader's Edition.
original style. Over the course of fifty-five verses, Nephi quotes twenty-two verses from Isaiah 29 while interspersing an additional thirty-three verses of his own interpretation, so that his integration looks something like that shown in table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2 Nephi</th>
<th>Isaiah</th>
<th>Type of Quotation</th>
<th># of Verses Added</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>26:14–19</td>
<td>29:3–5</td>
<td>slightly expanded quotation</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26:20–33</td>
<td>29:6–10</td>
<td>additional comments by Nephi</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27:1–5</td>
<td>29:11–12</td>
<td>greatly expanded quotation</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27:24–35</td>
<td>29:13–24</td>
<td>nearly exact quotation</td>
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In many ways, the second and fourth sections here are the most interesting. These are where Nephi departs most drastically from his underlying source material, adding the most by way of explanation to the verses he quotes. These largely “off-script” comments, at 2 Nephi 26:20–33 and at 27:6–23, offer the clearest picture of how Nephi reads Isaiah 29 and then shapes his readers’ perceptions of the text. We will consider each of them in turn.

Perhaps the most dramatic moment in a Mozart piano concerto comes right before the end of the first movement, in a section called the cadenza. Here, by tradition, the orchestra drops out and the pianist is given space to improvise, to go off-script as it were. In the score, it does not look like much—just one chord in a single measure, followed by fermatas in the orchestral parts. Fermatas, as you recall, are variable rests, and sometimes the orchestra will rest for a full minute, or three minutes, or even five minutes as the soloist weaves together new musical ideas with familiar themes in what is often the most virtuosic part of the entire concerto. When the orchestra finally rejoins the performer for a few recognizable motifs in the coda, the audience can often hear them in a fresh way. Something has changed, not in the melody itself, but in our perception of it. We might think of these two sections in 2 Nephi 26–27 as Nephi’s cadenzas: his performance of Isaiah continues, but here Nephi, as soloist, has the opportunity to display his own virtuosic interpretation.

2 Nephi 26:20–33

How, then, does Nephi shape his readers’ perceptions of Isaiah in his first improvised section, at 2 Nephi 26:20–33? At first glance, it seems completely intelligible to cut directly from 2 Nephi 26:19 to 27:1, where his direct adaptation of Isaiah 29 resumes—that is, to entirely skip Nephi’s independent commentary. But on closer inspection, some problems emerge when the intervening verses are omitted. The first thing to note is that in Nephi’s presentation, as opposed to Isaiah’s, the context has shifted dramatically from 26:19, where the focus is on the fratricidal destruction of the Nephites in AD 400, to 27:1, where the focus is instead on the pending destruction of the Gentile nations in the last days. One purpose, obviously, of Nephi’s “off-script” material is to ease this transition. But he also intervenes to forestall misunderstandings of particular passages in the Isaiah text that follows. For example, the impression we receive from both 2 Nephi 26:15 and 27:2 is that the Lord of Hosts is a god of judgment, vengeance, and punishment. Yet in his off-script commentary between these two passages, Nephi makes clear that God is actually best characterized by his compassion: “he doeth not anything save it be for the benefit of the world” (26:24), and he invites all humankind to come and “partake of his goodness” (26:33). Nephi does not want his readers to attach blame to the wrong party when they resume their reading of Isaiah 29 in chapter 27.
In like manner, Nephi’s description in his off-script commentary of self-satisfied, latter-day Gentiles also shapes our subsequent perceptions. When we get to the Lord’s admonition against the “wise and the learned” in the quotation of Isaiah 29:13–14 (in 2 Nephi 27:24–25), the antecedent is the learned book-reader adapted from Isaiah 29:12. Without the prior criticism of Gentiles who “preach unto themselves their own wisdom and their own learning” (2 Nephi 26:20), we might be tempted to see the learned man in question—whom we have come to recognize as Charles Anthon—as the sole villain of the prophecy. But his is simply a walk-on role; Nephi makes us aware in advance that he is representative of a much more pervasive problem.

Like any good improvising soloist, Nephi also provides in this cadenza an indication of where the performance is headed. His comment at 2 Nephi 26:17 that the Nephites would write and seal up a book before being destroyed anticipates the extended discussion of that book in chapter 27. Similarly, Nephi’s comments on the role of Gentile churches and the influence of the devil in the last days (26:20–22) anticipate chapter 28. And his equivalence of Jew and Gentile in the final verse of his cadenza foreshadows the end of his larger discourse that culminates in a prophecy about the uniting of the two groups in the Messianic age (chapters 29–30).

Between his two cadenzas, when he returns directly to Isaiah’s words in the first verses of 2 Nephi 27, Nephi begins again to play Isaiah like a musical score, with his own accents and articulation. In Nephi’s telling it is not Zion, but rather the nations of the Gentiles who fight against her that will be visited by the Lord with natural disasters (2 Nephi 27:2; cf. Isaiah 29:6). He also clarifies that it is the Gentiles’ iniquities and not the Lord’s indifference that has resulted in their gross lack of understanding (2 Nephi 27:5; cf. Isaiah 29:10). Moreover, Nephi continues to prepare his readers to interpret ambiguities in these verses in a particular way. Isaiah, for example, writes of people who are “drunken but not with wine” (2 Nephi 27:4 // Isaiah 29:9). Readers of Nephi’s version have no need to speculate about the meaning of this odd expression—are they confused? disoriented? insensible?—since he has previously described the latter-day Gentiles as “drunken with iniquity” (2 Nephi 27:1) and adds two more references to “iniquity” (in verses 4 and 5) between Isaiah’s lines. If the interpretation of “drunken” as “drunken with iniquity” seems obvious to readers of 2 Nephi 27, it is because Nephi has made it so. What is more, we do not need to puzzle over the nature of this spiritual stupor—asking whether it is the result of confusion or religious fundamentalism or political accommodation. Nephi has already listed the iniquities in question at 2 Nephi 26:32.

2 Nephi 27:6–23
As we move on to Nephi’s second largely improvised section, it is clear that something extraordinary is happening in his citation of Isaiah 29:11–12. Note first the very low density of italicized phrases (see figs. 5 and 6).
A Sealed Book (Midrash on Isaiah 29:11–12)\(^6\)

6And it shall come to pass that the Lord God shall bring forth unto you the words of a book, and they shall be the words of them which have slumbered. 7And behold, the book shall be sealed; and in the book shall be a revelation from God, from the beginning of the world to the ending thereof. 8Therefore, because of the things which are sealed up, the things which are sealed shall not be delivered in the day of the wickedness and abominations of the people. Wherefore the book shall be kept from them.

9But the book shall be delivered unto a man, and he shall deliver the words of the book, which are the words of those who have slumbered in the dust, and he shall deliver these words unto another. 10but the words which are sealed he shall not deliver, neither shall he deliver the book. For the book shall be sealed by the power of God, and the revelation which was sealed shall be kept in the book until the own due time of the Lord, that they may come forth; for behold, they reveal all things from the foundation of the world unto the end thereof. 11And the day cometh that the words of the book which were sealed shall be read upon the house tops; and they shall be read by the power of Christ; and all things shall be revealed unto the children of men which ever have been among the children of men, and which ever will be even unto the end of the earth.

12Therefore, at that day when the book shall be delivered unto the man of whom I have spoken, the book shall be hid from the eyes of the world, that the eyes of none shall behold it, save it be that three witnesses shall behold it by the power of God, besides him to whom the book shall be delivered; and they shall testify to the truth of the book and the things therein. 13And there is none other which shall view it, save it be a few according to the will of God, to bear testimony of his word unto the children of men; 4for the Lord God hath said that the words of the faithful should speak as if it were from the dead. 14Therefore, the Lord God will proceed to bring forth the words of the book; and in the mouth of as many witnesses as seemeth him good will he establish his word; and wo be unto him that rejecteth the word of God!

15But behold, it shall come to pass that the Lord God shall say unto him to whom he shall deliver the book, ʻTake these words which are not sealed and deliver them to another, that he may show them unto the learned, saying: ʻRead

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\(^{6}\) The prophecies in this section were fulfilled when Martin Harris took some characters copied from the Gold Plates to Professor Charles Anthon in New York City in 1828. See “Joseph Smith—History” 1:65–69; and appendix 2.

\(^{17}\) This apparently refers to the sealed portion of the Gold Plates. See Ether 3:25–28, 45–6.

\(^{12}\) See the “The Testimony of the Three Witnesses” in appendix 1.

\(^{13}\) See “The Testimony of the Eight Witnesses” in appendix 1.

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Figure 5. This passage from 2 Nephi 27 is an expansive prophetic interpolation of Isaiah 29:11–12. From Hardy, Reader’s Edition.
this, I pray thee.' And the learned shall say, ‘Bring hither the book, and I will read them.’ 16 And now, because of the glory of the world and to get gain will they say this, and not for the glory of God. 17 And the man shall say, ‘I cannot bring the book, for it is sealed.’ 18 Then shall the learned say, ‘I cannot read it.’ ”

19 Wherefore it shall come to pass, that the Lord God will deliver again the book and the words thereof to him that is not learned; and the man that is not learned shall say, “I am not learned.” 20 Then shall the Lord God say unto him, “The learned shall not read them, for they have rejected them, and I am able to do mine own work; wherefore thou shalt read the words which I shall give unto thee. 21 Touch not the things which are sealed, for I will bring them forth in mine own due time; for I will show unto the children of men that I am able to do mine own work. 22 Wherefore, when thou hast read the words which I have commanded thee, and obtained the witnesses which I have promised unto thee, then shalt thou seal up the book again, and hide it up unto me, that I may preserve the words which thou hast not read, until I shall see fit in mine own wisdom to reveal all things unto the children of men. 23 For behold, I am God; and I am a God of miracles; and I will show unto the world that I am the same yesterday, today, and forever; and I work not among the children of men save it be according to their faith.”

The Lord Knows and Judges (Isaiah 29:13–24) 24 And again it shall come to pass that the Lord shall say unto him that shall read the words that shall be delivered him:

25 Forasmuch as this people draw near unto me with their mouth, and with their lips do honor me, but have removed their hearts far from me, and their fear towards me is taught by the precepts of men—

26 Therefore, I will proceed to do a marvelous work among this people, yea, a marvelous work and a wonder, for the wisdom of their wise and learned shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent shall be hid.”

27 And wo unto them that seek deep to hide their counsel from the Lord! And their works are in the dark; and they say, “Who seeth us, and who knoweth us?” And they also say, “Surely, your turning of things upside down shall be esteemed as the potter’s clay.”

24 This section of Isaiah 29 is quoted directly, so it is not italicized.
This is where Nephi is expanding key phrases from the two following verses of Isaiah's by sixteen more:

“And the vision of all is become unto you as the words of a book that is sealed, which men deliver to one that is learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I cannot; for it is sealed: And the book is delivered to him that is not learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I am not learned.”

From this brief passage, Nephi launches into a breathtaking digression that will reshape the way we see the entire chapter.

Interestingly, in modern translations of the Bible that set Isaiah into poetic lines, verses 11–12 are distinct because they are in prose, and they stick out as such; indeed, many scholars have suggested that they are later glosses or additions for precisely this reason. Whatever form they may have taken on the brass plates, it is as if Nephi sees those verses and thinks, “Cadenza!” And he takes that moment to insert a prophetic interpolation concerning this sealed book and those who will someday attempt to read it. He begins by identifying Isaiah’s “vision of all” with his own prophecy of the revelation of “all things” that have been “written and sealed up to come
forth . . . in the own due time of the Lord” (2 Nephi 27:7, 10; cf. 1 Nephi 14:21–22, 26). He then writes of the motivations of the learned and unlearned readers, of the consequences of their actions, and the destiny of the marvelous book.

As before, Nephi seems to be interpreting in advance. At the end of the cadenza, he foretells two statements that the Lord will one day make to Joseph Smith, identified here (by description) as the unlearned man of Isaiah 29:12. The first of these statements, appearing in 2 Nephi 27:20–23 (fig. 6 #1), is introduced simply, “Then shall the Lord God say unto him . . .” with what follows appearing to be a fresh revelation to Nephi (this passage does not have any phrases taken from Isaiah). The second statement, appearing in verses 24–26 (fig. 6 #2), is quoted directly from Isaiah 29:13–15, where it appears as the Lord’s general pronouncement on Israel’s recalcitrance, though Nephi has applied it to latter-day Gentiles and directed it to Joseph Smith, as is made clear in his inserted introduction: “And again it shall come to pass that the Lord shall say unto him that shall read the words that shall be delivered him.”

Anticipatorily, Nephi has already worked significant phrases from both of these statements into the earlier part of his “off-script” discussion, apparently to forestall any misapprehension that might have arisen from reading the statements cold. All of the underlined terms in figure 7 were predefined by Nephi. For example, in 2 Nephi 27:6–14, Nephi had explained several otherwise ambiguous terms from these directives, including the words that are to be read, the sealed things that are not to be touched, the witnesses that have been promised, the subsequent resealing of the book, and the specific meaning of “all things” that are to be revealed at some future time. (Additional overlapping words and phrases include “mine own due time” and the equation of the Lord “proceed[ing] to bring forth the words of the book,” which appears in verse 14, with his “proceed[ing] to do a marvelous work and a wonder” later in verse 26.)

2 Nephi 27:24–35
If our task here is to read Nephi reading Isaiah, as if Nephi were onstage performing an Isaiah concerto, what are we to make of the coda—that is, of the part where, after going off-score for some prophetic improvisation, Nephi suddenly returns to the text of Isaiah 29, basically as written? At first glance, the last section of 2 Nephi 27, which quotes Isaiah 29:13–24 nearly verbatim, seems like an interruption. The bulk of the passage addresses reversals: the cedars of Lebanon will become a field; the blind will see; the poor will rejoice; the terrible one will be brought to naught; Jacob (the house of Israel), who was once ashamed, will praise God when he sees his posterity and God’s work among them; and, finally, those who erred in spirit will come to understanding. What are we to make of this series? Have we abandoned Nephi’s concerns in a return to the political controversies of Isaiah’s day, or are these reversals eschatological in nature, pointing to some vague but glorious future?

Whatever our impressions, the entire passage seems to represent a significant departure from the two primary themes we followed in 2 Nephi 26–27—those of the latter-day Gentiles and the sealed book. The fact that these two themes are again picked up at the beginning of chapter 28, immediately following the quotation, suggests either that the whole of 2 Nephi 27:24–35 is extraneous or that there is a closer thematic connection between the quotation and its context in Nephi’s record than meets the eye. Given both the presumed difficulty of engraving upon the plates and Nephi’s self-consciously intentional writing in this discourse (cf. 2 Nephi 25:1–7), the real question posed to readers here is why he includes Isaiah 29:13–24 at all.

It is possible that Nephi is, in fact, using Isaiah’s words to continue his discussion of the relationship between the latter-day Gentiles and the sealed book—at least part of which will become the future Book of Mormon. Verse 27, which speaks of some confusion in distinguishing the producer from the product is the first key to such an interpretation: “For shall the work say of him that made it, ‘He made me not’? Or shall the thing framed say of him
that framed it, 'He hath no understanding?' To most outsiders, the Book of Mormon—with its theological anachronisms, awkward diction, and lengthy quotations from the King James Bible—emphatically signals, *I was not made by an ancient prophet named Mormon.* The evidence of forgery, for them, is so obvious that it hardly merits discussion, and they assume that the text itself stands as sufficient evidence that Joseph Smith had no understanding. But if Nephi intended verse 27 as a reference to the Book of Mormon, then this dismissive attribution in itself represents a “turning of things upside down” (2 Nephi 27:27), and the rest of the passage falls into place.

Building on this interpretation, we can read Nephi’s gloss in the same verse (“‘But behold, I will show unto them,’ saith the Lord of Hosts, ‘that I know all their works’”) as suggesting further that God knows exactly what these faithless latter-day Gentiles are up to. He knows all about their “works in the dark,” which they will try to cloak with religion. This “I will show” insert (repeated in verse 28 as “I will show unto the children of men . . .”) may also be echoing an earlier statement from the Lord at 27:21 (“I will show unto the children of men that I am able to do mine own work”), thereby identifying who the “potter” or “framer” of the sealed book truly is: the God of Israel.

Another way to discern Nephi’s intention in including this passage is to identify its verbal connections with his interpretive comments both preceding and following the quotation. For example, the “wo” statement that begins verse 27 will be extended into a list of woes in the next chapter (28:15–29). Those who “seek deep to hide their counsel from the Lord” are later identified by Nephi as latter-day Gentiles (28:9), and their “works . . . in the dark” echo the “works of darkness” mentioned back in 26:22, which are again explicitly identified with latter-day Gentiles in 28:9. The status of the poor and the meek, mentioned in 27:30, is also described in 26:20 and 28:11–14, and the promise that “they that erred in spirit shall come to understanding” (27:35) echoes Nephi’s earlier assertion that because of the plainness of his own prophecies “no man can err” (25:7). Likewise, the follow-up statement in verse 35 that “they that murmured shall learn doctrine” contrasts with the false doctrines and precepts of men described in both chapters 26 and 28.

There is, at the very least, good reason to suggest that Nephi’s inclusion of Isaiah 29:13–24 is intentional. But two phrases in particular from Isaiah’s list of reversals stand out for their potential thematic significance. The first, in 2 Nephi 27:29, indicates that “the deaf [shall] hear the words of the book,” a reference that seems to refer back to the sealed book of 27:6-23, to the same book that Nephi describes after he completes his quotation as being “of great worth unto the children of men, and especially unto our seed” (2 Nephi 28:2). Nephi’s framing here suggests that the book itself will be the cause of the reversals that follow: the (spiritually) blind will see, the oppressed will find joy, and scoffers and critics who seize upon minutiae will come to nothing. The descendants of Jacob will recover their dignity and return to the correct worship of God, and, because of the Book of Mormon itself, many who have gone astray will find the truth.

But it is Nephi’s interpretation of a second phrase from the list of reversals that most clearly demonstrates his reading of Isaiah. Among those whose fortunes will change, Isaiah tells us, are they that “turn aside the just for a thing of naught” (2 Nephi 27:32). Nephi transfers this phrase directly into one of his “wo comments” in the following chapter, in a passage that echoes both Isaiah 29 and his prior description of the book to be revealed in latter days: “Wo unto them that ‘turn aside the just for a thing of naught,’ and revile against that which is good, and say, ‘That is of no worth!’ ” (2 Nephi 28:16). When he writes of those who “revile against that which is good,” he is speaking of the wise, learned, and rich Gentiles who will reject the Book of Mormon, and when he equates that action with “turning aside the just for a thing of naught,” it appears that he is, in fact, reading the “just” in 27:32 as a kind of code word for the people associated with that book—its authors, translator, believers, or perhaps even for the book itself.
Conclusions
We would like to conclude by responding to two related questions. First, how does Nephi read Isaiah? And second, how does he thereby shape his readers’ perceptions of the prophet’s words?

As far as reading goes, Nephi’s signature strategy is to use his own vision of God’s providential plan for the Lehites (from 1 Nephi 11–14) as a template for understanding the destiny of the entire house of Israel. Into this framework, Nephi fits particular passages from Isaiah and other brass plates prophets, and, in the subsequent extrapolation from the part to the whole, he articulates a comprehensive sequence of anticipated events—not only for his own people, but for Israel and the Gentile nations as well. In doing so, Nephi affirms his expectation of a temporal, that is, of an “according-to-the flesh” (1 Nephi 22:2, 18, 27), fulfillment of prophecy.

With his reading of Israel’s future in place, Nephi shapes his readers’ perceptions of Isaiah in the following ways:

1. He quotes extended blocks of text (such as Isaiah 48–49 or Isaiah 2–14) and then incorporates their general themes and particular passages into his own commentary in an articulation of his comprehensive prophetic scheme and as evidence of the validity of his extrapolation. He and Isaiah, Nephi is telling us, saw the same truth.

2. Nephi provides corroborating evidence for his interpretations by integrating the prophecies of multiple witnesses into his account. He alludes to additional writings from Isaiah, his brother Jacob, and several brass plates’ prophets. He acknowledges this strategy explicitly in 2 Nephi 11.7

3. Nephi also explicitly acknowledges his intention to interpret “plainly,” and he does so by defining ambiguities in terms of specific historical expectations, as when he explains Isaiah’s “even the captives of the mighty shall be taken away” (Isaiah 49:25, quoted at 1 Nephi 21:25) in terms of the “mighty” Gentile nation that will in latter days possess the Lehite land of promise; or, more extensively, when he identifies “the book” of Isaiah 29 as the record that his own people will produce. As we saw in 2 Nephi 26–27, he sometimes defines such terms in advance of their quotation in order to forestall reader misperceptions.

4. Nephi also on occasion shifts the objects or addressees of Isaiah’s prophecies. Sometimes this is the result of his recontextualization of Isaiah’s texts concerning (what for Nephi was) Israel’s past within his own interests regarding the Lehite future. On other occasions it is blatant reappropriation, as when he asserts that the Lord of Hosts will destroy not Zion, but those that fight against her in 2 Nephi 27:2 (cf. Isaiah 29:6).

5. On at least one occasion, Nephi shapes his readers’ perceptions of a passage from Isaiah by interpretive framing. We came to recognize the passage about radical reversals from Isaiah 29 as describing the changes that would result from the coming forth of the Book of Mormon primarily from Nephi’s positioning of this quotation between commentary on the twin themes of the latter-day Gentiles and the sealed book. Nephi’s subsequent exegesis suggests that he intended this interpretation.

6. Finally, Nephi recognizes and explains a typological pattern of multiple fulfillment for some of Isaiah’s prophecies, most notably those relating to the Lord’s repeated judgment of unrepentant Israel followed by the preservation of a righteous remnant. Other prophecies, particularly those relating to the sealed book of Isaiah 29, are portrayed as having a singular, unique fulfillment, and Nephi shapes his readers’ perceptions of this in both his direct commentary and his midrashic mode of interlinear quotation.

In the end, we will only understand Isaiah in the Book of Mormon—and what it might contribute to Isaiah in the Hebrew Bible—when we read Nephi’s nonnarrative writings as closely as a musician might read a score. In the film Amadeus, Antonio Salieri hears a Mozart serenade and exclaims, “It seemed to me that I had heard the voice of God.”8 The playwright Peter Shaffer, of course, uses this comparison of a Mozart piece to the word of God for his
own artistic purposes, but there may be a sense in which an inversion of Salieri’s exclamation might be instructive: the word of God can sometimes seem quite a bit like a Mozart masterpiece.

NOTES

1. As an illustration: How many depictions of Nephi portray him reading scripture, as opposed to confronting Laban, building a ship, or chastising his brothers? The only one we have been able to identify is the work of Jorge Cocco, an Argentinean LDS artist who, like Arnold Friberg, Minerva Teichert, and Walter Rane, has done a series of paintings illustrating Book of Mormon scenes. Cocco’s painting portrays Lehi and his sons reviewing the brass plates. See http://www.jorgecocco.com/big34.jpg, retrieved June 22, 2010.

2. In the introduction to the so-called psalm of Nephi, he writes: "my soul delighteth in the scriptures / and my heart pondereth them / and writeth them for the learning and the profit of my children" (2 Nephi 4:15).


5. It should be noted that Book of Mormon commentators have been quick to assume that Nephi is, in 2 Nephi 26–27, restoring the original text of Isaiah 29—and justification is often made with reference to the Joseph Smith Translation of Isaiah 29. Obviously, we are here approaching the text in another way, presuming that the King James Version of Isaiah 29 represents more or less the text Nephi had before him, and that 2 Nephi 26–27 therefore represents Nephi’s creative adaptation of and variation on the Isaianic text, rather than his reproduction of an original that has otherwise been lost.

6. Throughout Nephi’s writings, when he speaks of something having "worth" or "great worth," it is usually a reference to Joseph’s prophecy of the Book of Mormon at 2 Nephi 3:7.

7. As noted before, the Reader’s Edition makes many of these borrowings clear.