The relationship between Nephi and Isaiah on any level—historical, doctrinal, theological, etc.—is complex. And the relationship between Isaiah 29 and 2 Nephi 26–27 is extraordinarily so. Our goals at the beginning of the collective undertaking of this project appeared somewhat reasonable, perhaps even modest. As formulated in the seminar’s discussion questions, we sought to explore the following:

1. How does Nephi adapt Isaiah’s text, and what do his methods tell us about what it means to read a scriptural text?
2. What does 2 Nephi 26–27 tell us about the nature of prophecy and scriptural application?
3. How do these chapters provide a clearer understanding of what Nephi is trying to accomplish in his small plates?
4. What does 2 Nephi 26–27 teach us about the nature, role, and place of the Book of Mormon?

In short, part of what we hoped to gain from this experience is an increasingly nuanced and carefully articulated understanding concerning the contours of the textual relationship between Nephi and Isaiah. I wish to respond to the first question above by focusing on the thematic development of death throughout chapters 26 and 27 and then considering how Nephi’s use of death imagery provides a textual topos for the reading of the Book of Mormon, and indeed, scripture generally.

To begin, I will first provide a brief textual backdrop in order to orient us as we navigate our way through these potentially perilous waters. Within current Mormon scholarship and criticism, the link between Isaiah 29 and 2 Nephi 26–27 is undisputed. Much of this scholarship, however, tends to focus on the doctrinal and theological ties between the texts, explaining the textual relationship as “words . . . spoken to Isaiah centuries before . . . and recorded by Nephi in 2 Nephi.”¹ The process identified by Nephi as “likening” the scriptures (see, for example, 1 Nephi 19:23–24; 2 Nephi 11:2, 8) is thus commonly depicted as a re-presenting of the words of a past prophet, in this case, Isaiah. While this process accurately describes the manner in which Nephi inserts Isaiah 2–14 into 2 Nephi 12–24 more or less without (major) alteration, it fails to adequately explain the textual relationship between Isaiah 29 and 2 Nephi 26–27, wherein Nephi appropriates phrases and fragments of the Isaiah text, interweaving them with his own personal prophetic work without identifying their Isaianic source. As can be seen in Appendix 1, Nephi’s use of Isaiah’s words is substantial, but not necessarily sustained. Isaiah’s words are clearly central to Nephi’s discussion, but it does not appear that Nephi intends the reader to consciously jump back and forth within his or her reading, here attributing the text to Nephi and there to Isaiah. Indeed, the orthographic texture here instead demands a sort of textual seamlessness between Nephi and Isaiah, a partial erasure of Isaiah’s past prophetical identity and authority over the words.

Robert Cloward makes a critical observation concerning the textual relationship at hand that provides us with a way to move toward a thematic or literary discussion of the text. Cloward identifies the relationship between Isaiah 29 and 2 Nephi as extending beyond the more obvious linguistic parallels in chapters 26–27 and, instead, also including Nephi’s summary concerning the fate of the Jews in 2 Nephi 25:

“Isaiah 29 is not found in the Book of Mormon where readers usually look, that is, in 2 Nephi 27. The intent and meaning of Isaiah 29 are found in 2 Nephi 25:9–20. This first section of Nephi’s ‘own prophecy’
deals with Jerusalem and the Jews, just as Isaiah 29 does. Usually when looking for Isaiah in the Book of Mormon, readers look for Isaiah’s actual words. Many words of Isaiah 29 do appear in the second section of Nephi’s ‘own prophecy,’ but Nephi has given the words new meaning. He is no longer speaking of Jerusalem.”

The structural insight here is quite useful: Nephi’s prophetic interaction with Isaiah 29 occurs on multiple levels—the historical, the doctrinal, the thematic, as well as the linguistic—but it is imperative to recognize that not all such interactions need to occupy the same textual space. Indeed, extending Cloward’s discussion a bit further, we might say that Nephi’s interaction with Isaiah 29 as a text is experientially fragmented throughout chapters 25–27, with chapter 25 containing the rearticulation or explanation of Isaiah’s message in chapter 29, albeit without direct recourse to Isaiah’s language, and the following chapters containing Nephi’s prophetic experimentation upon the, as it were, now-liberated word, wherein Isaiah’s language is appropriated into Nephi’s own historical context and doctrinal teachings. It is this movement that I am interested in exploring further: how does one prophet accept the doctrinal content of another prophet’s words while simultaneously rejecting, to a degree, the prior prophet’s sense of ownership over his own words in an act of appropriation that clears the ground for a new prophetic discourse?

With this textual background and the resulting questions now in mind, let us return to the text of 2 Nephi 26–27 itself. Chapter 26 begins with a subtle evocation of both death and language, two poles around which the entirety of chapters 26 and 27 will continue to circle: “And after Christ shall have risen from the dead he shall show himself unto you, my children, and my beloved brethren; and the words which he shall speak unto you shall be the law which ye shall do” (verse 1, emphasis added). In the body of Christ we have both the death and the resurrection, along with an apparent reason for Christ’s future visit to Nephi’s descendants, namely, that they will receive Christ’s words as their law. Against this backdrop, the deaths described in the following verses carry the connotative weight of the joint relationship between loss and recovery and their implicit link to the image of the emergent voice.

“And after the Messiah shall come there shall be signs given unto my people of his birth, and also of his death and resurrection; and great and terrible shall that day be unto the wicked, for they shall perish; and they perish because they cast out the prophets, and the saints, and stone them, and slay them; wherefore the cry of the blood of the saints shall ascend up to God from the ground against them. Wherefore, all those who are proud, and that do wickedly, the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the Lord of Hosts, for they shall be as stubble. And they that kill the prophets, and the saints, the depths of the earth shall swallow them up, saith the Lord of Hosts; and mountains shall cover them, and whirlwinds shall carry them away, and buildings shall fall upon them and crush them to pieces and grind them to powder. And they shall be visited with thunderings, and lightnings, and earthquakes, and all manner of destructions, for the re of the anger of the Lord shall be kindled against them, and they shall be as stubble, and the day that cometh shall consume them, saith the Lord of Hosts.” (2 Nephi 26:3–6)

Notice the marked emphasis on equality in these verses. Everyone here will perish; death comes to all. The wicked will be destroyed due to their own destruction of the righteous prophets and saints. Beyond the act of death itself, Nephi’s imagery depicts what might be called a persistent materialism surrounding death. The dead saints leave the physical trace of their blood upon the ground and the site of their burial that also holds the instruments of their deaths (perhaps the blood remains upon the stones themselves). The deaths of the wicked are also materially marked as the unrighteous are swallowed by the earth, covered by mountains, and crushed into powder by their own buildings. To die, here, is not simply to cease to exist, but to leave a trace of one’s physicality upon or within
the earth itself. Death, in other words, is here always the death of a body. The difference between the deaths of the righteous and the deaths of the wicked is also worth noting. When the righteous are slain, their bodies buried, and their blood spilt, their voice remains, the "cry of the blood of the saints [that] ascend[s] up to God from the ground" (verse 3). The wicked, however, are granted no such voice. Their destruction is complete, even to consumption. While the blood of the righteous retains its power to speak, the physical remnant of the wicked—the crushed pieces that are ground into powder—remains silent. This theme of speaking and silencing serves to flesh out of the connection observed between death and language in verse 1.

Nephi returns again to death and language later in chapter 26 in verses 15–17. This time, however, he interweaves his own voice with that of Isaiah (Isaiah 29:3–5). (Italicized material marks wording taken by Nephi from Isaiah 29.)

"After my seed and the seed of my brethren shall have dwindled in unbelief, and shall have been smitten by the Gentiles; yea, after the Lord God shall have camped against them round about, and shall have laid siege against them with a mount, and raised forts against them; and after they shall have been brought down low in the dust, even that they are not, yet the words of the righteous shall be written, and the prayers of the faithful shall be heard, and all those who have dwindled in unbelief shall not be forgotten. 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; 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. 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, and those who have dwindled in unbelief shall not have them, for they seek to destroy the things of God." (2 Nephi 16:15–17)

The imagery of death in these verses parallels that of the previous verses in several interesting and instructive ways. In the first part of verse 15, Nephi (through Isaiah’s language) describes his distant descendants (note that he is speaking of the Lehites in the last days, well past the visit of Christ in 3 Nephi) as being “brought down low in the dust, even that they are not,” an image that appears to parallel his previous description of the destruction of the wicked at the coming of Christ—they each are related to powder or dust, and they each are consumed past the point of existence, “even that they are not.” The second half of verse 15 then returns to the issue of language, prophesying that the past words of the previously destroyed righteous and faithful saints will, following verse 16, be resurrected: they will rise up out of the ground, with the words emerging from the dust in a voice that will appear or be like that of a mystical séance—the necromancer who speaks with the dead.

Death here, then, acts as a barrier, perhaps even a type of seal, that can be broken or penetrated by a most unusual figure: a wizard with his “familiar” who is given power, not by the devil or other unholy sources, but by God himself so that the wizard may “whisper concerning them.” The wizard is not here to cast spells or to call forth the dead, but rather to act as the physical medium by which the voices of the dead may be brought forth out of the dust, out of death, and back into the discourse of the living. Notice that the wizard himself does not appear to have his own voice in this process—that is, his verbal production is entirely related to the words of the dead such that his own voice is, in a sense, voided or overwritten by the voices of the past. Unsurprisingly, these voices are returned to a material body through a reversal of the persistent materialism of death. As the voices are brought forth, they are reembodied within the translation of the book “written and sealed up” by the prophets of the past (verse 17). The wizard, of course, in this formulation, is associated with Joseph Smith Jr., and the text produced by this divinely aided encounter with the words of the dead is the Book of Mormon.
While it may appear that Nephi’s direct engagement with the themes of death and language ends here in chapter 26, I would argue that this is not the case. Chapter 27 opens with a return to the future historical content of Nephi’s vision: the last days, the days in which the Gentiles and the Jews will be “drunken with iniquity and all manner of abominations” (verse 1):

“And all the nations that fight against Zion, and that distress her, shall be as a dream of a night vision; yea, it shall be unto them, even as unto a hungry man which dreameth, and behold he eateth but he awaketh and his soul is empty; or like unto a thirsty man which dreameth, and behold he drinketh but when he awaketh and behold he is faint, and his soul hath appetite; yea, even so shall the multitude of all the nations be that fight against Mount Zion. For behold, all ye that doeth iniquity, stay yourselves and wonder, for ye shall cry out, and cry; yea, ye shall be drunken but not with wine, ye shall stagger but not with strong drink. For behold, the Lord hath poured out upon you the spirit of deep sleep. For behold ye have closed your eyes, and ye have rejected the prophets; and your rulers, and the seers hath he covered because of your iniquity. And 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.” (2 Nephi 27:3–6)

The repetition of the motifs of both drunkenness and sleep throughout these verses is striking. The Gentiles and the Jews will be incapacitated as they fight against Zion; the Lord himself will inebriate them to the point of slumber. While technically living, in their drunken slumber the Gentiles and Jews call forth the image of the dead, silenced and immobile. In their examination of the text of Isaiah, where much of the language of these verses originates, modern critics note that in Isaiah, “Drink fends off but also anticipates death, anaesthetizing fear and rendering the subject unconscious.” While this interpretive precedent does not necessarily mean that Nephi himself uses the words in this manner, it does not deny that possibility either. Therefore, we might argue that Nephi, through Isaiah’s language, alludes back to the previous deaths of the unrighteous in a thematic gesture that then reinforces the reintroduction of the book containing “the words of them which have slumbered” (verse 6). At this point, the words breaking through “death” are not a cry for vengeance nor the whispering speech arising from the grave/ground, but the sealed words of those in the sleep of death, “those who have slumbered in the dust” (verse 9).

It should be clear by now that Nephi works and reworks the themes of death and textuality throughout chapters 26 and 27, and that the language of Isaiah 29 is essential to the formulation and expression of his thoughts. At this point, it finally becomes possible to ask with the appropriate force the question that interests me here: Why, if the Isaianic text is so crucial to his own formulations, does Nephi not alert us to Isaiah’s authorship? Why are these words covered over by an undistinguished textuality that blurs authority and authorship?

Let us return to 26:16: “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; 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.” There are several readings of this verse yet to be explored that go beyond the thematic overview of death and language and point us toward a useful model for the Nephi/Isaiah textual relationship. To begin, it is worth observing that the phrase “one who hath a familiar spirit,” drawn from Isaiah 29:4, is open to retranslation. The Hebrew here can also be translated as “ghost-like.” The same word is also used in 1 Samuel 28:8, where Saul asks a witch to conjure Samuel’s spirit (or ghost) so that he may ask him for advice. A culturally and historically appropriate form of conjuration would be to first dig a hole in the ground and then pour a libation of wine into that hole so that the spirit could speak. Interestingly, the Hittite/Akkadian cognate of the Hebrew word can also...
literally mean a “hole in the ground.” Therefore, another, somewhat strained but nonetheless possible translation for “one who hath a familiar spirit” would be “the hole in the ground (from which one conjures a ghost).” The necromantic themes here are also subtly linked to the idea of drunkenness through the libation of wine, which then, of course, propels us forward to the beginning of chapter 27 in which we have the Lord pouring out a spirit of deep sleep upon the living. While 26:16 presents us with the voice of the actually dead rising up out of the ground, whispering forth through the libation and bearing witness through the words of the book, 27:1–9 presents the living as zombies whose flesh lives but whose words are “as a dream of a night vision”: unsubstantial, false, and ultimately unsatisfying.

It is also interesting to note that Nephi’s words throughout these chapters display a consistent, if subtle, recontextualization of Isaiah’s original discourse (another inverse relationship, perhaps). If we examine Isaiah 29:4 in its original context, the state of speaking low out of the dust reads as a negative or undesired quality, yet in 2 Nephi 26:16, the tone is much more positive, in part due to Nephi’s insertion of the figure given power by the Lord in order to bring forth the words of the dead. Beyond this insertion and the resulting shift in tone, the implied historical context of each verse is markedly different. Isaiah 29:4 describes the siege of Jerusalem during which the people are brought near death but do not, in fact, actually die. Isaiah’s poetic imagery here implies that the people of Jerusalem will be like those who are dead; that they will be so weakened, and their voices so faint, that it will be as if their voices are rising from the grave. In 2 Nephi 26:16, however, the Lehites and their descendants really are dead. Nephi refers to two groups, each deceased: the latter-day Lehite descendants and the former authors of the book and their people. While Nephi uses Isaiah’s language here—not only his imagery, but in terms of the actual construction of the passage itself, which contains word-for-word fragments citing 29:4—he is doing so in a particular way. Nephi is not quoting Isaiah. He is not bringing the hermeneutic and exegetical structures of Isaiah’s words into his own words. Instead, he utilizes the shell or formal structure provided by Isaiah’s sentences, but then gives them new life in the context of his own act of prophecy.

A pattern, at this point, begins to emerge. In a text that thematically addresses the physical death of a people and the later material resurrection of their voice via the text brought forth literally out of a hole in the ground, we also observe Nephi’s own voiding (a type of death) and reappropriation (i.e., resurrection) of Isaiah’s words. Nephi’s explicit quotation of the so-called Isaiah chapters in 2 Nephi 12–24 demonstrates a desire to pass on the words of Isaiah as the words of Isaiah, clearly identified as such, to his descendants. Similarly, his careful explication of the themes of Isaiah 29 throughout 2 Nephi 25, although not a direct quotation, is accomplished in open acknowledgment as an act of summarizing Isaiah: “Now I, Nephi, do speak somewhat concerning the words which I have written, which have been spoken by the mouth of Isaiah” (2 Nephi 25:1). Implicit in this summary is the idea that Isaiah 2–14, with its historical specificity, is thematically reiterated by Isaiah himself in chapter 29. Each level of this summary, then, functions to reinforce the voice of Isaiah (rather than Nephi) in the ears and eyes of the reader of Nephi’s text. In so doing, Nephi delineates a clear concept of authorship throughout both 2 Nephi 12–24 and 25: Isaiah is identified as the original author of the textual material presented in chapters 12–24 and the chapters are presented as direct quotations, carrying with them the authorial intentions, contexts, and even Hermeneutic structures that originated with Isaiah himself. Chapter 25, while not authored by Isaiah, is again clearly marked by its own author (Nephi) as indebted to Isaiah’s authorship. In summarizing his interpretation of Isaiah’s message in chapter 25, Nephi alerts us to the fact that the words, while his own, are faithful to what he understands Isaiah’s original intentions to have been. It is only after this Isaianic recapitulation that Nephi then turns himself toward his own project: to “proceed with my own prophecy, according to my plainness” (2 Nephi 25:7). Only after the words and themes of Isaiah have been put to rest does Nephi then continue on with his own work. Isaiah’s words have, for Nephi, been presented, discussed, and, in this sense, fully experienced and, in opposition to the act of voiding, filled.
In part due to Nephi’s prior careful replication and interpretation of Isaiah’s words, his subsequent unattributed use of the language of Isaiah 29 in chapters 26 and 27 may be taken to be a deliberate move. It is imperative that we recognize the significance of Nephi’s own authorial move here in chapters 26 and 27: he has just expended considerable energy copying, re-presenting, and interpreting Isaiah’s words, and it is only after this act that he returns to his own acts of prophecy. And yet, his recent extended contact with Isaiah’s words appears to have entered Nephi’s own prophetic psyche on a linguistic level—Nephi finds himself unable to leave Isaiah’s words, and yet, in order to remain faithful to his own prophetic calling and responsibility, he must break with Isaiah’s authorial ownership over those words and find a way to appropriate them for his own prophetic task. How can Nephi wrest the writings of Isaiah 29 from their original context and authorship? His decision to deliberately stop his previous pattern of attributing the quoted material to Isaiah marks a decision to accept his own authorial power and intention: Nephi may use the words of Isaiah in chapters 26 and 27, but he does so in a deliberate move of authorship that erases Isaiah’s previous authorial identity and imprint upon the language. Returning to the central themes of these chapters, we see that the words of the dead emerge only after their corporeal demise. Death is the act through which the voices of the righteous are transfigured so that they may be brought forth as the words of the book, as scripture. Could it be that Nephi’s relationship with Isaiah’s words is ultimately, in a way, that of “the death of the author,” famously articulated by Roland Barthes? While I am fairly sure Barthes and Nephi would not appreciate the association, I find Nephi’s linguistic movement here fascinating. Isaiah “lives” in Second Nephi, a formidable textual force that has stopped many an intrepid reader, only to ultimately “pass away” into Nephi’s own prophecy. Nephi assumes his prophetic mantle and authorship through the symbolic killing of Isaiah as his (Isaiah’s) words are buried beneath Nephi’s recontextualization in order to meet Nephi’s own prophetic necessities.

I realize this image—that of a prophet killing another prophet (whatever the sense and interpretive qualifiers of the term) in order to perform his own new and necessary act of prophecy—is problematic. But I also believe there are valid textual reasons to take this approach seriously and consider what it offers. To begin, Nephi’s own autobiographic record is hardly empty of problematic moral images. Every reader of the Book of Mormon quickly arrives at 1 Nephi 4, in which Nephi recounts his decision to kill a temporarily incapacitated Laban with his own sword and justifies his actions with the words of the Spirit: “Slay him, for the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands. . . . It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief” (1 Nephi 4:12–13). Laban’s death, however sanctioned, is still a disturbing, problematic image. Why must Nephi kill Laban? In order to access the brass plates. What we have here, right at the beginning of the story of Nephi’s own transition from son of a prophet to prophet in his own right, is a narrative that relates the necessity of killing a man in order to bring into Nephi’s possession the words of God.

If we have been reading carefully, Laban’s death should not take us completely by surprise. When Lehi tells Nephi that he and his brothers must return to Jerusalem to obtain the brass plates, Nephi’s initial response is one of obedience and action:

“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)

These words are so familiar that we often miss their underlying echo of another voice of prophetic obedience:
And he [Isaac] said, Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering? And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering.” (Genesis 22:7–8, emphasis added)

The God who provides himself with a lamb for the offering is the same God who prepares ways for the obedient to fulfill His commandments. Nephi knows who it is that he has chosen to obey: he obeys the God of Abraham and of Isaac, participants in one of the most ethically problematic scenes in all scripture, that of a father commanded to sacrifice his son. But of course, their experience foreshadows the ultimate moral and ethical injustice, that of a God who sacrifices his innocent Son in order to provide a way to overcome death and damnation through the resurrection, salvation, and exaltation of the rest of his imperfect, sinning children. Christ does not die: he is killed. And the force of his charity and extent of his grace is felt more fully in part because we react to a killing rather than a death. What I find in these texts here is evidence that God utilizes our powerful moral and ethical reactions to killing in part in order to emphasize the importance of individual obedience, faith, and commitment to bring to pass the will of God. It is this obedience, faith, and commitment—this charity—that I see at work in Nephi’s textual relationship with Isaiah. When Nephi appropriates and recontextualizes Isaiah’s words in 2 Nephi 26–27, he structurally reenacts the act that marked the beginning of his own prophetic identity—the killing of Laban—in a move that focuses the text toward the theological richness and prophetic power of Nephi’s own writings that close out the remainder of 2 Nephi.

And yet, in light of the thematic structures we have recently examined, Nephi’s authorial move here does not necessarily end simply with death. When we speak conversationally in the LDS Church regarding the supposed difficulty of the Isaiah chapters in 2 Nephi, we implicitly refer to Nephi’s openly acknowledged citation of Isaiah 2–14 in 2 Nephi 12–24 and not to 2 Nephi 26–27. Ironically, Nephi’s attributed citation of Isaiah is relatively straightforward, at least from a textual viewpoint, while the relationship between Isaiah 29 and 2 Nephi 26–27 complicates the text in a multitude of ways. As Nephi returns repeatedly to Isaiah 29, he does so from a new standpoint: that of a prophet uttering his own prophecy. The materials or words are textually reassembled in an act that calls up the image of creation—the unidentified or undifferentiated materials that are “organized” into a new earth—and Nephi as prophet thus secretly reanimates Isaiah, breathing new life into the dust of his words. Perhaps this interpretation gives us another way to read 2 Nephi 26:16: with Nephi himself occupying the wizard’s role as he brings forth, through the power of God given to him, the words spoken by a righteous prophet who was destroyed, and whose voice then only spoke in whispers from the dust. The prophetic resurrection of Isaiah’s words is not their (mere) repetition, but their reappropriation and recontextualization.

A final question: how do we react to Nephi’s somewhat radical approach to authorship and prophecy? Are we ourselves under any obligation to imitate Nephi’s actions? Surely not—the responsibilities of reading and interpretation as well as seeking continued revelation and prophesying do not weigh on each of us individually, do they?

And yet, in 2 Nephi 26:18 through 27:1 (a section in which Nephi stops utilizing Isaiah’s language), there is an unsettling matter: Nephi turns to the theme of universalism. Verse 24 of chapter 26 presents us with a Christ who lays “down his own life that he may draw all men unto him” (emphasis added). In 26:28 we learn that the Lord does not command “any that they should not partake of his goodness. . . . All men are privileged the one like unto the other, and none are forbidden” (emphasis added). And 26:33 states most emphatically that the Lord “inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he 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” (emphasis added). While the context of Nephi’s discourse in this section of chapter 26 makes it clear that he sees
this universalism as applying to the right and ability of every individual to receive the atonement, against our discussion of death and language another possibility emerges. If all truly are alike unto God, then the pattern here is clear. Nephi reads a scriptural text. He then shares those words and their interpretation with others. And finally, he takes it upon himself to make his own prophecy, weaving into his text as a voice whispering from the dust the words of Isaiah, together forming a new textual life. As we encounter the voices of the prophets in our scriptures, perhaps we are to do the same.

NOTES


3. Note that I am not arguing that Nephi necessarily understood Isaiah’s words in terms of authorial ownership. While we know that Nephi certainly identified Isaiah as author (e.g., “my soul delighteth in the words of Isaiah” [2 Nephi 25:5]), authorship does not equate ownership. The association between authorship and ownership is an admittedly modern development. However, given our own modernity as readers, given the very purpose of the readings in this project as experimental, hypothetical, and charitable, and given the absence of any specific textual evidence that Nephi did not equate authorship with ownership, I present this reading as an alternative, a possibility.

4. For a more complete visual representation of the relationship between Isaiah 29 and Nephi’s words here, please see appendixes 1–3.

5. This imagery, of course, derives from the original context and significance of “familiar” found in Isaiah 29. There the “familiar spirit” is understood in terms of the sorcerer’s familiar, i.e., a spirit, often popularly conceived as having an animal form, that accompanies and attends the magician in his or her work.

6. In his role as prophet, seer, and revelator, Joseph Smith gave special attention to recovering and revealing records from the past—to providing the voices of the dead with bodies—throughout his life. As Samuel Brown explains in his In Heaven As It Is on Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death (Oxford University Press, 2012), “Smith’s inner circle clearly understood Smith’s seerhood as a mode of revealing the records of the dead.” Brown fleshes out Smith’s role as a seer, arguing for seerhood as an active concern for voices past, demonstrated by bringing them into the present through the acts of translating, recording, transcribing, and writing, with the seer acting as a conduit for the dead.

7. Italics indicate wording taken from Isaiah 29.

9. Italics indicate wording taken from Isaiah 29.

10. Please note: I do not claim to be a scholar of Biblical Hebrew. This analysis arose during the seminar thanks to Julie Frederick’s work on this section.

11. I am indebted to discussion and comments by Kim Matheson and Grant and Heather Hardy during the seminar for the observations and thoughts developed in this section.

12. Again, recalling that this particular reading under way is that of a modern reader, working with a modern notion of authorship.


14. Given the previous discussion regarding the connections between the themes of death, drunkenness, and sleep, it seems not insignificant that Laban is found “fallen to the earth . . . drunken with wine” (1 Nephi 4:7).

15. In 1 Nephi, chapters 1–2, the prophetic activity and identity is clearly placed upon Lehi. It is only at the end of chapter 2, wherein Nephi speaks with the Lord, that we begin to see that prophetic mantle expand to include Nephi as well. The journey to Jerusalem to obtain the brass plates related in chapters 3–4 is significant to Nephi’s development as a prophet because it is on this journey that he shifts from following behind his brothers (e.g., they cast lots initially to choose who will go talk to Laban rather than Nephi simply taking the lead) to testifying to them (see 1 Nephi 3:15–20; 4:1–4) and eventually to going on his own to obtain the plates (1 Nephi 4:4–6). When Nephi kills Laban, it marks the initiation of his prophetic pattern: he submits himself to the Spirit, follows promptings, and obtains the words of God.

16. “Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done” (Luke 22:42).