



Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel

Volume 4 | Number 3

Article 12

9-2-2003

Nephi's Literary Endeavor

Steven L. Olsen

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/re>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Olsen, Steven L. "Nephi's Literary Endeavor." *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 4, no. 3 (2003). <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/re/vol4/iss3/12>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.



Nephi Writing the Golden Plates, painting by Paul Mann

Nephi's Literary Endeavor

Steven L. Olsen

Steven L. Olsen is associate managing director in the Family and Church History Department in Salt Lake City.

At the end of his ministry, Nephi, the first writer in the Book of Mormon, bore powerful witness of the eternal value of his sacred record. In fact, he declared that all mankind, willingly or reluctantly, will come to a knowledge of its truthfulness at the judgment bar of God:

And now, my beloved brethren, and also Jew, and all ye ends of the earth, hearken unto these words and believe in Christ; and if ye believe not in these words believe in Christ. And if ye shall believe in Christ ye will believe in these words, for they are the words of Christ, and he hath given them unto me; and they teach all men that they should do good.

And if they are not the words of Christ, judge ye—for Christ will show unto you, with power and great glory, that they are his words, at the last day; and you and I shall stand face to face before his bar; and ye shall know that I have been commanded of him to write these things, notwithstanding my weakness. (2 Nephi 33:10–11)

Few of the sacred writings in the standard works make such strong claims of divine approval. Nevertheless, the contents of Nephi's surviving record justify his perspective. How did Nephi come to a knowledge that his writings would play such a prominent role in the plan of salvation? What was Nephi's understanding of the divine purpose of his record? A careful review of the books of 1 and 2 Nephi reveals the origins and importance of the literary burden that Nephi bore with considerable responsibility and great anxiety.

Origins of Nephi's Records

Nephi made two accounts of his ministry, as he was commanded by God. The first was begun shortly after his extended family arrived in the promised land (see 1 Nephi 19:1); the second was begun some twenty years later (see 2 Nephi 5:28–30). Only the contents from Nephi's second record appear in the present-day translation of the Book of Mormon. To understand the ultimate value of Nephi's surviving record, let us examine what is known about the contents of Nephi's first account in comparison to those of the second.

None of Nephi's first record survives intact in the Book of Mormon. His first record was the initial portion of the large plates of Nephi, which Mormon abridged as part of his own prophetic calling (see Words of Mormon 1:3). This portion of Mormon's abridgment was translated by Joseph Smith but was lost after having been entrusted to Martin Harris in the fall of 1828.¹ Therefore, we cannot compare the contents of Nephi's two records directly. However, despite the tragedy of the lost manuscript, Nephi's comments about his first record in the surviving record give a general indication of its contents so that we can draw conclusions about the respective spiritual value of both records.

When Nephi was initially commanded to make a record of his ministry, he did not know God would eventually command him to make a subsequent account (see 1 Nephi 19:2). Furthermore, he had already received significant spiritual and miraculous experiences under the leadership of his father, Lehi. Hence, his first record likely contained an account of many, if not most, of these marvelous experiences, particularly since Nephi declares that his purpose in writing was to record that which is pleasing to God (see 1 Nephi 6:4–5, 19:6). Confirming this point, Nephi mentions that his first record included “the record of my father” and accounts of “our journeyings in the wilderness, and the prophecies of my father; and also many of my own prophecies” (1 Nephi 19:1, see also 10:15; 2 Nephi 4:14). In addition to these manifestly spiritual contents, Nephi declares that his first record also contained a “full account” or the “more part” of the history, “reigns of the kings,” and “wars and contentions” of his people (1 Nephi 9:2, 4; 19:4; 2 Nephi 5:33).

Although the contents that Nephi lists first (prophecies, teachings, and so forth) identify similarities between his two records, the second list of contents (kingly reigns, wars, and so on) suggests ways in which the records might differ. In fact, Nephi's surviving record is largely devoid of contents that could be classified as principally political, military, economic, or social.

This important difference between the two records can be explained, perhaps, by the chronology of their production. For at least his first twenty years in the promised land (ca. 589–569 BC), Nephi kept only one record. In it, he likely followed the spiritually significant literary tradition that had been preserved by his father, including prophecies, miraculous events, inspired teachings, and other sacred contents (see 1 Nephi 5:10–14). He also likely felt justified in including such contents as wars, migrations, reigns of kings, and other more empirical events similar to those in the historical portions of the “record of the Jews” (1 Nephi 5:12) found in our present-day Old Testament (for example, the book of Joshua through 2 Chronicles).

When Nephi began his second record, he obviously included the more spiritual contents of his first account—but perhaps with a grander or more refined perspective of their eternal value, which he likely had gained during the intervening decades.² Having begun the second account of his ministry, Nephi now had some degree of latitude to focus the contents of his respective records, though not to the extent of making one record primarily sacred and the other secular. An interest in preserving secular material is clearly contrary to Nephi's character. For the last two or more decades of his life, two records of his ministry were kept simultaneously. During this period, Nephi's first record could have preserved the “more part” of the empirical history of his people such as warfare and kingly reigns.

Nephi's second record of this same period concentrated exclusively on spiritual issues: Jacob's masterful discourse on the Atonement (see 2 Nephi 6–10), extended citations of Isaiah from the brass plates (see 2 Nephi 12–24), and Nephi's final prophecy and testimony (see 2 Nephi 25–33). Consistent with this refined focus, Nephi's second record contains no account of any empirical event from the last thirty years of this great prophet's ministry or from the lives of his people.

Though it would be speculative at best to draw many specific conclusions of Nephi's literary intent from the sketchy evidence of the contents of his first account, the following implications seem warranted: (1) Nephi's prevailing purpose in writing was sacred. No contents of either record could be considered secular, trivial, or worldly. Every detail of his two accounts, even those that were empirical or descriptive, was essential to his divinely ordained literary endeavor as he understood it. (2) God's purposes for commanding Nephi to write of his ministry were not completely accomplished in his first record (see 1 Nephi 9:3–5). Hence the need for a second.

Significance of Nephi's Surviving Record³

Is it possible to deduce what Nephi understood of the divine purpose for his second record from an examination of (1) how the second record clearly differs from the first and (2) the degree to which all portions of the second record fit together? The following analysis attempts to answer both parts of this question.

Defining and documenting the plan of salvation. Nephi's vision (see 1 Nephi 11–14) is the event that provides his second record with its unity, and this vision is the key to understanding the ultimate purpose of Nephi's writing. Nephi receives the vision in response to his desire to understand Lehi's dream of the tree of life (see 1 Nephi 10:17). Lehi's dream and Nephi's subsequent vision are similar in that both are representations of the plan of salvation.⁴

These spiritual experiences are different in that the dream is an allegorical representation, whereas the vision is both an explanation and a literal representation of future events. The elements of the dream—tree, rod of iron, great and spacious building, and so on—are symbolic: they stand for something else. Properly understanding the dream requires identifying the spiritual truths to which the symbols refer: the love of God, the word of God, the vanity of the world, and so on. The interpretive value of an allegory is that it can legitimately apply to a variety of actual events, personalities, and circumstances that are relevant to the spiritual truths to which the symbols refer. By contrast, the elements of Nephi's vision refer to specific historical events, groups, and processes by which God's plan of salvation will be literally realized within human, temporal, and spatial contexts. Properly understanding the vision requires documenting the empirical details and circumstances outlined in the vision.

A literal representation of the plan of salvation has great interpretive value because it identifies a specific set of historical events that are consistent with this compelling eternal drama. The redemptive drama outlined in Nephi's vision contains four main acts, which, in general, can be summarized as (1) the mortal ministry of the Messiah in the Holy Land (see 1 Nephi 11), (2) the life of Lehi's descendants in the promised land (see 1 Nephi 12), (3) the experience of the Gentiles in the promised land (see 1 Nephi 13), and (4) the ultimate triumph of good over evil (see 1 Nephi 14). This vision continues to the end of the earth.

The recurrent spiritual themes that pervade this vision—Christ as the Messiah, the scattering and gathering of Israel (including the role of the Gentiles), and the eventual salvation of the righteous in the king-

dom of God (Zion)—constitute the single-minded focus of Nephi's second record. All details of the record—historical narrative, scriptural citation, doctrinal discourse, spiritual experience, and so on—address directly or indirectly one or more of these central themes. The abridgment of Lehi's record (that is, 1 Nephi 1–10) introduces the major figures (the Messiah and Lehi's extended family) and conditions (inheriting a land of promise, identifying with covenant Israel, and following priesthood authority and Christ's gospel) within which this divine drama of salvation will be played out. The account of Nephi's ministry (see, for example, 1 Nephi 11–2 Nephi 5) documents the initial fulfillment of the promised blessings of the plan of salvation and elaborates on their eternal value through prophecy, discourse, and scriptural citation. Jacob's discourse further expands the central redemptive role of Christ's Atonement in the plan of salvation (see 2 Nephi 6–11). The extended Isaiah passages from the brass plates provide authoritative antecedents of these key themes of the plan of salvation (see 2 Nephi 12–24). Nephi's final prophecy and testimony recapitulate and expand the core themes of his vision, particularly as they relate to the last days (see 2 Nephi 25–30) and to the certainty of the promise of exaltation for all who are faithful to Christ's gospel (see 2 Nephi 31–33).

From this perspective, the fundamental unity of Nephi's second record and the reasons for his interrupting the historical narrative when he was commanded to create the second record become clear. Nephi's literary mission was to define, outline, and document a partial fulfillment of the plan of salvation in sermons, spiritual experiences, scriptural citations, and historical events.

Effecting the plan of salvation. The sacred goal of describing the plan of salvation is sufficiently exalted by itself to qualify Nephi's writings as among the most spiritually significant in all of scripture. There is, however, another purpose that renders his record all the more valuable. This additional purpose is also defined in Nephi's vision and expanded in his subsequent prophecy.

Although Nephi's vision reveals the general contours of the plan of salvation in material, temporal, and human contexts and although righteousness triumphs in the end, the details of this plan as revealed to Nephi contain much of tragedy. In fact, Nephi describes himself as weighed down in sorrow and greatly afflicted because of his knowledge of the events foretold in the vision (see, for example, 2 Nephi 26:7). Although he witnessed in the vision the "condescension of God" in the flesh, he also beheld Christ's crucifixion and the subsequent scattering of the covenant people of God (1 Nephi 11:26; see also 11:33–36).

Although Nephi foretold the ministry of the resurrected Christ among the Nephites, he also witnessed their eventual downfall, destruction, and annihilation because of wickedness (see 1 Nephi 12). Even though the vision has the Gentiles bringing the “record of the Jews” to the remnant of Israel in the promised land, it also recognizes that this book of scripture had been flawed by the “great and abominable church” that distorted its meanings and removed many of its “plain and precious” truths. Furthermore, in the vision, the Gentiles in the promised land scourge Israel’s remnant because neither group possesses or understands Christ’s gospel in its purity and simplicity (see 1 Nephi 13:1–29). In short, although the vision holds out ultimate hope for the salvation of mankind, its proximate story is one of considerable destruction and despair.

What changes the transformation of this narrative from the bleak to beneficent? At the point in the vision of almost total hopelessness, the angel who guides Nephi through each scene gives him assurance of eventual redemption on three main points:

Wherefore, thou seest that the Lord God will not suffer that the Gentiles will utterly destroy the mixture of thy seed, which are among thy brethren.

Neither will he suffer that the Gentiles shall destroy the seed of thy brethren.

Neither will the Lord God suffer that the Gentiles shall forever remain in that awful state of blindness, which thou beholdest they are in, because of the plain and most precious parts of the gospel of the Lamb which have been kept back by that abominable church, whose formation thou hast seen (1 Nephi 13:30–32).

These promises provide a turning point of sorts for the vision. Though challenges to the full realization of the plan of salvation still exist, the progress toward complete fulfillment of the divine promises from this point on is steady and sure. The first step toward the redemption of mankind begins with the Gentiles: “Wherefore saith the Lamb of God: I will be merciful unto the Gentiles, unto the visiting of the remnant of the house of Israel in great judgment . . . insomuch that I will bring forth unto them . . . much of my gospel, which shall be plain and precious” (1 Nephi 13:33–34). The key to this step is contained in the next verses: “For behold, saith the Lamb: I will manifest myself unto thy seed, that they shall write many things which I shall minister unto them, which shall be plain and precious; and after thy seed shall be destroyed, and dwindle in unbelief, and also the seed of

thy brethren, behold, these things shall be hid up, to come forth unto the Gentiles, by the gift and power of the Lamb. And in them shall be written my gospel, saith the Lamb, and my rock and my salvation" (1 Nephi 13:35–36).

In short, the blessings of salvation will be made available to mankind in the latter days by the sacred writings of Nephi and by those who are entrusted to complete the record after him. According to Nephi's vision, his record will not only define and document the plan of salvation but also effect the realization of its blessings in the last days. Nephi's sacred record is not only an account of the plan of salvation as revealed to an ancient prophet but also the agent of its eventual fulfillment. Thus, the angel declares, "And blessed are they who shall seek to bring forth my Zion at that day, for they shall have the gift and the power of the Holy Ghost; and if they endure unto the end they shall be lifted up at the last day, and shall be saved in the everlasting kingdom of the Lamb" (1 Nephi 13:37).

According to the vision of Nephi, the record of the Nephites combines with the record of the Jews and restores its plain and precious truths in order to unite both Jew and Gentile—for example, the entire human race—as the covenant people in the bonds of Christ's gospel. Ultimately, Christ will overcome evil and establish His millennial reign on earth (see 1 Nephi 13:38–14:17).

Nephi's final prophecy elaborates the role of his second record as principal agent of the plan of salvation in the last days. In fact, the expanded redemptive role of the Nephite record is the primary difference between the earlier vision (see 1 Nephi 11–14) and the later prophecy (see 2 Nephi 25–30). Both accounts address the same themes in much the same order and with similar emphasis: the mortal ministry of Christ and the scattering and gathering of the Jews (see 1 Nephi 11; 2 Nephi 25:1–20), the ministry of Christ to the Nephites and their eventual destruction (see 1 Nephi 12; 2 Nephi 26:1–11), the apostate conditions among both Jew and Gentile (see 1 Nephi 13:1–29; 2 Nephi 26:12–33; 28), and the restoration of Israel, redemption of the Gentiles, and destruction of the wicked at the end of time (see 1 Nephi 13:30–14:17; 2 Nephi 27, 29–30).

By contrast, though the role of Nephi's record in the last days plays a relatively minor role in the vision, occupying only eight verses (see 1 Nephi 13:35–42), it is the subject of at least sixty-four verses in his later prophecy. The prophecy mentions that Nephi's writings would restore Israel to her ancient covenants of salvation, correct false doctrines in the "record of the Jews," redeem the Gentiles from their apostate tra-

ditions, help overcome evil, and serve as a standard of truth in the final judgment of mankind (see 2 Nephi 25:18, 21–30; 26:16–17; 27:6–35; 28:2, 29–30; 29:1–14; 30:3–6).

In addition to describing the future role of his writings, Nephi's final prophecy is also prescriptive. The prophecy informs subsequent writers of its divinely required contents and foretells of the conditions and circumstances of its coming forth in the last day. According to these instructions, subsequent writers on the plates of Nephi were charged to focus their writings on the divinity of Christ and the necessity of His gospel (see 2 Nephi 25:18–30), the eternal value of God's ancient covenants with Abraham (see 2 Nephi 29:1–2), the plan of salvation as revealed by God "from the beginning of the world to the ending thereof" (2 Nephi 27:6–11), and other matters "of great worth unto the children of men" (2 Nephi 28:2).

To the man who "shall deliver the words of the book," Nephi commands him (1) not to translate the sealed portion of the book; (2) to keep the plates hidden from the eyes of the world, except for "three witnesses" and a few others, "according to the will of God," who will "bear testimony of his word unto the children of men"; (3) to deliver the words of the book to the learned who will refuse to read them because they are sealed; (4) to translate the record according to "the words which [God] shall give unto [him]"; and (5) to "seal up the book again and hide it unto [God]" once the translation is complete, in order to preserve the sealed portion to come forth at the end of time (2 Nephi 27:9–22).

By the end of his second record, Nephi accomplished the exalted and demanding literary mission that God had given him and created a record of his ministry that not only documented the "great things" that God had done in behalf of Lehi's family and all mankind but also defined the responsibility for those who would complete the record after him: to document the empirical fulfillment of a portion of the plan of salvation contained in his vision, to make explicit the fulness of Christ's gospel in precept and deed, to demonstrate the eternal value of God's covenants with Abraham, and to assure the righteous of God's power to save them in His kingdom in the last day. Nephi also commands those who will later receive his record to live according to its teachings and to assist God in realizing its lofty but certain vision of mankind's literal salvation in the last days. **RE**

Notes

1. Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 90–94.

2. For additional insight regarding the production and value of Nephi's two records, see John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne, eds., *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1999), 75–77.

3. The discussion that follows builds upon the insightful summaries of the significance of Nephi's second record in Welch and Thorne, *Pressing Forward*, 78–83.

4. Welch and Thorne, *Pressing Forward*, 49–53, contains a detailed comparison of the contents of Lehi's vision and Nephi's dream, suggesting a complementary purpose for these two accounts in Nephi's record.