Nephi's Psalm: 2 Nephi 4:16-35 in the Light of Form-Critical Analysis

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The passion and poetry of 2 Nephi 4:16–35 cannot help but move even the most casual reader of the Book of Mormon. These verses record one of the most powerful personal testimonies ever revealed in scripture with a tone of prophetic poetry that rivals David, Isaiah, or Luke. In his 1947 monograph Our Book of Mormon, Sidney Sperry christened this passage “The Psalm of Nephi,” and it has carried that epithet ever since. Sperry recognized in this passage the praise and “deep religious feeling” common to many psalms and noted within its literary structure a
rhythm "comparable to the noble cadence of David's poems." Reynolds and Sjodahl also make mention of the poetic qualities of these verses, referring to them as "A Song of Nephi." Beyond mentioning its general poetic nature neither of these works offers any substantive literary analysis of these verses.

Recent scholars have examined the poetry of the Book of Mormon in a more detailed and documented fashion. Two examples must suffice here. In his An Approach to the Book of Mormon, Hugh Nibley devotes an entire chapter to Lehi's genius as a poet and offers several examples of Lehi's use of a most ancient poetic form, the qaṣida. Second, John W. Welch introduced a very fruitful field of study with his discovery of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon. These and other works began to reveal that the Book of Mormon shares the rich poetry and lyricism long recognized in the Old Testament. This similarity is not surprising since the two works of scripture share the same cultural and spiritual history. This study seeks to identify the psalm as a specific literary type within the Book of Mormon in the same spirit in which Nibley and Welch identified the qaṣida and chiasm, respectively.

A more recent article by Steven P. Sondrup, "The Psalm of Nephi: A Lyric Reading," identifies the parallel structure within the passage and offers many insights into its poetic qualities. Sondrup's analysis leaves little doubt as to the beauty and power of the scriptures in question. A similar contribution is made by Richard D. Rust in his book, Feasting On the Word, which examines many literary elements in the Book of Mormon. Again, Rust comments on the beauty of the language and the parallel structures within Nephi's psalm but does not attempt to identify a

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1 Sidney Sperry, Our Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Stevens & Wallis, 1947), 110-11.
specific poetic type. What remains to be investigated here is the question Sondrup specifically avoids: Is 2 Nephi 4:16–35 “a psalm in the biblical sense of the term”? Is the cursory evidence mentioned previously sufficient to include these verses from 2 Nephi with those of the psalmists? Do these twenty verses bear more than just a passing similarity to the Hebrew Psalter of the Old Testament? Is there literary evidence to tie these verses of Nephi to the Near Eastern poetic tradition that created the biblical psalms? Answers to these questions can be found by using the light of modern psalm scholarship to illuminate our understanding of Nephi’s powerful prayer.

Form-Critical Analysis

Hermann Gunkel laid the groundwork for psalm research in 1926 with his pioneering work Die Psalmen: Handkommentar zum Alten Testament; here he identifies several Gattungen, or categories of psalms, each possessing its own unique set of characteristics occasioned by its use within the cultus and its corresponding Sitz im Leben. Thus those psalms belonging to the same Gattung reflect similar patterns of worship and are expressions inspired by similar life experiences.

Other important criteria for assigning psalms to a particular Gattung are the thoughts and moods they share and the literary forms most prevalent in them. Gunkel identified four main types of psalms that are still widely recognized by scholars today: hymns, thanksgiving songs, community laments, and laments of the individual. This method of dividing the psalms into literary groups for study is known as the form-critical method and has been refined, developed, and expanded considerably over the en-

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6 Richard Dilworth Rust, Feasting on the Word: The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1997), 71–75.
9 Ibid., 30–39.
suing eighty years with Gunkel's original Gattungen still relatively unchanged at the foundation.10

For the purposes of this inquiry I will rely on Gunkel's basic formula and the subsequent work in the mainstream of form-critical research without straying too far afield into the many branching streams that important primary works invariably create. First, I will offer a very brief description of the four major classes and then apply the identifying characteristics of the individual lament to Nephi's psalm. Using the distinct characteristics of this type of psalm I will illustrate how Nephi's psalm shares significant traits with the psalms of the Old Testament and more particularly how Nephi's psalm is a prime example of the individual lament identified by form-critical analysis.

**Hymn**

The hymn is a song of praise and can be traced to the songs sung on holy days in ancient Israel in connection with festivals and sacrifice. Frequently psalms in this category will begin: "Give praise," "Give thanks," or "Sing." The body of the hymn usually extols the power, attributes, and deeds of God that have inspired the Psalmist to praise. They are furthermore marked by ardent yet reverent adoration (see Psalms 8, 19, 33, 46, 48, 67–68, 76, 84, 87, 103, 105, 113, 122, 135, 136, 145–50).

**Thanksgiving Songs**

Thanksgiving songs are also closely tied to the worship service, specifically the songs of the thank offering. Generally these psalms express the gratitude of a person saved out of great distress and take the form of (1) a cry to bystanders, (2) a report of distress, (3) a prayer to Yahweh, or (4) a description of deliverance (see Psalms 18, 23, 30, 32, 34, 40, 65–66, 75, 92, 107, 114, 116, 118, 124, 138).

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Community Laments

Community laments are expressions of grief and appeals for deliverance during national or community difficulties. They are customarily divided into two parts: the appeal and the divine response. Scholars have noted that in connection with the second part a declaration of the people's "certainty of hearing" is often found (see Psalms 44, 59–60, 74, 79–80, 85, 90, 106, 123, 125–26, 129, 137).

Individual Laments

The individual lament is the most prevalent Gattung in the Psalms and represents a personal pious appeal for help or deliverance in time of need. Gunkel separates the community and individual laments along traditional lines dependent on the use of the pronouns I and we. Other scholars have suggested that many of the I psalms are actually national or community psalms, "put into the mouth of the king or leader of the people," and represent a personification of the community. The format and style of the two types are similar, and because Nephi's lament is clearly a personal one the intricacies of the I vs. we debate will not concern us here. The individual lament has a very pronounced style and an easily identifiable structure: (1) invocation, (2) complaint, (3) confession of trust, (4) petition, and (5) vow of praise (see Psalms 3, 5–7, 9, 12–14, 17, 22, 25, 28, 31, 35, 38, 39, 51, 53–58, 61, 64, 69–71, 77, 83, 86, 88, 102, 109, 130, 139–44).

Nephi's Psalm

Only a handful of the 150 psalms in the Old Testament do not fit into one of these major categories. If Nephi's psalm is a psalm in the "biblical sense of the term," then it should fit in one of these categories as well. This study will show that indeed it does.

A cursory comparison of 2 Nephi 4:16–35 with the brief descriptions outlined above would place Nephi's psalm in the Gattung of individual lament. This category of psalm is the most

prevalent in Hebrew scripture. With its very specific structure and content, it is a clear and easily identifiable type. In addition, since Gunkel first introduced this area of inquiry much has been written concerning the psalms from the viewpoint of form-critical analysis, specifically the individual lament. Comparisons with the Old Testament psalms and modern psalm research will reveal just how well Nephi’s psalm fits the pattern of a classic individual lament.

Before identifying and analyzing the five basic elements of an individual lament in Nephi’s psalm, it will be helpful to review these basic elements as they appear in a short exemplary individual lament from the Old Testament, Psalm 54.

Invocation
1 Save me, O God, by thy name, and judge me by thy strength.
2 Hear my prayer, O God; give ear to the words of my mouth.

Complaint
3 For strangers are risen up against me, and oppressors seek after my soul: they have not set God before them. Selah.

Confession of Trust
4 Behold, God is mine helper: the Lord is with them that uphold my soul.

Petition
5 He shall reward evil unto mine enemies: cut them off in thy truth.

Vow of Praise
6 I will freely sacrifice unto thee: I will praise thy name, O Lord; for it is good.
7 For he hath delivered me out of all trouble: and mine eye hath seen his desire upon mine enemies.

Does Nephi’s psalm fit the structural pattern of a typical individual lament as described above? In reality, of course, few psalms conform exactly to the “typical” formulation. Some laments stress certain elements over others and sometimes the basic parts appear in different orders. Still these basic elements are prevalent enough to make the personal lament a unique and easily identifiable Gattung. This study shows that Nephi’s psalm does follow the basic structure of the individual lament as defined by current
psalm scholarship and, in addition, contains many other literary details common to this type of psalm.

**Invocation: 2 Nephi 4:16–17**

According to the basic structure first identified by Gunkel and affirmed in many subsequent studies, the individual lament begins with a call to God and is often followed by a short introductory petition as in Psalm 25: "Unto thee, O Lord, do I lift up my soul" (Psalm 25:1).

The initial call to God is not as explicit in Nephi's psalm as it is in some of the psalms of the Old Testament. This is not unusual. When the subsequent sections support the initial cry for help it is sometimes difficult to isolate an invocation as such. This is the case with Nephi's psalm where subsequent sections contain numerous calls to God using the same phrase as above: "O Lord."

Also, in Nephi's psalm the difficulty in identifying a specific invocation may be due in part to the scriptural context. The Old Testament psalms represent a wide variety of poems united in a collection for the purpose of worship. Nephi's psalm is quite different in that it appears within the general narrative of 2 Nephi. Though Nephi does not specifically invoke the name of deity, here it is clear that the "things of the Lord" are what concern him.

Behold, my soul delighteth in the things of the Lord; and my heart pondereth continually upon the things which I have seen and heard. Nevertheless, notwithstanding the great goodness of the Lord, in showing me his great and marvelous works, my heart exclaimeth . . . (2 Nephi 4:16–17)

**Complaint: 2 Nephi 4:17–19**

The complaint portion of an individual lament generally follows the invocation and is where the supplicant describes his woes to the Lord. Typically the poet laments some tragedy or malady and describes its ill effects. Suffering described in laments can include many types of physical and emotional distress.
Nephi's sorrow expressed in this complaint centers around his sorrow for sin. Westermann identifies the confession of sins as one of the three main subclasses of individual laments, stressing that they constitute a distinct and important subclass, although relatively few are present in the Psalter (only seven). Psalms containing the confession of sins have become known collectively as the penitential psalms and have played an important role in many Christian denominations (see Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 69, 102, 130). Nephi's psalm offers the same hope and inspiration to its readers as the classic penitential psalms and can be added to their circle as an eighth psalmic support for the repentant sinner. Compare Nephi's complaint with that described in a penitential psalm, Psalm 6.

Psalm 6
6 I am weary with my groaning; all the night make I my bed to swim; I water my couch with my tears.
7 Mine eye is consumed because of grief.

Psalm 6
17 O wretched man that I am! Yea, my heart sorroweth because of my flesh; my soul grieveth because of mine iniquities. . . .
19 And when I desire to rejoice, my heart groaneth because of my sins.

In writing about the complaint portion of the individual lament, Sabourin makes mention of a common motive dating back to a collection of Babylonian psalms entitled "complaint to appease the heart." Nephi's psalm fits quite nicely into this ancient category. "And when I desire to rejoice, my heart groaneth because of my sins" (2 Nephi 4:19).

Another characteristic typical of the complaint is identified in the literature and is also present in Nephi's psalm. The sorrows expressed in individual laments are rarely specific but rather offer a general note of sickness, injustice, or other suffering. Westermann goes so far as to say, "No one could say that any of these

laments implies a description of a specific situation."¹⁴ This gen-
erality makes them much more accessible by the congregation so
that individuals may express their own suffering through any
number of psalms and find succor and relief there. Mowinckel
makes this important point by describing the "I" of the personal
lament as "Everyman."¹⁵

What was Nephi's sin? Some writers have identified anger as
the specific sin which "so easily beset" him.¹⁶ Their conclusions
are based on 2 Nephi 4:27 where Nephi asks, "Why am I angry
because of mine enemy?" My own reading of this passage leaves
the exact nature of Nephi's sin in question. The sentence quoted
above is only the last in a series of self-reflective questions Nephi
poses concerning the effects of his transgression.

Why should my heart weep and my soul linger in the
valley of sorrow, and my flesh waste away, and my
strength slacken, because of mine afflictions? And why
should I yield to sin, because of my flesh? Yea, why
should I give way to temptations, that the evil one have
place in my heart to destroy my peace and afflict my
soul? Why am I angry because of mine enemy?
(2 Nephi 4:26–27)

Anger is one of the negative effects of sin listed along with
several others: remorse, sorrow, ill health, moral weakness, agita-
tion, and waning strength. To single out anger as the sin seems
unwarranted. Anger concludes the list but is not set apart nor
made more prominent than any other in the list. Answering his
own questions, Nephi expresses trust in the Lord's redemptive
powers. He is confident that the Lord's mercies are sufficient to
save him from these distressing symptoms of sin.

Awake, my soul! No longer droop in sin. Rejoice, O
my heart, and give place no more for the enemy of my
soul. Do not anger again because of mine enemies. Do

¹⁵ Mowinckel, The Psalms in Israel's Worship, 2:1.
¹⁶ See, for example, M. Catherine Thomas, "A Great Deliverance," in
1 Nephi to Alma 29, vol. 7, Studies in Scripture, ed. Kent B. Jackson (Salt Lake
not slacken my strength because of mine afflictions.
(2 Nephi 4:28–29)

As described earlier, omitting the specifics of the Psalmist’s transgression is an important characteristic of classic individual laments and one I believe that Nephi adheres to. This is a good example of how recognizing the poetic form as it appears in the Book of Mormon can aid our understanding of these passages.

Nephi’s poignant complaint is a cry for forgiveness of sins. Nephi follows the standard pattern by making his confession very general, never specifying the exact nature or number of the transgressions that beset him. The feelings of remorse and the subsequent trust in the atonement are what is important. Thus Nephi leads penitent readers to “liken the scriptures unto themselves” so they might gain strength in their own battles against temptation and sin regardless of what each individual’s trial might be.

Confession of Trust: 2 Nephi 4:20–30

The lament is usually followed by a brief declaration of trust in the Lord and his abilities to relieve and reward the sufferer. Though sometimes found at the end or repeated near the end of the psalm, the confession of trust is a classic element and is rarely absent from the lament.\(^\text{17}\) The supplicant “is putting all his confidence in Yahweh; man can trust nobody else to help.”\(^\text{18}\) Nephi again follows the typical pattern; however, his statement of trust is longer and more elaborate than is usually encountered. In this, Nephi’s psalm reflects a subgroup identified in the literature as psalms of trust. Dalglish describes this subclass as “differentiated by an undaunted assurance in the imminent divine succor.”\(^\text{19}\) Fully one-half of Nephi’s lament is dedicated to testifying of his trust in the Lord and expressing the strength and hope this trust engenders (2 Nephi 4:20–30).

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Compare Nephi’s declaration of faith with the words of confidence expressed in Psalm 18, a psalm of trust from the Old Testament.

Psalm 18

16 He sent from above, he took me, he drew me out of many waters.

48 He delivereth me from mine enemies: yea, thou liftest me up above those that rise up against me: thou hast delivered me from the violent man.

6 In my distress I called upon the Lord, and cried unto my God: he heard my voice out of his temple, and my cry came before him, [even] into his ears.

7 Then the earth shook and trembled; the foundations also of the hills moved and were shaken, because he was wroth.

He maketh my feet like hinds’ feet, and setteth me upon my high places.

2 The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my buckler, and the

2 Nephi 4

20 My God hath been my support; he hath led me through mine afflictions in the wilderness; and he hath preserved me upon the waters of the great deep.20

22 He hath confounded mine enemies, unto the causing of them to quake before me.

23 Behold, he hath heard my cry by day, and he hath given me knowledge by visions in the nighttime.

24 And by day have I waxed bold in mighty prayer before him; yea, my voice have I sent up on high; and angels came down and ministered unto me.

25 And upon the wings of his Spirit hath my body been carried away upon exceedingly high mountains.

30 Rejoice, O my heart, and cry unto the Lord, and say: O Lord, I will praise thee forever; yea, my soul will rejoice in thee, my

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20 Though Nephi’s reference to the “waters of the great deep” can be taken literally here, it is important to note that deep waters, a pit, or prison are all common metaphors in psalms of lament. See John W. Wevers, “A Study in Form Criticism of Individual Complaint Psalms,” Vetus Testamentum 6 (1956): 90.
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horn of my salvation, and my high tower.

God, and the rock of my salvation.

The combination of these two subclasses—the penitential psalm and the psalm of trust—in one prayer might seem incongruous if found on the pages of the Old Testament. Psalm 51, the finest penitential psalm in the Bible, beautifully expresses the pain and contrition of the suppliant but nowhere expresses trust in the Lord’s mercy or expiation. Yet Nephi wrote with a clear understanding of the full plan of salvation as shown him in vision and taught by the Spirit of the Lord (1 Nephi 11). Such knowledge and testimony is never expressed by the psalmists of the Old Testament. The hope and strength manifested by the penitent Nephi hearkens back to that earlier divine instruction when the Spirit asked, “Knowest thou the condescension of God?” (1 Nephi 11:16). Nephi’s eloquence here is evidence of the depth of understanding he gained then.

O then, if I have seen so great things, if the Lord in his condescension unto the children of men hath visited men in so much mercy, why should my heart weep and my soul linger in the valley of sorrow, and my flesh waste away, and my strength slacken, because of mine afflictions? . . . Awake, my soul! No longer droop in sin. Rejoice, O my heart, and give place no more for the enemy of my soul. Do not anger again because of mine enemies. Do not slacken my strength because of mine afflictions. Rejoice, O my heart, and cry unto the Lord, and say: O Lord, I will praise thee forever; yea, my soul will rejoice in thee, my God, and the rock of my salvation. (2 Nephi 4:26, 28–30)

It is his sure testimony of the atonement of Christ to come that adds hope and trust to his penitential psalm.

In his comparisons of individual laments in the biblical psalms with earlier Sumero-Akkadian laments, Dalglish mentions a literary bridge often found at the end of the complaint or the beginning of the petition portions of a lament. In one of the two basic transition formulas identified by Dalglish, the suppliant mentions a cultic act performed in connection with his or her prayer, such
as an offering of grain or incense. Nephi incorporates just such a device in the beginning portion of the petition section, in which he describes the offering he brings in conjunction with his plea for forgiveness. It is significant that Nephi's offering is spiritual, not temporal. He offers the sacrifice described in Doctrine and Covenants 59:8 of "a broken heart and a contrite spirit," the same offering made by the repenting suppliant in Psalm 51, the greatest of the penitential psalms of the Old Testament.

Psalm 51
16 For thou desirerest not sacrifice; else would I give it: thou delightest not in burnt offering. 17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.

2 Nephi 4
32 May the gates of hell be shut continually before me, because that my heart is broken and my spirit is contrite!

Petition: 2 Nephi 4:31–33

In the petition the suppliant seeks the Lord's help in alleviating the sorrows or sufferings described in the complaint. The first verse of Nephi's petition contains referents and language common to the Near Eastern lament tradition. Westermann identifies defense against and freedom from enemies as the "dominant subject" and most elaborately developed part of the psalms of lament. Here Nephi's petition shows a close tie to an ancient and far-reaching tradition:

O Lord, wilt thou redeem my soul? Wilt thou deliver me out of the hands of mine enemies... O Lord, wilt thou encircle me around in the robe of thy righteousness! O Lord, wilt thou make a way for mine escape before mine enemies! Wilt thou make my path straight before me! Wilt thou not place a stumbling block in my way—but that thou wouldst clear my way

21 Dalglish, Psalm 51, 263.
before me, and hedge not up my way, but the ways of mine enemy. (2 Nephi 4:31, 33)

In tracing the historical development of the individual lament within the literary tradition of the Near East, a relatively late development is the use of what Westermann calls the “negative petition.” In very early examples the complaint was directed against God. Later these declarative statements were excised from the complaint and were transferred to the petition portion of the lament couched in the negative instead of the declarative. This device was in use during most of the period of Old Testament psalm composition. With few exceptions the individual laments in the Old Testament place complaints against God in the petition portion of the lament using the accusatory verbs common to complaints, yet wording them in the negative to soften the accusation. Instead of directly accusing God of hiding his face, being silent, or remaining far off, the Psalmist asks in his petition, hide not thy face, be not silent, or be not far off.

Psalm 27 provides a simple example of this type. In keeping with this literary tradition common to many psalms, Nephi also uses a “negative complaint” in his petition.

Psalm 27

9 Hide not thy face [far] from me; put not thy servant away in anger: thou hast been my help; leave me not, neither forsake me, O God of my salvation.

2 Nephi 4

32 O Lord, wilt thou not shut the gates of thy righteousness before me, that I may walk in the path of the low valley, that I may be strict in the plain road!

33 . . . Wilt thou not place a stumbling block in my way—but that thou wouldst clear my way before me, and hedge not up my way, but the ways of mine enemy.

23 Ibid., 185.
Vow of Praise: 2 Nephi 4:34-35

In the oldest laments the concluding portion is a vow to sing a song of praise or thanksgiving. In many psalms of lamentation the change from petition to praise is very abrupt, and this sudden change of tone and content has been noted by many psalm scholars. Gunkel believes that this abrupt change in the psalm’s closing verses is evidence of the suppliant’s great faith in the Lord’s imminent help and referred to this specific element as the certainty of a hearing. In many psalms this certainty on the part of the suppliant is demonstrated not by simply promising to sing thanksgiving and praise but by actually including their gratitude and praise for the Lord in the closing verses of the lament. Once again, Nephi’s psalm fits nicely into this established pattern. The final verse of Nephi’s psalm is certainly the voice of a trusting servant firm in his faith that the Lord has heard and will answer his prayer. This is a nice example of the certainty of a hearing and compares quite favorably with vows of praise from the Old Testament Psalter such as the closing passages of Psalm 6.

Psalm 6

8 Depart from me, all ye workers of iniquity; for the Lord hath heard the voice of my weeping.
9 The Lord hath heard my supplication; the Lord will receive my prayer.

2 Nephi 4

35 Yea, I know that God will give liberally to him that asketh. Yea, my God will give me, if I ask not amiss; therefore I will lift up my voice unto thee; yea, I will cry unto thee, my God, the rock of my righteousness.
Behold, my voice shall forever ascend up unto thee, my rock and mine everlasting God.
Amen.

Conclusion

Nephi’s psalm plainly follows the format and substance of the individual lament as described by Gunkel and elaborated upon by numerous subsequent scholars. Study and comparison reveal that 2 Nephi 4:16-35 is indeed a true psalm and not merely a passage of scripture bearing similarities in tone and feeling to the Old...
Testament Psalter. It is a classic example of an ancient poetic form: the psalm of individual lament. Not only does Nephi exhibit a talent for literary parallelism, but he has also written a beautiful “psalm in the biblical sense of the term.” Clearly Nephi was participating in an ancient literary tradition when he wrote his psalm recorded in chapter four of 2 Nephi. It is not unreasonable to expect that Nephi’s education described as “the learning of the Jews” and the “learning of my father” included an appreciation and use of Hebrew poetry.

The identification of the psalm described in this study, like many of the interesting literary and historical elements discovered in the Book of Mormon, is a direct result of modern biblical scholarship. Each such discovery, large or small, adds to our growing understanding and appreciation of the Book of Mormon and the prophetic calling of Joseph Smith. Melvin J. Thorne has pointed out the larger contributions such discoveries make concerning the complexity and authorship of the Book of Mormon.

These hidden complexities are usually discovered in the Book of Mormon only after having been found elsewhere. That is, modern research turns up some facet of the ancient world that was previously unknown or unappreciated by Western minds. Thereafter, LDS scholars who become aware of this turn to the Book of Mormon, and using the knowledge and tools that result from the previous research, are able to discover that it is also found in the Book of Mormon record, showing the book to be more complex than previously realized. Furthermore, there is no evidence that Joseph Smith knew of the existence of this facet of the ancient world, and it is very unlikely, perhaps impossible, that he could have known of it. Since it is unlikely or impossible that Joseph knew of it, its presence in the Book of Mormon argues for some other means of creation than Joseph’s authorship.24

Identifying and understanding the many poetic forms in the Book of Mormon allows readers to appreciate its beautiful literary style and to gain a better understanding of its message. Identifying Nephi’s lament as a true psalm further refines the Book of Mormon’s historical and literary context and reaffirms that the two books of Nephi accurately reflect the social and religious milieu of ancient Israel. As in other instances of Hebrew poetic forms in the Book of Mormon, a greater understanding and appreciation of the psalm, more particularly the personal lament, can offer new insights into 2 Nephi 4:16–35 and make its message of hope and trust more powerful and personal.