



# Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship

---

Volume 24 | Number 5

Article 3

---

January 2004

## 2 Nephi 26 and 27 as Midrash

Grant Hardy

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



Part of the [Mormon Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Hardy, Grant (2004) "2 Nephi 26 and 27 as Midrash," *Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship*: Vol. 24: No. 5, Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/insights/vol24/iss5/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

## 2 Nephi 26 and 27 as Midrash

Nephi was the only Book of Mormon author to receive what might be called a classical Hebrew education. He had ambivalent feelings about his training—indeed, he specifically noted that the tradition would end with himself: “I . . . have not taught my children after the manner of the Jews” (2 Nephi 25:6; see vv. 1–2). So it is not surprising that he remains the most literate, book-learned of the Nephite prophets. That is to say, his writings exhibit the most connections with earlier prophecies and texts, and he structures his teachings in a way that suggests he is working from written documents. In particular, he is eager to tie his own visions of the future of the House of Israel to the words of Isaiah, and his commentary at 1 Nephi 22—where he weaves phrases from the two Isaiah chapters he has just quoted into a new revelatory discourse—is a masterpiece of prophetic interpretation. The same style of commentary, which by placing familiar phrases into new contexts reinterprets as it explains, is found in a slightly more diffuse form at 2 Nephi 25–30.<sup>1</sup>

Nephi’s technique of prophecy through quotation is a striking feature of his writing, yet there are two chapters where his usage of earlier scripture is even more precisely organized. Rather than simply working Isaiah’s words and phrases into his own discourse (impressive as that may be), in 2 Nephi 26 and 27 he quotes nearly all of Isaiah 29, a phrase here and a phrase there, *but in order*, as he provides a new framework that particularizes that earlier prophecy and explains how it was to be fulfilled in latter days when Martin Harris took the page of reformed Egyptian to Charles Anthon in 1828. We sometimes speak of “reading between the lines,” but here Nephi is “writing between the lines.”

If we italicize the words of Isaiah starting in 2 Nephi 26:15–16, it looks like this:

15. 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.

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*.

Compare this with Isaiah 29:3–4:

3. And I will camp against thee round about, and will lay siege against thee with a mount, and I will raise forts against thee.

4. 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.

One might be tempted to regard this close correspondence as a coincidence, were it not for the fact that Isaiah 29:5–12 keeps coming, piece by piece, through the rest of this chapter and the next, with Isaiah 29:13–24 being quoted directly at the end of 2 Nephi 27.

In order to pull this off, Nephi would have to have known Isaiah literally forward and backward, or perhaps he was working with a copy of Isaiah 29 in front of him, reading and interpolating as he went along (this would be much easier to do with pen and parchment than by reading aloud). Nevertheless, what he is doing is not obvious. His prophecy of Charles Anthon and the sealed book is convincing whether or not one recognizes the underlying literary borrowing. This extraordinary, almost interlinear, commentary is

both playful and profound, in a way reminiscent of the later tradition of Jewish midrash.<sup>2</sup>

From the time of Ezra through the first centuries AD, Jewish rabbis developed a method of scriptural interpretation that sought to explain sacred writ though creative reinterpretation, clever wordplay, metaphor, and allegory. They wanted to uncover meanings that were not apparent in a surface reading. In so doing they placed emphasis on particular phrases and juxtapositions of events, and they tried to fill in the gaps of scripture imaginatively. These rabbis were not especially concerned with discovering the import of the words in their original ancient contexts (a task claimed by most modern academic scholarship); rather, they were interested in updating the scriptures and reading their own circumstances and lives back into the text. The *Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion* defines *midrash* as “the discovery of meanings other than literal in the Bible; derived from the root *darash* (inquire), denotes the literature that interprets scripture in order to extract its full implications and meaning. These interpretations often formed a response to the need of a particular age or environment.”<sup>3</sup>


The process is not unlike Nephi’s desire to “liken all scriptures unto us” (1 Nephi 19:23–24; see 2 Nephi 11:2, 8). Nephi wanted to let his people know exactly where they fit into Isaiah’s predictions and, by extension, how the prophecies were related to the future history of the book he was writing. As he did so, he was able to bring to light meanings that other readers of Isaiah, in different situations and perhaps with less inspiration, had long missed.

---

## Antiquity of Silver Scrolls Confirmed

A recent *New York Times* article reported new developments in the research on two ancient silver scrolls discovered in Jerusalem’s Hinnom Valley in 1979 and subsequently dated to the late seventh century BC. They were engraved with words that appeared to be text from Numbers 6:24–26. However, because of the aging of the metal, researchers were unable to read several of the inscriptions and thereby confirm the age of the scrolls.

Of course, Nephi’s revisions came with prophetic authority, and thus his commentaries and creative re-readings of Isaiah carry unusual weight.

Nephi’s literary sensibilities set him apart from other Book of Mormon authors. Indeed, his writings are never far from the prophetic tradition he knew and loved, but the remarkable way in which 2 Nephi 26 and 27 enter into a conversation with a sustained passage of scripture deserves special attention. The term *midrash*, somewhat loosely applied, conveys something of the unique methodology and spirit of these chapters. 

### By Grant Hardy

Chair of the History Department at the University of North Carolina at Asheville and author of *The Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Edition* (2003)

#### Notes

1. It is true that Jacob also quotes two and a half chapters of Isaiah in 2 Nephi 6–8, but his explanatory comments do not reach the same level of literary polish and intertextuality as Nephi’s do; and in any event, Jacob states in 2 Nephi 6:4 that he is quoting Isaiah because his brother asked him to.
2. For an extensive discussion of Nephi’s midrashic interpretation of Isaiah 29, see Robert A. Cloward, “Isaiah 29 and the Book of Mormon,” in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998). In the same volume, John W. Welch demonstrates how Abinadi’s discourse in Mosiah 15–16 is grounded in Isaiah 53, following a clear midrashic pattern (“Isaiah 53, Mosiah 14, and the Book of Mormon,” 302–5).
3. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, ed. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky and Geoffrey Wigoder (New York: Oxford, 1997), s.v. “midrash.”

Thanks to new photographic techniques and computer imaging technology, researchers at the University of Southern California were able to greatly improve the legibility of the inscriptions, making it possible to confirm the antiquity of the scrolls. Those words from Numbers are now positively identified as the oldest known instance of quoted text from the Hebrew Bible. The article noted that “early Hebrew inscriptions were a rarity” and further stated that the scrolls were “a significant contribution to the understanding of the

[continued on page 7](#)