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## Chapter 9: Nephi Writing

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## Chapter 9: Nephi Writing

### Applying His Training

Noel B. Reynolds noted: “Of course [The Book of Mormon] is a witness for Christ and his teachings. But in addition, it provides reasons why we should believe that the tradition of the Nephites was just and correct. The two messages of the book are tied together in such a way that whoever accepts the teachings of Christ accepts that Nephi was a legitimate ruler, and vice versa.”<sup>237</sup> Politics, science, and religion were interrelated belief systems that were difficult to separate in antiquity.<sup>238</sup> The Book of Mormon — the product of an author reared, trained, and immersed in such a society — is no exception. It is for this reason that when Nephi declares that “these [small] plates are for the more part of the ministry” (1 Nephi 9:4), the text he provides tells both a religious and political history. For Nephi, politics and religion merged into “the more part of the ministry.”

One of the important aspects of the national origin story is the presentation of the legitimacy of their rulers.<sup>239</sup> Nephi was faced with that very task. He had a new people in a new city. As he began to write on the small plates thirty years after he had left Jerusalem, he turned his attention to telling the story of the legitimate right of his people to be a separate people and for Nephi to be their king. Even with this treatise supporting his legitimacy, Reynolds points out that: “[t]hrough a thousand years of Nephite history, both Nephite dissidents and

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237. Noel B. Reynolds, “Nephi’s Political Testament,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, edited by John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1991), 220.

238. Prudence M. Rice, *Maya Political Science: Time, Astronomy, and the Cosmos* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 19.

239. Reynolds, “Nephi’s Political Testament,” 221.

Lamanite invaders would accuse Nephite rulers of usurping the right to rule that belonged to Laman and Lemuel”.<sup>240</sup>

The ways in which Nephi built his case drew upon his scribal training. One of the underlying structural elements with which he would have been familiar from his study of ancient Near Eastern texts was the cultural formula by which a new nation was justified. Establishing a new people is termed *ethnogenesis*. The texts Nephi would have studied would have modeled the typical origin story of a new people. Ann E. Killebrew lays out the basic form:

Following Hedwig Wolfram’s definition, the process of ethnogenesis that forms the core ideology of a group often comprises three characteristic features: (1) a story or stories of a primordial deed, which can include the crossing of a sea or river, an impressive victory against all odds over an enemy, or combinations of similar “miraculous” stories (e.g., the exodus); (2) a group that undergoes a religious experience or change in cult as a result of the primordial deed (e.g. reception of the Ten Commandments and worship of Yahweh); and (3) the existence of an ancestral enemy or enemies that cement group cohesion (e.g., most notably the Canaanites and Philistines). These basic elements form the key themes in the biblical narrative about the emergence of early Israel.<sup>241</sup>

Although it is possible this was a subconscious model,<sup>242</sup> the skill with which Nephi crafts his story to communicate these acceptable justifications for ethnogenesis points to an educated background that at least taught the texts that exemplified these ideas. Nephi made sure he covered the essential bases in 1 Nephi:

8. Nephi combined the crossing of the wilderness with the crossing of the ocean as the fulfillment of this element. He

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240. Noel B. Reynolds, “Nephite Kingship Reconsidered,” in *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World; Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson*, ed. Davis Bitton (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 152.

241. Killebrew, *Biblical Peoples and Ethnicity*, 149.

242. Alan Dundes, “The Hero Pattern and the Life of Jesus,” in *In Quest of the Hero* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), 190, discusses how common patterned expectations molded the biography of Abraham Lincoln to the “hero” pattern. See also Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977) for the socially defined structure that underlies Russian folktales.

included miraculous events to emphasize the presence of God in the process.

9. The acquisition of the brass plates functioned parallel to the reception of the ten commandments. The Lord's requirement that they separate from Jerusalem, as well as the declaration that there were missing teachings in the scriptures provided the need for the new religious formulation. Both Lehi and Nephi taught the Atoning Messiah as the new, or restored, element of their religion.
10. Laman and Lemuel are written unsympathetically so that they might serve as the external enemy that enforced Nephite cohesion.<sup>243</sup> The separation into Lamanite and Nephite defined both the "us" and "them," with the Lamanites as the perennial enemy (even when there might not have been any lineal connection to Laman or Lemuel).

In addition to the standard ethnogenetic elements, Nephi had to justify why he should be the ruler instead of Laman. Laman was the oldest son and Nephi the youngest (until Joseph and Jacob are born in the wilderness). Scribes used established texts as they created new ones.<sup>244</sup> Nephi therefore incorporates a parallel to Joseph of Egypt by receiving a revelation that he should be ruler over his brothers (Genesis 37: 5–10). Nephi establishes a divine model, then carefully builds the sequence to provide the revelation, have Laman and Lemuel recognize it, and then to declare it fulfilled.

As Nephi built his ethnogenetic origin story, he did not rely solely upon history, but he made certain to sacralize that history by intentionally modeling it against a known pattern. His family did not simply leave Jerusalem and travel. They enacted a new exodus:

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243. Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 33: "The first thing to notice is that Nephi flattens his older brothers by treating them as a single unit rather than as individuals. The only time that Laman does anything independently is when he goes to Laban's house to ask for the plates (1 Nephi 3:9–14); otherwise, he always speaks and acts in conjunction with Lemuel. Lemuel, in turn, never opposes Laman in any way, and never appears without Laman close by."

244. Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible*, 137–41, discusses the way that scribes used the established texts in the creation of new ones.

<b>Parallels Between Exodus and 1 Nephi<sup>245</sup></b>		
<b>Incident</b>	<b>Exodus</b>	<b>1 Nephi</b>
The call to the responsible leader through a revelation accompanied by fire	Exodus 3:2–4	1 Nephi 1:6
The despoiling of the Egyptians and the taking of Laban’s possessions	Exodus 12:35–36	1 Nephi 4:38; 2
Deliverance on the other side of a water barrier	Exodus 14:22–30	1 Nephi 17:8; 18:8–23
An extended period of wandering	Exodus 16:35	1 Nephi 17:4
Complaints along the way	Exodus 15:24	1 Nephi 2:11–12; 5:2–3; 16:20, 25, 35–38; 17:17–22
Outright rebellion	Numbers 16:1–35; 25:1	1 Nephi 7:6–16; 18:9–21
New law that was to govern the Lord’s people	Exodus 20:2–17	1 Nephi 2:20–24

The connection between the Exodus story and the departure of the Lehiters from Jerusalem was salient for a long time in Nephite history. S. Kent Brown explains:

The memory of Israel’s Exodus from Egypt runs so deep and clear in the Book of Mormon that it has naturally drawn the attention of modern students. The chief focus of recent studies has fallen on the departure of Lehi’s family from Jerusalem as a replication, almost a mirror image — even in small details — of the flight of the Hebrews. Such interest emerges naturally because Nephite teachers themselves drew comparisons between Lehi’s colony and their Israelite

245. S. Kent Brown, “The Exodus Pattern in the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 30, no. 3 (Summer 1990): 112. I have reorganized his insights into a table from the original paragraph form.

forebears. For instance, in an important speech, king Limhi referred to the Israelites' escape from Egypt and, immediately thereafter, drew a parallel to Lehi's departure from Jerusalem (Mosiah 7:19–20). Additionally, in remarks addressed to his son Helaman, Alma consciously linked the Exodus from Egypt with Lehi's journey (Alma 36:28–29).<sup>246</sup>

The new Nephite origin story began with a new exodus. However, both the political right to rule and the right to exercise their religion depended upon the ties between the new Nephites and old Israel. To emphasize this, Nephi again turns to scripture to place his people inside the inherited blessings pertaining to the house of Israel. Nephi certainly understood that the olive tree was a symbol closely tied to Israel (see Hoseah 4:5–9 and Jeremiah 11:16–17). In that context he provided his father's vision of the future:

Yea, even my father spake much concerning the Gentiles, and also concerning the house of Israel, that they should be compared like unto an olive tree, whose branches should be broken off and should be scattered upon all the face of the earth.

Wherefore, he said it must needs be that we should be led with one accord into the land of promise, unto the fulfilling of the word of the Lord, that we should be scattered upon all the face of the earth.

And after the house of Israel should be scattered they should be gathered together again; or, in fine, after the Gentiles had received the fulness of the Gospel, the natural branches of the olive tree, or the remnants of the house of Israel, should be grafted in, or come to the knowledge of the true Messiah, their Lord and their Redeemer. (1 Nephi 10:12–14)

The two elements of this prophecy that were important for Nephi's people-building document were the scattering of Israel and the gathering.<sup>247</sup> Further tying his people to the scattering and gathering, Nephi borrowed a phrase from Isaiah:

When thus it shall be in the midst of the land among the people, there shall be as the shaking of an olive tree, and as the gleaning grapes when the vintage is done.

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246. Ibid., 111.

247. Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 61, noticed this pattern in Nephi's paraphrase of his father's prophecies.

They shall lift up their voice, they shall sing for the majesty of the Lord, they shall cry aloud from the sea.

Wherefore glorify ye the Lord in the fires, even the name of the Lord God of Israel in the isles of the sea. (Isaiah 24:13–15)

Isaiah had tied the olive tree to those who would “praise the Lord God of Israel in the isles of the sea.” Nephi implicitly includes his own people into those scattered to the isles of the sea, as well as to the promised gathering of the scattered:<sup>248</sup>

And behold, there are many who are already lost from the knowledge of those who are at Jerusalem. Yea, the more part of all the tribes have been led away; and they are scattered to and fro upon the isles of the sea; and whither they are none of us knoweth, save that we know that they have been led away. (1 Nephi 22:4)

And it shall come to pass that they shall be gathered in from their long dispersion, from the isles of the sea, and from the four parts of the earth; and the nations of the Gentiles shall be great in the eyes of me, saith God, in carrying them forth to the lands of their inheritance. (2 Nephi 10:8)

Another very subtle use of a scriptural model comes in Nephi’s use of the story of David and Goliath to serve as a backdrop and perhaps justification for his encounter with Laban. Ben McGuire sees Nephi and Laban as paralleling David and Goliath as antagonists. He sees allusions to Saul and Israel in the murmurings of Laman and Lemuel. McGuire notes:

Both protagonists cite miracles as the basis for their faith. David cites instances from his own life, and Nephi cites one from the history of Israel and one from his own life. They each then conclude by remarking that just as God performed those miracles, God will deliver them from the hand of their antagonists....

A second thematic parallel also occurs in David’s suggestion that “they servant slew both the lion and the bear: and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be as one of them.” This suggests prophetically that what happened to the lion and the bear will also happen to the Philistine. In Nephi’s parallel account, he speaks of a similar fate awaiting Laban: “The lord

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248. The emphasis on the Nephites as “scattered Israel that would be gathered again” is prominent in Nephi and Jacob, and then disappears as an overt theme in the Book of Mormon. By the time Mormon wrote, his interest was in bringing the gospel to his descendants and not their gathering home to a distant Israel.

is able to deliver us, even as our fathers, and to destroy Laban, even as the Egyptians.”...

Another thematic parallel here is that David claims to be killing Goliath so that “all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel.” In Nephi’s account, Laban is killed so that Nephi’s posterity will know the God of Israel....

Both narrative units then end with the death of the antagonist and the subsequent removal and keeping of his armor.<sup>249</sup>

These uses of the scriptural stories show Nephi’s mastery of the scriptural texts, a mastery sufficient that he could not only recall the stories but also understand their fundamental aspects well enough to recast them as models for a new historical event. When the occasion warrants, he easily turns to scripture to support his position. When his brothers’ resolve fails them in the quest for the brass plates, Nephi turns to a scriptural text that he parallels to their task. He recounts the Lord’s destruction of Pharaoh during Israel’s Exodus (1 Nephi 4:2–3). Scribes often incorporated previous texts into their new works. Rather than copying, however, they relied on their memory of the texts.<sup>250</sup> Although Nephi was writing this long after the actual event, there is every reason to believe that he was capable of such extemporaneous citation and explication of scriptural texts.

### **Nephi’s Interpretation of Scripture**

Once a scribal student mastered the fundamental texts, he was trained in the exegesis of those texts.<sup>251</sup> This tradition is evidenced in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Robert Wiseman explains how this attribute of the scribal industry functioned in the Dead Sea Scrolls:

A *peshet* is a commentary — at Qumran, a commentary on a well-known biblical passage, usually from the Prophets, but also from Psalms and sometimes even other biblical books like Genesis, Leviticus, or Deuteronomy. The important thing is that the underlying biblical passage being interpreted should be seen as fraught with significance in relation to the ideology or history of the Scroll Community. Often this takes the form of citing

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249. Ben McGuire, “Nephi and Goliath: A Case Study of Literary Allusion in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 18, no. 1 (2009): 20–22.

250. Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible*, 117.

251. *Ibid.*, 58.



a biblical passage or quotation out of context or even sometimes slightly altered, followed by the words, “*peshet*” or “*peshet ha-diver*,” meaning “its interpretation” or “the interpretation of the passage is.” The text then proceeds to give an idiosyncratic interpretation having to do with the history or ideology of the group, with particular reference to contemporary events.<sup>252</sup>

Nephi understood scripture in very similar terms. Where Qumran interpreted scripture in “an idiosyncratic interpretation having to do with the history or ideology of the group,” Nephi similarly declared: “that I might more fully persuade them to believe in the Lord their Redeemer I did read unto them that which was written by the prophet Isaiah; for I did liken all scriptures unto us, that it might be for our profit and learning” (1 Nephi 19:23).

When Nephi speaks of likening the scriptures, his intent parallels the Qumran *peshet*.<sup>253</sup> After Nephi inserted multiple chapters from Isaiah, he declared what he intended to do with them:<sup>254</sup>

Now I, Nephi, do speak somewhat concerning the words which I have written, which have been spoken by the mouth of Isaiah. For behold, Isaiah spake many things which were hard for many of my people to understand; for they know not concerning the manner of prophesying among the Jews.

For I, Nephi, have not taught them many things concerning the manner of the Jews; for their works were works of darkness, and their doings were doings of abominations.

Wherefore, I write unto my people, unto all those that shall receive hereafter these things which I write, that they may know the judgments of God, that they come upon all nations, according to the word which he hath spoken.

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252. Robert Eisenman, *James the Brother of Jesus* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 81.

253. Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 65, suggests, specifically for Nephi’s reading of Isaiah: “As a fellow prophet, Nephi may have considered himself capable of providing creative reinterpretations of Isaiah’s words that may never have occurred to the eighth-century bc seer but which were nevertheless divinely inspired and authoritative.”

254. It is not uncommon for LDS scholars to discuss Nephi’s commentary on Isaiah. As Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 65, points out: “Nephi’s general pattern for interpreting scripture is to follow a direct quote — often rather lengthy — with a discussion that incorporates a few key phrases but does not provide a comprehensive or detailed commentary.”

Wherefore, hearken, O my people, which are of the house of Israel, and give ear unto my words; for because the words of Isaiah are not plain unto you, nevertheless they are plain unto all those that are filled with the spirit of prophecy. But I give unto you a prophecy, according to the spirit which is in me; wherefore I shall prophesy according to the plainness which hath been with me from the time that I came out from Jerusalem with my father; for behold, my soul delighteth in plainness unto my people, that they may learn. (2 Nephi 25:1–4)

Isaiah's writings were on the brass plates, and the brass plates were the only record the Nephites ever called scripture. Nevertheless, Nephi indicates that they required interpretation for his people. For them to understand Isaiah, they needed the spirit of prophecy, which Nephi not only declared he had but also declared he would exercise to explain the intent of Isaiah as it pertained to this branch of the house of Israel in a new world. Karel Van der Toorn confirms this was part of Nephi's scribal training: "The true scribe, in other words, has learned to see what others could not see even if they were given the ability to read."<sup>255</sup>

Nephi uses the difference between his trained understanding and Laman and Lemuel's less sophisticated scriptural understanding as a foil to explain his inclusion of Isaiah 48 and 49 at the end of 1 Nephi (1 Nephi 20, 21). At the beginning of 1 Nephi 22 (VII) we find:

And now it came to pass that after I, Nephi, had read these things which were engraven upon the plates of brass, my brethren came unto me and said unto me: What meaneth these things which ye have read? Behold, are they to be understood according to things which are spiritual, which shall come to pass according to the spirit and not the flesh?

And I, Nephi, said unto them: Behold they were manifest unto the prophet by the voice of the Spirit; for by the Spirit are all things made known unto the prophets, which shall come upon the children of men according to the flesh.

Wherefore, the things of which I have read are things pertaining to things both temporal and spiritual; for it appears that the house of Israel, sooner or later, will be scattered upon all the face of the earth, and also among all nations. (1 Nephi 22:1–3)

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255. Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible*, 106.

How to understand Isaiah relies on the Spirit in this case and on spirit of prophecy at the end of 2 Nephi. The two declarations have the same intent. Nephi's learning allowed him to understand, and his susceptibility to the Spirit allowed him to liken that understanding to their current circumstances.