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## On Doubting Nephi's Break Between 1 and 2 Nephi: A Critique of Joseph Spencer's "An Other Testament: On Typology"

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**On Doubting Nephi's break between 1 and 2 Nephi: A critique of Joseph  
Spencer's *An Other Testament: On Typology***

February 17, 2017 draft

Noel B. Reynolds

I will begin by locating this essay in its larger context. A few contemporary Book of Mormon scholars are increasingly convinced that the internal structures of Nephi's writings provide important guidance for would-be interpreters of his teachings. Joseph Spencer and I are two who are working on this issue currently. While the following essay may seem like a hard-hitting critique of his work, readers need to know that I have great respect both for his abilities and his work and that neither one of us claims to have final answers on these matters. We both nourish the hope that, as we continue both private and public dialogue, we may eventually come to shared understandings that will enable us to appreciate Nephi's great work more fully. And we would both welcome more participants in this quest!

It is noteworthy that the opening two books in the Book of Mormon are written by the same author and were labeled by him *The Book of Nephi, his reign and ministry* and *The Book of Nephi* respectively, though subsequent editions have

titled them First and Second Nephi to enable clear reference.<sup>1</sup> In the background, we know that Nephi's first great writing project, his large plates, probably contained these same materials interspersed with a detailed account of the people of Lehi and their proceedings. But we only have access today to this more focused second project.

What should attract our attention is the unique division of Nephi's writings on the small plates, or what he labels "the ministry and the prophecies, the more plain and precious parts of them," or "the more sacred things,"<sup>2</sup> into two books. The oddness of this break is further accentuated by the fact that the first book ends in a meeting in which Nephi is testifying of Christ and his gospel to his brothers and explicitly mentions that his father Lehi has also testified to these things (1 Nephi 22:31), and then the second book begins with an apparent continuation of the same meeting: "And now it came to pass that after I Nephi had made an end of teaching my brethren, our father Lehi also spake many things unto them" (2 Nephi 1:1). The two books are immediately tied together by the closing reference to

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<sup>1</sup> See the documentation and explanations for these changes in Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*, Part One, pp. 42–43 and 470–471. Skousen makes it clear that this division and the titles were in the original text.

<sup>2</sup> See 1 Nephi 19:3 and 5.

Nephi and Lehi testifying and teaching and by the opening reference to their joint teaching of Nephi's brethren. There is no gap in time suggested, nor is there any change of topic or other shift in the narration. So why does Nephi need to start a new book at this point? Nephi does not point to any external circumstances or internal purposes that would explain the division.

For readers who have been sensitized to the insights of literary or rhetorical analysis in the Bible or other ancient literatures, any unexplained break of such undeniable magnitude forces reflection on the author's reasons, which may most likely be found in separate purposes, messages, or rhetorical structures in the two books. In other writings I have argued for a single rhetorical structure in First Nephi, built around two parallel chiasms,<sup>3</sup> and more recently for a different structure in Second Nephi in which twelve sequential inclusios are organized chiastically around a central inclusio, which is itself another chiasm.<sup>4</sup> First Nephi presents a carefully arranged selection of six stories from the Lehite exodus experience to support Nephi's announced thesis: "I Nephi will shew unto you that the tender mercies of the Lord is over all those whom he hath chosen because of

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<sup>3</sup> "Nephi's Outline," *BYU Studies*, 1980, v. 20:2, 1-18.

<sup>4</sup> "Chiastic Structuring of Large Texts: Second Nephi as a Case Study." A prepublication version is available online at <http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/1679/>.

their faith to make them mighty, even unto the power of deliverance” (1 Nephi 1:20b).<sup>5</sup> First Nephi thus presents itself as a detailed demonstration that the Lord has kept the promise made to Lehi that if he and his family would obey the Lord, they would be led to a promised land. Second Nephi shifts into a higher gear theologically, beginning with Lehi’s account of the plan of salvation, centered on the testimonies of Christ from those prophets who have seen him, and climaxing with what I have found to be the most complete and authoritative presentation of the doctrine or gospel of Christ to be found in any scripture.<sup>6</sup> These findings would seem to provide emphatic support for the assumption that Nephi had strong rhetorical reasons for dividing his writings on the small plates into two books as he did.

But not all scholars agree with this approach. Thirty years ago, Fred Axelgard argued that the true division in Nephi’s writings comes between chapters

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<sup>5</sup> All quotations from the text of the Book of Mormon, including punctuation, are taken from the Yale critical edition. See Royal Skousen, *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*, Yale University Press, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> See, “The Gospel According to Nephi,” *Religious Educator*, vol. 16, No. 2 (2015), 51–75.

5 and 6 of Second Nephi.<sup>7</sup> And more recently, Joseph Spencer has adopted Axelgard's conclusion and arguments to provide grounding for his interpretation of Second Nephi as an esoteric writing.<sup>8</sup> Axelgard's argument is straightforward. He sees a clear division between the first 27 chapters featuring historical content (1 Nephi 1–2 Nephi 5), and the last 28 chapters featuring spiritual content.

“Everything Nephi has to offer in the way of historical information is presented between 1 Nephi 1 and 2 Nephi 5.”<sup>9</sup> “These passages thus give two main purposes for Nephi's record: one historical, to inform his descendants of their Israelite heritage; and one spiritual, to give them the gospel of Jesus Christ.”<sup>10</sup> As will be discussed below, Spencer accepts this Axelgard proposal, and refines it by dividing these two sections again, thereby restricting the spiritual core of Nephi's writings

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<sup>7</sup> Frederick W. Axelgard, “1 and 2 Nephi: An Inspiring Whole,” *Brigham Young University Studies*, vol 26:4 (Fall, 1986), 53–65.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph M. Spencer, *An Other Testament: On Typology*, Salt Press, 2012, esp. ch. 2. While in both private correspondence and in the introduction to the 2016 second edition there are clear indications that Spencer sees his position evolving, the published text remains unchanged.

With that caveat, this critique will have to focus on the 2012 version as reprinted in 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Axelgard, p. 54.

<sup>10</sup> Axelgard, p. 55.

to 2 Nephi 6–30.

While I will not devote a lot of space to this claim in this essay, I want to make it clear that I find it to be both unclear and seriously mistaken. Clearly, there is a lot more of a story maintained through the first 27 chapters. But 16 of those chapters also contain almost all of the original revelations to Nephi and Lehi, some of their doctrinal explanations and teachings, and two of the Isaiah chapters. In an unpublished working paper, I show that the principal two prophecies rehearsed by Jacob, Isaiah, and Nephi in 2 Nephi 6–30 are featured because of the revelations given to Lehi and Nephi in earlier chapters, and can only be fully appreciated in the Nephite context in light of those earlier and more detailed revelations.<sup>11</sup> Rather than taking the reader to new heights of spiritual insight, 2 Nephi 6–30 provides the required multiple witnesses to the same prophecies. As Nephi explains at the very center of Second Nephi, “Wherefore by the words of three, God hath said, I will establish my word. Nevertheless God sendeth more witnesses, and he proveth all his words” (2 Nephi 11:3).

Axelgard then focuses on 1 Nephi 19:5 as “the decisive evidence for

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<sup>11</sup> See the online working paper “Understanding the Abrahamic Covenant through the Book of Mormon” at <http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/>.

breaking Nephi’s record into two parts.”<sup>12</sup> It will be helpful to include this passage here as both Axelgard and Spencer place enormous interpretive weight on a few English words it contains (*italics identify the key terms used in their interpretation*):

And an account of my making these plates shall be given hereafter. *And then behold*, I proceed according to that which I have spoken; and this I do that the *more sacred things* may be kept for the knowledge of my people. (1 Nephi 19:5)

The traditional reading of this verse has been that Nephi is referring in the first sentence to the third “account” he will give “hereafter” in 2 Nephi 5:28–34. And the second sentence has been understood to simply restate Nephi’s purpose in the small plates and the fact that after this four-verse aside to readers, he is returning to what he was writing about—all of which is part of this record that features the “sacred” or “the more sacred things.” But both Axelgard and Spencer reject that reading and emphasize the English word *then* to portray that future account “as a threshold [Nephi] will cross in his writing of the small plates, before he conveys

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<sup>12</sup> Axelgard, 55..

‘more sacred things’.”<sup>13</sup> By assigning such a strong temporal meaning to “and *then* behold,” these authors hope to justify their proposed new distinction between the “sacred things” covered in Nephi’s writings up through 2 Nephi 5 and the “more sacred things” covered in the remaining chapters of 2 Nephi.

Spencer narrows the “more sacred things” even further by dividing off Nephi’s closing three chapters (2 Nephi 31–33) and characterizing them as “a brief conclusion,” as “less sacred material,” and as “summary reflections on baptism.”<sup>14</sup> Spencer then leverages his adaptation of the Axelgard thesis 1) to interpret everything after 1 Nephi 18 as a late change of writing plan for Nephi, 2) to focus on 2 Nephi 6–30 as “the core of Nephi’s writings,” and 3) to connect a perceived four-fold division of Nephi’s writings with a fourfold pattern he discerns in the prophet’s life and with the fourfold pattern Spencer postulates in the plan of redemption as taught in the Book of Mormon.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Spencer, 36, 39, and 42.

<sup>15</sup> Space will not permit a reasonable description or critique of the pattern Spencer outlines. Suffice it to say, the four stages he sees in Nephi’s small plates and in the plan of salvation as taught in the Book of Mormon are creation (1 Nephi 1–18), fall (1 Nephi 19–2 Nephi 5), atonement (2 Nephi 6–30), and veil (2 Nephi 31–30).

These authors offer their interpretations as a “close reading” of 1 and 2 Nephi. But in the critique that follows I will argue that they have ignored or violated a number of generally accepted norms for careful reading of ancient texts. In Axelgard’s case, the whole exercise ironically brings him to a general conclusion that I would strongly support, but for different reasons than those he advances. Nephi’s writings do constitute an inspiring whole—contrary to the prevailing academic opinion in the 1980s that 2 Nephi was a random collection of leftovers. Spencer, however, uses Axelgard’s approach to support what I see as a seriously flawed interpretation of Nephi’s writings that both misinterprets and undervalues what Nephi considered to be his most sacred teaching.

I will begin my analysis by listing some common-sense guidelines for interpreting ancient texts that I find to be most relevant in this discussion. While there are many norms that scholars generally follow in the interpretation of ancient texts, I only advance here three that I have found to be universally recognized in my research and teaching and that would seem to require special explanation by an interpreter that did not find them to be applicable to the writings of Nephi:

1. **The author knows best.** The reader must allow the author to guide his interpretation through explicit statements, culturally recognized

rhetorical devices, and textual organization. The reader should not twist the text to accommodate philosophical, doctrinal, or historical theses or insights that the reader has brought to the exercise.

2. **Respect the original language.** For most ancient texts we have access to the original language version, which must be given full priority over translations in interpretations. Because we do not have the original language version of Nephi's writings, we should generally assume that he was writing in Hebrew and interpret recognizable hebraisms as they would have been interpreted by late seventh-century BCE writers of Hebrew texts.<sup>16</sup>
3. **Respect the plain meanings first.** Much ancient writing employed irony or esoteric strategies to convey a separate and truer message to its more perceptive readers, over the heads of ordinary readers. Plato and others developed these techniques when writing in politically dangerous environments. In the absence of such an environment, readers should make every effort to fit their interpretations to the plain

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<sup>16</sup> While I agree with most scholars that Nephi was most likely writing the small plates in Hebrew, there are other possibilities. See the discussion in Brian D. Stubbs, "Book of Mormon Language," *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1:179–181.

meanings of the text. And reversions to esoteric or ironic readings must be explained with adequate supporting evidence from the text. Coincidence with the interpreter's own theses or philosophical insights would not be a convincing reason.

4. **Respect the author's categories.** Categories or concepts used in modern discourse should not be substituted for those advanced and explained by the ancient author. Of course, categories and concepts of modern discourse may be used to talk about the ancient text without anachronism, but should not be substituted for those used in the text when interpreting it.

In the following section of this paper, I will discuss some of Axelgard and Spencer's violations of these widely accepted norms for the interpretation of ancient texts such as the Book of Mormon.

### **Violating the hermeneutical rules.**

The most obvious and probably most egregious offense introduced by Axelgard and followed by Spencer is their disregard for Nephi's division of his writing into two books. While they do offer an argument for seeing another division between 2 Nephi 5 and 6, neither of these writers even pauses to recognize the clear facts of Nephi's two-book division and the enormous interpretive burden

they have assumed in disregarding the evident intention of the author and asserting a different one as his true intention. There may be a number of places in the modern English edition of the Book of Mormon where we could disagree quite convincingly with Orson Pratt's division of the text into chapters and verses. But not even Pratt was so bold as to challenge the book divisions left to us by the original authors such as Nephi or Mormon. Neither Axelgard nor Spencer even slows down to acknowledge the improbability of an intelligent author like Nephi making a mistake of this magnitude in the way he has explicitly organized his text. Such a dramatic and *prima facie* improbability and violation of rule #1 requires special comment and explanation. By failing to recognize and address that issue directly, Axelgard and Spencer immediately provoke a suspicion that they are more interested in developing and promoting their own insights and are not willing to let the author of the text guide readers to his meaning with his organization.

Spencer pairs Nephi's second and third explanations for the two sets of plates (1 Nephi 19:1–5 and 2 Nephi 5:28–34) for this analysis. But he fails to mention the first time Nephi offers this explanation in 1 Nephi 9:2–4, which, incidentally, is paired with the second explanation in the parallel two-part structure

of 1 Nephi.<sup>17</sup> Nor is there anything special about the third explanation inasmuch as we learn nothing new and can in fact get the full picture on the distinction between the two records from the first two explanations. The third one does explain the chronological relationship between the two projects—the earlier and continuing large-plates Nephite history, and the immediate and limited small-plates account of the ministries of the first Nephite prophets.

**[Allen: I would recommend a sidebar in this part of the paper providing readers with these three texts from the Yale edition: 1 Ne 9:2–4, 1 Ne 19:1–5, and 2 Nephi 5:28–34. Can we do that?]**

### **1 Nephi 9:2–4**

2 And now as I have spoken concerning these plates, behold, they are not the plates upon which I make a full account of the history of my people. . . .

3 Nevertheless I have received a commandment of the Lord that I should make these plates for the special purpose that there should be an account engraven of the ministry of my people.

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<sup>17</sup> “Nephi’s Outline,” p. 4.

4 And upon the other plates should be engraven an account of the reigns of the kings and the wars and contentions of my people. Wherefore these plates are for the more part of the ministry, and the other plates are for the more part of the reigns of the kings and the wars and contentions of my people.

### **1 Nephi 19:1–5**

1 And it came to pass that the Lord commanded me, wherefore I did make plates of ore that I might engraven upon them the record of my people. And upon the plates which I made I did engraven the record of my father and also our journeyings in the wilderness and the prophecies of my father. And also many of mine own prophecies have I engraven upon them.

2 And I knew not at that time which I made them that I should be commanded of the Lord to make these plates. Wherefore the record of my father and the genealogy of his forefathers and the more part of all our proceedings in the wilderness are engraven upon those first plates of which I have spoken. Wherefore the things which transpired before that I made these plates are of a truth more particularly made mention upon the first plates.

3 And after that I made these plates by way of commandment, I Nephi received a commandment that the ministry and the prophecies—the more plain and precious parts of them—should be written upon these plates, and that the things which were written should be kept for the

instruction of my people, which should possess the land, and also for other wise purposes, which purposes are known unto the Lord.

4 Wherefore I Nephi did make a record upon the other plates, which gives an account or which gives a greater account of the wars and contentions and destructions of my people. And now this have I done and commanded my people that they should do after that I was gone and that these plates should be handed down from one generation to another or from one prophet to another until further commandments of the Lord.

5 And an account of my making these plates shall be given hereafter. And then behold, I proceed according to that which I have spoken; and this I do that the more sacred things may be kept for the knowledge of my people.

6 Nevertheless I do not write any thing upon plates save it be that I think it be sacred.

## **2 Nephi 5:28–34**

28 And thirty years had passed away from the time we left Jerusalem.

29 And I Nephi had kept the records upon my plates which I had made of my people thus far.

30 And it came to pass that the Lord God said unto me: Make other plates; and thou shalt engraven many things upon them which are good in my sight for the profit of my people.

31 Wherefore I Nephi, to be obedient to the commandments of the Lord, went and made these plates upon which I have engraven these things.

32 And I engravened that which is pleasing unto God. And if my people be pleased with the things of God, they be pleased with mine engravings which are upon these plates.

33 And if my people desire to know the more particular part of the history of my people, they must search mine other plates.

34 And it sufficeth me to say that forty years had passed away. . . .

Whether the ambiguous pronoun references in the opening verses of 1 Nephi 19 are an artifact of modern translation or of the original composition, they do open the door for Axelgard's 1986 interpretation. Whatever the cause, we are forced to go beyond Nephi's recurring phrase "these plates," to a contextual determination of when he is referring to the predominant "large plates" project, which would be handed down over all generations of Nephite leaders to become

the primary resource for Mormon's abridgment, and the secondary "small plates" project, which Nephi passed on to his younger brother Jacob and his descendants. None of these ever matched Nephi's effort, and the small-plates project died out in the next generation.

There is no problem keeping up with Nephi's references as he switches back and forth between the two projects in the first three verses. The first verse provides the heretofore missing background information that Nephi had at some early point received a commandment from the Lord to write "the record of my people," which we now learn contains "the record of my father and also our journeyings in the wilderness and the prophecies of my father" and "many of mine own prophecies." That is Nephi's descriptions of the large plates or what Nephi twice labels the "first plates" (1 Nephi 19:2). These were the only plates Nephi produced during the first thirty years following their flight from Jerusalem. But after 30 years, the Lord said to Nephi, "Make other plates" to contain things "which are good in my sight for the profit of they people" (2 Ne 5:30). And so he made the small plates to include "that which is pleasing unto God." So if his people are "pleased with the things of God," they will be pleased with what he has written on the small plates. But if they desire to know "the history of my people, they must search mine other plates" (2 Nephi 5:33). Nephi's reference to the small

plates in the aside beginning 1 Nephi 19:1–5 provides additional clarification, for Nephi reports having received a specific commandment “that the ministry and the prophecies—the more plain and precious parts of them—should be written upon these [the small] plates,” and that they “should be kept for the instruction of my people” as well as “for other wise purposes . . . known unto the Lord” (1 Nephi 19:3). In these passages, Nephi clearly states his perspective that his historical writings are in the large plates and that the small plates contain things “pleasing unto God” (2 Nephi 5:32-33).

Referring again back to the large plates (“the other plates”), Nephi explains that that record “gives a greater account of the wars and contentions and destructions of my people.” He has kept that larger record and has commanded his people to do the same “that *these plates* should be handed down from one generation to another or from one prophet to another until further commandments of the Lord” (1 Nephi 19:4). It is at this point that pronoun references seem to slip a bit as Nephi lets us know that in writing now on the small plates he plans later on to provide “an account of my making *these plates* . . . that *the more sacred things* may be kept for the knowledge of my people” (1 Nephi 19:5). The phrase “these plates” in verse four refers properly back to the large plates described in the preceding sentence, where they were termed “the other plates,” to distinguish them

from the small plates described in the previous verse. But now, in verse 5, Nephi returns to the project in hand—his writing on the small plates, and calls them “these plates.” Axelgard and Spencer have missed this shift in reference and have interpreted the end of verse four to be referring, like verse 5, to the small plates.

This error in reference interpretation facilitates the next and more serious error, which brings us to rule #2, respecting the original language. Following Axelgard, Spencer places enormous interpretive weight on the English phrase *and then behold* that begins the second sentence of verse 5. The *then* is interpreted to be saying that Nephi *will proceed* to a recording of “the more sacred things” only after he gives his account of making the small plates in 2 Nephi 5.<sup>18</sup> This interpretation was designed to support their claim that Nephi’s writings really divide at that point between the sacred and the more sacred—a curious distinction itself, it must be noted. They might have questioned their interpretation first by noticing that Nephi does not use the future tense, here but instead says, “behold I *proceed* according to that which I have spoken; . . . that the more sacred things may be kept for the knowledge of my people” (1 Nephi 19:5). And just in case we may have inferred the wrong thing, he immediately clarifies, “I do not write any thing

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<sup>18</sup> Spencer, p. 34.

upon plates save it be that I think it be sacred” (1 Nephi 19:6)—apparently squashing any erroneous attribution to him of a distinction between *sacred* and *more sacred*. And it should also be clear that “the more sacred things” he mentions here refer to the contents of the small plates generally, not to some future section. Just as in verse 3 he says the small plates generally contain “the more plain and precious parts” of the ministry and prophecies that should “be kept *for the instruction of my people*,” here in verse 5 he proceeds to write “that the more sacred things may be kept *for the knowledge of my people*” (1 Nephi 19:3, 5). The standard interpretation of this passage would seem to be correct. The phrases “sacred things,” “more sacred things,” and “more plain and precious parts” all refer generally to the contents of the small plates, and not to some distinct section within Nephi’s writings in the small plates. So what seems to have happened is simply this. Axelgard and Spencer have borrowed the distinction Nephi developed to explain the different foci of his large and small plates projects, and have tried to use that distinction to divide the small plates into two sections between 2 Nephi 5 and 6. This would seem on its face to be a serious error of interpretation—and not convincing evidence for rejecting Nephi’s division of his writing into two books.

But now we can get back to the huge interpretive weight these authors have placed on Nephi’s phrase *and then behold*. For their thesis to have plausibility,

this phrase must denote temporal sequence, as it can do in English. But, we should also notice, this is a stock biblical phrase, and we would be right to suspect that it has a predictable Hebrew term behind it. Even in English, the phrasing does not require an interpretation of time sequence. But if we look at the available options for an underlying Hebrew original we discover that in the biblical occurrences there is no Hebrew word for *then*, but only for *behold*, (*hinneh*) or *and behold* (*we-hinneh*). While there may be other less obvious linguistic possibilities, the authors would need to make that case. There are only three places (twice in Jeremiah 14:18 and once in Daniel 8:15) where the *KJV* translators chose to add *then* into the English translation of this Hebrew phrase, and eight completely different passages where it is inserted by the New American Standard Bible translators (Gen 15:4, 41:3, 41:6, Num 25:6, Jud 19:16, 19:27, Jer 38:22, Ezekiel 9:11).

There is obviously a lot of translator discretion here, and the reason is that the underlying Hebrew for all these and for hundreds of other Bible passages is simply the Hebrew conjunction *we* (and/but) followed by the particle *hinneh* and usually translated as *behold*. One can review all the occurrences of *behold* in the principal translations of the Hebrew Bible, and there is never a separate Hebrew word there to provide the meaning of *then* as indicative of a time sequence, even

though English translators sometimes feel a need to include *then* as part of the translation.<sup>19</sup> Clearly, if Hebrew is the ancient language substrate, we should not put significant interpretive weight on the English word *then* in 1 Nephi 19:5. But that is the principal assumption of the Axelgard interpretation. The straightforward sense of the sentence in that case would be to interpret “and then behold, I proceed according to that which I have spoken,” as, having acknowledged that there will be a future expanded explication of the small plates, and that now Nephi is returning us to what he has just said about his distinctions between the large and small plates. And because he clarifies that both are sacred (v.6), we would naturally conclude that the reference to the “more sacred” is to the small plates, which we are reading.

The same Hebrew phrase *we hinneh* is usually translated as “and behold,” “and now behold,” or as “and then behold” throughout the Hebrew bible, with different translators choosing different English options at different points of the text. The Book of Mormon English translation also uses all three of these options, but only uses *and then behold* twice. *And behold* is used 315 times, and *and now*

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<sup>19</sup> See this laid out in detail at [http://biblehub.com/hebrew/hinneh\\_2009.htm](http://biblehub.com/hebrew/hinneh_2009.htm) and [http://biblehub.com/hebrew/vehinneh\\_2009.htm](http://biblehub.com/hebrew/vehinneh_2009.htm).

*behold* is used 111 times. The second occurrence of *and then behold* in 3 Nephi 8:19 is instructive. *For behold* and *and then behold* clearly are used as a pair rhetorically to set off a parenthetical comment that does not fit in the list of catastrophic consequences either substantively or grammatically. *For behold* begins the side comment, and *and then behold* signals its end and transition back to the main account. It should also be noticed that the modern insertion of dashes as punctuation at exactly those points in effect duplicates the function of the two *behold* phrases:

And it came to pass that when the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the storm, and the tempest, and the quakings of the earth did cease—

*for behold*, they did last for about the space of three hours; and it was said by some that the time was greater; nevertheless, all these great and terrible things were done in about the space of three hours—

*and then behold*, there was darkness upon the face of the land.

Hebrew linguists explain that this is standard usage of *hinneh* to signal a change in perspective. For example, Old Testament scholar Adele Berlin has demonstrated in some detail why *hinneh* and *we-hinneh* are atemporal. She explains that *hinneh* and *we-hinneh* are used primarily to signal a change of

perspective for the narrator, a character in the narration, or the reader.<sup>20</sup> That explanation would seem to fit 1 Nephi 19:5 well where *and then behold* functions to signal Nephi’s transition from his account of the divine commands to make and distinguish these two records back to what he is doing at the moment—engraving the second record, the small plates. Given the evidence above, a stronger case can be made that this phrase indicates a shift in authorial perspective and not a time lapse.

Whereas in vs. 1–5a Nephi had interrupted his narrative to provide this background explanation of the origins and purposes of the dual records as an aside to his readers, in 5b he returns to the point at which he drifted into this aside—perfectly indicated by *we-hinneh*. Assuming *we hinneh* as the substrate, an alternate translation following Berlin’s teaching could be: “And an account of my making these plates shall be given hereafter; but *at this point* I proceed according to that which I have spoken, and this I do that the more sacred things may be kept for the knowledge of my people.”

Not only does this interpretation of 1 Nephi 19:1–5 flow more naturally

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<sup>20</sup> See Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, “The uses of the word *hinneh*,” 91–95.

from the text as it endorses the traditional reading, it also avoids the awkwardness of having to attribute to Nephi a change of plans at this point in the narrative. I see Nephi as far too intelligent and thoughtful a writer to be caught midstream with the necessity of making a major change of plan. And even if that had happened to him, he would almost certainly have provided a more straightforward explanation. His own account tells us that he had been working on the large plates for almost thirty years before receiving the commandment to make a second record. And he had been planning and then engraving that second record for ten years by the time he completed the first 27 chapters.<sup>21</sup>

Spencer's motivation for adopting that key part of the Axelgard thesis in the first place was that it gave him a way to focus on 2 Nephi 6–30 and characterize these chapters as the spiritual core of all of Nephi's writings. But in doing so, he has discounted all of 1 Nephi and the final three chapters of 2 Nephi as less sacred. Based on my own previous and ongoing studies of Nephi's writings, this seems to be an error that fundamentally misses Nephi's principal theses. It ignores Nephi's basic thesis announced in the opening chapter:

I Nephi will shew unto you that the tender mercies of the Lord is over all

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<sup>21</sup> Compare 2 Nephi 5:30 and 34.

those whom he hath chosen because of their faith to make them mighty,  
even unto the power of deliverance . (1 Nephi 1:20b)

First Nephi is a tightly composed and inter-related selection of the experiences of Lehi's people designed to prove that thesis over and over again. Nephi uses both historical episodes and numerous revelations, including the great vision given to both Lehi and Nephi, to make his case—using all 22 chapters in a carefully designed rhetorical structure that includes all the text.<sup>22</sup> Second Nephi has its own carefully designed rhetorical structure—providing us with the most plausible and convincing explanation possible for the problem explained in the opening paragraph of this paper—the division by Nephi of his writings into two separate books at a juncture where there is no obvious break in the story.<sup>23</sup>

Through this surprising break in the story, Nephi can alert the reader, without verbal explanations, to the large rhetorical structures that end and then

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<sup>22</sup> See Reynolds, “Nephi’s Outline.” While I do see a need to update that 1980 essay in light of the dramatic advances in the field of Hebrew rhetoric over the last four decades, the basic outline proposed there still stands.

<sup>23</sup> See Reynolds, “Chiastic Structuring of Large Texts: Second Nephi as a Case Study,” in press at *Interpreter*. The pre-publication working paper is available meanwhile at <http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2699&context=facpub>

begin at that point in the text. Second Nephi begins with Lehi's explanation of the plan of salvation, centers on Nephi's assemblage of proofs for the prophesied ministry and atonement of Jesus Christ, and concludes in chapters Spencer has categorized as less sacred, with what Nephi presents as the spiritual climax of all his writings, the delayed account of how the Father and the Son had personally team-taught him the gospel of Jesus Christ, which constitutes the only way "whereby man can be saved in the kingdom of God" (2 Nephi 31:21). By separating off the final three chapters as less sacred material to balance his assessment of First Nephi, Spencer has missed Nephi's carefully positioned *inclusios* that define and bind together the first and second parts of Nephi's final sermon, constituting most of the seven chapters of 2 Nephi 25–31 as a single literary unit.<sup>24</sup>

It should also be noted that the Axelgard/Spencer proposal to divide Nephi's writings in a different way than the author's explicit organization would indicate, and Spencer's division of the text into more and less sacred sections, both implicitly suggest that Nephi is an esoteric writer, who is propounding a more

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<sup>24</sup> This analysis of the rhetorical limits of the sermon and the *inclusios* that define them is fully explained in Reynolds, "The Gospel According to Nephi," pp. 56–59. The content and organization of the sermon is analyzed in the same paper.

serious message which may only be discovered by his most careful readers. As mentioned earlier, esotericism is not rare in ancient texts, and usually signals the writer's fear for his personal welfare under an oppressive political or religious regime.<sup>25</sup> It can also signal the writer's concern for naive readers or doctrinal neophytes who are not ready for the full message he wants to share with some.<sup>26</sup>

But we would not expect Nephi to be writing a different message to a select few of his more perceptive readers. Again and again he stresses that his message is for all his descendants, for all Israel, and for all the Gentiles. And because he wants everyone to understand him, he repeatedly emphasizes his determination to speak with "plainness;" he "glories in plainness" (2 Nephi 33:6).<sup>27</sup> Any analysis that implies Nephi is really an esoteric writer would seem to contradict his clearly and repeatedly stated intentions and preferences. And to be credible, it would need to be grounded in a detailed supporting rhetorical analysis and assemblage of passages with evident double meanings. Any interpretation of Nephi that needs to

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<sup>25</sup> This observation is famously developed in Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Free Press, 1952.

<sup>26</sup> See, *e.g.*, Hebrews 5:12–14 and 1 Corinthians 3:2.

<sup>27</sup> See also 1 Nephi 13:26, 32, 34, 40, 14:23, 19:3, 2 Nephi 1:26, 9:47, 25:4, 7, 20, 28, 26:33, 31:2–3; and 32:7.

resort to esotericism will more likely be drawing on the interpreter's own theses and philosophical positions than on teachings and clues deliberately embedded in the text by Nephi himself.

## **Conclusions**

The primary goal of scholarly interpretation of ancient scripture is to improve our understanding of the messages intended by their authors. This is never easy as we have to cope with cultural and linguistic barriers and with the centuries of change in human thinking and world views. Equally challenging is the temptation to read our own modern categories and concepts and even understandings of the gospel into ancient writing. I began this paper by noting some commonsense rules that guide the efforts of scholars of ancient literatures including 1) letting the author guide you to his meaning, 2) respecting the original language, 3) giving priority to the plain meaning of the text, and 4) respecting the author's categories as he or she would have understood them. The inevitable uncertainties of these endeavors are best reduced by paying close attention to the author's statements of purpose, watching for rhetorical devices and structures that were known to the author's contemporaries, and looking for an interpretation that is consistent with the rest of the author's writings.

In this paper I have argued that Fred Axelgard (1986) and Joseph Spencer

(2012, 2016) have grounded their analyses of First and Second Nephi on a flawed interpretation of 1 Nephi 19:4–5 in which they interpret the phrase *and then behold* to refer to a future stage in the writing of the small plates which will begin to record “the more sacred (spiritual) things,” as contrasted with the less sacred historical things in the rest of 1 and 2 Nephi. I have advanced the following evidences and arguments to support this judgment:

1. Neither of these authors seems to recognize the enormous burden of proof they assume when they discount Nephi’s explicit division of his work into two books. They do not explore or assess the author’s reasoning for this division, but simply announce their own analysis in terms of a separation and sequence of historical information followed by spiritual things, a categorization that does not really fit well, especially for many of their “historical” chapters that are actually filled with key revelations. Their section of “more sacred things” (2 Nephi 6–30) does not include Lehi’s first theophany and visions (1 Nephi 1), his tree of life vision (1 Nephi 8), Lehi’s prophecies of the Messiah (1 Nephi 11), the great vision given to Nephi (1 Nephi 11–14), Lehi’s unique and formative explanation of the plan of salvation (2 Nephi 2), nor the direct and personal teaching of the gospel to Nephi by the Father and the Son in 2 Nephi 31—one of the most sacred

passages in all of scripture and, in my opinion, the most authoritative, complete, and detailed explanation of the gospel that we have anywhere.

2. These authors abandon the traditional interpretation of Nephi's explanation of the origins and roles of the two sets of plates, by interpreting the distinctions Nephi makes between his large and small plates to be a distinction between two parts of the small plates. They reject the usual understanding that the last sentence of verse four reports Nephi's command to his successors that the first or large plates—*these plates*—be kept and handed down from one generation to another, and that when Nephi goes on in verse five to talk about a future account of the making of “these plates,” he has switched back to talking about the small plates on which he is currently engraving an account.

Then comes the crux of the Axelgard and Spencer thesis, the interpretation of *and then behold* in 1 Nephi 19:5 to mean that Nephi will not record “more sacred things” until after he completes another future explanation of the small plates. It is probably fair to say that the full weight of the Axelgard/Spencer claim that the true division of Nephi's writings comes at the end of 2 Nephi 5, and not where Nephi himself divided it into two books, rests on their insistence on interpreting *then* to have a strong

meaning in terms of time sequences. But as I have shown, Bible translators dealing with the Hebrew *we-hinneh*, that most likely lies behind our English *and then behold*, know that it denotes no such time indicators, but only indicates a shift in the writer's point of view—in this case as Nephi shifts from talking about the distinction between the two sets of plates back to his current project of writing on the small plates. And this is all we are given to justify their rejection of the author's quite obviously intentional division of his writing at an earlier point in the text.

3. The claim that Nephi actually intended a different division and structure of his writings than what he stamped on the surface implicitly interprets Nephi to be an esoteric writer who is sending his true message to especially perceptive readers and over the heads of most readers. While esoteric writing is common in the ancient world in times of religious or political persecution, that is not Nephi's world. And such a suggestion clearly contradicts Nephi's repeated commitment to plainness in writing.

Each of these authors has advanced a variety of proposed interpretive insights and conclusions about Nephi's writings that depend on a novel interpretation of 1 Nephi 19:5. In so doing they took on an enormous burden of proof by rejecting the surface organization provided by Nephi. But their basic

defense turns out to depend on a particular meaning of an English word (*then*), a word which likely does not have a referent in the Hebrew original that could bear the meaning they want it to have. On the analysis presented here, and to the extent that other theses advanced in *An Other Testament* are derived from the Axelgard/Spencer division of Nephi's writings between chapters 5 and 6 of Second Nephi, there may be a need for reassessment of those positions as well.