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# Nephi's Small Plates: A Rhetorical Analysis

Noel B. Reynolds

August 16, 2021

Readers of the Book of Mormon commonly assume the adequacy of a simple and straight-forward explanation for the existence of Nephi's Small Plates.<sup>1</sup> As explained at various points in the text, Nephi had undertaken a shorter version of his Large Plates record by selecting out the spiritual teachings, prophecies and revelations for a more focused presentation. But the adequacy of that explanation has come under considerable strain from two very different directions. In 1986 Fred Axelgard advanced the idea that the description provided for the Large Plates of Nephi as being more historical also applied to all of First Nephi and the first five chapters of Second Nephi.<sup>2</sup> And now I am advancing a new paradigm for

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<sup>1</sup> For purposes of clarity, I will depart from common practice by capitalizing the common names of the different Nephite records.

<sup>2</sup> One popular interpretation of the Small Plates uses Nephi's characterization of the Large Plates as a description for his writings up through 2 Nephi 5 and Nephi's characterization of the Small Plates as a description for the rest of Second Nephi. See Frederick W. Axelgard, "1 and 2 Nephi: An Inspiring Whole," *Brigham Young University Studies* 26, no. 4 (Fall, 1986): 53–65 and Joseph M. Spencer, *An Other Testament: On Typology*, Salt Press, 2012. In a long review essay on Spencer's book, I have explained in detail why that approach must be rejected. See Noel B. Reynolds, "On Doubting Nephi's Break Between 1 and 2 Nephi: A Critique of Joseph Spencer's *An Other Testament: On Typology*," in *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 25 (2017), 85–102.

interpretation of the Small Plates that emphasizes Nephi's use of Hebrew rhetoric<sup>3</sup> to structure all of First and Second Nephi as a carefully calculated expansion and elaboration of Lehi's vision of the Tree of Life.<sup>4</sup> In this essay I will explain why Nephi provides so many versions of his explanations for the Small Plates by showing how these repeated passages provide key pieces of Nephi's rhetorical structures.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Small Plates of Nephi and Hebrew Rhetoric**

Nephi's writings constitute the bulk of the Small Plates of Nephi as we refer to them today. When he undertook that new composition thirty years after leaving Jerusalem, he was a mature prophet/ruler. He drew upon three primary records and his own experience:

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<sup>3</sup> In the western world we have inherited a highly developed analysis of compositional techniques and verbal formulations (figures of speech) that are designed to persuade readers and audiences that was developed by ancient Greeks and then Romans as early as the sixth century BCE. Over the last century or so, Bible scholars have discovered a different system of Hebrew rhetoric that was being taught in seventh-century scribal schools in Jerusalem and that surfaces frequently in the writings of the Bible. For a more extended explanation, see Noel B. Reynolds, "The Return of Rhetorical Analysis to Bible Studies," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 17 (2016): 91–98. I find Nephi's use of Hebrew rhetoric to be unexcelled.

<sup>4</sup> See "Lehi's Vision, Nephi's Blueprint," working paper, August 11, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Those structures have been identified in previous articles. See Noel B. Reynolds, "Nephi's Outline," *BYU Studies* 20 (Winter 1980): 131–149, and "Chiastic Structuring of Large Texts: 2 Nephi as a Case Study," in *Chiasmus: The State of the Art*, John W. Welch and Donald W. Parry (editors) (Provo: BYU Studies, 2020), 177–192.

1. The Plates of Brass that Lehi's family brought from Jerusalem contained the five books of Moses, the genealogy of ancient Joseph's descendants, "a record of the Jews from the beginning, even down to the commencement of the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah, and also the prophecies of the holy prophets from the beginning, . . . and also many prophecies which have been spoken by the mouth of Jeremiah" (1 Nephi 5:12–13).<sup>6</sup> These plates included the writings of prophets not mentioned in the Hebrew Bible<sup>7</sup> and a version of Genesis similar to the Book of Moses that was revealed to Joseph Smith.<sup>8</sup> The genealogy it contained and possibly the selection of prophetic texts it preserved belonged to the descendants of Joseph of Egypt, or at least to the descendants of his son Manasseh.

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<sup>6</sup> The account of how Lehi's sons retrieved the Brass Plates from Laban, who was his relative and custodian of the plates, is told in 1 Nephi 3–4, and the contents of those plates is summarized in 1 Nephi 5:10–16.

All quotations from the Book of Mormon are taken from the Yale critical edition, including punctuation and capitalization. Italics are sometimes added to call readers' attention to key terminology. See Royal Skousen (editor), *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*, Yale University Press, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Other prophets mentioned in the Book of Mormon include principally Zenos, but also Zenoch and Neum.

<sup>8</sup> See Jeff Lindsay and Noel B. Reynolds, "'Strong Like unto Moses': The Case for Ancient Roots in the Book of Moses Based on Book of Mormon Usage of Related Content Apparently from the Brass Plates," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 44 (2021):1–92.

2. The record of his father Lehi minimally contained original accounts of his numerous revelations and probably his own account of his life and experiences.<sup>9</sup>
3. And the Large Plates of Nephi contained Nephi's own record of the revelations received by Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob, their teachings, and the history of their descendants that Nephi had been commanded to record at some earlier point.<sup>10</sup> This was the main record handed through generations of Nephite kings and prophets and which eventually provided Mormon a primary resource for the abridgment which he prepared at the end of the Nephite dispensation that Joseph Smith translated "by the gift and power of God" and published as the Book of Mormon in 1830.

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<sup>9</sup> Nephi refers to "the record which has been kept by my father" (1 Nephi 6:1). It may have been written on some kind of paper or engraved on metal. The most thorough study of elements of that book that may have been preserved in the writings of his descendants can be found in S. Kent Brown, "Recovering the Missing Record of Lehi," *From Jerusalem to Zarahemla: Literary and Historical Studies of the Book of Mormon*, , edited by John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely, Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University (1998): 28-54.

<sup>10</sup> See Nephi's explanation at 1 Nephi 19:1. These plates contained much of what would have been found in Lehi's record. It also contained Nephi's own prophecies. And it the principal record of the Nephites from Nephi's time down to the last days of the Nephites when Ammaron and then Mormon took charge of the records. These Large Plates of Nephi provided Mormon with his principal source for his "small abridgment" known today as the Book of Mormon.

*New plates, new profile*

Nephi provides us with no less than six explanations of the differences between, and reasons for, his two sets of plates.<sup>11</sup> His brother Jacob begins his continuation of Nephi's Small Plates with a seventh and long explanation of those differences according to instructions he had received from Nephi. From these seven explanations, we learn that both writing projects were responses to direct commandments of the Lord. Nephi was surprised by the second command that came later in his life, but took full advantage of his earlier work and his prior scribal education to produce a thoroughly planned and concise expression of the central revelations and teachings given to Lehi and Nephi for their dispensation. The importance of these explanations for Nephi is emphasized not only by their number, but also by the rhetorical structuring and placement. All six of Nephi's explanations are themselves structured in classical Hebrew rhetorical forms and include six chiasms, two sets of parallel couplets, and two sets of parallel triplets. All but one are placed strategically in the text to support larger rhetorical structures—as will be explained further below.

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<sup>11</sup> See 1 Nephi 1:1–3, 16–17, 6:1–6, 9:1–6, 19:1–6, and 2 Nephi 5:28–34 as displayed with rhetorical analyses in Appendix 2 below.

*2 Nephi 5:28–34*

The sixth and final explanation offered by Nephi provides the specific historical context for the original commandment to make this second record and tells us it was not yet finished after a full decade of work. While the full text and its intricate rhetorical structure must have been worked out by this point, he had only reached 2 Nephi 5 in the process of engraving his composition on the metal plates.

- A And thirty years had passed away from the time we left Jerusalem.
- B And I Nephi had kept the records upon my plates **(LP)** which I had made of my people thus far.
- C And it came to pass that the Lord God said unto me:
- a “Make other plates **(SP)**;
- b and thou shalt engraven many things upon them **(SP)** which are good in my sight for the profit of thy people.”
- D Wherefore I Nephi, to be obedient to the commandments of the Lord, went
- a and made these plates **(SP)**
- b upon which **(SP)** I have engraven these things.
- C\* And I engravened that which is pleasing unto God.
- a And if my people be pleased with the things of God,

b            they be pleased with mine engravings which are upon these plates **(SP)**.

B\*           And if my people desire to know the more particular part of the history of my people, they must search mine other plates **(LP)**.

A\*           And it sufficeth me to say that forty years had passed away, and we had already had wars and contentions with our brethren.

While this last account helps us understand the historical context, it does not do much to clarify the prescribed profile for the new plates beyond saying that they should only contain those things “which are good in my sight for the profit of thy people.” And we are told that the Large Plates contain “the more particular part of the history of my people.” Nephi’s other five explanations all occur in First Nephi and provide a much more complete explanation of the profile. But before looking at each of these individually, it will be instructive to consult Jacob’s version of that profile as summarized in detail at the very opening of his contribution to the Small Plates.

### *Jacob’s version*

Interestingly, Jacob’s account of the instructions given to him by Nephi give us a much more complete and far richer explanation of the distinctive profiles assigned

by divine mandate to the two sets of plates. We cannot miss what Jacob is doing when his opening line exactly mimics Nephi's opening in the foregoing passage by informing us that "fifty-five years had passed away from the time that Lehi left Jerusalem." But what follows is a considerably expanded statement of the guidelines he has been given by Nephi for choosing what to include in the Small Plates. By describing how those guidelines relate to his responsibilities and activities as the spiritual leader of his people, he provides us with a more practical and in-depth understanding of the Small Plates and their contents.

*Jacob 1:1–8*

For behold, it came to pass that fifty and five years had passed away from the time that Lehi left Jerusalem;

A     wherefore Nephi gave me Jacob a commandment concerning these small plates (**SP**) upon which these things are engraven.

B             And he gave me Jacob a commandment that I should write upon these plates (**SP**) a few of the things which I considered to be most precious,

1             that I should not touch save it were lightly concerning the history of this people, which are called the people of Nephi.

2 For he said that the history of his people should be engraven upon his other plates (**LP**).

C and that I should preserve these plates (**SP**) and hand them down unto my seed from generation to generation.

1 And if there were preaching which was sacred,

a or revelation which was great,

b or prophesying,

2 that I should engraven the heads of them upon these plates (**SP**) and touch upon them as much as it were possible,

a for Christ's sake

b and for the sake of our people. (Jacob 1:1–4)

D For because of faith and great anxiety, it truly had been made manifest unto us concerning our people what things should happen unto them.

E And we also had many revelations

E\* and the spirit of much prophecy;

D\* wherefore we knew of Christ and his kingdom, which should come.

- C\*           Wherefore we labored diligently among our people  
 that we might persuade them to come unto Christ
- 1           and partake of the goodness of God, that they might  
             enter into his rest,
  - 2           lest by any means he should swear in his wrath they  
             should not enter in,
    - a           as in the provocation in the days of temptation
    - b           while the children of Israel were in the wilderness.

- B\*           Wherefore we would to God that we could persuade all men
- 1           not to rebel against God, to provoke him to anger,
  - 2           but that all men would believe in Christ
    - a           and view his death
    - b           and suffer his cross
    - c           and bear the shame of the world.

- A\*           Wherefore I Jacob take it upon me to fulfill the commandment of my  
 brother Nephi.

This long passage does not constitute a clear chiasm with repeated terminology in each of its parallel elements. But it does seem to feature a chiastic organization in that it begins and ends with references to the commandment Jacob had received

from Nephi—making it minimally a rhetorical inclusio. And the two center lines feature simple synonymous descriptions of the key contents of the Small Plates. Further, it is easy to believe that Jacob saw parallels in the other elements marked out here as parts of a possible chiasm.

Given some of the interpretive confusion in the literature about the divinely prescribed purposes for Nephi’s second record, it is more than helpful to have the instructions he gave to his chosen successor author and custodian of the small plates as he (Jacob) interpreted those instructions. For Jacob the distinction between the Small Plates and the Large Plates was both simple and clear. Inasmuch as the Large Plates contained the history of the people of Nephi, he was instructed to only touch lightly on that history in the Small Plates. Rather Jacob was only to include “a few of those things which [he] considered to be most precious,” whether they be “preaching which was sacred, or revelation which was great, or prophesying.” Jacob then goes on to make it clear that he was talking about preaching, revelation, and prophecies about Christ. As predicted by Nephi, Jacob and others found the Small Plates to be a precious resource as the spiritual leaders of the people of Nephi. That practical role had led Jacob to see the spiritual choices of the Nephites in a binary way:

Wherefore we labored diligently among our people that we might persuade

them to come unto Christ and partake of the goodness of God, that they might enter into his rest. . . .

Wherefore we would to God that we could persuade all men not to rebel against God, to provoke him to anger, but that all men would believe in Christ and view his death and suffer his cross and bear the shame of the world. (Jacob 1:7–8)

### **Nephi's other five explanations**

From these explanations, we learn that the Large Plates contain the “full account of the history of my people,” including “an account of the reigns of the kings and the wars and contentions of my people” (1 Nephi 9:2, 4). This included “the record of my father and also our journeyings in the wilderness and the prophecies of my father,” “the genealogy or [Lehi's] forefathers,” and also “many of mine own prophecies” (1 Nephi 19:1–2). In his final explanation, Nephi says “if my people desire to know the more particular part of the history of my people, they must search mine other plates”—the Large Plates (2 Nephi 5:33).

The Small Plates were to meet a different profile. Nephi was instructed by the Lord God to “engraven many things upon them which are good in my sight for the profit of thy people” and “that which is pleasing unto God” (2 Nephi 5:30, 32).

Nephi had earlier explained what he meant by “the things of God” and “things which are pleasing unto God” when he said: “For the fullness of mine intent is that I may persuade men to come unto the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob and be saved” (1 Nephi 6:3–5). At another point he explained that the Small Plates were made “for the special purpose that there should be an account engraven of the ministry of my people” (1 Nephi 9:3). Another explanation provides even more detail and nuance:

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. (1 Nephi 19:3)

The “other wise purposes . . . known unto the Lord” are usually interpreted to refer to an incident in the modern translation process which necessitated the insertion of the Small Plates translation as a replacement for the lost 116 pages of translation from the beginning of Mormon’s Gold Plates abridgement. The key point is that these Small Plates would preserve the prophecies and teachings “for the instruction” of the people. They may contain select bits of Nephite history to

contextualize and support those teachings, but prophecies of Christ and God's future dealings with Israel and the Gentiles and the teaching of the gospel and the plan of salvation will prove to be the clear focus on Nephi's writings.

*1 Nephi 1:1–3*

Nephi launched his introduction of the Small Plates with the facts that he “was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father” and that he had received “a great knowledge of the goodness and the mysteries of God.” This preface points us to the mental and spiritual profile of the Small Plates as discussed above. But he also brings in the material and physical aspects of metal record production:

A I Nephi having been born of goodly parents,

B therefore I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father.

A\* And having seen many afflictions in the course of my days,

B\* nevertheless having been highly favored of the Lord in all my days,

The alternating parallel lines of this opening construction simultaneously introduce the blessings of being born in Lehi's family and the afflictions suffered during his life of service to the Lord in a negative contrast. They also introduce his qualifications for writing an important book in a positive pairing. First, he has been taught in the highest compositional arts known to the Jerusalem scribal

schools. And second, he has been taught by the Lord directly. This latter point will be repeated and made more explicit as he continues:

A     yea, having had a great knowledge of the goodness and the mysteries of  
        God,

B             therefore I make a record of my proceedings in my days.

C             Yea, I make a record in the language of my father,

   a             which consists of the learning of the Jews

   b             and the language of the Egyptians.

C\*            And I know that the record which I make to be true.

B\*            And I make it with mine own hand,

A\*     and I make it according to my knowledge.<sup>12</sup>

As Nephi later confirms in regard to the Large Plates, he personally made the “plates of ore” and engraved the record of his people upon those plates.<sup>13</sup>

Nephi has explicitly laid claim not only to the educated skills of writing, rhetoric, and foreign languages, but also to the material skills of producing metal plates and metal engraving. As several new studies of Ancient Near Eastern literacy have

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<sup>12</sup> 1 Nephi 1:1-3. This rhetorical analysis modifies the chiasm given in Donald W. Parry, *Poetic Parallelisms in the Book of Mormon: The Complete Text Reformatted* (Provo: Maxwell Institute, 2007), 1, by applying the principle of subordination to Ca and Cb.

<sup>13</sup> See 1 Nephi 19:1.

shown, this rare combination of intellectual and material skills could only be obtained through years of training in a scribal school.<sup>14</sup>

*1 Nephi 1:16–17*

Nephi’s second explanation of the Small Plates says more about the internal rhetorical structure of First Nephi than it does about the spiritual profile of the larger Small Plates project itself and emphasizes a distinction between an account of Lehi’s proceedings and Nephi’s own account. This prepares us for the fact that First Nephi will be divided structurally between those two accounts and gives us a more fine-grained understanding of Nephi’s writing.

- A     And now I Nephi do not make *a full account of the things which my father hath written,*
- B             for *he hath written many things* which he saw in visions and in dreams.
- C             And *he also hath written many things* which he prophesied and spake unto his children,
- D             of which *I shall not make a full account.*

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<sup>14</sup> See Noel B. Reynolds, “Lehi and Nephi as Trained Manassite Scribes,” submitted paper, August 11, 2021, which updates and expands the 2011 analysis of Brant A. Gardner’s “Nephi as Scribe,” *Mormon Studies Review* 23, no. 1 (2011): 45–55.

D\*                    But *I shall make an account* of my proceedings in my days.

C\*                    Behold, I make an abridgment of *the record of my father* upon  
plates **(SP)** which I have made with mine own hands.

B\*                    Wherefore after that I have abridged *the record of my father*,

A\*    then will I make *an account of mine own life*.

It would be reasonable to ask why these five sentences are not attached immediately to Nephi's first explanation in verses 1–3, where they would have fit perfectly by expanding that first explanation. What we will now see is that this multiplication of explanations in First Nephi serves an important purpose in the rhetorical structure of that book. Because of their connection to and identity with each other, these explanations can be located in a series of chiasms to provide parallel elements for those chiasms and make their chiastic structures more recognizable. Note how these first two explanations provide parallel structure for the chiasm embedded in chapter one:

#### I NEPHI 1

- |   |   |       |
|---|---|-------|
| a | Nephi...the <b>learning</b> of his father | (1)   |
| b | Nephi's many <b>afflictions</b>           |       |
| c | the <b>goodness and mysteries</b> of God  |       |
| d | <b>Nephi's record...his own hands</b>     | (2-3) |

|    |   |      |
|----|---|------|
| e  | <b>Many prophecies</b>                            | (4)  |
| f  | Lehi prays ... <b>with all his heart</b>          | (5)  |
| g  | <b>Lehi saw and heard much...trembles</b>         | (6)  |
| h  | Lehi <b>overcome with the Spirit</b>              | (7)  |
| i  | The <b>heavens opened to Lehi</b>                 | (8)  |
| j  | He <b>sees God</b>                                |      |
| k  | <i>He sees <b>one</b> descend</i>                 | (9)  |
| j* | He <b>sees twelve</b>                             | (10) |
| i* | The <b>Lord opens a book to Lehi</b>              | (11) |
| h* | Lehi <b>filled with the Spirit</b>                | (12) |
| g* | <b>Lehi reads much...doom of Jerusalem.</b>       |      |
| f* | Lehi's <b>whole heart filled...praises God</b>    |      |
| e* | <b>Lehi records other prophecies</b>              | (16) |
| d* | <b>Nephi's record...his own hands</b>             | (17) |
| c* | the <b>Messiah and redemption</b> of the world.   |      |
| b* | Lehi's <b>afflictions</b>                         | (20) |
| a* | Nephi's <b>teaching</b> (learned from his father) |      |

Any long, conceptual chiasm like this one needs to have multiple solid parallel elements indicated by the repetition of the same words—as we see here the repetitions in d-d\*, f-f\*, h-h\*, combined with the strong apex structure in j-k-j\*. Here we see Nephi’s first two explanations of the Small Plates located parallel to one another in the rhetorical structure of 1 Nephi 1 labeled d and d\* above. Two of the other three explanations located in First Nephi will serve this same function in multiple overlapping chiasms, demonstrating the options a seventh-century Hebrew scribe had in distributing pieces of his composition in the creation

of these rhetorical structures.<sup>15</sup> The remaining three of Nephi’s explanations of the Small Plates will be taken up out of order to make it easier to track how they provide key anchors for his rhetorical structures in First Nephi.

### *1 Nephi 9: 1–6*

The first edition of the Book of Mormon shows that the current chapter 9 constituted the closing sentences of Nephi’s original second chapter and brings the section labeled “Lehi’s Account” to a conclusion. This fourth explanation of the Small Plates and their relationship to the Large Plates is placed at the end of Lehi’s account to connect back to the opening sentences of that account—the first explanation of the Small Plates in the opening sentences of chapter one. The presentation of this fourth explanation will be followed immediately by an outline of the chiasm that structures Lehi’s account that it anchors. Nephi has inserted this fourth explanation between his description of the Tree of Life portion of Lehi’s great vision in chapter eight and the long list of other prophecies and teachings that Lehi passed on to his family at the time he reported that vision to them, as summarized by Nephi in chapter ten. This fourth explanation emphasizes the different role of the Large Plates as a comprehensive history of Lehi’s descendants and only states once the primary “special purpose” of the Small Plates as an account “of the ministry of my people.” The explanation begins with a simple chiasm explaining the purpose of the Large Plates followed first by a trio of couplets articulating the different purposes of the Large and Small Plates and

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<sup>15</sup> See Reynolds, “Chiastic Structuring of Large Texts,” for a more detailed account of this feature of pre-exilic Hebrew rhetoric and how Nephi used it in his design of Second Nephi. See Noel B. Reynolds, “A Backstory,” for an explanation of the reasons to see Nephi as a recipient of advanced, formal, seventh-century scribal training in Jerusalem.

concluding with a pair of parallel couplets relating the Small Plates to the Lord's unstated purposes:

And all these things did my father see and hear and speak as he dwelt in a tent in the valley of Lemuel, and also a great many more things which cannot be written upon these plates **(SP)**.

A And now as I have spoken concerning these plates **(SP)**,

B behold, they are not the plates **(LP)** upon which I make a full account of the history of my people,

B\* for the plates **(LP)** upon which I make a full account of my people I have given the name of Nephi;

A\* wherefore they are called the plates of Nephi after mine own name.

Ballast:<sup>16</sup> And these plates **(SP)** also are called the plates of Nephi.

A Nevertheless I have received a commandment of the Lord that I should make these plates **(SP)**

B for the special purpose that there should be an account engraven of the ministry of my people.

A\* And upon the other plates **(LP)**

B\* should be engraven an account of the reigns of the kings and the wars and contentions of my people.

A\*\* Wherefore these plates **(SP)** are for the more part of the ministry,

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<sup>16</sup> Following earlier authors, Jack Lundbom distinguishes “ballast lines” that bring balance or resolution at the conclusion of small rhetorical structures in biblical writing and illustrates this phenomenon with examples from Isaiah. See Jack R. Lundbom, *Biblical Rhetoric and Rhetorical Criticism* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2013), 133–135.

B\*\*           and the other plates (**LP**) are for the more part of the reigns of the kings and the wars and contentions of my people.

A           Wherefore the Lord hath commanded me to make these plates (**SP**) for a wise purpose in him, which purpose I know not.

B           But the Lord knoweth all things from the beginning.

A\*          Wherefore he prepareth a way to accomplish all his works among the children of men.

B\*          For behold, he hath all power unto the fulfilling of all his words.

Chapter 2 closer:   And thus it is. Amen.

*Chiastic organization of Lehi's account*

In a 1980 publication I identified a complex rhetorical structure in First Nephi in which the twelve subsections of Lehi's account match up with the twelve subsections of Nephi's account in the second half of the book. These lists are included below. Most of the important discoveries about Hebrew rhetoric in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE have been published after that date, and while I see that original article as a still-serviceable guide to the rhetorical structure of First Nephi, I can see many ways in which it can be expanded and enriched from the perspective of Hebrew rhetoric as now understood by Bible scholars. The proposed chiastic analysis of Lehi's account follows here and shows the connection of Nephi's first and fourth explanations for the Small Plates in that account. The parallel listings of the twelve elements of each account will then be introduced to show the roles of Nephi's third and fifth explanations.

### Chiasmus in 1 Nephi 1–9 (Lehi’s Account)

- A     Nephi discusses his record, and he testifies it is true (1:1–3).
- B             Lehi’s early visions are reported, followed by his preaching and prophesying to the Jews (1:6–15, 18–20).
- C             Lehi takes his family into the wilderness (2:2–15).
- D             The Lord speaks prophecies to Nephi about Lehi’s seed (2:19–24).
- E             Lehi’s sons obtain the brass plates, and Nephi records the most striking example of the murmuring of his faithless brothers (3:2–5:16).
- D\*            Lehi, filled with the Spirit, prophesies about his seed (5:17–19; 7:1).
- C\*            Ishmael takes his family into the wilderness (7:2–22).
- B\*            Lehi’s tree of life vision is reported, followed by his prophecies and preaching to Laman and Lemuel (8:2–38).
- A\*     Nephi again discusses his record, and he records his testimony (9:1–6).

This analysis recognizes that the story of retrieving the Brass Plates is the centerpiece of Lehi’s account, which emphasizes the critical role that record played in Lehi’s dispensation and its supreme importance to Lehi and Nephi, who as trained scribes in the tribe of Manasseh, may even have been involved in its very recent production.<sup>17</sup> Further, Nephi has framed the account of his father’s proceedings with two of his explanations of the nature and purpose of the full

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<sup>17</sup> See Reynolds, “Lehi and Nephi as Trained Manassite Scribes.”

record of which it constitutes the first of three sections—the Small Plates.

### **Lehi’s Account Compared to Nephi’s Account**

*1 Nephi 19:1–6*

This fifth explanation coming near the end of the book of First Nephi is the most comprehensive of the six that Nephi has distributed throughout his writings. In this passage, Nephi clearly states the sequence in which he received divine commandments to make records. The first must have come early on and led Nephi to make his Large Plates, which contained both the history of his people and the prophecies and revelations received by him and his father. He was then surprised by the second command received thirty years after leaving Jerusalem to make a another set of plates. He was then commanded to write “the ministry and the prophecies—the more plain and precious parts of them” on these Small Plates. These would “be kept for the instruction of my people” and “for other wise purposes . . . known unto the Lord.”

This fourth explanation begins with a parallel pair of triplets (or extended alternates) that explain the Large Plates as a predecessor to these Small Plates. This is followed by a second pair of parallel triplets focused on explaining the Small Plates and how they are distinguished in their content and usage from the Large Plates.

- A And it came to pass that the Lord commanded me,
  - a wherefore I did make plates of ore **(LP)**
  - b that I might engraven upon them **(LP)** the record of my people.
- B And upon the plates **(LP)** which I made I did engraven the record of

my father

a and also our journeyings in the wilderness

b and the prophecies of my father.

C And also many of mine own prophecies have I engraven upon them **(LP)**.

A\* And I knew not at that time which I made them that I should be commanded of the Lord to make these plates **(SP)**.

B\* 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 **(LP)** of which I have spoken.

C\* Wherefore the things which transpired before that I made these plates **(SP)** are of a truth more particularly made mention upon the first plates **(LP)**.

A And after that I made these plates **(SP)** 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 **(SP)**,

B and that the things which were written should be kept for the instruction of my people, which should possess the land,

C and also for other wise purposes, which purposes are known unto the Lord.

A\* Wherefore I Nephi did make a record upon the other plates **(LP)**, which gives an account or which gives a greater account of the wars and contentions and destructions of my people.

- B\*           And now this have I done and commanded my people that they should do after that I was gone and that these plates **(SP)** should be handed down from one generation to another or from one prophet to another until further commandments of the Lord.
- C\*           And an account of my making these plates **(SP)** 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.
- Ballast:     Nevertheless I do not write any thing upon plates save it be that I think it be sacred.

Nephi's creativity in using the principles of Hebrew rhetoric is on display in many ways in this book, but none is more compelling than the way he uses his fourth and fifth explanations of the Small Plates in his parallel linkage of the twelve subsections in Lehi's and Nephi's accounts. In the chart that follows, these subsections are easy to connect—except for the puzzling partial reversal of the order in two instances. Subsections #3 and #5 of Lehi's account match up with subsections #5 and #3 respectively in Nephi's account. And then at the bottom of the chart subsections the same reversal recurs as subsections #9 and #11 of Lehi's account match up respectively with #11 and #9 of Nephi's account. This allows Nephi to use his fourth explanation twice in the rhetorical structure—first in parallel position with the first explanation in the chiasmic organization of Lehi's account—and then in parallel position with the fifth explanation which is placed well before the end of his own account.

## **Lehi's Account Compared to Nephi's Account**

### **1 Nephi 1–9 (Lehi's Account)**

1. Nephi makes a record (or account) of his proceedings but first gives an abridgment of Lehi's record (1:1–3, 16–17).
2. Nephi gives a brief account of Lehi's prophecies to the Jews, based on visions he received in Jerusalem (1:5–15, 19).
3. Lehi is commanded to journey into the wilderness, and he pitches his tent in the valley he names Lemuel (2:1–7).
4. Lehi teaches and exhorts his sons, and they are confounded (2:8–15).
5. Nephi desires to know the mysteries of God; he is visited by the Holy Spirit and is spoken to by the Lord (2:16–3:1).
6. Lehi is commanded in a dream to send his sons for the brass plates of

### **1 Nephi 10–22 (Nephi's Account)**

1. Nephi now commences to give an account of his proceedings, reign, and ministry but first “must speak somewhat of the things of [his] father, and . . . brethren” (10:1).
2. Nephi reports Lehi's prophecies about the Jews, as given to Laman and Lemuel in the wilderness (10:2–15).
3. Nephi desires to see, hear, and know these mysteries; he is shown a great vision by the Spirit of the Lord and by an angel (10:17–14:30).
4. Nephi instructs and exhorts his brothers, and they are confounded (15:6–16:6).
5. Lehi is commanded to journey further into the wilderness, and he pitches his tent in the land he names Bountiful (16:9–17:6).
6. Nephi is commanded by the voice of the Lord to construct a ship (17:6–18:4).

Laban (3:2–5:22).

7. In response to a command from the Lord, Lehi sends for Ishmael’s family (7:1–22).

8. They gather seeds of every kind (8:1).

9. Lehi reports to his sons the great vision received in the wilderness (8:2–35).

10. Lehi exhorts Laman and Lemuel, preaching and prophesying to them (8:36–38).

11. Nephi makes a distinction between the two sets of plates (9:1–5).

12. Nephi ends with a general formulation of his thesis and the formal punctuation: “And thus it is. Amen” (9:6).

7. In response to a command from the Lord, Lehi enters the ship and then sails (18:5–23).

8. Lehi’s family plants the seeds and reaps in abundance (18:24).

9. Nephi details the distinctions between the two sets of plates (19:1–7).

10. Nephi preaches and prophesies to Laman and Lemuel, his own descendants, and all Israel (19:7–21:26).

11. To explain Isaiah’s prophecies to his brothers, Nephi draws on the great vision given to him and Lehi (22:1–28).

12. Nephi ends with the highest formulation of his thesis, and with the formal punctuation: “And thus it is. Amen” (22:29–31).

### *1 Nephi 6:1–6*

This leaves Nephi’s third explanation of the Small Plates with no obvious role in the larger rhetorical structures. It comes immediately after and therefore juxtaposed to Lehi’s survey of the newly acquired Brass Plates and the genealogies contained therein. Nephi exploits this opportunity to make two points about his Small Plates in two short chiasms. The first explains why the Small Plates will not contain their genealogy. The second provides a clear and precise statement of the mission of the small plates: the fullness of his intent in this

writing is to bring men to God and to the salvation he offers.

A And now I Nephi do not give the genealogy of my fathers in this part of my record,

B neither at any time shall I give it after upon these plates **(SP)** which I am writing,

C for it is given in the record which has been kept by my father;

B\* wherefore I do not write it in this work.

A\* For it sufficeth me to say that we are a descendant of Joseph.<sup>18</sup>

A And it mattereth not to me that I am particular to give a full account of all the things of my father,

B for they cannot be written upon these plates **(SP)**,

C for I desire the room that I may write of the things of God.

D For the fullness of mine intent is that I may persuade men to come unto the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob and be saved.

C\* Wherefore the things which are pleasing unto the world I do not write,

B\* but the things which are pleasing unto God and unto them which are not of the world.

A\* Wherefore I shall give commandment unto my seed that they shall not occupy these plates **(SP)** with things which are not of worth unto the

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<sup>18</sup> See Parry, *Poetic Parallelisms*, p. 12.

children of men.

## **Conclusions**

This paper provides a detailed review of the six passages in which Nephi refers to his second record directly and distinguishes its purpose from the first record. It also recognizes a seventh similar passage at the beginning of Jacob's writings. All of these make it clear that Nephi and Jacob both understood the Large Plates to be a repository for a history of the people of Nephi, including their migrations, wars, and other events including preachings and revelations. The Small Plates were given a much narrower purpose by divine commandment. They should only include "a few of the most precious things" selected from the preaching, revelations, and prophecies. As it turned out, eighty percent of these plates would consist of Nephi's writings. It is even more explicit in Jacob's summary of Nephi's instructions that the most precious things would be the prophecies and teachings about Christ that could be used to bring the people to him and be saved rather than rebelling against God. And, finally, it has also been shown that Nephi had multiplied the passages in which he distinguished the two records in order to provide needed anchors for the rhetorical structures he had designed for his first section of the Small Plates (First Nephi).