

Huldah's Long Shadow

Julie M. Smith

LEHI SAW THE THRONE OF GOD IN A VISION and began preaching in 597 BCE (see 1 Nephi 1:4). About twenty-five years before that, he had witnessed a radical religious reformation in Jerusalem. It began when King Josiah ordered that the temple be renovated (see 2 Kings 22). During that process, a book¹ was discovered in the temple. Upon learning of its contents,² Josiah was penitent and mourned for the wickedness of his people. Desiring to know the Lord's will,³ he consulted the prophetess Huldah. It seems very likely that Huldah and Lehi would have known each other: they lived at the same time, not only in Jerusalem but probably

1. This "book" was actually a scroll.

2. The text never specifies which scroll this is; scholars generally conclude that it is all or part (perhaps chapters 27–28 or 32) of the book of Deuteronomy, although likely not identical to the version that would later be canonized.

3. Many readers assume that Josiah seeks out a prophet's word in order to determine if the scroll is genuine. But this seems unlikely because Josiah immediately rends his garments when he hears the text read (2 Kings 22:11), leading to the conclusion that he accepts the validity of the text even before consulting Huldah. Thus it seems more likely that he seeks a prophetic word in response to the text in order to interpret the text or to determine what his response to the text should be. Further support for this reading comes from the fact that the response Huldah gives does not authenticate the text but rather interprets it (2 Kings 22:15–20).

in the same section of the city.⁴ Huldah responded to King Josiah’s request with two messages from the Lord: first, that disaster would come to Jerusalem as a result of their iniquity and, second, that Josiah would be spared from this destruction—but only because he would die beforehand. In response, King Josiah purged the temple of idols, initiated a covenant renewal ceremony, and reinstated the celebration of the Passover.

I would like to explore how these events—which are recounted in 2 Kings 22 and 2 Chronicles 34—might nuance the readers’ understanding of the first chapter of the Book of Mormon. My observations will stem from two distinct approaches to the text: first historical and then literary. I will then comment briefly on how Huldah’s and Lehi’s stories can help readers navigate the potential pitfalls of historical and literary approaches to scripture.

Historical reading

The reaction to Huldah’s word from the Lord is momentous: the king organizes a ceremony where all the people in Jerusalem⁵—from the very youngest to the oldest—enter into the covenant. A complete

4. Huldah lived in the Mishneh or second quarter (see 2 Kings 22:14; the KJV refers, inaccurately, to the “college”); this part of Jerusalem is a later addition that was home to many who had migrated from the north, a group that likely included Lehi’s family in previous generations. This conclusion is based on Alma 10:3, which locates Lehi’s ancestors among the northern tribes who apparently fled into Judah to escape the Assyrian invasion. See Jeffrey R. Chadwick, “Lehi’s House at Jerusalem and the Land of His Inheritance,” in *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004). See also David Rolph Seely and Jo Ann H. Seely, “Lehi and Jeremiah: Prophets, Priests, and Patriarchs,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/2 (1999): 24–35, 85–86. Huldah may also be one of the prophets mentioned in 1 Nephi 1:4. In addition, most readings of 1 Nephi 5:12–13 would lead to the conclusion that the plates contained a record of Huldah’s story, so even if Lehi had somehow not been previously aware of (some elements of) it, Lehi and Nephi would have learned about it from the brass plates.

5. It is possible that this reference to “all” is hyperbole, but even if so, the scope and drama of the reforms initiated by Huldah’s proclamation are such that Lehi must have been aware of them.

purging of the idols and the paraphernalia of idol worship follows, and the people once again celebrate the Passover. Lehi had lived in Jerusalem all his days up to this point (see 1 Nephi 1:4), so a historical reading assumes that Lehi participated in this covenant renewal and observed the dramatic destruction of the idols. How would these events have impacted Lehi?

First, Lehi likely expected his own preaching to be well received. After all, he had witnessed a situation very similar to his own—one where a prophetic figure received a divine book and preached about the impending destruction of Jerusalem—and the response to her was very positive. He had good reason to believe that his preaching would be met, as was Huldah's, with repentance and recommitment.⁶ If anything, he might have suspected that his book, straight from heaven, would yield better results than Huldah's. So his audience's mockery might have come as a shock to him. Perhaps some derided him because they assumed that the necessary reforms had already taken place.⁷ This is the very argument that Nephi's brothers later made against Lehi (see 1 Nephi 17:22). It is also possible that otherwise righteous people—including, perhaps, some of his own sons—rejected Lehi's message because they assumed that their supposed individual righteousness would protect them, as it had Josiah, from experiencing the consequences of other people's wickedness. Perhaps others assumed that if twenty-five years had passed with no clear fulfillment of Huldah's prophecy of destruction, there was no point in continuing to worry about it. Maybe Lehi's audience contrasted him unfavorably with Huldah, who, after all, had an actual, physical book that others could touch, see, and read and not just something that she claimed to have seen in a dream. Perhaps some of Laman and Lemuel's difficulty with accepting their father's preaching stemmed from a belief that true prophets garner a response more akin to Huldah's than Lehi's. It seems

6. While other prophets received a negative response to their preaching, the fact that Lehi shared with Huldah access to a sacred book probably makes her the best model for his expectations.

7. Despite all the iniquity described in the Book of Mormon, the book makes very little reference to idolatry. Possibly the recent round of reforms under Huldah, which included a purging of the paraphernalia of idolatry, led to this state of affairs.

likely that Lehi's initial optimism would have been quashed by the response to his preaching, which would presumably have been very painful for him; perhaps he even doubted his own commission (which is not specifically included in the text, unlike in other similar prophetic call stories)⁸ and wondered if he had somehow misunderstood or failed. Immediately after relating that Lehi's life was threatened by his preaching, Nephi announces his intention to show readers the tender mercies of the Lord and then recounts that the Lord spoke to Lehi, reassuring him that he had been faithful and was blessed for what he had done. The Lord specifically indicates that it is precisely because of Lehi's faithfulness that the people are trying to kill him.⁹ This passage may be best understood in the context of Lehi's surprise at the negative response to his preaching.

Second, most readers of the Book of Mormon probably presume that Lehi's book¹⁰ contains a record of the abominations of the people, thus leading to his pronouncement of woes. However, a comparison with Huldah's story might lead to a different conclusion. In Huldah's situation, there is general agreement that the book is (some version of) the book of Deuteronomy. But Deuteronomy does not contain a listing of abominations in Huldah's day. Instead, it is a list of laws: King Josiah does not mourn because he has read a register of the people's sins but rather because it is now apparent to him that the people are not following the law. While certainty is not possible, the similarities between Huldah's and Lehi's experiences suggest that Lehi, too, may have been given in his vision a book containing a law code and that it is his reading of the law that leads him to pronounce woes upon

8. See Blake Thomas Ostler, "The Throne-Theophany and Prophetic Commission in 1 Nephi: A Form-Critical Analysis," *BYU Studies* 26/4 (1986): 67–95.

9. The current chapter divisions in the Book of Mormon are not original to the text. The original chapter divisions (which apparently represent divisions indicated on the plates) take all of 1 Nephi 1–5 as one chapter. So it may make more sense to consider 1 Nephi 2:1 as the final line of 1 Nephi 1; doing this would emphasize Lehi's faithfulness despite the unfortunate and unexpected response to his call.

10. It is interesting to speculate about the nature of Lehi's book: Was it an old book—taken to heaven, preserved, and then returned to earth, as if resurrected? Was it a future book, perhaps even the Book of Mormon itself?

Jerusalem. This interpretation helps explain an otherwise perplexing feature of Lehi's response to reading the book: he announces, "great and marvelous are thy works, O Lord God Almighty . . . because thou art merciful, thou wilt not suffer those who come unto thee that they shall perish" (1 Nephi 1:14). This is a rather odd response to a book that listed sins and promised destruction, but it is a sensible response to a book containing a law code—a code that shows a way for people to "come unto [God]" by observing the law.

Third, Nephi seems particularly concerned about his writing. In a manner unparalleled elsewhere,¹¹ he signals that he is deeply anxious to establish the validity of his record. He notes that he wrote it himself, that he knows it is true, that he made the record with his own hand, and that he condensed his father's writings. He also speaks directly to his audience to emphasize his desire that they will know Lehi's story. This anxiety may stem from the impact that Huldah's experience had on Lehi and that Lehi in turn transmitted to Nephi.¹² Although the initial response to Huldah's word from the Lord was overwhelmingly positive, in the longer term, the reaction was more complex. When, as Huldah had prophesied, calamity was poured out on the inhabitants of Jerusalem in the form of an attack from Babylon, there was debate as to whether it was, as Huldah had taught, the result of the people's wicked idolatry or whether God was punishing the people for getting rid of their idols.¹³ These competing explanations, which could have stemmed

11. There is some resonance with Deuteronomy 4:2; John 20:30–31; and Revelation 22:18–19, but Nephi's depth of concern for his record is unmatched in the Bible.

12. Nephi hints at this in 1 Nephi 1:1. Precise dates are unknowable, but it is likely that Lehi would have been a young man at the time of Josiah's reforms. It is even possible that a very young Laman and Lemuel witnessed the dramatic destruction of the idols; if this was the case, this formative experience may explain some of the gap in attitude between Laman and Lemuel on the one hand and Nephi and Sam on the other.

13. See Jeremiah 44:15–18. Interestingly, this viewpoint—quoted disapprovingly in Jeremiah—has been making a comeback among Latter-day Saints under the influence of Margaret Barker, who argues that Josiah's reforms negated earlier, more correct worship practices. There are solid reasons to dispute Barker's thesis, not the least of which is that it requires taking the position that a vast portion of the Hebrew Bible advocates false religion. At the same time, it is worth noting that one of the items specifically mentioned as being destroyed in Josiah's purging of idols is a tree that symbolized the divine

from the murky origin of the book found in the temple, may have led to Nephi's intense need to assure his audience of the authenticity of his own record. Further support for this reading comes from the contrast between the role of the scribes as intermediaries in Huldah's story and Nephi's repeated emphasis that he, on the other hand, made his record with his own hand (1 Nephi 1:3 and 17).

Next, commenters have long noted the absence of women's stories and women's voices from the Book of Mormon. This is in stark contrast to Huldah's story, where perhaps what is most remarkable about her gender is that it is not mentioned, despite the fact that the high priest assigned a woman the task of receiving and transmitting the word of God to the king in a situation where male prophets were active and where it was of crucial importance that the prophetic utterance be indisputable.¹⁴ Since this is the context of Lehi's life in Jerusalem, why, then, is the situation in the Book of Mormon so different? I should note first that women are more prominent in Nephi's narrative than in the rest of the Book of Mormon.¹⁵ So I might hypothesize that the

feminine (see 2 Kings 23:6; the KJV is not clear here, but a representation of Asherah is destroyed), but in Nephi's vision, he sees a tree and is taught that it symbolizes the mother of the son of God (see 1 Nephi 11:8–13). See also Daniel C. Peterson, "Nephi and His Asherah," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9/2 (2000): 16–25 and 80–81. So it may be that Josiah's reforms were fundamentally sound but slightly excessive, and Lehi's experience offers a recorection of Josiah's overcorrection. While speculative, it is possible that the prophets in 1 Nephi 1:4 are arguing that the people need to "repent" for abandoning their idol worship and, further, that Lehi's confusion over which voices are correct leads to his prayer (in a situation remarkably similar to what led to Joseph Smith's first vision).

14. Huldah's high status is further emphasized by the fact that the delegation from the king travels to her and not vice versa (see 2 Kings 22:14). Also, she repeatedly uses the phrase "thus saith the Lord" (2 Kings 22:15, 16, and 18). Note that her status as a prophet must have been well established before this incident; otherwise, the high priest would not have chosen her for this assignment.

15. The role of women is especially prominent in what was originally the first chapter of the Book of Mormon (now 1 Nephi 1–5). The quick shift from "goodly parents" in 1 Nephi 1:1 to "father" sets up the expectation that Nephi will return to the issue of his mother, which he does in 1 Nephi 5. This original first chapter was bookended by the stories of how Lehi and Sariah became convinced of his calling. The text shows Sariah gaining her own, independent knowledge (see 1 Nephi 5:8) of her husband's

absence of women stems from later redaction of the Book of Mormon instead of the experiences of Lehi's family. Another possibility is that the later lack of female voices reflects the increasing wickedness of the society: if Lehi experienced a prime prophetic voice as female and if this expectation were transmitted through the generations, then one way for the narrative to signal decline would be for society to silence female voices.¹⁶ (Interestingly, the Lamanites seemingly have a keener sensitivity to women's concerns than the Nephites do.)¹⁷

Fifth, Huldah's experience accentuates the importance of the written record: without it, the people had grievously strayed, and when they reencounter the law, they are confronted with a chasm between it and their own behavior, a tragic gap that they had not realized before encountering the text. They had active priests, scribes, and prophets, but this was not enough to ensure fidelity in the absence of a written text. This same concern for the written word—a concern that may be

commission, and her experience, along with Lehi's, frames the first chapter of the text. (If the family was intimately familiar with Huldah's story, it is even possible that 1 Nephi 5 is modeled on Huldah's experience, with Sariah in effect reenacting the experience.) In fact, a particular theme of 1 Nephi 5 is Lehi's inability to convince Sariah. His words may have provided comfort to Sariah, but they could not provide knowledge or joy—only her personal experience could do that (see 1 Nephi 5:6–8). Further, several structural elements suggest that Nephi intended the reader to compare Lehi's experience in 1 Nephi 1 with Sariah's in 1 Nephi 5: (1) for both, a return trip to Jerusalem was needed in order that revelation could be received; (2) each revelatory experience is immediately followed by Lehi's studying a new sacred record; (3) a main concern in both situations is "preserving the commandments" (see 1 Nephi 5:21); (4) Lehi's concern with the destruction of Jerusalem parallels Sariah's concern with the destruction of her sons; and (5) they each glimpse God's mercy in response. (It may also be productive to compare Huldah with Sariah: for both, something presumably lost forever [the text, the sons] is returned, permitting a woman's voice to speak her knowledge. Also, covenant renewal and worship are the immediate result of the speech.)

16. The extraordinary events of Alma 19 as a positive climactic moment in the Book of Mormon narrative may be exemplified by the role that Abish plays in voicing God's role in events (see Alma 19:17). Like Huldah, Abish is one who serves as a messenger to show that a dead text/body is not truly dead but merely requires a spiritually attuned messenger to bring it back to life.

17. See Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 46–47.

directly based on Lehi's memory of Huldah's reforms—permeates the Book of Mormon, where even the most casual reader quickly becomes aware of the repeated emphasis on the necessity of written records (see, for example, Mosiah 1:4). When Nephi, mentally girding himself to kill Laban, thinks that “they could not keep the commandments of the Lord according to the law of Moses save they should have the law” (1 Nephi 4:15), he may very well be recalling what Lehi has taught him about the lessons of Huldah's reforms.¹⁸

Literary reading

Now I shift my gaze away from strictly historical matters and toward a literary reading. Here I am less concerned with the historical context of events and instead consider Huldah's and Lehi's stories as if they were two case studies that can be analyzed in order to reflect upon their shared themes and patterns.

Huldah and Lehi are each given a book. Huldah's is recovered only because Josiah showed interest in restoring the temple. While not explicitly stated, readers can speculate that the text she received had been deliberately prepared to be read by those—and only by those—who would refurbish the temple. One might even say that it was hidden up for that purpose. Similarly, Lehi's prayers led to his experience with the pillar of fire, which led to his exhaustion on his bed, which led to his vision of the book. On both occasions, the book was awaiting the ones who sought out a closer connection to the divine, and the prophet is asked to read the book: Huldah is asked by King Josiah and Lehi is asked by the One associated with the throne of God. Each time, the person¹⁹ who requests the reading is already familiar with the contents of the book. They request the reading not because the text itself will

18. Because the temple restoration begins by using the silver that had been donated to the temple for repairs (see 2 Kings 22:4–5), there is a sense in which money has been traded for the book found in the temple. Similarly, in the Book of Mormon narrative, Nephi's attempt to trade silver (and gold) for Laban's record may echo what he has learned of Josiah's experience.

19. The text of 1 Nephi 1 does not clarify whether the “one” who descends is the person who was sitting on the throne (in which case the parallel to King Josiah is very

provide them with new information but rather because the text creates an opportunity for a prophetic response. This idea might nuance our understanding of the purpose of reading: it is not limited to conveying information but also serves as a springboard to new revelation. If they define the term *translation* broadly, then readers can consider both Huldah and Lehi as translating the texts that they read, in the sense of using them as source material from which to proclaim the word of the Lord anew. This paradigm might be a useful one for thinking about some of Joseph Smith's translation work, particularly his translation of the Bible and the Book of Abraham.

It is easy to imagine Huldah's book gathering dust in a neglected, hidden corner in the temple,²⁰ while Lehi's book, newly descended from heaven, would presumably be pristine. And yet Huldah's book can be touched and read by anyone while Lehi's exists only in his vision and is therefore inaccessible to anyone else. Consequently, recourse to a book seen only in a vision may be one of the worst ways to convince a hostile audience of the genuine nature of the prophetic message. So in both instances, the book's pedigree is compromised—but in different ways. I will return later to the implications of the imperfect nature of each text, but for now I will simply note that a divine book is not a perfect book—or a perfectly pedigreed book, or a perfectly accessible book.

Neither the reader of 2 Kings nor the reader of 1 Nephi is given the content of the book. This lacuna emphasizes the response each prophet has to the book; what Huldah's reader and Lehi's reader experience is not the book itself but rather the prophetic response to the book. In other words, the book is not important *per se* since the prophetic "translation" is accentuated. Huldah and Lehi each respond to the text with a similar prophetic utterance in two parts. The first halves closely track each other since they concern the impending destruction

tight) or is the deputy of the person who sits on the throne (in which case it is still substantial, if not as tight).

20. The account in 2 Kings does not specify where the text was found, but if it came from the holy of holies—which was understood to represent the Lord's seat or throne—then the comparison with Lehi's account is even tighter.

of Jerusalem for its wickedness.²¹ Neither prophecy is conditional; the coming destruction is announced but not the possibility of avoiding it through repentance. It seems that for both Huldah's and Lehi's audiences, the time has come when it is "everlastingly too late" to repent (Helaman 13:38).²² This state of affairs raises some interesting questions about the purpose of the text and the prophetic response to the text: What is the point of a new text and a prophetic utterance if repentance is not possible? Readers might assume that in Lehi's situation, the purpose was to get his family out of Jerusalem to avoid the coming destruction, but that command will come from an entirely separate dream in 1 Nephi 2:1–2. So both Huldah and Lehi announce destruction that cannot be avoided for (and, later, mercy that does not apply to) most of their audience. Why? This question asks us to rethink the point of prophecy. In these instances, it is clearly not for the immediate benefit of the audience but perhaps for future audiences to see how the prophecy was in fact fulfilled. In this way, the prophetic voice is capable of rupturing time—it speaks not to its own generation, not for its own benefit, but to a future reader. This situation ties in nicely with the move that Nephi will soon make in 1 Nephi 1:18 and 20 of speaking directly to his future readers. That, too, is an act of the prophetic voice.

Surprisingly enough, mercy is the second theme in both accounts: Huldah announces mercy for Josiah, and Lehi proclaims the Lord's mercy. Additionally, both accounts tie mercy to monarchy: Huldah refers specifically to the king while Lehi's words make reference to the throne of God and thus emphasize God's kingly elements. The antimonarchist rhetoric in many parts of the Hebrew Bible is strong; the minimization of this theme in the Book of Mormon and the very positive portrayal of, for example, King Benjamin, might be indirectly

21. Huldah says that the Lord will bring evil upon "this place" (2 Kings 22:16), which can be understood as Jerusalem or as all of Judah. In 2 Kings 23:27, the word of the Lord comes through an unnamed prophet (likely Huldah, given that she appears to be the king's choice of prophets to deliver new oracles) and announces the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem.

22. While speculative, it is possible that this predicament explains the "missing commission" in Lehi's prophetic call narrative: he is not commissioned because he does not, like other prophets (compare Isaiah 6:9–11), preach repentance.

attributable to the theme of monarchical mercy found in Huldah's and Lehi's statements.

The juxtaposition of destruction and mercy is as startling as it is comforting. This odd duo highlights the need for a prophetic voice in response to a text: that voice frames and nuances the message in what is essentially an act of translation. Both interpreted texts mitigate the stereotypical view of the retributive, punishing God by balancing the message of destruction for wickedness with the promise of God's mercy. The prophetic message to Josiah is the same as the one to Lehi:²³ because of his righteousness, he will be spared the need to witness the destruction of Jerusalem. In both cases, the admixture of judgment and mercy relies on the idea of a *place* being judged but of an *individual* being spared. The rupture between location and inhabitant sets the stage for Lehi's journey out of Jerusalem. And further complicating the message of mercy is the fact that both Josiah's and Lehi's silver lining accompanies a very dark cloud indeed: the only reason Josiah will be spared the destruction is that he will die before it happens. Similarly, Lehi's statement that God will "not suffer those who come unto [him] that they shall perish" (1 Nephi 1:14) weighs differently under the burden of knowing that his family will come very close to perishing²⁴ and will lose their community, wealth, and family unity. Personal righteousness is enough to prevent some level of harm, but not all of it. Maybe not even most of it. The individual can be disentangled from the community to an extent (and thus moral agency is preserved), but not entirely, and thus Josiah and Lehi escape the destruction of Jerusalem only by the most painful of means.²⁵ The prophetic responses

23. This link may be strengthened by Huldah's announcement that Josiah will be shown mercy because his heart was "tender" (see 2 Kings 22:19) and by Nephi's thesis at the end of the chapter that the Lord's "tender" mercies (see 1 Nephi 1:20) are over the faithful.

24. See 1 Nephi 2:11; 5:2; 16:39; 17:5; 19:20.

25. Given that Josiah dies in battle, the idea of his going to his grave "in peace" (see 2 Kings 22:20) is somewhat difficult to understand. Possibilities include that (1) he had a peaceful and honorable burial in Judah; (2) he did not in fact have a peaceful death because he violated prophetic counsel and returned to battle (see 2 Chronicles 35:20–22); (3) had he obeyed, things might have played out differently; and (4) he will be at peace

of both Huldah and Lehi share an identical message concerning the complicated relationship between destruction and mercy.

Huldah and Lehi: Historical and literary approaches

Now that I have explored the outlines of a historical and a literary reading of the relationship between Huldah and Lehi, it is time to complicate the picture by considering the limitations of these readings. Obviously, if Lehi was one of the people present at King Josiah's covenant renewal ceremony, it only makes sense to consider how this event would have shaped the background to 1 Nephi 1; it would be foolish to ignore an avenue that could potentially provide new insights into the Book of Mormon narrative. At the same time, reading historically is problematic. In this situation, Huldah's story is recounted in two canonized texts;²⁶ comparing these two accounts makes clear that at least one—if not both—of their authors has molded a historical narrative in order to advance distinct theological interests.²⁷ This is most obvious in 2 Kings' focus on the destruction of the idols when contrasted with 2 Chronicles' attention to the reinstatement of the Passover. However, other differences as well, including the fact that the texts do not share the same order of events, raise questions about causality. Further, many scholars wonder whether the ancient book discovered in the temple still had wet ink—that is, whether it was a recent creation designed to legitimize reforms that Josiah already desired to implement. The reader is left with irreconcilable accounts and no reliable, solid way to determine what actually happened. How, then, could this precarious account clarify Lehi's situation? The impenetrability of this question

after death because of his righteousness. It may be that the promise of going to his grave in peace actually hints at a violent death, since those are the likely circumstances under which a decent burial is an open question.

26. See 2 Kings 22 and 2 Chronicles 34.

27. This paper follows the account in 2 Kings 22, which emphasizes the purge of the idols, because it is generally regarded as the earlier text. The account in 2 Chronicles 34 is far more focused on the reinstatement of the Passover and merits further study alongside Lehi's experience given that his family will, in effect, enact a new exodus.

might lead readers to favor literary readings, but those are equally—if differently—fraught. What surety can there be as to whether any particular literary observation is inherent to the text or the product of the interpreter's own imposition? A second trouble that readers face when attempting a literary reading of the Book of Mormon is the inability to determine whether a particular word, phrase, or structure originated with its author, with the editor, or with Joseph Smith. So while Lehi's audience might have missed the mark by questioning his vision of the interpretation of books, the modern reader would probably bat well above average by adopting the same posture when presented with an interpretation. But if we delegitimize both historical and literary readings, what is left? How, then, might we interpret the text?

This is a swift rapid in a narrow shoal, but one that Huldah and Lehi can help readers navigate. Each audience has reason to doubt its text and its interpretation of it: in Huldah's case, because the author and origin of the text is completely unknown, and in Lehi's, because the text exists only in his vision and is not accessible to the audience. But both times the audience does not need to rely solely on the witness of the text, as it is combined with the authoritative word of the prophet. Further, in each situation, the audience is empowered to reach its own conclusions about the text: just as Josiah reads and rends his clothes, Nephi directly addresses his audience and invites them to know for themselves concerning what he is writing.²⁸ The brilliance of both Huldah's and Lehi's experiences is the way in which each story holds in tight tension the various avenues of revelation in order to convey to the audience that revelation does not depend upon a single slender thread but is instead an interwoven tapestry. For Huldah, revelation occurs because the king initiates temple repairs, because the high priest finds the scroll, because the scribes read the scroll, and because the prophetess Huldah receives the word of the Lord regarding the scroll. There is a balance here. Nephi presents a similar balance: attestations

28. Nephi's direct references to the audience via second-person pronouns (see 1 Nephi 1:18 and 20) nicely mirrors the other use of this rare narrative technique in Moroni 10.

of the validity of his record, the careful use of sources,²⁹ the vision, the dream, and the book are the different stakes pinning down the revealed will. Lehi's situation is particularly striking in that a divine being asks him to read a book. One might presume that that person could have directly communicated to Lehi whatever it was that needed to be said; a book is formally unnecessary in a face-to-face setting.³⁰ So Lehi's experience emphasizes the importance of the book and its mediating role—even in the very presence of one just descended from heaven. Similarly, one can imagine Huldah announcing the word of the Lord without a newly discovered book. The book is, again, formally unnecessary so that its presence emphasizes the mediating role of texts, even for an authoritative and well-respected prophet. For both Lehi and Huldah, revelation does not come through one channel but is reinforced, clarified, and interpreted through different venues. Even a book straight from the temple or from heaven requires interpretation.³¹ The Book of Mormon continues this theme by showing that even Lehi's wife did not believe in his calling until she had her own witness of it; similarly, Nephi asks to see what his father saw to gain an independent witness of it (1 Nephi 11:1).

In both Lehi's and Huldah's stories, it is clear that the Spirit is operative in their ability to read the text: in Lehi's case, because Nephi specifies that he was filled with the Spirit as he read (see 1 Nephi 1:12),

29. In 1 Nephi 1:16–17, Nephi makes clear that he will abridge his father's record, but he will make a fuller account of his own days. Lehi's record reflects Lehi's—not Nephi's—own knowledge, and so of course Nephi's account of it will of necessity be incomplete. Nephi will not be providing a full account of his father's experiences. He cannot; it is not his own experience. Nephi is very careful to draw a distinction between records where he is the primary source—material that he will relate in full and to which he can assent to its truthfulness—versus material that he abridges and that draws from experiences not his own. Surprisingly, Nephi does not class his father's records as beyond reproach, but he rather carefully delineates a difference between them and his own.

30. Similarly, one wonders why the plates were necessary for Joseph Smith to translate, given that he apparently sometimes translated without looking at the plates. It seems that the necessity for the text is something other than strictly functional.

31. Similarly, later Lehi and Nephi will see (what is apparently) the same vision, but they offer radically different interpretations of it.

and in Huldah's, because her triple repetition of the phrase "thus saith the Lord"³² implies that the Lord's Spirit is within her and prompts her speech. So the Spirit is yet another check on the process.

Lehi's and Huldah's stories simultaneously emphasize and de-emphasize the importance of texts by, on the one hand, making the text central to the development of the narrative—even when it is not formally necessary—and, on the other hand, including a variety of mediators of the text. Each time the role of the prophet as interpreter and translator of the text is emphasized. The role of a book is, as Isaiah wrote and as Nephi quoted, to make it possible that "the words of the faithful should speak as if it were from the dead" (2 Nephi 27:13). In other words, when a prophet interprets a text, the prophet has resurrected the text.

For both Josiah and Lehi, the mercy they receive is predicated not on the book per se but rather on the prophetic response to the book. And while one can easily imagine both Huldah's and Lehi's stories proceeding with no book at all—simply with divine revelation coming to the prophet without the mediating text—the presence of the text speaks to its important mediating role. With Huldah, the presence of prophets was incapable of maintaining righteousness in the absence of the written word, but the written word was incapable of being fully understood and implemented without her prophetic interpretation of it. The book can be an aid to memory, a way to displace time, and a prompt to new prophetic inspiration. But it is not an end in itself. The same dynamic might apply to the work of Joseph Smith, where, for example, his work on the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible led to many revelations for what would later become the Doctrine and Covenants. The message to the reader is clear: as important as a text is in understanding the will of God, it is but one step in a process that consists of, in a more modern analogy, a variety of checks and balances. The problems of the text—whether the provenance of Huldah's, the reality of Lehi's, or the stumbling blocks hiding in a historical or literary reading—are solved not by proving anything outright but rather by balancing a slew of methods and modes of revelation. Thus, the book

32. See 2 Kings 22:15, 16, and 18.

is never an end in itself; the book is a link in the chain of revelation. Huldah and Lehi are two witnesses to the same pattern: they are each given a book of sacred origin, and their response to reading the text is to prophesy. They have thus taught readers how to account for the fact that it is impossible to prove the provenance—or the literary nature—of the text. They translate their texts—not into another tongue but rather into another tone—to show that while texts always mediate the divine presence, prophets always mediate the text.³³

Conclusions

Given the historical proximity to and importance of Huldah's experience to Lehi's life, and given the myriad ways in which Lehi's story echoes and amplifies Huldah's, readers have good reason to argue that Huldah casts a shadow over the entire Book of Mormon narrative, but especially the first chapter. Her concern with texts is unlike anything seen elsewhere in the Bible yet is perfectly at home with the near obsession with texts, records, and the prophetic responses to them that permeates the Book of Mormon. Her prophecy emphasizes commandments and mercy, which will become two key themes in the Book of Mormon. It is also pinned to history by its prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem, which is the signal event in the inauguration of the Book of Mormon narrative. She is the mother of the "likening it unto yourself" hermeneutic that is so very characteristic of the Book of Mormon. And if one goal of the Book of Mormon is to convince the reader that new revelation is possible, there are few better ways to do that than by reference to Huldah's experience. The pattern is simple: receive a divine book, read the book, and engage the book with your world through the prophetic voice. Huldah sets a pattern followed by Lehi, by Alma,³⁴ by Joseph Smith, and, ideally, by every modern reader of the Book of Mormon.

33. Contrast Matthew 2:4–6, where the chief priests and scribes can recite the text but cannot apply it to their current circumstance.

34. See Joseph M. Spencer, *An Other Testament: On Typology*, 2nd ed. (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2016), 8–9.