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“Upon All the Ships of the Sea, and Upon All the Ships of Tarshish”: Revisiting 2 Nephi 12:16 and Isaiah 2:16

Dana M. Pike
Brigham Young University, dana_pike@byu.edu

David R. Seely
Brigham Young University, david_seely@byu.edu

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Some Latter-day Saint commentators deem a phrase that appears in 2 Nephi 12:16 but not in the parallel passage in Isaiah 2:16—“and upon all ships of the sea”—as evidence that the Book of Mormon preserves a version of this verse from the brass plates that is more complete than the Hebrew or King James readings. One scholar’s conclusions in this regard are reviewed and then critiqued for ignoring the complexities of the ancient Hebrew and Greek versions of the Bible. The authors examine Isaiah 2:16 in its broader literary context, noting that the 2 Nephi reading alters a pattern of synonymous couplets; analyze the Greek and Hebrew texts of the verse; and relate their findings to the Book of Mormon reading. They discuss the inherent limitations of textual criticism in this kind of study and conclude that LDS and non-LDS scholars are open to different interpretive possibilities owing to the role that faith plays in one’s approach to and interpretation of textual evidence.
“Upon All the Ships of the Sea,
Readers of the Book of Mormon soon realize that a large number of passages from the book of Isaiah are quoted therein. In fact, 21 chapters, as well as many shorter passages from the book of Isaiah, appear in the Nephite record. These Isaiah passages have long challenged and intrigued students of the Book of Mormon. In this study we focus on one verse from Isaiah 2 in order to thoroughly explore the differences between this verse as it occurs in the Bible and in the Book of Mormon.

Isaiah 2:10–22 proclaims that the “day of the Lord” will bring devastating effects upon a variety of people and things, including

upon all the ships of Tarshish,
and upon all pleasant pictures. (Isaiah 2:16 KJV)

Some students of Latter-day Saint scripture place a great deal of significance on the wording of Isaiah 2:16 because it occurs in 2 Nephi 12:16 with an additional line:

and upon all the ships of the sea,
and upon all the ships of Tarshish,
and upon all pleasant pictures.

While a few Latter-day Saint commentators on the book of Isaiah and 2 Nephi 12 make no mention of this variation, most consider the extra line found in 2 Nephi 12:16 to be significant, claiming, for example, that this is “incidental evidence that the Book of Mormon had the complete original text [of Isaiah 2:16] from the plates of brass” and that “the Book of Mormon contains the most complete retention of the original structure of this verse.”

By Dana M. Pike and David Rolph Seely
Sidney B. Sperry presented the first and fullest expression of this perspective, basing his observation on the King James Version of the Hebrew Bible (the Christian Old Testament) and on the Septuagint, the earliest Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, originating in the third to second centuries BC. Sperry claimed that in 2 Nephi 12:16 (compare Isaiah 2:16) the Book of Mormon has a reading of remarkable interest. It prefixes a phrase of eight words not found in the Hebrew or King James versions. Since the ancient Septuagint (Greek) Version concurs with the added phrase in the Book of Mormon, let us exhibit the reading of the Book of Mormon (B.M.), the King James Version (K.J.), and the Septuagint (LXX) as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>B.M.</th>
<th>K.J.</th>
<th>LXX</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>And upon all the ships of the sea,</td>
<td>— — — — — — — — —</td>
<td>And upon every ship of the sea,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and upon all the ships of Tarshish</td>
<td>— — — — — — — — —</td>
<td>And upon all the ships of Tarshish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and upon all pleasant pictures.</td>
<td>— — — — — — — — —</td>
<td>and upon all pleasant pictures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and upon every display of fine ships.</td>
<td>— — — — — — — — —</td>
<td>and upon every display of fine ships.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Book of Mormon suggests that the original text of this verse contained three phrases, all of which commence with the same opening words, “and upon all.” By a common accident, the original Hebrew (and hence the King James) text lost the first phrase, which was, however, preserved by the Septuagint. The latter lost the second phrase and seems to have corrupted the third phrase. The Book of Mormon preserved all three phrases.7

Sperry thus proposed that the Masoretic Text (MT)—the traditional Hebrew Bible, which is the basis for the Old Testament in the King James Version (KJV) and most other English translations—and the Greek Septuagint (LXX) both contain portions of an “original” version of Isaiah 2:16, but that both are incomplete, each having lost a different phrase in transmission. His observation that “the Book of Mormon preserved all three phrases” indicates his understanding that 2 Nephi 12:16 represents a more complete form of this verse than the one preserved in Isaiah 2:16.

Sperry’s analysis is included in the Church Educational System student manual for the Old Testament8 and is quoted or at least cited by many Latter-day Saint commentators on the book of Isaiah.9 It also appears to be the basis for the following statement in 2 Nephi 12:16 footnote 16a in the current English edition of the Book of Mormon, which de facto bestows a seemingly official status on it: “The Greek (Septuagint) has ‘ships of the sea.’ The Hebrew has ‘ships of Tarshish.’ The Book of Mormon has both, showing that the brass plates had lost neither phrase.”10

Since Joseph Smith did not know Hebrew or Greek prior to 1830 (the year the Book of Mormon was published), he obviously did not check ancient versions of Isaiah as he produced the Book of Mormon.11 Latter-day Saints therefore accept that the text of 2 Nephi 12:16 must have come from the plates Joseph Smith received from Moroni. Thus Isaiah 2:16 // 2 Nephi 12:16, a short verse of no real...
doctrinal significance, has been assigned a great deal of weight by many Latter-day Saints since it seems to provide tangible support for the divine calling of Joseph Smith and the revealed nature of his translation of the Book of Mormon. However, the issues and challenges involved in dealing with the ancient Hebrew and Greek versions of the Bible as they impact our understanding of Isaiah 2:16 in 2 Nephi 12:16 are much more complex than Sperry’s explanation suggests.¹²

In this study we aim to demonstrate that the relationship between Isaiah 2:16 and 2 Nephi 12:16 is not nearly as simple or clear-cut as some publications by Latter-day Saints have suggested. We also explain why Latter-day Saints who accept the divine nature of the Book of Mormon will always provide an explanation different from that of other people for the relationship between Isaiah 2:16 and 2 Nephi 12:16. To accomplish this, we will review the relationship between Isaiah 2:16 and its broader context in Isaiah chapter 2, analyze the Hebrew and Greek texts of Isaiah 2:16, and relate these data to the text of 2 Nephi 12:16 in the Book of Mormon.

### Chart 1: Isaiah 2:13–16 and 2 Nephi 12:13–16

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NRSV Isaiah 2</th>
<th>KJV Isaiah 2</th>
<th>2 Nephi 12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13 -----</td>
<td>13 -----</td>
<td>13 Yea, and the day of the Lord shall come upon all the cedars of Lebanon, for they are high and lifted up; and upon all the oaks of Bashan;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>against all the cedars of Lebanon, lofty and lifted up; and against all the oaks of Bashan;</td>
<td>And upon all the cedars of Lebanon, that are high and lifted up, and upon all the oaks of Bashan,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 against all the high mountains, and against all the lofty hills;</td>
<td>14 And upon all the high mountains, and upon all the hills that are lifted up,</td>
<td>14 And upon all the high mountains, and upon all the hills, and upon all the nations which are lifted up, and upon every people;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 against every high tower, and against every fortified wall;</td>
<td>15 And upon every high tower, and upon every fenced wall,</td>
<td>15 And upon every high tower, and upon every fenced wall;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 -----</td>
<td>16 -----</td>
<td>16 And upon all the ships of the sea, and upon all the ships of Tarshish, and upon all pleasant pictures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>against all the ships of Tarshish, and against all the beautiful craft.</td>
<td>And upon all the ships of Tarshish, and upon all pleasant pictures.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Literary Context of Isaiah 2:16

Some initial comments on the literary context of Isaiah 2:16 are necessary to appreciate the form and content of this verse. Isaiah 2 begins with the well-known, lyric prophecy that the temple of the Lord will be built in the tops of the mountains and “all nations shall flow unto it” and that eventually nations will not “learn war any more” (vv. 1–4). Verses 5–9 contain the Lord’s invitation to the “house of Jacob” to “walk in the light of the Lord” rather than in the ways of the world.¹³ These worldly ways are represented by symbols of false religion, wealth, power, and pride.

Isaiah 2:10–22. Isaiah 2:10–21 powerfully relates the resultant fear of, and the effects upon, those involved in the ways of the world when the “day of the Lord” arrives. Latter-day Saints understand that ultimately this “day” is Jehovah’s/Jesus’s second coming, when the Lord’s power will be unleashed against the wicked.¹⁴ Verses 10–12 and 17–21 bracket this block of text, emphasizing that Jehovah’s glory will humble and destroy the arrogant ones of the earth, who will be casting aside their worthless idols.
and seeking to hide in “the clefts of the rocks” and “in the dust” (note the similarity between these two passages). Verse 22 reiterates the content of verse 5 from a different perspective and provides one last encouragement to not follow the ways of mortals, who are devoid of any real power to save.\textsuperscript{16}

Isaiah 2:13–16. Amid this larger block of text (vv. 10–22), verses 13–16 recount representative items symbolizing the human pride that the Lord will destroy “in that day” (v. 17) when he comes in glory to cleanse and redeem the earth. For purposes of comparison, chart 1 presents Isaiah 2:13–16 as found in the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV; employed here as a representative modern English translation), the King James Version (KJV), and 2 Nephi 12:13–16 (1981 English edition of the Book of Mormon).\textsuperscript{17} While the NRSV and KJV exhibit some differences in English word choice, they are generally the same since both are based on the Hebrew Masoretic Text (MT).

Isaiah 2:13–16 displays an obvious symmetry of form and content. Each of these four verses specifies a pair of items symbolizing the earthly power and pride that will be destroyed by the Lord. Each pair is a synonymous parallelism (although verse 13 does contain some descriptive amplification).\textsuperscript{18} For example, verse 14 pairs “high mountains” with “hills that are lifted up,” repeating a similar topographic feature in somewhat different words. Likewise, verse 15 pairs “every high tower” with “every fenced wall,” both examples of fortifications.\textsuperscript{19} This pattern implies that the pair of items cited in verse 16 will be synonymous as well (this point is discussed below).

The pattern of synonymous couplets in Isaiah 2:13–16 is somewhat altered in 2 Nephi 12:13–16. The latter contains an introductory line that reiterates the idea, expressed at the beginning of verse 12, that “the Lord” is the agent of the action against the items mentioned in verses 13–16. Verse 14 contains an extra synonymous couplet that has the effect of shifting the perspective from naturally occurring symbols of pride to nations and their creations (the fortifications and ships cited in verses 15–16). And, as noted above, verse 16 contains three lines of text, the first two of which are a parallel pair. The significance of this latter discrepancy is discussed below.

Isaiah 2:16 in the Hebrew Masoretic Text (MT)

Having reviewed the basic literary context of verse 16, we now address issues involving the Hebrew text of Isaiah 2:16 and its translation. The two English translations of Isaiah 2:16 cited above (KJV and NRSV) derive from the standard Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible, the oldest surviving manuscripts of which date to the end of the first millennium AD.\textsuperscript{20}

Since the documents known as the Dead Sea Scrolls preserve copies of most books of the Hebrew Bible from the last two centuries BC, and since some of these biblical texts differ from what later became the normative Hebrew text (the Masoretic Text), they provide an important resource for checking the status of biblical texts at the turn of the era. Remnants of 21 copies of the book of Isaiah have been discovered...
in caves around Qumran, but most are quite fragmentary. Isaiah 2:16 is fully preserved on only one of these, 1QIsa\(^a\), known as the “Great Isaiah Scroll.”\(^{21}\) As preserved thereon, Isaiah 2:16 is essentially the same as in the later Masoretic Text.\(^{22}\) Additionally, a few letters from Isaiah 2:16 are preserved at the bottom edge of 4QIsa\(^b\) fragment 2, and they also match the Masoretic Text.\(^{23}\) These earlier textual witnesses thus provide no alternative information regarding the form or content of Isaiah 2:16. The textual tradition from which the traditional Hebrew Masoretic Text developed is the only Hebrew version available for analysis.

Although all English translations of Isaiah 2:16 based on the Hebrew text of Isaiah use the Masoretic Text, the NRSV renders the second line of verse 16 (designated 16b) much differently from the corresponding translation in the KJV (see chart 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MT(^{24})</th>
<th>NRSV</th>
<th>KJV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>wĕ al kol-ʾônîyôt taršîš [a] wĕ al kol-šĕkîyôt haḥemdâ [b]</td>
<td>against all the ships of Tarshish [a] and against all the beautiful craft [b] [i.e., watercraft, boats]</td>
<td>And upon all the ships of Tarshish [a] and upon all pleasant pictures [b]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The difference between verse 16b in most recent English translations, represented here by the NRSV, and the KJV is the result of two important decisions: how much interpretive influence the poetic form should have on the translation and how to best render the rare Hebrew word šĕkîyôt.\(^{25}\)

The repetitive, formulaic nature of the synonymous parallelisms in verses 13–15 (“against all/every . . . and all/every . . .”) clearly continues into verse 16 mentioned in 16a in order to complete the parallel form. Harold Cohen thus confidently asserted: “That šĕkîyôt [translated ‘pictures’ in the KJV] must refer to some kind of ship is indicated by the parallelism šĕkîyôt /// ʾônîyôt.”\(^{26}\) The KJV’s “pleasant pictures,” however, brings to mind a collection of paintings, not something analogous with “ships of Tarshish.”\(^{27}\)

In addition to this pattern-based expectation of synonymous phrases in Isaiah 2:16a+b, the key difference between the King James translation of

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Dead Sea Scrolls text 1QIsa\(^a\) (Great Isaiah Scroll), with wording at Isaiah 2:16 boxed.
Isaiah 2:16 and most modern ones is the translation of the Hebrew word śĕkîyôt. This feminine plural noun occurs only once in the Masoretic Text, here in Isaiah 2:16b. The singular form śĕkîyâ, from which śĕkîyôt derives, does not occur at all in the Masoretic Text, nor is any form of śĕkîyâ attested in known Israelite inscriptions from before 600 BC (about the time the Lehiites left Jerusalem with the brass plates). In cases such as this, scholars seek help in determining the meaning of rarely attested Hebrew words by examining cognates in other languages in the Semitic language family, of which Hebrew is a part.

Prior to the mid-20th century, English translations of the Bible often rendered the Hebrew noun śĕkîyôt as “pictures,” as in the Geneva Bible (1st ed., 1560) and the King James Version (1st ed., 1611). There is a Semitic root SKH, which has the general meaning of “to look out for, to hope for,” and a rare Hebrew noun maśkît, presumably connected with this linguistic root, which is often translated “figure, image.”

Lacking other comparative data, earlier translators supposed that the rare Hebrew noun śĕkîyôt in Isaiah 2:16b was related to these words; thus the translation “pictures”—something to look at—occurs in the KJV.

However, the discovery of alphabetic cuneiform texts in a Semitic language preserved on clay tablets from ancient Ugarit near the coast of Syria that date to the 14th and 13th centuries BC has provided a valuable cognate resource. These texts, the first of which were discovered in 1929, indicate that the Ugaritic word ṣkt designates a type of ship. One particular text lists ṣkt—ships under the heading of ḫmight, “ships of Maḥaadu.” The Ugaritic word ḫmicht, “ships,” is cognate with Hebrew ḥanîyôt, which occurs in Isaiah 2:16a in the phrase “ships of Tarshish” and elsewhere in the Masoretic Text. The Ugaritic word ṣkt appears to be cognate with Hebrew śĕkîyôt, which occurs only in Isaiah 2:16b.

This correlation is strengthened by the fact that a related Egyptian word, sktw, means “ship.”

The Hebrew noun śĕkîyôt in Isaiah 2:16b is in a genitival relationship with the following feminine singular noun ḫemđâ (usually translated adjectively in English), which means “desirable things, pleasant things.” Accepting Hebrew śĕkîyôt as cognate with Ugaritic ṣkt, as most Bible translators now do, the phrase in Isaiah 2:16b literally reads, “and against/upon all ships of pleasantness/desirableness/beauty.”

The translation of the rare Hebrew word śĕkîyôt in modern English versions of Isaiah 2:16 as “ships,” or the like, instead of “pictures” is thus based on two main considerations: the expected synonymous parallelism in Isaiah 2:16 itself—that is, the presumption that the object mentioned in verse 16b will be similar to the “ships” mentioned in 16a; and the insight that the Ugaritic word ṣkt, which designates a type...
of ship, is cognate with the Hebrew ṣēkiyōt in Isaiah 2:16b. The Greek Septuagint rendition of this verse is an additional consideration in such translations (see below). Thus this data does not support Sperry’s proposal, quoted above, in which he understood the line “and upon all pleasant pictures” in Isaiah 2:16b as distinctly different from two lines mentioning ships in 2 Nephi 12:16a+b (“ships of the sea,” and “ships of Tarshish”).

Isaiah 2:16 in Its Ancient Greek Translation:

The Septuagint (LXX)

The Septuagint is an ancient Jewish translation of the Hebrew biblical books into Greek, produced during the third and second centuries BC. Even though the best manuscripts come from several centuries later, this old Greek translation provides early evidence for the text of the Hebrew Bible. Eventually, Jews and Christians alike used the Septuagint as scripture, though many Jews came to reject it when Christians adopted it.

As a group, textual critics have attempted to construct the original Greek text, in part to determine the Hebrew text that lies behind the Septuagint translation. But this has proven to be very difficult for a number of reasons. First, differences in translation style (literal, free-style, etc.) and in the vocabulary used to translate the same Hebrew words indicate that there were different translators for different biblical books. And the process of translating the biblical books spanned a century or more. Second, numerous revised translations into Greek were made in later centuries. Throughout the transmission history of these texts, various scribes occasionally altered the Greek translations they had available to better suit a particular audience. In some cases the scribes also had Hebrew texts before them and attempted to reflect those texts more accurately by retranslating a particular Greek passage they were copying. Thus through the centuries various Greek translations came into being.

In order to address these complexities, modern editions of the Septuagint are often eclectic texts—that is, they are texts created by editors who attempt to provide the best reading from the various Greek text traditions for each passage. Significant textual variants are then collected and cited in a set of notes, called an apparatus, at the bottom of the page, along with suggestions concerning the most likely Hebrew text behind the Greek translation.

Until the mid-20th century, most scholars assumed that the Septuagint was translated from the forerunner of the Hebrew Masoretic Text. Variations between the Masoretic Text and the Greek translations were often assumed to have resulted from errors, such as misunderstandings of the Hebrew, theological discrepancies, or inaccurate copying or translations. However, with the discovery and publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls from 1947 onward, it became evident that a significant number of the differences between the Greek and the Hebrew biblical texts are best explained as differences in the ancient Hebrew texts employed by the Greek translators. An instructive example of this phenomenon is the book of Jeremiah, which is 15 percent longer in the Hebrew of the Masoretic Text than in the Greek Septuagint.

Some Hebrew fragments of the book of Jeremiah discovered at Qumran closely match the Masoretic Text, while others are similar to the Septuagint translation of Jeremiah, demonstrating
that many of the differences in the ancient Greek are best attributed to differing Hebrew texts of Jeremiah. This situation illustrates how any discussion of variants between biblical texts in Hebrew and Greek is tentative. Since none of the original Hebrew or Greek biblical texts have survived, we cannot always be sure whether differences between the Greek Septuagint and the Hebrew Masoretic Text resulted from the translation process itself or from the use of a different Hebrew base text by the translators of the Septuagint. Thus we cannot certify whether the Septuagint preserves an accurate translation of the Hebrew text employed by the translators, nor know what other forms of this verse may have existed in antiquity.

With these challenges in mind, we now turn to the Greek text of Isaiah 2:16. The most authoritative modern edition of the Septuagint is the Göttingen series, which collates the many different Greek manuscripts of the Septuagint in order to ascertain the best possible reading for each verse of the Bible. In this edition Isaiah 2:16 reads as found in chart 3:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LXX</th>
<th>English Translation of LXX</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kai epi pan ploion thalassēs [a]</td>
<td>and upon every ship of the sea [a]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kai epi pasan thean ploïn kallous [b]</td>
<td>and upon every display of fine ships [b]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to the variants cited in the Göttingen apparatus, there is no known evidence for the existence of three lines in the Greek text tradition of this verse, as are found in 2 Nephi 12:16.

Chart 4 compares Isaiah 2:16 in the Septuagint with the English translations in the NRSV and KJV, both of which are based on the Hebrew Masoretic Text:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LXX</th>
<th>MT/NRSV</th>
<th>MT/KJV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kai epi pan ploion thalassēs [a]</td>
<td>wĕ al kol-ʾôniyôt taršîš [a]</td>
<td>wĕ al kol-šēkyôt haḥemdā [a]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kai epi pasan thean ploïn kallous [b]</td>
<td>against all the ships of Tarshish [a]</td>
<td>and against all the beautiful craft [b]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And upon every ship of the sea [a]</td>
<td>and upon every display of fine ships [b]</td>
<td>And upon all the ships of Tarshish [a]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the other hand, some scholars have identified a plausible reason for the difference between the Hebrew Masoretic Text and the Septuagint translation that is not based on error. As James Barr observed, “It is clear that there was a school of thought [in antiquity] which consistently interpreted [Hebrew] taršîš as ‘sea.’ Jerome maintained that taršîš was the ‘proper’ word for ‘sea’ in Hebrew.”

Two major differences are observable. In the first line of the Septuagint (16a) the Greek reads “sea” (thalassēs) instead of “Tarshish.” The second line has “every display of fine ships” (pasan thean ploïn kalillow), similar to the translation of the Hebrew found in the NRSV, instead of “all pleasant pictures” as found in the KJV.

Rather than postulating the original existence of two different lines—like “ships of the sea” and “ships of Tarshish”—as in 2 Nephi 12:16—Bible scholars have attempted to explain the difference between the first line of the Greek version (16a: “and upon every ship of the sea”) and the first line of the Masoretic Text (16a: “and upon all the ships of Tarshish”) in two different ways. On the one hand, it is possible that a translator or a scribe simply made an error between the similar Greek words for “sea,” thalassē, and “Tarshish,” Tharsēs. Isaac Seeligmann, a prominent scholar of the Septuagint of Isaiah, indicated “it is probable that thalassē should be regarded as nothing more than a thoughtless error on the part of the copyists, instead of an actually intended Tharsēs.”

40

Chart 3: Isaiah 2:16 in the LXX

Chart 4: Isaiah 2:16 in Greek, Hebrew, and English
Daniel 10:6, in which Hebrew taršîš/Tarshish is rendered “sea” in the Septuagint, supports this explanation. First- and second-century-AD translators of Isaiah and other prophetic books demonstrate this same propensity for rendering the Hebrew word for Tarshish as “sea.” This conflicts with Sperry’s explanation of 2 Nephi 12:16, in which he assumed the Septuagint preserved a text that read “sea” but not “Tarshish.”

The Hebrew text of Isaiah 2:16b apparently challenged ancient Greek translators, just as it did later English translators. In the Septuagint this line is rendered “and upon every display of fine ships” (kai epi pasas opseis tēs epithumias). Symmachus and the kaige-Theodotion text similarly render the phrase as “upon all desirable views” (kai epi pasas theas epithumētas). These alternative Greek translations of the Hebrew text of this phrase suggest that the translators were unsure of what the unique Hebrew term šĕkîyôt in verse 16b meant. The Greek translators all understood verse 16b to refer to a view of desirable or pleasant things. The Septuagint renders “display of fine ships”: either translating šĕkîyôt as “ships” since in Hebrew it is a plural noun or translating it as “display” and adding the word ships to create a line parallel to the one before. Aquila, Symmachus, and the kaige-Theodotion texts apparently translated šĕkîyôt as “views.”

This resulted in differing Greek translations, similar to the situation in English: “and against all the beautiful craft” (NRSV) and “and upon all pleasant pictures” (KJV).

Thus many scholars deduce that the Septuagint version of Isaiah 2:16 comes from a Hebrew text very much like the Masoretic Text. Early Greek translators may have erred in rendering “sea” for Hebrew taršîš/Tarshish in verse 16a, or they may have followed a translation practice, preserved later by Jerome, that Tarshish meant “sea.” And at least some Greek translators were unsure of what Hebrew šĕkîyôt meant in verse 16b. The simplest explanation for this data is that the translators of the Greek Septuagint worked from a Hebrew text similar to that from which the Hebrew Masoretic Text derives. This review of the Greek textual tradition of Isaiah 2:16 highlights the complex nature of reconstructing the original text behind the translation in 2 Nephi 12:16. It also tends to undermine Sperry’s theory about the form of Isaiah 2:16 in the Septuagint.

Comparing Isaiah 2:16 with 2 Nephi 12:16

Having surveyed the difficulties in dealing with Isaiah 2:16 in Hebrew and Greek, we now turn to the challenge of analyzing the relationship between Isaiah 2:16 and 2 Nephi 12:16. We preface this analysis with three qualifying observations that impact the following discussion:

1. There are inherent, insurmountable limitations to dealing with textual questions regarding passages in the Book of Mormon given that we must work with the English translation only, rather than the original language of the passages.

2. Presuming there was an original text of Isaiah 2:16 (by about 700 BC), there is no way to determine whether this was accurately transmitted onto the brass plates, which left Jerusalem about 600 BC, nor whether Nephi accurately transferred this passage from the brass plates onto his small plates some 30 years later (see 2 Nephi 5:28–33; remember the cautions in such passages as 1 Nephi 19:6 and Mormon 8:17). Thus while many Latter-day Saints accept 2 Nephi 12:16 as the “original” form of Isaiah 2:16, we cannot know this for sure at the present time. We do not encounter the oldest preserved text of Isaiah 2:16 in Hebrew (1QIsa, from among the Dead Sea Scrolls) until about 450 years after Nephi, and the form of the verse at that time is similar to its form in the later Masoretic Text tradition.

3. No one knows much about Joseph Smith’s translation procedure for the Book of Mormon vis-à-vis the KJV in passages in which the English is similar. Commenting on the Isaiah passages in the Book of Mormon, Royal Skousen has stated that “witnesses who observed Joseph Smith dictating the Book of Mormon claimed that Joseph Smith used no book at all.” This would seem to rule out his use of the Bible for the Isaiah passages in the Book of Mormon. However, Daniel Ludlow, for example, has contended that there appears to only be one answer to explain the word-for-word similarities between the verses of Isaiah in the Bible and the same verses in the Book of Mormon. When Joseph Smith translated the Isaiah references from the small plates of Nephi, he evidently opened his King...
James Version of the Bible and compared the impression he had received in translating with the words of the King James scholars. If his translation was essentially the same as that of the King James Version, he apparently quoted the verse from the Bible. . . . However, if Joseph Smith’s translation did not agree precisely with that of the King James scholars, he would dictate his own translation to the scribe [while generally utilizing the language of the KJV]. This procedure in translation would account for both the 234 verses of Isaiah that were changed or modified by the Prophet Joseph and the 199 verses that were translated word-for-word the same.49

With these challenging limitations in mind, we can now discuss 2 Nephi 12:16 in relation to Isaiah 2:16. In the following chart, we note again the differences in form and content:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chart 5: Isaiah 2:16 and 2 Nephi 12:16</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Isaiah 2:16 NRSV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>against all the ships of Tarshish [a] and against all the beautiful craft [b]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In contrast to the KJV rendition of Isaiah 2:16, 2 Nephi 12:16a-b preserves a synonymous couplet (“ships of the sea” // “ships of Tarshish”), followed by a third, concluding line of text (16c).

If they are original, the three poetic lines preserved in 2 Nephi 12:16 could have become the two lines preserved in the standard Hebrew Masoretic Text through a well-attested process in which scribes accidentally omitted words, phrases, or even whole passages because their eyes skipped to similar wording elsewhere in the text.50 In this case, a scribe could have omitted one of the three phrases, all of which began with the same “and against/upon every . . .” (וְאֵל כֹּל . . .). This process is the “common accident” to which Sperry made reference in his proposal. He suggested it happened twice, once with the Hebrew text and once with a different line in the Greek translation. However, if this “accident” actually happened, we consider it much more plausible that it occurred only once, with the Hebrew. It appears that the Greek Septuagint was translated from a Hebrew text that had the same two poetic lines for verse 16 that the Hebrew Masoretic Text does.

Interpretive Possibilities. Those who do not accept the Book of Mormon as ancient scripture brought forth by divine power provide a few basic explanations for the differences between the text of Isaiah 2:16 in the Hebrew Masoretic Text, the Greek Septuagint, and 2 Nephi 12:16. Two recent publications employ such explanations, so we refer to them here as illustrations. We do not provide a full, interactive analysis of either author’s claims in this context.

David P. Wright attempted in a lengthy study to provide a detailed response to the question of “whether the several chapters or passages of Isaiah cited and paraphrased in the book [Book of Mormon] derive from an ancient text or whether they have been copied with some revision from the King James Version of the Bible.”51 His interpretation of the “internal textual evidence” led him to assert that the Isaiah material in the Book of Mormon “is a revision of the KJV and not a translation of an ancient document.”52

In another recent study, Ronald V. Huggins undertook to demonstrate the “possible sources” for the “changes” Joseph Smith made in two biblical verses when he rendered them in the Book of Mormon (Isaiah 2:16 > 2 Nephi 12:16 and Matthew 5:22 > 3 Nephi 12:22), since Joseph Smith did not know Hebrew or Greek before the publication of the Book of Mormon and thus could not have found support for such revisions through his own acquaintance with Hebrew or Greek texts.53 Huggins’s orientation is clear: “One point that seems obvious is that we should look for the source of these two variants in an influence on Joseph Smith at the time of his
first use of them . . . in the Book of Mormon.”

Huggins concluded that certain English-language resources or people familiar with such resources were sufficiently accessible to Joseph Smith so as to demonstrate that he could have obtained these alternative readings in the Book of Mormon from those resources.

From these two examples, it is evident that those who study the Book of Mormon but deny it is ancient scripture analyze its text against the only comparative sources available to them: the surviving ancient versions of the Bible, in particular the Hebrew Masoretic Text and the Greek Septuagint, and potential modern influences on Joseph Smith. Of course, none of these authors’ assertions can be established as fact. Indeed, Huggins in his concluding remarks carefully used qualifiers such as likely and perhaps more than a dozen times in the course of two pages. He does not claim that his theory is fact, just that it “might” be.

For those who do accept the Book of Mormon as ancient scripture translated “by the gift and power of God,” there are likewise a few interpretive possibilities available to help explain the difference between Isaiah 2:16 and 2 Nephi 12:16. It is conceivable, for example, that an ancient scribal accident in copying Isaiah 2:16 affected the form of 2 Nephi 12:16 before Joseph Smith translated this verse, or that a modern scribal error in dictation or transcription occurred as Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery produced the English translation manuscripts of this verse. However, most Latter-day Saints not only accept the divine origins of the Book of Mormon but expect that the text of 2 Nephi 12:16 represents an original form of Isaiah 2:16, as opposed to what is preserved in the Bible. Working from this perspective, we cite three possible explanations for this discrepancy. One is Sidney B. Sperry’s well-known proposal.

Sperry’s approach looks neat and convincing because it is presented only with English translations, including the KJV translation of the Hebrew. However, the above review of the available Hebrew and Greek texts of Isaiah 2:16 demonstrates that Sperry’s proposal glosses over several complexities. He posited that 2 Nephi 12:16a (“ships of the sea”) is preserved in the Greek Septuagint but is missing from the Hebrew and KJV. However, “ships of the sea” in the Septuagint can be explained as an error or as an intentional, interpretive translation from Hebrew (“ships of Tarshish”) to Greek, not necessarily as a witness for an original textual reading.

Also, Sperry assumed that the second line in the KJV (“all pleasant pictures”) represents an acceptable rendition of the unique Hebrew phrase šékîyôt haḥêmdâ. But accepting Sperry’s approach requires one to discount the Ugaritic cognate ťkt, “ships” (plus the related Egyptian form). Finally, Sperry stated that the second of the two lines in the Greek Septuagint (“upon every display of fine ships”) is a misrepresentation of an original third line of the verse, preserved in 2 Nephi 12:16c as “all pleasant pictures.” However, Isaiah 2:16b in the Septuagint translates quite similarly to Isaiah 2:16b in the Hebrew Masoretic Text, if one renders Hebrew šékîyôt as “ships,” as opposed to “pictures” (KJV).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chart 6: 2 Nephi 12:16 Compared to the Hebrew and Greek of Isaiah 2:16</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>2 Nephi 12:16</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MT</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NRSV</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>KJV</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>LXX</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>English LXX</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Thus the apparent simplicity of Sperry’s solution relies upon an oversimplification of the Hebrew and Greek textual situation.

An alternative explanation to the relationship between Isaiah 2:16 and 2 Nephi 12:16 includes accepting that Hebrew śĕkîyôt should be translated “ships,” and that Isaiah 2:16 in the Hebrew Masoretic Text (“all the ships of Tarshish” // “all the beautiful craft”) and in the Greek Septuagint (“every ship of the sea” // “every display of fine ships”) consists of a synonymous couplet deriving from the same textual tradition. Theoretically, this couplet would have to somehow correlate with the first two lines of 2 Nephi 12:16a+b (“all the ships of the sea . . . all the ships of Tarshish”), which is problematic. 2 Nephi 12:16c (“all pleasant pictures”) would then function as a third, summary line preserved only in the translation of 2 Nephi 12:16c, having been lost in antiquity from the text of Isaiah before the Septuagint was produced and before the Masoretic Text became the standard Hebrew text.

In light of Isaiah 2:13 // 2 Nephi 12:13, where an additional phrase stands at the beginning of 2 Nephi 12:13 and helps introduce the series of parallel couplets in verses 13–16 (see chart 1 above), 2 Nephi 12:16c (“all pleasant pictures”) may have served as a summary phrase at the end of this series of parallel couplets (verses 13–16): the Lord “in that day” will be against everything that is desirable or precious from a worldly perspective. As noted, however, neither the additional phrase at the beginning of 2 Nephi 12:13 nor this extra phrase at the end of 12:16 is preserved in the Hebrew Masoretic Text of Isaiah 2:13 or 2:16.

According to this second approach, the KJV language “pleasant pictures” in Isaiah 2:16b that appears in 2 Nephi 12:16c would have been employed by Joseph Smith to render 2 Nephi 12:16c because it adequately expressed the meaning of the language on the plates in front of him. It could therefore be argued that 2 Nephi 12:16 preserves an earlier form of Isaiah 2:16, although not one (contra Sperry) that is partially preserved in the Hebrew Masoretic Text and partially preserved in the Greek Septuagint. This alternative explanation makes better sense of the available Hebrew and Greek texts but does not fully account for the phrase “ships of the sea” in 2 Nephi 12:16a (as distinct from “ships of Tarshish”). Nor does it fully explain how the phrase “all pleasant pictures,” which some older commenta-

tors accepted as a possible translation of the Hebrew in Isaiah 2:16b (śĕkîyôt haḥemedāṯ), came to represent a third line of text (2 Nephi 12:16c) different from two lines that refer to ships. Therefore, this explanation has challenges in its own right, although in different ways than Sperry’s proposal.

A third possible approach to the relationship between Isaiah 2:16 and 2 Nephi 12:16, implied in some recent Latter-day Saint publications, is that 2 Nephi 12:16 originally consisted of three synonymous lines referring to ships. This approach requires accepting that an initial line mentioning “ships of the sea” (2 Nephi 12:16a) was lost from the ancient textual tradition before the standardization of the Masoretic Text, and that Hebrew śĕkîyôt originally meant “ships” but was somehow misrendered in 2 Nephi 12:16c, presumably under the influence of KJV Isaiah 2:16b. The verse would thus have theoretically read: “upon all the ships of the sea, and upon all the ships of Tarshish, and upon all beautiful craft/vessels.” Unfortunately, the authors of these recent Latter-day Saint publications have not provided any explanation of their rendition of Isaiah 2:16 // 2 Nephi 12:16, how they arrived at it, or what its implications are.

We are thus not presently aware of any solution that satisfactorily accounts for all the questions regarding 2 Nephi 12:16 in its relation to the preserved text of Isaiah 2:16. Given the limitations of the available textual data, Latter-day Saints must continue to deal with proposals of how to best explain the formal relationship between Isaiah 2:16 and 2 Nephi 12:16.

Concluding Thoughts

As demonstrated in the preceding discussion, any explanation of the form and content of 2 Nephi 12:16 depends on a number of factors, including (1) whether one accepts or rejects the Book of Mormon as divinely revealed scripture, (2) the likelihood that 2 Nephi 12:16 preserves an “original” form of this verse, (3) whether one accepts or rejects the modern translation of the Hebrew text of Isaiah 2:16 as two synonymous lines referring to ships, and (4) how one deals with the Greek Septuagint text of Isaiah 2:16a (“sea” from Hebrew tarsît/Tarshish).

As expressed above, we accept that the earliest Greek rendition of Isaiah 2:16 is similar to the Hebrew preserved in the Masoretic Text (two lines
referring to ships). We also accept the rendering of the Hebrew word šēkiyôt in Isaiah 2:16b as “ships,” thus making it synonymous with the content of 16a. But our view of 2 Nephi 12:16 is largely dictated by our acceptance of the Book of Mormon as ancient scripture. And this is a most significant consideration.

Any conclusion about the relationship between Isaiah 2:16 and 2 Nephi 12:16 is for most people a matter of faith—as is acceptance of the Book of Mormon in general—not just a matter of textual analysis. People who accept the authenticity of the Book of Mormon typically favor an explanation for the form of 2 Nephi 12:16 that other people reject, although Latter-day Saint explanations regarding this matter cannot now be substantiated by the available comparative biblical textual evidence alone.

People who do not accept the authenticity of the Book of Mormon will likely accept the primacy of the synonymous couplet found in the Masoretic Text and Septuagint over the three-line form of 2 Nephi 12:16 and will suggest that Joseph Smith erred or accepted outside influences when he “composed” this verse. Huggins, for example, asserted that “Joseph could not have avoided coming into contact with Methodist books,” especially Adam Clarke’s commentary on the Bible. This may be true. But even if Joseph Smith did have such contact, this does not prove he rendered 2 Nephi 12:16 under the influence of Clarke or anyone else other than the Holy Spirit. Our conclusion differs from Huggins’s in this case because we start from a different perspective, not because we dismiss outright the possibility of Joseph Smith’s encountering someone or something other than the gold plates during the translation process. Indeed, it would seem very odd if at least some people had not approached Joseph Smith with all sorts of religiously oriented questions, suggestions, and challenges. However, we seriously doubt the plausibility of Huggins’s proposal and question the effect such incidents had on Joseph Smith and his translation, especially given the rather inconsequential nature of the doctrinal content of Isaiah 2:16. (Our use of the word translation in the preceding sentence indicates our faith-based approach to this question.)

In conclusion, we have observed that some Latter-day Saints blithely cite 2 Nephi 12:16 as a tangible vindication of Joseph Smith’s prophetic call without sufficient consideration of the complexities involved in dealing with the ancient Hebrew and Greek versions of this verse. Furthermore, we are concerned that Sperry’s explanation has been too readily and uncritically accepted by Latter-day Saints and that 2 Nephi 12:16 footnote 16a in the current edition of the Book of Mormon continues to encourage the oversimplification of this issue. All students of the Book of Mormon should understand the challenges of translating Isaiah 2:16 (and ancient texts in general), the complex relationship between the Hebrew and Greek texts of Isaiah 2:16 and 2 Nephi 12:16, and the role that one’s faith plays in one’s approach to and interpretation of textual evidence. We hope that this article serves as a cautionary note concerning such issues and as food for thought on similar matters in other Book of Mormon passages.

Assyrian bas-relief from the palace of Sargon II at Khorsabad, in northern Iraq (late 8th century BCE, contemporary with the prophet Isaiah). It depicts Phoenician vessels transporting cedar timbers. Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY (ART64987).
31. Hiram Page to “Wm” (apparently William E. McLellin), 2 February 1848, Community of Christ Library Archives, Independence, Missouri; see David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ, By A Witness to the Divine Authenticity of The Book of Mormon* (Richmond, MO, 1867), 30–31. Several details related to the trip to Canada are unclear, such as the exact date and who actually made the journey. David Whitmer indicated decades later that Oliver Cowdery and Hiram Page went by themselves. Hiram Page did not mention Martin’s debt as a factor in the attempt to sell the copyright in Canada.

32. Wayne County New York Deeds, 29 November 1825, book 5, 330–32. No records of any divorce proceedings have been found. According to her grave marker in Palmyra, Lucy Harris died at age 44 (sometime between 1 May 1836 and 30 April 1837). Martin married Caroline Young on 1 November 1836 (presumably after Lucy’s death). Caroline, the daughter of John and Theodocia Young, was born on 17 May 1816 at Hector, Schuyler County, New York.


35. Thomas Lakey owned a blacksmith shop and a wagon shop and often bought and sold real estate. A cusory survey of the Index to Grantees, Wayne County, New York, 1823–1869, indicates that Lakey was involved in some 68 land purchases and 45 sales, with additional sales being handled by his heirs after his death.


46. Certification of Thomas Rogers, 28 January 1832, recorded 8 February 1832 by Cullen Foster, Wayne County deputy clerk. See Minor T. Patton, “How it was that my great-grandmother’s gold paid for the printing of the first edition of the Book of Mormon,” typescript, Church Archives, 1–6; Wayne Cutler Gunnell, “Martin Harris—Witness and Benefactor to the Book of Mormon” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 1955), 37–39; Tuckett and Wilson, *Martin Harris Story*, 49–50; and Wayne County New York Deeds, book 11, 128–89. A copy of this agreement was obtained from Carl Lakey, son of Thomas Lakey, by Willard Bean. Bean sent the agreement to William Pilkington Jr. sometime after 24 July 1935.

47. *Palmyra Courier*, 31 May 1872.


"Upon All the Ships of the Sea, and Upon All the Ships of Tarshish": Revisiting 2 Nephi 12:16 and Isaiah 2:16

1. We began discussing the topic of this article many years ago. Our determination to finish and publish this article was motivated, in part, by two relatively recent publications that employ Isaiah 2:16 / 2 Nephi 12:16 as part of their authors’ efforts to raise questions about the means by which the Prophet Joseph Smith brought forth the Book of Mormon. These are David P. Wright, “Isaiah in the Book of Mormon: "How it was that my great-grandmother’s gold paid for the printing of the first edition of the Book of Mormon,” typescript, Church Archives, 1–6; Wayne Cutler Gunnell, “Martin Harris—Witness and Benefactor to the Book of Mormon” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 1955), 37–39; Tuckett and Wilson, *Martin Harris Story*, 49–50; and Wayne County New York Deeds, book 11, 128–89. A copy of this agreement was obtained from Carl Lakey, son of Thomas Lakey, by Willard Bean. Bean sent the agreement to William Pilkington Jr. sometime after 24 July 1935.


of the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1964), 92–93 (republished by Bookcraft as Answers to Book of Mormon Questions [1967], 92–93); and Book of Mormon Compendium (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968), 508. Sperry’s first published note on the difference between Isaiah 2:16 and 2 Nephi 12:16, with no discussion, seems to have been in “The ‘Isaiah Problem’ in the Book of Mormon, Part II,” Ensign, October, 1939, 594.

While Sperry’s suggestion seems to neatly explain the discrepancy between Isaiah 2:16 and 2 Nephi 12:16, it is highly improbable from a textual perspective that the accidents of transmission he proposed for the verse in the MT and LXX would have worked out so nicely.


10. See also the similar statement in footnote 16a for Isaiah 2:16 in the Latter-day Saint edition of the KJV. Sperry’s name is not cited in these footnotes to scripture, but we assume the footnotes were generated based on Sperry’s publications.

11. Joseph Smith, Notes of Hebrew began in Kirtland, Ohio, in late 1835 (perhaps at least partially motivated by the acquisition in July 1835 of Egyptian mummies and the papyri with which the Book of Abraham is connected). Professor Joshua Seixas was hired to teach biblical Hebrew in Kirtland, Ohio, from 6 January to 29 March 1836. References to the study of Hebrew in Kirtland by Joseph Smith and other Church leaders are found in History of the Church, e.g., 2:385, 390, 396–97, 428.

D. Kelly Ogden, “The Kirtland Hebrew School,” in Milton V. Backman, ed., Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint Church History, Ohio (Provo, UT: BYU Department of Church History and Doctrine, 1990), 63–87, provides a convenient sum- mary and discussion of this activity.

12. See also the assessment of John A. Tvedtnes, “Isaiah Variants in the Book of Mormon,” in Isaiah and the Prophets, ed. Monte S. Nyman (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1984), 170, who, in speaking of Isaiah 2:16 // 2 Nephi 12:16, observed that “the matter is a very complex one.” This publication by Tvedtnes is based on an earlier FARMS paper, “Isaiah Textual Variants in the Book of Mormon.”

13. The verses in Isaiah 2:1–5 are generally thought to constitute the first portion of Isaiah 2, following a traditional paragraph break after verse 5 in the MT. However, the prophecy of the future temple and the millen- nial imagery ends in verse 4. Verse 5 serves as a transi- tion and begins a multiverse invitation to the Lord’s people to (re)turn from their worldly ways to the Lord’s ways.

14. The name Jehovah is derived from the unvocalized Hebrew form jehw, usually written YHWH in English. This name is vocalized as “Yahweh” by scholars. Latter-day Saints are unique in the Christian world in claiming “Jehovah is the premortal Jesus Christ and came to earth as a son of Mary” (Guide to the Scriptures, s.v. “Jehovah,” at scriptures.lds.org/gs/jehovah, accessed 10 March 2006).

Scriptures and statements by latter-day Church leaders indicate that the expression “the day of the Lord” usually (ultimately) designates Jesus’s second coming. In addition to the citations in the Topical Guide in the Latter-day Saint edition of the King James Bible, s.v. “Day of the Lord,” see, for example, Joseph Field-ing Smith Jr., Doctrines of Salva- tion (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954), 1:173: “Elijah was to bring back to the earth his priesthood and restore to men the power to seal on earth and in heaven, so that mankind might have means of escape from the destruction which awaited the wicked in that great and dreadful day of the Lord. This great and dreadful day can be no other time than the coming of Jesus Christ to establish his kingdom in power on the earth, and to cleanse it from all iniquity.” Compare Bruce R. McConkie, The Mor-tal Messiah (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 4:367–68.

15. There is not sufficient space here to deal with the several differences between the KJV and the Book of Mormon in this block of text. For a discussion of these differences see the various Latter-day Saint commentaries on Isaiah (cited above, notes 2–9). See also, Tvedtnes, “Isaiah Variants in the Book of Mormon,” 169–70; and Royal Skousen, “Textual Variants in the Isaiah Quota- tions in the Book of Mormon,” in Isaiah in the Book of Mormon, 369–90.

16. See the poetic format of these verses suggested by Donald W. Parry, The Book of Mormon Text Reformatted According to Parallelistic Patterns (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1992), 77–78.

17. 2 Nephi 12 is not preserved on what survives of the original manuscript. The current printed text is the text that is vocalized as “Yahweh” by scholars. The MT and LXX both have a unique designation.

18. The difference between Isaiah 2:16 in the MT and in Q1Qsa is merely orthographic: both instances of kî, “all, every,” in the MT are written plene (full spelling) as kwh in Q1Qsa.


20. The Hebrew text transcribed here is from Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (Stuttgart, Ger.: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1977). This edition is based on the earliest complete copy of the Hebrew Bible, the Leningrad manuscript (now St. Petersburg) Codex B 19°, which dates to AD 1008. Compare the Handsomely parallelism, an opposition is expressed between the content of the two lines (see, e.g., Proverbs 15:5).
produced The Lexicon of the Old Testament, rev. W. Baumgartner and J. J. Stramm (New York: Brill, 1995), 641. The word maskit occurs six times in the Hebrew Bible, for example, Numbers 33:52 (NRSV, “figured stones”; KJV, “pictures”); Proverbs 25:11 (NRSV, “setting”; KJV, “picture”). Of course, alternative derivations and translations of maskit have been proposed. These are conveniently summarized, with further references, in Cohen, Biblical Hepax Legomena, 71n133, 72–73n143.

30. Ancient Ugarit, now Tell Ras Shamra, Syria, flourished during the mid-second millennium BC. The site is located near the northern end of the eastern Mediterranean sea-board. The texts are in a West Semitic language with affinities to Hebrew. See “Ugarit,” in Anchor Bible Dictionary, 6:699.

31. For the text, see Menfried Dietrich, Oswald Loretz, and Joaquin Sanmartín, The Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts from Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hanî and Other Places (KTU [Keilalphabetische Texte aus Ugarit], 2nd ed.; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1995), 4.81. This text, the parallelism between Ugaritic anyt and škt, and its correlation with Isaiah 2:16 are noted in Loren R. Fisher, ed., Ras Shamra Parallels, vol. 2 (Rome: Pontificio Institutum Biblicum, 1975), 8 (1.5). See also Cohen, Biblical Hepax Legomena, 41–44.

32. Most Ugaritic texts, including this one, which was first published in 1940, were not available to Sidney B. Sperry when he first published his interpretation of Isaiah 2:16 // 2 Nephi 12:16 in 1899 (note 7 above). Of course, this data was available when he republished it in subsequent years.

33. This correlation requires understanding the initial letter sin in the MT as a variant or mistake for a šin (ש‬‎). Since both letters were represented by the same grapheme, or letter, in antiquity, this detail does not detract from what is accepted as compelling evidence for a cognate connection. This matter is discussed by Cohen, Biblical Hepax Legomena, 71n135. See also Gregorio Del Olmo Lete and Joaquín Sanmartín, A Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language in the Alphabetic Tradition, pt. 2, trans. Wilfred G. E. Watson (Boston: Brill, 2003), 904.

34. See, for example, Raymond O. Faulkner, A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1981), 252. Cohen, Biblical Hepax Legomena, 71n137, and others cite the connection of Ugaritic škt with Egyptian sktw, or sk.ty, as it is sometimes written. See, for example, Cyrus H. Gordon, Ugaritic Textbook (Rome: Pontificio Institutum Biblicum, 1965), 502–2680.


37. The location of Tarshish is still a matter of debate. Most scholars favor the central or western Mediterranean area, although somewhere along or south of the Red Sea is also a possibility. The phrase “ships of Tarshish,” which occurs several times in the Hebrew Bible, apparently became a figure of speech based on the great size of these ships and the precious cargo they used to carry. See “Tarshish (Place),” in Anchor Bible Dictionary, 6:331–33.

38. See also, for example, the Jewish Publication Society translation found in I. W. Slotki, ed., Isaiah (Loeb’s Commentary, 1949), 14: “delightful imagery.”


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46. So Jerome most likely had a Hebrew text similar to the MT, but his observation, cited by Barr, that Tharsis is synonymous with “sea” in Hebrew is taken as support for the premise that the earlier Greek translators thought likewise and rendered Hebrew “ships of Tarshish” as “ships of the sea.” Tvedtnes, “Isaiah Variants in the Book of Mormon,” 170, claimed that the Vulgate reads “sea” here, like the LXX, but we are unable to find sea as a variant in either of the two standard critical editions of the Vulgate. They both read Tharsis, “Tarshish.” Tvedtnes was apparently relying for his assertion on the apparatus to Isaiah 2:16 in the preliminary edition of Moshe H. Goshen-Gottstein, ed., The Book of Isaiah (Jerusalem, 1995; preliminary ed., 1975), in which it is incorrectly noted that the Vulgate reads “sea” here. 47. The Hebrew word taršîš in Daniel is actually a homonym of the place-name Tarshish and is the name of a precious stone, “but this made no difference, since...
the interpretation of taršīš as sea was itself connected with the view of the colour of this stone” (Barr, “Review,” 118).

43. Tvedtøes has cited Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, an Ara- maic rendition of the Hebrew prophetic books, as further evidence for the originality of the LXX translation “ships of the sea” (“Isaiah Variants in the Book of Mormon,” 170). The Aramaic reads w’l kly ṣbpy nüm w’l ᵇdr ᵇbnymn ᵇp’, “and upon all those who go down in ships of the sea, and upon all those who dwell in palaces of beauty” (Alexander Sperber, ed., The Bible in Aramaic, 2nd impression [New York: Brill, 1992], 326). However, Tvedtøes’s claim is problematic since nearly everywhere else in the Targum the Hebrew taršīš is rendered in Aramaic as “sea.” Indeed, Wright, “Isaiah in the Book of Mormon: Or Joseph Smith in Isaiah,” 188–89, notes that “in [the Targum of] Isaiah the rendering of ‘Tarshish’ as ‘sea’ occurs everywhere the former term occurs [in Hebrew]” and that this pattern is evident in other of the prophetic books as well (e.g., Ezekiel 27:12, 25; Jonah 1:3; 4:2). For a discussion of the Targums and their inherent issues, see, for example, Tov, Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible, 148–51; and “Targum, Targumim,” in Anchor Bible Dictionary, 6:320–21.

As an aside, this data demonstrates that Tarshish and sea are perfect candidates for a synonymous pair in a Hebrew parallelism—though they do not appear as such anywhere else in scripture besides 2 Nephi 12:16.

44. Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion all produced Greek translations of the Bible that are called “revi- sions” (or recensions) in that they attempted to preserve the more exactly as the original Old Greek translation. These three “revisions” were columns three, four, and six, respectively, in Origen’s Hexapla (ca. AD 245). Since the Hexapla has only survived in fragments, the revisions are known only from various sources such as early papyrus fragments, vellum fragments from the Middle Ages, and quotations from the LXX in various ancient writers who had access to these revisions. The surviving fragments are recorded in the Cambridge and Göttingen editions as part of the Hexaplaric evidence. For a useful discussion see Tov, Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible, 143–48; and Karen H. Jobes and Moises Silva, Invitation to the Septuagint (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 45–68.

45. Some scholars believe that the LXX is translating a Hebrew text that had the Hebrew word ᵇḏpını’ı` (meaning “ships”) rather than ᵇkêḻyōt (see note in Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia). For a review of these possibilities see Barr, “Review,” 116–17.


49. Daniel Ludlow, A Companion to Your Study of the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 141–42. See similarly B. H. Roberts, “Biblical Quotations in the Book of Mormon and Reasonable- ness of Nephi’s Prophecies,” Improvement Era, January, 1904, 191; and Sperry, Our Book of Mormon, 172 (in prefacing his comments on 2 Nephi 12:16 and 20; see also the rest of his publications cited in note 7 above). Skousen, “Textual Variants in the Isaiah Quotations in the Book of Mormon,” 377–78, concluded that, at the very least, the biblical quotations in the Book of Mormon would have been dictated by Joseph Smith, not directly copied from the KJV by his scribe.

50. Sometimes generally called haplography or parablepsis, the technical terms design- ing the loss of words or phrases between phrases with similar beginnings or similar endings are homoioarcton and homoiooteleuton, respectively. For a discussion of this phenomenon and biblical examples, see Tov, Textual Criticisms, 236–40. This scribal accident is also attested in the printed editions of the Book of Mormon. Alma 32:30 presents a classic example of this acci- dent in the Book of Mormon. This verse is significantly longer in the 1920 edition compared to the 1881 edition because a central portion of the verse was “lost” due to the typesetter’s eye jumping from one similar phrase to another, eliminating the words in between.

51. Wright, “Isaiah in the Book of Mormon: Or Joseph Smith in Isaiah,” 157. Wright studied the text of Isaiah in the MT and the KJV in comparison with the Isaiah material in the Book of Mormon, giving spe- cial attention to those passages in which the KJV translators used italicized words to indicate that their English rendi- tion was not based on corre- sponding words in Hebrew. For example Isaiah 1:8 and 2 Nephi 30:16–17, but none of these passages are quite like 2 Nephi 12:16 in relation to the preced- ing verses, 13–15.

52. Wright similarly claimed that the Isaiah passages in the Book of Mormon are “connected to the KJV” and “distant” from the Hebrew text. See Wright, “Isaiah in the Book of Mormon: Or Joseph Smith in Isaiah,” 157, 182 (compare 158, 208–11). See similarly B. H. Roberts, “Biblical Quotations in the Book of Mormon,” 158, and Oliver Cowdery, especially if Joseph Smith did utilize the KJV (as Ludlow asserted) when translating extended passages of Isaiah from the plates. Dittography is the addi- tion of extra letters, words, or phrases to a text because of the similarity of words and word sounds (contrast haplography and parablepsis, mentioned above). Whether one finds this suggestion plausible or not, it at least needs to be considered as a possibility.

53. Other instances of three poetic lines in conjunction with poetic couplets do occur, for example Isaiah 1:8 and 2 Nephi 30:16–17, but none of these passages are quite like 2 Nephi 12:16 in relation to the preced- ing verses, 13–15.

54. Alternatively, to argue that the MT/LXX synonymous couplet is preserved in 2 Nephi 12:16b+c still requires one to explain the origins of Nephi 12:16a. See the third explana- tion, given in the next para- graph, for a proposal that is similar.

55. We are concerned with the translation of Isaiah 2:16 that Parry, Parry, and Peterson pro- vide in Understanding Isaiah, 32, wherein the phrase “and upon all [luxury ships]” is pro- vided as a third line of text in the verse. This results in three synonymous lines about ships in Isaiah 2:16, which does not at all match the present text.
of 2 Nephi 12:16 (no "pleasant pictures"), nor does it follow the preserved Hebrew or Greek texts of Isaiah 2:16. Such a representation implies that these authors think their rendition represents the original form of Isaiah 2:16, but they provide no discussion of this point, a serious omission. This same configuration of Isaiah 2:16 is repeated, again without explanation, in Donald W. Parry, Harmonizing Isaiah (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2001), 45. See somewhat similarly David J. Ridges, Isaiah in the Bible Made Easier (Springville, UT: Bonneville, 2002), 140, who explains 2 Nephi 12:16c (“Upon all pleasant pictures”) as meaning “pleasant ships upon which the wealthy traveled,” without further comment. This, again, suggests three poetic lines about ships in 2 Nephi 12:16, for which there is no available textual support. Ridges provides the same explanation for the second line of Isaiah 2:16, altering the “pleasant pictures” in the KJV text (p. 4). This results in a synonymous couplet in Isaiah 2:16 (which we accept), but there is no comment on how this form of Isaiah 2:16 relates to 2 Nephi 12:16 or what becomes of the phrase “pleasant pictures.”

62. The quotation is from Huggins, “‘Without a Cause’ and ‘Ships of Tarshish,’” 171. His discussion of Clarke’s commentary is on pages 172–74. The research 2:16, but Huggins’s claim relates to Joseph Smith’s stay in Harmony, Pennsylvania, and he cites a claim that the Rev. Nathaniel Lewis, one of Emma Smith’s uncles, had a copy of Clarke’s commentary and supposedly mentioned it to Joseph Smith (p. 173).

63. We thank our wives and other reviewers for their suggestions for improving this study. We extend an extra note of thanks to John A. Tvedtne for his careful reading and comments. As always, all deficiencies are our responsibility alone.

God in History? Nephi’s Answer Roy A. Prete


2. For a recent collection of articles on aspects of the subject, see Out of Obscurity: The LDS Church in the Twentieth Century: The 29th Annual Sidney R. Sperry Symposium (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000).

3. God’s role in history is a vast topic, well beyond the scope of this brief essay. For a fuller discussion, see Window of Faith: Latter-day Saint Perspectives on World History, ed. Roy A. Prete et al. (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2005).


5. For a nuanced treatment of the historiography of providential history and the issues it faces, see Brian Q. Cannon, “Providential History: The Need for Continuing Revelation,” in Window of Faith, 143–60.

