God in History? Nephi's Answer

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Trained to accept only material evidence, professional historians since the late nineteenth century have avoided writing “providential history”—history that acknowledges the hand of God in shaping human events. Even believing historians, lacking prophetic insight and revelation, have been at a loss to determine God’s role in the historical process. In Latter-day Saint tradition, the Book of Mormon, and especially the sweeping visions of prophet-historian Nephi, is seen as a welcome corrective. In defining God’s plan for the salvation of humankind, identifying specific instances of divine providence (e.g., the discovery and colonization of the American promised land), and outlining the principles governing such intervention (e.g., the higher purposes behind God’s ongoing covenant relationship with the house of Israel), Nephi’s writings greatly inform the modern LDS understanding of providential history.
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LATTER-DAY SAINTS have long believed that God has played a significant role in preparing the world for the restoration of the gospel. They recognize his guiding hand in such European movements as the Reformation, the discovery of the New World, and the founding of the American colonies, as well as in the rise of freedom in America. As The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints faces the opportunities and challenges of the 21st century, faithful Saints acknowledge the Lord’s hand in the Church’s rapid expansion, the internationalization of its membership, and the world’s preparation for the preaching of the gospel. Nephi, author of the first two books of the Book of Mormon, offers a significant contribution to our understanding of the concept of God’s role in the unfolding of history for the accomplishment of divine purposes.

Providential History

Since the late 19th century, professional historians, trained in their discipline to accept only material evidence, have with relatively few exceptions excluded the divine role from their historical treatments. As Brian Q. Cannon has shown, successive small groupings of providential historians, while believing in the sovereignty of God and his involvement in human affairs, have been at a loss to relate divine intervention to the course of human events beyond the broad outlines of divine purpose contained in the Bible. This problem is particularly acute in the time span between the ministry of Christ and his apostles and his promised second coming, during which there has been no revelation accepted into the canon of mainstream Christianity. The dilemma of the faithful Christian historian, functioning in the absence of continuing revelation, is eloquently described by Ronald A. Wells, a noted historian among those Christian historians who have attempted to include God in the historical process.

In order to have an acceptable dialogue, all historians must discuss the same reality. Reality includes all past human activity. Much “Christian history,” i.e., the Bible, is a testimony to the acts of God. But, as historians, we study past human activity. Here is the contentious point: We historians study humans, not God. As historian Stanford Reid (1973) has suggested, we study humans rather than God because of the radical break between time and eternity. God, who is in eternity, is inexplicable in human terms. We simply cannot reason from our time-space to God’s infinite space. We who can only partially comprehend what we call time can scarcely comprehend the One who clearly transcends time. Thus, for historians to discern God’s actions in modern history seems a sterile task because of the hidden nature of the subject.

Though committed Christians, such historians are at a loss to include the “unknowable” God and his purposes in the unfolding of history or to determine his immediate role as part of the historical process. Several have thus lamented the absence of continuing revelation, which prevents them from integrating God into their historical accounts. As Christian historian C. John Sommerville acknowledges, “Knowledge of providence comes through inspiration, to prophets. . . . We don’t get there through study, as scholars.”

This fits in well with the Latter-day Saint view. As the Book of Mormon prophet Jacob pointed out, no one can know the works of God and his ways “save it be revealed unto him” (Jacob 4:8). But Latter-day Saints enjoy the additional light of modern revelation, which provides at least some guidance about God’s role in history. While God has not chosen to speak on every matter, and statements on his role in history have been fragmentary and incomplete, the additional scriptures of the Restoration and the statements of modern prophets and apostles
provide Latter-day Saints with fresh insights into the role of God in the shaping of modern history. The problem nonetheless persists for Latter-day Saints to ascertain what are reliable prophetic texts. In that regard, the Book of Mormon, scripture written by prophet-historians, is a particularly rich source for the Latter-day Saint historian seeking to understand the divine role in human affairs. While interpretations may vary, there can be little question of the validity of the Book of Mormon as a divinely approved text. The authenticity and correctness of the record has been affirmed by the Lord himself—“as your Lord and your God liveth it is true” (Doctrine and Covenants 17:6).

This brief article will attempt to delineate the views of Nephi, the first prophet-historian of the Book of Mormon, on God’s role in Nephite history and that of subsequent generations. Nephi’s historical views, it must be observed, came not from study at a great university but from the scriptural tradition of the ancient Jewish people, the revelations of God to his father Lehi, and his own powerful revelatory experiences. As might be expected, Nephi does not follow the practice of modern scholars of differentiating between the historical, doctrinal, and philosophical components of his interpretation, but presents an approach that integrates past events and his own experience with prophetic insight and understanding. As a result of his prophetic visions of the future, he is able to transcend the limitations of the here and now and to see future historical developments as part of the unfolding plan of God for the salvation of his children. In defining God’s plan for the salvation of his children as it relates to world history, in identifying specific instances in which God has intervened for the accomplishment of his purposes, and in outlining principles that govern his intervention, Nephi makes a major contribution to modern Latter-day Saint understanding of the role of God in history.

The Relationship between God and Man in History

Nephi’s approach to history is based on his understanding of the relationship between man and God over time. This is clearly indicated in the first verse of 1 Nephi: “I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents, therefore I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father; and having seen many afflictions in the course of my days, nevertheless, having been highly favored of the Lord in all my days; yea, having had a great knowledge of the goodness and the mysteries of God, therefore I make a record of my proceedings in my days.” The first few lines of the verse summarize Nephi’s earthly experience, while the last few describe his relationship with God, which gives meaning to the events of his life. The phrase “having had a great knowledge of the goodness and the mysteries of God, therefore I make a record of my proceedings in my days” indicates the didactic purpose of his record. “For the fulness of mine intent is that I may persuade men to come unto the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, and be saved,” he later writes (1 Nephi 6:4; see 2 Nephi 25:26).
Fundamental to Nephi’s view of the relationship between God and man in history is the covenant relationship between God and the house of Israel. Nephi had knowledge of Israel’s covenants through the brass plates of Laban, which contained the five books of Moses, the “record of the Jews,” and other prophetic books down to the reign of King Zedekiah (see 1 Nephi 5:10–13; 13:23). Within this paradigm, history unfolds with alternate blessings or cursings, according to the obedience or disobedience of the house of Israel to its covenants with God (see Deuteronomy 26–31). A subset of the larger history of the house of Israel, the history of Lehi’s descendants, members of the tribe of Joseph (see 1 Nephi 6:2), is a history in which specific blessings and curses are linked to a special covenant that includes obtaining the promised land. This is defined early in the narrative, as Nephi recorded the following revelation from God:

And inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments, ye shall prosper, and shall be led to a land of promise; yea, even a land which I have prepared for you; yea, a land which is choice above all other lands. And inasmuch as thy brethren shall rebel against thee, they shall be cut off from the presence of the Lord. . . . For behold, in that day that they [descendants of Nephi’s brothers] shall rebel against me, I will curse them even with a sore curse, and they shall have no power over thy seed except they shall rebel against me also. And if it so be that they [Nephi’s posterity] rebel against me, they [his brothers’ posterity] shall be a scourge unto thy seed, to stir them up in the ways of remembrance. (1 Nephi 2:20–24)

In the above passage much of the history of the Nephites and Lamanites is foreshadowed. This passage not only ties the prosperity of the people to keeping the commandments of God, but indicates that if the Nephites should rebel against God, the Lamanites will be the means to stir them up “in the ways of remembrance” through numerous wars. In Book of Mormon history, the repeating cycle of righteousness followed by pride, wickedness, chastisement, and finally repentance is thus foreshadowed (see Helaman 12:2–4). Thus Nephi beheld in vision many future generations of Nephites in the promised land “pass away, after the manner of wars and contentions” (1 Nephi 12:3).

Quoting his father Lehi, Nephi defines a further blessing related to keeping the commandments in the promised land—namely, that “it shall be a land of liberty unto them; . . . [and] they shall never be brought down into captivity . . . [unless] iniquity shall abound.” And for the accomplishment of divine purposes, “this land should be kept as yet from the knowledge of other nations,” as long as the posterity of Lehi did not fall into transgresssion (2 Nephi 1:7, 8).

**Divine Deliverance after the Israelitish Pattern**

Nephi fully understood that his father’s revelatory experiences, coupled with his own revelations in which God had covenanted with him directly regarding the promised land, represented new covenant relationships for their posterity, ushering in a new dispensation of the gospel. The people at Jerusalem had broken their covenants with God through “their wickedness and their abominations,” their rejection of “the coming of a Messiah,” and their rejection of the words of the prophets, including Lehi, whom they had attempted to kill. As a result they would soon be destroyed (1 Nephi 1:4, 13, 18–20; 2:1–4; 3:17–18). Following Lehi’s divinely ordained flight from Jerusalem, Nephi realized that it was essential to obtain the scriptural records contained on the brass plates of Laban. This would enable them to preserve the language of the people and the words “spoken by the mouth of all the holy prophets” as they sought to establish a faithful offshoot society in the promised land (see 1 Nephi 3:19–20).

Nephi identified strongly with Moses, who delivered the house of Israel from bondage in Egypt by the power of God. To his doubting brothers, Nephi reaffirmed the divine purpose in obtaining the brass plates: “Let us be strong like unto Moses; for he truly spake unto the waters of the Red Sea and they divided hither and thither. . . . Let us go up; the Lord is able to deliver us, even as our fathers, and to destroy Laban, even as the Egyptians” (1 Nephi 3:31; 4:1–3). In a later exposition, Nephi again drew parallels between Moses, who led the children of Israel out of bondage in Egypt by the power of God, and Lehi, who led his group by divine command from the impending destruction of Jerusalem (see 1 Nephi 17: 17–44). Both Lehi and
Nephi thus became Moses figures in the deliverance of their people from spiritual bondage and physical destruction. The degree to which Lehi as a prophet found favor with God may be inferred from his later statement that he had obtained by covenant from the Lord “a land of promise . . . choice above all other lands”—the land of America—for “the inheritance of [his] seed . . . forever,” along with those “who should be led out of other countries by the hand of the Lord” (2 Nephi 1:5).

Nephi’s understanding of the significance of his family’s future destiny strengthened him in his resolve to obtain the brass plates of Laban as he went forth in the night “led by the Spirit, not knowing beforehand the things which [he] should do” (1 Nephi 4:6). Finding Laban drunk with wine and fallen to the earth near his own house, Nephi was “constrained by the Spirit” to kill him (see vv. 4:7–10). As he struggled with that command, Nephi was strengthened by the promise given earlier that “inasmuch as thy seed shall keep my commandments, they shall prosper in the land of promise” and the realization that his descendants would need to have the law of Moses, contained on the brass plates, to be able to keep the commandments. He thus obeyed the voice of the Spirit and slew Laban with his own sword (see vv. 4:14–18).

The Nephites’ preservation of sacred artifacts may be cited as a further evidence of Lehi and Nephi’s awareness that their deliverance followed a pattern similar in many regards to the Israelites’ deliverance from the Egyptians. The sword of Laban and the Liahona, which symbolized God’s deliverance from evil and oppression, occupied somewhat the same role as the budding staff of Aaron and the preserved bowl of manna in Israelite history. Here were sacred relics that bore a continuing witness to God’s power of deliverance. The Liahona, “a round ball of curious workmanship,” the compass or director that Lehi discovered at his tent door just as he was to begin his long journey in the wilderness, deserves special consideration. An instrument prepared by God to guide his people to the promised land, it worked according to their faith, one of the two spindles within pointing the way they should go (see 1 Nephi 16:10, 16; Alma 37:38–40). Also, on occasion, as during the crisis in the wilderness when Nephi broke his bow, it displayed words of instruction or reproof, and for a time it conveyed frequent instructions (see 1 Nephi 16:25–29). Later writers interpreted the Liahona as a figure of the simpleness of the way to Christ—requiring only obedience in order to ensure divine favor (see Alma 37:38–46). The conscious preservation of the Liahona as a sacred relic is similar to the preservation of other symbols of God’s direct involvement and deliverance in Israelite history.

In the case of the Israelites, God instructed Moses to place the two tablets of the law, written by the hand of God, in the most holy of places, within...
The ark of the covenant held sacred relics betokening God’s merciful deliverance of the children of Israel from bondage in Egypt. The Nephites similarly witnessed God’s direct involvement in their own history by preserving sacred artifacts such as the brass plates, the sword of Laban, the Liahona, and the gold plates.

the ark of the covenant (see 1 Kings 8:9), along with the golden bowl filled with manna and Aaron’s rod that had miraculously budded, in witness of God’s mercy in the deliverance of the children of Israel from bondage in Egypt (see Exodus 16:32–34; 25:16; 40:3; Numbers 17:10; Hebrews 9:4). Beside the ark was placed a copy of sacred scrolls, constituting the “book of the law,” which was delivered to Moses as a testimony against the people (see Deuteronomy 31:26). The parallels to Nephi’s disposition of sacred artifacts are striking. The writings of Nephi attest to his preservation of the brass plates of Laban, the Liahona, and the sword of Laban in his flight from his brothers to the land of Nephi (see 1 Nephi 5:12–14). These objects as well as the large and small plates of Nephi were transmitted to succeeding kings and prophets (see Mosiah 1:16; Alma 37:2–5, 38, 47; D&C 17:1). The transmission of sacred artifacts to each new prophet-leader was intended to keep him and the Lord’s covenant people in remembrance of God’s mercy in delivering their forebears from the prophesied destruction of Jerusalem (see Alma 36:28–29).

A New Beginning with Christ as Focus

While Nephi recognized that the new society in the promised land was derivative of the old, he had a profound sense of creating a new social order. As observed, associated with obtaining the land of promise was a new covenant and a new dispensation of the gospel, the Jews having rejected “the coming of a Messiah, and also the redemption of the world” (1 Nephi 1:19). In this new society, the law of Moses would be taught, but its deeper meaning as an instrument pointing to Christ would also be fully taught. The doctrine of Christ and his atonement, the principles of faith and repentance, and the attendant ordinances of baptism and the gift of the Holy Ghost would thus occupy center stage in the religious practice, with observance of the law of Moses seen as a necessary part of the old covenant, but ultimately to be replaced by a higher law when Christ came (see 2 Nephi 5:10; 25:23–27; 31:4–21; compare 1 Nephi 11:1–28). The centrality of Christ in the religious observance of the Nephites was emphasized. “We talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we prophesy of Christ, and we write according to our prophecies,” wrote Nephi, “that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins” (2 Nephi 25:26). Thus, though antedating the advent of Christ by approximately six centuries, Nephi, with prophetic insight, devoted several chapters in his two books to explaining and interpreting the doctrine of Christ’s atonement (see 1 Nephi 11; 19; 2 Nephi 2; 9; 31).

Nephi retained the utmost respect for the prophets, citing in particular Zenock, Neum, and Zenos—by all evidence, prophets of the tribe of Joseph whose writings were on the brass plates of Laban but are not in our Bible—with regard to events surrounding Christ’s life and crucifixion (see 1 Nephi 19:10–12).14 But to “more fully persuade” his people “to believe in the Lord their Redeemer,” he turned to Isaiah (see 1 Nephi 19:23). Said Nephi, “My soul delighteth in the words of Isaiah” (2 Nephi 25:5). Both he and his brother Jacob, consecrated as a priest and teacher among the people, expounded at great length the texts of Isaiah. Isaiah reinforced the Christian focus of Nephi’s teaching and provided one of three witnesses, along with Nephi himself and his brother Jacob, of Christ’s divine mission. Of Isaiah, Nephi wrote, “He verily saw my Redeemer, even as I have seen him. And my brother, Jacob, also has seen him” (2 Nephi 11:2–3). Isaiah thus figured as an integral part of Nephi’s teaching.

Isaiah also spoke “concerning all the house of Israel” (2 Nephi 6:5), which necessitated, as Christ would later explain, that he “must speak also to the Gentiles” (3 Nephi 23:2). Using Isaiah’s writings, Nephi reinforced his own appreciation of the
unfolding destiny of the house of Israel and the unfolding scenes of broad future developments. Numerous chapters of Isaiah are thus quoted in full and many others in part in Nephi’s two books. But the “manner of the Jews,” whose works Nephi considered to be “works of darkness,” he did not teach to his people, and he therefore found it necessary, when expounding Isaiah, to speak with “plainness” so that his people could understand those parts of Isaiah “which were hard for many of my people to understand” (see 2 Nephi 25:1–7).

Though Nephi did not explicitly spell it out, this new dispensation of the gospel would function under the Melchizedek Priesthood (see Alma 13). According to Joseph Fielding Smith, “The Nephites did not officiate under the authority of the Aaronic Priesthood. They were not descendants of Aaron, and there were no Levites among them. . . . The Book of Mormon tells us definitely, in many places, that the priesthood which they held and under which they officiated was the Priesthood after the holy order, the order of the Son of God. This higher priesthood can officiate in every ordinance of the gospel, and Jacob and Joseph, for instance, were consecrated priests and teachers after this order.”

After his hegira from the original land of promise, Nephi built a temple patterned after the one in Jerusalem constructed by Solomon (see 2 Nephi 5:16). The temple and its ordinances would thus complete the religious observance of his people (compare D&C 124:37–39).
As did most of the Old Testament prophets, Nephi devoted considerable attention in his writings to various aspects of the scattering and promised gathering of the house of Israel, quoting and expounding several chapters of Isaiah in that regard (see 2 Nephi 6–8; 10–30) and adding his own and his brother Jacob’s prophetic interpretations. These insights provide an important key for understanding Isaiah, particularly God’s merciful gathering of the house of Israel in the latter days, both to their lands of inheritance and into the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Nephi was fully conscious of his father Lehi’s heritage as a descendant of Joseph who was sold into Egypt (see 1 Nephi 6:1–2). He knew that the presence of Lehi’s descendants in the promised land was more than an incident in their temporal salvation, but would have a special role in the divine plan. Knowing the broad sweep of future history regarding his posterity and that of his brothers in the promised land, Nephi continually reaffirmed the critical nature of God’s covenant that the land would be a land of promise only for those who would keep the commandments of God, that those who would become wicked would be “scattered and smitten” and the land would then be given to other nations (see 2 Nephi 1:9–11; also 1 Nephi 2:20; 4:14; 2 Nephi 1:20, 31–32; 4:4).17

Having seen in vision the future history of his descendants, Nephi was sorely afflicted by the knowledge that his own people, after receiving a multitude of divine blessings, would be destroyed when they departed from righteousness into wickedness (see 1 Nephi 12:1–23; 15:4–5). But he understood that the descendants of Lehi (including a “mixture” of Nephi’s seed with that of his brethren), after being chastised by the Gentiles who would possess the land, would in fact be blessed by receiving the fulness of the gospel in a “marvelous work and a wonder” of the latter days (see 1 Nephi 13:30–31, 38–41; 14:7; 15:13–17).

Nephi thus quoted in detail Lehi’s reiteration of the prophecy of Joseph of old about the future destiny and role of his (i.e., Joseph’s) posterity, the coming forth of their scriptural record in the latter days, and the Lord’s raising up of a “choice seer” who, like his father, would bear the name of Joseph (see 2 Nephi 3:6–15). The precision of Joseph’s prophecy is remarkable:

But a seer will I raise up out of the fruit of thy loins; and unto him will I give power to bring forth my word unto the seed of thy loins—and not to the bringing forth my word only, saith the Lord, but to the convincing them of my word, which shall have already gone forth among them. Wherefore, the fruit of thy loins shall write; and the fruit of the loins of Judah shall write; and that which shall be written by the fruit of thy loins, and also that which shall be written by the fruit of the loins of Judah, shall grow together, unto the confounding of false doctrines and laying down of contentions, and establishing peace among the fruit of thy loins, and bringing them to the knowledge of their fathers in the latter days, and also to the knowledge of my covenants, saith the Lord. (2 Nephi 3:11–12)

The divine plan would thus require the merging of the scriptures of Lehi’s posterity, who are descendants of the house of Joseph, with the record of the Jews for the accomplishment of the divine plan. In his second book, drawing on the texts of
Isaiah, Nephi returned to this theme and prophesied at length about the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and its special mission in the latter-day “marvelous work and a wonder,” associated with the restoration of the gospel, in which “the deaf [shall] hear the words of the book, and the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity and out of darkness” (2 Nephi 27: 26, 29). In line with this emphasis, Nephi devoted several chapters to prophesying about events in the latter days, when the gospel would be restored, detailing conditions that would prevail and giving appropriate warnings (see 1 Nephi 13–14; 2 Nephi 26:14–33; 27–30). The precision with which Nephi described prevailing conditions, including the multitude of churches and their varied teachings that would exist in the latter days at the moment when the restoration of the gospel would take place, adds further evidence to the veracity of his prophecies.

Nephi thus appreciated fully that the history of his people was not only derivative of Israelite history but part of the larger development of world events at a future date. Nephi’s vision of the role of God in history thus extended beyond the descendants of Lehi and beyond the several branches of the house of Israel to include all the peoples of the earth, including latter-day Gentiles. Nephi’s vision of the tree of life, in which the love of God for all his children was manifested in the atonement of Christ, beautifully set the stage for Nephi’s prophetic integration of traditional sacred themes with the broader themes of world history (see 1 Nephi 11:4–24; 12–14).

All mankind thus become heirs of salvation, and as such are the recipients of God’s special favor. For as Nephi states in 2 Nephi 29:7, “Know ye not that there are more nations than one? Know ye not that I, the Lord your God, have created all men, and that I remember those who are upon the isles of the sea; and that I rule in the heavens above and in the earth beneath; and I bring forth my word unto the children of men, yea, even upon all the nations of the earth?” God, the ruler of the universe, thus has an interest in the affairs of all people and works actively for their salvation. And further: “For I command all men, both in the east and in the west, and in the north, and in the south, and in the islands of the sea, that they shall write the words which I speak unto them; for out of the books which shall be written I will judge the world, every man according to their works, according to that which is written” (2 Nephi 29:11).

In that light, God guides the destiny not only of the house of Israel but also of those outside the house of Israel for the accomplishment of divine purposes. The Gentile nations thus figure in the Lord’s plan for the unfolding of his purposes (see 3 Nephi 23:1–2).

That the Gentiles (in this context, all non-Jewish people) are under divine influence and are to play a significant role in the divine purpose is demonstrated in Nephi’s vision of the latter-day future of America:

The angel said unto me: Behold, the wrath of God is upon the seed of thy brethren. And I looked and beheld a man among the Gentiles, who was separated from the seed of my brethren by the many waters; and I beheld the Spirit of God, that it came down and wrought upon the man; and he went forth upon the many waters, even unto the seed of my brethren, who were in the promised land. And it came to pass that I beheld the Spirit of God, that it wrought upon other Gentiles; and they went forth out
of captivity, upon the many waters. And it came to pass that I beheld many multitudes of the Gentiles upon the land of promise; and I beheld the wrath of God, that it was upon the seed of my brethren; and they were scattered before the Gentiles and were smitten.

And I beheld the Spirit of the Lord, that it was upon the Gentiles, and they did prosper and obtain the land for their inheritance. . . . And it came to pass that I, Nephi, beheld that the Gentiles who had gone forth out of captivity did humble themselves before the Lord; and the power of the Lord was with them.

And I beheld that their mother Gentiles were gathered together upon the waters, and upon the land also, to battle against them. And I, Nephi, beheld that the power of God was with them, and also that the wrath of God was upon all those that were gathered together against them to battle. And I, Nephi, beheld that the Gentiles that had gone out of captivity were delivered by the power of God out of the hands of all other nations. And it came to pass that I, Nephi, beheld that they did prosper in the land; and I beheld a book, and it was carried forth among them. (1 Nephi 13:11–20; paragraphing modified)

Major chapters in the history of the development of America are thus transcribed in advance, with a clear indication that God has played a major role in them. According to the above passages, God not only influences the development of human history relating to two continents but guides the activities of various people and, in the case of the Revolutionary War, the success of the revolutionaries.

In a similar vein, Nephi’s vision captures the divine origin of the Bible and its partial corruption by the “great and abominable church” (1 Nephi 13:6). While Nephi decries that plain and precious parts have been taken from the Bible, causing many of the Gentiles to stumble, he nevertheless views the Bible as an important means by which God will eventually bring knowledge of the truth to his posterity, in conjunction with the revelation of additional scriptural records (see 1 Nephi 13:20–41).

The blending of Nephite history with this wider vision of world history paints in broad strokes for the providential historian—at least for the historian who believes in the Restoration—a significant part of the canvas depicting God’s designs and purposes in modern history. It also brings into full focus Nephi’s affirmation of God’s love for all his children and desire to work with every people in behalf of their salvation: “He inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile” (2 Nephi 26:33). Thus God not only is viewed as an active participant in human affairs, but his influence extends to all people (see Alma 29:8). God, from the point of Nephi’s revelatory experience, plays a major role in the destinies of all nations.

Nephi, in fact, was privileged early in his ministry to see in vision the entire future history of the world, though he was not permitted to write it, that task being reserved for the apostle John (see 1 Nephi 14:18–28). He nevertheless was privileged to write of a time somewhat future to our own when “the Church of the Lamb of God” was upon “all the face of the earth” (1 Nephi 14:12). While it is not my purpose here to relate Nephi’s prophesying to current or future conditions of the world, his insight that the conflict between the forces of good and evil would grow in intensity
in the last days seems particularly appropriate to our times (see 1 Nephi 14:10–17; D&C 1:35–36).

**Prophetic Perspectives**

As a truly great prophet with an unusually clear view of future developments, Nephi provides a vast sweep of God’s role in human affairs for the accomplishment of divine purposes. In his inspired writings, Nephi reaffirms what is central in human history—the need to believe in Christ and obey his commandments in order to receive the blessings that flow from that obedience (see 2 Nephi 33:9–15). With the prophets of ancient Israel, Nephi shared the view, derived from Israel’s covenant relationship with God, that obedience to God’s commandments assures prosperity and divine favor, while disobedience carries with it dire consequences. This view, emphasized in Nephi’s writings and echoed throughout the Nephite record, sets the stage for the repeated cycle of righteous living, prosperity, pride, and chastisement so prominent in the history of the Nephite nation.

But Nephi’s historic-prophetic perspective extended beyond a cyclical to a linear and teleological view of history as he elaborated broader themes in the divine plan. This becomes apparent as he discusses a second major theme in his writings—the accomplishment of God’s purposes through the scattering and gathering of the house of Israel. As he established his people in the promised land, Nephi, through his own experience with Deity, was able to comprehend the divine plan for the future blessing of all the house of Israel and the entire Gentile world that would come with the blending together of the scriptures of the Jews and the scriptures of his branch of the tribe of Joseph. He thus viewed divinely orchestrated future events in America that paved the way for the coming forth of the scriptural records of his people and for the latter-day restoration of the gospel as necessary steps in the unfolding of God’s plan for the salvation of all his children. While having “written but a small part” of the great future unfolding of events that he saw (see 1 Nephi 14:28), Nephi nevertheless recorded his appreciation of the universality of God’s love and His concern for the salvation of all mankind, and hence His providential dealings with all peoples.

Because Latter-day Saints accept the Book of Mormon as scripture, and hence the words of Nephi as divine revelation, his powerful prophetic interpretation of God’s role in world history is a fundamental building block for a Latter-day Saint perspective on world history. In defining God’s plan for the salvation of his children as it relates to world history, Nephi has filled a major gap in our understanding of providential history, particularly with regard to the modern world. His identification, by revelation, of specific instances in which God has intervened in human affairs to accomplish his purposes, and his discussion of principles that govern that intervention, add immeasurably to our understanding. His judicious blending of a cyclical view of history with a longer, linear, and teleological view will be of interest, not only to Latter-day Saints, but to secular historians as well.

**God, from the Point of Nephi’s Revelatory Experience, Plays a Major Role in the Destinies of All Nations.**
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 “pleasure 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 has become of the phrase “pleasant pictures.”


10. For an introduction to the subject of God in history that focuses on relevant principles from a Latter-day Saint perspective, see Alexander R. Morrison, “God in History,” in Window of Faith, 1–12.


12. For discussions of gospel dispensations, including that of the Nephites, see Joseph Fielding Smith, Doctrines of Salvation, comp. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1977–78), 1:160–64; Bruce R. McConkie, Mormon Doctrine, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 200–202; Milton R. Hunter, The Gospel through the Ages (Salt Lake City: Stevens & Wallis, 1945), chaps. 11–13; and “Dispensations,” in the Bible Dictionary in the Latter-day Saint edition of the King James Version of the Bible, 657–58. The Prophet Joseph Smith stated, “It is in the order of heavenly things that God should always send a new dispensation into the world when men have apostatized from the truth and lost the priesthood.”


14. See Millet, “Influence of the Brass Plates,” 210–11, which presents evidence to suggest that these were prophetic of the tribe of Joseph.

15. According to Terry B. Ball, Isaiah “is the most quoted prophet in the Book of Mormon, having approximately 35 percent of his Old Testament writings either quoted directly or paraphrased by Nephite prophets.” “Isaiah, life and ministry,” in Book of Mormon Reference Companion, ed. Dennis L. Largay et al. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 340. Nephi quotes 18 chapters of Isaiah completely: Isaiah 48–51 (1 Nephi 20–21; 2 Nephi 7–8); Isaiah 2–14 (2 Nephi 7–24); and the greater part of Isaiah 29 (2 Nephi 27); plus additional portions, either quoted (such as 2 Nephi 6:5–7; 30:9, 11–15) or paraphrased (e.g., 1 Nephi 22:6). So powerfully impressed was Nephi with the prophecies of Isaiah that of the 55 chapters in 1 and 2 Nephi, approximately one-third are drawn from Isaiah.


18. Nephi must have been personally gratified to receive the Lord’s promise that his writings on the small plates would be preserved “as long as the earth shall stand,” a point he apparently had not appreciated when he was commanded to prepare them (2 Nephi 25:21–23; 1 Nephi 19:3).


20. While the precise titles of such books have not been given in revelation, there is some indication from a 1978 First Presidency letter that Mohammed, among others, was inspired to bring forth truths of God, suggesting that the Qur’an and other sacred texts could be among these. For this interpretation and a discussion of world religions with references to their sacred texts, see Roger R. Keller, “Why Study World Religions?” in Window of Faith, 213–30.