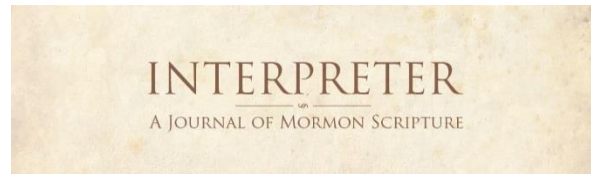




BOOK OF MORMON CENTRAL
<http://bookofmormoncentral.org/>



The Interpreter Foundation
<https://www.mormoninterpreter.com/>

Nephi's Change of Heart

Author(s): Dennis Newton

Source: *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, Volume 20 (2016), pp. 261-291

Published by: The Interpreter Foundation

Abstract: How long did it take Nephi to compose his portions of the “small account?” Careful text analysis and data mining suggest that “Nephi’s” texts may have been composed across periods as great as forty years apart. I propose a timeline with four distinct periods of composition. The merits of this timeline are weighed, and some thoughts are explored as to how this timeline alters the reader’s perceptions of Nephi. The net effect is that Nephi becomes more sympathetic, more personable, and more relatable as his record progresses and that the totality of Nephi’s writings are best understood and interpreted when the factor of time is considered.



The Interpreter Foundation is collaborating with Book of Mormon Central to preserve and extend access to scholarly research on the Book of Mormon. Items are archived by the permission of the Interpreter Foundation.

<https://mormoninterpreter.com/>

INTERPRETER

— § —
A JOURNAL OF MORMON SCRIPTURE

Volume 20 · 2016 · Pages 261-291

Nephi's Change of Heart

Dennis Newton

Offprint Series

© 2016 The Interpreter Foundation. A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

ISSN 2372-1227 (print)
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

The goal of The Interpreter Foundation is to increase understanding of scripture through careful scholarly investigation and analysis of the insights provided by a wide range of ancillary disciplines, including language, history, archaeology, literature, culture, ethnohistory, art, geography, law, politics, philosophy, etc. Interpreter will also publish articles advocating the authenticity and historicity of LDS scripture and the Restoration, along with scholarly responses to critics of the LDS faith. We hope to illuminate, by study and faith, the eternal spiritual message of the scriptures—that Jesus is the Christ.

Although the Board fully supports the goals and teachings of the Church, The Interpreter Foundation is an independent entity and is neither owned, controlled by nor affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or with Brigham Young University. All research and opinions provided are the sole responsibility of their respective authors, and should not be interpreted as the opinions of the Board, nor as official statements of LDS doctrine, belief or practice.

This journal is a weekly publication. Visit us at MormonInterpreter.com
You may subscribe to this journal at MormonInterpreter.com/annual-print-subscription

NEPHI'S CHANGE OF HEART

Dennis Newton

Abstract: How long did it take Nephi to compose his portions of the “small account?” Careful text analysis and data mining suggest that “Nephi’s” texts may have been composed across periods as great as forty years apart. I propose a timeline with four distinct periods of composition. The merits of this timeline are weighed, and some thoughts are explored as to how this timeline alters the reader’s perceptions of Nephi. The net effect is that Nephi becomes more sympathetic, more personable, and more relatable as his record progresses and that the totality of Nephi’s writings are best understood and interpreted when the factor of time is considered.

In her teens, my eldest daughter was a prolific journal keeper. As my wife and I were recently going through her high school memorabilia, we filled an entire suitcase with these journals. Because she is in her thirties now and has her own basement, we decided to dump this suitcase on her doorstep. She immediately became enthralled with the writings of her past, rereading and reliving the words and memories of her youth. She laughed, grimaced, and reminisced. Seemingly insignificant trinkets such as a “Skittles” candy wrapper triggered a flood of thoughts and emotions. She smiled over best friends long forgotten, recalled bouts of silliness, recognized life episodes that had planted tiny seeds of faith, and cringed over some of the “weird” things she once held dear. Foremost, she was struck by her own personal growth and how she had matured since her last college journal entry when for her, the process of physically writing in the journal had given way to electronic recording methods such as blogging. My present-day daughter — although she consciously remembers writing those journals — is today an entirely different person

and could never produce them again. The passage of a decade or two has changed who she is, how she thinks, and how she writes.

Nephi identified himself as the primary author of the first two books in the Book of Mormon. In that text there is evidence of a considerable time gap from when the earliest portions of the text were authored and when Nephi wrote his final farewell, perhaps as long as forty years. Is there also evidence that the persona Nephi sketched for his audience evolved during this same period? The passage of time changes each of us — how we speak, how we write, what we believe, and what we feel is important. I propose that the careful reader of the Book of Mormon can witness both subtle and dramatic changes in Nephi’s writings and doctrines best explained by the “softening” of his heart via the passage of time, an expanded appreciation of the importance of his record, and his relationship with his brother Jacob. I argue that Nephi’s writings become even more accessible if the reader approaches his record holistically and contemplates the overall arc of the life he had chosen to share with us.¹

Contemporary Scholarship on Nephi’s Compositional Timeline

Considerable scholarship has focused on Nephi with notable volumes examining his role as an editor, his use of Isaiah, the Tree of Life vision, his prophecies, the Old World context of his travels, and his reliance on biblical motifs.² Little, however, has been written about the span of time it took Nephi to author the plates, how the persona that he presented to his audience evolved, and how his understanding of the purpose of his record changed. Book of Mormon readers and scholars have generally assumed that Nephi wrote the small account during a relatively short

1 Nephi is both a character in this drama as well as the purported author. For the purposes of this paper, I will take Nephi at his word but fully understand that many do not. The best that I can hope to do is try to evaluate the character that Nephi presented to us, as readers, independent of whatever the objective historical reality is.

2 A complete bibliography would be too exhaustive for our purposes. Book-length treatments include Grant Hardy’s *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide*; Hugh Nibley’s *Lehi in the Desert & the World of the Jaredites; Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, edited by Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch; *The Things Which My Father Saw: Approaches to Lehi’s Dream and Nephi’s Vision*, edited by Daniel L. Belnap, Gaye Strathearn, and Stanley A. Johnson; Bradley J. Kramer’s *Beholding the Tree of Life: A Rabbinic Approach to the Book of Mormon*; Joseph M. Spencer’s *An Other Testament: On Typology*; Brant A. Gardner’s *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*; and *First Nephi: The Doctrinal Foundation*, edited by Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr.

period (e.g., a few years at most) later in his life with a specific purpose in mind while referring to an assemblage of documents which included but were not limited to the brass plates, Lehi's records, sermons, recorded blessings, and Nephi's own writings.³ Another oft-implied assumption is that Nephi had a master plan or outline with which he used to organize his writings.⁴

Recent scholarship has begun to question these traditional assumptions. Authors such as Joseph M. Spencer are willing to “explore the possibility — heretofore unexplored in Book of Mormon scholarship — that the character of Nephi's project changed dramatically after he finished writing 1 Nephi 1–18 ... It might be, then, that Nephi eventually took his record in a different direction than he had intended.”⁵ Likewise, Brant A. Gardner recently published a short article touching upon these themes. Gardner highlights a point of demarcation between 2 Nephi 5 and the remainder of 2 Nephi and concludes that this is the moment where Nephi took his record down a completely different path.

First Nephi is very clearly a planned text and was written after Nephi had already created the dynastic record. In 2 Nephi 5:28, he declares that he is writing thirty years after they had left Jerusalem. He certainly had the time to prepare what he would write in this second set of plates. Careful examination of the way Nephi constructed his text shows intricate planning at least during the creation of his first book on the small plates ... For Nephi, we have the structurally complex book we call 2 Nephi. Even a cursory reading of 2 Nephi shows it to be quite different from 1 Nephi. Although chapters 1-5 appear to follow the model established in 1 Nephi, chapter 6 abruptly changes into something quite different. Nephi, who had rarely

3 This is the sense, for example, given by Noel B. Reynolds in *The Political Dimension in Nephi's Small Plates* (BYU Studies 27.4, Fall 1987) when he writes “when Nephi undertook late in his life to write an account of the founding events of the Lehi colony” and John W. Welch in *FARMS Update in Insights* (April 1999), 2, when he writes that “Nephi wrote his small plates *soon after* important events such as Lehi's death, Nephi's separation from his rebellious brothers, and the establishment of the reign of kings” [emphasis added].

4 Joseph M. Spencer in *An Other Testament: On Typology* (Salem, OR: Salt Press, 2012), 42, argues for a “fourfold structure” of a) Creation, b) Fall, c) Atonement and d) Veil. John W. Welch in *Chiasmus in Antiquity* (Provo, UT: FARMS), 199-201, feels both 1 and 2 Nephi were intentionally organized using chiasmic structures.

5 Joseph M. Spencer, *An Other Testament: On Typology*, 40.

quoted from another source to this point, quotes a sermon from his brother Jacob. There is no transition from the more historical information at the end of chapter 5. In fact, the end of chapter 5 has a tone of finality.⁶

Benjamin L. McGuire argues that Nephi, in his role as editor, regularly spoke directly to his audience, setting and resetting what they, as readers, should expect of the text. McGuire argues that 1 Nephi 1, 6, and 9 and 2 Nephi 33 are all “narrative beginnings” designed to alter how Nephi’s audience should approach his words.⁷ “By the time we finish Nephi’s texts, we have journeyed through four narrative beginnings. At each step we are encouraged to change both our understanding of the text and the way in which we read it.”⁸ McGuire concludes that the manner with which Nephi, himself, perceived his own text evolved during the process of writing the record.

Nephi starts his text by lending his presence: he stands behind his text, he declares it to be “true.” On the journey of his writing, he discovers that it is true only in a uniquely personal way. His audience, should they follow his suggestions, will discover their own revelation, their own experience, and their difference from his.⁹

While Grant Hardy does not propose an explicit timeline as to when each portion of Nephi’s text was composed, he does demonstrate an acute awareness of the various life stages during which Nephi authored each of his texts and bases much of his literary analysis upon this awareness. For example, Hardy tells us that when we as readers reach 2 Nephi 5, that we

6 Brant A. Gardner, “Two Authors: Two Approaches in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 24 (2015), 257-258. While Gardner is highlighting the difference between 1 and 2 Nephi, he maintains that Nephi carefully planned the structure of 1 Nephi.

7 Although McGuire does not specifically mention time, his argument for separate narrative beginnings implies that considerable time passed between the periods of composition. This is reminiscent of the observation regarding Moroni’s three attempts to conclude the record, first proposed by Mark D. Thomas, “Moroni: The Final Voice,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12/1 (2003) and later discussed by Grant Hardy in *Understanding the Book of Mormon*. The suggestion is that Moroni believed he was closing the record three separate times and that a substantial amount of time passed between these three authorship periods.

8 Benjamin L. McGuire, “Nephi: A Postmodernist Reading,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* Vol 12 (2014), 74.

9 *Ibid.*, 72.

should reread the earlier text because we now have the realization that, “Nephi is not recording events as they happen. Instead, he is a middle-aged man recounting incidents from his teens and early twenties, with the full knowledge that life in the Promised Land has soured, that there has been an irreparable breach with his brothers, and that his closest relatives have spent years trying to kill each other.”¹⁰

Hardy, like McGuire, also argues that how Nephi perceived his record changed during the compositional process. For example, after discussing Nephi’s prophecy that references the writings of “thy” seed (which contemporary readers generally equate with the Book of Mormon),¹¹ Hardy poses the question “when does Nephi come to realize that the book he is writing is actually the same book he saw in vision several decades earlier?”¹² He argues that when Nephi began the small plates, he seemed to have a single audience in mind, but by the time he closed his record, he was writing to at least two audiences.

From the beginning, Nephi had some audience in mind (“Therefore, I would that ye should know ... But behold, I, Nephi, will show unto you ...” 1 Nephi 1:18, 20). At first, these intermittent personal references seem directed to his people, and he is writing either as a king or as an ancestor, despite one somewhat tentative appeal “unto all the House of Israel, if it so be that they should obtain these things” (1 Nephi 19:19). But by the time he begins to comment in 2 Nephi 25-33, he is addressing a second audience as well.¹³

Hardy argues that Nephi’s understanding of why he was writing the small plates changed and that his acknowledgement of a latter-day audience is evidence of this evolution.¹⁴ Hardy suspects that the editorial comment Nephi made in 2 Nephi 4 “has to do with his [Nephi’s] evolving

10 Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 13. As another example Hardy says, “Of course we have heard Nephi’s mature voice from the opening verse, but the first time he quotes his teenage self we read ...” (36).

11 Hardy quotes 1 Nephi 13:35. “For behold, saith the Lamb, I will manifest myself unto thy seed that they shall write many things which I shall minister unto them, which shall be plain and precious. And after that thy seed shall be destroyed and dwindle in unbelief, and also the seed of thy brethren, behold, these things shall be hid up to come forth unto the Gentiles by the gift and power of the Lamb.”

12 Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 77.

13 *Ibid.*, 78.

14 Throughout this article, I generally refer to the “small account” (Words of Mormon 1:3) or these “other plates” (2 Nephi 5:30) as the “small plates.”

sense of his own contribution to the now doubly foretold book and an awareness of his readership for whom he was ultimately writing.”¹⁵ Although Hardy does not explicitly state this, he implies that such an evolution in Nephi’s thought process while he composed his text is linked to the passage of an extended period of time.¹⁶

Proposed Timeline of Authorship

Nephi recounted the historical portion of his narrative in a rigid chronological manner. Each event is told in its proper order. This characteristic of Nephi’s storytelling is helpful for establishing a timeline of text composition. Nephi occasionally interrupted his story with editorial commentaries, which often are designed to explain the nature of the present text (small plates) in relation to other texts preserved by the Nephites. These editorial asides can help us piece together a theoretical timeline of text composition we can then evaluate against the entire work to determine if it tells us anything new and worthwhile about Nephi. The model I propose organizes Nephi’s text into four distinct compositional periods, and I suggest likely dates for each period.

Nephi tells us that he was commanded to fashion the small plates sometime between thirty and forty years after his party had left Jerusalem.¹⁷

And it came to pass that we lived after the manner of happiness. And *thirty years* had passed away from the time we left Jerusalem. And I Nephi had kept the records upon my plates which I had made of my people thus far. And it came to pass that the Lord God said unto me: Make other plates; and thou shalt engraven many things upon them which are good

¹⁵ Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 78.

¹⁶ Both Hardy and McGuire also stress the importance of realizing that Nephi, in his role as editor, selected what to share with his audience and what to withhold. McGuire states “being an unreliable narrator does not mean, of course, that the character Nephi in his text is speaking untruths. What it means is that he has not necessarily told us everything and we discover the unreliability in the contradictions and motivations presented to us in the text.” McGuire, “Nephi: A Postmodernist Reading,” 59. For me, this simply means that as readers, we need to be conscious of Nephi’s maturation and growth as he returns again and again to his record. The writings of a young Nephi are only “unreliable” in the context of the writings of a more mature Nephi.

¹⁷ Although not entirely clear in the text, I concur with most commentators that this date refers to the time the family left the city of Jerusalem and not when they left Bountiful.

in my sight for the profit of thy people. Wherefore I Nephi, to be obedient to the commandments of the Lord, went and made these plates upon which I have engraven these things ... And it sufficeth me to say that *forty years* had passed away, and we had already had wars and contentions with our brethren. (2 Nephi 5:28-34; emphasis added)¹⁸

Although he had previously mentioned their existence, Nephi told the story of creating the small plates when he reached the appropriate chronological point along his historical timeline.¹⁹ Just prior to the thirty-year mark, Lehi had passed away, the family schism had occurred, the Nephites had constructed a temple, and Nephi had consecrated Jacob and Joseph as priests. The text also states that Nephi already had been keeping the larger, more historical record of his people. Sometime after the thirty-year mark, he was commanded to “make other plates,” a commandment which he followed. He fashioned these “other plates” and began to engrave upon them. Chronologically, this seems to be the only important historical event Nephi noted on the small plates during this ten-year period. However, Nephi included a telling comment immediately after mentioning the passing of “forty years.” He remarked that they “already had wars and contentions with our brethren.” Following Nephi’s strict chronological telling of events, I take this to mean that between when he fashioned the small plates and when “forty years” had passed, there was enough time for “wars and contentions” to have occurred (note the plural). Contrast this with Nephi’s comment just prior to the passing of “thirty years” where he noted that the people lived “after the manner of happiness.” It is logical that Nephi would have begun a project such as the small plates during a time of harmony and prosperity and that during a time of “wars and contentions,” the “king,” Nephi, would likely have been distracted and thus, the authorial process stopped and started.

Due to the “happiness” reported at year thirty compared to the contention leading up to year forty, I feel it is more likely that Nephi began his text closer to year thirty (30 – 33) and composed 1 Nephi – 2 Nephi 5 over the course of that decade.²⁰ By the time we reach 2 Nephi 5:34,

18 Royal Skousen’s *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009) is the default Book of Mormon text used for this paper.

19 1 Nephi 1:1-3, 16-17, 1 Nephi 6, and 1 Nephi 19:1-6.

20 For the remainder of this paper I refer to points upon the proposed timeline in this manner. Year thirty, therefore, refers to thirty years after the family left

we can be certain that at least forty years have passed.²¹ Therefore, it is a reasonable conclusion that Nephi had been working on the small plates for between 5 and 10 years at this point in the text.

While Nephi told us he began his work on the small plates after year thirty, he also informed us that he abridged much of his history from earlier sources. Nephi reported that he made an abridgment of the record of his father (1 Nephi 1:17)²² and his own writings — the plates that he created just after arriving in the new world (1 Nephi 19:1). Does this mean Nephi completely rewrote his source material or that he selectively determined what to quote and what to exclude? The evidence from the text favors the latter scenario. For example, in 1 Nephi 5, Nephi recounted the content that the family found on the “plates of brass,” and then he added an editorial aside explaining that at this point he was breaking from the source record and would not include “the genealogy of my fathers in this part of my record.”²³ Likewise, Nephi’s account of Lehi’s vision of the “rod of iron” (1 Nephi 8) quoted Lehi directly until verse 29, where Nephi reasserted control of the narrative with the statement “and now I, Nephi, do not speak all the words of my father” and thereafter gave a short summary of the remainder of the vision.²⁴ In this instance, Nephi seemed to be quoting directly from an older source and then intentionally interjected his own, later, editorial voice. While Nephi often inserted his editorial voice, he was usually transparent when he did this, typically employing the distinctive phrase “and now I, Nephi” as an indicator that he was about to comment.²⁵ But the vast majority of 1 Nephi seems to be direct quotations from Nephi’s original source material. It is useful for our purposes, therefore, to consider the likely composition dates of the older, original plates from which Nephi extracted much of his early history.

A few years after he arrived in the Promised Land, Nephi is commanded to “make plates of ore” to “engraven them with the record

Jerusalem.

21 Nephi did not tell us how far past forty years the time line had passed. He could have written 2 Nephi 5:34 anywhere between year forty and year fifty. If, at this point in his text, he had been writing later than year fifty, I believe he would have mentioned that in the text.

22 “Behold, I make an abridgement of the record of my father, upon plates which I have made with mine own hands; wherefore, after I have abridged the record of my father then will I make an account of mine own life.”

23 1 Nephi 6:1

24 1 Nephi 8:29

25 See 1 Nephi 1:16, 1 Nephi 6:1, 1 Nephi 8:29, 1 Nephi 10:1 as examples.

of my people.”²⁶ While the record is not entirely clear when the party arrived, it is reasonable to assign a date of approximately 15 years post-Jerusalem for the construction of these plates. This implies that Nephi began these earlier plates about 15 years prior to when he fashioned the small plates. It does not mean, however, that the family had not written down the stories of their exodus in some other manner or had developed an oral tradition.²⁷

As Gardner notes, Nephi's record took a radical turn immediately after 2 Nephi 5. Nephi's writings no longer recounted the history of his people. His record is now something altogether different; he quoted a sermon by his brother, recorded extensive passages from Isaiah, he shared his own prophecies, and he closed with what Hardy refers to as an appendix.²⁸ When was the latter half of 2 Nephi written? One clue comes from the first chapter of Jacob, when we are told that fifty-five years after Jerusalem, Nephi put Jacob in charge of “these small plates.”²⁹ It is likely that Nephi attached his final ending to his record (“appendix”) just prior to handing over responsibility for the plates.³⁰ And when did Nephi write the remainder of 2 Nephi? Based on evidence which I summarize

26 1 Nephi 19:1. I place the formation of the “plates of ore” within a few years of the family's arriving in the Promised Land. Immediately after arriving in the Promised Land, the family planted seeds, had abundant success, explored the wilderness, and discovered precious metals including gold, silver, and copper. These activities would likely have required only a few years to complete. On the other hand, the chronological events that occur in the text after Nephi created the plates are a) Nephi used the plates of brass to preach to his people, b) he had a conversation about Zenos/Isaiah with his brethren, c) Lehi gave blessings to his children, d) Lehi died, e) the family divided, f) a city and a temple were built, g) Nephi's ascended as ruler, and h) Joseph and Jacob were consecrated as priests. These are events that seem more significant and time consuming. Since all of this occurs within a period of approximately twenty years, I suggest a date of three years after arrival in the Promised Land for formation of the large plates.

27 It is highly likely that many of the historical stories found in 1 Nephi were part of a family oral tradition and told often. One evidence for this discussed in a forthcoming paper is the prevalent use of chiasmic poetic form when Nephi quoted from abridged source material versus his comparative abandonment of the form when he wrote content specifically for the small plates.

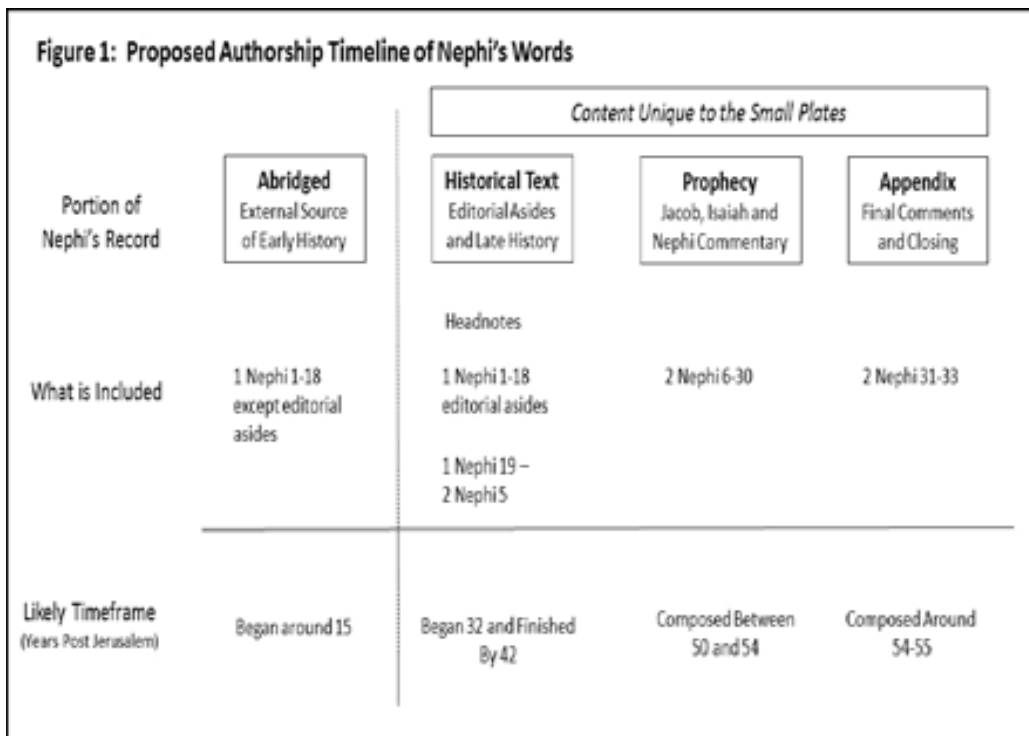
28 2 Nephi 30 closes with a sense of finality (“and now my beloved brethren, I must make an end of my sayings”). The final three chapters of 2 Nephi (31-33) appear to be a final ending, which is why it is referred to as an appendix.

29 Jacob 1:1

30 Nephi's last words have a strong sense of finality as he bids an “everlasting farewell.” It is unlikely that Nephi penned these words until he had a sure knowledge that they were his last.

throughout the remainder of this article, I prefer a later date (year fifty or later) for 2 Nephi 6-30 as well.³¹

Figure 1 summarizes my proposed compositional timeline for Nephi's writings. There appears to be a nearly forty-year gap between some of the earliest of Nephi's stories that he quoted directly from external sources (i.e., Laban, tree of life, and wandering in the wilderness) and his final appendix. Now that we have a proposed timeline, we can reexamine Nephi's writings through the lens of this model, specifically looking for new insights that this model might bring to the text and about its author, Nephi.



Narrative Beginnings and Editorial Asides

If the proposed timeline is correct, it would not be surprising if Nephi's designs and purposes for his record changed as he aged. As mentioned previously, McGuire argues that Nephi wrote four separate narrative beginnings designed to reset and refocus the expectations of his reader. I concur and argue that there are an additional four editorial asides that Nephi employed to mark further changes in how we should perceive his

³¹ The reasons for a substantial time gap include evidence of a change in Nephi's writing style, the impact of Jacob and Isaiah upon Nephi's later doctrinal writings, a general softening on doctrinal topics such as eternal life, and a deeper understanding about the fate of his people.

record (see **Figure 2** for a list and summary of all of Nephi's editorial asides).³²

Figure 2: Nephi's Editorial Asides

Reference	Text Highlights	Appropriate Readers' Expectations
1 Nephi 1: 1-3	<i>And I know that the record which I make is true; and I make it with mine own hand; and I make it according to my knowledge</i>	Learning and language of his father, Nephi favored of God, based on Nephi's knowledge, his proceedings, record is true
1 Nephi 1: 16-17	<i>I make an abridgment of the record of my father, upon plates which I have made with mine own hands</i>	Not a full account but an abridgment based on record of his father, will tell his father's story and then his own
1 Nephi 6: 1-5	<i>The fullness of mine intent is that I may persuade men to come unto the God of Abraham...and be saved</i>	No genealogy, not a full historical account, write what is pleasing unto God, intent is to persuade men to come unto God
1 Nephi 9: 2-5	<i>Wherefore the Lord hath commanded me to make these plates for a wise purpose in him, which purpose I know not</i>	These plates for the ministry and other plates for reign of kings, Nephi commanded to make these plates for what purpose he knows not
1 Nephi 19: 1-7	<i>I proceed according to that which I have spoken; and this I do that the more sacred things may be kept for the knowledge of my people</i>	Will only write that which he consider sacred, will give an account of how these plates were made later, if he errs it is because of the weakness in him
2 Nephi 4: 14-15	<i>And upon these I write the things of my soul, and many of the scriptures which are engraven upon the Plates of Brass</i>	Will not include all of Lehi's sayings, will include things of Nephi's soul and scriptures from Plates of Brass
2 Nephi 5: 29-34	<i>And it came to pass that the Lord God said to me, "Make other plates; and thou shalt engraven many things upon them which are good in my sight, for the profit of thy people"</i>	When and why he made this record, has engraven what is pleasing unto God
2 Nephi 33: 1-4	<i>...cannot write all the things which were taught among my people; neither am I mighty in writing, like unto speaking...</i>	Not mighty in writing (weakness), many that harden hearts against his words, great worth to Nephi and his people

Nephi began his record brimming with self-confidence, a sense of which he conveyed to his audience (“I know that the record which I make is true”). This is likely reminiscent of the period of relative tranquility in which he wrote this portion of the record (shortly after year thirty), a

³² There are many other editorial comments in which Nephi speaks directly to his audience but that do not, in my opinion, invite us to rethink how we should approach the totality of Nephi's record or discuss Nephi's overall purpose. These include the aforementioned 1 Nephi 8:29 where Nephi told us that he was going to give a quick summation of the rest of Lehi's story and 2 Nephi 11:8, where Nephi introduced the words of Isaiah with an invitation to “liken them unto you.”

tranquility that would be shattered by “wars and contentions.” We find no hint of second guessing, no indication of self-doubt. His stated purpose in his first narrative beginning is to “make a record of my proceedings in my days.”³³ He did not tell his readers that this record is meant to be uniquely spiritual. Rather Nephi planned to abridge the record of his father and then record his own history. Before long, however, he modified his audience’s expectations slightly and indicated that his genealogy will not be included in the record. McGuire points out that a typical reader of an ancient document would have expected a genealogy.³⁴ He also told us that he did not include a full history but rather that he abridged existing records so that he could focus these plates on “the things of God.” For the first time, Nephi told us his purpose for writing this record; “For the fullness of mine intent is that I may persuade men to come unto the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, and be saved” (1 Nephi 6:4).

Shortly thereafter, Nephi gave his readers another narrative beginning. This time Nephi appeared more honest and circumspect with regard to his intent for these plates. He admitted that he is unsure as to why he has created this smaller set of plates, although he knew that they are “for the more part of the ministry” (1 Nephi 9:4). Nephi wrote, “wherefore, the Lord hath commanded me to make these plates for a wise purpose in him, which purpose I know not” (1 Nephi 9:5). This is an important clue as to the timing of when Nephi wrote these editorial asides. Later in the record, Nephi reported that he has learned through revelation and his study of the plates of brass that his words would ultimately come forth in the form of a book and be of “great worth unto the children of men, and especially unto our seed, which is a remnant of the house of Israel” (2 Nephi 28:2). But as of 1 Nephi 9, there is no foreshadowing of his later knowledge about the ultimate purpose of the record, suggesting that Nephi wrote these comments prior to receiving that revelation. Nephi reported being unsure about the ultimate purpose of his record as late as when he wrote 1 Nephi 19:3 (“for other wise purposes, which purposes are known unto the Lord”).³⁵

33 1 Nephi 1:2

34 McGuire, “Nephi: A Postmodernist Reading,” 66.

35 Joseph Spencer asserts that 1 Nephi 19 through 2 Nephi 5 is a unified text because of Nephi’s promise in chapter 19 that he will give an account of “my making these plates”; a promise that he fulfills in chapter 5 of 2 Nephi. A careful reading of the text does not require the conclusion that this is a unified text (although it certainly could be). Nephi could simply be telling his story in chronological order. After arriving in the Promised Land, Nephi was commanded to create plates of

McGuire argues that Nephi's final words also serve as another narrative beginning. Here Nephi spoke with a spirit of humility reflective of one who has carried heavy burdens throughout his life. Nephi lamented that his "eyes water my pillow by night."³⁶ He also wrote as one who has read and pondered the words he has previously written and was reflective about the process. Like my daughter's experience with her journals, he seemed slightly nostalgic and slightly hesitant about the words he had written. By employing the phrase, "I have written what I have written," when he described his personal reflections upon reviewing his record, Nephi told us much about his heart and his state of mind at that time. The earlier exuberance and confidence had waned. He was a more mature writer who understood that others will have different reactions to his words than what he might have hoped. While he felt the record to be of great worth, he acknowledged that others might not feel the same way.³⁷ In his final narrative beginning, Nephi seemed obsessed with the writing process³⁸ and at three separate points acknowledged his own weakness as an author ("neither am I mighty in writing").³⁹ He then realized that his words, in and of themselves, were not sufficient to persuade his readers to come to Christ unless the Spirit strengthens his words. Thus, he invited the reader to reexamine his writings from a new perspective and, conjointly, we are invited to revisit what we know of Nephi as author and as a person.

Comparing and contrasting Nephi's first narrative, beginning with his last, is instructive (see **Figure 3**). When Nephi began his record, he believed he was writing another autobiographical narrative. Over time, his true writing purpose came into focus; he was attempting to convince his future audiences to reconcile their own wills to that of the Savior. While he found personal worth in his writings, he understood that

ore — the story of which Nephi related at the appropriate point in the text. When he mentioned that he will tell the story of the small plates at the appropriate chronological moment in his record, Nephi did not necessarily imply that he had a master plan other than that which he had already shared with us, to give his and his father's histories — Spencer, *An Other Testament: On Typology*, 34-5. He relies heavily here on the work of Frederick W. Axelgard, "1 and 2 Nephi: An Inspiring Whole," *BYU Studies* 26/4 (Fall 1986).

36 2 Nephi 33:3

37 McGuire, "Nephi: A Postmodernist Reading," 74-77.

38 Nephi mentioned the writing process seven separate times in 2 Nephi 33:1-11.

39 2 Nephi 33:1; The other instances are "the things which I have written in weakness" (2 Nephi 33:4) and "I have been commanded of him to write these things, notwithstanding my weakness" (2 Nephi 33:11).

others may not react the same way. When he began his record, rejection was limited to Laman, Lemuel, and the sons of Ishmael. As he closed his record, however, we get the impression that he has experienced much more personal tragedy and rejection. In short, Nephi's final beginning was written with more humility and meekness than his first and is reflective of a maturation indicative of a lifetime of trials and heartbreak.⁴⁰

Figure 3: Comparison of Nephi's First and Last Narrative Beginning

	First Beginning (1 Nephi 1: 1-3; 16-17)	Final Beginning (2 Nephi 33: 1-11)
Purpose	To make a record of Nephi's and his father's proceedings	To persuade Nephi's people to do good
Tone	Confident bordering on arrogant (Nephi knows the record is true because he makes it with his own hands)	Apologetic and explanatory (Nephi tries to explain why he has written what he has written)
Authority	Nephi claims to have been highly favored of the Lord in all of his days	Christ
Anticipated Reception	That the reader will automatically accept this record as an accurate history of Nephi's life	God will make things written in weakness strong. Those that believe in Christ will believe in his words; many will reject

The proposed timeline helps explain Nephi's evolved understanding of the purpose of his record. His purposes changed dramatically from when he started writing the plates (after year thirty) and when he concluded the plates (around year fifty-five). Initially Nephi did not know the ultimate purpose of these "other" plates; he was simply being obedient. His headnotes to 1 and 2 Nephi made no mention of spiritual writings to be included in the record (e.g., quotations from Isaiah, tree of life vision, Lehi's blessings, and Nephi's final prophecies).⁴¹ Over time he modified this record to be more focused on the spiritual vis-a-vis the historical and, simultaneously, he altered his purpose for writing

⁴⁰ Nephi's final tone is reminiscent of an aged Lehi as he implored his sons to "hear the words of a trembling parent" (2 Nephi 1:14).

⁴¹ The headnote to 2 Nephi implies that the bulk of 2 Nephi was an afterthought. It gives no indication of what was to come after 2 Nephi 5. It simply reads "an account of the death of Lehi. Nephi's brethren rebelleth against him. The Lord warns Nephi to depart into the wilderness, etc. His journeyings in the wilderness, etc."

the text. In an early vision, he had learned of “other books” that would “come forth” unto the Gentiles in the latter days, but not until he received his revelation about the coming forth of the “sealed” book did he fully realize the role this specific record of his would play.⁴²

Further Evidence Supporting the Timeline

In addition to direct comments found in the text, the four narrative beginnings, Nephi's additional editorial asides, and the way Nephi's understanding of the purpose of the small plates evolved, there is more evidence that supports the proposed timeline. This section summarizes these additional arguments.

It is interesting to note that Nephi initially expected to hand over the responsibility of maintaining these plates “unto my seed.”⁴³ But surprisingly and possibly tragically, this is the last mention in Nephi's writings of his direct lineage. He mentioned his people generically (i.e., “thy seed”), but never again did he refer to his own children. Even Laman and Lemuel's offspring were specifically given a blessing by Lehi. But as Grant Hardy has conjectured, the blessing that Nephi likely received from his father (along with that of his offspring) has been omitted from the text.⁴⁴ We can surmise, therefore, that somewhere between 1 Nephi 6:6 and the end of the text, something occurred to Nephi's seed as he ultimately handed over responsibility of the record to Jacob and appointed “a man” as ruler in his stead.⁴⁵

Grant Hardy speculates about the fate of Nephi's children and suggests three possibilities; a) that Nephi only had daughters, b) that his sons died at a relatively young age, or c) that they joined forces with Laman and Lemuel.⁴⁶ While this is all speculative, it is interesting to consider what the proposed timeline suggests about this topic. Nephi's mention of his offspring came early in his record, likely between year thirty and thirty-four, which would be been before the “wars and contentions” that Nephi referenced. Although Nephi claimed that his brethren tried to take his life several times, the only blood shed during 1 Nephi appears to be that of Laban. On the other hand, casualties are implied by Nephi's use of the term “wars.” It is quite possible that Nephi lost someone close

42 1 Nephi 13:39, 2 Nephi 27:7

43 1 Nephi 6:6

44 Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 51.

45 Jacob 1:9

46 Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 48. Another possibility is that Nephi's sons were not as worthy successors as was Jacob.

to him during these initial battles with the Lamanites. And as son(s) of the king, Nephi's children would have been responsible for defending the kingdom. This reading makes some sense out of Nephi's mention of his children early in the record, his later reluctance to reference them, and his "anger" towards his enemies at the time when he penned his so-called psalm.⁴⁷

Another evidence supporting the timeline comes from textual analysis of Nephi's words. While a treatise explaining the emergence of the digital humanities field is beyond the scope of this paper, it is sufficient to state that text analysis involves using advanced computing along with statistical and data mining techniques to better understand written information. Two techniques in particular, authorship attribution and topic modeling, are well-suited to contribute to our understanding of Nephi's writings. If, as the timeline suggests, Nephi composed the text of the small plates over four notably different periods, it is reasonable to conclude that his writing style likely changed and that we should expect to find statistical evidence of this as we analyze his writing style. For example, Roper, Fields, and Schaalje examined one set of texts from Sidney Rigdon dating to the 1830s and another set dating to the 1860s and concluded that the data strongly suggest that "Rigdon's early writing style had evolved into another style later in his life."⁴⁸

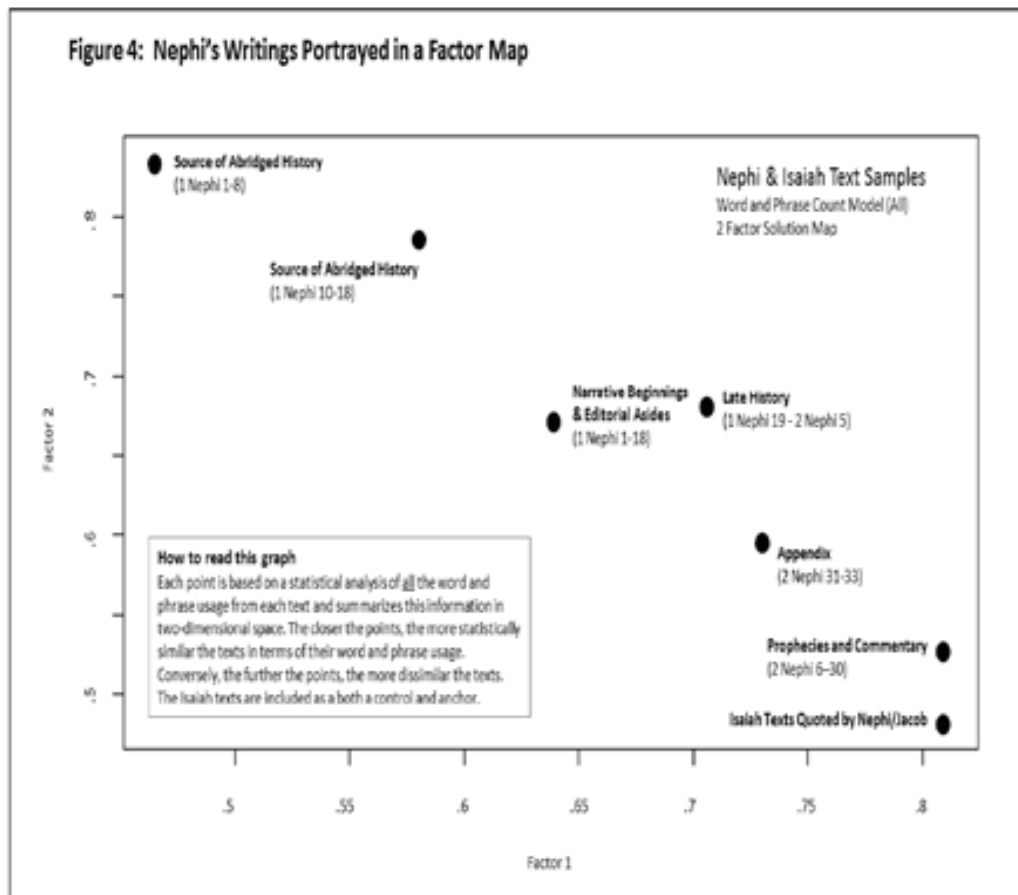
An authorship attribution model that uses text samples from Nephi, organized using the proposed timeline, is charted in **Figure 4** via two-dimensional principal components mapping (I have also included the Isaiah texts as an anchor).⁴⁹ While this type of analysis is meant to be directional and not statistically definitive, the data does suggest four rather interesting conclusions that are supportive of the timeline. First, Nephi's writing style evolved slowly over time in nearly a linear fashion. For example, the first text he authored is mathematically closest in style and form to the second text he authored and furthest from the

47 2 Nephi 4. I speculate that this was written between years forty and forty-two, certainly after the period of peace and happiness referenced by Nephi around year thirty.

48 Roper, Field and Schaalje, "Stylometric Analyses of the Book of Mormon: A Short History", 40.

49 A stylometric model using lexical features (words and phrases) was developed. Each of the relevant texts was scrubbed to include only the specific content that can be sourced directly to the stated author. The results were then displayed via principal components analysis to highlight the differences between the text samples in two-dimensional space. The larger the mapped distance between the sample texts, the greater the mathematical difference between the two.

final texts he authored. The only exception to this rule is Nephi's final appendix, where he reverted back to a style more closely aligned with his late history. Second, Nephi's editorial asides and narrative beginnings, although physically located in the text alongside his abridged history, are better aligned statistically with his later history, a finding predicted by the timeline. Third, Nephi's word and phrase usage changed dramatically over the course of his life, indicating a shift in interests, ideas, and influences upon Nephi. For example, the famous phrase "and it came to pass" was used 133 times by Nephi in his abridged and later histories (year 15 to year 42) but was completely abandoned thereafter with not a single use (years fifty to fifty-five). Fourth, late in his life, Nephi's study of Isaiah was so in-depth and comprehensive that his writing style began to emulate that of the Old Testament prophet. The result of this is that the two writing signatures are mathematically indistinguishable in our model.



Jacob and the Softening of Nephi's Heart

Figure 4 vividly illustrates just how different Nephi's early abridged historical writing style (year 15 from the large plates and other sources) was from that of his later prophecies (year fifty). Closer analysis reveals that these differences reflect a common theme; Nephi's approach to doctrine, leadership, and his audience became more mature and gentle. In short, Nephi's heart softened. His verbal landscapes were no longer painted strictly black and white; Nephi discovered more grey in the world. Although several possible factors can account for this transformation, I wish to highlight one — Nephi's burgeoning relationship with his younger brother, Jacob.

Jacob first appeared in Nephi's record when he was "begat" in the wilderness (a line probably written between years twenty and thirty). At this moment in the text, Nephi gave his readers no indication of how important Jacob would become later on. This nonchalant introduction leads us to suppose that Jacob and Joseph will be personality-free characters in Nephi's drama, much like Sam. Lehi was the vehicle whom Nephi used to more fully introduce Jacob to his readers (via Jacob's blessing). This blessing laid the groundwork for much of the soteriological discussion, doctrine, and speculation that followed later in the Book of Mormon from other writers such as Mosiah, Amulek, Alma, and Mormon. It is interesting that Lehi addresses this sermon to his son Jacob.⁵⁰ There seemed to be a special bond between Lehi and Jacob, as he was the one who took Lehi's ideas and advanced them.⁵¹ And, ultimately, it was through Jacob and his lineage that the records were passed from generation to generation.

Although Nephi presented himself as a prophet and shared many of his visions and prophecies, he did not seem to enjoy endless speculation about the things of God. Nephi's abridged text highlighted his willingness to ask for direct guidance from the Lord and then obediently follow that guidance. Nephi's vision of the Tree of Life was akin to a Q&A session with an angel of the Lord. Nephi was not trying to answer all of life's mysteries, he simply wanted to know what all of the symbolism presented in the vision meant. He noticed different details than his father did. Nephi also was the first to "liken" the scriptures unto himself;

⁵⁰ Midway through this sermon, Lehi included an invitation to all of his children to pay attention to his words. I argue that the primary recipient of his message, however, remains Jacob because Lehi continues the blessing with the same tone and context as before.

⁵¹ 2 Nephi 9-11 for example.

his study of the “brass plates” led to a midrash-like practice in which he selectively quoted scripture to support his authority and teachings.⁵² He organized his abridged history (likely the large plates) using thematic elements from the Exodus; employed the words of Zenos, Neum, Zenock and Isaiah to prophesy of Christ; and selectively quoted from Isaiah 29 as he discussed the latter-day coming forth of his record.⁵³

Nephi had a telling exchange with his brethren as they struggled to understand Lehi's vision of the tree of life. His brethren remarked to Nephi, “We cannot understand the words which our father hath spoken concerning the natural branches of the olive-tree, and also concerning the Gentiles.”⁵⁴ Nephi's response was, “Have ye inquired of the Lord?” He then gave them an interpretation but appears frustrated that they have not done what he did (“I desire to behold the things which my father saw”).⁵⁵

Towards the end of his life, Nephi could at least sympathize with those who did not comprehend the mysteries of God, yet he did not fully understand why they made plain things difficult. Speaking to a later audience as he closed his record, Nephi acknowledged that many would find it difficult to follow his counsel. But Nephi struggled to understand why his readers would “ponder” these things in their hearts and not simply just pray for divine guidance.

And now behold, my beloved brethren, I suppose that ye ponder somewhat in your hearts concerning that which ye should do after that ye have entered in by the way. *But behold, why do ye ponder these things in your heart?* Do ye not remember that I said unto you that after ye had received the Holy Ghost, ye could speak with the tongue of angels? ... And now my beloved brethren, *I perceive that ye ponder still in your hearts.* And it grieveth me that I must speak concerning this thing. For if ye would hearken unto the Spirit which teacheth a man to pray, ye would know that ye must pray. (2 Nephi 32:1-2, 8; emphasis added)

Lehi, on the other hand, was portrayed as a visionary man with a passion for theology. Lehi's visions and dreams were quite different from

52 1 Nephi 19:23

53 See Brant A. Gardner's *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 44-46 for a summary of the Exodus parallels.

54 1 Nephi 15:7-8

55 1 Nephi 11:3

Nephi's Q&A sessions.⁵⁶ His were full of symbolism, which he seemed to understand, perhaps due to his maturity at the time when he received these visions. Lehi took the plates of brass and was able to surmise the existence of a fallen angel, knowledge previously unknown to the family.⁵⁷ From the outset, Jacob appeared to have more in common with his father than did his brother Nephi. Although he also received direct revelation, Jacob's discourses, like Lehi's, were more theoretical and theological. For example, Jacob's choice of topics and words revealed a deep interest in Christology and soteriology. We first find the term "atonement" in the Book of Mormon text during Lehi's blessing of Jacob. In his writings, it is clear that Jacob was not content just to have known about the atonement, he wanted a deeper and more personal understanding of how it works. He coined a new phrase, "infinite atonement," which he used in his first recorded sermon. Jacob made mention of the atonement 19 times in his writings; Nephi mentioned it only once. And Nephi paraphrased Jacob the one time he did mention the term "atonement." As **Figure 5** shows, Jacob's word choice reflected his interests in Christology (atonement, resurrection, grace) and soteriology (death and hell, justice, restored); he utilized terms related to these topics at a much higher frequency than Nephi.

In the text, Jacob is presented as more personable and relatable than Nephi. He used words like "souls," "love," and "your" more often. Even when Jacob was called by the Lord to rebuke his audience, he did it softly and with great personal trepidation. He prefaced his admonitions with phrases like, "it grieveth my soul and causeth me to shrink with shame before the presence of my Maker"⁵⁸ and "and stumble because of my overanxiety for you."⁵⁹ While Nephi never steered his story back to the Lamanites after the schism, Jacob returned to them quite often and reported on attempts to unify the two communities. Jacob, like his father, never gave up on the Lamanites and even spoke favorably of them during his temple discourse.⁶⁰

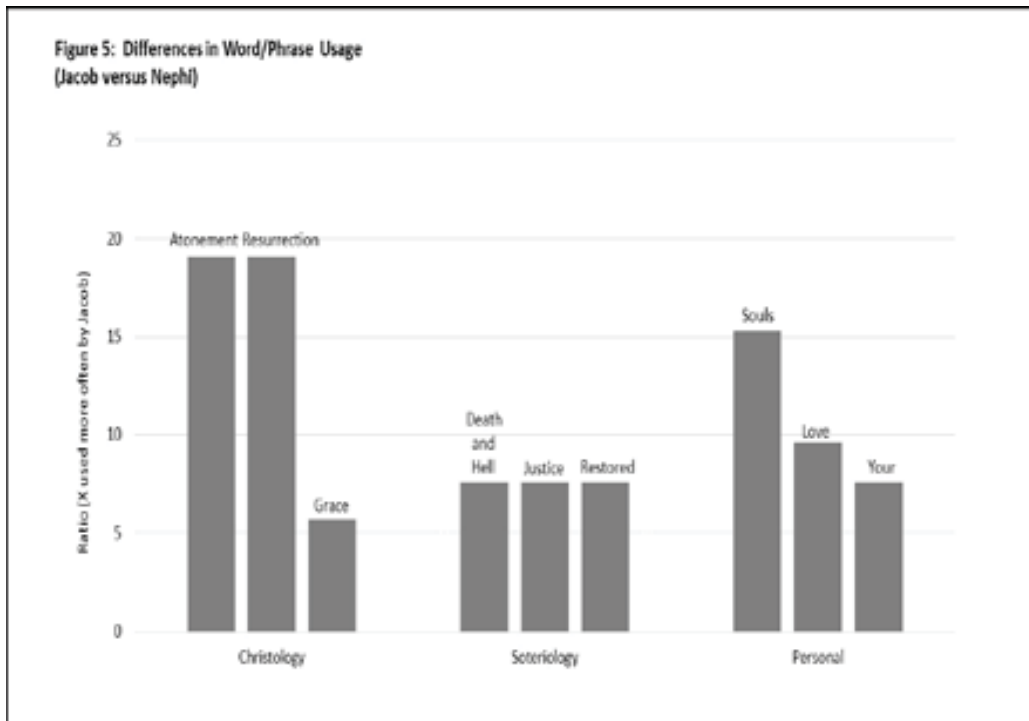
56 "Nephi's prophetic mode was quite different from his father's, more direct and less symbolic." Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 77.

57 And likely the Hebrews of the time.

58 Jacob 2:6

59 Jacob 4:18

60 Jacob 3



Did Jacob have a softening effect on Nephi? Based on my reading of the text, the answer is affirmative; Jacob appears to have had a profound impact on Nephi which can be best summarized by a single significant phrase shown in **Figure 6**. In the small plates the first recorded words that Jacob spoke are “Behold, my beloved brethren.” This phrase, “my beloved brethren,” proved to be a favorite term of endearment for Jacob when addressing an audience; he used it often. Prior to Jacob (2 Nephi 6:1), the phrase had not been used in the text by any other speaker. However, Nephi soon adopted the phrase and made it his own.⁶¹ Almost exclusively, where Nephi previously would have addressed “my brethren,” he then addressed “my beloved brethren.”

⁶¹ While I presume that Nephi adopted this phrase from Jacob, I cannot be 100% certain that Jacob did not adopt it from Nephi.

Figure 6: Words Used by Nephi to Address His Audience

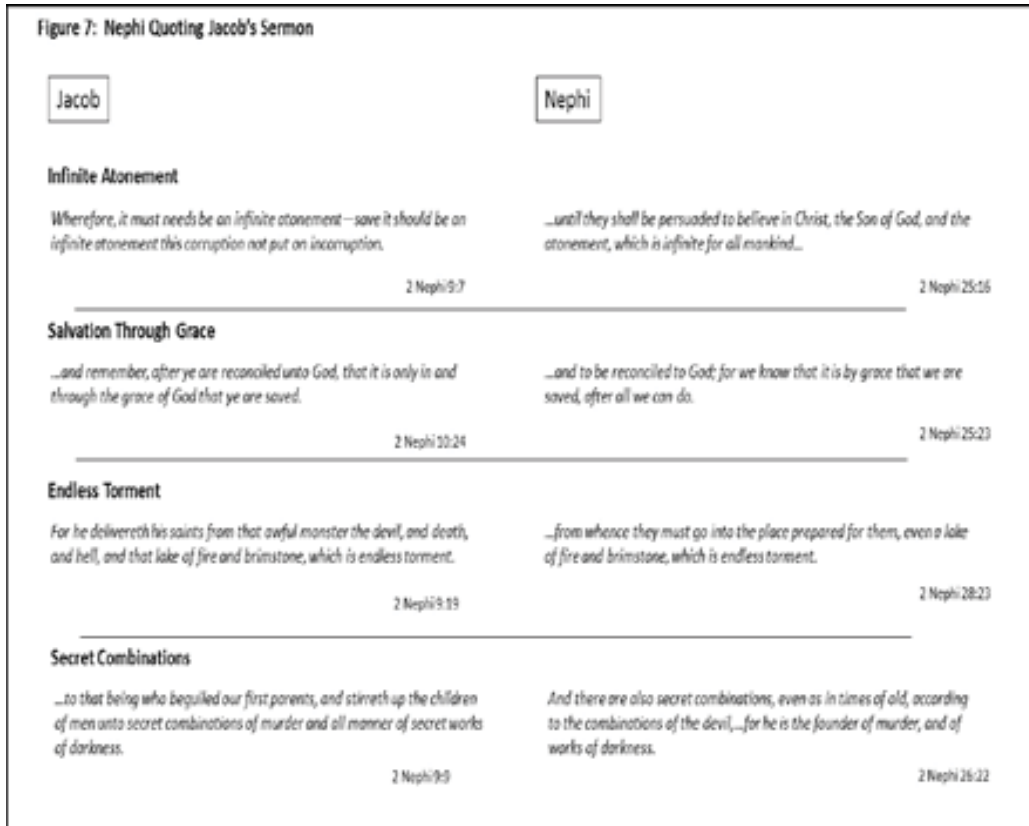
Phrase	Nephi Prior to 2 Nephi 6	Nephi After 2 Nephi 6
My brethren	45	3
My beloved brethren	0	15

Another example of Nephi's softening came from the way he internalized Jacob's deep theological insights. During his prophecy phase (year fifty), Nephi borrowed liberally from the words of Lehi, Isaiah, and Jacob, intermingling their ideas with his own to produce an amazingly coherent whole.⁶² While not as pronounced as his use of Isaiah, Nephi gathered doctrinal and theological ideas from the one sermon of Jacob's that he had recorded in the record; over and over Nephi restated Jacob's foundational arguments with little alteration. In **Figure 7**, I have listed four such instances of restatement found in 2 Nephi 25-30.

As mentioned, Jacob used the word "atonement" 19 times in total and introduced the scripturally unique concept of an "infinite atonement." Nephi, on the other hand, only used the term once (2 Nephi 25:16), and he was clearly sampling from Jacob because he linked the words "atonement" and "infinite" together during his one mention. Note that Jacob came to the conclusion that the atonement is infinite through theological reasoning ("*it must needs be*") whereas Nephi's "*which is infinite*" in reporting this conclusion, reflected none of the conjecture and uncertainty which was characteristic of Jacob's thought process. Likewise, Nephi quoted Jacob's viewpoints on endless torment, grace, and secret combinations almost verbatim.⁶³

⁶² He also included several references to his brother Joseph's blessing (see Grant B. Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 79-80).

⁶³ Joseph M. Spencer performs a detailed exegesis comparing 2 Nephi 10:24 and 2 Nephi 25:23 and states that the "similarity between the two texts is obvious." He concludes that "the parallel between Jacob's and Nephi's uses of the word 'after' can dispel the most common interpretation of 2 Nephi 25:23. Nephi cannot be



Nephi's Soteriology: A Lifetime Filling in the Details

The path to eternal life, according to Nephi's early abridged account (year 15), is relatively straightforward. Monikers such as “inasmuch as ye shall keep my commands”⁶⁴ and “a strait and narrow path”⁶⁵ are the dominant messages he conveyed to his readers with regard to their salvation. Nephi never strayed from this vision of salvation even as his brothers struggled with obedience to both their father and to the Lord. In fact, Nephi closed his first book with the following matter-of-fact formula for salvation:

Wherefore if ye shall be obedient to the commandments of God and endure to the end, ye shall be saved in the last day. And thus it is. Amen. (1 Nephi 22:31)

But it was never as simple for Lehi, who struggled mightily as a parent of wayward children, who always held out hope for their ultimate salvation and who agonized over their refusal to partake of the fruits of

saying that grace is only what makes up for what goes beyond an individual's ‘best efforts’” (Spencer, *An Other Testament: On Typology*, 92-95).

64 1 Nephi 2:20

65 1 Nephi 8:20

righteousness. It was also never as simple for Jacob, whose empathetic manner inherently made him more understanding toward those caught in the snares of sin. As Nephi matured and was influenced by Jacob, his thoughts on how to obtain eternal life changed as well. Theologically, where Nephi's thoughts on salvation ultimately evolved to is quite different and more nuanced than where his views were when he closed 1 Nephi. While he never abandoned this original foundational model (salvation=obedience + enduring to the end), Nephi noticeably expanded on the details as he wrote the closing to 2 Nephi.

At the end of his portion of the small plates, Nephi authored a statement (or appendix as Hardy refers to it) in which he shared, among other things, his ending thoughts on salvation.⁶⁶ In 2 Nephi 31, Nephi laid out, step by step, a formula for obtaining eternal life (“ye shall have eternal life”), and he shared the sources from whence he learned of each step (see **Figure 8**). The formula begins with baptism (as revealed by Lehi's vision), the receipt of the Holy Ghost (as revealed to Nephi by the voice of the Son), standing firm in that baptism (as revealed by the voice of the Son), holding fast to the iron rod (quoting Lehi's vision), and enduring to the end (revealed by the voice of the Father).

After he reviewed these steps, Nephi asked his audience a hypothetical question. “And now, my beloved brethren, after ye have gotten into this strait and narrow path, I would ask if all is done?”⁶⁷ One can only imagine a younger Nephi replying with a resolute “yeah” with the caveat that we need to endure to the end. But Nephi answered his own question with a resounding “Nay!” This is so unexpected that it is worth examining his final words in greater detail. Here is how Nephi answered his own hypothetical:

Behold, I say unto you: Nay. For ye have not come thus far save it were by the word of Christ with unshaken faith in him, relying wholly upon the merits of him who is mighty to save. Wherefore ye must press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope and a love of God and of all men; wherefore if ye shall press forward, feasting upon the words of Christ and endure to the end, behold, thus saith the Father, ye shall have eternal life. (2 Nephi 31:19-20)

⁶⁶ Hardy, *The Book of Mormon: A Reader's Edition*, 134.

⁶⁷ 2 Nephi 31:19

Figure 8: Nephi's Model of Salvation (as presented in 2 Nephi 31)

	Step Required for Salvation	Source
Requirements for Salvation	• Baptism	- Lehi's Vision (1 Nephi 10:7)
	• Baptism of fire and the Holy Ghost	- The Voice of the Son (2 Nephi 31:13)
	• Consequences of denial after baptism	- The Voice of the Son (2 Nephi 31:14)
	• Endureth to the end	- The Voice of the Father (2 Nephi 31:15)
	• Follow the straight and narrow path	- Lehi's Vision (1 Nephi 8:20)
Hypothetical	And now my beloved brethren, after that ye have got into this straight and narrow path, I would ask if all is done. Behold, I say unto you: Nay.	
How to Stay on the Strait And Narrow Path	• Have not come this but by word of Christ	- Likely Jacob's teachings on grace
	• Relying on the merits of the one mighty to save	- Likely Jacob's and Lehi's teachings on atonement
	• Press forward with hope	- Likely Nephi
	• With love of God and all men	- Likely Nephi
	• Feasting upon the word of Christ	- Likely Nephi

Nephi recognized that we cannot progress without the grace of Christ (his “word”) and an unshaken faith in him (thus it is by grace we are saved). We are to rely on him who is mighty to save (via his “atonement”). Both expressions are creative ways of describing the ideas put forward by Lehi and Jacob on grace and atonement. Then Nephi took his analysis one step further. So far he had relied heavily on other sources (e.g., direct revelation, Lehi’s Vision, Jacob) and made them his own. But Nephi concluded his summary with his own personal thoughts on salvation, which are not as easily sourced. Nephi exclaimed that the reader must retain a perfect brightness of hope and press forward in Christ. This implies developing a long-term relationship with Christ filled with prayer, hope, and united companionship. Then Nephi stated that we must have a genuine love of God and of all men. The requisite works of obedience are actually works of love. Although the topic of love is more likely to be discussed by Jacob, Jacob never gave us a love-based model of salvation. Nephi’s model of salvation replete with grace, love, hope, and faith is doctrinally softer and more appealing than his earlier model of strict obedience (e.g., grasp the rod of iron and hold on to the

end). One might say it is more Christlike. While obedience remained important to Nephi, it was no longer the central feature of his model.⁶⁸ In its place was true devotion to Jesus Christ; “this is the way and there is none other way nor name given under heaven whereby man can be saved in the kingdom of God.”⁶⁹

Words Spoken in Anger

In his final chapter, Nephi reflected upon his own writings and questioned how they would be received. He seemed genuinely concerned that his audience “will be angry at the words which I have written.”⁷⁰ Just like my daughter’s experience with her journals, Nephi seemed comfortable with the fruit of his efforts (“I esteem it as of great worth”),⁷¹ but this does not mean that he was entirely satisfied with all of the words he had written. In this section I want to explore a portion of his writings that I believe Nephi tried to take back.

The text suggests that one undesirable trait of Nephi’s personality was his quickness to harshness and anger. In his psalm, Nephi lamented, “why am I angry because of mine enemy?”⁷² Lehi reported that one of Laman and Lemuel’s complaints against Nephi was that “he hath used sharpness ... that he hath been angry with you.”⁷³ If the proposed timeline is correct, Nephi’s psalm would have been composed around year forty, after the initial rounds of “wars and contentions” with the Lamanites. It is likely that during this period Nephi’s anger would have been piqued. It was also at this time when Nephi penned one of his most controversial passages.

And he had caused the cursing to come upon them, yea, even a sore cursing because of their iniquity. For behold, they had hardened their hearts against him, that they had become like unto a flint. Wherefore as they were white and exceeding fair and delightsome, that they might not be enticing unto my people, therefore the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them. And thus saith the Lord God: I will cause that they shall be loathsome unto thy people save they shall

68 Nephi’s final words are “for thus hath the Lord commanded me, and I must obey” after all (2 Nephi 33:15).

69 2 Nephi 31:21

70 2 Nephi 33:5

71 2 Nephi 33:3

72 2 Nephi 4:27

73 2 Nephi 1:26

repent of their iniquities. And cursed shall be the seed of him that mixeth with their seed, for they shall be cursed even with the same cursing. And the Lord spake it, and it was done. (2 Nephi 5:21-23)

Book of Mormon readers have long struggled with the meaning of this passage. Using the timeline as a guide, however, can help us put this verse into the broader context of Nephi's life. His people were at war with the Lamanites (around year forty), and it was quite probable that close family members had been killed in these wars, possibly even his aforementioned son(s). We can begin to appreciate Nephi's likely sense of frustration and bitterness as he authored this passage. Although there has been considerable discussion as to whether or not Nephi meant this specific passage literally or metaphorically, the reader can sense a real anger in Nephi's tone.⁷⁴

This passage may reflect Nephi's feelings at the time of the "wars," but does it reflect how he continued to feel throughout the rest of his life? Did the passage of time somehow soothe some of the anger? Do we have evidence that Nephi ever regretted authoring this passage? I suggest that Nephi attempted to soften the impact of this specific passage twice in his later writings. And the text records that immediately upon Nephi's death, Jacob is forced to confront and rebuke the remnants of ethnic prejudice that had crept into Nephite society.

As discussed earlier, it is unclear when Nephi received the visions and/or prophecies recorded in the last half of 2 Nephi.⁷⁵ Although he recorded pessimism about the fate of his people as early as 1 Nephi 13, he did not provide much detail about their fate.⁷⁶ Later in his record, however, he reported being shown the fate of his people and that of his brethren. He had learned that their fates are intertwined, he then knew of their ultimate demise, and that this record was partially meant for

⁷⁴ Brant A. Gardner, *Analytical & Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon: Second Nephi through Jacob*, 110-115. Gardner provides a useful summary of the two schools of thought; literal proponents include Milton R. Hunter and Rodney Turner, and metaphorical proponents include John L. Sorenson, Hugh Nibley, Armand L. Mauss, and Brant A. Gardner.

⁷⁵ Nephi's visions and prophecies encompass most of 2 Nephi 26-30. Nephi indicated that this is a vision(s) or prophecy via language such as "I have beheld that many generations shall pass away" (2 Nephi 26:2), "For I, Nephi, have seen it" (2 Nephi 26:7), and "now, I would prophecy somewhat more concerning" (2 Nephi 30:3).

⁷⁶ Shown wars and the loss of faith so that they become a "dark, and loathsome, and a filthy people."

them. So when Nephi prophesied of the time when the gospel shall be shared “unto the remnant of our seed,” he used language reminiscent of the above passage and returned to the idea of a physical curse upon his brethren.⁷⁷ This time, however, I suggest Nephi had a broadened understanding of his role in their (the Lamanites) redemption.

And their scales of darkness shall begin to fall from their eyes.
And many generations shall not pass away among them save they shall be a white and a delightsome people.⁷⁸ (2 Nephi 30:6)

In this later passage, Nephi implied the curse to be more symbolic than physical. He prophesied that the scales of darkness shall begin to fall “from their eyes.” By qualifying the curse with this phrase, Nephi softened his earlier claim of a literal “skin of blackness” and opened up the possibility of an interpretation allowing for darkness and whiteness as metaphors for sin and purity. This is the conclusion, for example, that Brant A. Gardner arrives at in his commentary on Nephi.

These verses, to modern ears, seem to have racial overtones. In this case, however, it is clear that the “scales of darkness” must refer to something rather than skin color, since this darkness will fall from their eyes and not from their skins.⁷⁹

Thus, when Nephi returned to the topic of the Lamanites and darkness, his softened tone suggested that he meant for his earlier comments to be taken metaphorically. And, surprisingly, it is Nephi who authored what is considered by modern-day readers to be the definitive Book of Mormon statement on prejudice and physical discrimination.⁸⁰

And 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)

Had Nephi’s initial pejorative attitudes at the time of “wars and contentions” changed over time? These two texts imply that they had

⁷⁷ 2 Nephi 30:3

⁷⁸ Joseph Smith changed the term “white” to “fair” in the 1840 edition of the Book of Mormon.

⁷⁹ Gardner, *Analytical & Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon: Second Nephi through Jacob*, 426.

⁸⁰ As an example, 2 Nephi 26 is referenced three times in the essay on *Race and the Priesthood* on LDS.org.

and that it was a substantive change. It is informative that Nephi felt the need to return to the topic at all. Since it is not likely that he had metal plate “white out” available to him, Nephi did the next best thing by reinterpreting the Lamanites’ darkness as symbolic rather than physical and making a clear declaration that all are alike unto God regardless of their physical appearance.⁸¹ This is how I feel Nephi “took back” 2 Nephi 5.

After Nephi’s death, Jacob was also concerned with the prejudicial attitudes of his people towards the Lamanites. In his temple sermon, Jacob admitted that his people “hate [the Lamanites] because of their filthiness and the cursing which hath come upon their skins.” He then gave his people a direct commandment that they must overcome this false sense of racial superiority.

A commandment I give unto you, which is the word of God, that ye revile no more against them because of the darkness of their skins; neither shall ye revile against them because of their filthiness; but ye shall remember your own filthiness, and remember that their filthiness came because of their fathers. (Jacob 3:9)

Both Nephi and Jacob probably held discriminatory attitudes towards their brethren initially. But as they witnessed the effect that such prejudice had upon their people and after Nephi saw visions of the fate of the combined peoples, their stances seemed to have changed. Both authored texts designed to soften such thoughts and feelings, with Jacob going so far as to issue a commandment against such attitudes. Nephi’s initial writings on the topic, therefore, should be considered in the context of the time and his later explanations. In an essay about racial attitudes within the Book of Mormon, Jared Hickman argues that texts such as 2 Nephi 5 challenge readers to reconsider how we approach canon and scripture.

Insofar as the Book of Mormon purports to be scripture, its self-deconstruction draws attention to that which the literalist hermeneuts of Biblicist America were keen to ignore — the contingent human conditions of scripture writing and scripture reading, in other words, precisely the conditions

⁸¹ It is possible that this was Nephi’s feelings all along and that there was not a change of heart in this regard. My own personal reading is that Nephi “mellowed” and realized how inflammatory his initial remarks were.

from which might conceivably arise spurious notions of theological racism.⁸²

Through identifying Nephi's humanity via charting the roadmap of his life, we are no longer required to revere each of Nephi's words equally. Rather, we can map the arc of his entire journey, jointly experiencing his revelations and insights while, hopefully, avoiding the pratfalls.

Conclusions

Due to our desires as readers for textual harmony and our tendency to simplify characters, I believe that we have missed the subtle character evolution that is reflected in Nephi's writings ("line upon line"). This has led to the general LDS and scholarly preference of 1 Nephi texts over 2 Nephi texts and a willingness to create an oversimplification of Nephi as a didactic Boy Scout. When we do this, I contend, we are missing the main points of Nephi's life and record. Consider Hardy's assessment of Nephi's role as editor.

A careful reading of what Nephi chooses to reveal and to obscure suggests that his faith was also accompanied by sorrow, frustration, and spiritual anguish. Nephi never doubts, but his position in the family and even with God may not have been as clear-cut as would appear from a first reading. There is much more to Nephi.⁸³

I could not agree more with Hardy; there is much more to Nephi than initially meets the eye. There is depth, growth, personal learning, reflection, sorrow, tragedy, anger, frustration, mistakes, loyalty, regret, self-doubt, and redemption. Viewing Nephi's text through the lens of a lifespan allows the reader to better understand and discover a multifaceted Nephi.

A detailed analysis of Nephi's writings reveals substantial character growth best explained by the passage of time as Nephi composed his portion of the small plates. The proposed timeline suggests that there might have been forty years between when he authored his original source texts and his final appendix. The evidence for this time gap is compelling. Nephi displayed confusion about the true nature and purpose of these plates and seemed to be lacking knowledge about how the story would eventually end. He set and reset his audience

⁸² Jared Hickman, "The Book of Mormon as Amerindian Apocalypse," *American Literature* 86/3 (September 2014), 444.

⁸³ Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 44.

expectations via his narrative beginnings and editorial asides. He began his tome with great confidence and bravado yet ended by apologizing three times for his perceived weaknesses. After a brief mention of his children, they disappeared, and the record is passed on through Jacob's progeny. His writing style changed over the years and is detectable via authorship attribution models. The influence of his father waned, and the influences of others such as Isaiah and Jacob grew. He softened his stance with regard to the curse put upon his brothers and even appeared to attempt to clarify some early passages to counteract growing prejudice within his community. His final treatise on salvation showed a deftness and maturity unfound in the younger Nephi. All in all, Nephi's heart softened as he matured, and he began to address each of us, his readers, as his "beloved brethren" instead of just his "brethren."

Just as my daughter experienced a personal epiphany of sorts as she looked at her own journal, we can better understand Nephi as he looked back on his record and exclaimed "*I Nephi have written what I have written, and I esteem it as of great worth.*"

Dennis Newton is presently "retired" from a 25-year career as a professional market researcher. His professional focus has been on quantitative research methods, statistical modeling, and text analytics. He has a BA in English and an MBA from the University of Wyoming. He and his wife are preparing to serve a mission.

