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“Wherefore, for This Cause”: The Book of Mormon as Anti-type of the Brass Serpent

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“WHEREFORE, FOR THIS CAUSE”: THE BOOK OF MORMON AS ANTI-TYPE OF THE BRASS SERPENT

Scott Stenson

Abstract: *Nephi₁ represents the sacred record that becomes the Book of Mormon as a new brass serpent to heal the nations. Nephi’s typological project is reasonable given that he self-identifies with Moses, his family’s scriptures and compass are made of brass, and he consistently describes reading as an act of seeing, looking, or believing. Nephi understands from Isaiah that the book he (Nephi) prepares — and that he has so much to say about — will become an ensign, or sign, that will be lifted up and heal the nations that have stumbled in blindness. Nephi’s project emerges most fully in 2 Nephi 25, the introductory material to an extended prophecy wherein he points the Jewish people to their Messiah, a figure he equates with Moses’s raised serpent and Jesus Christ.*

Serpent imagery features prominently in ancient texts and cultures, and in modern texts that strive for a primeval quality. The serpent as symbol can be found in all mythologies and literatures, including Egyptian, Hebrew, Babylonian, Greek, Latin, and English.¹ So it is no surprise to find serpent imagery and symbolism in the Book of Mormon, particularly since it draws so heavily from Hebrew tradition.² The serpent references in the Book of Mormon, including those from Isaiah,³ fit comfortably in that record’s ancient Near Eastern milieu. It is well known that Egyptian

1. The serpent appears as a symbol across world mythologies, including African, Australian Aboriginal, Chinese, Cadmus, Finnish, Indian, Japanese, Middle Eastern, Norse, and North American. See Alice Mills, ed., *Mythology: Myths, Legends, and Fantasies* (Birmingham, AL: Sweet Water Press, 2013).

2. See, for example, 1 Nephi 17:41; 2 Nephi 25:20; Alma 33:19–22; Alma 37:46–47; Helaman 8:14–15.

3. See 2 Nephi 21:8; 24:29; 30:14.

culture, which figures conspicuously in the early pages of the record, was rife with references to serpents and their sacredness or maliciousness.⁴ Moses, after leading his people out of Egypt, famously raised a brazen serpent in the wilderness to save his people from perishing.⁵ Part of the effort by Noel Reynolds and others to situate the Book of Mormon in its Near Eastern context has been to demonstrate that Nephi and Lehi saw themselves as reenacting Mosaic events (see 1 Nephi 17:23–32, 41–46).⁶ Others have argued that serpent references in the Nephite account suggest a Mesoamerican connection to Quetzalcoatl, the god represented as a feathered or flying snake.⁷ In accord with these earlier approaches, I propose that Nephi, and subsequent Nephite prophets and record keepers, understood their endeavor typologically. For them, not only did the record *refer to serpents*, but also it was to *become a serpent*, like the brass serpent raised on a standard by Moses, to figuratively “hiss forth”⁸ (2 Nephi 29:2–3, Moroni 10:28), “proceed forth” (2 Nephi 29:2, 4;

4. Andrew Skinner, “Serpent Symbols and Salvation in the Ancient Near East and the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 10, no. 2 (2001): 42–55, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol10/iss2/8/>.

5. See Numbers 21:4–9; Deuteronomy 8:15; see also John 3:14–17.

6. George S. Tate, “The Typology of the Exodus Pattern in the Book of Mormon,” *Literature and Belief: Sacred Scripture and Religious Experience*, ed. Neal E. Lambert (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1981), 245–62, <https://rsc.byu.edu/literature-belief/typology-exodus-pattern-book-mormon>, and Noel B. Reynolds, “The Israelite Background of Moses Typology in the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (2005): 4–23, <https://byustudies.byu.edu/content/israelite-background-moses-typology-book-mormon>.

7. Wallace E. Hunt, Jr., “Moses’s Serpent as It Relates to Serpent Worship in Mesoamerica,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 2, (1993): 121–31, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=jbms>. On the other hand, Brant Gardner warns against the common view that Quetzalcoatl was associated with Jesus Christ. See Brant Gardner, “The Christianization of Quetzalcoatl: A History of the Metamorphosis,” *Sunstone* 10, no. 11 (1986): 6–10, https://www.academia.edu/783672/The_Christianization_of_Quetzalcoatl.

8. The verb phrase “hiss forth” will be examined at a later point when we consider its interpretive possibilities, but we note here that the clear association in English of “hiss” and serpents is not the same in Hebrew, where the word Isaiah and perhaps Nephi uses for “hiss” does not necessarily refer to serpents, though relevant connections may still be present. According to Royal Skousen, “hiss” appears “six times” in the Book of Mormon, excluding the quoted Isaianic material. Three times it is used in reference to an act of “scorn” (1 Nephi 19:14, 3 Nephi 16:9, 3 Nephi 29:8); and three times it is used in reference to the words of Christ issuing from his mouth to the nations (2 Nephi 29:2–3, Moroni 10:28). The word *hiss* was first introduced into the Isaianic passages in the English language with the

Moroni 10:28), “be carried forth” (1 Nephi 13:20; 2 Nephi 30:3), and heal the nations⁹ or bless the Gentiles¹⁰ (1 Nephi 13:34–42; 2 Nephi 6:6, 29:2–4, 30:3–8; 1 Nephi 21:22, 22:6–12; 1 Nephi 10:14; 3 Nephi 16:14). To situate the comparison, I examine two common Nephite artifacts (the brass plates of Laban and the Liahona) before analyzing Lehi’s blessing to his son Joseph (see 2 Nephi 3) and Nephi’s final extended prophecy (see 2 Nephi 25–30). I focus on 2 Nephi 25, as it is the most “hermeneutically relevant” and intimates three possible reasons Nephi equated or typologically likened his record to Moses’s brass serpent:¹¹ 1) the messianic record would be lifted or raised as an ensign to the nations; 2) it would heal those nations and peoples who would look unto it; and 3) it would “hiss forth” to the nations, gathering all who would hearken to its urgent Christological message.¹²

In taking this particular typological approach, I intend, where possible, to let the record speak for itself.¹³ Grant Hardy has argued that the book has its own internal logic that should be honored where it can

translation of the “1560 Geneva Bible,” according to Skousen. Nephi’s use of “hiss” in 2 Nephi 29:2–3 may derive from this use of Isaiah 5:26 in 2 Nephi 15:26 (see also Isaiah 7: 18 [2 Nephi 17:18]). Hiss is a biblical word, but somewhat “ambiguous” in its usage, explains Royal Skousen in “King James Vocabulary,” in *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2016), 3:245–46.

9. Joseph Spencer understands the act of typological reading of scripture as “conversion.” It is, he argues, “eventual,” an end in itself, or a “means without end” (Spencer, *An Other Testament: On Typology* [Salem, OR: Salt Press, 2012], 26–27, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1007&context=mi>). As the scriptures teach, conversion leads to healing (see 2 Nephi 16:10; 3 Nephi 9:13; see also Isaiah 6:10; Acts 28:27). Or rather, healing is conversion.

10. The Hebrew word *goyim* can mean both “Gentiles” and “nations.”

11. Daniel J. Treier, “Typology” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic: 2005), 823–27. I use “likening” much as does Spencer in his work on typology in the Book of Mormon. That is, “to liken would be to give shape to something through a predetermined likeness” (Spencer, *An Other Testament*, 76).

12. To support my argument, it should be noted that Nephi’s extended prophecy in 2 Nephi 25–30 is bracketed by Isaiah 14 (2 Nephi 24) and Isaiah 11 (2 Nephi 30:9–15), two sections of scripture that contain serpent imagery. The first compares successive Assyrian kings to serpents; the second suggests that even the serpents (and other fierce animals of prey) that once were at enmity with humankind will no more harm in all the earth. The “sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice’s den.” The whole “earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”

13. The structurally sophisticated record is in conversation with itself (or its writers draw upon its writers) and former sacred texts as well as its various readers,

be ascertained.¹⁴ One characteristic of the record is that it is profoundly reflexive or self-referential and is loaded with metadiscourse. Part of its reflexivity is manifest as allusiveness. Readers of the text have traced its intertextuality and intratextuality¹⁵ as well as its typology.¹⁶ However, those who have taken such approaches apparently have not yet identified and explained Nephi's textual/typological project likening the book to a serpent of salvation. Those who have taken a textual approach (e.g., Hardy¹⁷) have explored internal, parallel patterns and distinct narrative points of view; others, more interested in prototypes, types, and antitypes,¹⁸ have connected the text to historical characters and

past and present. I acknowledge that the text is often challenging and thus that alternative readings are obviously possible and welcome.

14. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010).

15. In *Abinadi: He Came Among them in Disguise*, intertextuality and intratextuality are explored by such scholars as Nicholas J. Frederick and John Hilton III. Frederick's project focuses on the presence of the New Testament in the Book of Mormon and Hilton's project focuses on the influence of Abinadi's teachings in the same record. See Nicholas J. Frederick, "If Christ Had Not Come into the World" in *Abinadi: He Came Among them in Disguise*, ed. Shon D. Hopkins (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2018), 117–38; and John Hilton III, "Abinadi's Legacy: Tracing His Influence through the Book of Mormon," also in *Abinadi*, 93–116.

16. Much earlier than Joseph Spencer, scholars such as George Tate (previously mentioned) and Richard Dilworth Rust were interested in the Book of Mormon's use of typological method. See Richard Dilworth Rust, *Feasting on the Word: The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1997), chapter 8, 196–218; <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/mi/34/>. The Book of Mormon invites this approach as it refers to (see 2 Nephi 2, 4, 8) and even enacts typological reading (see Alma 37:38–47).

17. Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*.

18. An antitype stands opposite its type, like Jesus stands as the fulfillment of the sacrifices under the law of Moses, or like when the Father and Son's atonement was shadowed forth by the near-offering by Abraham of his son, Isaac. "Typology ... relates 'the past to the present in terms of a historical correspondence and escalation in which the divinely ordered prefigurement finds a complement in the subsequent and greater event'" (Treier, "Typology," 823). Treier suggests that types may be identified using deductive or inductive exegetical methods. My approach is inductive. That is, I allow the text to speak for itself without attempting to impose a typology (or a theology) on it. Following this method may require quoting passages from the text at more length than other approaches. However, as the typological parallel I analyze is less than obvious and spreads throughout the Book of Mormon, it may be more accurate to call my hermeneutical approach metaphorical typology. Joseph M. Spencer more recently has defined typology

events (e.g., Reynolds¹⁹). I demonstrate how Nephi understands and portrays his record itself and how his project is taken up and portrayed by others, such as Alma₂, who themselves were record keepers among the Nephites.²⁰ This admittedly synthetic approach is *intertextual*, *intratextual*, and *typological* and assumes a high level of unity in the record, which, if required, would easily be demonstrable.²¹ I ask: "How did the writers of the Book of Mormon (especially Nephi) understand their own records in relation to former sacred history and texts?"²² The answer to that question gives insight into the book's redemptive message, but in extended scriptural context. This method opens up the text to new readings and yet does not pretend to be definitive.²³

as "read[ing] in such a way that history [in God's providences] is effectively rewritten in light of a graceful event" (Spencer, *An Other Testament*, 33). Even though Spencer attributes "two distinct models of typological interpretation in the Book of Mormon" (33), I propose a third, one other than those he has identified that pertain to Nephi (and Jesus) and Abinadi. Specifically, Spencer justifies his approach to Nephi in two passages wherein Nephi refers to his typology directly: 2 Nephi 11:4 and 2 Nephi 25:24–27 (33). My effort primarily focuses on a new reading of the second. Lastly, Spencer posits that Nephi's typology is learned from Isaiah (99). Much of what I do is also grounded in the Prophet Isaiah's writings. I follow Spencer's standard divisions of the Book of Isaiah and see the authorship of Isaiah's book much as he does (58–63).

19. Reynolds, "The Israelite Background of Moses Typology in the Book of Mormon."

20. Alma₂ carefully incorporates the words of Lehi and Nephi into his writings.

21. Some readers may fault this intratextual approach, saying it is an imposition on the text. However, it is demonstrable that Nephi's writings are highly allusive and unified. For instance, in 2 Nephi 31 Nephi's reader is required to remember both his brother Jacob's former words and a person he calls "that prophet" (2 Nephi 31:1, 4). What makes this requirement interesting is that Jacob's prior sermon (see 2 Nephi 6–10) is found about twenty chapters earlier and the prophet referred to is found about forty chapters earlier (see 1 Nephi 11:27). Clearly, Nephi asks much of his reader's memory, and in doing so, suggests the unity of his record.

22. Spencer has explored a similar question using Alma 36 and 1 Nephi 1 (Spencer, *An Other Testament*, 8–11).

23. This method necessitating the pulling together of terms from different places within the text should not be dismissed lightly as Nephi and his successors were profoundly aware of each other as any close reading of the Book of Mormon demonstrates. Besides, Nephi's prophetic manner was to lump language and ideas together as opposed to set up rigid categories like his brothers and the later Greek philosophers (see 1 Nephi 22:1–3).

Early Nephite Artifacts and Typology

This synthetic and figural method causes one to ask the related question, “What does the text of the Book of Mormon say about how the Nephites (especially Nephi) understood their inherited records and the reading of scripture” (see 2 Nephi 25:1–8 and Alma 32:28–43)?²⁴ The first clues to answering this question may be derived from the early scene in the wilderness, wherein Nephi and his brothers return from Jerusalem with the brass plates, and Lehi “search[es] them from the beginning” (1 Nephi 5:10). The plates, prepared on “brass” so as to endure (see Jacob 4:1–2), “contain the five books of Moses” and a “genealogy of [Lehi’s] fathers,” and many prophecies, including the great prophecies of Joseph of Egypt (1 Nephi 5:11, 14; see 2 Nephi 4:2). On “beh[olding]” or seeing the brass plates, Lehi, “filled with the Spirit ... prophes[ies] concerning his seed” (1 Nephi 5:11, 17; see also 2 Nephi 11:8 and Mosiah 1:5–6), predicts that they will “go forth unto all nations ... who were of his seed,” adding they would “not be dimmed anymore by time” (1 Nephi 5:17–19). This wilderness episode, part of which resembles 2 Nephi 3 (both accounts speak of Joseph of Egypt and Moses and Lehi’s distant seed), wherein we observe Lehi as exegete reveals a pattern: 1) the record of Laban, himself of Joseph’s house, is made of *brass*; 2) the reading of the brass plates is described as *beholding*, *seeing*, or *looking* (see 1 Nephi 5:11, 17; see also 2 Nephi 11:8; Jacob 4:3; Mosiah 1:5–6); 3) it would go “forth unto all *nations*”; and 4) it would “not be dimmed anymore by time,” or to use Alma’s later language, it would “retain [its] brightness” or would not become corrupted in its meaning (Alma 37:3–5; see also 2 Nephi 25:22). This pattern descriptive of the brass plates (and, in part, the Liahona, as we shall see) Nephi and others projected onto the small record they kept that would be known as part of the Book of Mormon when added to Mormon’s plates.²⁵

24. This question, more or less, is deeply explored in Joseph Spencer and Jenny Webb, eds., *Reading Nephi Reading Isaiah*, 2nd ed. (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2016). Like many contributors to the edited volume just cited, I see Nephi in 2 Nephi 25–30 as creatively expounding Isaiah’s writings in terms of his own prophecy. He integrates, explains, re-contextualizes, repurposes, appropriates, adapts, and creatively expands and uses (as in Midrash) what is needed from the former prophet to make his own authoritative argument. He mines Isaiah, but also somewhat rewrites him. In this paper I use terms such as reference, allusion, echo, as synonyms. I am not creating a new methodology here, just applying a proven one to generate new understanding.

25. It is inconsequential that Mormon’s plates were apparently prepared on gold instead of brass. The material point is that Nephi and others intentionally prepared on precious metals a record to be preserved that would have healing

The italicized words and phrases above demonstrate how the account of Lehi's reading of the brass plates relates to the biblical story involving serpents and salvation in Numbers 21:4–9. The following passage ascribed to Moses contains the language I analyze later on. However, the passages from the Book of Mormon that refer directly to the brass serpent episode are even more detailed (see footnote 2 for references). They were read and copied from the brass plates, and therefore, can be trusted where they are not also corrupted by error due to human weakness and other factors, such as the text's translation into English (see 1 Nephi 19:6). Since the passage from Numbers is not found in full in the Book of Mormon, I provide the complete passage here as it stands in the King James Version of the Bible:

And the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died.

Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD, and against thee; pray unto the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us. And Moses prayed for the people.

And the LORD said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live.

And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived. (Numbers 21:6–9)

If it is plausible that Nephi develops his typological project from his exposure to the brass plates, it is at least as plausible that he develops his approach to his record from the Liahona.²⁶ That is because the compass

power if looked upon. In the providences of the Lord, Nephi's record was written *well before* Mormon's work was completed. It does not matter that Mormon adds the Small Plates of Nephi late in his abridgement process. For one thing, it can be demonstrated that many parts of Nephi's record anticipate Mormon's abridgment of the Large Plates of Nephi (see 1 Nephi 16:10, 26–29; 17:3, 41, 51; Alma 37:6–7, 38–39, 40–41, 44, 46). The frequency of stark direct allusion (or subtle reference) cannot be a coincidence. An article by Clifford P. Jones ("That Which You Have Translated, Which You Have Retained," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 43 [2021], 1–64) suggests that Mormon became aware of the small plates while abridging the Book of Mosiah, after which he was heavily influenced by the small plates in his abridgement work.

26. Stan Spencer has argued that the Liahona, a kind of "urim," served three purposes among the Nephites: 1) like a urim, it provided written instruction; 2) like

itself is described in Nephi's account, much as an inspired book (and in Alma's later account as the "word of Christ") (Alma 37:44). It too is made of "brass" and is to be "looked upon," and according to one's "faith and diligence," its "new writing" is "plain to be read ... [giving] understanding concerning the ways of the Lord" (1 Nephi 16:29). In addition to the cultural artifacts that may have informed the production of Nephi's small record, a record meant to heal the nations, he must also conceive of himself (or the record's future translator) as an antitype of Moses. Fortunately, as indicated, both are true (see 1 Nephi 17:50; 2 Nephi 3:9–10). Nephi clearly understands his family's sojourn in the wilderness after fleeing Jerusalem as a type of Israel's Egyptian exodus (see 1 Nephi 17:23–32, 41–46).²⁷

To support the claim that Nephi finds correspondence with Moses's raising of the serpent, I examine a brief but early characteristic passage from the Book of Mormon, which allows one to identify more evidence for the proposed reading. 1 Nephi 17, a chapter that frames the broad Mosaic typology involved as it relates to the word of Christ, also conveniently concentrates the relevant terms. The passage that follows directly echoes the language of Numbers 21 and prefigures other passages I examine in more depth later. In this passage, Nephi reproves his brothers because they have murmured, much as did the more ancient Israelites, against the Lord their God and against his chosen servant (see 1 Nephi 17:30). In the midst of Nephi's defense of his father, he uses the miraculous episode of the brass serpent to advance his point:

And [God] did straiten them [or chasten Israel] in the wilderness with his rod; for they hardened their hearts, *even as ye have* [evidence of the typological presentation]; and the Lord straitened them [sought to prove them] because of

a pillar of fire, it provided direction; and 3) like a brass serpent, it tested their faith in the wilderness. See Stan Spencer, "Reflections of Urim: Hebrew Poetry Sheds Light on the Directors-Interpreters Mystery" *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 14 (2015): 187–207, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/reflections-of-urim-hebrew-poetry-sheds-light-on-the-directors-interpreters-mystery/>.

27. George Tate explains as early as 1981 that "Nephi senses that he and his family are reenacting a sacred and symbolic pattern that looks back to Israel and forward to Christ — the pattern of the Exodus" (Tate, "The Typology of the Exodus Pattern in the Book of Mormon"). Further, he writes, "Nephi is conscious of replicating Exodus and that he reads texts and visions figurally." Importantly, in Tate's treatment of the Exodus pattern in the Book of Mormon, he includes the passage my argument concludes with from 3 Nephi 15:9.

their iniquity. He sent fiery flying serpents among them; and after they were bitten he prepared a way [Nephi's phrase that Alma also employs] that they might be healed; and the labor which they had to perform was to look; and because of the simpleness of the way, or the easiness of it, there were many who perished. (1 Nephi 17:41)²⁸

Admittedly, this more detailed Book of Mormon passage does not directly connect the brass serpent episode from Numbers 21 to the Book of Mormon, but as stated, it enables that analysis by providing certain interconnected words and phrases ("flying," "healed," "look," "prepared a way," and "simpleness of the way") that when associated with Nephi's record effectively confirm what is claimed. This is not unreasonable, given that this key language appears concentrated in chapters that emphasize the word of Christ. For example, in the above passage one sees Moses's phrase "flying serpents" and his word "look" coupled with slight variations of Nephi's and Alma's words "simpleness" and "easiness" (see Alma 37:6, 44, 46). So, although Nephi's typological teaching in 1 Nephi 17 does not refer to a book, Alma's deployment of it refers his reader to the word of Christ and demonstrates that he reads Nephi (and Moses) in textual terms. But the argument is that Nephi's typological project is taken up by Alma, and not vice versa. Thus we begin to see that the early Nephite artifacts and Nephi's self-identification with Moses and his people's wilderness sojourn may have contributed to Nephi's understanding of his record and its transmission as sacred text and serpent with power to condemn or heal.

Lehi's Blessing to Joseph and Typology

2 Nephi also draws upon these emergent patterns and preliminaries. Moses is again invoked in a textual context early in 2 Nephi 3, where Nephi records his father's blessings to his posterity. The blessing I focus on contains a typological prophecy from Joseph of Egypt (see 2 Nephi 3:6–21). Lehi recounts it while blessing "[his] last-born ... in the wilderness of [his] afflictions" (2 Nephi 3:1). In the last part of 2 Nephi 3, we may again find artifacts to consider: a "rod" and "judgment [in] writing,"

28. First Nephi 17, a chapter about the power and place of the word of God in salvation history, seems to structurally draw attention to this particular and isolated brass serpent episode. Whereas miracles have been recounted like the parting of the Red Sea, the raining of manna from heaven, the smiting of the rock, the brass serpent episode receives different treatment. It is presented as a test of faith that, if passed, qualifies them to enter the Promised Land.

a possible reference to sacred records such as tablets (2 Nephi 3:17).²⁹ However, this time the artifacts identified are used only to introduce two ancient persons: 1) *Moses* (original custodian of the rod), and 2) *Aaron*, *Moses's "spokesman"* (2 Nephi 3:17). These two persons, according to the prophecy's logic, are to be typologically comparable to a later servant, a "choice seer," and the record he would translate: presumably *Joseph Smith* and the *Book of Mormon* (2 Nephi 3:7). Although there are alternative ways to understand the servant ("him") and his "spokesman" referred to in 2 Nephi 3:18, the reading I propose is reasonable, since the servant seer referred to would be "great like unto Moses" (2 Nephi 3:9), and yet, also like Moses, would not be gifted in speaking: "I will not loose his tongue" (2 Nephi 3:17). And, what could be a more fitting "spokesman" for the seed of Joseph than the record of Joseph's seed to be known as the Book of Mormon, as it would "cry from the dust" unto future generations (2 Nephi 3:18–20)? The blessing given by Lehi, therefore, not only provides a prophecy but compares Moses (a servant who brought forth a text written by the "finger [of God's] own hand") and his spokesman Aaron with Joseph Smith and the text he would "bring forth" by divine "power" that would convey those "words which are expedient in [God's] wisdom should go forth unto the fruit of [Joseph's loins]" (2 Nephi 3:11, 15, 19). That the Nephite record would "cry from the dust" announcing its message of "repentance" was apparently known to more than Isaiah, for here we find it originating with Joseph of Egypt (2 Nephi 3:20; see Isaiah 29:4).

Further, the reader of Lehi's blessing is tacitly invited to typologically connect Moses's raising of the serpent referred to by Nephi in 1 Nephi 17:41 to what becomes the Book of Mormon itself. This connection is signaled in verses 20 and 21 of 2 Nephi 3 where the comparison between Moses and Aaron with the servant seer and the Book of Mormon becomes understandable. The connection emerges when Lehi explains that "after this manner did my father of old prophesy," implying that Joseph of Egypt had prophesied in a less than direct way (2 Nephi 3:22; see also 2 Nephi 25:1–8). From Joseph of Egypt's prophecy, we learn that he was promised by the Lord that in a latter day he would "raise up" a seer who would "bring forth [his] word" (2 Nephi 3:6–11, 15). The word the seer would bring forth would also have the effect of "convincing" people of the "word which shall have already gone forth among them" (2 Nephi 3:11). The later book (Book of Mormon) would convince its

29. Second Nephi 3:17 again refers to the tablets later in the same verse: "I will write unto him [Moses] my law, by the finger of my own hand."

readers of the truthfulness of the former (Bible). By the end of the prophecy (along with Lehi's framing explanations in 2 Nephi 3:1–5 and 22–25), Nephi's reader learns that the later book would fulfill one of the "covenants" made to Joseph of Egypt (2 Nephi 3:4). In the forthcoming record, Lehi explains, the "Messiah should be made manifest ... in the spirit of power" (2 Nephi 3:5; see also 1 Nephi 13:35–42; 14:1). Notably, it is in this context that part of the prophecy in 2 Nephi 3 again employs a variation on Nephi's earlier phrase from 1 Nephi 17:41: the "simpleness of the way" or the "easiness of [the way]" is evoked by the phrase the "simpleness of their words" (2 Nephi 3:20; see also Alma 37:46):³⁰

And [the Nephites] shall cry from the dust; yea, even repentance unto their brethren, even after many generations have gone by them. And it shall come to pass that their cry shall go, even according to the *simpleness of their words*.

Because of their faith their words shall proceed forth out of my mouth unto their brethren who are the fruit of [Joseph of Egypt's] loins; and the *weakness of their words* will I make strong in their faith, unto the remembering of the covenant which I have made unto thy fathers. (2 Nephi 3:20–21)

In the verses just cited, the similarly rare phrase "weakness of their words" suggests the imperfect character of the promised record as a translated document. The second of the two verses, vs. 21, equates through parallelism the phrase "simpleness of their words" with the "weakness of their words." The repetition of the three-word phrase, "of their words," and the common English suffix, "-ness," links them in Nephi's reader's mind. Further, the parallel pulls together the earlier comparison between Moses and the servant seer and their spokesmen as well as 2 Nephi 3:20 with 1 Nephi 17:41 and Numbers 21 by means of the rare phrase "simpleness of the way" and its similarly contextualized

30. Each of these last phrases appears only once in scripture. Because of the phrases' clear similarities, I propose that they should be read in relation to each other. It appears that Nephi's phrase "simpleness of the way" may derive from Joseph of Egypt's phrase "simpleness of their words." Alma seems to borrow from one or both of the former writers when he uses the phrase "easiness of the way," *easy* being a synonym for *simple*, a word Alma uses only once and in reference to the Word (see Alma 37:6–7). Alma, in discussing the brass plates and other plates to come forth, employs the strongly related phrases "by small and simple things" and "by very small means" (*ibid.*). "[S]mall means" is only found in two places in scripture: 1 Nephi 16:29 (a passage about the Liahona as inspired text) and in Alma 37:6–7, 41 (passages about the brass plates of Laban and about the Liahona as the Word).

variants, which emphasize the phrase “their words.” Narrators of the emerging Nephite record lamented their “weakness” in writing. Nephi₁ concerns himself with his weakness in writing (2 Nephi 33:1–4, 11) as does Jacob (Jacob 4:7) and Moroni (Ether 12:22–40). The servant seer himself also, according to the prophecy, was “out of weakness ... made strong” (2 Nephi 3:13). The use of the word “simpleness” (or its variants) and its sister term “weakness” in 2 Nephi 3:20–21 and in the passages previously quoted (see 1 Nephi 17:41) intimates that they all should, as Joseph of Egypt predicts, in some sense “grow together” in Nephi’s reader’s imagination.³¹ According to the prophecy’s logic (and its framing commentary from Lehi), the later translated book described in 2 Nephi 3 would bear powerful witness of the “Messiah” and “grow together” with the earlier biblical record (2 Nephi 3:5, 12).

The claim for a Nephite type that effectively pulls together the writings of Nephi (and Alma)³² with the narrative of Moses’s brass serpent will get more attention. From Lehi’s blessing containing Joseph of Egypt’s prophecy, Nephi’s reader encounters at least two typological truths: 1) that the servant seer would not only become another Moses when he would “deliver my people, O house of Israel,” but 2) that what he would translate also would become a “spokesman” “from the dust” to future generations that would “bring [the Lord’s] people unto salvation” (2 Nephi 3:15, 17–18, 19). Like Moses, the servant seer would by means of a small and simple record deliver Israel “out of captivity unto freedom” (2 Nephi 3:5). Specifically, if we follow Lehi’s framing commentary, Joseph of Egypt received a promise from the Lord that through a “book” translated by one from his loins (see 2 Nephi 3:16–23), “the Messiah should be made manifest unto [his posterity] in the latter days, in the spirit of power, unto the bringing of them out of darkness unto light — yea, out of hidden darkness and out of captivity unto freedom” (2 Nephi 3:5; see also 1 Nephi 14:1; Isaiah 29:4, 18).³³ Moreover, Joseph of Egypt was

31. Nephi has already been weaving the words of the brass plate’s prophets together with his small plates record in a rather ingenious way since at least 1 Nephi 19. He has intentionally multiplied witnesses and will yet do more of the same.

32. Apparently following Nephi₁, Alma directly compares the word of God to the Liahona and then indirectly compares the Word to the brass serpent account in Numbers 21 (see Alma 37:38–47; 38:2). Further, Alma directly speaks of typology or “shadow[s].” For him, typology compares the “temporal” to the “spiritual” (Alma 37:43). These interpretive distinctions were also made in Nephi’s day (see 1 Nephi 15:31–32; 1 Nephi 22:1–3).

33. The rare phrase “out of darkness unto light” found in 2 Nephi 3:5 appears only in two other passages of scripture, both of which discuss sacred records

assured that the servant seer commanded to do this work would be "great like unto Moses" and bring to pass "much restoration [gathering of] the house of Israel" (2 Nephi 3:9, 24). Lehi's blessing describes in typological terms a foreordained seer who would raise up a messianic book to restore or heal Jew and Gentile and all nations.

Nephi's Final Prophecy and Typology

Joseph of Egypt's prophecy (see 2 Nephi 3:3, 5, 11, 14, 16, 19, 23) is again broadly alluded to in 2 Nephi 25 in similar typological context (see 2 Nephi 25:18, 21). Nevertheless, however convincing the foregoing argument has been, it has only been a beginning. Much transpires between 2 Nephi 3 and 2 Nephi 25 (too much to be considered in any detail here). For instance, Nephi records Jacob's sermon on the fulfillment of the covenant (2 Nephi 6–10; see also Isaiah 49–52) along with several chapters from Isaiah on the "judgments of God, that ... come upon all nations" (2 Nephi 25:3, 6) unless they, "see[ing] these words" (2 Nephi 11:8), repent and begin to believe in Christ (see 2 Nephi 12–24; see also Isaiah 2–14).

2 Nephi 25 is the first part of a longer prophecy on the eschatological role of the Book of Mormon in converting the Jews and Gentiles to Christ in a day of pending destruction. Oddly, the bulk of the Isaiah material in 2 Nephi is followed with a chapter that begins with a hermeneutic for Isaiah (see 2 Nephi 25:1–8). The chapter launches the reader into a prophecy and commentary that carefully interplays both with the foregoing writings of Nephi (including 2 Nephi 3) and Isaiah 29, a chapter he never actually fully records. 2 Nephi 25 is framed by two general subjects: 1) the prophets' role in predicting Christ, and 2) the law of Moses's role in predicting Christ. It is a chapter written for the benefit of Nephi's people and other Jews of the house of Israel and can be divided further into three additional parts, the last two of which frame my discussion: In Part 1, as indicated, Nephi acknowledges the difficulty and yet importance of understanding the prophets, especially Isaiah (see

coming forth (see Alma 37:23–25; Mormon 8:16). So, although in 2 Nephi 3:5 a people emerge from darkness unto light when the "Messiah [is] made manifest unto to them," its sequential phrases "out of darkness unto light" and "out of hidden darkness" and "out of captivity" elsewhere suggest the coming forth of a messianic record out of the "ground," "dust," or "earth" (see Isaiah 29:4, 18; Mormon 8:16). In practical terms, the record would come forth out of darkness unto light before its readers could come forth from their spiritual darkness unto spiritual light through conversion to the Messiah.

2 Nephi 25:1–8). Parts 2 and 3 are framed, as stated, by the subjects of the prophets (see 2 Nephi 25:9–23) and the law (see 2 Nephi 25:24–30).

What harmonizes the chapter's three parts is that despite Nephi's repeated claims to communicate in "plainness" (see 2 Nephi 25:4, 7, and 20), his reader, if not familiar with typology, can easily miss what he suggests by his comparative method, much as he/she may do when interpreting 1 Nephi 17 and 2 Nephi 3. Unlike his people, Nephi has experience with the "manner of prophesying among the Jews," and now that he seeks to communicate with the Jews (they understanding the prophets as they do), he may intentionally speak to them in the manner he believes they will best comprehend (see 2 Nephi 25:5). So, Nephi's typological approach that compares Moses's brass serpent to the record to be known as the Book of Mormon may be part of his attempt to be so plain that "[no person] can err," even if communication by allusive comparison is not how his modern readers normally define plainness in writing (2 Nephi 25:20).³⁴ In an interesting way, as poets know, figurative approaches may strike a kind of clarity far more memorable and powerful than mere straightforward prose.

Nephi's prophecy in 2 Nephi 25 focuses his reader's attention yet again on the brass serpent, but this time in terms of the book referred to in 2 Nephi 3:23 (and Isaiah 29:18). For Nephi, the book for the nations is a second brass serpent, but in a new expanding international context. Nephi's prophecy deals with the Jewish and Gentile reception of the record in the final dispensation. There are at least three reasons for saying that Nephi likens the record he engraves on plates to the brass serpent raised by Moses in Numbers 21: 1) According to Isaiah's prophecies (and the revelations Nephi has experienced), the record would *lift up* the name of Messiah (serpent)³⁵ to a perishing world before his second coming; 2) it would *heal all those nations* and peoples who *look unto it* and thereby are convinced or persuaded to believe in Jesus

34. Nephi's writings present a paradox. That is, he frequently extols plainness and yet composes an often sophisticated presentation (see 2 Nephi 25:4, 7, 33:6). I think we are to comprehend Nephi's plainness in relative terms. He is not writing in what modern Gentiles would call a professional or academic mode. Instead, he writes prophetically, typologically, and allusively, and with all the energy of his soul. His plainness is an ancient Eastern plainness, not a modern Western plainness. Further, he confesses that he has a weakness when it comes to writing that is not present when he speaks (see 2 Nephi 33:1–3).

35. Andrew Skinner in "Serpent Symbols and Salvation" equates the serpent with the Messiah using Genesis 1–2.

Christ and enter into his latter-day kingdom; and 3) it would *hiss*³⁶ forth and gather the “meek” and “poor among men” before the end (see 2 Nephi 27:29–30; Isaiah 29:18–19). To begin, the specific writings that Nephi desires his readers to “see” that they might “rejoice for all men” often are punctuated by reference to the lifting up of a “standard” (sign) in a latter day (2 Nephi 11:8; see also 2 Nephi 25:17; 3 Nephi 29:4). The following three sections provide examples of Isaiah’s standard motif from 2 Nephi 15 (see Isaiah 5) and 21 (see Isaiah 11).

He Will Lift Up an Ensign

Therefore, as the fire devoureth the stubble, and the flame consumeth the chaff, their [God’s ancient covenant people] root shall be rottenness, and their blossoms shall go up as dust; because they have cast away the law of the Lord of Hosts, *and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.*

Therefore, is the anger of the Lord kindled against his people, and he hath stretched forth his hand against them, and hath smitten them; and the hills did tremble, and their carcasses were torn in the midst of the streets [i.e., Israel would be destroyed and scattered to the nations]. For all this [God’s] anger is not turned away, *but his hand is stretched out still* [possibly in great mercy].³⁷

36. In most biblical commentaries, the Hebrew word translated in the KJV as “hiss” (*sharaq*) in Isaiah 5:26 is said to mean “whistle,” “signal,” or “call.” See Terry B. Ball, “Isaiah Chapter Review: 2 Nephi 15 // Isaiah 5” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company 2003), 149, 365, 610; and H8319, James Strong, “*Sharaq*,” in *The New Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Reference and Electronic, 1995), 610 (also see H8322). (Another way “hiss” is commonly deployed, as mentioned in footnote 6, is to suggest condemnation, scorn, or ridicule.) I will later suggest that Nephi may be adapting Isaiah’s words or building on them to add further allusions or implications. Suggesting that Nephi uses an “adaptive methodology” when he *likens* Isaiah to his own situation and later generations’ receipt of his Nephite record is consistent with several recent essays collected on the subject of Nephi’s creative appropriation of his prophetic predecessor Isaiah. In addition, “not only does Nephi creatively adapt Isaianic images into new, prophetically projected contexts, but Isaiah *himself* consistently employs images, metaphors, and symbols that *are already open to multiple interpretations and readily available for future adaptation*,” as stated by Joseph Spencer regarding Isaiah 29 in “Summary Report” in *Reading Nephi Reading Isaiah*, 9.

37. This last image of the outstretched or lengthened arm or hand of the Lord is a common Isaianic refrain in the chapters that Nephi quotes in 2 Nephi. For instance, it appears as a poetic refrain three times in 2 Nephi 19:12, 17, 21 (see

And [because he is merciful] *he will lift up an ensign*³⁸ *to the nations* [i.e., a book containing the fullness of the everlasting gospel of the Messiah] from far, and will hiss unto them [its readers] from the end of the earth; and behold, they shall come

Isaiah 9:12, 17, 21) and twice in 28:32. It appears that Nephi creatively adapts the phrase to convey mercy (signified by a book's emergence in a day of apostasy) as opposed to the threat of further judgment, which is the common way to understand this Isaianic use of the image. In the Nephite mind (Jacob also uses the image as does Nephi, see Jacob 6:5), God's promise to extend his arm/hand in great mercy is to be understood as his effort to gather the seed of Abraham from among the nations through the Book of Mormon and the Restoration, as can be seen by reading 3 Nephi 22 (see Isaiah 54) in context with Jesus's other teachings in 3 Nephi 9–27.

38. The treatment of the word “ensign” in its various iterations in the prophecies of Isaiah is somewhat complicated (Isaiah 5:26 and 11:10, 12). However, they are remarkably consistent as to the word's literal meaning. According to most sources, an “ensign” is “a standard, banner, flag, or signal to which the nations are to rally” (Ball, “Isaiah Chapter Review,” 365). Where the complexity comes in is in attempting to determine what Isaiah's word “ensign” may refer to symbolically, for it is variously to be “lift[ed] up” (5:26), “stand” (11:10), and/or be “set up” (11:12). Most LDS scholars view the ensign as referring to one or more aspects of the gospel restoration, or the restoration itself. Terryl L. Givens explains that for certain early members of the Church, the Word could represent the Church, its elders, or the Book of Mormon. I agree in spirit with this general understanding (Givens in a later chapter heading also suggests that the book can be understood as “A Standard”) but argue specifically that the “ensign” (or “standard”) in Isaiah's writings primarily refers to the invitation underscored in the new covenant (it is also “everlasting”), the Book of Mormon, to believe in Christ and come unto him and his kingdom. The ensign is the book and its message, making it a “messenger before [God's] face to prepare the way before [him]” (D&C 45:9). As the Book of Mormon suggests of itself, it is the “sign” (or in-“sign”) of the gospel restoration (see 3 Nephi 21:1 and 29:1–4). See Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002), 64–66, 240.

Furthermore, there are certain scholars (for example, Wallace E. Hunt, Jr.) who assert that the phrase “fiery flying serpent” cited in the Book of Mormon (differing from the account in Numbers 21 by addition of the word “flying”) may refer to the manner in which Moses's serpent was placed horizontally on its pole or standard, making it more of a “flagstaff” (Hunt, Jr. “Moses's Serpent,” 129). I would add that the addition of the adjective “flying” to the phrase in the Book of Mormon (probably a phrase derived from the more perfect brass plates' account) may also correspond to the familiar teaching in Nephi's great prophecy concluding his record that the Messiah would, “rise from the dead with healing in his wings,” wings being suggestive of flying and the name Messiah being suggestive of serpent (2 Nephi 25:13; 26:9; see footnote 35). Some work has also been done on Nephi's use of “flying” in “Why Did Nephi Say Serpents Could Fly?,” *Book of Mormon Central*, May 22, 2017, <https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/knowhy/why-did-nephi-say-serpents-could-fly>.

with speed swiftly [i.e., be gathered]; none shall be weary nor stumble among them. (2 Nephi 15:24–26)

And relatedly, in 2 Nephi 21 (see Isaiah 11) Nephi records a prophecy that the angel Moroni instructed Joseph Smith in 1823 was “about to be fulfilled” (see JSH 1:40):

And in that day there shall be a root of Jesse [possibly a latter-day servant], which shall stand for *an ensign of the people*; to it [the record the servant would translate] shall the Gentiles seek [i.e., they shall look to its message and the work it ushers in]; and his rest [presumably the translator’s] shall be glorious.

And it shall come to pass in that day that the Lord shall set his hand again the second time to recover the remnant of his people [another reference to the book and work that would come forth; see also 2 Nephi 3:15] which shall be left, from Assyria, and from Egypt, and from Pathros, and from Cush, and from Elam, and from Shinar, and from Hamath, and from the islands of the sea.

And [God] *shall set up an ensign for the nations*, and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth. (2 Nephi 21:10–12; see also D&C 45:9)

The above Isaianic passages quoted at length by Nephi (and rehearsed by the angel Moroni, the heavenly being who holds the keys to the Nephite record) describe a servant and/or object lifted up that would signal a gathering of the Lord’s people. What would be “lifted up” would be a sign, antitype, or signal “set up” “to the nations” or “for the nations,” suggesting that the Lord had “set his hand again a second time to recover his people” (2 Nephi 15:26; 21:12). The Book of Mormon is referred to as the “sign” (“these sayings”) of the commencement of the work of the Father in at least two places: 3 Nephi 21:1 and again in 3 Nephi 29:4. Thus, I infer that this second event, when the Lord would “set his hand again a second time to recover his people,” serves as an antitype of the event described in Numbers 21, wherein we learn that the serpent was lifted up, and because of its divinely bestowed power, was able to “heal the nations” of Israel who looked unto it (2 Nephi 25:20).

In Nephi's prophecy in 2 Nephi 25, astute readers see he draws attention to two names.³⁹ That is, what is lifted are names that would have healing properties. The first is the name of "Messiah" and the second is the name of "Jesus Christ." As if for emphasis, Nephi uses the name of Messiah eight times in only seven verses in Chapter 25. The following verse from Nephi characterizes the title's frequency in the text:

Wherefore, [God] shall bring forth his words unto them [the Jewish peoples], which words shall judge them at the last day, for they [the words] shall be given them for the purpose of convincing them of the true *Messiah*, who was rejected by them; and unto the convincing of them that they need not look forward any more for a *Messiah* to come, for there should not any come, save it should be a false *Messiah* which should deceive the people; for there is save one Messiah spoken of by the prophets, and that *Messiah* is he who should be rejected of the Jews. (2 Nephi 25:18)

Nephi's emphatic approach makes some sense at this point in his prophecy since he seeks to "convince" the Jews who are familiar with the title of Messiah to "believe in Christ," the same being who came among them only to be "rejected by them." Moreover, Nephi employs the name Messiah because it conveys the typological intention involved. In this passage, Nephi redirects the Jews' vision, for he admonishes them that they "need not look forward any more for a Messiah to come," for he has already come, and, Nephi implies, that Messiah now should be looked to if they desire to live (2 Nephi 25:18). Nephi may enfold something else into the passage. That may be why he exults near the beginning of his account after prophesying that the Messiah would "rise from the dead with healing in his wings" that "[his] heart doth magnify [or glorify, lift up, or make appear enlarged] his holy name" for all to see (2 Nephi 25:13). At verse 20 in the same chapter, Nephi ceases to repeat the name "Messiah" and begins to invoke the name "Jesus Christ,"⁴⁰ thus reorienting the eyes and hearts of his Jewish audience to the Messiah's Christian name. It is here that Nephi directly refers to and dwells on the

39. Terryl Givens, *2 Nephi: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2020), 26–27; and Joseph M. Spencer, *1 Nephi: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2020), 50–55.

40. This name is apparently first revealed to the Nephites by Jacob as recorded in 2 Nephi 10:3. His account, however, is largely concerned with the name, Holy One of Israel. Before this time, the Nephite writings emphasize names for the Lord, such as Messiah, Savior, and Redeemer (see 1 Nephi 10:4–6).

account of Moses's holding up the brass serpent for the nations of Israel that they might be healed from the bites they had sustained.

That He Should Heal the Nations

As indicated, Nephi's prophecy underscores the spiritual healing that would take place among all the nations for those who would choose to believe in or look unto the name Jesus Christ as revealed through the book (ensign) Nephi struggles to engrave. The following important passage from Nephi's argument highlights his position that the Jews (and all who read his prophecy and book) should look unto Jesus Christ to be restored and healed:

And now, my brethren, I have spoken plainly that ye cannot err. And as the Lord God ... gave unto Moses power that he should heal the nations after they had been bitten by the poisonous serpents, if they would cast their eyes unto the serpent ... behold I say unto you, that as these things are true, and as the Lord God liveth, there is none other name given under heaven save it be this Jesus Christ, of which I have spoken, whereby man can be saved.

Wherefore, for this cause hath the Lord God promised unto me [Nephi] that these things which I write shall be kept and preserved, and handed down unto my seed, from generation to generation, that the promise may be fulfilled unto Joseph [of Egypt], that his seed should never perish as long as the earth should stand [see 2 Nephi 3:3, 5, 11, 14, 16, 19, 23].

Wherefore, these things [Nephi's writings] shall go from generation to generation as long as the earth shall stand; and they shall go according to the will and pleasure of God; *and the nations who shall possess them shall be judged of them according to the words which are written.*

For we labor diligently to write, to persuade our children, and also our brethren [the Lamanites and others of the house of Israel], to believe in Christ, and to be reconciled to God; for we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do.
(2 Nephi 25:20–23)

This pivotal passage from Nephi that identifies and develops an intertextual comparison and type or shadow, and others that follow it which develop the meaning further, emphasizes also the importance of looking to Jesus Christ for salvation. Salvation in this sense has to do

with remission of sin. In marking the relevant language that follows, it is clear that Nephi understands his record to be a type of brass serpent like that found in Numbers 21 to those among the nations of the earth in the last days. He continues to exhort his Jewish brethren in what remains of the same chapter and prophecy:

And, notwithstanding we *believe in Christ*, we keep the law of Moses, *and look forward with steadfastness unto Christ*,⁴¹ until the law shall be fulfilled.

For, for this end was the law given; wherefore the law hath become *dead unto us*, and we are made *alive in Christ* because of our faith; yet we keep the law because of the commandments.

And we talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ, and *we write according to our prophecies*, that our children may know to what source *they may look for a remission of their sins*.

Wherefore, we speak concerning the law that our children may know the *deadness of the law*; and they, by knowing the *deadness of the law, may look forward unto that life which is in Christ*, and know for what end the law was given. And after the law is fulfilled in Christ, that they need not harden their hearts against him when the law ought to be done away.
(2 Nephi 25:24–27)

As Nephi concludes his high-stakes argument, he has three times spoken of choosing between “life” and “death” — the Nephite record’s emergence would force a choice (see 1 Nephi 14:7) and cause a division (see 2 Nephi 30:10). He directs the ears, eyes, and hearts of his audience to Jesus Christ, the name above all names under heaven (see 2 Nephi 25:20), using language reminiscent of Numbers 21:4–9 and later passages in the Book of Mormon dealing with the same Mosaic motif (see page 4). The phrasal repetitions underscore Nephi’s teaching that “believ[ing] in Christ” is the “right way,” and apparently, the opposite of what he calls “dwindl[ing] in unbelief” (2 Nephi 25:28–29, 26:15). Finally, Nephi invites his audience not only to believe in Christ, the Holy One of Israel, but he commands them to “bow down before him and

41. The phrase “look forward,” or its negative variant, “look not forward,” appears first in 2 Nephi 25, and among the LDS scriptures is only in the Book of Mormon. About one third of the phrase’s thirteen mentions occur in 2 Nephi 25–26 (see 2 Nephi 25:16, 18, 24, 27; 26:8).

worship him” (2 Nephi 25:29). The remainder of the extended prophecy after 2 Nephi 25 describes the book’s miraculous coming forth and its mixed reception among the Gentile nations which are “drunken with iniquity” and in a “deep sleep” (2 Nephi 27–30).

My Words Shall Hiss Forth

Nephi’s extended prophecy makes a few more connected contributions as it advances to its end (an end that alludes to 1 Nephi 8, 11–14, 19–22, 2 Nephi 3; 2 Nephi 6–10; and Isaiah 2–14), not the least of which is Nephi’s representation of the poisoned condition of the nations and their potential redemption through hearing and accepting the words of a sealed book. *Hearing the word in faith or belief is prerequisite to seeing or knowing by the power of the Holy Ghost in Nephi’s holistic ontology of the prophecy* (see 2 Nephi 27:12–13). Thus, hearing precedes convincing and conversion, which process brings healing. Nevertheless, the readers of the sacred book to spring forth are initially identified as both “deaf” and “blind,” both “meek” and “poor” (2 Nephi 27:29–30). These receptive readers are they who shall believe in Christ upon hearing the new and additional “testimony,” and then they shall “see out of obscurity” and “sanctify his [Christ’s] name” (2 Nephi 27:29–30, 34; 29:8). Speaking of the remnant of Lehi (and implicitly all nations), Nephi says that the “scales of darkness shall fall from their eyes” when they hear his words of testimony and begin to believe in Christ (2 Nephi 30:5–8).⁴² In light of my claims about Nephi’s typological project that derives from Numbers 21, 2 Nephi 29 is particularly interesting. In the midst of Nephi’s discussion of the Gentile’s response to the Nephite record in the last days, his readers

42. It appears that the spiritually benighted Lehites (those with “scales” — perhaps snake scales — over their eyes) who have heard the voice of Christ again and seen the merciful hand of God reaching out for them may be figuratively represented as serpents themselves. They shed their scales/skin from their eyes and partake of a newness of life in Christ. Scholars have recently compared Nephi’s creative adaptations of Isaiah to the breathing of new resurrected life into the letter of the scriptures. See Jenny Webb, “Slumbering Voices: Death and Textuality in 2 Nephi,” in *Reading Nephi Reading Isaiah*, 59–74, and George Handley, “On the Moral Risks of Reading Scripture,” in *Reading Nephi Reading Isaiah*, 89–104. Likening is enlivening or resurrecting the text, giving it new possibilities. These Lehite converts having “dwindled in unbelief” for many generations have allowed the poison of false traditions, error, and sin to transform them into serpents who are now healed by looking to the true serpent (2 Nephi 26:15). After healing, they become the spiritual seed of the true serpent, Christ, becoming his sons and daughters. This fulfills the Lehitic covenant as articulated to the Nephite fathers.

encounter this material probably influenced by an Isaianic passage he had quoted earlier (2 Nephi 15:26; Isaiah 5:26):

But behold, there shall be many — at that day when I shall proceed to do a marvelous work [e.g., bring forth the Book of Mormon and other associated events] among them [the Gentile nations⁴³], that I may remember my covenants which I have made unto the children of men, that I may set my hand again the second time to recover my people, which are of the house of Israel;

And also, that I may remember the promises which I have made unto thee, Nephi, and also unto thy father, that I would remember your seed; *and that the words of your seed* [the Nephite record] *should proceed forth out of my mouth unto your seed; and my words shall hiss forth unto the ends of the earth, for a standard unto my people, which are of the house of Israel;*

And because *my words shall hiss forth* — many of the Gentiles shall say: A Bible! A Bible! We have got a Bible, and there cannot be anymore Bible. (2 Nephi 29:1–3)

Near the end of Nephi’s prophecy, English language readers might assume that the prophet, picking up on Joseph of Egypt’s and Isaiah’s Mosaic suggestiveness, typologically likens the sibilant sounds of a serpent (a hiss) to the words that would “whisper out of the dust” to the stumbling nations (2 Nephi 26:16; see also Genesis 3:14–15, Isaiah 66:25, and Micah 7:17, which associate the serpent with dust, further supporting a relationship between the hissing of the “voice from the dust” and the brass serpent). As discussed further below, such a reading may be plausible, even though the Hebrew word for “hiss” does not carry the same association to serpents that it does in English.

Nephi, drawing upon biblical teachings, describes the faint but urgent voice/hiss of *his* fallen people to his reader variously as a “cry,” a “speech,” or a “whisper” from the dust (2 Nephi 3:19–21, 26:15–16; cf. 2 Nephi 27:9, 33:13; Mormon 8:23; and Moroni 10:27). Accordingly, Nephi appears to use Isaiah’s term for “whistle” or “call” from Isaiah 5:26, translated as “hiss” in the KJV, to suggest the distant but intense voice of his fallen people. Isaiah indicates that the sign (ensign/pole/staff/standard) and hiss (familiar voice of a fallen people) would come “from far,” arguably consistent with a New World source.

43. See the previous verse in 2 Nephi 28:32, which is directed to the Gentiles.

Here is how Nephi puts it in 2 Nephi 29:2 “I [God will] remember your [Nephi’s] seed ... *that the words of your seed* [the Nephite record] *should proceed forth out of my mouth unto your seed*; and *my words shall hiss forth unto the ends of the earth*, for a standard/ensign unto my people, which are of the house of Israel.” The same Hebrew word is used for “ensign” in Isaiah 5:26 that is used for “pole” in Numbers 21:8–9. Here I propose that the voice of a remote fallen people, possibly like a snake’s small or weak (but distinct) hissing forth or whispering forth, would come from out of the dust (adding to the serpent association), and, importantly, from *out of the mouth of Christ* (the real antitype of the brass serpent raised by Moses) in a record to heal the blind and perishing nations.⁴⁴ So, although Egypt was mockingly exhorted to seek “balm” in “Gilead,” it would be “vain [... for them to] use many medicines; *for* [they would] not be cured [healed]” without turning and looking to God (Jeremiah 46:11).

The question remains as to whether the use of “hiss” in the Book of Mormon might have been intended in some way to invoke the concept of a serpent, given that the KJV “hiss” in Isaiah 5:26, which Nephi draws upon, does not actually refer to the aspirate sound of a serpent. The answer may be no, though some speculative possibilities might be considered. “Hiss,” as in Nephi’s phrase “hiss forth” in 2 Nephi 29:2, in Hebrew means something like to be shrill, such as with the shrill noise or sound of a whistle, or other sharp call or signal. One possibility is that the leading sibilant in the word for “hiss,” *sharaq* (and its close associates), may stir still other associations with the sibilant-containing word for serpent, *nachash* (the word repeatedly used in Numbers 21:9). Victor Avigdor Hurowitz employs an onomatopoeic method to Numbers 21:4–9, not solely focusing on a single word’s literal meanings, but also considering the allusions to serpent sounds through repeated sibilants in proximity.⁴⁵

Interestingly, while Nephi quotes Isaiah 5 in 2 Nephi 15, he uses Isaiah 5:26 in 2 Nephi 29:2 in a way that may bring together several sibilants in the Hebrew and add one more. Isaiah 5:26 begins by using the words *nasa’* (raise up) and *nes* (standard/ensign, the same word translated as “pole” in Numbers 21:8–9 that held the brass serpent), and then later has three sibilants from the roots *sharaq*, *qatseh*, and *erets*,

44. A type may have several antitypes, without diminishing the worth of its application to Christ in whom all things center (see 2 Nephi 11:4).

45. Victor Avigdor Hurowitz, “Healing and Hissing Snakes: Listening to Numbers 21:4–9,” *Scriptura* 87 (2004): 278–87; <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/a084/f947a6143df795036e6a81f12c0b6dce0b2d.pdf>.

translated as “hiss unto them from the end of the earth.”⁴⁶ 2 Nephi 29:2 has the phrase “my words shall hiss forth unto the ends of the earth, for a standard unto my people, which are of the house of Israel,” invoking the sibilant-containing roots *sharaq*, *qatseh*, *erets*, *nes*, and *Yisrael*.⁴⁷ Perhaps Nephi achieves here the serpent-suggesting onomatopoeic effect described by Hurowitz. This is, of course, speculative and merely a suggestion for further study.

Further speculative possibilities may be considered involving the word “whisper.” While Nephi in 2 Nephi 26:16 most likely used the same Hebrew word Isaiah used for the KJV “whisper” in Isaiah 29:4, *tsaphaph*, Strong’s H6850, another Hebrew word for “whisper,” *lachash*, Strong’s H3907, is quite similar to the word for serpent, *nachash*, and again has a sibilant, like the word for “hiss,” *sharaq*. Both possibilities for “whisper” begin with a sibilant (*tsaphaph* begins with the letter tsade, one of several sibilants in Hebrew⁴⁸), and there is the possibility that these or related words used by Nephi may have resonated with or invoked concepts associated with the serpent, *nachash*, or the fiery serpent, *seraph*.^{49, 50}

Whether “hiss” or related words may have been used to provide a subtle suggestion of serpents in the Hebrew, Nephi’s use of the “ensign” or “standard,” apparently based on the same word used for “pole” in the account of the brass serpent in Numbers, and the association of the standard with the words of the Lord that will hiss forth in 2 Nephi 29:2, links the future Book of Mormon with the brass serpent that can heal the nations. When the “standard” is lifted up and “hisses forth,” many hearing and understanding it would “look to God and live” (Alma 37:47), while many others, when it would be lifted up, not understanding it,

46. See the Hebrew roots used in Isaiah 5:26 with transliteration in “Masoretic Text [for Isaiah 5:26],” *Blue Letter Bible*, https://www.blueletterbible.org/kjv/isa/5/26/t_conc_684026. See the transliterated Hebrew at “Isaiah 5:26,” *Bible Hub*, <https://biblehub.com/text/isaiah/5-26.htm>.

47. Hans Rutger Bosker, “Sibilant Consonants,” *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*, ed. Geoffrey Khan (Leiden, NDL: Brill, 2013), 3: 557–61, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328531863_Sibilant_consonants.

48. *Ibid.*

49. Strong, *The New Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance*, 610 (H8319, H8322), 93 (H5172, H5173, H5174, H5175), 149 (H8319, H8322 [see entry for Jeremiah 51:37]).

50. A related connection is the concept of conjuring, known to be associated with serpents and also a meaning of *lachash* (Strong’s H3907). Laman and Lemuel apparently accuse Nephi of planting the brass Liahona before their father’s tent in these accusatory words: “and he [Nephi] worketh many things by his cunning arts, that he may deceive our eyes, thinking, perhaps, *that he may lead us away into some strange wilderness*” (1 Nephi 16:38), suggesting that conjuring was the implicit charge.

would refuse to look (some even raging against it, as in 2 Nephi 28:20, 28), though the “labor which they had to perform” would be simple or easy (1 Nephi 17:41). Those readers who would be meek and charitable enough to receive the record, even though it is written in weakness, would “come to [an] understanding” and “learn doctrine” (2 Nephi 27:30, 35). Moroni, apparently also aware of Nephi’s project, concludes the Book of Mormon with similar language to that of his predecessors. Here are his parting words concerning the record he seals up to be raised up and carried forth:

I declare these things [the emergence of the Nephite writings in a day of salvation] unto the fulfilling of the prophecies. And behold, *they shall proceed forth out of the mouth* of the everlasting God (see 2 Nephi 27:23); *and his word shall hiss forth from generation to generation.*⁵¹

That last phrase, “from generation to generation,” as indicated earlier, conjures up again Nephi’s extended prophecy wherein the phrase is repeated four times (see 2 Nephi 25:9, 16, 21–22; see also 2 Nephi 3:19–20).

Conclusion

We have seen that Nephi, apparently drawing on his experience with cultural artifacts, on the inspired words of his father to his brother, and on his own searching of Isaiah, understood that his writings (and the writings of others who would keep the records after him) would come forth in a future day. The record as typological figure would represent three truths: 1) a sign would be raised to proclaim the name and grace of Jesus Christ to a perishing world before the end as a means of saving it; 2) the ensign or record would effectively heal all those nations and peoples who would *look unto Christ* when they, hearing it, would believe and be persuaded of it and all it confirms; and 3) the record would “hiss forth” in some sense, as a call that would help gather the meek and poor of the earth, and all those who would be willing to repent and be baptized and enter the kingdom of God on earth. When Nephi transferred his sacred records, he transferred his project. It is unclear how much of his understanding made it down to later writers and editors of the record. Nevertheless, it seems possible that much the same understanding was passed down to figures like Alma as they demonstrate an awareness of aspects of the original project. For instance, Alma, as indicated, fuses the “word of Christ,” the brass “compass,” and

51. The phrase “from generation to generation” appears fourteen times in the Book of Mormon, seven of them in 2 Nephi (four of them in 2 Nephi 25).

the narrative from Numbers 21 in the context of typology in his record (Alma 37:44).

Alma seems to adapt the typological tradition established by Nephi even as he persuades his audience to “believe in” Jesus Christ, “the Son of God” (see Alma 33:18–22). In his message, he accentuates the healing properties of Jesus Christ who would “come to redeem his people,” or all those who would look to him and believe on him:

Behold, [the Son of God] was spoken of by Moses; yea, and behold a type was raised up in the wilderness, that whosoever would look upon it might live. And many did look and live.

But few understood the meaning of those things, and this because of the hardness of their hearts.⁵² But there were many who were so hardened that they would not look, therefore they perished. Now the reason they would not look is because they did not believe that it would *heal* them.

O my brethren, if ye could be *healed* by merely casting about your eyes that ye might be *healed*, would ye not behold quickly, or would ye rather harden your hearts in unbelief, and be slothful, that ye would not cast about your eyes, that ye might perish?

If so, wo shall come upon you; but if not so, then cast about your eyes and begin to believe in the Son of God, that he will come to redeem his people, and that he shall suffer and die to atone for their sins; and that he shall rise again from the dead ... (Alma 33:19–22).

This passage highlighting the healing power that results from “casting about [one’s] eyes” to Christ seems a fitting conclusion, since healing is a characteristic of the text with which we began (see 1 Nephi 17:41). Like Nephi, Alma understood the brass serpent Moses “raised up” as a type of Christ’s crucifixion and mission (Alma 33:19–22). It suggested to Alma’s mind that Christ would “suffer and die to atone for their sins” and also “rise again from the dead” (Alma 33:22). That is the most common way to see the typology involved. What I have argued, in contrast to that common Christological approach, is that the record prepared by the Lord would also point its readers to Christ in a latter day, and therefore serves

52. It appears that some looked and were healed but never really understood by whom they were healed. What is implied here is that some not only looked but also pondered the sign given and began to understand the meaning of those things.

as an eschatological fulfillment of the type. The Book of Mormon, which bears persuasive witness of Christ and his gospel, was also anticipated by Moses’s act, if not by Moses himself. This was understood by the prophets (see Helaman 8:14–16, 24).

Lastly, the curative qualities of the record (or rather of Christ who speaks in spiritual power through the record) that Nephi and others prepare for the nations is a serpent of brass in another important sense: it teaches them of the universal resurrection through Christ, which central truth provides the ultimate healing, hope, and consolation. The serpent has long been a symbol across cultures of divine resurrection and regeneration.⁵³ Many of the prophets understood that the record would speak from the dead. It would “shine forth out of darkness” as if it were itself raised from the slumber of death (Mormon 8:16). Lifted up, and having “retained [its purity or] brightness,” it has power to save all from perishing from the philosophical poisons and moral pollutions of the world, whether sectarian or secular in origin (Alma 37:5). As the passage above illustrates, the doctrine of the universal resurrection is fundamental to the messianic message of the Book of Mormon. It is addressed powerfully page after page.

In fact, the grand climactic scene in the record depicts the promised descent of the resurrected Christ to his people with “healing in his wings” (2 Nephi 25:13, 20; 3 Nephi 17:5–10). On that sacred occasion, he instructs the Lehites in many truths relative to the eventual fulfillment of the prophecies and the covenant made to Abraham, Lehi, and Nephi. In the midst of that unparalleled, two-day sermon spanning the body of Third Nephi, Jesus Christ demonstrates his awareness and acceptance of Nephi’s former declarations and offering, and of the promised record’s eschatological destiny to bring to pass the gathering of the house of Israel.

53. Hugh Nibley and Michael Rhodes have done much work linking the serpent as symbol to resurrection and regeneration in their work on facsimile 2 from the Book of Abraham. See Hugh Nibley and Michael D. Rhodes, *One Eternal Round* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2010), 250. Andrew Skinner reminds his reader more than once of this ancient Egyptian idea of the snake as symbol of regeneration. See Skinner, “Serpent Symbols and Salvation.” One reason for this understanding is that the snake sheds its skin periodically and, therefore, has become a symbol of regeneration and resurrected life. Saint Augustine, for instance, attributes the sluffing off of the skin of the snake to its passing through a “narrow opening.” In this manner, Augustine says, the snake not only “sheds its skin” but “renews its vigor.” For him, the snake is a symbol of the “old man” put[ting] on the “new” man in Christ. See Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D.W. Robertson, Jr. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997), 51.

He says, in essence, the law of Moses, which the Nephites have observed for so long, is fulfilled in me. Then, apparently alluding to typological elements from Nephi, he authoritatively commands all to look to him and live: “Behold, I am the law and the light. *Look unto me*, and endure to the end, *and ye shall live*; for unto him that endureth to the end,” he promises, “will I give *eternal life* (3 Nephi 15:6–9; see also 3 Nephi 9:13; 17:5–10).⁵⁴

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54. This final reference (see 3 Nephi 15:6–9) appears in a passage that touches upon the law and the prophets, as does 2 Nephi 25, although, there, the prophets come before the law.