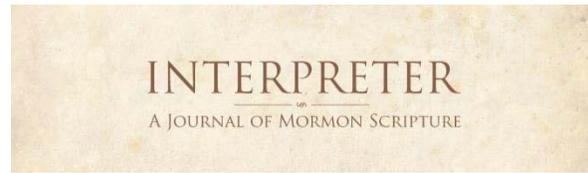




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## Nephi: A Postmodernist Reading

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## **Nephi: A Postmodernist Reading**

Benjamin L. McGuire

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# NEPHI: A POSTMODERNIST READING

Benjamin L. McGuire

*Authors inevitably make assumptions about their readers as they write. Readers likewise make assumptions about authors and their intentions as they read. Using a postmodern framing, this essay illustrates how a close reading of the text of 1 and 2 Nephi can offer insight into the writing strategies of its author. This reading reveals how Nephi differentiates between his writing as an expression of his own intentions and desires, and the text as the product of divine instruction written for a “purpose I know not.” In order to help his audience understand the text in this context, Nephi as the author interacts with his audience through his rhetorical strategy, pointing towards his own intentions, and offering reading strategies to help them discover God’s purposes in the text.*

## Introduction

**N**ephi, of course, could not have been a postmodernist. No matter what conclusions we may draw from the text, even from the perspective of a book published in 1830, his work simply stands outside the postmodern time period.<sup>1</sup> Yet as I, a postmodernist, read Nephi,<sup>2</sup> I find that he reflects that

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<sup>1</sup> The term *postmodern* seems to have been first used in the 1870s; although in the sense used here, the term more specifically reflects shifts in philosophy and critical theory beginning in the 1950s.

<sup>2</sup> Over the course of this essay, I will use the name *Nephi* to refer to both the writing character in 1 and 2 Nephi in the Book of Mormon and the author of

perspective. In this sense, I am providing both a postmodern reading of Nephi and illustrating how Nephi anticipates that reading. My goal in this essay is to offer a new perspective on the narrative of the Book of Mormon — a perspective that changes not only the way we read the text but also the way the text changes us and our perceptions of our faith.

Nephi is a character in his own book. Although he exists for us primarily through words on the printed page, the way that we understand him is shaped by the ways in which we experience reality. As Wolfgang Iser explains:

The manner in which the reader experiences the text will reflect his own disposition, and in this respect the literary text acts as a kind of mirror; ... Thus we have the apparently paradoxical situation in which the reader is forced to reveal aspects of himself in order to experience a reality which is different from his own. The impact this reality makes on him will depend largely on the extent to which he himself actively provides the unwritten part of the text.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, what the text doesn't tell us (and perhaps cannot tell us) must be drawn from our own experience and understanding. Reading in this sense creates meaning that is somewhere in between the experience of the writer and the experience of the reader. And in turn as we read, this character Nephi, found in the pages of the Book of Mormon, shapes our future reality.<sup>4</sup> Every reader encounters Nephi differently — he

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that text without always trying to distinguish between the two.

3 Wolfgang Iser, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," from *The Implied Reader*, in *Reader-Response Criticism*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980), 56–57.

4 As Iser explains: "Whatever we have read sinks into our memory and is foreshortened. It may later be evoked again and set against a different background with the result that the reader is enabled to develop hitherto unforeseeable connections. The memory evoked, however, can never reassume its original

is real in a way that reflects that reader's individuality<sup>5</sup> although these differences don't necessarily make him more real (or less real) for some than for others.

Nephi, as the character in the text, resembles in many ways an archetypal character found in postmodern literature:

Postmodernism is not about the end of the story but, rather, about the story of the story. Curiously, one of those stories that pervades this movement is the one that figures an author. The prevalence of this theme is fascinating, even when not counting the numerous appearances of the writing self, the writer doubling as character. Where, in earlier literary movements, a character is only occasionally based on the biography of a real author, without any serious impact on that movement's general aspect, real-world authors appear abundantly as characters in postmodern fiction. They are the flesh and bones, so to speak, of postmodernism, embodying its major

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shape, for this would mean that memory and perception were identical, which is manifestly not so" (p. 54). Reading a text changes us at the very least as the text becomes a part of our experience, and recalling that text shapes how we read future texts.

5 Different readings are not caused simply by different readers. The same reader can encounter multiple readings over time. Iser explains: "With all literary texts, then, we may say that the reading process is selective, and the potential text is infinitely richer than any of its individual realizations. This is borne out by the fact that a second reading of a piece of literature often produces a different impression from the first. The reasons for this may lie in the reader's own change of circumstances; still, the text must be such as to allow this variation. On a second reading, familiar occurrences now tend to appear in a new light and seem to be at times corrected, at times enriched. ... It is a common enough experience for a person to say that on a second reading he noticed things that he had missed when he read the book for the first time, but this is scarcely surprising in view of the fact that the second time he is looking at the text from a different perspective" (pp. 55-56).

themes: concern with writing, origin and loss, the question of representation.<sup>6</sup>

In Nephi, we have an author who is preoccupied with texts — with reading texts, with writing texts, and with these other themes of postmodern literature: origin, loss, and questions of representation. This essay additionally aims to take a closer look at these often neglected aspects of his writings. It does this through the lens of narrative theory, in particular the work of Peter J. Rabinowitz, outlined in his essay “Truth in Fiction: A Reexamination of Audiences.”<sup>7</sup> In doing so, it looks at Nephi as the narrating character in a book authored by Nephi, it looks at the audiences that Nephi writes for (and writes about), and finally it looks at our reading and response as the real readers.

### The Author and the Audience

Rabinowitz distinguishes between four different audiences that exist conceptually for an author writing a text. He labels them 1) the *actual audience*, 2) the *authorial audience*, 3) the *narrative audience* (sometimes called the “implied audience of the text”), and 4) the *ideal narrative audience*.<sup>8</sup> Rabinowitz’s *actual audience* is the only real audience of the group — that

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6 Aleid Fokkema, “The Author: Postmodernism’s Stock Character,” in *The Author as Character Representing Historical Writers in Western Literature*, ed. Paul Franssen and Ton Hoenselaars (Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1999), 41.

7 Peter J. Rabinowitz, “Truth in Fiction: A Reexamination of Audiences,” *Critical Inquiry* 4/1 (Autumn 1977), 121–41.

8 Although Rabinowitz was primarily writing about fiction, much of what he produces can be applied to non-fiction, particularly since we see texts (even non-fiction texts) as a representation of reality and not as reality themselves. Rabinowitz is also aware that the lines between fiction and non-fiction are blurred — especially where fictional and non-fictional accounts exist within the same genre: history, biography, and autobiography. Writing of William Demby’s *The Catacombs*, Rabinowitz suggests that “The work is deceptive, however, and the implied author (indeed, the “real” author as far as I can tell from the little I know of Demby) and the narrator are all but indistinguishable.” For his discussion of the issue, see “Truth in Fiction,” 126.

is, it is the only audience that actually exists and reads the text — and in fact, the only audience “over which the author has no guaranteed control.”<sup>9</sup> The other three are constructs. And while I return to the actual audience shortly, I first want to explore Nephi’s awareness of these other audiences and how he shapes his text with this awareness.

Rabinowitz describes the second audience more as a function of assumptions on the part of the author:

Second, the author of a novel designs his work rhetorically for a specific hypothetical audience. Like a philosopher, historian, or journalist, he cannot write without making certain assumptions about his readers’ beliefs, knowledge, and familiarity with conventions. . . . But even if an author makes a serious attempt to write for the “real people out there,” the gap between the actual and the authorial audience will always exist. And since all artistic choices, and hence all effects, are calculated in terms of the hypothetical knowledge and beliefs of the authorial audience, this gap must be bridged by readers who wish to appreciate the book. The greater the distance — geographical, cultural, chronological — between the author and his readers, the more of a challenge this is to provide.<sup>10</sup>

Writers assume a certain amount of knowledge on the part of their audience. Where they believe that this knowledge will not be present, they must provide it. Nephi shows a keen awareness of the necessity of knowledge for understanding. He discusses it with us (his hypothetical audience) when he explains his reasons for his inclusion of Isaiah. In fact, Nephi

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9 Rabinowitz, “Truth in Fiction,” 126.

10 Rabinowitz, “Truth in Fiction,” 126–127.

and Rabinowitz describe this awareness in very similar ways. First Rabinowitz:

If historically or culturally distant texts are hard to understand, it is often precisely because we do not possess the knowledge required to join the authorial audience.<sup>11</sup>

Nephi, in similar fashion, tells us this:

Now I, Nephi, do speak somewhat concerning the words which I have written, which have been spoken by the mouth of Isaiah. For behold, Isaiah spake many things which were hard for many of my people to understand; for they know not concerning the manner of prophesying among the Jews. (2 Nephi 25:1)

Nephi describes for us this body of necessary knowledge since without it Isaiah is hard to understand. This situation can be mitigated; Rabinowitz tells us that “even such things as the belief structures of a society must often be ‘explained’ to the reader before he can fully understand the text.”<sup>12</sup> And Nephi suggests that his own understanding comes from this sort of experience and learning; he tells us:

I know that the Jews do understand the things of the prophets, and there is none other people that understand the things which were spoken unto the Jews like unto them, save it be that they are taught after the manner of the things of the Jews. ... but behold, I, of myself, have dwelt at Jerusalem, wherefore I know concerning the regions round about. (2 Nephi 25:6–7)

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11 Rabinowitz, “Truth in Fiction,” 127.

12 Rabinowitz, “Truth in Fiction,” 127.

If Nephi is aware that certain knowledge is necessary to understand Isaiah, and is in possession of that information, then he as an author would be expected to provide that knowledge so that his text too could be understood. Rabinowitz explains that a novel dealing with the political environment of the 1960s might achieve its intended “sense of impending doom only if the reader knows that John F. Kennedy will be assassinated when the events of the novel reach 22 November 1963.” The effect would be lost on an audience unfamiliar with that history, and if the author anticipated this in an audience, he would need to “rewrite the book accordingly.”<sup>13</sup> Nephi, on the other hand, while recognizing this issue, takes us in the opposite direction:

For I, Nephi, have not taught them many things concerning the manner of the Jews; ... But behold, I, Nephi, have not taught my children after the manner of the Jews. (2 Nephi 25:2, 6)

Nephi has deliberately prevented his *authorial audience* from being able to understand Isaiah in the same way that Nephi understands Isaiah, and at the same time, he is letting that audience know that this step in his writing is not merely accidental, or caused by Nephi’s own flawed assumptions in creating his *authorial audience*. This development is deliberate. What remains is something even more radical. The *authorial audience* is an audience that doesn’t have this social and cultural knowledge and, in fact, that may have no recourse to receive it. Nephi withheld this information from the authorial audience.

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13 Rabinowitz, “Truth in Fiction,” 126.

Nephi presents his authorial audience with a new tension. If reading Isaiah without a proper context and knowledge makes it hard, we would think that providing that context and knowledge would make it easy (or in Nephi's words "plain"). But this isn't how Nephi envisions it: "for because the words of Isaiah are not plain unto you, nevertheless they are plain unto all those that are filled with the spirit of prophecy" (2 Nephi 25:4). Nephi has proposed a radically different strategy for reading — to read the text plainly, Nephi suggests, we must read with the Spirit.<sup>14</sup>

### The Narrative Audience

Rabinowitz describes for us his third audience — the *narrative audience* — by suggesting that this is an imaginary audience to whom the narrator is writing, characterized not so much by its knowledge, but by its beliefs. Rabinowitz suggests:

"What sort of person would I have to pretend to be — what would I have to know and believe — if I wanted to take this work of fiction as real?" Normally, it is a fairly simple task to pretend to be a member of the narrative audience: we temporarily take on certain minimal beliefs in addition to those we already hold.<sup>15</sup>

The narrative audience and the authorial audience don't have to believe the same things (although within non-fiction, this is usually the case). To use an example from Rabinowitz, if we read *Cinderella* without participating in the narrative audience, we end up reading the story of a "neurotic, perhaps

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<sup>14</sup> Having knowledge doesn't prevent reading with the Spirit; hence, these are not mutually exclusive propositions.

<sup>15</sup> Rabinowitz, "Truth in Fiction," 128.

psychotic, young woman subject to hallucinations” instead of a children’s fairy tale.<sup>16</sup>

On the surface, the distinction between a narrative audience (an implied audience) and an authorial audience isn’t always as useful when looking at non-fiction, particularly within autobiography where the narrator is usually presumed to be the author, and the narrator’s audience is the author’s audience. However, there is always a difference between the author and the narrator. While the narrator represents the author, the author exercises complete control over the representation seen in the narrator.<sup>17</sup> In this way, the character of the narrator is in some sense fictional. Rabinowitz illustrates this by suggesting that “the implied author is often a person ethically superior to his flesh-and-blood counterpart,”<sup>18</sup> and Nephi seems to be no different.<sup>19</sup>

Nephi takes care to describe his *authorial audience* in some detail, providing us with room to discuss his *narrative audience* even in work of non-fiction. Given Nephi’s description, our interest is not where the narrative audience knows (or believes) more than the authorial audience; it is where it knows less. Rabinowitz explains:

Sometimes, however, we must go even further, and pretend to abandon our real beliefs and accept in their stead “facts” and beliefs which even more

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16 Rabinowitz, “Truth in Fiction,” 129.

17 Grant Hardy notes: “In the case of Nephi, we can see him shape the narrative for certain ends and we can form a picture of his character and personality, his biases, and blind spots. If he employs literary devices, he does so for his own purposes” *Understanding the Book of Mormon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 14.

18 Rabinowitz, “Truth in Fiction,” 126.

19 Only in 2 Nephi 4 does he apparently admit to weaknesses and imperfections. See also the discussion by Hardy (*Understanding*, 45), where he notes: “It might be tempting to dismiss Nephi as a biased, self-aggrandizing character, but that would be a mistake. Instead we ought to ask why he writes the way he does.”

fundamentally contradict our perceptions of reality. In much science fiction, for instance, the narrative audience accepts what the authorial audience knows to be false scientific doctrine. And the process can become more complex still. Jules Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon* has obviously lost much of its impact as science fiction now that moon voyages have become a part of our lives. If we wish to read it and get anything like the intended effect, we must first, as authorial audience, pretend *not* to believe in moon travel so that we can then, as narrative audience, pretend to be convinced that it *is* possible.<sup>20</sup>

Returning to 2 Nephi 25, we find that Nephi describes his intended audience by what they don't know rather than what they do: "for they know not concerning the manner of prophesying among the Jews" (2 Nephi 25:1). The narrative audience that Nephi is addressing seems to know little about the Jews — "their manner of prophesying," "the manner of the things of the Jews," and even "concerning the regions round about." The suggestion here is novel. While we might be interested in studying language, history, culture, and other features of Israelite (and Jewish) society to help us understand Isaiah as he intended his writings to be understood, we may need to suspend what we know of the Jews, their manner of prophesying, even their regions and history to appreciate Isaiah as Nephi intended.<sup>21</sup> Nephi's approach to understanding Isaiah

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20 Rabinowitz, "Truth in Fiction," 128.

21 Nephi may describe his motivations for not giving his people this knowledge in 2 Nephi 25:2: "For I, Nephi, have not taught them many things concerning the manner of the Jews; for their works were works of darkness, and their doings were doings of abominations." Reading Isaiah as an audience that had access to this knowledge did not prevent them from falling into apostasy and experiencing the judgments of God. At the same time, it is clear that Nephi does teach his people many things from the political and religious context of the Jews at Jerusalem. They practice the Law of Moses, and we have some elements in the

outlines a method in which that knowledge is conspicuously absent. For us to read the Book-of-Mormon Isaiah with that sort of knowledge is to avoid participating in the narrative audience. It is akin to reading *Cinderella* only to find a psychotic, paranoid young woman.

### **The Unreliable Narrator**

This difference between the narrator and author — and subsequently between the authorial audience and the narrative audience — leaves room for the notion of the unreliable narrator:

I do not wish to imply that in order to become members of the narrative audience, we must pretend to accept *everything* that the narrator tells us. There *are* unreliable narrators. ... The narrative audience believes the narrator is a real, existing historian. But it does not automatically assume that he is an accurate historian any more than in reading a work of history we automatically assume the author to be accurate and truthful.<sup>22</sup>

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.<sup>23</sup> For example, Nephi,

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departure narrative relating to the wilderness and its relationship to Jerusalem, and so on. The suggestion seems aimed more at allowing Nephi's strategy of likening the text to move forward, and to prevent our understanding of Isaiah in its original context to take precedence over Nephi's use of that Isaiah text within his new context.

22 Rabinowitz, "Truth in Fiction," 133–34.

23 Grant Hardy asks, "Why did Book of Mormon prophets write the way they did? What kinds of experiences, motivations, and personalities might have resulted in the narrative as it is presented? How did they perceive their lives and work? What did they choose to omit from their record?" (*Understanding*, xix.)

in telling us of his encounter with Laban early in his record, notes that he “was led by the Spirit, not knowing beforehand the things which I should do.” Written as this is, in the first person, his portrayed surprise over what transpires next confronts two earlier comments: the first in 1 Nephi 3:29, “the Lord will deliver Laban into your hands,” followed by Nephi’s own assertion to his brothers in 1 Nephi 4:3, “Lord is able to ... destroy Laban, even as the Egyptians.” Nephi the author knows what is happening (what has in fact already happened), even while Nephi the character is presented to us as being unprepared for the events about to unfold. The resulting disconnect in the narrative invites us to engage the narrative in further examination.<sup>24</sup>

Along these same lines, a highlight of Nephi’s writings (and perhaps a description of an event that was instrumental in Nephi’s developing perspective) is his vision of the Tree of Life. The vision is filled with a language of *looking* and *seeing*; in fact, in his description he tells us “I looked” sixteen times, and “I saw” thirty-five times. This way of describing coincides with his early views on what it means to write and to be an author. Within this narrative section of his writings, however, we discover a hidden tension that encourages us to look again.

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In Nephi’s case, a contributing factor to his omissions lies in the experiences of forty years that occur between some of these events and the time in which he records them.

24 See the discussion in Ben McGuire, “Nephi and Goliath: A Case Study in Literary Allusion,” *Journal of The Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 18/1 (2009): 26–27. When Grant Hardy deals with this episode, he also notes several key elements in the text indicating these disconnects exist: “we have seen (1) a narrative gap, (2) the narrator’s attempt to disguise it, (3) a chronological disjunction, (4) a deviation from narrative convention, ... (5) shifts between paraphrase and direct discourse, (6) significant repetition, (7) the demarcation of a literary unit, (8) the balancing of key phrases, (9) strong characterization, and (10) an illustration of a theological issue of urgent importance to the narrator” (*Understanding*, 22; but see also the more complete discussion illustrating how these details create the literary tension in the text, pp. 16–23).

The narrative unit in which this vision occurs begins with Lehi's having a dream and sharing it with his family.<sup>25</sup> Following that dream, two responses are presented. One is the response of Nephi and the other comes from his brothers Laman and Lemuel. The first is given in this way:

For it came to pass after I had desired to know the things that my father had seen, and believing that the Lord was able to make them known unto me, as I sat pondering in mine heart I was caught away in the Spirit of the Lord, yea, into an exceedingly high mountain, which I never had before seen, and upon which I never had before set my foot. And the Spirit said unto me: Behold, what desirest thou? And I said: I desire to behold the things which my father saw. And the Spirit said unto me: ... wherefore, thou shalt behold the things which thou hast desired. (1 Nephi 11:1–6)

Laman's and Lemuel's approach is portrayed in this way:

And it came to pass that I [Nephi] beheld my brethren, and they were disputing one with another concerning the things which my father had spoken unto them. ... I spake unto my brethren, desiring to know of them the cause of their disputations. And they said: Behold, we cannot understand the words which our father hath spoken concerning the natural branches of the olive tree, and also concerning the Gentiles. And I said unto them: Have ye inquired of the Lord? And they said unto me: We have not; for

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25 The narrative unit starts in 1 Nephi Chapter 8 but is then interrupted by Chapter 9, where we have a third narrative beginning of the text. Nephi apparently wanted his audience to have a different set of instructions on how to read the text that is brought on by this narrative.

the Lord maketh no such thing known unto us. (1  
Nephi 15:2, 6–9)

The two approaches deal with discovering meaning in the vision. In the first potential response to the vision, Nephi goes to the source and asks to receive this vision for himself. Laman and Lemuel on the other hand take a more traditional approach and argue with each other over what the vision that their father had described meant. After the failure of the second approach, a third is offered, with Nephi (who has now seen the vision and can be considered its oracle) explaining it to his brothers. It is in his explanation that we see an admission of the unreliable narrator:

And they said unto me: What meaneth the river of water which our father saw? And I said unto them that the water which my father saw was filthiness; and so much was his mind swallowed up in other things that he beheld not the filthiness of the water. (1 Nephi 15:26–27)

True to the words of the Spirit, Nephi is shown the same thing that his father saw. But, as Nephi tells us with his pervasive language of *looking* and *seeing*, the vision is something that is experienced. Lehi missed some details of the vision that Nephi saw because he was paying attention elsewhere. Lehi then (apparently) could not answer Laman and Lemuel's question about the river. What Nephi does not tell us explicitly is that while his mind was swallowed up looking at the river of filthy water, he inevitably missed some details that his father saw.

Seen in this way, this revelation by vision is a personal experience. Since we are all different people, our interactions will not conform to some universal standard — our individual experience of the vision will be different from everyone else's. While we may have greater overlap with those who share our

backgrounds and knowledge, the experience may be quite different when compared with those who don't. The narrator can only provide us with the details that he is aware of. He cannot give us the details of his father's vision that he missed. And he certainly cannot provide us with a reasonable telling of the vision as we might experience it.

The inclusion of this narrative of the vision within Nephi's book, along with an interpretation, isn't an invitation to stop. In fact, in following Nephi's explanation, if we stop with his text, we have in fact become no better than Laman or Lemuel asking Nephi for meaning (or, since we really cannot ask a text anything, we are left to dispute one with another as to its meaning). Even if we look to authoritative sources for interpretations (including the interpretation provided by Nephi himself), we are left with something that is best used only if the "Lord maketh no such thing known unto us."

The underlying message is that only in receiving the vision for ourselves can we approach the revelation of God. Only in our experience can we find greater understanding (even while we recognize that our own vision may be different and potentially even contradictory to what others have seen). Nephi cannot give us the vision; he can only reflect on its meaning and interpret it for us.

What is the tension that we see? Nephi is both providing us with a text that is true, based on his experiences — the things which he saw and heard — and yet at the same time, at least from a postmodernist perspective, Nephi is undermining the authority and the value of his experience as truth: namely, he cannot present us with his vision and he cannot give us his experience. What he does give us is woefully incomplete and potentially misunderstood and misinterpreted by those who do not seek the revelation for themselves (either by pursuing the vision as Nephi did or by reading with the Spirit as Nephi later explains). From a postmodernist perspective, Nephi unveils

himself as the unreliable narrator as he begins to dismantle the assumptions he brought with him as he began his text.

### **Narrative Beginnings**

Most authors provide us with an introduction that helps provide the reader with some basic understanding of the text they are about to read and how to make sense of it. Brian Richardson describes the traditional beginning in this way:

Before the rise of modernism, most authors discursively framed the opening of the text and ensured that the first pages conveyed a sense of the beginning. The more a work aspired to a totality, the more natural and definitive the beginning would be made to appear. ... the author's address to the reader concerning the appropriate expectations of the narrative that follows.<sup>26</sup>

Nephi seems at first glance to follow this pattern. He wants us to understand that he has made a beginning. And so he introduces his narrator character (himself):

I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents, therefore I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father; and having seen many afflictions in the course of my days, nevertheless, having been highly favored of the Lord in all my days; yea, having had a great knowledge of the goodness and the mysteries of God, therefore I make a record of my proceedings in my days. Yea, I make a record in the language

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<sup>26</sup> Brian Richardson, "Narrative Beginnings," in *Narrative Beginnings: Theories and Practices*, ed. Brian Richardson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 4.

of my father, which consists of the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians. 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. (1 Nephi 1:1–3)

Here Nephi gives us what we might see as appropriate expectations for reading his text. Just as importantly, we start with a sense of totality. This is a record of his “proceedings in [his] days.” Nephi also tells his audience that he is not just an author of this text; he is the authority behind it. It is his knowledge that is conveyed in his text, and he offers us his testimony of its being in some way “true.”

As we proceed through the text, we encounter a sequence of narrative beginnings,<sup>27</sup> as Nephi, unexpectedly, addresses his audience (the readers) directly about an appropriate set of expectations for his narrative. First, he tells us that what we might have been expecting (perhaps what we should be expecting, given his first beginning) is not what we will find:

And now I, Nephi, do not give the genealogy of my fathers in this part of my record; neither at any time shall I give it after upon these plates which I am writing; for it is given in the record which has been kept by my father; wherefore, I do not write it in this work. . . . And it mattereth not to me that I am particular to give a full account of all the things

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<sup>27</sup> Terry Givens suggests that this displays a development in Nephi’s awareness of the specific audience he is writing to: “When Nephi addresses a reading audience directly, that audience is at first undefined. ‘I would that ye should know’ of his father’s faithfulness, he writes only eighteen verses into his record, and then a few verses later, ‘I will show unto you that the tender mercies of the Lord are over all those whom he hath chosen’ (1 Nephi 20). But not until near the end of his record does he specify more exactly whom he has in mind” *The Book of Mormon: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 85. Grant Hardy suggests that these narrative beginnings describe Nephi’s “methods” (*Understanding*, 44).

of my father, for they cannot be written upon these plates. (1 Nephi 6:1, 3)

Our expectations, given the time and distance that separates the modern reader from the text, do not necessarily match up to Nephi's presuppositions about his audience. But some of these expectations seem clear. We should have been expecting the same sorts of content that were included in his father's autobiography. Unlike his father's writing, Nephi writes that he is not going to include this genealogy that we should have been looking for.<sup>28</sup> What does he replace these expectations with?

For I desire the room that I may write of the things of God. For the fulness of mine intent is that I may persuade men to come unto the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, and be saved. Wherefore, the things which are pleasing unto the world, I do not write, but the things which are pleasing unto God and unto those who are not of the world. (1 Nephi 6:3–5)

Shortly after this, Nephi returns again to his audience, with yet another set of expectations (and potentially, a third beginning). Similar to the last one, he again explains what we aren't going to find in this text — and this time he makes a more significant dent into that totality he started with:

And now, as I have spoken concerning these plates, behold they are not the plates upon which I make a full account of the history of my people; ... Upon the other plates should be engraven an account of the reign of the kings, and the wars and contentions

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<sup>28</sup> Nephi explains that not only will the genealogy not appear at the beginning where we might have expected it to be, but he isn't planning on including it at all.

of my people; wherefore these plates are for the more part of the ministry; and the other plates are for the more part of the reign of the kings and the wars and contentions of my people. (1 Nephi 9:2, 4)

Once more, Nephi adjusts the expectations of his audience:

Nevertheless, I have received a commandment of the Lord that I should make these plates, for the special purpose that there should be an account engraven of the ministry of my people. ... Wherefore, the Lord hath commanded me to make these plates for a wise purpose in him, which purpose I know not. (1 Nephi 9:3, 5)

Finally, at the very end of his text, Nephi provides us with a final beginning — another reversal of past expectations along with a new set of appropriate expectations.<sup>29</sup>

And now I, Nephi, cannot write all the things which were taught among my people; neither am I mighty in writing, like unto speaking; for when a man speaketh by the power of the Holy Ghost, the power of the Holy Ghost carrieth it unto the hearts of the children of men. But behold, there are many that harden their hearts against the Holy Spirit, that it hath no place in them; wherefore, they cast many things away which are written and esteem them as things of naught. But I, Nephi, have written what I have written, and I esteem it as of great worth, and especially unto my people. ... And the words which

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<sup>29</sup> This corresponds to Givens's suggestion that the most explicit formulation of an audience comes from Nephi at the end of his text: "As he bears final witness, he prays that his words will 'be made strong unto them.' Seen in this light, his final farewell to 'my beloved brethren, and also Jew, and all ye ends of the earth' is formulaic (2 Nephi 33:4, 10). Nephi is writing to Nephites" (*Very Short Intro*, 86).

I have written in weakness will be made strong unto them. (2 Nephi 33:1–4)

In many ways, this end to his writing stands in contrast to his first beginning. Over the course of Nephi's literary journey, there is a profound change in the outlook on the text and its contents. In its first beginning, the text identifies itself as "true" (1 Nephi 1:3). By its last beginning, the text labels itself as weakness. In each iteration, the text's self identification changes. It goes from truth to desire and intention, to a state of representing an unknown purpose, and finally at the end, to weakness. And with each change of the text, our investment as its audience changes as well.

### **Nephi Reading**

Nephi does provide his audience with two interpretive strategies. The first is described near the beginning of the lengthy excerpts from Isaiah:

But that I might more fully persuade them to believe in the Lord their Redeemer I did read unto them that which was written by the prophet Isaiah; for I did liken all scriptures unto us, that it might be for our profit and learning. (1 Nephi 19:23)

If Nephi has invited his audience to read without the special knowledge needed to understand the texts as their authors intended, he does explain that they can re-contextualize them within their own communities. His second interpretive strategy appears near the end of the Isaiah excerpts:

For because the words of Isaiah are not plain unto you, nevertheless they are plain unto all those that are filled with the spirit of prophecy. (2 Nephi 25:4)

Perhaps the most interesting example of Nephi's interpretive strategies in action occurs in 2 Nephi 26–27. There we have much of Isaiah 29 incorporated into Nephi's text. However, Nephi's rendition changes several parts of Isaiah and intersperses it with additional text and commentary. In many ways, Nephi's presentation resembles a *peshar* on Isaiah.<sup>30</sup> But, when we see where Nephi is pulling the rest of his text from, our perspective changes: Nephi remakes Isaiah's words into his own prophecy. The narrative unit begins with Nephi's description in verse 14: "But behold, I prophesy unto you concerning the last days; concerning the days when the Lord God shall bring these things forth unto the children of men." It's easy to see the entire verse as an introduction of sorts. It is certainly punctuated that way. However, Nephi has already started the presentation of his prophecy which begins with "Concerning the days when ... ." Nephi continues with this passage in verse 15:

After my seed and the seed of my brethren shall have dwindled in unbelief, and shall have been smitten by the Gentiles; yea, after the Lord God shall have camped against them round about, and shall have laid siege against them with a mount, and raised forts against them; and after they shall have been brought down low in the dust, even that they are not, yet the words of the righteous shall be written, and the prayers of the faithful shall be heard, and all those who have dwindled in unbelief shall not be forgotten. (2 Nephi 26:15)

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30 See for example: Brant Gardner, "Nephi as Scribe," in *Mormon Studies Review*, 23/1 (2011): 45–55. A *peshar* is an interpretative commentary on scripture. Grant Hardy suggests something similar when he notes that "Nephi's general pattern for interpreting scripture is to follow a direct quote — often rather lengthy — with a discussion that incorporates a few key phrases fit into a fresh prophecy that recontextualizes and expands the meaning of the original" (*Understanding*, 65.) In my analysis, the process is seen in reverse, and the material is not a "fresh prophecy."

After the first bit, the text is modified and taken from Isaiah 29:3–4a. And while much of this text comes from Isaiah 29, the rest comes from 1 Nephi 13:34–35, and it progresses through that text:

the Lord God shall bring these things forth (2

Nephi 26:14)

I will bring forth unto them (1 Nephi 13:34)

After my seed and the seed of my brethren shall

have dwindled in unbelief (2 Nephi 26:15)

after thy seed shall be destroyed, and dwindle in

unbelief, and also the seed of thy brethren (1 Nephi

13:35)

and shall have been smitten by the Gentiles (2

Nephi 26:15)

and smitten them by the hand of the Gentiles (1

Nephi 13:34)

They shall write the things which shall be done

among them (2 Nephi 26:17)

they shall write many things which I shall minister

unto them (1 Nephi 13:35)

In recognizing the earlier text from Nephi being used here, our perspective shifts. We are no longer reading just a commentary on Isaiah. Rather, we are reading a commentary on Nephi's prophecy. Instead of Nephi's using his own language to comment on Isaiah, he uses the language of Isaiah to comment on his own earlier text. Nephi understands that his own prophecy is not about Jerusalem (as Isaiah 29 is). He even perhaps recognizes that the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy may never be verified for many of his descendants (they don't get confirmation of the fall of Jerusalem until the Nephites

discover Zarahemla and the Mulekites). In using Isaiah to interpret his own text, Nephi has given them an entirely different framework for understanding Isaiah — one based on the premise of likening the scriptures unto themselves. And this happens not in a rather simple way but in a radical repurposing of Isaiah’s text.<sup>31</sup> What Nephi does in this narrative unit is to give us an example of reading, both by likening the scriptures unto himself and by invoking the spirit of prophecy.

### VII Truth, Intention, Purpose, Weakness: Nephi Deconstructing Nephi

There is a subtext to Nephi’s reading strategies. In his second beginning, Nephi tells us of his desire and his intention:

I desire the room that I may write of the things of God. For the fulness of mine intent is that I may persuade men to come unto the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, and be saved. (1 Nephi 6:3–4)

As we just noted, he explains that he likens scripture unto his community to “more fully persuade them to believe in the Lord.” And he justifies this by suggesting that the Jews “works were works of darkness, and their doings were doings of abominations” (2 Nephi 25:2). The Jews had Isaiah, they had read Isaiah (in the manner in which Nephi had been taught) and yet this scripture didn’t (apparently) persuade the Jews to come to God and be saved (as evidenced by their impending doom).

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<sup>31</sup> Instead of quotation, then, Nephi’s use of Isaiah here is closer to reinscription, a practice which has been described as textual cannibalism. For additional discussion and some useful examples, see Felisa Vergara Reynolds, “Literary Cannibalism: Almost the Same, But Not Quite/Almost the Same But Not White” (PhD diss. Cambridge: Harvard University, 2009).

In his third beginning, Nephi tells us that he was making this record “for the special purpose that there should be an account engraven of the ministry of my people.” His desire and intention from his second beginning is seriously questioned:

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)

While Nephi may have some idea how to move his desire into an intention and carry out that intention in his text, here he recognizes that despite his understanding that God has asked him to create this record, he has no idea what God’s intentions or desires are for Nephi’s text. And he is left to wonder how he can fulfill God’s purposes when he does not know what they are. He cannot move an unknown intention into the text.

When we arrive at his final beginning, it comes as no surprise that he first apologizes to us: “And now I, Nephi, cannot write all the things which were taught among my people” (2 Nephi 33:1). After all, more than two thirds of his text, following his statement about the ministry of his people, has been filled with the writings of Isaiah and Nephi’s interpretations and reading strategies for those writings. And despite having once again gone a bit off course, he tells us: “I, Nephi, have written what I have written, and I esteem it as of great worth.”

Nephi starts his text by lending his presence: he stands behind his text, he declares it to be “true” (1 Nephi 1:3). 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. Nephi has come to the realization that you cannot write a text that will mean the same thing to everyone; and more importantly, just as with Isaiah’s writings when read by the Jewish people he left behind,

his own writings will not cause someone to come to the Lord (despite his own desires and his intentions):

But behold, there are many that harden their hearts against the Holy Spirit, that it hath no place in them; wherefore, they cast many things away which are written and esteem them as things of naught. (2 Nephi 33:2)

In the end, Nephi's writings go from being "the record which I make [that] is true" to "the words which I have written in weakness." I find a related theme in

Jacques Derrida's discussion of *Le Livre des Questiones* by Edmond Jabès. Jabès writes: "Little by little the book will finish me." Derrida replies:

This movement through which the book, *articulated* by the voice of the poet, is folded and bound to itself, the movement through which the book becomes a subject in itself and for itself, is not critical or speculative reflection, but is, first of all, poetry and history. For in its representation of itself, the subject is shattered and opened. Writing is itself written, but also ruined, made into an abyss, in its own representation.<sup>32</sup>

Derrida's words, written of another text seem to apply equally well here to Nephi. As Nephi writes about his writing, as Nephi explores in his text the meaning of his experiences — his visions and his reading, he shatters the subject of his writing. But Nephi also finds a way to save it, just as he found a way to save Isaiah. If God has a purpose for Nephi's writings, then what is left — after we take away Nephi's truth, after we strip out Nephi's desire, after we remove Nephi's intentions

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32 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 65.

— what is left is that purpose of God. And while Nephi writes in weakness, in reading with the Spirit, the text is made new:

And I know that the Lord God will consecrate my prayers for the gain of my people. And the words which I have written in weakness will be made strong unto them. (2 Nephi 33:4)

### **The End as a Beginning**

It may seem a bit odd perhaps to end a text with a beginning. I began the discussion on beginnings with a description of the pre-modern narrative. By the time we finish Nephi's texts (at least for the first time), 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.

Whatever knowledge and beliefs we bring as we read, the text challenges our expectations. For Wolfgang Iser, this is part of the nature of literary texts:

For this reason, expectations are scarcely ever fulfilled in truly literary texts. If they were, then such texts would be confined to the individualization of a given expectation, and one would inevitably ask what such an intention was supposed to achieve. ... For the more a text individualizes or confirms an expectation it has initially aroused, the more aware we become of its didactic purpose, so that at best we can only accept or reject the thesis forced upon us. More often than not, the very clarity of such texts will make us want to free ourselves from their clutches.<sup>33</sup>

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33 Iser, "The Reading Process," 53.

This is the appeal of ending a text with a beginning. We see a text, fully realizing its own paradox only in its concluding moments. Nephi's text invites us to read again, from the first beginning (again and again). And each time, the memory of the text and what it meant to us becomes the new background from which we start.<sup>34</sup> The loss of expectation also helps us commit to Nephi's strategy for reading — to read with the Spirit.

*“Ehyeh imach,”* says God to Moses out of the Burning Bush, “I will be with you”; and being-with is a postmodern theme, in three senses: We don't read alone. This means, first, that the text we read is not a naked text whose meaning displays itself to anyone who would see it. It is a text that speaks in certain ways to a certain groups of people. We read with-others as part of some groups. That is a rabbinic rule of reading that is being repossessed by postmodern scholars. A second meaning is that, even when reading individually, we read-with. As shown by late modern analysts of interpretation theory, we read with presuppositions. A text doesn't simply mean something, but means something with respect

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34 As Iser notes: “The new background brings to light new aspects of what we had committed to memory; conversely these, in turn, shed their light on the new background, thus arousing more complex anticipations. Thus, the reader, in establishing these inter-relations between past, present, and future, actually causes the text to reveal its potential multiplicity of connections. These connections are the product of the reader's mind working on the raw material of the text” (p. 54). Grant Hardy proposes a similar idea when he notes that in 2 Nephi 5, we learn for the first time that this is a text that is produced decades after the events it describes: “We are reading a second version of his memoirs, based in part on writings of his father and focusing particularly on spiritual matters ... This information is crucial in trying to sort out the narrator's attitudes and perspectives, but because it is mentioned only in passing much later in the text, few readers of First Nephi realize that their conception of Nephi is still incomplete” (p. 13). Re-reading Nephi after we learn this important information results in a different perspective of both text and author.

to the beliefs and pre-understandings we bring to the text. Postmodern reading may be distinguished from modern reading, however, by its assumptions that there is an ultimate presupposition without which reading is not the reading we have in mind: namely, that we are reading with-God (even if Jewish readers are not accustomed to enunciating this partnership so explicitly). This third meaning, we might say, is the biblical assumption recovered by postmodern readers. We read with others, we read with our assumptions, and we read with God's presence.<sup>35</sup>

Reading-with becomes a dominant theme of Nephi's text. Despite his best efforts, and his own declaration at the end that "what I have written ... I esteem it as of great worth," there is the recognition that for those who cannot read-with, "they cast many things away which are written and esteem them as things of naught" (2 Nephi 22:2–3). The Book of Mormon is something to be read-with: read-with ourselves, read-with our community of faith, and (perhaps most importantly) read-with the Spirit.

In order to shift the way we read — from centering our reading on Nephi (from reading-with Nephi) to reading-with ourselves and reading-with the Spirit, Nephi has to liberate the text from himself. As Roland Barthes suggests:

To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. Such a conception suits criticism very well, the latter then allotting itself the important task of

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35 Peter Ochs, "Foreward," *The Postmodern Jewish Philosophy Network* 4/1 (February 1995), downloaded from the online source [http://etext.virginia.edu/journals/tr/archive/pmjp/pmjp4\\_1.html](http://etext.virginia.edu/journals/tr/archive/pmjp/pmjp4_1.html) (accessed 15 August 2012). In 1996, this journal was renamed *The Journal of Textual Reasoning*, and this issue was renumbered as Vol. 5.

discovering the Author (or its hypostases: society, history, psyche, liberty) beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is “explained” — victory to the critic.<sup>36</sup>

We might just as well substitute “interpreter” here for Barthes’s critic. The reading strategies Nephi offers us are lost when we settle on a final interpretation — a basis for the meaning of the work. Nephi’s strategies intentionally leave the work open to us as readers. We can approach the text multiple times, each time coming away with a different but valid understanding. Reading in this way means that we, in a sense, lose Nephi the author, but not necessarily Nephi the narrator. That character in the text remains and teaches us. But for us to relate to Nephi as narrator, we have to join that narrative audience. We have to adopt his strategies of reading-with. We have to be open to the Spirit, and we have to liken the text to ourselves.

It is this openness of the text that also appeals to us. The text makes no special demands on us; it does not require that we possess some esoteric knowledge to uncover the “real” meaning. Just as Nephi’s vision of the Tree of Life complements his father’s vision (by adding a different experience; a different awareness of its details) so do our various readings complement each other. We want to see interpretations for every individual and every community; we want men’s readings and women’s readings; we want approaches from different ethnicities; we need interpretations from the spectrum of economic strata. All of these readings combine to complement each other. Singularly and collectively, as we read-with, we unfold the purpose of God. As we read and then re-read, we like Nephi, can deconstruct our own preconceptions of the text.

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<sup>36</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image-Music-Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 147.

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