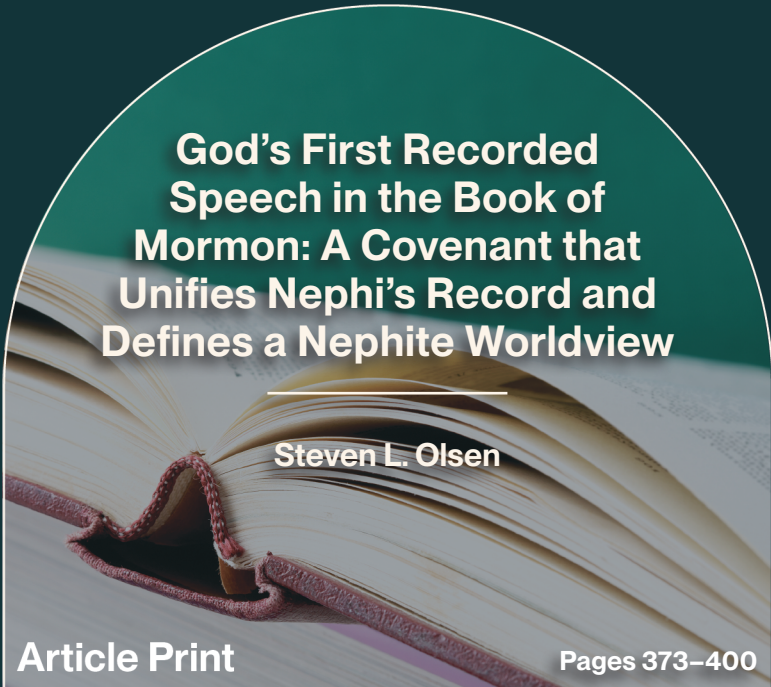


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**God's First Recorded
Speech in the Book of
Mormon: A Covenant that
Unifies Nephi's Record and
Defines a Nephite Worldview**

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God's First Recorded Speech in the Book of Mormon: A Covenant that Unifies Nephi's Record and Defines a Nephite Worldview

Steven L. Olsen

Abstract: *A variety of literary conventions that are characteristic of the Hebrew Bible also appear in the initial books of the Book of Mormon. This study features one of these conventions, which may be called the "general principle of firsts." According to this convention, the first actions and first speeches of a character in a biblical story reveal his or her character and role in the narrative. God's first recorded speech in the Book of Mormon is a covenant that unifies Nephi's record and defines a Nephite worldview. This thesis is demonstrated through a detailed examination of the literary craftsmanship of the covenant text and its relation to dominant themes of Nephi's small-plates record, the parallel structuring of 1 and 2 Nephi, and the covenant-foundations of a comprehensive Nephite worldview.*

The highest form of consciousness in most cultures is known by scholars as a *worldview*. Worldviews encompass the perceived structure and functioning of the universe and provide society with three things: an ultimate explanation of life and existence, a pervasive justification for what happens in life, and that culture's privileged place and role in the world. In many societies, worldviews are expressed as sacred stories that carry ultimate authority, exist beyond analysis within that society, and are rehearsed at crucial junctures of community and individual life cycles. In short, worldviews underscore the

supreme truths of a culture and serve as the centerpiece of a people's identity.¹

The traditional Judeo-Christian worldview is grounded in the primordial story of Creation as found in the book of Genesis. In this microcosm of existence, God creates "the heavens and the earth" and all living things including the first humans, Adam and Eve, placing them in an ideal setting, the Garden of Eden. God's plan included not only provisions to preserve this ideal order in perpetuity, but also provisions that enable God's eternal purposes to be fulfilled in case the utopia is compromised.

The literary craftsmanship of the Creation story illustrates its role as a worldview. In his magisterial translation of and commentary on the Pentateuch, Robert Alter, a scholar of the literary craftsmanship of the Hebrew Bible, concludes, "It is a general principle of biblical narrative that a character's first recorded speech has particular defining force as characterization."² Meir Sternberg refines and expands Alter's

1. A sample of the extensive and diverse scholarly literature on worldviews in ancient and traditional cultures include Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City: A Study of the Religion, Laws and Institutions of Ancient Greece and Rome*, trans. Willard Small (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1901), archive.org/details/ancientcitystudy02fust/mode/2up; Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1959), archive.org/details/The-Sacred-And-The-Profane/mode/2up; Edmund Leach, "Genesis as Myth" in *Genesis as Myth and Other Essays* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), 7–23, archive.org/details/genesisasmythoth0000leac/page/6/mode/2up; Paul Wheatley, *The Pivot of the Four Quarters: A Preliminary Enquiry into the Origins and Character of the Ancient Chinese City* (Chicago: Aldine, 1971), archive.org/details/pivotoffourquart0000whea/mode/2up; Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return, or Cosmos and History*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), archive.org/details/cosmoshistorymyt00elia/mode/2up; Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, *Primitive Classification*, trans. Rodney Needham (London: Cohen & West, 1969), archive.org/details/isbn_0710068913/mode/2up; Joseph Rykwert, *The Idea of a Town: The Anthropology of Urban Form in Rome, Italy and the Ancient World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), archive.org/details/ideaoftownanthro0000rykw/mode/2up; Henri Frankfort et al., *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man: An Essay on Speculative Thought in the Ancient Near East* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), archive.org/details/intellectual_adventure/mode/2up; Remi Brague, *The Wisdom of the World: The Human Experience of the Universe in Western Thought*, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Alessandro Scafi, *Maps of Paradise* (London: The British Library, 2013), archive.org/details/mapsofparadise0000scaf/mode/2up.

2. Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 158n1; see also 77n2; 131nn30, 31; 207n6.

"general principle of firsts" with the observation that, while revealing, first speeches and first actions of biblical characters are not formulaic rules of ancient Hebrew narratology. The "drama of reading," as he calls it, must allow for challenges to and nuances of readers' first impressions of characters, settings, and events as they unfold in the story.³ Nevertheless, both scholars agree that paying careful attention to how and when characters enter the scene is an excellent way for readers to plumb the deeper meanings of the text.

The literary convention of first actions and first speeches is central to the Creation story. The first character, God, enters the scene without introduction, prelude, context, or fanfare. His first action consists of his first recorded command: "Let there be light." Thus, in a simple declarative statement, God defines himself as Creator and Controller of the most powerful, complex, universal, and evanescent force in nature and a crucial pre-requisite of all life.

The Creation story proceeds by featuring another core literary convention of biblical Hebrew: parallelism.⁴ The seven "days" of creation present a cultural logic of existence. Alter observes, "The biblical imagination . . . conceived creation as an orderly series of divisions imposed on primordial chaos."⁵ This divine order emerges as a series of successive binary contrasts that introduce the core categories of created things and that define their dynamic and complex interconnectedness. The narrative and structural logic of this worldview is shown in figure 1.⁶

3. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 322–28.

4. See Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985).

5. Alter, *Five Books of Moses*, 44n.

6. The traditional Judeo-Christian Creation story varies significantly among its multiple authoritative retellings. While the structural approach to sacred narratives of Claude Levi-Strauss and others may provide insight into its textual variations, assessing these differences is far beyond the purpose of this study. See Claude Levi-Strauss, *Mythologies*, trans. John Weightman, Doreen Weightman, 4 vols. (Quebec: Librairie Plon, 1964–1971; English trans., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983–1990). The focus of the present study is simply to use the Creation story to propose a comparable role of a paradigmatic passage in Nephi's opening narrative in the Book of Mormon. To do so, I use the text of Genesis 1 of the King James translation of the Hebrew Bible. On day 6 in figure 1, "Humans" is shown as a separate line because the Hebrew word traditionally translated as *Adam* means *human*, from the soil. See Alter, *Five Books of Moses*, 21n7.

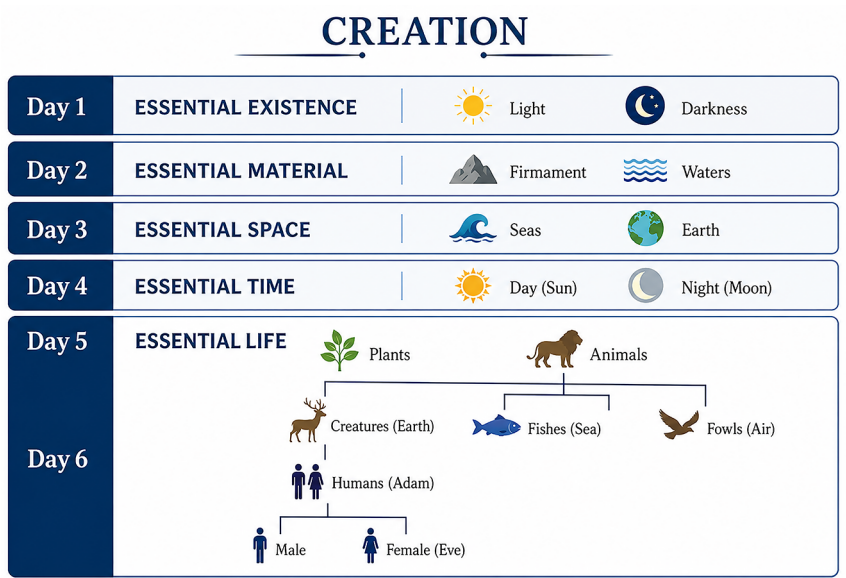


Figure 1. The Hebrew creation worldview.

In simple, profound, systematic, and comprehensive terms, the Judeo-Christian Creation story defines a traditional worldview that thought-leaders throughout the centuries have used to account for and give meaning to existence and experience. The Creation is arguably the single most meaningful, powerful, and widespread story in Western civilization. From this perspective, the account of Creation is meant to be a conceptual framework, that is, prescriptive of a meaningful order rather than descriptive of a natural, empirical process. It illustrates that worldviews are often expressed as a microcosm—a condensed but paradigmatic statement of the purpose of existence.

God’s Covenant with Nephi

The present study examines the conceptual foundations of a worldview for a “remnant” of the house of Israel. While the consciousness of the extended family of Lehi is grounded in the traditional Judeo-Christian story of Creation, their circumstance as members of the chosen seed of Abraham and refugees from their God-given homeland require renewal and refinement of the traditional Israelite worldview to justify their radically altered existence. Specifically, this study illustrates the extent to which God’s first recorded speech—reflecting Alter’s principle of firsts—frames and focuses the sacred record

of this remnant of Israel and lays the foundation for a worldview for Lehi's extended family.

Nephi uses one common literary convention, type scenes, to introduce and contextualize others. Type scenes consist of two or more stories or settings that are crafted in parallel fashion, even if they are widely separated in time and space.⁷ Use of this convention underscores the authors' intent for separate stories to be read as meaningful complements.

In Nephi's record, the first reported act of both Nephi and his father Lehi is a prayer. Lehi prays "in behalf of his people" (1 Nephi 1:5) at Jerusalem, whose imminent destruction has been foretold by "many prophets" (1 Nephi 1:4). On his part, Nephi prays that his rebellious brothers accept their father's command to vacate Jerusalem to avoid destruction (1 Nephi 2:16). The parallel structure of these two accounts is indicated in table 1.

Table 1. Lehi's and Nephi's first actions.

	Lehi's Prayer (1 Nephi 1:5–15)	Nephi's Prayer (1 Nephi 2:16)
A spiritual crisis motivates both prayers	Jerusalem's impending destruction (1:4)	Rebellion of his older brothers to evacuate Jerusalem (2:11–14)
Are words of the prayers included in the record?	No (1:5–6)	No (2:16)
Is God's response to the prayer recorded firsthand?	No, Nephi only summarizes Lehi's resulting vision (1:6–13)	No, Nephi only summarizes God's response: "he did visit me" (2:16)
Resulting change of heart	Lehi accepts God's warning of Jerusalem's destruction (1:14–15)	Nephi accepts Lehi's decision to leave Jerusalem (2:16)
Does their resulting mission succeed?	No, Lehi's prophetic warnings are rejected by residents who try to kill him (1:19–20)	No, Nephi's fails to convince his older brothers who try to kill him on later occasions (2:18)

7. See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 55–78; Meir Sternberg, "The Structure of Repetition: Strategies of Informational Redundancy," in *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 365–440; Steven L. Olsen, "Birth and Calling of the Prophet Samuel: A Literary Reading of the Biblical Text," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (2017), 13n12, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol56/iss1/3/.

	Lehi's Prayer (1 Nephi 1:5–15)	Nephi's Prayer (1 Nephi 2:16)
Is God's consolation included in the record?	Yes, parallel to Nephi's: "Blessed art thou Lehi . . ." (2:1)	Yes, parallel to Lehi's: "Blessed art thou Nephi . . ." (2:19)
Are the words of God's subsequent instruction included in the record?	No, Nephi reports secondhand that God instructs Lehi to "take his family and depart into the wilderness" (2:2)	Yes, God's first reported speech in the Book of Mormon is a covenant (2:19–24)
How are Lehi's and Nephi's resulting actions reported in the record?	Nephi reports only secondhand that Lehi "was obedient unto the word of the Lord . . . he did as the Lord commanded" (2:3)	Nephi's first recorded words implement the covenant: "I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded . . ." (3:7)

The systematic parallels of the two accounts, reflected in the first six lines of table 1, indicate Nephi's intent for them to be read as type scenes.

- Both prayers attempt to avert a spiritual crisis.
- Nephi records neither the words of God nor God's specific response to either prayer.
- Nephi's account reflects a change of heart that inspires father and son on an ardent mission.
- Both missions fail to achieve their desired outcome.
- God's first recorded words to Lehi and Nephi are identical and provide consolation.

While the parallel craftsmanship of the two accounts defines the reported events as type scenes, their crucial differences, contained in the last two lines of table 1, introduce the literary principle of firsts and signal a core rhetorical purpose of Nephi's record. While Nephi records only a secondhand account of God's instructions to Lehi and Lehi's subsequent actions, Nephi records verbatim both God's first speech to him and his declaration to his father that follows. The first recorded speeches of God and Nephi define their respective roles in the narrative: God is the author and executor of an eternal covenant, and Nephi is God's earthly agent to administer and interpret the covenant. The terms of the covenant frame and focus Nephi's record and lay the foundation of a sacred Nephite worldview.

Literary Craftsmanship of the Covenant

The words and phrases that follow illustrate the role and meaning of the covenant in Nephi's record:

And inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments, ye shall prosper, and shall be led to a land of promise; yea, even a land which I have prepared for you, yea, a land which is choice above all other lands.

And inasmuch as thy brethren shall rebel against thee, they shall be cut off from the presence of the Lord. And inasmuch as thou shalt keep my commandments, thou shalt be made a ruler and a teacher over thy brethren.

For behold, in that day that they shall rebel against me, I will curse them even with a sore curse, and they shall have no power over thy seed except they shall rebel against me also. And if it so be that they rebel against me, they shall be a scourge unto thy seed, to stir them up in the ways of remembrance. (1 Nephi 2:20–24)

Keep my commandments

Commandments define the stipulations of the covenant, a standard feature of treaty-type covenants that differentiate those who are blessed for their obedience from those who are cursed for their disobedience.⁸ While the text of God's covenant does not detail its stipulations, Nephi's record clearly indicates that they are contained in the law of Moses, the gospel of Jesus Christ, and personal revelations to Lehi, Nephi, and other spiritual leaders of the extended family.⁹ The possessive pronoun *my*, repeated in both uses of the verb phrase, indicates that God is the author and executor of the covenant.

In addition to appearing twice in the text of the covenant, the

8. Delbert R. Hillers, *Covenant: The History of a Biblical Idea* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1969), 32–35; Scott W. Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God's Saving Promises* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 49–50.

9. In its noun and verb forms, *commandments* appears 114 times in 1 and 2 Nephi, nearly all in the context of a divine imperative. Nearly half of these uses (54) are in the plural noun, *commandments*, as in the covenant with Nephi, and nearly two of every three times that *commandments* appears in Nephi's record, as in the phrase, "keep my commandments." See R. Gary Shapiro, *An Exhaustive Concordance of the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants and Pearl of Great Price* (Salt Lake City: Hawkes, 1977), s.vv. "command," "commanded," "commandeth," "commanding," "commandment," "commandments."

“keep my commandments” verb phrase appears several dozen other times in Nephi’s writings. While other imperatives also appear with *commandment(s)*, their relative infrequency indicates that *keep* is clearly Nephi’s preferred verb when referring to formal stipulations of the covenant.¹⁰ This preference may be explained by the verb’s many related connotations, including *attend, care for, celebrate, defend, follow, maintain, obey, observe, preserve, protect, remember, retain, save, support, and watch over*.¹¹ These connotations fit the covenant’s verb phrase and expand the breadth and depth of its meaning for Nephi’s sacred record, covenant community, and worldview.

Nephi’s first recorded speech — “I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded, for I know that the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they shall accomplish the thing which he commandeth them” (1 Nephi 3:7) — is the most concentrated use of *commandment* and its variations in the entire Book of Mormon.¹² Nephi’s first recorded speech immediately follows inauguration of the covenant and implements it in the story. The subsequent narratives — retrieving the brass plates and recruiting a second family for the journey — illustrate the manifold ways that God miraculously blesses those who keep his commandments (1 Nephi 3–5, 7).

Prosper

The verb *prosper* first occurs in God’s covenant with Nephi and is repeated in crucial contexts throughout his record.¹³ The text of the covenant initially defines the verb: “be led to a land of promise” (1 Nephi 2:20). Later, an angel adds that the covenant people will become a “nation” if they obtain and live by the scriptural record contained on the brass plates that Nephi is entrusted to retrieve (1 Nephi 4:13–14). Lehi’s final blessing to his extended family enlarges the nation-building connotation of the verb by broadly aligning *prosper* with a concept of *sovereignty*:

And if it so be that they shall keep his commandments they

10. By contrast, the most frequent alternate verbs used in the phrase in Nephi’s record are *fulfill* (4 times), *obey* (2), and *give* (2). Shapiro, *Concordance*, 192–94.

11. *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (1971), s.v. “keep;” *Concise Oxford American Thesaurus* (2006), s.v. “keep.”

12. Shapiro, *Concordance*, s.vv. “commandment,” “commandeth,” “commandments.”

13. Shapiro, *Concordance*, s.vv. “prosper,” “prospered,” “prospereth,” “prosperity,” “prosperous.”

shall be blessed upon the face of this land, and there shall be none to molest them, nor to take away the land of their inheritance, and they shall dwell safely forever. (2 Nephi 1:9)

The most explicit and comprehensive exposition of the Nephite concept of *prosper* occurs after Nephi separates his followers from those of his older brothers who seek to kill him following the death of their father (2 Nephi 5:5–7). Once separated, the followers take upon themselves a distinctive name ("Nephi") and give the same name to the land they settle (vv. 8–9). Nephi identifies nine key characteristics of their new covenant-based society. Twice in their enumeration, Nephi repeats the verb in vv. 10–18, reminding readers that *prosper* unifies and integrates these qualities which include:

- **Keeping God's Commandments.** "And we did observe to keep the judgments, and the statutes, and the commandments of the Lord in all things, according to the law of Moses" (2 Nephi 5:10).
- **Providing for their Sustenance.** "And the Lord was with us; and we did prosper exceedingly; for we did sow seed, and we did reap again in abundance. And we began to raise flocks, and herds, and animals of every kind" (v. 11).
- **Preserving Sacred Records.** "And I, Nephi, had also brought the records which were engraven upon the plates of brass; and also the ball, or compass, which was prepared . . . by the hand of the Lord" (v. 12).
- **Raising Stable Families.** "And it came to pass that we began to prosper exceedingly, and to multiply in the land" (v. 13).
- **Securing Adequate Defense.** "And I, Nephi, did take the sword of Laban, and after the manner of it did make many swords, lest by any means the people who were now called Lamanites should come upon us and destroy us" (v. 14).
- **Constructing Buildings with Natural Materials.** "And I did teach my people to build buildings, and to work in all manner of wood, and of iron, and of copper, and of brass, and of steel, and of gold, and of silver, and of precious ores, which were in great abundance" (v. 15).
- **Worshipping at Temples.** "And I, Nephi, did build a temple . . . after the manner of the temple of Solomon" (v. 16).
- **Working Industriosly.** "And it came to pass that I, Nephi,

did cause my people to be industrious, and to labor with their hands” (v. 17).

- **Providing Righteous Leadership.** “And it came to pass that they would that I should be their king. But I, Nephi, was desirous that they should have no king; nevertheless, I did for them according to that which was in my power” (v. 18).¹⁴

Virtually every social detail of the millennium-long Nephite history alludes positively or negatively to one or more of these covenant-based characteristics of *prospering*, meaning that in Nephi’s record *prospering* is the pervasive socio-cultural interpretive concept for this civilization.

Land

Land(s) is one of the most frequently repeated nouns in Nephi’s writings. Few uses of the noun connote merely earth’s territorial environment. Rather, virtually all refer to the material sign of a covenant with God — specifically, the Israelites’ “land of Jerusalem” and the Nephites’ “land choice above all other lands.” Thus, for Nephi, the counterpart to *land* is not *water* but *wilderness*, a term that implies not *wasteland* but that portion of the earth’s surface that has not yet been designated for extended occupation by covenant peoples.¹⁵ In short, *land* connotes a covenant community’s spiritual home and locus of chosen identity.

Nephi’s record acknowledges two named divisions of the Nephite

14. Steven L. Olsen, “Prospering in the Land of Promise,” *The FARMS Review* 22, no. 1 (2010), 229–45, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1812&context=msr. Nephi’s complex, covenant-based definition is not recognized by the Oxford English Dictionary.

15. Steven L. Olsen, “Cosmic Urban Symbolism in the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 23, no. 1 (Winter 1983): 79–92. In 1 and 2 Nephi, *land(s)* appears 164 times and *wilderness* a little more than half as many times. See Shapiro, *Concordance*, s.v. “earth,” “land,” “lands,” and “wilderness.” In the Hebrew Bible, *wilderness* appears more than 250 times. Its connotations related to its use in the Book of Mormon include uninhabited land and a place of wandering. See James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (New York: Hunt & Eaton, 1894), s.v. “wilderness”; Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2014), #4057; David Noel Freedman, ed., *Eerdmans’ Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), s.v. “wilderness.” On the comparable concept of *land* in the Hebrew Bible, see Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), archive.org/details/landplaceasgiftp0000brue/mode/2up.

land of promise: "land of our first inheritance" and "land of Nephi," the latter replacing the former once Nephi and his followers separate themselves from his older brothers. This distinction implies that in Nephi's worldview, *lands of promise* are not immutable places with fixed boundaries. Rather, they are designated and ordered homelands for a covenant community, susceptible to modification or relocation as directed by the spiritual leader of the group acting under the inspiration of God.

Presence of the Lord

The structure of God's covenant with Nephi creates the following logical syllogism: $c > pr :: -c > -p/l$, where "c" = keep God's commandments; "pr" = prosper in the land of promise; "p/l" = presence of the Lord; "-" = negation of the term; ">" = an 'if-then' relation between the two clauses in each phrase; and "::" = a direct relationship between the syllogism's two phrases, called, respectively, its antecedent and consequent.

Expressed in this manner, the covenant implies that prospering in the *land of promise* is spiritually analogous to living in the *presence of the Lord*. Thus, the Book of Mormon implies that covenant people who keep God's commandments can imagine themselves approximating on earth an ideal heavenly state.

Thy brethren and thy seed

God's covenant with Nephi formalizes the perpetual divisions of Lehi's extended family, who become known, collectively, as *Nephites* and *Lamanites*—traditional markers of ethnic identity that distinguish those who keep the covenant from those who do not, regardless of their genetic make-up or literal descent lines.

Ethnic identity in Nephi's record consists of four complementary dimensions:

- **Nations.** Groups loyal to a political leader or who persistently occupy a designated area of the earth's territorial environment
- **Kindreds.** Groups united by common descent
- **Tongues.** Groups united by a common language
- **Peoples.** Groups united by a common culture

People is one of the most frequent nouns in Nephi's record and

the Book of Mormon generally, distinguishing named groups that are bound together by a covenant with God.¹⁶

Binary contrasts, a key feature of the widespread convention of parallelism in biblical Hebrew, differentiate the following named ethnic groups in Nephi's record, descending from the most comprehensive to the most specific.

- **Humanity.** All humans are consistently divided between *Jews* and *Gentiles* who are respectively the “house of Israel,” or God’s covenant people, and the residue of humanity who are not bound to one another or distinguished from others by a covenant with God. While the Book of Mormon regularly refers to *Jews* as a *people* in the covenant sense and occasionally to *Gentiles* as *nation(s)*, it never recognizes *Gentiles* as a *people*. Given this pattern, Book of Mormon authors neither recognize nor name non-covenant social groups living in their midst.¹⁷
- **Covenant Community (1).** The principal divisions of the house of Israel living in the Holy Land are *Israel* and *Judah* (or *the Jews*). While *Israel*, in this usage, is a socio-political alliance of several Israelite tribes, both groups are considered *people(s)* because they are included in God’s covenant with Abraham.¹⁸
- **Covenant Community (2).** The house of Israel is further differentiated by the main body living in the Holy Land from Israel’s *remnant(s)*, or portions of the covenant community who are “scattered” upon “the isles of the sea.” Lehi’s extended family are one of Israel’s remnants, removed by

16. As complementary characteristics of ethnic identity, the four features appear together—once in Nephi’s writings and multiple times in Mormon’s abridgment. See Shapiro, *Concordance*, s.vv. “kindred,” “nation,” “people,” “tongue.” Some uses of *people* in the Book of Mormon connote “groups of individuals;” however, its nearly universal pattern of usage carries the covenant connotation.

17. In 1 and 2 Nephi, *Gentile(s)* and *Jew(s)* appear ninety and sixty-eight times, respectively, nearly all in prophetic contexts. See Shapiro, *Concordance*, s.vv. “Gentile,” “Gentiles,” “Jew,” “Jews.”

18. In 1 and 2 Nephi, *Israel* appears 125 times, most frequently in prophetic contexts, and *Judah* appears only nineteen times, most with specific reference to the tribe of Judah. See Shapiro, *Concordance*, s.vv. “Israel,” “Jew,” “Jews,” “Judah.”

God from the main body to preserve a righteous branch of the covenant community.¹⁹

- **Israel's Remnant in the Land of Promise.** The major divisions of Lehi's *remnant* are *Nephites* and *Lamanites*.²⁰ Even though Lamanites receive the curse specified for not following the covenant, they still qualify as a *people* because in Nephi's record their lives and histories, in the short- and long-run, are governed and given meaning by the covenant.

Rebel against me / thee

In Nephi's record, four of nine total uses of this verb phrase occur in the text of God's covenant with Nephi. *Rebel* complements other verbs that connote breaking the covenant, such as *cut off*, *curse*, and *scourge*.²¹ The different objects of the preposition *against*, namely *me* and *thee*, illustrate that God and Nephi are, respectively, the heavenly and earthly agents of the covenant.

Cut off

The verb phrase *cut off* appears first in the text of the covenant and more than a dozen other times in Nephi's record, exclusively as the curse realized for not keeping a covenant. In the Hebrew Bible, *cut* and *cut off* variously connote circumcision as a symbolic oath of God's covenant with Abraham, the dividing of an animal sacrifice often in the ritual renewal of a covenant, exile from the covenant community of a rebellious individual, or (as in this case) separation from God of a group who break the covenant.²²

Ruler and teacher

Ruler and *teacher* privilege, respectively, the dominant political and

19. In Nephi's record, *remnant(s)* and *branch(es)* appear twenty-four and twenty-five times, respectively, nearly all connoting a recognized portion of the covenant people who have been formally separated from the main body. The phrase *isles of the sea* refers to any land mass, regardless of its size, that serves as a homeland for remnants of Israel removed from the Holy Land. In this usage, the Western hemisphere could be considered one of the isles of the sea. See Shapiro, *Concordance*, s.v. "branch," "branches," "remnant," "remnants," "sea," "seas."

20. The ethnic terms *Lamanite(s)* and *Nephite(s)* appear only after the formal division of Lehi's family (2 Nephi 5). Shapiro, *Concordance*, 519–23; 664–66.

21. See Shapiro, *Concordance*, s.v. "rebel."

22. Shapiro, *Concordance*, s.v. "cut off"; Strong, *Concordance*, s.v. "cut"; Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant*, 32, 44–48, 51–52, 115–16, 334.

spiritual status of those who keep the covenant.²³ Lehi and Nephi perform both roles relative to their extended family prior to the split, and Nephi does so for his own followers afterwards (2 Nephi 5:6–8, 19). To assist his religious responsibilities, Nephi “did consecrate Jacob and Joseph [his two younger brothers], that they should be priests and teachers over the land of my people” (2 Nephi 5:26).

Curse

The curse for not keeping God’s covenant with Nephi applies to Nephites and Lamanites in two complementary ways. Because of their rebellion, Lamanites remain largely in a state of perpetual spiritual oblivion, meaning they are *cut off* from the presence of the Lord. Thus, they generally have *no power* over the Nephites and are viewed by the Nephites as being savage, idle, full of mischief and subtlety, hardened, loathsome, iniquitous, and aggressive — in short, the antitheses of the Nephites.²⁴ By comparison, Nephites who rebel against God are *scourged* by the Lamanites to *stir them up in the ways of remembrance* (see below).

Subsequent prophecies of Lehi and Nephi nuance this covenant cursing. In a final blessing to his posterity, Lehi places the results of not keeping the covenant squarely on Laman and Lemuel themselves, not on their descendants, especially those who “repent of their iniquities” (2 Nephi 4:4–9; 5:22). In his vision of the plan of salvation, Nephi learns that eventually the Nephites will be destroyed as a people when they categorically reject the covenant, and the Lamanites will be blessed by the covenant that is restored to them in the latter days by Gentiles who accept the gospel of Jesus Christ and who are thereby “numbered among the house of Israel.”²⁵

23. In 1 and 2 Nephi, the first use of *ruler* and *teacher*, singular or plural, occurs in the covenant with Nephi. The second use of *ruler* is by the angel who reinforces Nephi’s dominant role relative to his older brothers (1 Nephi 3:29). Other early uses reflect Laman’s and Lemuel’s resentment of Nephi’s expanding leadership in the extended family. The first use of *priests* (plural) occurs in the formal separation of Nephites from Lamanites. Most uses of these terms in Nephi’s record occur in combination with other positions of legitimate leadership within the covenant community. Shapiro, *Concordance*, 763–64; 821–22; 947–48.

24. In 1 and 2 Nephi, the noun and verb forms of *curse* occur first in the covenant with Nephi. Variants occur eight other times, all in a covenant context. See Shapiro, *Concordance*, s.vv. “curse,” “cursed,” “curses,” “cursing.” Specific curses for the rebellious Lamanites are enumerated in 2 Nephi 5:20–25.

25. 1 Nephi 12:14–23; 13:35–42; 14:2, 14–17; 2 Nephi 10:18. Nephi repeats the

Scourge

Scourge has two connotations in Nephi's record: a generic term referring to a curse for breaking the covenant and a specific synonym of physical abuse, such as the scourging of Christ prior to his crucifixion. Nephi's initial and principal uses of the verb emphasize its covenant connotation.²⁶

No power

While the use of *no power* in the text of the covenant implies military or political prowess, the noun appears more than eighty other times in Nephi's record, most connoting the capacity of God to accomplish his divine purposes.²⁷ Instances of Lamanite-Nephite warfare nuance but do not alter this covenant principle. Rather than reflecting a secular focus in the Book of Mormon, armed conflict illustrates a key feature of the covenant.

Ways of remembrance

Nephi's only uses of the noun phrase *ways of remembrance* occur in a covenant context (1 Nephi 2:24; 2 Nephi 5:25). More generally, *remember* (with variations) is one of the most frequently used verbs in the Book of Mormon, connoting not only the familiar cognitive recall, but also *commemorate*, *mention in prayer*, *reflect upon*, and *put together again* (as in *re-member*). This last connotation is synonymous with the common Book of Mormon term *gathering*, as in *gathering of Israel*, a covenant-based theme woven throughout Nephi's record and mentioned especially in prophecies of the latter days. Book of Mormon connotations of *remember* that are not recognized by the Oxford English Dictionary include *renew*, *re-animate*, and *re-focus*, as when God promises, "I will remember my covenant."²⁸

prophecy of the Nephites' ultimate destruction at the end of the historical portion of his record, when he summarizes the initial fulfillment of the covenant in the lives of his extended family (2 Nephi 5:25–27).

26. In 1 and 2 Nephi, the verb *scourge* occurs first in the covenant with Nephi and five other times, three connoting the curse of the covenant. Shapiro, *Concordance*, 851.

27. Shapiro, *Concordance*, 747–51.

28. See Shapiro, *Concordance*, s.vv. "gather," "gathered," "gathereth," "gathering," "remember," "remembered," "rememberest," "remembering," "remembrance."

Principal Themes of Nephi’s Record

Table 2 illustrates the close correspondence between the dominant language of the covenant text and pervasive themes of Nephi’s record.

Table 2. Language and themes.

Principal Language of the Covenant	Main Covenant Themes ²⁹
“Land choice above all other lands” “Prosper”	Promised Land
“Thy Brethren”/“Thy Seed” “Ruler and Teacher” “No Power”	Chosen People
“Keep my Commandments” “Ways of Remembrance”	Mission and Gospel of Jesus Christ

The present section of this study illustrates the extent to which these three covenant-based themes unify the contents of Nephi’s record and define the essence of a Nephite worldview.

While books of the Hebrew Bible tend to have a primary content focus — such as law, history, poetry, or prophecy — the books of 1 and 2 Nephi contain a strong mix of both historical narrative and prophetic discourse.³⁰ Nephi not only combines historical and prophetic contents in his record but also blurs their traditional distinctions. For example, Isaiah and the other Israelite prophets craft their prophecies using contemporary and familiar events, personalities, and circumstances as figures of speech. By contrast, Nephi glories “in plainness” (2 Nephi 31:3, 32:7, 33:6). Thus, his prophecies are surprisingly descriptive, expressed largely as history before it happens.

The following analysis illustrates the extent to which the principal themes of God’s covenant with Nephi integrate the contents of his record and lay the foundation of a Nephite worldview.

Historical narrative

Nephi’s story, like that of Abraham in the Hebrew Bible (Genesis 12), begins not at his birth or during his childhood, but rather with a life

29. The most frequent nouns from Nephi’s record are *Lord*, *God*, *people*, and *land(s)*, used 532, 382, 186, and 164 times respectively. Shapiro, *Concordance*, 386–401; 561–76; 524–34; 719–30.

30. In the current edition of the Book of Mormon, principal contents of 1 and 2 Nephi are distributed as follows: history (1 Nephi 2–5, 7, 16–18; 2 Nephi 5, or a total of nine chapters) and prophecy (1 Nephi 1, 8, 10–15, 19–22; 2 Nephi 1–4; 6–10, 12–33, or a total of forty-two chapters).

crisis—the impending destruction of Jerusalem and its inhabitants. For centuries Jerusalem, with its land and temple, had been the center of the world for ancient Israelites, the material sign of an eternal covenant with JHWH.³¹ Its destruction meant not only the disruption of their traditional way of life but, more importantly, a serious challenge to their identity as God's chosen people. Responding to a divine calling, Nephi's father joins the chorus of local prophets who warn residents of this pending spiritual, material, social, political, and economic catastrophe. Unfortunately, Nephi's older brothers align with Jerusalem's residents and disbelieve their father's dire predictions. Nephi himself needs specific divine confirmation that Lehi's warnings come from God (1 Nephi 2:16). Thus, like those whom God had spared from earlier disasters—the Tower of Babel, the flood, and Passover—Lehi's family needs not only a way out of harm but also a renewed covenant that provides them a new homeland, divine protection, and continued identity as God's chosen.

God's first recorded words to Nephi do just that. Thus, the central themes of the covenant—obtaining a land of promise, preserving an identity as God's chosen people, and receiving the gospel of Jesus Christ—form the basis of Nephi's historical narrative. From this perspective, Nephi's record is not merely a personal, family, or dynastic history. More importantly, it is the record of a community from the perspective of a defining covenant. Salient features of this epic are:

- **Promised Land.** God directs and preserves Lehi's extended family as they allow its conditions (*commandments*) to govern their lives. Miracles, angelic interventions, divine directions, and other "tender mercies of the Lord" (1 Nephi 1:20) punctuate their experience in fleeing Jerusalem, traversing the wilderness, crossing "Irreantum" (1 Nephi 17:5), and arriving at the promised land. As a result, they know and can bear witness that "it is by [God] that [they] are led" (1 Nephi 17:13).
- **Leader.** Throughout his record, Nephi's role transitions from a subordinate younger son in the extended family to

31. "The Land of Israel is situated in the center of the world, and Jerusalem in the center of the land of Israel, and the Holy Temple in the center of Jerusalem," Midrash Tanchuma, Kedoshim 10, quoted in Sharon Liberman Mintz and Elka Deitsch, *Towards the Eternal Center: Israel, Jerusalem, and the Temple* (New York: Exhibition, 5 March 5–27 June 1996, Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America), [web.archive.org/web/20080512075630/http://www.jtsa.edu/prebuilt/exhib/etercen/index.shtml](http://www.jtsa.edu/prebuilt/exhib/etercen/index.shtml).

ruler and teacher of the covenant community. As mentioned earlier, his first recorded action in the story is a prayer that allows him to accept “all the words which had been spoken by my father” (1 Nephi 2:16), and his first recorded words (1 Nephi 3:7) identify him as the dutiful son who keeps God’s commandments as revealed directly from God or indirectly through his father. While Nephi defers to his father’s patriarchal authority throughout his life, he also fulfills a key promise of the covenant by increasingly exercising leadership. Examples include independently receiving divine revelation (for example, to understand Lehi’s dream of the tree of life), instructing his brothers (for example, on the meaning of their father’s dream), addressing his father’s faith crisis (regarding the broken bow incident), taking crucial initiatives (for example, building the ship and guiding the ocean crossing), assuring himself of being qualified to assume leadership of the group despite his imperfections, and creating a new covenant community as directed by the Lord.

- **Chosen People.** Becoming and sustaining an identity as a “chosen people” complement the quest for the land of promise in Nephi’s record. Doing so is the focus of the angel’s promise to Nephi for obtaining the brass plates (1 Nephi 4:13) and the objective of the second mission to Jerusalem (1 Nephi 7). The rebelliousness of Laman and Lemuel is one of Nephi’s first extended commentaries in the narrative (1 Nephi 2:8–14), the focus of Nephi’s first independent initiative resulting in God’s covenant (1 Nephi 2:18), and repeated portions of the historical narrative (1 Nephi 3:18–21; 7:6–19; 17:17–55; 18:9–20; 2 Nephi 5:1–3). In short, documenting the family’s perpetual rift³² is a crucial subtext of the book of 1 Nephi and of the account of their formal separation following Lehi’s death (2 Nephi 5).
- **Inspired Record.** Nephi begins his record with a declaration of its authenticity and interpretive focus:

. . . having had a great knowledge of the goodness
and the mysteries of God, therefore I make a record

32. Val Larsen, “Josiah to Zoram to Sherem to Jarom and the Big Little Book of Omni,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 44 (2021): 217–64, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/josiah-to-zoram-to-sherem-to-jarom-and-the-big-little-book-of-omni.

of my proceedings in my days. Yea, I make a record in the language 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.

But behold, I, Nephi, will show unto you that the tender mercies of the Lord are over all those whom he hath chosen, because of their faith, to make them mighty even unto the power of deliverance. (1 Nephi 1:1–3, 20)

Nephi declares that his record is accurate and true and that it focuses on temporal and eternal salvation.³³ Consistent with this interpretive focus, Nephi's major editorial asides are covenant-based: reflecting on the spiritual significance of his record (1 Nephi 6, 9) and the legitimacy of his leadership, whose major responsibility is to keep a record (2 Nephi 4:15–35). Upon arriving in the land of promise, which constitutes initial fulfillment of the first covenant promise, Nephi's record details an account of his making plates on which he engraves his first record (1 Nephi 19). Fulfillment of the second covenant promise — being distinguished as a covenant people — completes the historical portion of his record, which includes an account of his making the set of plates on which he engraves his second record (2 Nephi 5).

Prophetic discourse

Nephi's record includes prophecies of Lehi, Nephi, Jacob, and Isaiah. While 80% of Nephi's record is devoted to prophetic discourse, Nephi repeatedly indicates that he is highly selective in the prophecies he chooses to include.³⁴ The thesis of this study is that this editorial emphasis reflects Nephi's intent to frame and focus his second record on the covenant which constitutes God's first recorded speech in the Book of Mormon. Table 3 illustrates the extent to which the prophecies of Nephi's record feature the three principal themes of God's covenant with Nephi: promised land, chosen people, and Christ's gospel.

33. *Deliverance*. The noun *deliverance* and its variations appear several dozen times in Nephi's record, almost exclusively in the contexts of temporal and eternal salvation. See Shapiro, *Concordance*, s.vv. "deliver," "deliverance," "delivered," "deliveredst," "delivereth," "delivering."

34. For example, 1 Nephi 1:16–17; 6:1–3; 9:1; 10:15; 14:28–30; 19:22–24; 2 Nephi 4:14–15; 5:33; 11:1–2; 31:2.

Table 3. Recorded prophecies in Nephi's record.

Prophecy	Lehi	Nephi	Jacob	Isaiah	Covenant Theme
Destruction of Jerusalem	1 Nephi 1:13, 18; 10:3		2 Nephi 6:8		Promised Land
Scattering and Gathering of Israel (ancient)	1 Nephi 10:3, 12–14; 2 Nephi 3	1 Nephi 22:3–6;		1 Nephi 20:12–22; 2 Nephi 7:1–11; 12:6–22; 13; 15:1–30; 16:10–12; 19:13–21	Chosen People
Nephite-Lamanite Warfare		1 Nephi 12:2–3; 2 Nephi 26:2			Chosen People, Promised Land
Ministry of Jesus Christ to the Holy Land and Promised Land	1 Nephi 1:19; 10:4–11; 2 Nephi 2:6–18	1 Nephi 11:26–34; 12:6–10; 19:8–13; 2 Nephi 25:10–19; 26:1–9; 31:5–8	2 Nephi 6:9; 10:2–3	2 Nephi 7; 17:14–16; 19:1–7;	Gospel of Jesus Christ
Widespread Righteousness in Promised Land		1 Nephi 12:11–12; 2 Nephi 26:9			Chosen People, Promised Land
Destruction of Nephites as a People		1 Nephi 12:14–20; 2 Nephi 26:10–11			Chosen People
Gentiles occupy the Promised Land		1 Nephi 13:10–19; 22:7–9; 2 Nephi 26:19			Promised Land
Widespread Wickedness in the World (latter days)		1 Nephi 12:21–23; 13:1–9; 14:14–16; 2 Nephi 26:20–22; 27:1–5; 28			Gospel of Jesus Christ

Prophecy	Lehi	Nephi	Jacob	Isaiah	Covenant Theme
Role of Scriptures (latter day)	2 Nephi 3:11–21	1 Nephi 13:20–42; 14:18–30; 2 Nephi 25:21–27; 26:15–17; 27:6–35; 29			Gospel of Jesus Christ
Restoration of Israel, Establishment of Zion, and Conversion of Gentiles (latter day)	1 Nephi 10:12–14; 2 Nephi 4:7–9	1 Nephi 14:1–14; 15:12–20; 19:15–17; 22:9–14; 2 Nephi 25:17–22; 26:12–16; 27:6–25; 30	2 Nephi 6:10–12	1 Nephi 21: 7–22; 2 Nephi 8; 10:18–22; 12; 14; 15:26–30; 21; 22; 24:1–7, 26–32	All three themes
Fulfilling the covenant: judgment, millennium, resurrection (latter day)	1 Nephi 8; 10; 2 Nephi 2:27–29;	1 Nephi 11:35–36; 13:37–42; 14:1–17; 15:29–36; 22:15–28; 2 Nephi 30:1–10;	2 Nephi 6:13–18; 9:7–26;	1 Nephi 20; 21:23–26; 2 Nephi 8; 20; 21; 23; 24	All three themes

As can be seen, virtually all the prophecies in the books of 1 and 2 Nephi feature the three dominant themes of God's covenant with Nephi. This focus reinforces Nephi's intent to center his record on his covenant with God. Supporting this thesis is the fact that in their respective commentaries Nephi and Jacob identify covenants as a principal purpose for including selected prophecies of Isaiah in Nephi's record.

... for the Lord God will fulfill his covenants which he has made unto his children; and for this cause the prophet [Isaiah] has written these things. (2 Nephi 6:12)

And now, my beloved brethren, I have read these things [the prophecies of Isaiah] that ye might know concerning the covenants of the Lord that he has covenanted with all the house of Israel—That he has spoken unto the Jews, by the mouth of his holy prophets, even from the beginning down, from generation to generation, until the time comes that they shall be restored to the true church and fold of

God [Christ's gospel]; when they shall be gathered home to the lands of their inheritance [chosen people], and shall be established in all their lands of promise [promised land]. (2 Nephi 9:1–2)

And also my soul delighteth in the covenants of the Lord which he hath made to our fathers. (2 Nephi 11:5)

The historical and prophetic contents of Nephi's record contribute to the thesis of this study in the following ways.

- **Editorial focus.** Nephi curates the content of his record to be consistent with a widespread practice of biblical writers, whose principal purpose was to preserve and reinforce the “pious tradition” of their society.³⁵ The editorial focus and literary craftsmanship of Nephi's record reinforce the spiritual significance of its contents, and all three features (promised land, chosen people, and Christ's gospel) align with and support the authoritative foundations of the Nephite worldview. All other details of Nephi's life and times are marginal to this perspective and are therefore omitted from the record.
- **Antecedents and complements.** Nephi's second record acknowledges the authoritative writings of his father Lehi and Hebrew prophets from the brass plates, especially Isaiah. He also builds upon his first record, includes the witness of his brother Jacob, and defers to the Apostle John to complete his account of the plan of salvation. These authoritative witnesses reinforce and complement one another to strengthen Nephi's own compelling witness of the truth.
- **Origins and foundations.** Nephi's worldview is initially formed in the education he received from his “goodly parents” and from his formal training in “the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians,” supplemented by his intensive study of the brass plates (1 Nephi 1:1–2; 2 Nephi 4:15). This training becomes *his* through two direct and explicit encounters with the divine. God's covenant with Nephi (1 Nephi 2:20–24) frames and focuses his worldview and his vision of the redemption of mankind (1 Nephi 11–14). It illustrates how the covenant, with its core dynamics and

35. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 14, archive.org/details/mimesisrepresent00auer/page/14/mode/2up.

central themes, informs the salvific history of the earth and its inhabitants.

- **Covenant focus.** Nephi's record consists of two quite different sets of contents—historical narrative that documents the past and prophetic discourse that anticipates the future. Nephi intentionally combines the two and integrates them in his record using the three principal themes of God's covenant—promised land, chosen people, and Christ's gospel. Nephi honors this covenant by having it be God's first recorded speech in his sacred record and the foundation of his worldview.
- **Worldview.** The temporal dimension of Nephi's worldview is reflected in the similar craftsmanship of its historical and prophetic contents. For Nephi, the past and the future are part of the same reality, and spiritual gifts, including revelation, are crucial to integrate both into a single comprehensive perspective. The spatial dimension of Nephi's worldview is made meaningful by the divine designation of lands of promise—actual physical places that are distinguished from the rest of the earth's territorial environment—as material signs of a covenant with God. Lands of promise provide a model for the proper ordering of the earth according to a heavenly pattern, to emphasize the harmony of heavenly and earthly habitations. The social dimension of Nephi's worldview privileges a covenant community that occasionally models a lifestyle worthy of the blessings of eternity and the presence of God. The basis for this moral order is the commandments of God expressed in the law of Moses, gospel of Jesus Christ, and personal revelations to the spiritual leaders of the extended family.

In short, Nephi's worldview is grounded in authoritative sources, animated by an eternal covenant, explicated by divine revelations and visions, and realized by human experience. His record is a witness to the truthfulness of this worldview and to its significance for all mankind.

Covenant-based Structures of Nephi's Record

Besides informing the language and themes of Nephi's record, God's covenant with Nephi gives meaning to the structure of the written text

in two complementary ways: Nephi's prevalent use of binary contrasts and the division of his record into two books, 1 and 2 Nephi.

Binary contrasts

Binary contrasts are one of the most common examples of the widespread literary convention of parallelism in the Hebrew Bible and Book of Mormon.³⁶ As seen above, binary contrasts order the text of God's covenant with Nephi. They also define social relationships in Nephi's record along two complementary axes.

- **Vertical Axis.** The covenant binds God as *father* to his *people as sons and daughters or children*. As *Father*, God defines the terms of the covenant, and as *son*, Nephi may only accept or reject the terms. He and his followers cannot alter them.³⁷
- **Horizontal Axis.** The covenant binds *people* together and distinguishes them from all other human groups. As in the Hebrew Bible, in the Book of Mormon "the covenant is the underlying principle of family solidarity," and "through the covenant, the family becomes the source of religious unity and social cohesion."³⁸ Common markers of covenant-based group identity and solidarity include distinctive names, customs, living arrangements, languages, cultural values, and societal norms and institutions. The covenant privileges those whose lives and lifestyles align with the covenant but not those who violate its stipulations. It also recognizes binary moral contrasts that distinguish earthly populations by the contrasting verbs, "keep" and "rebel," as mentioned above.

Parallel structure of 1 and 2 Nephi

Nephi's choice to divide his record into 1 and 2 Nephi where he does

36. Berlin, *Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*, 11–13, 140–41. The convention of parallelism in the Book of Mormon is ably treated by Donald W. Parry in *Poetic Parallelisms in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Maxwell Institute, 2007) and Steven L. Olsen, "'An Opposition in All Things': Binary Contrasts in the Book of Mormon," (presentation, Book of Mormon Symposium, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, 11 October 1987).

37. "The father-son relationship is a constant and critical part of suzerain-vassal treaty relationships." Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant*, 60.

38. Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant*, 38–39, 41.

makes little narrative sense. As reflected in its first sentence, the book of 2 Nephi simply continues the extended public devotional that ends Nephi's first book.³⁹ Thus, Nephi must have had a more crucial rhetorical purpose than chronological integrity to divide his record at this point. As reflected in table 4, the parallel ordering of 1 and 2 Nephi reveals a possible justification for the division. God's covenant with Nephi is central to this structural logic.

Table 4. Parallel structure of 1 and 2 Nephi.

Element	1 Nephi	2 Nephi
1	Lehi's initial spiritual experiences and prophecies culminate in God's covenant with Nephi (chaps. 1–2)	Lehi's final prophetic blessings are expressed in covenantal terms (chaps. 1–4)
2	Israel's righteous "remnant" separates from the wicked residents of Jerusalem. The covenant's purposes are initially fulfilled. Nephi begins his first record. (chaps. 3–19)	The righteous portion of Israel's "remnant" separates from its wicked portion. The covenant's purposes are further fulfilled. Nephi begins his second record. (chap. 5)
3	Nephi and Jacob quote from and comment on Isaiah's prophecies. The record focuses on the covenant's purposes "according to the flesh." (chaps. 20–22)	Nephi and Jacob quote from and comment on Isaiah's prophecies. The record focuses on the eternal purposes of the covenant (chaps. 6–33)

Each element in table 4 deserves additional consideration. Element 1 highlights that Lehi's initial and final spiritual experiences are set in a covenant context.

- 1 Nephi opens with Lehi's vision of God in which he receives a sure knowledge of Jerusalem's impending destruction, the coming of the Messiah, and the eventual redemption of the

39. In addition to developing the thesis of the present study, this point contributes to an ongoing academic discussion on whether and why Nephi divided his record as in published editions of the Book of Mormon. For an eloquent summary of this debate from one perspective, see Noel B. Reynolds, "On Doubting Nephi's Break Between 1 and 2 Nephi: A Critique of Joseph Spencer's *Another Testament: On Typology*," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 25 (2017): 85–102, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/on-doubting-nephis-break-between-1-and-2-nephi-a-critique-of-joseph-spencers-an-other-testament-on-typology. The present analysis offers another perspective in support of Reynolds's position of privileging the division of Nephi's record as contained in the published editions of the Book of Mormon.

world (1 Nephi 1:4–19). Thereafter, Lehi and Nephi receive additional spiritual experiences that culminate in a covenant that anticipates the major contours of their thousand-year extended family history (1 Nephi 1–2).

- 2 Nephi opens with Lehi’s final blessings to his posterity, expressed in the form of prophetic discourses that emphasize the three dominant covenant-based themes: promised land, Christ’s gospel, and chosen people. These anchor an understanding of the plan of salvation (2 Nephi 1–4).

In element 2, covenant peoples are differentiated and separated by their contrasting faithfulness to the covenant.

- The bulk of 1 Nephi details the separation of Lehi’s “remnant” from the main body of the house of Israel in the Holy Land. Lehi’s extended family is led to a land choice above all other lands, and Jerusalem is destroyed, with most of her residents killed or led captive into Babylon (1 Nephi 3–19).
- The corresponding segment of 2 Nephi occupies a single, crucial chapter in which Nephi leads his followers to a separate land of promise where they prosper according to the covenant. By contrast, the Lamanites are cut off from the presence of the Lord and are cursed according to the covenant. These salient covenant-based events conclude Nephi’s historical narrative (2 Nephi 5).

Element 3 notes that prophecies about the plan of salvation conclude the respective books of 1 and 2 Nephi. The covenant with Nephi is central to these prophecies.

- The book of 1 Nephi ends with several citations from Isaiah’s prophecies. Jacob’s and Nephi’s extended commentaries emphasize central covenant-based themes—the coming of the Messiah, the scattering and gathering of Israel, converting Gentiles, and establishing Zion. In 1 Nephi 22:8–9 Nephi explicitly mentions that this “marvelous work . . . which shall be of great worth” is in fulfillment of the “covenants of the Father of heaven unto Abraham.” Thus, “In thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed” (1 Nephi 20–22).
- The bulk of 2 Nephi consists of extended citations from Isaiah’s prophecies accompanied by commentaries by Jacob and Nephi. Together, they explicate a concept of eternal life that integrates mortality and eternity into a powerful

and profound worldview whose centerpiece is God's covenant with Nephi (2 Nephi 6–33).

The foregoing illustrates that a key structuring device for Nephi's record is parallelism, centered on covenant themes. From this perspective, 1 and 2 Nephi are parallel accounts of Nephi's ministry that are structured around a covenant whose words constitute God's first recorded speech in the Book of Mormon.

Summary and Conclusion

While biblical (and Book of Mormon) poetics employ a variety of literary conventions for mnemonic and aesthetic purposes, Sternberg uses the phrase "ideological literature" to propose a deeper rhetorical purpose.⁴⁰ The stories and books of the Hebrew Bible are crafted to preserve the "pious tradition"⁴¹ of the house of Israel, which identifies their acceptance by God as a covenant people. The present study claims that a similar purpose motivates Book of Mormon authors. Nephi focuses his official record on God's first recorded speech—a covenant that gives ultimate meaning to their marginal residence, fractured ethnic identity, collective experience, and legacy, including their eventual destruction, and lays the conceptual foundations of a sacred worldview.

In sum, this study suggests that God's covenant with Nephi is one of the most, if not *the* most comprehensive and unifying statements in Nephi's record if not the entire Book of Mormon.



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40. The quoted words are from the subtitle of Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*. (See note 3.)

41. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 14.

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