

Old Testament Psalms in the Book of Mormon

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The Psalms provide powerful messages of praise and worship. Their words reverberate not only throughout the Old Testament but also in the New. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland has written that “the book of Psalms may be the one biblical text admired nearly equally by both Christians and Jews, to say nothing of those of other faiths—or no faith at all—who find comfort in its verses and encouragement in the hope they convey.”¹

Over one hundred years ago Franz Delitzsch noted, “Next to the book of Isaiah, no book is so frequently quoted in the New Testament as the Psalter.”² Henry Shires similarly states that “the N[ew] T[estament] has been influenced by Psalms more than by any other book of the O[lid] T[estament]. In 70 cases N.T. quotations of Psalms are introduced by formulas. There are 60 more quotations that have no introductory formula, and in an additional 220 instances we can discover identifiable citations and references.”³ These frequent New Testament allusions to the Psalms should not be surprising, for as Robert Alter writes, “Through the ages, Psalms has been the most urgently, personally present of all the books of the Bible in the lives of many readers.”⁴

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Given that the Psalms are frequently quoted in the New Testament, one wonders if a similar phenomenon occurs in the Book of Mormon. Although Psalms are not specifically mentioned as being on the brass plates (see 1 Nephi 5:10–16),⁵ certainly some of what we today have as the book of Psalms could have been included on the plates.⁶ Even if the Psalmic material did not appear in written form on the brass plates, early Book of Mormon authors such as Nephi could have been familiar with some Psalms based on their experience with temple worship in Jerusalem. Moreover, while there are no explicit references to Psalms in the Book of Mormon, David Larsen has found several textual connections between the biblical Psalter and the Dead Sea Scrolls, none of which were explicitly identified, leaving open the possibility of similar connections in the Book of Mormon as well.⁷

When making the case that Book of Mormon authors utilized the Psalms, some caveats are in order. First, the writings in the Book of Mormon have been both abridged and translated. Thus potential textual connections could have been created or obscured through these processes. The connections presented in this paper assume a literal English translation of the Book of Mormon from original text.⁸ Second, because we do not have a complete record of the brass plates, several of the connections that appear to occur between Psalms and the Book of Mormon could in fact stem from other unknown sources.⁹

In this paper I provide forty-three phrases that have strong connections between the Book of Mormon and Old Testament Psalms. These demonstrate the extent to which the Psalms' language of praise and worship influenced Book of Mormon authors. I will then provide two extended examples of how these connections can deepen our understanding and appreciation of both texts.

Textual Allusions to Psalms in the Book of Mormon

Admittedly, uncovering allusions is a difficult and subjective endeavor. Given that "little or no consensus has emerged regarding what distinguishes a quotation from a mere verbal coincidence or vague reminiscence,"¹⁰ it can be difficult to discern whether textual similarities are intentional or coincidental.¹¹ Robert Girdlestone cautioned, "We have to be on our guard against mistaking resemblances for references. Some expressions may have been common property to several Hebrew writers; they may have almost become idioms in the language; and we cannot say that the writers borrowed them from one another."¹² Moreover, finding allusions between the book of

Psalms and the Book of Mormon is particularly difficult, given the size of the two texts (43,760 and 268,323 words, respectively).

In this paper I focus on potential textual allusions, in this case, instances in which the phrasing of Psalms and Book of Mormon passages is identical.¹³ In order to make these textual connections, I used WordCruncher¹⁴ to identify every four-word phrase commonly held in the two texts. In total, WordCruncher found 1,567 four-word phrases that were in each of the two texts. Some of these were clearly commonly used phrases (for example, “the house of Israel”) or relatively insignificant phrases (for example, “to the words of”), while others seemed potentially significant (for example, “enter into my rest”). Two research assistants, Alyssa Aramaki and Sam Woodall,¹⁵ reviewed each of the 1,567 four-word phrases for potentially important allusions. I then synthesized their work and reviewed the phrases, looking for additional textual connections between the Psalms and Book of Mormon. In distinguishing between potential allusions and mere textual coincidences, we followed the criteria set forth by Richard Hays, such as significance of words in the two texts and thematic coherence.¹⁶

As a result of this analysis, I believe there are at least forty-three textual allusions to the book of Psalms in the Book of Mormon, as outlined in table 1.¹⁷ It should be noted that the data in table 1 include not only the specific words listed but also variant phrases.¹⁸ The purpose of the “appearances elsewhere” column is to indicate the relative scarcity of the phrase outside the Psalms and Book of Mormon. While some of these phrases may appear to be common (for example, “the goodness of the Lord”), this table clarifies the extent to which these phrases actually appear in scripture. While some phrases (for example, “that I may walk”) appear in other Old Testament passages, the context indicates a particularly close relationship between the Book of Mormon and the Psalms.¹⁹

Table 1. Textual Connections between Old Testament Psalms and the Book of Mormon

Case	Book of Mormon	Psalms	Textual Connection	Appearances Elsewhere
Case 1	1 Nephi 1:20	Psalms 145:9	Tender mercies . . . are over all	0
Case 2	1 Nephi 8:8	Psalms 69:16	According to the multitude of tender mercies	0
Case 3	1 Nephi 8:19	Psalms 2:9	A rod of iron	Revelation 2:27; 12:5; 19:15
Case 4	1 Nephi 13:36; 15:15	Psalms 62:2, 6	My rock and my salvation	D&C 18:17, Abraham 2:16
Case 5	1 Nephi 16:5; Alma 7:19	Psalms 23:3	In the paths of righteousness	0
Case 6	2 Nephi 2:7, 3 Nephi 9:20, 12:19, Mormon 2:14, Ether 4:15, Moroni 6:2	Psalms 34:18	Broken heart . . . contrite spirit	D&C 20:37; 59:8
Case 7	2 Nephi 4:17	Psalms 27:13; 33:5	Goodness of the Lord	Jeremiah 31:13
Case 8	2 Nephi 4:25	Psalms 18:10; 104:3	Upon the wings of	2 Samuel 22:11
Case 9	2 Nephi 4:27, 29; 3 Nephi 3:26	Psalms 5:8; 27:11; 69:18	Because of mine enemies	0
Case 10	2 Nephi 4:30; Alma 36:28	Psalms 52:9	I will praise thee forever	0
Case 11	2 Nephi 4:30	Psalms 89:26	My god and the rock of my salvation	0
Case 12	2 Nephi 4:32; Mosiah 4:26; Alma 7:22	Psalms 56:13	That I may walk	Proverbs 2:20; Ezekiel 11:20; 1 Thessalonians 4:12
Case 13	2 Nephi 4:33	Psalms 5:8	Make . . . straight before	Joshua 6:5
Case 14	2 Nephi 4:34	Psalms 55:23; 56:3	I will trust in thee	0
Case 15	1 Nephi 21:22; 2 Nephi 4:35; 6:6	Psalms 63:4; 121:1	I will lift up my	Isaiah 49:22
Case 16	2 Nephi 4:35; Alma 33:11	Psalms 57:2	I will cry unto	0
Case 17	2 Nephi 9:40; Alma 36:1; Alma 38:1	Psalms 5:1	Give ear to my words	D&C 58:1

Case	Book of Mormon	Psalms	Textual Connection	Appearances Elsewhere
Case 18	2 Nephi 9:45	Psalms 62:7; 89:26; 95:1	The rock of . . . salvation	2 Samuel 22:47; Isaiah 17:10; Deuteronomy 32:15
Case 19	2 Nephi 25:16; Alma 5:19	Psalms 24:4	Clean hands . . . pure heart	0
Case 20	2 Nephi 26:5	Psalms 21:9	Shall swallow them up	Hosea 8:7
Case 21	2 Nephi 26:5; 3 Nephi 9:6, 8; 28:20	Psalms 71:20	The depths of the earth	0
Case 22	2 Nephi 30:10	Psalms 145:20	The wicked will he destroy	0
Case 23	2 Nephi 33:3	Psalms 6:6	Water my . . . night	0
Case 24	Jacob 1:7	Psalms 95:8	As in the provocation	Hebrews 3:8
Case 25	Jacob 3:11; Alma 14:6, 26:13, 36:13	Psalms 116:3	The pains of hell	0
Case 26	Alma 12:35; Jacob 1:7	Psalms 95:11	Swear in my wrath	Hebrews 3:11; 4:3
Case 27	Jacob 4:10; Alma 37:12	Psalms 145:9	Over all his works	0
Case 28	Jacob 6:6	Psalms 95:7	Today if ye will hear his voice harden not your hearts	Hebrews 3:7
Case 29	Mosiah 7:33, 29:20; Alma 36:27; 38:5; 61:13	Psalms 7:1; 25:20, 31:1	Put my trust . . . deliver	1 Chronicles 5:20; Isaiah 57:13; Jeremiah 31:18
Case 30	Alma 5:50	Psalms 47:7	The king of all the earth	0
Case 31	Alma 7:27	Psalms 113:2; 115:8; 121:8	From this time forth and forever	0
Case 32	Alma 26:8	Psalms 145:21	Praise . . . his holy name . . . forever	0
Case 33	Alma 26:12	Psalms 145:2	Will praise . . . name forever	0
Case 34	Alma 26:36; Moroni 8:2	Psalms 115:12	Hath been mindful of us	0
Case 35	Alma 26:37	Psalms 30:12	I will give thanks unto [God] forever	2 Samuel 22:50
Case 36	Alma 37:15; Mormon 5:16	Psalms 35:5	As chaff before the wind	0
Case 37	Alma 60:34	Psalms 119:115	Keep the command- ments of my God	0
Case 38	Helaman 6:34	Psalms 111:8	In truth and uprightness	(1 Kings 3:6 similar)

Case	Book of Mormon	Psalms	Textual Connection	Appearances Elsewhere
Case 39	Helaman 12:1	Psalms 34:8	See that the Lord . . . good . . . bless . . . trust in him	0
Case 40	3 Nephi 19:25	Psalms 4:6; 44:3; 89:15; 90:8	Light of . . . countenance	Job 29:24; Proverbs 16:15; D&C 88:56, 58
Case 41	Moroni 7:7	Psalms 106:31	Counted unto him for righteousness	Romans 4:3
Case 42	Moroni 7:22	Psalms 90:2; 103:17; 106:48	From everlasting to everlasting	D&C 20:17; 61:1; 109:77; 132:20
Case 43	Moroni 10:25	Psalms 14:3; 53:3	None that doeth good . . . no not one	Romans 3:12

Table 1 illustrates that some sections of the Book of Mormon have particularly high Psalmic concentrations. For example, ten (approximately 25 percent of the total) come from 2 Nephi 4, a subject which I will explore in a subsequent section of this paper. Sixty-three percent of the potential allusions to Psalms come from either Nephi or Jacob, a fact that makes sense given their cultural closeness to the brass plates and the culture of temple worship in Jerusalem.²⁰ In contrast, all other Book of Mormon speakers and authors combined (including important figures such as King Benjamin, Abinadi, Alma, Mormon, and Moroni) only account for one-third of the connections. This also is intuitive given that their relative distance from the brass plates. Another interesting finding is that Ammon's exultant praises in Alma 26 comprise approximately 10 percent of the cases in table 1. Perhaps also significant is that, with one exception that is clearly attributable to Moroni, there are no apparent allusions to Psalms in the book of Ether, sections of which are drawn from material that predates the brass plates.²¹

The data presented in table 1 can be reorganized by the order of Psalms in order to more clearly illustrate which Psalms have textual connections to the Book of Mormon. This information is presented in table 2.

Table 2. Allusions to Old Testament Psalms in the Book of Mormon, Organized by Reference to Psalms

Case	Psalms	Book of Mormon	Allusion	Appearances Elsewhere
Case 1	Psalms 2:9	1 Nephi 8:19	A rod of iron	Revelation 2:27; 12:5; 19:15
Case 2	Psalms 4:6; 44:3; 89:15; 90:8	3 Nephi 19:25	Light of . . . countenance	Job 29:24; Proverbs 16:15; D&C 88:56, 58
Case 3	Psalms 5:1	2 Nephi 9:40; Alma 36:1; Alma 38:1	Give ear to my words	D&C 58:1
Case 4	Psalms 5:8; 27:11; 69:18	2 Nephi 4:27; 2 Nephi 4:29; 3 Nephi 3:26	Because of mine enemies	0
Case 5	Psalms 5:8	2 Nephi 4:33	Make . . . straight before	Joshua 6:5
Case 6	Psalms 6:6	2 Nephi 33:3	Water my . . . night	0
Case 7	Psalms 7:1; 25:20; 31:1	Mosiah 7:33; 29:20; Alma 36:27; 38:5; 61:13	Put my trust . . . deliver	1 Chronicles 5:20; Isaiah 57:13; Jeremiah 31:18
Case 8	Psalms 14:3; 53:3	Moroni 10:25	None that doeth good . . . no not one	Romans 3:12
Case 9	Psalms 18:10; 104:3	2 Nephi 4:25	Upon the wings of	2 Samuel 22:11
Case 10	Psalms 21:9	2 Nephi 26:5	Shall swallow them up	Hosea 8:7
Case 11	Psalms 23:3	1 Nephi 16:5; Alma 7:19	In the paths of righteousness	0
Case 12	Psalms 24:4	2 Nephi 25:16; Alma 5:19	Clean hands . . . pure heart	0
Case 13	Psalms 27:13, 33:5	2 Nephi 4:17	Goodness of the Lord	Jeremiah 31:13
Case 14	Psalms 30:12	Alma 26:37	I will give thanks unto [God] forever	2 Samuel 22:50
Case 15	Psalms 34:8	Helaman 12:1	See that the Lord . . . good . . . bless . . . trust in him	0
Case 16	Psalms 34:18	2 Nephi 2:7; 3 Nephi 9:20, 12:19; Mormon 2:14; Ether 4:15; Moroni 6:2	Broken heart . . . contrite spirit	D&C 20:37; 59:8
Case 17	Psalms 35:5	Alma 37:15; Mormon 5:16	As chaff before the wind	0
Case 18	Psalms 47:7	Alma 5:50	The King of all the earth	0

Case	Psalms	Book of Mormon	Allusion	Appearances Elsewhere
Case 19	Psalms 52:9	2 Nephi 4:30; Alma 36:28	I will praise thee forever	o
Case 20	Psalms 55:23; 56:3	2 Nephi 4:34	I will trust in thee	o
Case 21	Psalms 56:13	2 Nephi 4:32; Mosiah 4:26; Alma 7:22	That I may walk	Proverbs 2:20; Ezekiel 11:20; 1 Thessalonians 4:12
Case 22	Psalms 57:2	2 Nephi 4:35; Alma 33:11	I will cry unto	o
Case 23	Psalms 62:2, 6	1 Nephi 13:36; 15:15	My rock and my salvation	D&C 18:17; Abraham 2:16
Case 24	Psalms 62:7; 89:26; 95:1	2 Nephi 9:45	The rock of . . . salvation	2 Samuel 22:47; Isaiah 17:10; Deuteronomy 32:15
Case 25	Psalms 63:4; 121:1	1 Nephi 21:22; 2 Nephi 4:35; 6:6	I will lift up my	Isaiah 49:22
Case 26	Psalms 69:16	1 Nephi 8:8	According to the multitude of tender mercies	o
Case 27	Psalms 71:20	2 Nephi 26:5; 3 Nephi 9:6, 8; 28:20	The depths of the earth	o
Case 28	Psalms 89:26	2 Nephi 4:30	My God and the rock of my salvation	o
Case 29	Psalms 90:2; 103:17; 106:48	Moroni 7:22	From everlasting to everlasting	D&C 20:17; 61:1; 109:77; 132:20
Case 30	Psalms 95:7	Jacob 6:6	Today if ye will hear his voice harden not your hearts	Hebrews 3:7
Case 31	Psalms 95:8	Jacob 1:7	As in the provocation... In the day of temptation	Hebrews 3:8
Case 32	Psalms 95:11	Alma 12:35; Jacob 1:7	Swear in my wrath	Hebrews 3:11; 4:3
Case 33	Psalms 106:31	Moroni 7:7	Counted unto him for righteousness	Romans 4:3
Case 34	Psalms 111:8	Helaman 6:34	In truth and uprightness	(1 Kings 3:6 similar)
Case 35	Psalms 113:2; 115:18; 121:8	Alma 7:27	From this time forth and forever	o
Case 36	Psalms 115:12	Alma 26:36; Moroni 8:2	Hath been mindful of us	o
Case 37	Psalms 116:3	Jacob 3:11; Alma 14:6; 26:13; 36:13	The pains of hell	o

Case	Psalms	Book of Mormon	Allusion	Appearances Elsewhere
Case 38	Psalms 119:115	Alma 60:34	Keep the commandments of my God	0
Case 39	Psalms 145:2	Alma 26:12	Will praise . . . name forever	0
Case 40	Psalms 145:9	Jacob 4:10; Alma 37:12	Over all his works	0
Case 41	Psalms 145:9	1 Nephi 1:20	Tender mercies . . . are over all	0
Case 42	Psalms 145:20	2 Nephi 30:10	The wicked will he destroy	0
Case 43	Psalms 145:21	Alma 26:8	Praise . . . his holy name . . . forever	0

When the multiple references to various Psalms are combined, we see that allusions are made to potentially forty-one different psalms.²² Thirteen of these psalms appear to have multiple connections to the Book of Mormon.²³ Psalm 145 contains text that is utilized by Nephi, Jacob, Alma, and Ammon, including echoes of phrases as “his tender mercies are over all his works” (Psalm 145:9; compare 1 Nephi 1:20) and “my mouth shall speak the praise of the Lord: and let all flesh bless his holy name forever” (Psalm 145:21; compare Alma 26:8).

One interesting facet of allusions to Psalms is the fact that many psalms are *not* alluded to in the Book of Mormon. There may be a variety of reasons for this fact, including the idea that some psalms may have been considered to be less important by Nephite prophets. A similar phenomenon occurs in the New Testament. Shires points out that “as many as 29 of the psalms may have no direct relationship with the N[ew] T[estament] at any point, and these are well scattered throughout the Psalter. Some of the psalms seem to have been judged unsuitable by early Christian authors and so rejected or ignored.”²⁴ It may be significant that the Book of Mormon likewise appears to not utilize these same twenty psalms that do not appear in the New Testament.²⁵

While an analysis of each of the cases presented in table 1 is beyond the scope of the present article, I will provide two examples of how connections between Psalms and the Book of Mormon can deepen our understanding and appreciation of both texts. I begin with an analysis of Jacob’s use of Psalm 95.

Jacob's Use of Psalm 95

As one of the earliest writers in the Book of Mormon, Jacob was surely familiar with the material on the brass plates, part of which may have been Psalm 95.²⁶ Even if Psalm 95 was not recorded on the brass plates, it could have been part of contextual worship services in Jerusalem, something Nephi could have discussed with Jacob. As we will see, sections of this psalm play a key role in Jacob's book. In Jacob 1:7, he records, "Wherefore we labored diligently among our people, that we might persuade them to come unto Christ, and partake of the goodness of God, *that they might enter into his rest*, lest by any means *he should swear in his wrath they should not enter in, as in the provocation in the days of temptation while the children of Israel were in the wilderness.*" The italicized portions of this verse bear a clear connection to Psalm 95:8 and 11, which state, "As in the provocation, and as in the day of temptation in the wilderness . . . Unto whom I swear in my wrath that they should not enter into my rest."

This shared text cannot be coincidental. This is doubly the case when we see another allusion to Psalm 95 at the end of Jacob's record. In Jacob 6:6, he exhorts, "Yea, today, if ye will hear his voice, *harden not your hearts*; for why will ye die?" These words directly echo Psalm 95:7–8: "To day if ye will hear his voice, *harden not your heart.*"²⁷ Thus Jacob alludes to Psalm 95 at the beginning of his book (Jacob 1:7) and as he nears the end of it (Jacob 6:6).²⁸ Moreover, these introductory and concluding allusions use adjoining phrases from Psalm 95.²⁹ Psalms 95:7–8 reads, "To day if ye will hear his voice *harden not your heart, as in the provocation, and as in the day of temptation in the wilderness.*" In Jacob 1:7, Jacob quotes the latter portion of these verses "as in the provocation in the days of temptation while the children of Israel were in the wilderness." In Jacob 6:6, he uses the first phrase, "Today if ye will hear his voice *harden not your hearts,*" thus alluding to both halves, but reversing their order.³⁰

Both Jacob 1:7 and Jacob 6:6 are portions of texts in which Jacob directly addresses readers. They are not part of a continuous discourse; rather, they are broken up by Jacob's sermon at the temple (Jacob 2:1–3:11) and his recording of the allegory of the olive tree (Jacob 5). Because Jacob is addressing the reader at each of the bookend allusions of Psalms 95:7–8, I believe he uses these two statements to cohesively communicate to readers of his book two of his core themes, those of not hardening our hearts and of coming unto Christ.

As I will demonstrate, Jacob uses textual connections to Psalm 95 to develop these themes.

Psalm 95 is an important psalm of worship. It is a hymn of praise focused on one of the three major Mosaic festivals, preparing worshippers to enter into God's presence.³¹ As such, it certainly could predate the Babylonian exile and could have been in common use prior to Lehi's day. In context, Psalm 95:7–8 refers to an event in which the Israelites, while camped at Meribah, complained against Moses, leading Moses to miraculously provide water from a rock (see Exodus 17:1–7 and Numbers 20:1–13). Commenting on the connection between Psalm 95 and Exodus 17, Catherine Thomas states, "The Provocation refers not only to the specific incident at Meribah but to a persistent behavior of the children of Israel that greatly reduced their spiritual knowledge. . . . After a succession of provocations, the Israelites in time rejected and lost the knowledge of . . . the great plan of grace inherent in the doctrine of the Father and the Son."³²

With this understanding of Psalm 95, a potential relationship between it and the book of Jacob becomes clearer and helps us see why Jacob would bracket his book with these verses. Psalm 95 refers to a people who were greatly blessed (not only in escaping Egypt but also in the riches of manna) but who out of pride sought for more. This mirrors the situation Jacob faced as he taught people who had received temporal blessings only to be "lifted up" in pride (Jacob 2:13). Psalm 95 refers to a people who counseled the Lord's prophet (see Psalm 95:8; compare Exodus 17:3), and Jacob states, "Seek not to counsel the Lord, but to take counsel from his hand" (Jacob 4:10). The continual provocations to which Psalm 95 alludes resulted in the Israelites losing important gospel principles. Jacob likewise spoke of a people who "despised the words of plainness . . . and sought for things they could not understand" (Jacob 4:14).

These connections carry into Jacob's quoting of the allegory of the olive tree. In Psalm 95:10 the Lord states, "Forty long years was *I grieved* with this generation." This could be related to the Lord of the vineyard saying on several occasions, "*It grieveth me* that I should lose this tree" (Jacob 5:7, 11, 13, 32, 46, 47, 51, 66).

Just before his second bookend reference to Psalm 95, Jacob makes a statement that could have been said by Moses to the Israelites: "God . . . remembereth the house of Israel, both roots and branches; and he stretches forth his hands unto them all the day long; and they are a stiffnecked and a gainsaying

people; but as many as will *not harden their hearts* shall be saved in the kingdom of God. Wherefore . . . repent, and come with full purpose of heart, and cleave unto God as he cleaveth unto you. And while his arm of mercy is extended towards you in the light of the day, *harden not your hearts*” (Jacob 6:4–5). And then, after these two warnings against hardened hearts, Jacob turns to Psalm 95: “Yea, today, if ye will hear his voice, *harden not your hearts*; for why will ye die?” (Jacob 6:6; compare Psalm 95:7–8).

What should we do in place of hardening our hearts? Just before his first bookend reference to Psalm 95, Jacob records, “We labored diligently among our people, that we might persuade them to *come unto Christ*, and partake of the goodness of God” (Jacob 1:7). Likewise, prior to the second bracketed statement, he states, “*Come with full purpose of heart, and cleave unto God*” (Jacob 6:5). These two statements are similar to Psalm 95:6, which states, “*Come . . . : let us kneel before the Lord.*” The context of Psalm 95 as a hymn of praise connected with entering the presence of God, allows us to envision a powerful theme of coming unto Christ woven through Jacob’s use of Psalm 95. Figure 1 illustrates how Jacob incorporates Psalm 95 in both the beginning and end of his book to develop a cohesive leitmotif of hardening not our hearts and coming unto Christ.

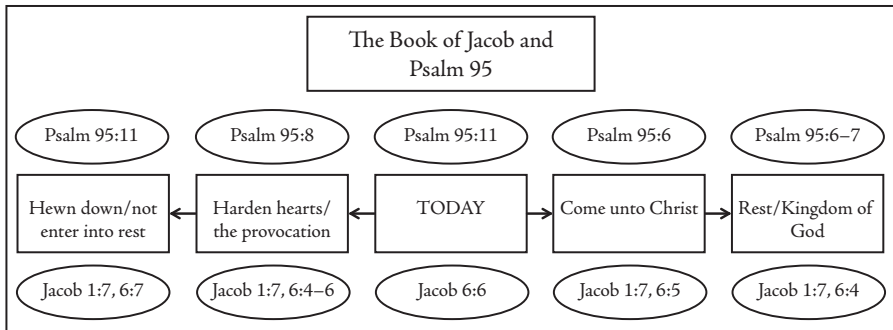


Fig. 1. Jacob and Psalm 95.

By invoking Psalm 95, Jacob reminds readers of a story of hardened hearts during the Exodus; he invites us to learn from them, to harden not our hearts, and to come unto Christ. Jacob wants us to choose *today* which path we will take. It may be that Jacob saw in the people of his day (and ours) many similarities to the rebellious Israelites in the wilderness. By echoing Psalm 95,

Jacob ultimately encourages us to “enter into [God’s] rest” and “obtain eternal life” (Jacob 1:7, 6:11).

The Old Testament Psalms and the “Psalm of Nephi”

The previous section focused on Jacob’s use of one psalm throughout his entire book. I now discuss Nephi’s use of a variety of psalms in one small part of his record, which is popularly called “the Psalm of Nephi.”³³ S. Kent Brown has called this passage (2 Nephi 4:17–35) “a most poignant depiction of Nephi’s own struggles with sin and with feelings about rebellious members of his family.”³⁴

It has been noted previously that the Psalm of Nephi shares several features with ancient Hebrew psalms. For example, Matthew Nickerson states that “Nephi’s psalm plainly follows the format and substance of the individual lament as described by Gunkel and elaborated upon by numerous subsequent scholars.”³⁵ Brown points out that Nephi’s psalm “exhibits poetic characteristics found in the Old Testament.”³⁶ Steven Sondrup finds that “in the ‘Psalm of Nephi,’ just as in Hebrew poetry . . . logical, formal or conceptual units are set parallel one to another.”³⁷

In addition to these overarching literary patterns, the Psalm of Nephi shares a surprisingly large amount of text with the Old Testament Psalms. It appears that Nephi (perhaps intentionally, or perhaps because of his familiarity with Psalmic material), drew on phrases of lament, praise, and worship from the Psalter as he composed his own words. Of the 660 words comprising the Psalm of Nephi, 127 (approximately 20 percent) are key words or phrases that are also found in the biblical Psalter. While some of these key words or phrases are used frequently throughout scripture, and thus did not qualify for inclusion in table 1,³⁸ others are significant, and appear only in these two pericopes. The concentration of references to Psalms may indicate intentionality on Nephi’s part as he wrote these words. The Psalm of Nephi appears below, with potential allusions to Psalms in italics.

Nevertheless, notwithstanding the great *goodness of the Lord* [Psalms 27:13; 33:5], in showing me his great and marvelous works, my heart exclaimeth: O wretched man that I am! Yea, my heart sorroweth because of my flesh; my soul grieveth *because of mine iniquities* [Psalm 31:10].

I am encompassed about, because of the temptations and the sins which do so easily beset me.

And when I desire to rejoice, my heart groaneth *because of my sins* [Psalm 38:3]; nevertheless, I know in whom *I have trusted* [Psalms 13:5; 26:1; 33:21].

My God hath been my support; he hath led me through mine afflictions in *the wilderness; and he* [Psalm 106:9] hath preserved me upon the waters of the great deep.

He hath filled me with his love, even unto the consuming of my flesh.

He hath confounded mine enemies, unto the causing of them to quake before me.

Behold, *he hath heard my* [Psalm 116:1] cry by day, and he hath given me knowledge by visions in the night-time.

And by day have I waxed bold in mighty prayer before him; yea, my voice have I sent up on high; and angels came down and ministered unto me.

And *upon the wings of* [Psalms 18:10; 104:3] his Spirit hath my body been carried away upon exceedingly high mountains. And mine eyes have beheld great things, yea, even too great for man; therefore I was bidden that I should not write them.

O then, if I have seen so great things, if the Lord in his condescension unto the children of men hath visited men in so much mercy, why should my heart weep and my soul linger in the valley of sorrow, and my flesh waste away, and my strength slacken, because of mine afflictions?

And why should I yield to sin, because of my flesh? Yea, why should I give way to temptations, that the evil one have place in my heart to destroy my peace and *afflict my soul* [Psalm 143:12]? Why am I angry *because of mine enemy* [Psalms 5:8; 8:2; 27:11; 69:18]?

Awake, my soul! No longer droop in sin. Rejoice, O my heart, and give place no more for the enemy of my soul.

Do not anger again *because of mine enemies* [Psalms 5:8; 8:2; 27:11; 69:18]. Do not slacken my strength because of mine afflictions.

Rejoice, O my heart, and *cry unto the Lord* [Psalm 107:19, 28], and say: O Lord, *I will praise thee forever* [Psalm 52:9]; yea, my soul will

rejoice in thee [Psalms 9:2; 85:6], my God, and the rock of my salvation [Psalm 89:26].

O Lord, wilt thou *redeem my soul* [Psalm 49:15]? Wilt thou *deliver me out of the* [Psalm 69:14] *hands of mine enemies* [Psalm 31:15]? Wilt thou make me that I may shake at the appearance of sin?

May the gates of hell be shut *continually before me* [Psalms 38:17; 44:15; 50:8], because that my *heart is broken* and my *spirit is contrite* [Psalms 34:18; 51:17]! O Lord, wilt thou not shut the *gates of thy righteousness* [Psalm 118:19] before me, *that I may walk* [Psalm 56:13] *in the path of* [Psalms 23:3; 119:35] the low valley, that I may be strict in the plain road!

O Lord, wilt thou encircle me around in the robe of thy righteousness! O Lord, wilt thou make a way for mine escape before mine enemies! Wilt thou *make my path straight before* [Psalm 5:8] me! Wilt thou not place a stumbling block in my way—but that thou wouldst clear my way before me, and hedge not up my way, but the ways of mine enemy.

O Lord, *I have trusted in* [Psalms 13:5; 33:21] thee, and *I will trust in thee* [Psalms 55:23; 56:3] forever. I will not *put my trust in the* [Psalms 4:5; 73:28] arm of flesh; for I know that cursed is he that *putteth his trust in the* [Psalms 4:5; 73:28] arm of flesh. Yea, cursed is he that putteth his trust in man or maketh flesh his arm.

Yea, I know that God will give liberally to him that asketh. Yea, my God will give me, if I ask not amiss; therefore *I will lift up my* [Psalms 63:4; 121:1] voice unto thee; yea, *I will cry unto* [Psalm 57:2] thee, my God, *the rock of my* [Psalms 62:7; 89:26; 94:22; 95:1] righteousness. Behold, my voice shall forever ascend up unto thee, *my rock* [Psalms 18:2, 46; 28:1; 31:3; 42:9; 62:2, 6; 71:3; 78:35; 92:15] and mine everlasting God. Amen.

When the multiple connections to Psalms are added together, Nephi could have alluded to potentially forty-seven different Psalms in just eighteen verses.³⁹ It stretches one's imagination to believe that Joseph Smith could have been responsible for making all of these connections, particularly with the understanding that the Psalm of Nephi may have been translated in less than two hours.⁴⁰ While some sections of Nephi's soliloquy have relatively few allusions to Psalms,

in other sections the number of connections is impressive. For example, 40 percent of the words in 2 Nephi 4:29–32 also appear in Old Testament Psalms (54 out of 135 words). I believe these allusions stem from Nephi’s meditations on the Psalms and that the high concentration of psalmic references in this pericope indicates that Nephi had access to them (either from the plates or his own cultural experiences in Jerusalem).⁴¹ Nephi’s apparent familiarity and love of the psalms can provide motivation for Latter-day Saints to follow Nephi’s example and become deeply familiar with the language of praise and worship as found in the Old Testament Psalms.

Conclusion

The Old Testament Psalms are beautiful, moving, and inspirational. They provide poetic praises in the Old Testament. They are also foundational in other books of scripture, such as the New Testament. In this paper I have demonstrated that the Psalms also influenced the ancient authors of the Book of Mormon. Nephi and Jacob in particular showed a propensity to provide textual allusions to the Psalms in their writings. I have proposed forty-three instances in which there may be textual allusions to the Psalms within the Book of Mormon. I have also explored some of the ramifications of these connections in the case of Jacob’s use of Psalm 95 and Nephi’s use of a variety of psalms when composing his own.

The Psalms provide powerful language of worship. With Nephi we can say, “O Lord, *I will praise thee forever, yea, my soul will rejoice in thee, my God, and the rock of my salvation* (2 Nephi 4:30; compare with Psalms 52:9; 9:2; 89:26). Hearing these echoes from the Psalter in the Book of Mormon should inspire in each of us the desire to drink more deeply from the moving, majestic Psalms of the Old Testament.

Notes

1. Jeffrey R. Holland, *For Times of Trouble* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), 7.
2. Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*, trans. Francis Bolton (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1959), 1:38.
3. Henry M. Shires, *Finding the Old Testament in the New* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 126.

4. Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2007), xiii.

5. The Book of Mormon contains several instances of textual allusions to material from the brass plates. Several of these allusions are explicit (for example, quotations from Isaiah). In addition, many textual connections are more subtle. For example, Julie M. Smith pointed out more subtle textual connections between Isaiah 55 and Alma 32; see “So Shall My Word Be: Reading Alma 32 through Isaiah 55,” in *An Experiment on the Word: Reading Alma 32*, ed. Adam S. Miller (Salem, OR: Salt Press, 2011), 71–86. Reynolds examined textual connections between the Book of Mormon and the Book of Moses; see “The Brass Plates Version of Genesis,” in *By Study and Also by Faith*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 2:138. For a broader discussion of intertextuality in the Book of Mormon, see John Hilton III, “Textual Similarities in the Words of Abinadi and Alma’s Counsel to Corianton,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (2012): 39–60.

6. One issue that comes up regarding whether Psalms could have been a part of the brass plates is that some of what we have as Psalms may have been written after the time that Lehi left Jerusalem. Scholars disagree on which psalms are preexilic and which are postexilic. In the *Jewish Study Bible*, we find this statement: “Dating the psalms is notoriously difficult, partly because they contain few explicit references to specific historical events or personages . . . While many modern scholars believe that at least some, perhaps even many of the psalms are from the preexilic period (before 586 BCE), none can be dated on linguistic grounds to the tenth century BCE, the period of David. There is little consensus on the dating of preexilic psalms, or even on which psalms are preexilic.” Michael Fishbane, Adele Berlin, and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *Jewish Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1282. Nevertheless, because at least some of the psalms are preexilic, their presence on the brass plates is possible.

7. David J. Larsen, “Royal Themes in the Psalms and in the Dead Sea Scrolls” (PhD diss. currently in progress).

8. See Royal Skousen, “How Joseph Smith Translated the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7, no. 1 (1998): 22–31. Because we do not have original-language materials for the Book of Mormon, I compared the English translation of the Book of Mormon with the English translation of the Psalms as found in the King James Version. Comparisons with other versions of the Bible could yield different results.

9. For example, the psalmist Nephi could have both been referring to an unknown portion of the words of Zenos. Alternatively, a Book of Mormon author could have had a psalm in mind; however, the source of this psalm is a previous, unknown prophet.

10. Richard L. Schultz, *The Search for Quotation* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 18.

11. Sandmel referred to the propensity of some to find parallels that do not actually exist as “parallelomania,” and said, “We might for our purposes define parallelomania as that extravagance among scholars which first overdoes the supposed similarity in passages and then proceeds to describe source and derivation as if implying literary connection flowing in an inevitable or predetermined direction.” Samuel Sandmel, “Parallelomania,”

Journal of Biblical Literature 81 (March 1962): 1. Similarly, Lincoln Blumell points out, “With the aid of electronic databases and search engines where a word, root of a word, or even a short phrase, can be readily searched across a huge corpus, if one is willing to look hard enough, they can usually find numerous scriptural echoes and reminiscences. However, the obvious problem with this is that just because one can find a rare word or a distinct phrase . . . , it does not automatically guarantee the author . . . was necessarily echoing or reminiscing [another] passage”; Lincoln H. Blumell, *Lettered Christians: Christians, Letters, and Late Antique Oxyrhynchus* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 220.

12. Robert Baker Girdlestone, *The Foundations of the Bible: Studies in Old Testament Criticism* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1890), 50.

13. One weakness of searching for textual allusions is missing potential conceptual allusions (for example Psalm 42:5, 11; compare 2 Nephi 4:26, 28, 30). Due to the length of the two texts, however, an exhaustive search for conceptual allusions was not practical for this study.

14. Available at <http://wordcruncher.byu.edu>.

15. In addition to acknowledging their efforts made by these research assistants, I also thank Jaclyn Nielson, who did significant work in preparing the final versions of tables 1 and 2.

16. Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 29–31. These criteria are as follows: “(1) *Availability*. Was the proposed source of the echo available to the author and/or original readers? . . . (2) *Volume*. The volume of an echo is determined primarily by the degree of explicit repetition of words or syntactical patterns, but other factors may also be relevant [such as] how distinctive or prominent is the precursor text within Scripture. . . . (3) *Recurrence*. How often does [the author] elsewhere cite or allude to the same scriptural passage? . . . (4) *Thematic Coherence*. How well does the alleged echo fit into the line of argument that [the author] is developing? . . . (5) *Historical Plausibility*. Could [the author] have intended the alleged meaning effect? . . . (6) *History of Interpretation*. Have other readers, both critical and pre-critical, heard the same echoes? . . . (7) *Satisfaction*. With or without clear confirmation from the other criteria listed here, does the proposed reading make sense?” Noel B. Reynolds set forth similar criteria in “The Brass Plates Version of Genesis,” in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley* (Provo, UT: FARMS; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 2:138. We referred to both sets of criteria in determining which phrases should be included in table 1.

17. While a discussion of each of these cases is beyond the scope of this article, I believe that based on Hays’s criteria, a good argument for intertextual allusions could be made in each of these cases. In addition, I acknowledge that there are other potentially significant allusions not included here either because they were either shorter (for example, two or three words), inexact phrase matches (some words were transposed), or had conceptual (but not strong textual) connections. For example, Matthew L. Bowen finds impressive connections between Mosiah 5:7 and Psalm 2:7; see “Becoming Sons and Daughters at God’s Right Hand,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 21, no. 2 (2012): 2–13. David Rolph Seely and John W. Welch find important conceptual conceptions between Psalm 52, Psalm 80, and Jacob 5; see “Zenos and the

Texts of the Old Testament,” in *The Allegory of the Olive Tree: The Olive, the Bible, and Jacob 5*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1994). In addition, there simply may have been allusions that were missed in the analysis process. I also note that allusions to Psalms that are present in Isaiah portions of the Book of Mormon were excluded from this analysis.

18. For example, consider case 7 in table 1: *because of my enemies*. Our search included variants of each of those words (while keeping the phrase intact). Thus, we would have counted the phrase *because of their enemy* as a match. The phrase *because of my enemies* seems like a common phrase, yet it appears only in Psalms and the Book of Mormon (even when including variant versions of each word). Each case has at least one *exact* phrase match between a Psalm and a Book of Mormon passage. When multiple verses are present in the “Book of Mormon,” “Psalms,” or “Appearances Elsewhere” columns, one or more of them may be a variant phrase match. Our purpose in including variants was to demonstrate that the phrases presented in table 1 are in fact relatively unique.

19. As noted previously, it is also possible that these phrases could be connected with another Old Testament text, an unknown prophetic phrase, or they could simply be part of the common language of the day.

20. In calculating this figure, I only included the first reference made to a specific phrase, based on the idea that later allusions to the phrase could have been the result of Nephi or Jacob’s words. I also did not double count multiple references that Nephi or Jacob made to the same phrase.

21. Compare Psalm 34:18 with Ether 4:15. While the phrases “broken heart” and “contrite spirit” appear frequently in our vernacular, they appear together only once in the Bible. Furthermore, within the Bible, the four words *broken*, *heart*, *contrite*, and *spirit* only appear together in Psalms 34:18 and 51:17. Because Moroni, as the editor of the book of Ether, had access to the plates of brass, he could have inserted allusions to Psalms. It is also possible that Moroni drew these phrases from previous Nephite writings. The fact that textual allusions to Psalms do not appear in sections of Ether that most likely would have been drawn from the plates of Ether make for a neat apologetic argument, given that Ether would most likely not have had access to the book of Psalms.

22. These include Psalms 6, 7, 14, 18, 21, 23, 24, 25, 27, 30, 31, 33, 34, 35, 44, 47, 52, 53, 55, 56, 57, 62, 63, 69, 71, 89, 90, 95, 103, 104, 106, 111, 113, 115, 116, 119, 121, and 145.

23. Eight psalms (27, 34, 56, 69, 90, 106, 115, and 121) have two allusions, three psalms (5, 62, and 89) contain three, Psalm 95 has four allusions, and Psalm 145 has five. It should also be noted that there are five books that comprise the Psalms; apparent allusions appear from all five of these books.

24. Henry M. Shire, *Finding the Old Testament in the New* (Louisville, KY: Westminster Press, 1974), 129; spelling standardized. The Psalms he lists as having no direct relationship with the New Testament include 25, 43, 54, 58, 59, 60, 70, 85, 87, 100, 101, 108, 114, 120, 123, 127, 131, 133, and 142.

25. There are two minor exceptions. First, the phrase *put my trust in* is used in connection with the word *deliver* in Psalm 25:20 and five Book of Mormon passages. However, there are two other psalms from which this connection could have been drawn. Second,

the phrase *rejoice in thee* appears in Psalm 85:6 and 2 Nephi 4:30; however, it also appears in four other psalms.

26. After acknowledging a scholarly debate regarding the dating of Psalm 95 and considering a variety of factors, Howard states, "I conclude that the psalm is most likely preexilic and possibly goes back to the early monarchical period or earlier." David M. Howard Jr., "The Structure of Psalms 93–100," in *Biblical and Judaic Studies* (San Diego: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 5:190. Jacob may also have alluded to Psalm 95 in 2 Nephi 9:45 (compare Psalm 95:1).

27. Grant Hardy provides footnotes to both of these connections to Psalm 95 in *The Book of Mormon: A Reader's Edition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 140, 156. It should be noted that Hebrews chapters 3 and 4 and Alma 12:35 also contain extensive references to Psalm 95. An extended discussion of all of these texts is beyond the scope of this article. Peter E. Enns provides a discussion of the relationship between Psalm 95 and Hebrews 3:1–4:13; see "Creation and Re-Creation: Psalm 95 and its Interpretation in Hebrews 3:1–4:13," in *Westminster Theological Journal* (Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1993), 55:255–80.

28. While Jacob's record extends into chapter 7, it is clear that chapter 6 represents a conclusion of sorts (see Jacob 6:12–13).

29. This may be a literary form known as *inclusio*, which appears in the writings of Jeremiah and elsewhere in ancient scripture. See various examples in Jack R. Lundborn, *Jeremiah: A Study in Ancient Hebrew Rhetoric* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997).

30. It is interesting to consider why Jacob quoted the second half of Psalms 95:7–8 before the first half. One possibility is that it is a manifestation of Seidel's law, which refers to instances when later authors quote from previous ones, and in doing so reverse the order of part of the quotation. Welch stated that "repetition in the opposite order of the original is thought by scholars to be a strong sign . . . [of] a conscious form of quotation." John W. Welch, "Echoes from Sermon on the Mount," in *The Sermon on the Mount in Latter-day Scripture: The Thirty-Ninth Annual Brigham Young University Sidney B. Sperry Symposium*, ed. Gaye Strathearn, Thomas A. Wayment, and Daniel L. Belnap (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2010), 315. See also Michael A. Lyons, "Marking Innerbiblical Allusion in the Book of Ezekiel," *Biblica* 88, no. 2 (2007), <http://www.bsw.org/Biblica/Vol-88-2007/Marking-Innerbiblical-Allusion-In-The-Book-Of-Ezekiel/73/>; and Pancratius C. Beentjes, "Discovering a New Path of Intertextuality: Inverted Quotations and their Dynamics," in *Literary Structure and Rhetorical Strategies in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. L. J. de Regt, J. de Waard, and J. P. Fokkelman (Assen, Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1996). Thus Jacob's reversal may have been intended as a signal to readers that he using a quotation. While Jacob's inverted quotation of Psalm 95:7–8 does not match with the classical instance of Seidel's Law (given that the inverted quotations are separated by a significant amount of text), it is possible that this reverse order was Jacob's way of illustrating his intentionality in referencing these verses. Alternatively, Lyons demonstrates that allusions are sometimes marked "by the splitting and redistribution of elements in the borrowed locution" ("Marking Innerbiblical Allusion," 245). In either case Jacob could have been following conventions similar to Old Testament authors.

31. Beverly Roberts Gaventa and David Petersen, eds., *The New Interpreter's Bible: One-Volume Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010), 336.

32. Catherine M. Thomas, "The Provocation in the Wilderness and the Rejection of Grace" in *Sperry Symposium Classics: The Old Testament*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 165.

33. This phrase appears to have been coined by Sidney B. Sperry, *Our Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1947), 110.

34. S. Kent Brown, "Nephi's Psalm," in *The Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 602.

35. Matthew Nickerson, "Nephi's Psalm: 2 Nephi 4:16–35 in Light of Form-Critical Analysis," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6, no. 2 (1997): 26–42. Nickerson also notes textual similarities between 2 Nephi 4 and Psalms 6, 18, 27, and 51. See also the chapter by Kenneth L. Alford and D. Bryce Baker in this book.

36. S. Kent Brown, "Nephi's Psalm," 602.

37. Steven P. Sondrup, "The Psalm of Nephi: A Lyric Reading," in *BYU Studies* 21, no. 3 (1981): 359. While Sondrup's focus is not on textual connections to the Psalms, he does point out relationships between 2 Nephi 4 and both Psalm 51 and Psalm 84.

38. More common phrases (such as "cry unto the Lord") were not included in table 1, as their relative frequency throughout scripture made it difficult to determine whether a relationship exists between Psalms and the Book of Mormon. Nevertheless, given the high number of these phrases from Psalms concentrated in 2 Nephi 4, I included them in analyzing 2 Nephi 4. While some phrases may seem insignificant by themselves (for example "because of mine iniquities"), their similar contextual use in Psalms and the Book of Mormon may demonstrate important connections. Individually, some of these phrases may be insignificant, but collectively they are impressive.

39. Nephi makes multiple potential textual allusions to Psalms 27, 31, 33, 38, 56, 69, and 89.

40. See John W. Welch, "How Long Did It Take Joseph Smith to Translate the Book of Mormon?" *Ensign*, January 1988, 46.

41. It is also possible that these phrases came from personal revelation to Nephi or that they were part of a commonly held vocabulary with which he was familiar.