



Nephi's Vision, © Clark Kelley Price

Nephi would not have seen what he desired to see if he had not been quick to observe.

“Look! And I Looked”: Lessons in Learning and Teaching from Nephi’s Vision

JOHN HILTON III

John Hilton III (johnhiltoniii@byu.edu) is an assistant professor of ancient scripture at BYU.

On several occasions Elder David A. Bednar has shared his fascination with Nephi’s vision found in 1 Nephi 11–14 and, in particular, what it teaches about teaching and learning.¹ The purpose of this paper is to begin exploring principles of learning and teaching that can be distilled from the interactions Nephi had with the Spirit of the Lord and an angel and to discuss what learners and teachers can do to apply these principles. I state at the outset that this represents only the beginning of such a study. I also acknowledge that the lens I bring to 1 Nephi 11–14 is undoubtedly colored by my own views relating to teaching and learning.

Before the Vision

A clear lesson for learners and teachers is that the process of teaching begins before formal instruction starts. Nephi makes it clear that he had made extensive preparation for the learning he was about to experience. He states, “*After* I had [1] desired to know the things that my father had seen, and [2] believing that the Lord was able to make them known unto me, as I [3] sat pondering

in mine heart I was caught away in the Spirit of the Lord” (1 Nephi 11:1; emphasis and numbering added).² Those who want to learn can ponder on what they can do to bring this type of preparation to the learning settings that they are in. Those who want to teach can attempt to discern what they should do to encourage their students to prepare in this manner. It is also important to recognize that the types of instruction given by the Spirit of the Lord and by the angel may be best suited for learners who have prepared themselves sufficiently for and desire deep learning.

Initial Teachings

The first teacher Nephi has is the Spirit of the Lord. The Spirit of the Lord begins the conversation by asking, “What desirest thou?” (1 Nephi 11:2). In other words, the teacher began the conversation by essentially asking, “What do you want to learn?” This question allowed Nephi to set the agenda. At times a teacher may come prepared with what he or she thinks is the most important message to share. And perhaps it *is* the most important message. However, in this case, it appears that the Spirit of the Lord did not have an agenda of what to teach but instead opened it up to the learner.

The fact that Nephi has a ready response to the question “What desirest thou?” is also important. Some teachers face settings where some students might answer this question by requesting treats! Nephi’s active desire to learn contributed in large part to the learning that was about to take place.

From a practical standpoint, it may be difficult for a classroom teacher to ask students, “What desirest thou?” In a class of twenty students, there may be twenty different answers to this question. Thus it could be difficult to follow each of those paths.³ Perhaps a more difficult situation to encounter would be a class of twenty students all of whom respond to the question “What desirest thou?” with heads that are down or with blank faces. Students who are in this state may need coaching as to the whys and hows of gospel learning. When students don’t desire to actively learn, the teaching that can take place will likely be limited.

After Nephi explains his desire (to see the things his father saw), the Spirit asks him a pointed question: “Believest thou that thy father saw the tree of which he hath spoken?” (1 Nephi 11:4). Nephi responds by stating, “Yea, thou knowest that I believe all the words of my father” (1 Nephi 11:5).

Why does the Spirit ask a question to which both he and Nephi know the answer? Perhaps there is power in the question “Do you believe?” as it invites

people to take a stand. It seems likely that had Nephi responded to the Spirit’s question by saying, “Not really,” the teaching would have gone in a completely different direction.

After Nephi responds that he does believe, the Spirit cries out exuberantly, praising God and complimenting Nephi on his belief. One possible insight here is that the Spirit shows genuine gratitude and enthusiasm for his student’s preparation and learning. Modern teachers can also seek for opportunities to praise their students.

Nephi’s initial desire is to behold the things his father saw (see 1 Nephi 11:3). The focal point of Lehi’s dream was the tree, so the Spirit shows Nephi the tree that his father had seen. At this point the Spirit has fulfilled Nephi’s original request—to show him what his father saw—and he goes no further. The Spirit again asks, “What desirest thou?” (1 Nephi 11:10).

This time Nephi shares an expanded desire—to know the interpretation of the dream—and what unfolds is expanded learning and teaching. All of what Nephi has been shown and is about to be shown is dependent on Nephi taking action as a learner. Nephi’s proactive decision about what he wants to learn made possible the learning that took place. It is also interesting to note that the angel’s instruction in 1 Nephi 12–14 goes beyond Nephi’s second request.

After Nephi expresses this second desire, the Spirit directs Nephi to look, and when Nephi looks he finds that the Spirit “had gone” (1 Nephi 11:12). Nephi looks again and sees the beginning of the answer to his question. Thus Nephi first looks to his teacher and, not finding him, begins to look for answers on his own. One important implication for learners is that Nephi saw and discovered part of the answer to his question when his teacher was not there. He learned for himself.⁴ Some of the most significant learning takes place outside the direct supervision of the teacher.

However, Nephi is not without a teacher for long. An angel appears to him and begins the longest one-on-one conversation in the Book of Mormon.

Elements of the Interaction between Nephi and the Angel

Look, and I looked (behold, and I beheld). One of the most obvious elements of the interaction between Nephi and the angel is the frequent exhortation to look. As stated previously, the Spirit twice instructs Nephi to look (1 Nephi 11:8, 12), and the angel tells Nephi to look an additional eleven

times (1 Nephi 11:19, 24, 26, 30, 31, 32; 12:1, 11; 13:1; 14:9, 18). In each instance, Nephi looks.

The angel also tells Nephi to “behold” on eight additional occasions (1 Nephi 11:35; 12:14, 16, 22; 13:5, 8, 11, 23), and Nephi looks or beholds. Because the word “behold” means “to fix the eyes upon; to see with attention; to observe with care,”⁵ this instruction can be seen as additional encouragement to look. Thus combined, there are twenty-one times that Nephi explicitly says “I looked” or “I beheld” in response to the Spirit’s or the angel’s injunction to look or behold. To have twenty-one such occurrences in such a brief encounter cannot be inconsequential. What principles of teaching and learning can be drawn from this frequent exhortation to look?

There are at least two obvious answers. First, Nephi looked every time that he was instructed to look. He was not distracted by text messaging or some other way of not paying attention. He was fully engaged, and he looked when he was instructed to do so. This is an important lesson for learners. Seminary students who open their scriptures and look at the verses their teachers point out will generally learn significantly more than students who do not look. Nephi continually acted as an agent by asking for further enlightenment and by choosing to look.

Second, much of what of the angel did was point Nephi to interesting things to look at so that Nephi could begin to make meaning out of them. A general pattern that appears in 1 Nephi 11 is that the angel shows Nephi something, Nephi tells us what he saw, and then he and the angel discuss it.

How could a religious educator facilitate a similar teaching environment? One answer could be to invite students to look at scripture text and make their own meaning of it, as opposed to simply telling them about the scripture text. For example, there are several powerful phrases in 1 Samuel 17 that typically are not included in a simple retelling of the story of David and Goliath.⁶ A teacher could invite students to look at specific sections of 1 Samuel 17 and find phrases that stand out as meaningful to them and then invite students to share what they have found.

The frequent invitations to look could go beyond looking in the scripture text. While the angel had some pretty incredible audiovisual resources (a heavenly vision!) that most teachers do not have immediate access to, there are many audiovisual resources that students could be shown with an invitation to look. Teachers can also invite students to look at object lessons, cross-references, supporting quotations, and so on. All of this is done for the

purpose of giving students something to look at so that they can begin to make sense of it and construct their own understanding.⁷

Another aspect of the invitation to look is that at times the angel instructs Nephi to “behold” (look at) something, and while Nephi is looking at it, the angel explains what Nephi is seeing (see 1 Nephi 12:8; 14:16, 21). Similarly, at times a teacher today might point students to verses and comment on them. However, when the angel says “Look!” most often it is Nephi, not the angel, who comments on what he sees. Teachers can thus invite students to look and to comment on what they see.

Another subtle aspect of the invitations to look is the decreasing number of invitations to look or behold. Nephi is told to look or behold nine times in chapter 11, five times each in chapters 12 and 13, and twice in chapter 14. This may indicate that as the teaching process progressed, Nephi was able to see and comprehend information in different ways. Perhaps students need more active guidance early in the learning process than in later stages.

Counting the words. Another insight from Nephi’s learning experience comes from analyzing Nephi’s conversation with the Spirit of the Lord and later with the angel. In these conversations Nephi says 106 words, while the Spirit and angel combined say 2,537.⁸ While that may seem like an imbalanced conversation, it may have important implications for teaching and learning.

Even in an era where active learning is often touted, lecture can sometimes still be an effective way to help students understand. This account makes it clear that in some circumstances it is fine for a teacher to lecture and impart vital knowledge. However, it should be noted that one of the reasons this lecture was so successful was that Nephi actively participated in the experience. Although he did not say much, he was active in looking and seeing for himself. Nephi uses the phrase “I saw” thirty-three times in 1 Nephi 11–14. The phrase “I saw” is very different from “I was told”!

It also may be of importance to note that the amount the Spirit or angel speaks changes throughout the teaching. In chapter 11 the Spirit and angel combined say 248 words. In chapter 12 the angel speaks 272 words, in chapter 13 he speaks 1,240 words, and in chapter 14 he speaks 777 words. After adjusting for chapter length,⁹ we see a clear pattern of the angel speaking very little at first then increasing to the point where in chapters 13 and 14 there is much less looking on the part of the learner and much more telling on the part of the instructor. This pattern may indicate that different types of

teaching are appropriate as the learning process progresses. It may also have been that in chapters 11 and 12 the angel was listening to and observing Nephi so that he could discern and know what to say in chapters 13 and 14.¹⁰

Possible implications for teachers and learners include the following: (1) At times, lecture is appropriate. (2) If you are going to lecture, make sure there are ways for students to look and act so that they can benefit from the lecture. (3) Lecture may not be the most appropriate approach when teaching students who have not come prepared to seriously study the topic. (4) Lecture is particularly effective when it is prompted by a student's desire to learn. (5) Learners who are listening to lectures should take responsibility to be active participants in the learning process—even if they do not speak, they can still actively learn.

What beholdest thou? On two different occasions the angel asks Nephi, “What beholdest thou?” or in other words, “What do you see?” (1 Nephi 11:14; 13:2). This powerful question (similar to the invitation to look) allows Nephi to make his own meaning out of what he sees. Some educational theorists believe that this type of knowledge construction is the best way to help students deeply understand the material they are learning about.¹¹

Nephi is shown something, and the angel invites him to construct meaning around what he has seen. Similarly, teachers today can present students with material (a series of verses, a song, a video, a quote, and so forth) and invite them to build on what they already know and to make deeper connections by asking questions like, What do you see? What stands out as meaningful to you? What questions do you have?¹² This allows the students to engage with material at their level and invites them to be active participants in the learning process.

Questions asked. The Spirit of the Lord and the angel ask Nephi ten questions. While some of these questions have been analyzed in other sections of this paper, it may still be helpful to see all of these questions in one place. Table 1 lists these questions, along with the verses in which they were asked. It is interesting that while teachers are sometimes instructed to avoid yes-no questions, six of the ten questions posed to Nephi are yes-no questions. However, Nephi gives a one-word response to only one of these questions. Only one of the questions asked is rhetorical—this question, “Thou rememberest the twelve apostles of the Lamb?” appears to serve the purpose of calling Nephi's attention to a point that the angel was about to make.

Table 1

Verse	Question asked
1 Nephi 11:2	What desirest thou?
1 Nephi 11:4	Believest thou that thy father saw the tree of which he hath spoken?
1 Nephi 11:10	What desirest thou?
1 Nephi 11:14	What beholdest thou?
1 Nephi 11:16	Knowest thou the condescension of God?
1 Nephi 11:21	Knowest thou the meaning of the tree which thy father saw?
1 Nephi 12:9	Thou rememberest the twelve apostles of the Lamb?
1 Nephi 13:2	What beholdest thou?
1 Nephi 13:21	Knowest thou the meaning of the book?
1 Nephi 14:8	Rememberest thou the covenants of the Father unto the house of Israel?

Three times Nephi is asked a question that essentially begins, “Do you know . . . ?” In two of these instances Nephi does not know the answer. Why does the angel ask Nephi, “Do you know?”

One possibility is that while the angel already knows that Nephi does not know, he wants to help Nephi realize that he doesn't know. There can be a great virtue in helping people realize that they do not know the answer. If people believe they know everything there is to know on a subject, they will not be very teachable. But if they recognize that they do not know something, they will be much more likely to learn.

Another reason why the angel might ask “Do you know?” is that the angel was trying to determine where the edge of Nephi's knowledge was so that he could help expand this knowledge. Educational theorists have postulated that the best learning takes place when students are at the very edge of their understanding.¹³

One other curious feature of questions in this dialogue is that Nephi did not ask the angel (or the Spirit) any direct questions. Nevertheless it is clear that Nephi had a desire to learn and clearly had questions, although he did not directly ask them.

Preview and review. One common teaching technique is to both preview and review material. We see both of these activities taking place in this teaching exchange. The Spirit of the Lord previews for Nephi what he will see in his vision, stating, “After thou hast beheld the tree which bore the fruit which thy father tasted, thou shalt also behold a man descending out of heaven, and

him shall ye witness; and after ye have witnessed him ye shall bear record that it is the Son of God” (1 Nephi 11:7).

At two different points in the teaching process, the angel reviews with Nephi some of the information that has been discussed. In one instance he states, “Thou hast beheld that if the Gentiles repent it shall be well with them; and thou also knowest concerning the covenants of the Lord unto the house of Israel; and thou also hast heard that whoso repenteth not must perish” (1 Nephi 14:5; see also 1 Nephi 13:24). Classroom teachers can enhance student learning both by previewing concepts that are to be taught and by reviewing them afterwards.

What didn't happen. Sometimes in educational research the most important discoveries are of what did *not* happen, as opposed to what *did* happen.¹⁴ In the case of 1 Nephi 11–14 it may be what the Spirit and angel did *not* do that is most telling.

Some modern teachers believe that they must spend a good portion of their lesson getting students ready to learn. While so-called readiness activities certainly have their place, it may be significant that neither the Spirit nor the angel appear to have used an attention-getter to capture Nephi's attention. Of course, this could be based on the intense desire to learn that Nephi had.

Another thing that the Spirit and angel did not do was entertain Nephi. While humor and fun certainly have their place in the classroom, some teachers take it to an extreme by spending large amounts of time entertaining students. Teachers' focus on entertainment may be a manifestation of their lack of faith that the students they teach are seekers who are hungry for the gospel. The Spirit and the angel did not use gimmicks, tricks, or bribery to encourage Nephi to act as an agent in the learning process.¹⁵

In addition, the Spirit and the angel appear not to have come with a rigid teaching agenda. Rather than giving Nephi a prepared lecture, they asked him questions and based their teaching on clarifying points that Nephi wanted to learn about.

Conclusion

In this article we have seen some of the implications for learning and teaching that come from Nephi's interactions with the Spirit of the Lord and the angel. Some of the lessons learned include the following:

- Learner preparation—including praying, pondering, believing, and desiring—is very important.
- The process of looking is important both in that the learner must be willing to look and in that the teacher needs to have valuable material to direct the learner to look at. In addition to pointing Nephi to things to look at, the angel did not hesitate to offer commentary regarding what Nephi was seeing.
- It can be effective to ask questions that invite learners to examine their beliefs and knowledge. Students should have the opportunity to vocalize how they are making sense of what they are studying.
- Learning can be aided by previewing and reviewing teachings.
- We can learn from what the Spirit and angel did *not* do in addition to what they *did* do.

There is much more that could be done to analyze the learning and teaching interactions that take place in 1 Nephi 11–14. For example, one could analyze the order of the visions that Nephi saw. In addition, it would be interesting to compare how Nephi was taught with how he taught his brothers the things he had learned. As stated previously, this article represents a beginning of studying 1 Nephi 11–14 in terms of learning about teaching. I hope that this article inspires readers to study these chapters deeply and to discover their own lessons on how to become better learners and teachers. **RE**

Notes

1. Here are two such statements:

I have long been fascinated by the nature of the interaction between the Spirit of the Lord and Nephi found in chapters 11 through 14 of 1 Nephi. As you recall, Nephi desired to see and hear and know the things his father, Lehi, had seen in the vision of the tree of life (see 1 Nephi 8). In chapters 11 through 14 the Holy Ghost assisted Nephi in learning about the nature and meaning of his father's vision. Interestingly, thirteen times in these chapters the Spirit of the Lord directed Nephi to “look” as a fundamental feature of the learning process. Nephi repeatedly was counseled to look, and because he was quick to observe, he beheld the tree of life (see 1 Nephi 11:8); the mother of the Savior (see 1 Nephi 11:20); the rod of iron (see 1 Nephi 11:25); and the Lamb of God, the Son of the Eternal Father (see 1 Nephi 11:21). I have described only a few of the spiritually significant things Nephi saw. You may want to study these chapters in greater depth and learn from and about Nephi's learning. As you study and ponder, please keep in mind that Nephi would not have seen what he desired to see, he would not have known what he needed to know, and he could not have done what he ultimately needed to do

if he had not been quick to observe. Brothers and sisters, that same truth applies to you and to me! (David A. Bednar, “Quick to Observe,” devotional address, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, May 10, 2005)

Recall how Nephi desired to know about the things his father, Lehi, had seen in the vision of the tree of life. Interestingly, the Spirit of the Lord begins the tutorial with Nephi by asking the following question, “Behold, what desirest thou?” (1 Nephi 11:2). Clearly the Spirit knew what Nephi desired. So why ask the question? The Holy Ghost was helping Nephi to act in the learning process and not simply be acted upon. (I encourage you at a later time to study chapters 11–14 in 1 Nephi and notice how the Spirit both asked questions and encouraged Nephi to “look” as active elements in the learning process.) (David A. Bednar, “Seek Learning by Faith,” address to CES religious educators, Jordan, UT, February 3, 2006)

2. This preparation was also emphasized as Nephi said, “I, Nephi, was desirous also that I might see, and hear, and know of these things, by the power of the Holy Ghost” (1 Nephi 10:17).

3. The purpose of this paper is to outline principles of learning and teaching that can be drawn from these teaching interactions. Thus a detailed list of suggestions for how to handle a situation where twenty learners all have a different desire is beyond the scope of this paper. Possible ideas include (1) having students work in pairs or groups to answer the questions they have, (2) prayerfully selecting one or two students and following the direction they wish to go, and (3) collecting a list of answers to the question “What do you want to learn?” and then following the Spirit in discerning which ones to answer first.

4. Compare with Joseph Smith’s statement to his mother: “I have learned for myself” (Joseph Smith—History 1:20).

5. *American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828), Webster’s, “behold,” accessed November 18, 2011, <http://1828.mshaffer.com/d/search/word,behold>.

6. For example, “Is there not a cause?” (1 Samuel 17:29), “the battle is the Lord’s” (1 Samuel 17:47), and “David hastened, and ran . . . to meet the Philistine” (1 Samuel 17:48).

7. In commenting on the teaching and learning in 1 Nephi 11–14, Bryce Dunford states that there is a “great difference . . . between telling students the answers and guiding them through the process of discovery so they find their own solutions. When Philip met a man from Ethiopia who was reading from the book of Isaiah, Philip asked him, ‘Understandest thou what thou readest?’ ‘How can I,’ was the reply, ‘except some man should guide me?’ (Acts 8:30–31). Notice that he did not ask for someone to tell him; rather, he wanted someone to guide him to understanding. That is why students need teachers—not to tell them all the answers but rather to guide them to find the answers themselves. Doing so helps students own the truths they discover. They are then more likely to carry those principles and doctrines in their hearts as a permanent possession throughout their lives.” “Hey, Teacher, You’re in the Way,” *Religious Educator* 6, no. 3 (2005): 76.

8. These words include the words that they quote “the Lamb” as saying (e.g., 1 Nephi 13:34–37).

9. The angel spoke virtually the same amount of words per verse in 1 Nephi 13 as in 1 Nephi 14.

10. This would be following the pattern of teaching set forth by Elder David A. Bednar: “I think we talk too much because we believe talking and telling is teaching, and it’s not. To teach you first have to observe and listen so that you can discern and then know what to say.”

David A. Bednar, “A Conversation on Leadership,” February 24, 2010, 13, <http://lds.org/gospellibrary/leadership/hr-2010-02-leadership-elder-david-a-bednar-conversation-eng.pdf>.

11. In some respects the question “What beholdest thou?” is quintessential constructivist teaching, in which the learners “generate knowledge and meaning from an interaction between their experiences and their ideas.” *Wikipedia*, s.v. “Constructivism (learning theory),” last modified November 10, 2011, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constructivism_%28learning_theory%29.

12. Eleanor Duckworth, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, writes, “If others tell us about the connections they have made, we can only understand them to the extent that we do the work of making these connections ourselves. Making connections must be a personal elaboration.” *The Having of Wonderful Ideas* (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University), 26. A question like “What beholdest thou?” allows students to create their own connections and meaning about what is being studied.

13. One example of this theory is Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development. This theory posits that some tasks are too easy for learners and others are too difficult. The best tasks for increasing learning will be those that push learners to stretch beyond current abilities, but not so far that they have no chance of success. See Lev S. Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1986).

14. Gary Blasi, in his article “Reforming Educational Accountability,” alludes to an instructive exchange from a Sherlock Holmes story. The inspector asks, “Is there any point to which you would wish to draw my attention?” Holmes replies, “To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time.” Puzzled, the inspector states, “The dog did nothing in the night-time.” Holmes rejoins, “That was the curious incident.” Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, “Silver Blaze,” in *Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (1894; Project Gutenberg, 2008), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/834/834-h/834-h.htm>. Blasi points out things he finds missing from California’s Public Schools Accountability Act of 1999 and states that these missing things are the most important. Gary Blasi, “Reforming Educational Accountability,” in *California Policy Options* (Los Angeles: UCLA, 2002), 65, <http://www.spa.ucla.edu/calpolicy02/Blasi.pdf>.

15. Elder Richard G. Scott said, “There is no place in your teaching for gimmicks, fads, or bribery by favors or treats. Such activities produce no lasting motivation for personal growth nor any enduring beneficial results.” “Helping Others to Be Spiritually Led” (CES Symposium address, August 11, 1998).