

2 Nephi 1

Lehi's Final Counsel to His Sons

2 Nephi 1:1

¹ And now it came to pass that after I, Nephi, had made an end of teaching my brethren, our father, Lehi, also spake many things unto them, and rehearsed unto them, how great things the Lord had done for them in bringing them out of the land of Jerusalem.

Comments

Although Nephi begins a new book, he picks up where he left off. His introduction is that he concluded speaking to his brothers. Immediately, he has Lehi speaking to them. This suggests that Nephi began writing the book of 2 Nephi soon after ending 1 Nephi. Nephi is telling a story of two worlds, and tells his people's origin story from the perspective of each of those worlds.

In each of the two stories, the genesis of the Nephite people is placed in the hands of Lehi's prophecies. In the Old World he preached repentance to the people of Jerusalem, and said that otherwise, they would be destroyed. In the New World, his descendants must repent, else they will be destroyed.

There is another subtle shift in the way Nephi is telling the story. This is where the information in the header helps us understand Nephi's thought process. He had created the first book to discuss the exodus from Jerusalem and the events that led them to the New World. In that book, he set the stage for how he was the prophesied teacher over his brothers, but there was still the prophecy of him becoming a ruler. That was to happen in the New World.

Thus, 1 Nephi was the Old World and the development of the teacher, and 2 Nephi was for the New World and the development of the ruler. This book was to cover the essential formation of the Nephites in the New World. After Lehi's family arrived in the New World, they continued as a family. They would later divide into what will become Nephites and Lamanites. Lehi's prophecies and blessings to his sons set the stage for the division into Nephites and Lamanites.

2 Nephi 1:2–4

2 And he spake unto them concerning their rebellions upon the waters, and the mercies of God in sparing their lives, that they were not swallowed up in the sea.

3 And he also spake unto them concerning the land of promise, which they had obtained—how merciful the Lord had been in warning us that we should flee out of the land of Jerusalem.

4 For, behold, said he, I have seen a vision, in which I know that Jerusalem is destroyed; and had we remained in Jerusalem we should also have perished.

Comments

In 1 Nephi, Nephi had developed the way in which the prophecy was fulfilled that he would be a teacher over his brothers. As he prepares for the New World story, it will be a story of Nephi becoming a ruler. However, there is another transition that had begun, and Nephi wanted to bring it to a close. Nephi had subtly shown his ascendance in the leadership of the family, assuming more of the prophetic role than his father.

That process is completed in the New World, and to show the final form of that transition, Nephi writes his father's blessings to his sons. In these blessings, the future form of the division between Lamanites and Nephites will be prophetically laid out, and then Lehi will die. Nephi will become the new religious leader, as well as found the city that will serve as the base for the beginning of the people called Nephites.

As Lehi begins, he addresses Laman and Lemuel. The theme will be their rebelliousness, and Lehi begins with his prophetic understanding of the destruction of Jerusalem. The desire to return to Jerusalem had been a constant subtheme in the descriptions of Laman and Lemuel. Perhaps they still harbored some desire to return. Lehi informs them that it is impossible, and not just because they are now in the New World. There is nothing to which to return. Not only is there nothing to return to, but that destruction justified the family's exodus in which they have perhaps unwillingly participated.

The destruction of Jerusalem also provides a point of prophetic fulfillment. The Old World connection no longer exists. From this point on, Nephi is telling the story of the creation of a new people rather than the travails of a couple of families.

There isn't a clear closing point to Lehi's recounting of Laman and Lemuel's rebellions, but at this point Lehi will no longer address Laman and Lemuel directly; he will address all his children. It is tempting to see this address to Laman and Lemuel as part of Nephi's literary device to move from his address to his brothers, and then to his father's blessings to the family, which do more appropriately begin with the whole family rather than just focusing on Laman and Lemuel.

The Promise of the Land

2 Nephi 1:5

5 But, said he, notwithstanding our afflictions, we have obtained a land of promise, a land which is choice above all other lands; a land which the Lord God hath covenanted with me should be a land for the inheritance of my seed. Yea, the Lord hath covenanted this land unto me, and to my children forever, and also all those who should be led out of other countries by the hand of the Lord.

Comments

Before leaving the Old World, Yahweh promised Lehi that he would lead them to a new land. After leaving their lands behind, they would be rewarded with a new home. The description of that new land as a land of promise has led to an inevitable association with the Israelites promised land. However, it is not clear that it is a legitimate comparison.

Both the phrase “land of promise” and “promised land” occur with great frequency in Nephi’s writings, and, to a lesser extent in the rest of the Book of Mormon. They do not appear at all in the Old Testament. The phrase “land of promise” does occur in Hebrews 11:9, where it speaks of Abraham leaving his home and “sojourning in the land of promise, as in a strange country.”

Tradition promises the land that Abraham was given as an inheritance for his descendants, but it was never an entire continent, never an entire hemisphere, never more than a relatively small section of land. Thus, when we read the Book of Mormon’s land of promise as any large expanse of territory, we are reading modern ideas backwards into the text in ways that the ancient people would never have understood.

As Lehi discusses this land of promise, it will never describe the dimensions of that land. What he will emphasize is the promise that is associated with the land. It is promised to his children forever, but upon conditions of righteousness. The Nephites, whose story exemplifies that promise of the land, eventually lose it. It was given them, but they will not keep it.

2 Nephi 1:6–8

6 Wherefore, I, Lehi, prophesy according to the workings of the Spirit which is in me, that there shall none come into this land save they shall be brought by the hand of the Lord.

7 Wherefore, this land is consecrated unto him whom he shall bring. And if it so be that they shall serve him according to the commandments which he hath given, it shall be a land of liberty unto them; wherefore, they shall never be brought down into captivity; if so, it shall be because of iniquity; for if iniquity shall abound cursed shall be the land for their sakes, but unto the righteous it shall be blessed forever.

8 And behold, it is wisdom that this land should be kept as yet from the knowledge of other nations; for behold, many nations would overrun the land, that there would be no place for an inheritance.

Comments

All scripture is interpreted by its readers, and these verses are open to multiple interpretations. Historically, they have been interpreted as indicating that only the people mentioned in the Book of Mormon, the Lehites, Mulekites, and Jaredites, were the only ones who came upon the land. That is a very simple reading of the text, but one which falls before the evidence of history and archaeology.

Lehi spoke in a land that was already inhabited. How do we know that? We know he landed on a coast, and there was no habitable coast in the entire hemisphere that did not have some human population. There were numerous people who had already come to the New World before any Book of Mormon population arrived. Even the early Jaredites probably arrived on a coast where they could have been met by existing populations.

Then again, if there were already people here, perhaps they were included among those Lehi indicated that the Lord would bring. The Jaredites were already in the land, so that promise of whom the Lord would bring was not exclusive to the future. It is therefore difficult to know how this prophetic statement is to be reconciled. Inside the text of the Book of Mormon, the conditions of liberty were constantly under Lamanite attack, and often threatened by internal dissent. It is probably best to read these verses for the part that Lehi emphasized—the promise of protection upon righteousness—rather than emphasize the more problematic understanding of who might be brought, and from which nations they would be hid.

2 Nephi 1:9

9 Wherefore, I, Lehi, have obtained a promise, that inasmuch as those whom the Lord God shall bring out of the land of Jerusalem shall keep his commandments, they shall prosper upon the face of this land; and they shall be kept from all other nations, that they may possess this land unto themselves. And if it so be that they shall keep his commandments they 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.

Comments

This divine promise first appears in 1 Nephi 2:20, where Nephi writes what Yahweh told him: “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.” When Nephi wrote of the angel’s command to slay Laban, he “remembered the words of the Lord which he spake unto me in the wilderness, saying that: Inasmuch as thy seed shall keep my commandments, they shall prosper in the land of promise” (1 Nephi 4:14).

For both Lehi and Nephi, the most important aspect of the promise of the land was the conditional requirement for peace and prosperity. There was never an unconditional location for Lehi’s descendants,

and indeed, the Nephites were forced from their lands and had to move to a new location. When the Nephites arrived in Zarahemla they referred to their lost lands as their first inheritance. They had lost one land of promise, and their continued invocation of the promise should tell us that they considered a promise to move with them, even when they were no longer on the land of their first inheritance, or even later when they were removed from the land southward entirely.

The promise of the land was important for the promise, not for the land.

2 Nephi 1:10–12

10 But behold, when the time cometh that they shall dwindle in unbelief, after they have received so great blessings from the hand of the Lord—having a knowledge of the creation of the earth, and all men, knowing the great and marvelous works of the Lord from the creation of the world; having power given them to do all things by faith; having all the commandments from the beginning, and having been brought by his infinite goodness into this precious land of promise—behold, I say, if the day shall come that they will reject the Holy One of Israel, the true Messiah, their Redeemer and their God, behold, the judgments of him that is just shall rest upon them.

11 Yea, he will bring other nations unto them, and he will give unto them power, and he will take away from them the lands of their possessions, and he will cause them to be scattered and smitten.

12 Yea, as one generation passeth to another there shall be bloodsheds, and great visitations among them; wherefore, my sons, I would that ye would remember; yea, I would that ye would hearken unto my words.

Comments

Immediately after Lehi tells his sons that they have received a land of promise that will be protected from other nations that would come unto it, he tells them that it won't last. There will come a time when they will "dwindle in unbelief, after they have received so great blessings from the hand of the Lord."

The explanation for the nations that had been kept from this new land is answered when Lehi notes that it is only after his seed has dwindled in unbelief will those nations come unto them. After that, there will be terrible bloodsheds.

Nephi had already seen this vision of the future and wrote about it in 1 Nephi 13:7 when he speaks of the gentiles who would come over the many waters. That process of destruction by the gentiles from across the ocean began in the early 1500s as Spain conquered most of the New World. No doubt some of the "great visitations" were the diseases that depopulated much of the New World. It was a sad story that was repeated when virtually every nation of the gentiles crossed the ocean and came upon the land. It devastated not only the place where the Nephites had lived, but it also devastated the entire hemisphere.

Exhortation to Keep the Commandments

2 Nephi 1:13

13 O that ye would awake; awake from a deep sleep, yea, even from the sleep of hell, and shake off the awful chains by which ye are bound, which are the chains which bind the children of men, that they are carried away captive down to the eternal gulf of misery and woe.

Comments

The meaning modern readers associate with hell must be different from those that Lehi intended as he spoke to his sons. There are several reasons for this assertion. The first is that the concept we have of hell is a theological development that postdates Lehi's departure from Jerusalem. For Israel, there was a place called Sheol, a place where the dead ("shades") go. It was not, however, the antithesis of heaven that hell has become. Thus, at least that part of our perception of the word hell is anachronistic.

Second, the imagery Lehi employs of a deep sleep, or the sleep of hell, is incongruous with the punitive hell of later Christian tradition. It is much closer to the concept of Sheol as a resting place for the dead, righteous and unrighteous alike.

The most important difference, however, is that Lehi and his sons are still alive, and while alive, Lehi describes his sons as being in the sleep of hell. In verse 15, just a couple of sentences away, Lehi will note that he has been redeemed from hell. Thus, Lehi is referring to something very different than any of the meanings which we associate with hell.

The clue to Lehi's meaning is in the phrase that those in hell would be "carried away captive down to the eternal gulf of misery and woe." The idea of the eternal gulf is the appropriate image to understand Lehi's meaning. It recalls the dream of the Tree of Life. Nephi described the gulf as part of his vision, rather than his father's, but since Nephi intentionally abbreviated Lehi's dream to move on to his own, Lehi likely understood the same imagery.

Therefore, for Lehi, hell is the gulf that separates us from Yahweh, or his influence. The chains of hell are those habits or beliefs that contribute to our separation from God. That separation is ultimately definable as misery and woe because it is a separation from the happiness and joy that come from becoming one with God's purposes.

2 Nephi 2:14–16

14 Awake! and arise from the dust, and hear the words of a trembling parent, whose limbs ye must soon lay down in the cold and silent grave, from whence no traveler can return; a few more days and I go the way of all the earth.

15 But behold, the Lord hath redeemed my soul from hell; I have beheld his glory, and I am encircled about eternally in the arms of his love.

16 And I desire that ye should remember to observe the statutes and the judgments of the Lord; behold, this hath been the anxiety of my soul from the beginning.

Comments

Lehi continues his metaphorical reference to Sheol, which was a place where the dead would sleep. Thus, his sons are exhorted to “awake and rise from the dust.” This is a reference to the dead, even though the sons are not physically dead. Lehi uses the imagery of the sleep in Sheol to describe their spiritual state. If they are in the awful gulf, then they are essentially dead to God’s influence. Hence, they must awake and arise from the dust of that state of spiritual death.

This reference is made more poignant by Lehi’s declaration that he believes that he is on his deathbed. Thus, he is about to enter the physical state from which he desires his sons to escape the likened spiritual state. This is declared to be possible, because Lehi declares that Yahweh “hath redeemed my soul from hell.” As noted in the discussion of verse 13, Lehi is not dead, and this redemption must be from a spiritual hell, which Lehi has likened to a spiritual separation from God. In this context, it must mean that his sins are forgiven and thus he is redeemed from sin.

Having been redeemed from hell, Lehi desires that his sons similarly be redeemed, and he informs them that the path to this redemption is “to observe the statutes and the judgments of the Lord.”

2 Nephi 1:17–20

17 My heart hath been weighed down with sorrow from time to time, for I have feared, lest for the hardness of your hearts the Lord your God should come out in the fulness of his wrath upon you, that ye be cut off and destroyed forever;

18 Or, that a cursing should come upon you for the space of many generations; and ye are visited by sword, and by famine, and are hated, and are led according to the will and captivity of the devil.

19 O my sons, that these things might not come upon you, but that ye might be a choice and a favored people of the Lord. But behold, his will be done; for his ways are righteousness forever.

20 And he hath said that: Inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments ye shall prosper in the land; but inasmuch as ye will not keep my commandments ye shall be cut off from my presence.

Comments

This is not simply a lecture to his sons, but it is a prayer for them. It is Lehi near the end of his life expressing his fears and desires for his sons (and daughters, though they are not explicitly addressed). In this he is like most fathers. Children are the focal point of so many hopes and fears.

For Lehi, he has reason to fear. Prophecy has indicated that some of his descendants will not follow Yahweh. Personal experience has taught him that Laman and Lemuel, in particular, were rebellious and in

grave danger of declining to partake of the fruit of the Tree of Life. Thus, when Lehi fears that the hardness of their hearts would cause their destruction, he is referencing prophecy more than simple parental anxiety.

What is interesting is that fears of destruction are placed in the context of Laman and Lemuel's rebellion; however, they are communicated to all his sons. That is important to remember, because even though it is certain that Lehi and the early Nephites saw the prophecy of destruction applying to the Lamanites, it would be the Nephites who were eventually "visited by sword, and by famine," and destroyed.

In spite of the prophecy, and in spite of the physical realities of the wars and famines, what concerned Lehi most was that they would be "cut off and destroyed forever." Not that they would be cut off from the Old World, but that they would be cut off from Yahweh.

There is a solution, and Lehi repeats the promise of the land. They would prosper in this new land if they kept the commandments, but if they did not, they would be cut off from Yahweh's presence. That is a more devastating and final destruction than the physical end of a people.

2 Nephi 1:21–23

21 And now that my soul might have joy in you, and that my heart might leave this world with gladness because of you, that I might not be brought down with grief and sorrow to the grave, arise from the dust, my sons, and be men, and be determined in one mind and in one heart, united in all things, that ye may not come down into captivity;

22 That ye may not be cursed with a sore cursing; and also, that ye may not incur the displeasure of a just God upon you, unto the destruction, yea, the eternal destruction of both soul and body.

23 Awake, my sons; put on the armor of righteousness. Shake off the chains with which ye are bound, and come forth out of obscurity, and arise from the dust.

Comments

If this were a written speech, a good editor would trim it significantly. It is quite repetitive. Lehi spoke of the promise of the land, and then evoked it again. Lehi spoke of his sons arising from the dust, and now does it again. This was not, however, a discourse governed by literary rules, but rather oral ones. In oral discourse, repetition reinforces meaning because the listeners hear the same message repeated in slightly different contexts. That we have this in written form suggests that Nephi did not edit for literary concerns.

This does not mean that there is no literary value, but only that it develops the art orally. It is a well-constructed discourse precisely in the way the repetition is used. Thus, Lehi begins a section with the introduction of the theme of arising from the sleep of hell, and then describes that condition and the way to resolve it.

In the verse which concludes this section, Lehi emphasizes the theme by noting that he does not desire to be "brought down with grief and sorrow." The idea that he might be "brought down" echoes the imagery he has

been using of being laid in the grave. That is a point he emphasizes by making this a genuine possibility rather than simply a moral point.

As he began this section, he exhorted his sons to awake and arise, and to shake off the chains that bound them. These are the precise verbal images that he uses to close that section of his discourse.

2 Nephi 1:24–27

24 Rebel no more against your brother, whose views have been glorious, and who hath kept the commandments from the time that we left Jerusalem; and who hath been an instrument in the hands of God, in bringing us forth into the land of promise; for were it not for him, we must have perished with hunger in the wilderness; nevertheless, ye sought to take away his life; yea, and he hath suffered much sorrow because of you.

25 And I exceedingly fear and tremble because of you, lest he shall suffer again; for behold, ye have accused him that he sought power and authority over you; but I know that he hath not sought for power nor authority over you, but he hath sought the glory of God, and your own eternal welfare.

26 And ye have murmured because he hath been plain unto you. Ye say that he hath used sharpness; ye say that he hath been angry with you; but behold, his sharpness was the sharpness of the power of the word of God, which was in him; and that which ye call anger was the truth, according to that which is in God, which he could not restrain, manifesting boldly concerning your iniquities.

27 And it must needs be that the power of God must be with him, even unto his commanding you that ye must obey. But behold, it was not he, but it was the Spirit of the Lord which was in him, which opened his mouth to utterance that he could not shut it.

Comments

Nephi is writing this discourse. He began by having Lehi address Laman and Lemuel, but then the discourse turned more to all the sons. Now, Nephi closes the general section of Lehi's discourse and returns to an emphasis on Laman and Lemuel. It should be noted that when we examine this discourse in Nephi's writings, Nephi wrote this down years after the fact. We do not know if he, or anyone else, recorded Lehi's words when they were given. No one at the time had a recorder, no one took shorthand. It does not diminish the truthfulness of what Lehi said if Nephi wrote it as he remembered it and it was remembered as a less than verbatim account of what Lehi said.

In this section, Lehi not only addresses Laman and Lemuel, but calls them out for their anger against Nephi. The specifics that Lehi mentions will be the very things that cause the dissolution of the family and the division into what would become Lamanites and Nephites.

The specifics of this section could point to a very particular way in which Nephi remembered what his father said, for his father reiterates the themes that Nephi built in the book of 1 Nephi, that he would

be the teacher and ruler over his brothers, and that the brothers rebelled against that idea. Lehi declares that Yahweh is on Nephi's side in this internecine dispute.

Counsel to Laman, Lemuel, Sam, the Sons of Ishmael and Zoram

2 Nephi 1:28–32

28 And now my son, Laman, and also Lemuel and Sam, and also my sons who are the sons of Ishmael, behold, if ye will hearken unto the voice of Nephi ye shall not perish. And if ye will hearken unto him I leave unto you a blessing, yea, even my first blessing.

29 But if ye will not hearken unto him I take away my first blessing, yea, even my blessing, and it shall rest upon him.

30 And now, Zoram, I speak unto you: Behold, thou art the servant of Laban; nevertheless, thou hast been brought out of the land of Jerusalem, and I know that thou art a true friend unto my son, Nephi, forever.

31 Wherefore, because thou hast been faithful thy seed shall be blessed with his seed, that they dwell in prosperity long upon the face of this land; and nothing, save it shall be iniquity among them, shall harm or disturb their prosperity upon the face of this land forever.

32 Wherefore, if ye shall keep the commandments of the Lord, the Lord hath consecrated this land for the security of thy seed with the seed of my son.

Comments

Although we currently have a chapter break at the end of verse 32, there was no chapter break in the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon. Orson Pratt created this division, and perhaps one of the reasons was his desire to have fewer verses in a chapter. Thus, this split gives us 32 verses in Chapter 1, followed by 30 verses in Chapter 2, both of which were combined into a single chapter in the 1830 edition. In this case, if there were to have been a division, it should have been before the current verse 28. It is at verse 28 that the blessings of the sons formally begin.

The blessings begin by addressing Nephi's three older brothers; Laman, Lemuel, and Sam, rather than only Laman and Lemuel. Thus, it is a conditional blessing and not a curse, which one might suppose from the content of the discourse up to this point. It is simple. They should follow Nephi, and if they do, they are blessed, and if they do not, the blessing is removed.

Zoram is addressed separately because he is not part of the family. He is already counted as one who will follow Nephi. Sam has already similarly demonstrated his faithfulness, but Sam was included with the brothers' blessing, while Zoram required a separate blessing.