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## Father Lehi

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## FATHER LEHI

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H. Donl Peterson

**L**ehi is the prominent and dominant figure in the opening of the Book of Mormon record. But because the chief role soon shifts to Nephi, the reader may be prone to overlook the importance and personality of this great prophet and patriarch who was the original founder of the Nephite nation. Let us examine, in the manner suggested by Brigham Young, the part played by this courageous ancient prophet:

Do you read the Scriptures, my brethren and sisters, as though you were writing them a thousand, two thousand, or five thousand years ago? Do you read them as though you stood in the place of the men who wrote them? If you do not feel thus, it is your privilege to do so, that you may be as familiar with the spirit and meaning of the written word of God as you are with your daily walk and conversation, or as you are with your workmen or with your households.<sup>1</sup>

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## Lehi the Man

Lehi was of the house of Joseph through his son Manasseh (Alma 10:3). The land apportioned by the prophet Joshua to the sons of Joseph (Manasseh and Ephraim) was north of Jerusalem and south of the Sea of Galilee in the area generally known as Samaria at the time of Christ. We are not told when Lehi's ancestors first lived in Judah. Many people fled from their lands in Israel to Judah in 721 B.C. when the Assyrians captured the Northern Kingdom and carried off many slaves. Earlier, others of Ephraim and Manasseh had gathered to Jerusalem under King Asa (2 Chronicles 15:1–15). The scripture does tell us that Lehi “dwelt at Jerusalem in all his days” (1 Nephi 1:4).

Lehi was probably born between 650–640 B.C. This estimate is based on the fact that Lehi and Sariah had four sons of marriageable age—Laman, Lemuel, Sam, and Nephi—when the family departed from Jerusalem. They also had daughters who had apparently already married, but there is no mention of daughters leaving Jerusalem with the original company (1 Nephi 2:5).<sup>2</sup> Thus we estimate that Lehi would have been about forty or fifty years old.

Lehi was an educated man who was familiar with the Egyptian language as well as his own Hebrew tongue (1 Nephi 1:2). He was also a wealthy man. He may have had property in Jerusalem (see 1 Nephi 1:4), but he definitely owned some outside of Jerusalem in the land of his inheritance (1 Nephi 3:16), and that is where he apparently kept his wealth. When his four sons collected their father's gold, silver, and precious things in an attempt to purchase the plates of brass from Laban, they got it outside of Jerusalem (1 Nephi 3:16, 25).

We don't know what Lehi's occupation was, but since he was conversant in the Egyptian language and he seemed somewhat familiar with the ways of the desert, it is logical to assume that he had some occupation or some previous experiences that utilized both skills.

## Lehi the Prophet

Lehi was a record keeper. He wrote “many things which he saw in visions and in dreams; and he also hath written many things which he prophesied and spake unto his children” (1

Nephi 1:16–17). If we had the record of Lehi, we would know more about him as a prophet in Jerusalem. A fuller account of Lehi's visions and dreams was recorded in the 116 pages of manuscript that were lost by Martin Harris after they were translated. Since they were not retranslated (see D&C 10), our analysis of Lehi's prophetic nature will be limited to what we can determine from the record we now have.

Lehi was a visionary man. Sariah, and Laman and Lemuel, on two different occasions used that phrase in referring to him (1 Nephi 2:11; 5:2). Both accounts carry the same uncomplimentary implications that father Jacob's older sons had when they saw Joseph approaching their camp saying "Behold, this dreamer cometh" (Genesis 37:19).

Lehi did not deny the charge of being visionary. He confirmed his sons' accusation by confounding them through the power of the Spirit (1 Nephi 2:14). To his wife, he replied: "I know that I am a visionary man; for if I had not seen the things of God in a vision I should not have known the goodness of God, but had tarried at Jerusalem, and had perished with my brethren" (1 Nephi 5:4). This response reminds one of the Prophet Joseph Smith's statement concerning his experiences:

Though I was hated and persecuted for saying that I had seen a vision, yet it was true; and while they were persecuting me, reviling me, and speaking all manner of evil against me falsely for so saying, I was led to say in my heart: Why persecute me for telling the truth? I have actually seen a vision; and who am I that I can withstand God, or why does the world think to make me deny what I have actually seen? For I had seen a vision; I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it, neither dared I do it; at least I knew that by so doing I would offend God, and come under condemnation. (Joseph Smith—History 1:25.)

First Nephi records several visions or dreams, as Lehi used these two terms. While Lehi was in prayer in behalf of his people, a pillar of fire appeared to him and dwelt upon a rock. Nephi does not say what his father saw and heard, only that he did see and hear much and it caused him to "quake and tremble exceedingly" (1 Nephi 1:6).<sup>3</sup> Lehi returned to his home at Jerusalem and cast himself upon his bed, being overcome by the Spirit and the things which he had witnessed. Being thus overcome with the Spirit "he was [again] carried away in a vision." In this vision Lehi "saw the heavens open, and he thought he saw God sitting

upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God." He next saw "One," who undoubtedly was Jesus, "descending out of the midst of heaven." Jesus' luster was described as "above that of the sun at noon-day." Twelve others followed Jesus and their brightness exceeded the "stars in the firmament." Jesus presented Lehi with a book and bade him read it.<sup>4</sup> As he read the account, he was filled with the Spirit of the Lord. It was confirmed to him that Jerusalem should be destroyed and many of its inhabitants should perish by the sword while others should be carried away into Babylon.

Lehi concluded from that marvelous vision that: (1) the works of God are great and marvelous; (2) God's throne is high in the heavens and his power, goodness, and mercy are over all the inhabitants of the earth; and (3) because of God's mercy those that come unto him shall not perish (see 1 Nephi 1:14). Lehi was now, if he had not been before, a special witness of Jesus Christ, a prophet in the fullest sense.

Anxious to share this great theophany with his people, Lehi went among the inhabitants of Jerusalem prophesying of those things that he had seen in the vision. But the Jews mocked him and sought his life as they had the lives of the prophets of old. A man is not warmly accepted if he does not espouse the popular cause. To speak of their defeat and capture would surely solicit such responses as "traitor," "coward," and "liar."

In a third dream, or vision, the Lord commanded Lehi to take his family and depart into the wilderness. Obedient to that command, Lehi left most of his possessions and took only his family, provisions, and tents and departed into the wilderness.

The Lord continued to instruct Lehi by dreams. In one dream, he was commanded to send his four sons back to Jerusalem to obtain the records known as the plates of brass (1 Nephi 3:1-4). After their successful return, he sent them to Jerusalem again, this time to get Ishmael and his family. The Book of Mormon does not say that this commandment came by dream but only that "the Lord spake unto him [Lehi] again" (1 Nephi 7:1). He had other dreams of his family (1 Nephi 8). He also probably saw the same visions of Jerusalem, the promised land, and the nations and kingdoms of the Gentiles which Nephi later saw (1 Nephi 11-14). Indeed Lehi was a visionary man, for that was why and how he escaped the fall of Jerusalem (2 Nephi 1:4).

## Lehi, Man of Faith

Lehi was a man of great faith. He shows this in the early chapters of 1 Nephi. He prayed "with all his heart, in behalf of his people" (1 Nephi 1:5). The visions he was given in answer to this prayer is certainly evidence of his faith (compare James 1:5-6). The Lord commended him for being faithful in preaching to the Jews in spite of mockery and persecution (1 Nephi 2:1). His faith was further exemplified by his willingness to leave all of his earthly possessions and depart into the wilderness not knowing the extent of his journey or the trials he would face. All this he was willing to do to be "obedient unto the word of the Lord" (1 Nephi 2:2-4). His faith is once more verified by the Spirit accompanying his speaking with his sons in the valley of Lemuel in convincing them to do as he commanded.

One of the most famous statements in the Book of Mormon is Nephi's faithful reply to his father about returning to Jerusalem to obtain the plates because he knew that "the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth them" (1 Nephi 3:7). A careful reading of the text strongly suggests that it was Lehi's teachings that were reflected in Nephi's answer. Referring to the older brothers' hesitancy in fulfilling the assignment of the Lord, Lehi reminded his son that it was not his own requirement but the Lord's, "Therefore go, my son, and thou shalt be favored of the Lord" (1 Nephi 3:5-6). Nephi fit the adage "like father, like son." He was certainly reflecting his father's teachings in his own faith.

Although Lehi's faith wavered one time in the face of extreme hunger and hardship (1 Nephi 16:20), and few there are who would not have wavered under similar conditions, he had been a pillar of strength before that and would be thereafter. But even though he was a prophet, he was still a human being. Again this reminds us of a statement by the Prophet Joseph Smith.

I was this morning introduced to a man from the east. After hearing my name, he remarked that I was nothing but a man, indicating by this expression, that he had supposed that a person to whom the Lord should see fit to reveal His will, must be something more than a man. He seemed to have forgotten the saying that fell from the lips of St. James [James 5:17-18], that Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, yet he had such power with God,

that He, in answer to his prayers, shut the heavens that they gave no rain for the space of three years and six months; and again, in answer to his prayer, the heavens gave forth rain, and the earth gave forth fruit.<sup>5</sup>

Although Lehi's wavering brought chastisement from the Lord and the deepest of sorrow to Lehi himself, it did not cost him his prophetic calling. The Lord still allowed him to use the Liahona and receive instructions for the people he had been called to preside over. (1 Nephi 16:25–27.)

## A Father of Nations

There are many millions of people who can trace their genealogy to the patriarch Lehi. Did he understand that this would happen when he began his prophetic career? Probably not. Although later he was shown his posterity in vision (1 Nephi 5:17), he was apparently oblivious to his destiny at the beginning of his mission. Let's examine how it all came about.

When his four sons went back to Jerusalem a second time, to invite Ishmael and his family to join the Lehi colony in the wilderness, Ishmael and his family consented. Why would Ishmael even entertain the thought of joining Lehi in the wilderness? It appears that they were not strangers. It is obvious that Ishmael accepted Lehi as a prophet of God, but there were other ties also. According to Erastus Snow, "The Prophet Joseph informed us that . . . Ishmael was of the lineage of Ephraim, and that his sons [had] married into Lehi's family, and Lehi's sons married Ishmael's daughters."<sup>6</sup> It is concluded from this statement that Lehi had some older daughters who had already married Ishmael's sons. It is further thought that Lehi and Ishmael had previously contracted with each other to have their children marry. Both were of the tribe of Joseph, and their families were nearly compatible in the number of matchups for marriage. When Zoram is included, there is a perfect numerical matchup of marriageable-aged people.

The marriages between these two families fulfilled prophecy. Elder Erastus Snow said that Joseph Smith explained that this marriage fulfilled the words of Jacob as he blessed Ephraim and Manasseh in Genesis 48: "And let my name be named on them,

and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth" (Genesis 48:16).

Thus these descendants of Manasseh and Ephraim grew together upon this American continent, with a sprinkling from the house of Judah, from Mulek descended, who left Jerusalem eleven years after Lehi, and founded the colony afterwards known as Zarahemla and found by Mosiah—thus making a combination, an intermixture of Ephraim and Manasseh with the remnants of Judah, and for aught we know, the remnants of some other tribes that might have accompanied Mulek.<sup>7</sup>

The children of Lehi and Ishmael were married while the colony was camped in the valley of Ishmael.

### Lehi the Seer

After the two families of Joseph's descendants were safely out of Jerusalem, once again the voice of the Lord spoke to Lehi by night and commanded him that "on the morrow he should take his journey into the wilderness" (1 Nephi 16:9). When Lehi went to his tent door the next morning he found on the ground "a round ball of curious workmanship" made of "fine brass." Within the ball were two spindles; one pointed the way they should go into the wilderness (1 Nephi 16:10). The miraculous brass ball directed Lehi's colony into the more fertile parts of the wilderness (1 Nephi 16:16).

Nephi explained that the pointers in the ball worked according to the faith, diligence, and heed given to them. He further said that writing appeared on the ball that was plain to read and which gave them "understanding concerning the ways of the Lord" (1 Nephi 16:29). This also changed from time to time according to the group's faith and diligence. And because those who looked into the interpreters were called seers (Mosiah 8:13), it is possible that those who were commanded to look into the ball would qualify as seers. "A seer can know of things which are past, and also of things which are to come, and by them shall all things be revealed, or, rather, shall secret things be made manifest, and hidden things shall come to light, and things which are not known shall be made known by them, and also things shall be made known by them which otherwise could not be known"

(Mosiah 8:17). Regardless of the Liahona experience, Lehi was in this sense certainly a seer.

## Lehi the Explorer

Another dimension of this great leader was his courage to tackle the frontier, to extend into the unknown. Lehi did just this, relying solely upon the Lord and the miraculous instrument that he had provided for them.

The group traveled south-southeast for many days and then established another camp. At that encampment Ishmael died and was buried (1 Nephi 16:34). This incident once again triggered a rebellion in the camp. The mourning daughters of Ishmael remonstrated against Lehi because of their father's death and of the great sufferings they had endured in the wilderness. And after all their sufferings they stated that they feared they would yet perish in the wilderness from hunger. They wanted to return to Jerusalem. (1 Nephi 16:35–36.)

The situation was so tense that the Lord himself had to intercede. Nephi records that “the Lord was with us, yea, even the voice of the Lord came and did speak many words unto them, and did chasten them exceedingly” (1 Nephi 16:39). As a result of the Lord's chastening, once again the rebellious temporarily repented, and the Lord blessed the caravan with food.

The weary travelers packed their provisions and journeyed on—on into the wilderness. However, the group changed directions and traveled nearly eastward from that time on, enduring hunger, thirst, and fatigue. There were ever-present murmurings, and the women were bearing children in the wilderness. Lehi and Sariah had two sons, Jacob and Joseph, born to them while in the wilderness. We have no record of any other children born to them, but the record does note that their married children were starting their families (1 Nephi 18:6, 19).

Those were difficult times. Lest anyone think that it was a joyous occasion—even ever-optimistic, positive Nephi described those days as follows: “And so great were the blessings of the Lord upon us, that while we did live upon raw meat in the wilderness, our women did give plenty of suck for their children, and were strong, yea, even like unto the men; and *they began to bear their journeyings without murmuring*” (1 Nephi 17:2; italics added).

When the weary travelers reached the Arabian Sea, they pitched their tents by the seashore. Nephi reported that notwithstanding they had suffered many afflictions and much difficulty, "even so much that we cannot write them all, we were exceedingly rejoiced when we came to the seashore; and we called the place Bountiful, because of its much fruit" (1 Nephi 17:6).

The colony spent a total of eight years in the wilderness (1 Nephi 17:4). The distance from Jerusalem to Southern Arabia then east to Bountiful is a distance of between 2,000 to 2,400 miles. The four sons made two additional round trips from the valley of Lemuel to Jerusalem, adding another 800 to 1,000 miles to their travels. By comparison, the Mormon pioneers walked about 1,100 miles—half the distance that Lehi and his colony did.

### Lehi the Family Man

One role of Lehi which is often overlooked is that of being a father with a responsibility to save his family. He was shown in a vision at the very beginning that Laman and Lemuel would probably fail in their quest for eternal life (1 Nephi 8:4, 17–18). Undaunted, he sought to persuade them otherwise throughout the length and breadth of his journey. At times he was even opposed by his usually faithful wife Sariah (1 Nephi 5:1–7). Torn by his sure knowledge that they were on the Lord's errand and the opposition from those he loved most, he undoubtedly had a constant worry on his mind. Probably only those who have struggled with similar family problems will fully appreciate Lehi's dilemma, but the realities of life covered this experienced father as he struggled to help some in his family feel and see what he felt and saw. Even at death's door he still prayed and yearned for some change to take place in his wayward sons (2 Nephi 1:12–23).

Yet, how he rejoiced in the accomplishments of faithful Nephi and stalwart Sam! His love is further exemplified in his love for one of the extended family—Zoram, the servant of Laban (2 Nephi 1:30–32). He gloried in the leadership exemplified in Nephi and fervently recommended that the rest of the family follow him as he followed the Spirit of the Lord (2 Nephi 1:24, 27). As Nephi had consistently honored his father, Lehi honored and respected his son and fully recognized him as his successor on this errand of the Lord. That Lehi was respected as

a father by even the rebellious sons is obvious from the fact that he kept them in one unit until his death.

One of the last acts Lehi completed in his role as father was to call each of his own sons, Zoram, and the sons of Ishmael together for one final blessing. One by one he pronounced his prophetic views upon them, extending that blessing unto their posterity for hundreds of years. The blessing to his son Joseph best exemplifies his views of the future.

### Lehi Blesses Joseph

Lehi reminded his youngest son that he had been born in the wilderness "in the days of my greatest sorrow." He then spoke of Joseph, the great patriarch who was sold into Egypt, who was young Joseph's direct ancestor and namesake. Lehi, quoting from the plates of brass, stated that "Joseph truly saw our day." That is, Joseph, who lived over a thousand years before Lehi, saw his posterity, the Nephite nation, in vision. He also prophesied of two Saints of the latter days who would also be named Joseph, who would be blessed of the Most High. Those two were Joseph Smith, Sr., and Joseph Smith, Jr.

The Prophet Joseph Smith, according to the Book of Mormon, would bring the posterity of young Joseph to a knowledge of the covenants which God made with their fathers. He would be great like unto Moses. Not only would Joseph Smith bring to the world the Book of Mormon, but he would help convince the world of the truthfulness of the Bible. Lehi further quoted Joseph's ancient prophecy relative to Joseph Smith that out of weakness he would be made strong. Those that sought to kill Joseph Smith would be confounded. The Lord promised Joseph of old that Joseph Smith "shall write the writing of the fruit of thy loins, unto the fruit of thy loins" (2 Nephi 3:18). That is, Joseph Smith would be instrumental in restoring the writings on the Josephic plates of brass and the Josephic Book of Mormon to the offspring of Joseph in the last days, even the house of Ephraim and Manasseh who constitute the vast majority of the Latter-day Saints. (See also 2 Nephi 4:2.)

### Conclusion

When Lehi settled in the New World, he rehearsed the great mercies of the Lord in bringing them out of the land of Jerusalem

to their land of promise in spite of their rebellions. He also told them concerning the land of promise which they had obtained, that it was their land of promise and it was a land choice above all other lands, and that the Lord had covenanted with him [Lehi] that it should be a land for his children forever (2 Nephi 1:5). The Western Hemisphere had been protected of the Lord and had not been discovered as yet by other nations, so it would not be overrun and there would be no place for an inheritance (2 Nephi 1:8). Lehi's final leg of his mission was now complete. He had weathered the storm of adversity from without and within. The Lord recognized the faithfulness of this good man by giving him an assurance of his eternal life. He proclaimed to his sons: "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" (2 Nephi 1:15).

We honor father Lehi as one of the noble and great ones; as the head of a major dispensation of the gospel of Jesus Christ; the father of a multitude of nations; as a prophet, seer, and revealer; a loving, caring parent and husband; a man of courage and convictions; one given a land inheritance forever for himself and his posterity; a pioneer and explorer; a patriarch and inspired scribe; an exemplar and a true disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ. As his vision extended forward, may his posterity of today extend their vision backward to the greatness of this exemplary patriarch.

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## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. John A. Widtsoe, comp., *Discourses of Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1961), p. 128.

2. *JD* 23:184 (will be quoted later in the text).

3. It is interesting to note that Moses described Jehovah's presence by night among the Israelites as a pillar of fire (Exodus 13:21-22). Nephi and Lehi, while in prison, were protected from bodily harm by a pillar of fire, and all who saw the miracle were so blessed (Helaman 5:24, 43). The Twelve Apostles will stand in a pillar of fire at Christ's coming (D&C 29:12). Joseph Smith, in two of his accounts of the First Vision, describes the Father and the Son descending in a "pillar of fire" (see also Paul's account in Acts 26:13).

4. It is also interesting to note that Ezekiel also saw a book in a vision wherein he was commanded to eat it (Ezekiel 2:9–3:4). John the Revelator had a similar experience (Revelation 10; see also D&C 77:14).

5. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), p. 89.

6. *JD* 23:184.

7. *JD* 23:185.