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Nephi's Ultimate Encounter with Deity: Some Thoughts on Helaman 10 7

Andrew C. Skinner

Our purpose in this paper is to discuss the doctrine of calling and election in relation to the life of one of God's great, but unsung, prophets—Nephi₂, son of Helaman (Nephi₂ is the second man mentioned in the Book of Mormon named Nephi). We are supported in the examination of such a topic by the Prophet Joseph Smith, who in June of 1839 said:

St. Paul exhorts us to make our calling and election sure . . . This principle ought (in its proper place) to be taught, for God hath not revealed anything to Joseph, but what he will make known unto the Twelve, and even the least Saint may know all things as fast as he is able to bear them. (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* 149; hereafter *TPJS*)

One of the most ennobling doctrines taught in ancient scripture is that of election. For people to have their calling and election made sure “means that the Lord seals their exaltation upon them while they are yet in this life” (McConkie 109). Modern prophets have taught that the doctrine and principles of election have their origin in the premortal organizing councils where future inhabitants of this earth were taught and blessed by gods and angels.

Brigham Young and Willard Richards explained that the general principle of election means that God elected or chose certain individuals in our premortal state to receive certain

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blessings, or to perform certain works, while in mortality (*HC* 4:258). According to the Book of Mormon, one great foreordained appointment or blessing was to receive the Melchizedek priesthood (*Alma* 13:3–9). Since we know that the greatest of all the gifts or blessings which God can bestow is eternal life (*D&C* 14:7), it follows that the greatest foreordained calling or appointment that could be received in the premortal existence was to eternal life.

And yet, the prophets have taught that before any blessing associated with premortal appointments or callings can be realized, the recipients must prove their worthiness by constant, steady righteous living on this earth—by fulfilling the requirements of righteousness imposed by divine laws which operate in mortality. In other words, election is contingent.

Joseph Smith said that the “unconditional election of individuals to eternal life was not taught by the Apostles” nor was the predestination of God’s spirit children to salvation or damnation:

God did elect or predestinate, that all those who would be saved, should be saved in Christ Jesus and through obedience to the Gospel; but He passes over no man’s sins, but visits them with correction, and if His children will not repent of their sins He will discard them. (*TPJS* 189)

Loyalty to God is the grand key by which an individual’s premortal, *conditional* calling and election to eternal life may be made sure and unconditional. Note again the Prophet Joseph’s words:

After a person has faith in Christ, repents of his sins, and is baptized for the remission of his sins and receives the Holy Ghost (by the laying on of hands), which is the first Comforter, then let him continue to humble himself before God, hungering and thirsting after righteousness, and living by every word of God, and the Lord will soon say unto him, Son, thou shalt be exalted. When the Lord has thoroughly proved him, and finds that the man is determined to serve him at all hazards, then the man will find his calling and election made sure, then it will be his privilege to receive the other Comforter which the Lord hath promised the Saints. (*TPJS* 150)

The Apostle Peter also implied the need for a constant, steady course of progressive righteousness when he encouraged all of us to make our calling and election sure.

And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity. For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But he that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins. Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall. (2 Peter 1:5–10)

For every true doctrine and principle, Satan (the great spoiler) has concocted and promoted a counterfeit. The Book of Mormon teaches us much about the *perverted* notion of election which prevailed among the Zoramites, whose beliefs stand in stark contrast to the truths revealed by both the Apostle Peter and the Prophet Joseph Smith. It is significant that the Zoramites' errant views concerning election resulted from their failure to *perform* the actions of all humble and submissive followers of God who have exaltation as a worthy goal:

But they had fallen into great errors, for they would not observe to keep the commandments of God, and his statutes, according to the law of Moses.

Neither would they observe the performances of the church to continue in prayer and supplication to God daily, that they might not enter into temptation.

Yea, in fine, they did pervert the ways of the Lord in very many instances; . . . For they had a place built up in the center of their synagogue, a place for standing, which was high above the head, and the top thereof would only admit one person.

Therefore, whosoever desired to worship must go forth and stand upon the top thereof, and stretch forth his hands towards heaven, and cry with a loud voice, saying: . . . Holy God, we believe that thou hast separated us from our brethren; and we do not believe in the tradition of our brethren, which was handed down to them by the childishness of their fathers; but we believe that thou hast elected us to be thy holy children; and also thou hast made it known unto us that there shall be no Christ.

But thou art the same yesterday, today, and forever; and thou hast elected us that we shall be saved, whilst all around us are elected to be cast by thy wrath down to hell; for the which holiness, O God, we thank thee; and we also thank thee that thou hast elected us, that we may not be led away after the foolish traditions of our brethren, which doth bind them down to a belief of Christ, which doth lead their hearts to wander far from thee, our God. (Alma 31:9–11, 13–17)

Although the Zoramites used the terminology of election, what they really fostered was the idea of elitism, which almost always has at its heart a disdain for others. True election promotes a genuine concern for the welfare of others. Elitism seems to cause people to forget God six out of seven days because it turns them selfishly inward. But the true doctrine of election promotes a daily desire for communion with deity and a search for the divine within us.

As a contrast to the practices of the Zoramites, we look to Helaman's son Nephi². Among those Book of Mormon personages whose lives serve as models of constant, steady righteous service in the face of tremendous opposition, there is none greater than Nephi, son of Helaman. Though not often emphasized or highlighted, his life provides us an opportunity to observe those behavioral patterns and attitudes necessary to have one's calling and election made sure according to the revelations to Peter and Joseph Smith.

We hear little about Nephi before the death of his father only that he was older than his brother Lehi and that the two of them "began to grow up unto the Lord" (Hel 3:21). Whether or not Nephi and Lehi were formally consecrated to God's service as were Jacob and Joseph, we have no way of knowing. However, we can be sure they were among those of the Church of God who fasted, prayed often, increased in humility, and yielded their hearts to God (v 35).

In the 53rd year of the reign of judges, Helaman died and Nephi began to serve as chief judge—at the start of very difficult times, indeed. For the next several years he witnessed contentions, rebellion, bloodshed, aristocratic oppression of the poor and humble, mockery of sacred things, rejection of prophecy

and revelation, murder, lying, stealing, adultery, and treason (Hel 4:12).

Eventually, Nephi, Lehi, and Moronihah got the people to repent for a time. Even though the majority of the population soon returned to their wicked ways, Nephi continued to cry repentance and to testify of the atoning mission of Christ. The pattern of his life was one of constant vigilance and concern for the spiritual welfare of his people in the face of unrelenting iniquity.

Paralleling the situation of Alma² fifty years before, and possibly even influenced by his example, Nephi yielded the judgment seat to another so as to devote his full time and energy to preaching the word of God (compare Alma 4:11–19 and Hel 5:1–4). Because Nephi taught with such great power, eight thousand Lamanites in the land of Zarahemla were converted and baptized (Hel 5:18–19).

But life was not easy for Nephi. He accomplished the Lord's work only at great personal sacrifice, even being cast into prison for the word's sake (Hel 5:21–22). In this he displayed significant parallels to Ammon, Alma, Amulek, Peter, Paul, Joseph Smith, and others—all had to endure physical abuse and psychological hardship (see for example Mosiah 7:7; Alma 14:17; Acts 12:5; and D&C 122:6).

Nephi was imprisoned many days without food while awaiting execution. However, God did not leave him alone and comfortless. During this prison experience Nephi was transfigured, heard the voice of God the Father, and was ministered to by angels, and the greater part of the Lamanites were converted and exceeded the Nephites in righteousness (Hel 5:36, 44–48; 6:1).

Spiritually renewed and fortified, Nephi went into the land northward for six years, but he met with little success for the people there “did reject all of his words” (Hel 7:3). When he returned to the land of his birth, he was appalled and heart-sick over how quickly and thoroughly his people had apostatized. Soon after Nephi returned a secret combination of Gadianton

judges sought to destroy him through a conspiracy (Hel 8:4–7). Faced with another life threatening situation, Nephi did not stop crying repentance and bearing powerful testimony of the mission and meaning of the Messiah. It is important to note that his teachings were grounded in the scriptures and in the words of prophets which testified in plainness of the coming of the son of God (vv 10–22).

Nephi next passed the surest test by which the validity of any prophet's predictions can be measured. According to Deuteronomy the test is simple:

And if thou say in thine heart, How shall we know the word which the Lord hath not spoken? When a prophet speaketh in the name of the Lord, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the Lord hath not spoken, but the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously: thou shalt not be afraid of him. (Deut 18:21–22)

It appears his people were also aware of this principle, for when Nephi told both of the murder and the murderer the people's chief judge, certain curious investigators said, "Behold, now we will know of a surety whether this man be a prophet and God hath commanded him to prophesy . . . if this thing which he has said . . . be true . . . then will we believe that the other words which he has spoken are true" (Hel 9:2).

As Nephi's predictions were verified, controversy and debate over his identity intensified. The corrupt officials of the government tried even harder to instigate a lynching, but Nephi harshly rebuked them in the same manner Jesus would later rebuke his enemies. His words serve as a poignant reminder to people of future dispensations that God does not tolerate disobedience indefinitely:

But Nephi said unto them: O ye fools, ye uncircumcised of heart, ye blind, and ye stiffnecked people, do ye know how long the Lord your God will suffer you that ye shall go on in this your way of sin? (Hel 9:21)

Some of the people began to believe that Nephi was a true prophet. Still others thought he might be a god because, as they

rightly surmised, only God can know the thoughts and intents of the heart! (D&C 6:16). Ultimately, there arose such a division among the people, that in their arguing they forgot the very object of their debate. They left Nephi literally standing by himself as they dispersed. The crisis had passed.

In this series of events, as in the rest of his life, Nephi demonstrated his absolute and uncompromising loyalty to the Savior of whom he prophesied. Indeed, his life at this point models the pattern of behavior of those who have their calling and election made sure as revealed by Joseph Smith. To reiterate: "When the Lord has thoroughly proved him, and finds that the man is determined to serve him at all hazards, then the man will find his calling and election made sure" (TPJS 150).

It becomes apparent from what follows in the scriptural account that Nephi did have his calling and election made sure at that time. As he went on his way toward his own house, dejected, he pondered the things which the Lord had shown him.

Discourses could be written about the importance of pondering and the results which flow therefrom. Great and marvelous are the revelations which have come to those who have pondered the Gospel plan and principles. For example, when Nephi¹, son of Lehi, pondered the words of his father, an unsurpassed vision of the condescension of God was unveiled to him (1 Ne 11:1). Those visions of the Lord led him to ponder *continually* the things he had seen and heard (2 Ne 4:16). As President Joseph F. Smith sat pondering the scriptures and the atonement, an unsurpassed vision of the spirit world was unveiled to him (D&C 138:1). As Joseph Smith Jr. pondered the instruction in James 1:5, he was motivated to pray, and the most sublime of all revelations in this dispensation was unveiled unto him (JS-H 1:12). Pondering is so crucial to the comprehending of eternal truth that the resurrected Savior specifically instructed the people on the American continent to go to their homes and ponder and pray about the things he had told them the first day he was with them, promising that then their minds would be

prepared for what he would teach them on the morrow (3 Ne 17:3).

As Nephi², son of Helaman, walked along pondering, he, too, was given an awe-inspiring revelation as the voice of the Lord spoke to him.

Blessed art thou Nephi, for those things which thou hast done; for I have beheld how thou hast with unweariness declared the word, which I have given unto thee, unto this people. And thou hast not feared them, and hast not sought thine own life, but hast sought my will, and to keep my commandments.

And now, because thou hast done this with *such* unweariness, behold I will bless thee forever; and I will make thee mighty in word and in deed, in faith and in works; yea, even that all things shall be done unto thee according to *thy* word, for thou shalt not ask that which is contrary to my will.

Behold, thou art Nephi, and I am God. Behold, I declare unto thee in the presence of mine angels, that ye shall have power over this people, and shall smite the earth with famine, and with pestilence, and with destruction, according to the wickedness of this people.

Behold, I give unto you power, that whatsoever ye shall seal on earth shall be sealed in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven; and thus shall ye have power among this people. (Hel 10:4–7; emphasis added)

Here the Lord declared four important truths which indicate that this complex and sacred experience was the ultimate encounter with deity that both Peter and the Prophet Joseph Smith encouraged all the Saints to strive for.

1. Nephi was blessed forever because of his unwearying loyalty and attention to the Lord's will without regard for personal desires.

2. All things which Nephi desired for himself would be brought to pass.

3. The Lord formally acknowledged His identity in direct relationship to Nephi's.

4. Nephi would receive the sealing powers of the priesthood including control over the elements and power "to bind and loose" on earth and in heaven (power to seal eternal relationships just as Elijah had).

What do these statements mean? First of all, the Lord said he was blessing Nephi eternally because he had served Him with “such unwearyingness” (Hel 10:5). This certainly fits what Joseph Smith taught about the prerequisites for having one’s calling and election made sure. Nephi had been “thoroughly proved” and had served the Lord “at all hazards.”

Second, the Lord promised Nephi that he could do all things according to his word. In other words, the Lord was extending to Nephi an invitation to ask for knowledge, power, and blessings up to and including eternal life as D&C 42:61 makes clear: “If thou shalt ask, thou shalt receive revelation upon revelation, knowledge upon knowledge, that thou mayest know the mysteries and peaceable things—that which bringeth joy, that which bringeth life eternal.”

Third, the Lord explicitly stated: “thou art Nephi, and I am God” (Hel 10:6). Since it is reasonable to assume that Nephi knew who he was, and since we know that of the Lord speaks no words in idleness, such a statement must have profound meaning. It appears to be an acknowledgement, in the presence of divine witnesses (the text says “angels”), of a special relationship of mutual love and respect between the Lord and Nephi. The Lord was claiming him as his servant and part of his spiritual posterity. It was also formal acknowledgement of a special covenant which the Lord was confirming with Nephi.

The Lord’s statements as recorded in this section of the book of Helaman fit perfectly the pattern of formal covenant making in the Old Testament world. The main features or components of covenants (and even treaties) established during Mosaic times include formal mention of the parties involved in the agreement; the stipulations of the covenant; the witnesses to the covenant; the statements of blessings and cursings; and the oaths confirming the promises made (see *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* 1:719–720).

Scriptural parallels to Nephi’s experience are found in the lives of others who were also promised eternal life by the Lord. To Alma₁ the Lord declared: “Blessed art thou, Alma . . . Thou

art my servant; and I covenant with thee that thou shalt have eternal life . . . ”(Mosiah 26:15, 20). To Joseph Smith the Lord said: “I am the Lord thy God, and I gave unto thee, my servant Joseph, an appointment, and restore all things. Ask what ye will, and it shall be given unto you according to my word . . . For I am the Lord thy God . . . for verily I seal upon you your exaltation . . .” (D&C 132:40, 49).

Fourth, Nephi also received the sealing powers of the Holy Priesthood. We know, therefore, that Nephi had entered into a state of sanctification since modern revelation confirms that those who are endowed with power and taught from on high are those who are first sanctified (D&C 43:16). This marvelous promise is made to all the Saints of God who become sanctified:

Therefore, sanctify yourselves that your minds become single to God, and the days will come that you shall see him; for he will unveil his face unto you, and it shall be in his own time, and in his own way, and according to his own will. (D&C 88:68)

This verse undoubtedly has reference to the Second Comforter. It will be remembered that Joseph Smith taught the following concerning the Second Comforter:

Now what is this other Comforter? It is no more nor less than the Lord Jesus Christ Himself; and this is the sum and substance of the whole matter; that when any man obtains this last Comforter, he will have the personage of Jesus Christ to attend him, or appear unto him from time to time, and even He will manifest the Father unto him, and they will take up their abode with him, and the visions of the heavens will be opened unto him, and the Lord will teach him face to face, and he may have a perfect knowledge of the mysteries of the Kingdom of God; and this is the state and place the ancient Saints arrived at when they had such glorious visions—Isaiah, Ezekiel, John upon the Isle of Patmos, St. Paul in the three heavens, and all the Saints who held communion with the general assembly and the Church of the Firstborn. (*TPJS* 150–151)

However, we must note that not every vision of the Savior is associated with his appearance as the Second Comforter. Three illustrations of this point are to be found in the lives of Nephi₁, Joseph Smith, and King Lamoni. Both Nephi and

Joseph, who had seen the Lord in vision, were given their unconditional guarantee of exaltation only *after* long years of devoted service, through hazardous times and life-threatening situations.

What we learn from this seeming paradox is that receiving a glorious vision is not an automatic guarantee of exaltation nor are marvelous manifestations given only to those who have had their calling and election made sure. The revelation of Jesus Christ is *not* synonymous with the seal of exaltation or the unconditional promise of the Second Comforter. Thus a person like King Lamoni could receive a vision of his Redeemer and not necessarily have his calling and election made sure (Alma 19:13).

Guarantees of exaltation along with receiving the Second Comforter are given to those who are proven to be thoroughly loyal to the Lord at all hazards. The nature of those hazards may change from dispensation to dispensation and may even be different from individual to individual. However, according to Joseph Smith hazards must come and one must stand loyal to God in the face of those hazards while continuing to hunger and thirst after righteousness. This statement implies, as do the very lives of Joseph Smith and Nephi, the son of Helaman, that the guarantee of exaltation comes only after a significant period of testing, and that glorious spiritual experiences can come prior to the giving of that guarantee.

We also need to note that people may receive exaltation without having the Savior appear to them in mortality. Many who obtain eternal life will do so by enduring to the end of mortality in faithfulness. In Doctrine and Covenants 50:5 we read: "But blessed are they who are faithful and endure, whether in life or in death, for they shall inherit eternal life" (see also 2 Nephi 31:20; D&C 14:7; 46:14).

Conclusion

Much resulted from Nephi's experience with God as recorded in Helaman 10. It became an anchor to his soul, and he continued his preaching (Hel 10:13–16), sealed and unsealed the heavens (Hel 11), received *many* revelations daily, and finally put an end to strife for a time.

And in the seventy and ninth year there began to be much strife. But it came to pass that Nephi and Lehi, and many of their brethren who knew concerning the true points of doctrine, having many revelations daily, therefore they did preach unto the people, insomuch that they did put an end to their strife in that same year. (Hel 11:23)

Ultimately, however, Nephi's experience seems to have made it impossible for him to remain in mortality for he apparently was translated like Alma, who had also experienced many of the same things.

And Nephi, the son of Helaman, had departed out of the land of Zarahemla, giving charge unto his son Nephi, who was his eldest son, concerning the plates of brass, and all the records which had been kept, and all those things which had been kept sacred from the departure of Lehi out of Jerusalem. Then he departed out of the land, and whither he went, no man knoweth . . . (3 Ne 1:2–3)

The record of Nephi, son of Helaman, is one of the finest examples and most complete renditions of one who “suffered tribulation in [his] Redeemer's name” (D&C 138:12–13). This is a sacrifice required of all who have their calling and election made sure.

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