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Source: *The Book of Mormon: First Nephi, The Doctrinal Foundation*

Editor(s): Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate, Jr.

Published: Provo, UT; Religious Studies Center, 1988

Page(s): 35-54



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THE CALLING OF A PROPHET

John W. Welch

Chapter 1 of 1 Nephi reports in very brief but significant terms the essential facts about the call and public ministry of the prophet Lehi. These rich verses reward close examination. While many approaches can be taken to enhance our understanding and appreciation of the inspiration and courageous dedication of this father-prophet,¹ the approach taken in this paper seeks to examine several details in the text of 1 Nephi 1, attempting, among other things, to see Lehi's prophetic call in light of his world by inquiring how his words and experiences may have been understood by his contemporaries. It is concluded that in many remarkable respects Lehi had much in common with other prophets of God called in that classic era of ancient Israelite prophecy.

Despite the fact that the text reporting the call of Lehi is very brief,² it employs several key words and images that were full of tradition and conveyed much meaning in the world in which Lehi lived. By understanding the significance of these ancient words

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and phrases, modern readers can appreciate many interesting aspects of Lehi's prophetic call. Especially important is Lehi's vision in which he sees God "sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels" (1 Nephi 1:8). It appears that by this experience, which compares closely with the so-called "council visions" of Old Testament prophets,³ Lehi became a prophet.

The commencement of the first year of the reign of Zedekiah. The engaging story of Lehi's call is familiar to virtually every person who has ever begun to read the Book of Mormon. It came in the commencement of the first year of the reign of Zedekiah,⁴ king of Judah, in 597/96 B.C. This was undoubtedly an unforgettably troubling year, for in the first part of December, 598 B.C., Jehoiakim, king of Judah, had died. His son Jehoiachin, who was probably only an adolescent, was made king.⁵ Three months and ten days later, on 16 March (2 Adar) 597 B.C., Jerusalem fell, having been besieged by the Babylonians (2 Kings 24:10–16).⁶ They deposed king Jehoiachin and deported him to Babylon, along with many of the leading citizens, soldiers, and craftsmen of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 24:1),⁷ leaving Jehoiachin's uncle, the mere twenty-one-year-old Zedekiah, on the throne as a puppet king.⁸ Therefore, at the time when Lehi became concerned about the welfare of his people, the still insurgent Jews at Jerusalem already knew well the indomitable military power of the Babylonians and were in a weakened political position with an inexperienced, twenty-one-year-old king at their helm. The situation in Jerusalem was grave and volatile, if not already desperate.

Such circumstances as trouble in the land and the coronation of a new king often precipitated prophetic action in the ancient world. One scholar, for example, has argued from circumstantial evidence in the Old Testament that prophecy played an especially important role at or around the coronation of each new king. He suggests that the distinctive council visions and messenger prophecies of Micaiah (1 Kings 22:1–38), Isaiah (Isaiah 6, 40), Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1–10), and Amos (Amos 7:1–3, 4–6, 7–9; 8:1–3; 9:1), as well as Jeremiah's temple sermon (Jeremiah 26:1)—which have much in common with 1 Nephi 1—all occurred around the New Year, at the "epiphany and enthronement of Yahweh," the day when the king was typically crowned and the fates or destinies pronounced.⁹ If there is any merit to such suggestions, we

may understand more clearly the sharply negative reaction which Lehi's public message evoked,¹⁰ since it was apparently near the day when the Israelites were celebrating Zedekiah's enthronement, or at least "in the commencement" of the first year of his troubled reign, that many prophets including Lehi came forth and spoke out pessimistically against Zedekiah's newly installed regime.

Many prophets. Nephi reports that "there came many prophets, prophesying unto the people that they must repent, or the great city Jerusalem must be destroyed" (1 Nephi 1:4). Who were these other prophets and how do their words compare with Lehi's? Prophetic messages of judgment and destruction were in fact common among the so-called classical prophets of Israel who are known to have been active at this time. For example during Lehi's lifetime, Nahum (ca. 612 B.C.) proclaimed the vengeance of the Lord on his enemies and marked the fall of Nineveh. Zephaniah (who also lived during this time) prophesied that God would sweep the earth completely clean and would stretch his hand over Judah to punish its royal house and to wipe out of Jerusalem all remnants of Baal (Zephaniah 1:2-9). "The whole land shall be devoured by the fire of his jealousy," he prophesied (Zephaniah 1:18). "Gather yourselves together, . . . O nation, . . . before the fierce anger of the Lord come upon you," he exhorted (Zephaniah 2:1-2; cf. 3:8).¹¹ Zephaniah spoke doom against Jerusalem, calling it a tyrant city, filthy and foul (Zephaniah 3:1-8), while he also promised that a poor and afflicted remnant would be preserved by finding refuge in the Lord (Zephaniah 3:11-13; cf. Isaiah 6:13, which also holds out some optimism for the return or repentance of a remnant through the power of the "holy seed") and that the survivors would be rescued and gathered when the proper time would come (Zephaniah 3:19-20). Habakkuk (ca. 609-598 B.C.) prophesied during the reign of Jehoiakim¹² of the destruction of the treacherous and of the overconfident, pronouncing five woes upon extortioners, exploiters, debauchery, and idolatry (Habakkuk 2:5-20), while also offering a prayer to God that He be merciful (Habakkuk 3:2). Jeremiah was also similarly active during and after Lehi's day. And indeed, there were undoubtedly many other prophets who arose during this time for whom we have no names (2 Chronicles 36:15-16).¹³

It is significant in seeing Lehi among his contemporaries that he was not a lone voice delivering the messages of woe, destruc-

tion, mercy, and redemption. He likewise prophesied that Jerusalem would be destroyed and that its inhabitants would perish by the sword (1 Nephi 1:13), yet he also praised the mercy of God and looked forward to the "redemption of the world" (1 Nephi 1:14, 19). Although 1 Nephi makes no explicit statement relating Lehi's message to that of his contemporaries, the point is evident: The people in Jerusalem in Lehi's day had been warned expressly and repeatedly.

Nephi also leaves the ill fate of these other prophets unstated. Only a few years earlier, for example, the prophet Urijah had been persecuted, had fled to Egypt, was extradited, convicted, and ignominiously executed for preaching the same message that the prophets were again preaching in the first year of the reign of Zedekiah (Jeremiah 26:20–23). Similarly 2 Chronicles 36:15–16 later explains what had happened to these prophets and why: "And the Lord God of their fathers sent to them by his messengers . . . because he had compassion on his people, and on his dwelling place: But they mocked the messengers of God, and despised his words, and misused his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against his people, till there was no remedy." The fact that he was willing to deliver that very message entrusted to him by God, knowing full well that precisely the same thing would undoubtedly happen to him as had already happened to others delivering that identical message only a few months or years before, marks Lehi as a man of extraordinary courage, commitment, and devotion to the Lord and to his people, one of the hallmarks of a true prophet of the Lord.

It was also typical at this time for these prophets to work largely by themselves. They fulfilled "their missions alone as individuals,"¹⁴ although this does not imply that they were "detached from the mainstream of Israel's religious tradition."¹⁵ Lehi appears to have worked this way, acting on his own inspiration and initiative,¹⁶ for Nephi's account is silent on any involvement Lehi might have had with his fellow prophets. He may have gone forth and prayed unto the Lord (1 Nephi 1:5) because he was among the prophets who were already actively crying repentance in Jerusalem, but it appears more likely that he was profoundly moved to pray, motivated by the problems in Jerusalem and by the messages of the prophets whom he had just heard.

Prayed . . . on behalf of his people. Lehi's first recorded impulse was to pray on behalf of his people (1 Nephi 1:5). In so

doing, he was in harmony with the spirit of classic Hebrew prophecy which flourished during his day. A prophet who knows with moral certainty what will happen to his people has been characterized as having an "irresistible" need not only to deliver his message, but "to intercede on behalf of his people."¹⁷ Such attempts by the prophets to try through prayer to offset the impending doom of all their people as a whole community have been identified as one of the notable functions of the classic Israelite prophets during the time of Lehi.¹⁸ Thus, Lehi's action would probably have been viewed by his contemporaries as being in tune with the spirit of prophecy in his day.

A pillar of fire. As Lehi prayed, he beheld a pillar of fire dwelling upon a rock in front of him. From this pillar Lehi saw and heard many powerful things,¹⁹ but Nephi does not elaborate on who or what Lehi saw in this pillar of fire. Joseph Smith described how God, angels, and spirits appear in fiery manifestations; he taught, for instance, that "spirits can only be revealed in flaming fire and glory."²⁰ From ancient sources, too, one learns that the appearance of fire, especially a pillar of fire, was a frequent mode of heavenly manifestation, sometimes of God and other times of his messengers or of the holy beings who surrounded him. God appeared to Moses in a burning bush (Exodus 3:2) and on a flaming Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:18); he also appeared over the tabernacle at night in a fire (Numbers 9:15) and over the door of the tabernacle by day in a similar "pillar of cloud" (Deuteronomy 31:15). On some occasions in the Old Testament, fire was associated with God's messengers, especially those emanating from God's council (discussed further below; see, for example, Psalm 104:4), whose fiery description can be compared with the appearance of Moroni in Joseph Smith—History 1:30–32; and in other ancient accounts fire was used to combat God's enemies.²¹ Thus, we cannot be certain who or what²² Lehi saw in the pillar of fire that appeared to him. Lehi could have seen God in this pillar, but since his vision of God himself is reported as the next stage of the vision, it seems more likely to me that what he beheld at this time was a messenger of God whose threatening words and presence, perhaps summoning Lehi, caused Lehi to "quake and tremble exceedingly" (1 Nephi 1:6).

He thought he saw God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels. Lehi returned directly to

his bed, where the next part of his vision opened. There, most significantly, he beheld "God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels." Such visions of God seated in the midst of his host assembled in heaven appear to have been particularly meaningful for people in Lehi's day.²³ If the prevailing understanding is correct, it was by such a vision that the prophet received his commission, his authorization, his perspective, his knowledge of God, and his information about God's judgments and decrees. Similarly, from the texts of the Book of Mormon one can assume that in connection with his encounter with God and the heavenly council Lehi likewise received his call to serve as a prophet of God, as the following details further show.

In many other texts from the ancient Near East, God is visualized presiding over and working with his council. Important relationships between this council and God's prophets have been scrutinized in recent years by several scholars.²⁴ While the members of this council served several functions, such as accompanying their God in battle²⁵ and giving "praise to his glorious position,"²⁶ the council's most distinctive purpose was to govern the world by delivering the decrees of God.²⁷ These decrees were typically issued to messengers or prophets who would deliver them to those affected. In earlier years, the prophets of Israel had delivered their messages primarily to the kings of Israel, but in Lehi's day, they typically directed these edicts, like imperial heralds, to the entire population.²⁸

Three main elements common to most accounts of such council visions in the Bible have been identified. They are, first, that God was described as surrounded by his numerous host; second, that the discussion of the council was brought to a conclusion by a council leader; and third, that the word of God was then stated to determine the fate of a person or group.²⁹ The heralds of the council who delivered God's decrees were sometimes deities or angels; other times they were human prophets, messengers, or apostles who were admitted in a vision into the council, made privy to the judgment of the council, and then dispatched to make their assigned proclamation. From the fact that many ancient Near Eastern accounts show the messenger delivering the identical words he received from the council, it has been concluded that it was apparently important to these people that "the message [be] delivered in precisely the same words that had been given to the divine couriers,"³⁰ and that this gave divine

authority and legitimacy to the decrees the prophet or messenger delivered.³¹ That council, its decrees, its intimate confidences, and the heavenly principles upon which this council was based, were known in Hebrew as the *sod* (Greek *mysterion*),³² and knowing the *sod* conferred great power and wisdom.

This understanding of God, his heavenly council, and the prophet's role as a messenger of that council has been derived from several passages in the Old Testament and in ancient Near Eastern literature. It was apparently fairly well understood in Lehi's day. For example, 1 Kings 22:19–23, as noted earlier, records the experience of the prophet Micaiah, who saw God and his council, heard its deliberation and resolution, and was sent forth with the decree of God:

And he said, Hear thou therefore the word of the Lord: I saw the Lord sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing by him on his right hand and on his left. And the Lord said, Who shall persuade Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead? And one said on this manner, and another said on that manner. And there came forth a spirit, and stood before the Lord, and said, I will persuade him. And the Lord said unto him . . . Thou shalt persuade him, and prevail also: go forth, and do so.

Likewise, Jeremiah 23:18 (contemporaneous with Lehi) asks rhetorically about those who are true prophets: "For who hath stood in Yahweh's council [*sod*], and seen and heard his word? Who has carefully marked [obeyed] his word?"³³ This passage not only stresses the importance in Lehi's day for a prophet to stand in the council of God, but also to both "see and hear" what goes on there, and then to carry out his assignment meticulously by delivering the precise words of the council's decree, just as Lehi does. To so report and do, it has been concluded, was certification in that day that the prophet was a true messenger of God.³⁴

Our understanding of Lehi's mission as a prophet can be increased in this light. As Jeremiah demands of a true prophet, Lehi indeed beheld God and his assembly, "saw and heard" (1 Nephi 1:18, 19; also 1:6) what transpired there, and then "went forth . . . to declare unto [the people of Jerusalem] concerning the things which he had both seen and heard" (verse 18).

Angels. In Lehi's vision, God was surrounded by his numerous host. As described above, it appears that the host was typi-

cally viewed in antiquity as serving three functions, namely, praising God, delivering the decrees of the council, and accompanying God in battle. The first two of these functions are quite clearly present in Lehi's vision, and the third may be inferred. First, in 1 Nephi 1:8, the host was "singing and praising their God."¹⁵ Second, Lehi describes the members of the host as angels (literally "messengers"). In both Hebrew and Greek the words translated as "angel" or "apostle" can literally mean "messenger," indicating the likely presence here of the messenger function of these individuals in God's council. As in the paradigm above, a conspicuous council leader also came forth in Lehi's vision to deliver a book to him and to send him forth as a messenger. Third, while that was done, twelve others from the council then "went forth upon the face of the earth." Perhaps they were viewed as fulfilling the warrior function often served by these heavenly beings. The vision of Ezekiel appears to have been grounded in a similar manifestation. He saw "six men" come forth, each with "a slaughter weapon in his hand; and one man among them was clothed with linen, with a writer's inkhorn by his side" (Ezekiel 9:2-3).¹⁶ It is possible that the twelve whom Lehi saw were likewise coming forth to take their battle stations or warning posts, imminently prepared to execute judgment upon Jerusalem, but there is no express indication in 1 Nephi who these twelve were or what they did. They probably should not be thought of as archangels, as understood in later Judaism.¹⁷ Perhaps more relevant is the possibility that the number twelve may have had significance in the minds of Lehi and his contemporaries because multiples of twelve often had judicial and administrative significance in the courts and official bodies of Israel. Later, Lehi would learn more about the coming of the Messiah and his Twelve Apostles, but in the context of Lehi's vision up to this particular point, these twelve would probably have been thought of as functioning in the role of executing God's judgment, rather than in the other roles they would later fulfill during Jesus' earthly ministry.¹⁸

One descending. The leader of this council was exceptionally glorious ("his luster was above that of the sun at noon-day," 1 Nephi 1:9; cf. Acts 22:6; Joseph Smith—History 1:30), but beyond that he is not specifically identified in the text. It may be that this principal messenger was one of the angels, if the pronoun *one* in verse 9 refers to "one" of the angels, which would be

the closest plural antecedent out of which "one" might have been identified. On the other hand, it seems more likely that the "one descending" was "the Holy One of Israel," the Lord himself, who then had left his throne to deliver in person his decree to his messenger the prophet,³⁹ for as in Amos 3:7 the Lord God himself reveals his secrets (*sod*) unto his servants, the prophets. Under this understanding, the one who came down⁴⁰ to speak to Lehi was the God himself who had been initially seated on his throne, and thus Lehi's exclamation "unto the Lord" at the conclusion of his vision, extolling the highness of his throne (verse 14), should be understood as having been made in a direct personal statement to that God, Christ himself, as he stood right before Lehi (verse 11).⁴¹

Book. The edict delivered to Lehi contained the judgments of God and his council upon the city of Jerusalem.⁴² It began with a curse upon the city: "Wo, wo, unto Jerusalem, for I have seen thine abominations!" (1 Nephi 1:13; cf. Ezekiel 2:10).⁴³ From this decree, Lehi learned many other things about the destruction of Jerusalem by the sword (verse 13, cf. David's vision in 1 Chronicles 21:16); he also read there about the coming of a Messiah and, as others too had prophesied about the eventual recovery of the scattered remnant (cf. Zephaniah 3:19–20 above), about the redemption of the world (1 Nephi 1:19).

It is interesting that Lehi read this information in a "book" (verse 11).⁴⁴ The book may have been a scroll, or it could have been comprised of tablets. A close analogue to 1 Nephi 1:11 is found in the contemporary writings of Habakkuk, where the Lord spoke to Habakkuk about the preparation of a book that a herald from the Lord's council was to carry forth with speed: "And the Lord answered me, and said, Write the vision, and make it plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth it" (Habakkuk 2:2). Equally, it appears that the unstated instruction to Lehi was that he should deliver his message post haste.⁴⁵ The fact that Lehi was handed a written decree may also reflect the contemporary legal and political practices of his day. Some have theorized that preclassical, nonwritten prophecy flourished in the ninth and tenth centuries B.C. in part because at that time an oral message was still regarded as an authoritative decree.⁴⁶ During Lehi's day, however, written edicts under the Assyrian practice had become the standard legal mode of issuing proclamations, and prophets were more concerned with writing, and thus the

authoritativeness of Lehi's words in the minds of his listeners was probably enhanced by the fact that he could report that he had read these words in a written decree.

He did exclaim many things. Lehi's reaction to this edict was profoundly spiritual. He was "filled with the Spirit of the Lord" and his "soul did rejoice, and his whole heart was filled" (1 Nephi 1:12, 15). He spontaneously and eloquently joined the heavenly host in praising God. By so doing, he functionally, if not constitutionally, joined the council as one of its members. Since his words seem to reflect poetic composition similar to exaltations of God's controlling power and wisdom found in ancient Near Eastern literature,⁴ it may have been that Lehi, too, sang his words of praise, like the other hymns or psalms of praise in his day were sung:

Great and marvelous are thy works,
O Lord God Almighty!
Thy throne is high in the heavens.

Thy power, and goodness, and mercy
Are over all the inhabitants of the earth

Because thou art merciful
thou wilt not suffer those who come unto thee
that they shall perish! (verse 14.)

He truly testified. Lehi next "went forth among the people, and began to prophesy and to declare unto them" what he had "seen and heard" (verse 18). He had little choice but to speak out, in the sense that he, like the other prophets of God, was impelled and constrained by the Spirit. Prophets speak because they must, and because they cannot hold back what they know. Lehi probably also knew, like Ezekiel, that if he did not deliver the warning that God had commanded him to speak, the blood of all the wicked would be required at his hand; but if he warned the wicked then he would save his own soul (Ezekiel 3:17-19).

His message was one of testimony. "He truly testified of their wickedness and their abominations" (1 Nephi 1:19). Since Lehi had seen the facts in the council and in the book, he could stand as a witness and testify against the people, much as a plaintiff would lodge a complaint or accusation against a defen-

dant or lawbreaker. If he spoke like the other prophets of his day, Lehi's testimony was punctuated with blunt declarative statements, offering no excuses, rationales, theological justifications, or explanations. He simply declared the message he had been told to give. Thus, like several other prophets at this time who brought so-called "prophetic lawsuits" against the people of Israel or in the Book of Mormon,⁴⁸ Lehi issued a declarative testimony or affidavit against the wickedness of the people in Jerusalem. In addition, he could also deliver the verdict, as in the formulaic "prophetic judgment-speeches" of other contemporaneous prophets,⁴⁹ for the verdict in heaven had already been handed down.

While Lehi's reference to the redemption of the world offered hope to the people of Jerusalem that they would someday be bought back from this foreclosure, and that the world would eventually be saved (1 Nephi 1:19) even though it be utterly wasted (cf. Zephaniah 1:2), the reaction to his message was still predictable. The people became angry and tried to kill him. Since they were law-abiding citizens, they probably raised some technical charge of treason or false prophecy against Lehi, as they did against Jeremiah (Jeremiah 26:11), but their underlying motive would more likely be found in the fact that Lehi, like so many prophets, spoke concerning the coming of a Messiah to overthrow the wicked establishment. In the face of this threat, and just as the Lord also promised to protect Jeremiah, he delivered Lehi, for, as Nephi explains, "the tender mercies of the Lord are over all those whom he hath chosen, because of their faith, to make them mighty even unto the power of deliverance" (1 Nephi 1:20). In a dream, Lehi was blessed by the Lord for having faithfully fulfilled the assignment he had been given. He was permitted and commanded to leave his post and depart into the wilderness (1 Nephi 2:1-2), so that he could become an instrument "unto the fulfilling of the word of the Lord, that [Israel] should be scattered upon all the face of the earth" (1 Nephi 10:13).

The mysteries. Not everyone, however, rejected Lehi's message. At least Nephi desired to know of the truthfulness of the words of his father. In faith, with great desires and lowliness of heart,⁵⁰ and being willing to be obedient and not rebellious, Nephi sought and received a confirmation from God so that he "did believe all the words which had been spoken" by Lehi (1

Nephi 2:16). In a comparable way, the Lord will make known to all his children the truthfulness of the words of his messengers, the prophets.

It is significant to me that Nephi specifically says here that he desired to know “of the mysteries of God” (verse 16). While all are invited to seek and all are promised knowledge (1 Nephi 15:8; Matthew 7:7; Moroni 10:4–5), this is not an open invitation for all men and women to seek “mysteries” beyond the declarative words of the prophets. When Nephi said that he desired to know of the “mysteries,” he was most likely referring quite precisely to the information that Lehi had just learned through his visions in 1 Nephi 1.³¹ As stated above, the Hebrew word *sod* basically means “council,” but by association it also came to mean the “decree of the council” itself.³² Because the council and its actions were not open to the general public, they were thought of as being very confidential, esoteric, or secret, also “conveying the notion of intimate friendship.”³³ Hence, the word *sod* can also be translated as “mystery”: “*Sod* also came to be used for the secret decision rendered at such councils . . . and in the Hebrew represented by Prov, Sir, and Qumran, *sod* is used simply for secrets or mysteries.”³⁴ Just as Raymond E. Brown has concluded that “the background of such a concept is that of the prophets being introduced into the heavenly assembly and gaining a knowledge of its secret decrees,”³⁵ so it would appear that Lehi, in just such a way, had attained access on this occasion to the “mysteries” of God. From this, one can see that while the decrees of the divine council (*sod*) were confidential and privileged information (and that in this sense they can be called *mysteria*), they were not puzzles or cryptic information. Hence when Nephi has great desires to “know of the mysteries of God,” so shortly after Lehi had experienced the *sod*, it would appear that Nephi is similarly seeking to know the *sod* and the decrees and glories of that council, just as Lehi had known them and as Jeremiah speaks of them. He is blessed with a visit of the Lord and a belief in “all the words” which Lehi had spoken, that is, the words which Lehi had delivered as he had received them from the Lord (1 Nephi 2:16).

Conclusion. First Nephi 1 can clearly be approached in many ways to better understand and appreciate the call of Lehi as a prophet of God. This presentation has tried to use a variety of

information about the gospel and about Lehi's own day to elucidate the possible meanings of his visions in 1 Nephi 1.

From this, one can see how Lehi's dedication and inspiration can be confirmed in terms of several universally applicable aspects of prophecy. Under generally applicable definitions of what it means to be a prophet, Lehi certainly qualifies. Hugh B. Brown has defined eleven characteristics that "should distinguish a man who claims to be a prophet."⁵⁶ Lehi manifests them all: (1) He boldly claims that God has spoken to him; (2) he is a dignified man bearing a dignified message; (3) he declares his message without fear; (4) he bears witness without argument or concession; (5) he speaks in the name of the Lord; (6) he predicts future events that come to pass; (7) his message pertains to future as well as present generations; (8) he endures persecution; (9) he denounces wickedness fearlessly; (10) he does things that no man could do without God's help; and (11) his teachings are in strict agreement with scripture. Other criteria can be added to this list; for example, (12) that he prophesies of Christ.⁵⁷ Each of these characteristics are found in 1 Nephi 1:4-20 and in the life and courageous deeds of the prophet Lehi.⁵⁸

Additionally and equally so, Lehi's prophetic attributes can be understood and confirmed in light of classical Israelite prophecy specific to his own contemporaneous world. Like other prophets in the seventh century, Lehi was steeped in the precise terminology and conception of the divine heavenly council (verse 8) and in its many particular functions and its distinctive images and protocol, which gave meaning and power to his message. Like his many prophetic contemporaries, Lehi also abhorred and testified against the abominations he saw in Jerusalem (verse 19); he and they rejected the arrogant nationalism of many Jews in Jerusalem and spoke instead of a worldwide redemption (verse 19); he spoke out publicly, triggered by events at the commencement of a new king's reign (verse 4); he pleaded with God in behalf of his people (verse 5); he called for simple righteousness, addressing the general population as opposed to the king (verse 18); he worked essentially alone, and was greatly concerned that his prophecies be written down. These were typical characteristics of prophets of this time; they and several others like them are reflected in remarkable detail in the abbreviated account of 1 Nephi 1.

It is clear that prophets have been called upon by God to say

and do many different things over the centuries. Some have been called like Moses as lawgivers, or like Joshua as military leaders. Abraham served as a paragon of faith, peace, and covenant making, while others like Elijah were outspoken dissidents decrying the wickedness of kings and idolatry.¹⁹ Similarly, Lehi's role among the prophets of God was specifically suited to the needs of the Lord in that day. He was called as a messenger of the Lord, faithfully delivering God's decree against Jerusalem, and obediently following the direction of the Lord during that pivotal period in the history of Jerusalem and of the world as well. By all eternal and historical criteria, Lehi qualifies functionally, archetypally, literarily, spiritually, and scripturally as one of the great prophets of God. His call as a prophet in 1 Nephi 1 gives a foundation of divine authority, revelation, and guidance for everything that follows father Lehi's posterity throughout the Book of Mormon.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. For various approaches, see George Reynolds and J. Sjodahl, *Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1955) 1:7–12; Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1952), pp. 4–13; Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1957), pp. 25–54; Sidney Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968), p. 97; S. Kent Brown, "Lehi's Personal Record: Quest for a Missing Source," *BYU Studies* 24 (1984), pp. 19–42; Blake Thomas Ostler, "The Throne-Theophany and Prophetic Commission in 1 Nephi: A Form-Critical Analysis," F.A.R.M.S. Preliminary Report, OST-82 (1982), in *BYU Studies*, 26:4 (Fall 1986), 67–95.

2. 1 Nephi 1 contains only an abridgment of the record of Lehi (verse 17). Sometimes Nephi appears to paraphrase his father's words, as in verse 15, "after this manner was the language of my father"; other times he is quoting verbatim, as in verse 8 (compare Alma 36:22, also quoting these twenty-one words of Lehi) and 1:13.

3. Throughout this article, I speak of Lehi's vision as a "council vision." I do this for several reasons, primarily because it is similar to the council visions of Old Testament prophets. Also, the word *concourse* in Joseph Smith's day meant "a moving, flowing or running together; a concourse of men," and it is used in this sense in 1 Nephi 8:21; but the word also meant "a meeting; an assembly of men; an assembly of things," thus indicating that the idea of a council might be more expressly present in Lehi's account than a modern reader is likely to notice. Noah Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language*

(1828). See also Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1967), pp. 212–13, describing Lehi's vision as one that takes us "back to a council in heaven as a fitting prologue to a religious history." The term *council*, of course, should not be understood to describe a small group. Like the premortal Council in Heaven, the council which Lehi beheld was not a small cabinet meeting, but was multitudinous, as is reflected in the fact that the word *concourses* is plural. However, comparisons between Lehi's vision and the "council visions" of his contemporaries or others should not be overstated. Like all comparisons, there will be differences as well as similarities.

4. Events in the ancient world were normally dated by reference to regnal years. A similar reference introduces Isaiah's council vision in Isaiah 6:1, "In the year that king Uzziah died."

5. According to 2 Chronicles 36:9, Jehoiachin was eight years old when he was placed on the throne. According to 2 Kings 24:8, he was eighteen, but since his father Jehoiakim only lived to be thirty-six, the younger age for Jehoiachin seems more likely.

6. A contemporaneous cuneiform tablet records the specific events surrounding this conquest. See D. Winton Thomas, ed., *Documents from Old Testament Times* (Edinburgh: Nelson, 1958), p. 80. A different account is given in 2 Chronicles 36:5–7, which reports that Jehoiakim was still king when the Babylonians attacked, that Jehoiachin was placed on the throne for three months and ten days and then was brought to Babylon and replaced by Zedekiah.

7. Jeremiah 52:28 numbers them at 3,023. 2 Kings 24:14 reports that ten thousand were taken captive, perhaps in a second stage of deportation. See Robert Smith, "Book of Mormon Event Structure: Ancient Near East," F.A.R.M.S. Preliminary Report, SMI-84, pp. 14–15; John W. Welch, "They Came from Jerusalem," *Ensign* (Sept. 1976), pp. 27–30.

8. Zedekiah was apparently placed on the throne on 22 April (10 Nisan) 597 B.C. but his coronation would have taken place either on 1 Tishri, or 1 Nisan of the following year, and thus it is unclear whether the Book of Mormon phrase "in the commencement of the first year of the reign of Zedekiah," 1 Nephi 1:4, cf. Jeremiah 49:34, refers to the day he began to rule or the day of his coronation. See Smith, "Book of Mormon Event Structure," p. 15.

9. Edwin Kingsbury, "The Prophets and the Council of Yahweh," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 83 (1964), p. 284, pointing especially to parallels in the determination of destiny in the council of the gods following the reenthronement of Marduk in the Babylonian year-rite. Cf. G. Widengren, *The Ascension of the Apostle and the Heavenly Book (King and Saviour III)* (Uppsala: Lundequistska/Leipzig: Harrasowitz, 1950), p. 10. These sources help us understand reasons why the New Year was an effective time for a prophetic call.

10. The reaction of the people in Jerusalem was political in the sense that his message indicted and condemned the city whose inhabitants then collectively sought Lehi's life. This would have involved, in my opinion, several forms of legal and political action, much like the lawsuit brought against Jeremiah and the extradition procedure initiated in the case of Urijah discussed in Jeremiah 26.

11. J. Watts's translation, in *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah* (Cambridge: University Press, 1975).

12. John Bright, *Jeremiah* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965), p. 333. There may have been others. Although they cannot be dated precisely, prophecies such as Joel's predictions of the disastrous "day of the Lord" and his pleas for repentance also can "most naturally . . . be understood [in] reference to the cataclysmic events of 587 B.C." L. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 24, and Obadiah's prophecies, particularly in verses 11–14, speaking of an overthrow of Jerusalem and of God's justice, may also relate to events in Lehi's day. *Ibid.*, p. 130. J. Watts, p. 13, sees the "Day of the Lord" as the liturgical high day of the great autumn festival (1 Tishri?) from the time of Amos through Joel.

13. This exemplifies the eternal principle that God will warn all nations of his judgments; see Marion G. Romney, Conference Report, April 1958, p. 128.

14. Compare Abinadi, Samuel the Lamanite, John the Baptist, and other such prophets who stand alone in crying out the word of the Lord. See also *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 13:1162 (hereafter cited as *EJ*); E. W. Heaton, *Hebrew Kingdoms* (Oxford: University Press, 1968), pp. 237–44.

15. Heaton, *Hebrew Kingdoms*, p. 243.

16. Compare Lehi with the description of the "independent prophets" in *ibid.*, pp. 238–39.

17. *EJ* 13:1169.

18. For example, Jeremiah was told to cease praying on behalf of his people, Jeremiah 14:11; *EJ* 13:1170. This prophetic and intercessory function was also served by prophets such as Abraham (Genesis 20:7), Samuel (1 Samuel 7:5–9), and in the Book of Mormon notably by Enos (Enos 1:9–17).

19. Nephi does not indicate whether this was Lehi's first vision. It seems probable that it was, although a similar vision in Isaiah 6 is thought by some to have come in the midst of Isaiah's work as a prophet, rather than as his first revelatory experience.

20. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978) p. 325; hereafter *TPJS*. See also D&C 29:12, prophesying that Christ will come "in a pillar of fire" with his Twelve Apostles "to judge the whole house of Israel." Similarly, here the function of the pillar of fire seems to be associated with God's judgment upon Jerusalem. See note 21.

21. See Exodus 14:24; Numbers 21:27–30; Deuteronomy 9:3; Genesis 3:24; 19:24; Malachi 4:1. Compare especially Psalm 104:4 with the description of the messengers of Yamm in the Ugaritic Text *CTA* 2.1.32–33: "A fire, two fires, they appear / / Their tongues a sharpened sword." Discussed in E. Theodore Mullen, *The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1980), p. 199. It has been concluded that, among the Israelites and the peoples of the ancient Near East, fire was "intimately associated with those divine beings who attend the great gods, and the fire appears to be a sort of weapon." P. Miller, "Fire in the Mythology of Canaan and Israel," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 27 (1965), 259.

22. It is possible that the pillar contained things having to do with the destruction of Jerusalem. Amos had prophesied that the fire of God would destroy the walls and palaces of Tyre (Amos 1:4, 10). Perhaps in Lehi's vision the rock upon which the pillar dwelt was symbolic of the hardhearted Jerusalem, or of its walls, or of Jerusalem as the mountain of the Lord. Possibly a flaming sword was involved. The sword of God's justice which hangs over people threatening their destruction (1 Nephi 15:30; Alma 54:30; 60:29; Helaman 13:5; 3 Nephi 20:20; Moroni 8:41) may be related to God's destroying fire, since the Hebrew words *lahat* and *lahab* each mean both "flame" and "sword blade," and since God's messengers are not only "accompanied by the imagery of fire" but also frequently come bearing swords. See Genesis 3:24; Numbers 22:31; Joshua 5:13; Mullen, p. 199. If a flaming sword was involved, Lehi's vision may have been similar to one given to king David, when he "saw the angel of the Lord stand between the earth and the heaven, having a drawn sword in his hand stretched out over Jerusalem" (1 Chronicles 21:14-16). See also Isaiah 29, which prophesied that God would wage a holy war against Jerusalem to visit that city "with the flame [*lahab*] of devouring fire" (Isaiah 29:6). Heavenly armies and council visions generally were connected with this fire motif. P. Miller, "The Divine Council and the Prophetic Call to War," *Vetus Testamentum* 18 (1968), 100-107.

23. See note 24. Blake Ostler, "Throne Theophany," has demonstrated that Lehi's throne theophany, in addition to being similar to other prophetic accounts from Lehi's day, also resembles several visions in the later pseudepigrapha; but one need not go beyond sources from Lehi's day in order to find historical analogues for each aspect of Lehi's vision. For example, Ostler looks to the pseudepigrapha for an instance of a prophet acting as an intercessor on behalf of his people, whereas Jeremiah 14:11, 18:20, and other texts place this prophetic function in preexilic times. He also places more emphasis on the throne and less on the council than appears appropriate. For a discussion of another form of prophetic call that was current in Lehi's day, in which the prophet meets God, is commissioned, objects, is reassured, and is given a sign, see Stephen Ricks, "The Narrative Call Pattern in the Prophetic Commission of Enoch (Moses 6)," *BYU Studies* 26 (Fall, 1986), 97-105.

24. See, for example, Mullen; Claus Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), pp. 98-128; Widengren; Frank M. Cross, "The Council of Yahweh in Second Isaiah," *JNES* 12 (1953), 274-77; E. Kingsbury, "The Prophets and the Council of Yahweh," *JBL* 83 (1964), 279-86; P. Miller, "The Divine Council and the Prophetic Call to War," *VT* 18 (1968), 100-107; John S. Holladay, "Assyrian Statecraft and the Prophets of Israel," *HTR* 63 (1970), 29-51; N. Tidwell, "*Wa'omar* (Zechariah 3:5) and the Genre of Zechariah's Fourth Vision," *JBL* 94 (1975), 343-55; Joseph F. McConkie, "Premortal Existence, Foreordinations and Heavenly Councils," in *Apocryphal Writings and the Latter-day Saints*, C. Wilfred Griggs, ed. (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1986), pp. 173-98. Similar conceptions of the assembly of the gods convened in heaven are found among the Canaanites, the Babylonians, the Greeks, and others in the ancient Near East.

25. Mullen, pp. 181-85; see, for example, Deuteronomy 33:2-3; Psalm 89:6-9.

26. Mullen, pp. 145–46, 200.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 209. Those verdicts were issued by God pursuant to eternal principles, divine laws, and immutable regulations. In the Sumerian Hymns, one frequently encounters terms involving the word *ME*, whose precise meaning cannot be determined, but which embraces “world order,” “divine command or edict,” “divine norms,” “secrets, mysteries,” “fate or destiny” and “divine powers.” Karl Oberhuber, *Der Numinose Begriff ME in Sumerischen* (Innsbruck: Leopold-Franzens-Universitaet, 1963), p. 3. R. Otto describes the *numina*, or eternal things, which existed before the gods and the world came into being, and Oberhuber points out the possible relation between the meaning of *ME* and the *numina*. *Ibid.*, pp. 5–8. The *MEs* may be related historically to the principles, decrees, edicts, fates, and powers of the divine council in the Semitic sources. See also G. Farber-Fluegge, *Der Mythos “Inanna und Enki,”* *Studia Pohl* 10 (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1973); T. Jacobsen, *Toward the Image of Tammuz* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 359–60, n.20; Y. Rosengarten, *Sumer et le sacre* (Paris: Boccard, 1977). I am grateful to Paul Hoskisson for bringing these Mesopotamian materials to my attention. Cf. Kingsbury, pp. 284–85, briefly comparing Israelite prophecies with the Babylonian year-rite determination of destinies; Widengren, p. 91. Compare also Alma 42, similarly affirming that God is subject to eternal law.

28. Holladay, pp. 42–46.

29. Mullen, p. 218, n.180, summarizing Tidwell, “Wa’omar.” See 1 Kings 22:19–22; Isaiah 6:1–10; 40:1–8; Job 1:6–12; 2:1–6; Zechariah 1:8–13; 3:1–7; 6:1–8. Mullen notes that Psalm 29, 82, 89:6–9 and Deuteronomy 32:8–9 do not entirely fit the pattern.

30. Mullen, pp. 209–10. Cf. Mosiah 3:23, where the angel of God certifies that he has “spoken *the words* which the Lord God hath commanded me” (*italics added*). See also Mosiah 11:20; 12:1.

31. “It would seem that the question of the messenger’s authority could be answered simply: it is that of the one who sends him.” J. Ross, “The Prophet as Yahweh’s Messenger,” in *Israel’s Prophetic Heritage* (New York: Harper, 1962), p. 101. Joseph Smith explained how this authority was conferred: “All the prophets had the Melchizedek Priesthood and were ordained by God himself,” *TPJS*, p. 181.

32. Also in Hebrew as the *édad*, or *dor*. See Mullen, pp. 118–19.

33. J. Bright’s translation.

34. Mullen, p. 221.

35. This compares with Isaiah’s vision of God seated in the presence of the seraphim (literally “fiery things”), who praised his holiness and glory (Isaiah 6:1–3). See also Ezekiel 1:4–28; 1 Enoch 14:22. Michael Carter has suggested to me that such singing and circumambulation “surrounding” God may have cosmogonic and cultic significance.

36. The overall character of Ezekiel’s vision is “the proclamation of an act of judgement”; Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), p. 247; thus these six come forth to execute judgment.

37. Since he wrote at a time when the council members typically remained anonymous in deference to the Supreme Deity (see Mullen, p. 178), it is unlikely that Lehi would have thought in terms of the intricate angelology which developed under Babylonian influence during the sixth and fifth centuries, and thus Reynold's reference, *Commentary*, pp. 8–9, 11–12, to the angelic names and personalities found in Daniel, 1 Enoch, and other Old Testament pseudepigrapha, is probably out of place.

38. Nephi later calls the twelve "the apostles of the Lamb" (1 Nephi 11:29, 34). Both the Hebrew word *shaliach*, meaning "sent one" or "agent," and the Greek word *apostolos*, "one sent forth," also mean "messenger," and thus Nephi's word is not inapposite to messengers of the heavenly council; see Widengren, pp. 31–36, 47.

39. Thus it is appropriate that the word *one* was capitalized in the 1981 LDS edition of the Book of Mormon.

40. On God's position in the heavens or on his mountain, see Exodus 19–20; 1 Nephi 11:1; Moses 1; Richard J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972). On God coming down, compare Ugaritic Text CTA 14.II.57–58, which Mullen reconstructs to describe how the council of the gods there, led by El and Ba'al, "descended" to the earthly meeting place.

41. Elder Marion G. Romney affirms that this being was Christ the Lord. Conference Report, October 1970, p. 28.

42. "This contained the decision of the court. It was the judgment of that great court." Reynolds, p. 9.

43. On the connection between the curse and the announcement of judgment, see Westermann, pp. 190–98.

44. Another appearance of the heavenly book is discussed in D&C 77:14; see also G. Widengren, who connects this book with the book of law that (like the Urim and Thummim) was worn on the king's breast at his coronation (2 Kings 11:12), p. 25, and was related to the Book of Life associated with New Year's (cf. Mosiah 5:11, 6:1–2), pp. 10, 38, cf. 1 Nephi 1:4, discussed above. The heavenly book appears often in Mesopotamian, Jewish, Samaritan, Gnostic, and other sources.

45. The scroll which Ezekiel sees, reads, and eats (Ezekiel 2:9–3:2; cf. Revelation 10:9) is a subsequent development of this motif. Going beyond the prophets like Lehi and Habakkuk a generation before him, Ezekiel not only reads, but eats, the words he is commanded to deliver. Like Lehi's book, however, Ezekiel's roll spelled out "lamentations, and mourning, and woe" (Ezekiel 2:10).

46. For example, Mullen, p. 216.

47. Compare, for example, the tricolon in Ugaritic Text CTA 3.V.38–39, "Your decree, O 'El, is wise // Your wisdom is eternal // A life of fortune your decree," discussed in Mullen, p. 145. Cf. Psalm 29:1–2. David N. Freedman, *Pottery, Poetry and Prophecy: Studies in Early Hebrew Poetry* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1980), argues convincingly that poetry was a concomitant of ancient Israelite prophecy.

48. See Kirsten Nielsen, *Yahweh as Prosecutor and Judge*, JSOT Supp. Series 9 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1978); Antoon Schoors, *I Am God Your Saviour: A Form-critical Study of the Main Genres in Israel XL-LV* (Leiden: Brill, 1973), pp. 189–244. For an analysis of several such cases in the Book of Mormon, see Richard McGuire, "Prophetic Lawsuits in the Hebrew Bible and Book of Mormon," F.A.R.M.S. Preliminary Report, MCG-83.

49. See Westermann, pp. 169–204. We have too little of Lehi's public statement, however, to know whether his words were couched in terms of a "prophetic lawsuit," a "prophetic judgment speech," or in some other form of prophetic rhetoric.

50. Compare "At times God does reveal His secrets especially to the humble. Sir 42, 18–9. . . . It is to the humble that He reveals His secrets (*mysteria-sodaw*)," Raymond E. Brown, "The Pre-Christian Semitic Concept of 'Mystery,'" *CBQ* 20 (1958), 417–43; the quote is from p. 424 and n.32.

51. This is not to limit the meaning of the phrase *the mysteries of God* in other contexts. But at the time Nephi inquired of the Lord in 1 Nephi 2:16, it seems that what he was seeking to know was the truth of the things that Lehi had learned in his vision in 1 Nephi 1:6–14.

52. Ross, p. 103. Discussed further in John Tvedtnes, "Hebraisms in the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 11 (1970), pp. 50–60, showing Book of Mormon usages consistent with the semantic range of meaning of the Hebrew *sod*.

53. Brown, pp. 417–21.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 421.

55. *Ibid.*

56. Hugh B. Brown, *Eternal Quest* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1956), pp. 130–31.

57. Both the Book of Mormon (Jacob 4:4; 7:11) and Jewish rabbinic tradition, TB *Berakoth* 34b, affirm that all the prophets know of Christ. The Talmud states: "R. Hayya b. Abba said in the name of R. Johanan: All the prophets prophesied only for the days of the Messiah, but as for the world to come, 'Eye hath not seen, oh God, beside Thee.'"

58. Compare also the similarly defining attributes of a prophet given in *EJ* 13:1151–52, and Truman G. Madsen, *Joseph Smith Among the Prophets* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1965), pp. 1–35. *EJ* 13:1160–61 also offers a helpful summary of the attributes of classical Israelite prophets as distinguished from prophets in other periods of Israelite history.

59. See generally H. Wheeler Robinson, *Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1946).