

2: 1 NEPHI 1–7

John W. Welch Notes

The book of 1 Nephi is quite an amazing book. It can be profitably studied in numerous ways. I began working on this text over 60 years ago when I was encouraged by my angel mother to read Hugh Nibley's *Lehi in the Desert*, and as one thing has then led to another, I still don't feel like I'm anywhere close to noticing, appreciating, comprehending, extracting, organizing, or putting into spiritual practice, let alone exhausting everything this unique text has to offer.

Nephi was for real. Nephi came to know what matters most in his personal life, in his family life, in his Israelite world, in his various circumstances and cultural settings, and ultimately in the history and plan of God for all the people of this world. Nephi learned this by dedication, hardship, revelation, and obedience, by having Jesus Christ personally invite him to repent with real intent (2 Nephi 31:13), and by having the Father lovingly confirm that the words of His Beloved were true and faithful (2 Nephi 31:15). Nephi is really good to get to know. And when your understanding begins to be enlightened and your mind begins to expand, as Alma has said, "O then, is not this real?" (Alma 32:35). Gladly we can add our "Yes" to Alma's "Yea."

1 Nephi 1

1 Nephi 1:1 – 3 Nephi's Personal Colophon

Nephi often speaks in the first person in 1 Nephi. He uses the pronoun "I" throughout 1 Nephi—16 times in 1 Nephi 1 alone; 64 times in giving his account of obtaining the plates of brass in chapters 3-4; and a massive 147 times in telling what he saw in his great vision at told at the center of 1 Nephi in chapters 11-14. He says "I, Nephi," over 60 times in this book. Listen for his personal voice and personal testimony.

Indeed, for many reasons, the ancients valued eye-witness testimonies, in court, and in recordkeeping. Ancient authors, especially in Egypt, would often begin or end with what is called a colophon. This is a kind of written verification of authorship, saying, "I am the one who has written this. I saw these things. My record is true. I'm giving you my verification," and it's often a first-person statement.

As you read through the Book of Mormon, notice that its books begin with “I Nephi,” or “I Jacob.” The pattern continues with “I Enos,” “I Mormon,” and others. This pattern of Book of Mormon witnessing continues all the way to the end when Moroni ends his final statement in Moroni 10 saying, when you get these things, ask God, and he will tell you that I have not lied. You will see me at the judgment bar, and you will know that I have told you the truth (Moroni 10:4–5, 27, 34). These are credible, personal, urgent testimonies.

Book of Mormon Central, “[Why Does Nephi Begin by Saying “I, Nephi . . .”?](#) (1 Nephi 1:1),” *KnoWhy* 476 (October 16, 2018).

Book of Mormon Central, “[Why Did Book of Mormon Authors Use Colophons?](#) (1 Nephi 1:3),” *KnoWhy* 443 (June 21, 2018).

1 Nephi 1:1 The Learning of My Father

Nephi knew the scriptures. He knows and uses Isaiah very effectively. When we get to the story of the slaying of Laban, you will also see that it is heavily influenced by scriptural references and allusions, especially to Exodus 21:13–14. As readers, we can expect that when Nephi wrote something containing an allusion to his set of scriptures, he was making that textual connection intentionally. Nephi, like his father Lehi, was a record keeper and also a record reader. This explains why obtaining the brass plates was so crucial to Nephi in laying the religious, legal, and ethical foundations of his people.

Book of Mormon Central, “[Why Is It Good to Seek Both Spiritual and Secular Learning?](#) (1 Nephi 1:1),” *KnoWhy* 324 (June 9, 2017).

1 Nephi 1:1 How Old Were Lehi and His Sons?

When was Lehi born? We know that Lehi left Jerusalem in 600 BC. How old were his children? We do not know for sure, but we know that Nephi was “large in stature” and yet “exceedingly young” when they left Jerusalem (1 Nephi 2:16). Perhaps he was sixteen or seventeen years old when Lehi had his vision. It makes sense that Laman and Lemuel would be twenty-two to twenty-four years old. Sam, then, would be around twenty-years-old. It seems they had sisters, as well. These sisters (along with others) fled with Nephi after he and Laman and Lemuel had a falling out (2 Nephi 5:6). So, Nephi may have been the fifth or even the sixth child.

How old was Lehi when he got married? Typically, ancient Israelite men would not marry until they were about twenty-five. In those days, you had to establish yourself as a young man—usually, you had a military duty when you were about twenty and then you had to establish a living and a household. You did not have to have a house, but the alternative was living with your wife’s family. It might well have taken Lehi a couple of

years to start his family. If Lehi married when he was twenty-five and Laman was twenty-two to twenty-four when 1 Nephi begins, then Lehi would have been about fifty years old when they left Jerusalem, meaning he would have been born about 650–655 BC.

1 Nephi 1:1 Why Did Nephi Call His Parents “Goodly?”

The English word "goodly," or the Hebrew word Nephi used that stands behind it, indicated more than Nephi's parents' generosity, excellence, or grace. It could also mean honorable, fair, or attractive. In other words, they had good social standing, and they likely looked reputable. In fact, Lehi was probably a member of the ruling class, due to having inherited land. In other words, there was no reason why the people in Jerusalem should have discounted Lehi's testimony.

Book of Mormon Central, "[What Is So Good about Nephi's Name?](#) (1 Nephi 1:1)," *KnoWhy* 445 (June 28, 2018).

1 Nephi 1:1 When Did Nephi Write 1 Nephi?

Nephi wrote this record thirty years after the events of 1 Nephi, after Lehi died, and after Laman and Lemuel rejected Nephi. Nephi wrote his personal record in 1 Nephi after he moved up into the Land of Nephi (2 Nephi 5). He was separated from Laman and Lemuel and had tried to reconcile with them, but that did not work. Nephi now needed to tell this story for the benefit of his posterity so that they would know the history and principles upon which the Nephite nation was founded. That was after Lehi and Sariah had died. Nephi and his followers had built a temple, and Nephi had agreed to be the king. At that point, the Lord commanded Nephi to create another record, in addition to the Book of Lehi and Nephi's Large Plates. So, at the point when Nephi wrote of his parents being "goodly," there may also have been a subtext relevant to Laman and Lemuel in his use of the word "goodly." Nephi knew what had happened with Laman and Lemuel after arriving in the New World. It is possible that he had Laman and Lemuel in mind when he wrote these words. He must have wished that things had worked out better in the family and that Laman and Lemuel could have honored their deceased parents better. Nephi would have wanted everyone to know that they were goodly people. They were not to blame for anything that had gone wrong.

Welch, John W. "When Did Nephi Write the Small Plates." In *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon: The FARMS Updates of the 1990s*, edited by John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne, 75–77. Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999.

1 Nephi 1:2 — Language of the Egyptians

We don't know precisely what Nephi meant by "the language of the Egyptians," but quite a bit has been written on this topic. We have lots of archaeological evidence of the presence of Egyptian culture and influence in Israel.

Jerusalem has always been a borderland between the two big river valleys of Egypt and Mesopotamia. Nebuchadnezzar would try to push his power farther south. Other times, the Egyptians would drive things farther north. People living in Jerusalem always had to keep a lookout in both directions. For strategic reasons and for other purposes, we know that Israelites had contact, trade and alliances with these super powers on both sides.

A case in point here is that the Lord called multiple prophets to stand in the streets and prophesy that Jerusalem would be destroyed. Urijah was one of these prophets. When he was chased out of the city, where did he run? To Egypt. This is evidence of contact between people in Egypt and people in Israel. Jewish people must have had a community in Egypt where Urijah thought he could flee and find refuge. But what happened to Urijah? As further evidence of an even higher level of relationship between Egypt and Israel, rulers in Jerusalem sent a delegation to Egypt, extradited Urijah, brought him back to stand sentencing and ignominious execution (see Jeremiah 26).

More evidence of Egyptian influence in Israelite culture is a papyrus that was found in Egypt called the Amherst Papyrus, which is actually a Hebrew Psalm that is written in demotic Egyptian characters. So, in this case, one has the learning of the Hebrews (the literature of the Hebrews) written in Egyptian characters, and that is an eighth-century B.C. text. So, some of these people were bilingual, and they could use different scripts to write down the sounds and the words of other languages. Today, that would be a bit like taking a Japanese word and spelling it with Roman letters. If you don't know both languages, you can't make much sense of it.

What was the nature of record-keeping in Lehi's world? Did the Egyptians write? Absolutely, all the time! Every mummy, every tomb, every temple wall, every palace had writing all over it. Now, we do not find that kind or volume of writing in the archaeological remains of the Israelites, but it is not hard to believe that Israelites knew plenty about writing. They encountered it. People traveled through Jerusalem. They had merchants coming and going. Lehi may well have traveled to Egypt himself, where he learned how to read and write Egyptian. Lehi was a reasonably sophisticated person. As a caravan owning merchant, he must have been literate and able to keep records and communicate with people in different lands.

Of course, writing was not just used for business records. Most of what was written in Egyptian were sacred religious texts, like the Book of the Dead. If you were wealthy, you had the whole Book of the Dead buried with you or parts of it copied onto the walls of your tomb. But even the poor had some portion of the Book of the Dead written out for them. Why? The Book of the Dead gave the road map of the next life. To pass the tests one would encounter in the next life, you needed that information. It contained the passwords, the keys and the language they needed to use in order to express eternal loyalty and much more.

In Israel, what did they mostly write? Archaeologists have found a few little messages scrawled on potsherds saying, "help! Our city is being over-run, send soldiers." Recently, they discovered one of the earliest Hebrew writings, and it turns out it appears to be a shopping list. Go to the market and get this, this, and this. That tells us something about who could write: an ordinary person writing ordinary words. And that tells us that writing was more common than many have previously thought.

Even so, the main things the Israelites captured in writing were the teachings of the prophets and the words of the law. They needed the law, especially in the temple, so that the priests would know the order of sacrifice, the rules of purity and other things that they had to do. One of the jobs of the Levites was to maintain the records—to copy them. The records had to be copied over and over again because they wore out. Papyrus wears out about every 30 years in regular use. So, scribes were needed and were trained to do this writing.

Other recently found Hebrew texts that have survived are two small silver scrolls. They are each about an inch long and have archaic Hebrew letters, written on very thin silver and rolled up. One was worn as a necklace by a young girl who was buried around 610 BC—the time of Lehi. The text on the scroll includes part of the priestly blessing found in Numbers 6:24–26, "The Lord bless and keep thee. The Lord make his face shine upon thee...and give thee peace." Coming from Numbers and dating to Lehi's day, this was a real shock to a lot of biblical scholars when it was found. Here was evidence of people writing religious texts, writing on metal, and drawing upon scriptures at that early date, well before the time when the Jews were taken to Babylon.

This was a part of Lehi's world, and Lehi was a scribe who could read the plates of brass and wrote his own book of Lehi. Additionally, Nephi would have spent his days as the youngest son often did, not out farming and not out learning military tactics, but in learning language, writing records and reading scriptures.

Book of Mormon Central, "[Did Ancient Israelites Write in Egyptian?](#) (1 Nephi 1:2)," *KnoWhy* 4 (January 5, 2016).

Pike, Dana M. "[Israelite Inscriptions from the Time of Jeremiah and Lehi.](#)" In *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, edited by John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely and Jo Ann H. Seely, 193–244. Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2004.

Welch, John W. "[The Trial of Jeremiah: A Legal Legacy from Lehi's Jerusalem.](#)" In *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, edited by John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely and Jo Ann H. Seely, 337–356. Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2004.

1 Nephi 1:4 — Many Prophets in Jerusalem

When an author writes a book, he tries to put the thesis statement clearly toward the beginning. First Nephi, Chapter One, is foundational. It establishes the foundational doctrine that the Lord speaks to His people through prophets. It is clear that, for Nephi, this doctrine must be understood upfront.

Nephi explained that in the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, there came many prophets prophesying to the people that they must repent. Many prophets were called and acted as prophets at the same time. Lehi was not a lone voice crying in the wilderness like John the Baptist. Who were the prophets at this particular time? The Book of Mormon names a few of them—Zenos, Zenock and Nahum. We do not know exactly when those prophets lived, but maybe about this time. What prophets from this period of time are mentioned in the Bible Dictionary? If you look under "Chronology," you will see that Nahum prophesied in about 642 BC. In 640 BC, Huldah was preaching as a prophetess. In 627, in the thirteenth year of Josiah's reign (Jeremiah 1:1), Jeremiah began prophesying, and that was about the same time that Josiah found the Book of Deuteronomy and totally changed the direction of worship in Israel.

The changes that Josiah brought about were popular with some people. However, anytime you have a major reform of a civilization or a society, you are going to make some people very happy and other people very angry. As Josiah changed the way the old sacrificial system had worked, he put a lot of people out of business, so to speak. So, this was not a particularly popular reform in some circles. Some of those opposing Josiah's reform were prophets who were speaking against the way things had been mishandled. Zephaniah was one of those. Then there was Urijah, who prophesied in 609. The chief prophet of this time, however, was Jeremiah and then there was, of

course, Lehi, who was about the same age as Jeremiah. Nephi's record makes special note of Jeremiah (1 Nephi 5:13; 7:14).

Obadiah's ministry was right around 605. In 606, the prophet Daniel was carried captive into Babylon. If you consider Daniel's age, you'll see it was possible that Nephi and Daniel knew each other, being peers. In 598, Habakkuk began prophesying. Ezekiel, likely a contemporary of Laman and Lemuel, was taken captive into Babylon in 598 and began prophesying there. That was right about the time Lehi was leaving Jerusalem. It is possible that Ezekiel knew that a group of people from the branch of Joseph (Lehi's family) had gone out into the wilderness. Lehi was not the only prophet to leave. The Narrative of Zosimus recalls a tradition about a group that followed Rachab into the wilderness.

There were indeed many prophets in Lehi's day. We also have many prophets in our day—15, to be exact. We have prophets and apostles working together to lead and guide the children of God. Is there strength in numbers? There is, especially in crucial times. Does the Lord send a lot of prophets? If we listen to all of them, we can learn. In Lehi's world, they did not have correlation committees, and they did not have ways of regulating the scriptures and clarifying the doctrine the way we do. But, if you have many prophets saying the same thing, that is something to pay attention to. The Lord gave fair warning to Israel—fair warning to the people in Jerusalem. "You must repent, and if you do not, you are going to be destroyed." Lehi was just one of many taking the same message to the streets. We can learn a lesson—not just about listening to the prophets, but also that the Lord will not abandon us.

Book of Mormon Central, "[Who Were the “Many Prophets” in Jerusalem During Lehi’s Time?](#) (1 Nephi 1:4)," *KnoWhy* 441 (June 14, 2018).

Seely, David Rolph, and Jo Ann H. Seely. "[Lehi and Jeremiah: Prophets, Priests, and Patriarchs.](#)" In *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, edited by John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely and Jo Ann H. Seely, 357–380. Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2004.

Seely, David Rolph. "[Sacred History, Covenants, and the Messiah: The Religious Background of the World of Lehi.](#)" In *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, edited by John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely and Jo Ann H. Seely, 381–420. Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2004.

Might Lehi Have Been Present at Urijah's or Jeremiah's Trials?

When Urijah was extradited from Egypt and was publicly executed and refused a burial, Lehi may well have been present. The killing of this prophet, who spoke out against the

unrepentant leaders in Jerusalem, would have stood as a sober warning to any other prophets who dared to defy the ruling authorities. Likewise, Jeremiah was arrested and was brought to the gates of the temple. The officials were about to kill him too. Fortunately, some of the princes heard what was going on and they rushed over from the palace to come to Jeremiah's defense. Jeremiah had friends in high places and managed to escape the death penalty. Lehi would have known Jeremiah. If Lehi was not out on a caravan trip to Egypt or somewhere else at the time, he might have been there to witness Jeremiah's trial and near conviction. When God then called Lehi to deliver essentially the same prophetic warning that Urijah and Jeremiah had been delivering, he must have been chilled to the bone. But he courageously answered the call and went forth and soon found himself fleeing for his life.

Welch, John W. "[The Trial of Jeremiah: A Legal Legacy from Lehi's Jerusalem](#)." In *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, edited by John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely and Jo Ann H. Seely, 337–356. Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2004.

Babylonian Rule and Jewish Rebellion

At the time of Lehi's ministry, Jerusalem had already been conquered. Babylon had taken the first wave of people into captivity. Those left in Jerusalem were allowed to stay on the condition that if they behaved themselves, they would be made into a vassal state, and if they paid taxes and were good to the Babylonian overlords, they would be allowed to continue doing what they wanted. But the elders, rulers and aristocrats in Jerusalem retorted, "We cannot tolerate this. We are not going to be subject to these foreign rulers." And so, they started agitating, and pressed for a rebellion.

Zedekiah had been on the throne by the Babylonians after that first conquest. There was plenty of evidence that the Jewish leaders should have behaved themselves. They were given a second chance politically, if you will, and maybe a second chance by the Lord too. But they still pushed the envelope. Why would they do that? They now had a puppet king. He was weak and young. He did not know what he was doing. After Zedekiah was put on the throne, there was a formal coronation. The coronation ritual was a rather elaborate traditional one. Most importantly, there would be prophecies connected with the coronation. People did not do important things in the ancient world without getting a reading from the gods—augury or something that told whether this was an auspicious time or not. The coronation of a king was often a time when many prophets came forth. Typically, the king would want favorable prophecies. Of course, a prophet who wanted to survive to give another prophecy usually spoke favorably of the king. At the time of a coronation, if prophets came forward saying bad things, the

reaction would be hostile because they were threatening a king. It was blasphemy or treason to be questioning the legitimacy or success of the regime. But, in the alternative, if they prophesied falsely, how would they face their God? This was a very trying time to be a prophet.

Schade, Aaron P. "[The Kingdom of Judah: Politics, Prophets, and Scribes in the Late Preexilic Period](#)." In *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, edited by John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely and Jo Ann H. Seely, 299–336. Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2004.

1 Nephi 1:4 — In What Ways Was Jerusalem a “Great” City?

The idea of the great City of Jerusalem being destroyed was an extraordinary thought. The estimated population for all of Jerusalem in Lehi's day was maybe 10,000 people. Most people did not live in the city but were living on farms in their local villages. Jerusalem was “great”—not so much in the sense that there were lots of people residing there. It was “great” because it was holy and the temple was there. It was the Holy Place mentioned several times in Deuteronomy 12. It was the home of God. For many reasons, the idea that God's holy place could be destroyed seemed sacrilegious, ridiculous, even impossible.

Seely, David Rolph, and Fred E. Woods. "[How Could Jerusalem, “That Great City,” Be Destroyed?](#)" In *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, edited by John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely and Jo Ann H. Seely, 595–610. Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2004.

1 Nephi 1:5 — Lehi's Intercessory Prayer

With the stage set for how vital Jerusalem was and how indestructible it seemed to most people, even at that point, most had turned toward wickedness. Few responded positively to the prophets' warnings. But Lehi did not discount these warnings. He believed. Against great odds, he trusted.

But first, Lehi went out and prayed on behalf of his people. This prayer has been called an intercessory prayer, and it was a prevalent part of Israelite worship in those days. Prophets prayed for the people. They prayed that God would be with them and bless them. Their prayers came with pleas for blessings for righteous obedience as well as curses for disobedience and wickedness. Even as they invoked curses upon the wicked, they were praying on behalf of the people and hoping that they would turn back and repent (see Deuteronomy 11:26–28; 29:18–28).

Book of Mormon Central, "[How Did God Call His Prophets in Ancient Times?](#) (1 Nephi 15:8)," *KnoWhy* 17 (January 22, 2016).

Welch, John W. "[The Calling of Lehi as a Prophet in the World of Jerusalem](#)." In *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, edited by John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely and Jo Ann H. Seely, 421–448. Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2004.

1 Nephi 1:6–7 — Lehi's First Visions

As Lehi prayed fervently for Jerusalem and for his family, there came a pillar of fire. This opened his eyes to a vision of the Heavenly Counsel, where he was given a book.

The pillar of fire was an important symbol. In the exodus of Israel, they were led by a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. The scriptural record stated that this pillar came and dwelt upon a rock. There was a rock that was especially important in Lehi's neighborhood: the rock the temple was built on. The pillar of fire was a manifestation of the glorious presence of God coming down. Wickedness could not abide the presence of the power of righteousness. And here, the pillar of fire came down and dwelt upon the temple. The people of Jerusalem believed that nothing could happen to their temple. What would Lehi go out and prophecy would happen? He prophesied that the temple, the Temple of Solomon, would not survive for more than a few years.

At the end of his vision, "[Lehi did] quake and trembled exceedingly," such was his experience with the Spirit.

The pillar of fire must signify something. Where else in scripture do we see a pillar of fire? Moses saw a burning or fiery bush. Jehovah's presence led the children of Israel in a pillar of fire by night. In Lehi's vision, the Lord may have been saying with the symbol of fire, "Lehi, like Moses, you have prayed, you are pleading for your people, but it is too late." Indeed, the pillar of fire that Lehi now saw coming down upon "the rock" may now have come to symbolize the consuming power of divine holocaust settling upon the temple, built in Jerusalem upon the primordial rock on the temple mount. Lehi was overwhelmed, but the Lord assured him, "I am with you. Follow me in the pillar of fire out into the wilderness just as Moses did."

Lehi went back to his house and cast himself down onto the bed, being overcome with the spirit and the things which he had seen. And while he was overcome, he received a second vision. And this is when he says he saw the heavens open and "God sitting upon his throne surrounded with numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God" (1 Nephi 1:8). This is called a throne theophany. In such a vision, the prophet was admitted into the heavenly council. The purpose of the divine counsel is usually to dispense the judgment of God, and accordingly Lehi was then

shown a book. And what does he read on that book or scroll? He reads the fate of Jerusalem: "Woe, woe unto Jerusalem for I have seen thine abominations!"

Is there a pattern here that you have seen in the scriptures where a prophet has a vision, rests, and then the vision continues, turning into something even greater? Joseph Smith and Moroni come to mind. Moroni came back again and again and said the same thing over and over. Similarly, Moses had a significant spiritual manifestation in which he saw and heard much, and then, it took him several hours before he regained his strength and said, "For this reason, I know that man is nothing" (Moses 1:10). Then he experienced another divine vision. He saw this extraordinary vision where he saw the entire earth, and there was not a particle of it which he did not behold. In these monumental visions, we see that Lehi was part of a great tradition of seers who were called to the work and speak in the name of the Lord.

Lehi was not alone in experiencing exhaustion following a great spiritual experience. Joseph found himself on his back in the grove after the First Vision. He also fell by the fence after his visit from Moroni. A significant spiritual experience exhausts you. After Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon had the vision that is recorded in Doctrine and Covenants 76, Sidney was utterly exhausted. Smith instructed Rigdon that this is how a great out-pouring of the Spirit hits you at first.

1 Nephi 1:8 — Lehi's Call to Preach

Emphatically, in this very first chapter, Nephi states the purpose of his record: to teach the doctrine of Christ. And significantly, in this very first chapter, Nephi also records the vision in which Lehi learns of the coming of the Messiah (as Lehi repeatedly calls Him, 1 Nephi 1:19, 10:4, 5, 7, 9, 10, 11, 14, 17) and the Twelve.

What did the Twelve do? They went forth and followed the Messiah. As Nephi explained that "[T]he twelve came down and went forth upon the face of the earth, and the first came and stood before my father." The Twelve were sent throughout the whole earth. What do the Quorum of the Twelve do today? They oversee all the affairs of the world. But *the One* came down and spoke directly to Lehi. This was no small thing.

There is one preposition that needs to be pointed out in these passages. Lehi "thought he saw God sitting upon his throne, surrounded *with* numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God." Surrounded *with*. What is the difference between "with" and "by"? It is significant, because it may signal that God is *with* them. Most people would say "surrounded by," but Lehi says surrounded "with" numberless concourses of angels. "With" may mean a lot more than "by." This small, unusual word choice depicts something about *who* God is. He is not surrounded *by* concourses because

He needs to show off. He is surrounded *with* them because He is an invested partner in every one of those individual's salvation. I think that's a beautiful revelation.

Next, this glorious being, whose brightness was above that of the sun at noonday, even the Lord Jesus Christ, came down. What did He do? He gave Lehi a book. What was the importance and significance of the book? What is the significance of the Book of Mormon? If you look at the establishments of the major religions in the world, they all begin with a book. Books are essential in establishing doctrine and religion. There are books on earth and books in heaven, and as is seen here in Lehi's vision, heavenly decrees will be announced in books, our deeds will be recorded in books of life, and by the words given to us by God we will be judged (Mosiah 3:24; Moroni 10:27).

Welch, John W.. "[The Calling of Lehi as a Prophet in the World of Jerusalem.](#)" In *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, edited by John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely and Jo Ann H. Seely, 421–448. Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2004.

1 Nephi 1:13–14 — Redemption despite Affliction

While in this vision, Lehi sees the abominations of Jerusalem and that the city and its inhabitants should be destroyed and led away into captivity. After watching all this destruction, he then exclaimed unto the Lord, "Great and marvelous are thy works, O Lord God almighty! Thy throne is high in the heavens, and thy power, and goodness, and mercy are over all the inhabitants of the earth; and because thou art merciful, thou wilt not suffer those who come unto thee that they shall perish!" (1 Nephi 1:14). You would think Lehi would have been traumatized and perhaps horrified at the destruction the Lord was announcing against Lehi's people. But no, Lehi's response was that of reverence and worship. This becomes a theme throughout the Book of Mormon, especially throughout 1 and 2 Nephi. Lehi's son, Nephi, recorded his father's experience through this frame of mind decades later. Nephi, by that point, had seen many afflictions, had himself been shown visions of the future destruction of his own people, and had lost many family members to death and wickedness. Still, always for Nephi, the glory of God was the central focus. Especially in times of trial, Nephi, like Lehi, could see the power of redemption transcending above the affliction.

1 Nephi 1:8, 14–15 — Grace in the Destruction: "Singing and Praising God"

Lehi saw the destruction and woe that would come upon his people if they did not repent. He also saw angels singing praises to their God. At the end of his vision, Lehi was overwhelmed with gratitude and reverence for the goodness of God. How? Where is the goodness in destruction? The key thing here, in the end, is that God is merciful because He will not allow those who come to Him to perish. Lehi not only saw the woe

and the consequences of the inhabitants of Jerusalem and their leaders continuing as they were in disobedience, but he saw the grand promise given to those who would repent and turn from wickedness. After Lehi saw destruction and terrible things, he exclaimed, "Great and marvelous are thy works." First of all, he completely accepted what the Lord was doing. "Thy throne is high in the heavens; thy power and goodness and mercy are over all the inhabitants of the earth." Lehi's focus from this point forth seemed to be on mercy. That is what his spirit saw in that vision—the mercy of God.

Book of Mormon Central, "[What is it to Speak with the Tongue of Angels?](#) (2 Nephi 32:2)," *KnoWhy* 60 (March 23, 2016).

1 Nephi 1:18 – Lehi Prophecies to Jerusalem Concerning its Destruction

In 605 BC, as Lehi began prophesying, the Assyrians had conquered Egypt. They may have over-stretched themselves, spreading their forces thin all the way down to Egypt. The Assyrians were now vulnerable on their east flank, and Babylon decided to move in and take over. These circumstances then allowed Babylon the staging area to move south, down into Jerusalem. For good reason, Lehi and many other prophets warned, "we are next."

The fall of Jerusalem is generally thought to have happened in 597. What eventually happened to Babylon? The victorious Babylonians soon got fat and lazy with all of their conquests, and another group, the Persians (up in the mountains in Iran), decided they wanted to live down where the water flowed nice and easy in the Euphrates Valley. The Persians entered the Mesopotamian area from the east and destroyed the Babylonians. Then, they kept advancing. Within the following ten years, the Persians went all the way into Egypt. Alexander the Great (the Greeks) would eventually come in from the west, conquer the Persians and finish it all off, conquering everything.

Can you imagine what the international political climate was like at this time, with whole civilizations vanishing, great cities being destroyed, and Lehi experiencing it? Is there anything we can learn from understanding Lehi's prophecy in retrospect? For one thing, we can learn lessons about the vulnerability of civilizations that think they are secure, mighty, and protected when, in reality, the more secure you feel, you may be overlooking essential things that will lead to your own demise.

In *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, Bruce Satterfield wrote an excellent chapter asking the question, "Why was Jerusalem destroyed?" What can we learn from the ancient writings of Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel? What were the problems of their world? Their problems were not exactly the same as our problems, but our problems are often the same types as theirs. Brother Satterfield challenges us to look at the progression of what

went wrong in Jerusalem in Lehi's day and in the world that rejected him, because they are the problems we must watch out for today:

First, Jeremiah complained that the people repeatedly sinned. They would sin and repent and then sin again—doing the same thing over and over again, continually returning to their old problems and wrongdoing. As you do this, Jeremiah says, it becomes harder and harder each time to repent. So, lesson number one is: repent completely and turn away from wrongdoing.

Second, you can read in these texts that as it became harder for the people in Jerusalem to repent, they began rationalizing their sins, explaining that it was not such a big problem after all, for “God certainly would not destroy them—they were His people.” Rationalizing, making excuses, over-confidence—does that sound like something that might be happening in the world today as well? It is a pattern. The more things change, the more the world really stays the same, does it not?

Third, rationalization eventually led the people to a rebellious and stubborn approach toward righteousness. We have, in the Book of Mormon, plenty of places where people like King Benjamin talk about those who come out in open rebellion against God. This is the third step in this process of decline. This type of rebellion leads to what Brother Satterfield calls a “seared conscience,” where you become so calloused to what is going on, that even in your rebellion, you lose the feeling that you are rebelling. You become hard and insensitive. In this state, if a previous version of you looked at your now-calloused self, that past version would recognize the change for the worse. In this process, you become so calloused that you lose a sense of conscience and, as a part of that, you are no longer ashamed. Shame becomes something that is not tolerated in your life or in your world. But once all shame or regret is gone, how can you possibly turn yourself around? This is when the prophets enter. Their ministry is to tell the people that it is urgent and that they must reverse their course.

Fourth, the final step that happened over and over again in Jerusalem was the rejection of the prophets. Final warnings were given over and over again, and not only were the messages rejected, but the prophets themselves were killed or were driven out, as was Lehi. Having rejected the prophets, people continued in their sinful ways and the consequences followed.

This was Lehi's world—a world he lived in and understood from revelation and dreams. He saw up close how this downward spiral of pride and wrongdoing was the undoing of a great city of promise, a place that had been the home of righteous prophets and people of God. Can we learn something from that?

In this world setting, Lehi went out among the people, preaching repentance. How was his message received? With anger. The Jews were furious with Lehi because he was not saying, “All is well.” He was saying, “Jerusalem is going to get destroyed. I have seen it. You are a wicked people.” Just like the people did with Jeremiah, the people raged against Lehi. So much so that his life was at risk.

Satterfield, Bruce. [“The Divine Justification for the Babylonian Destruction of Jerusalem.”](#) In *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, edited by John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely and Jo Ann H. Seely, 561–594. Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2004.

1 Nephi 1:20 — The Tender Mercies of the Lord

As Nephi concludes this first section in 1 Nephi, he announces that he will “show unto you that 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.” Not only will the mercies of God be a major theme for Nephi, clear to the end of the final chapter in the Book of Mormon Moroni will identify remembering God’s mercifulness as a key step in preparing one’s heart and soul to receive inspiration and revelation through the power of the Holy Ghost (Moroni 10:3–4).

Book of Mormon Central, [“How Can We Be Delivered through the Lord’s Tender Mercies?”](#) (1 Nephi 1:20),” *KnoWhy* 447 (July 5, 2018).

1 Nephi 2

1 Nephi 2:4 — What Did Lehi’s House Look Like?

Nephi tells us that Lehi had “his own house at Jerusalem” (1 Nephi 1:7). He left that house and also “the land of his inheritance” (1 Nephi 2:4) which would have been outside the holy city, presumably in the lands of Manasseh north of Jerusalem, for Lehi was “a descendant of Manasseh” (Alma 10:3). Archaeologists have found the remains of free-standing houses in Jerusalem in Lehi’s day, so we at least have some idea of what his Jerusalem house might have looked like.

If he lived in a typical three-parallel room house, the rooms would have been only about ten feet wide. So, they were living in pretty cramped quarters. Even if they had a larger four-room house, Lehi and Sariah—along with all of their children (four sons and potentially a couple daughters), and probably some of their relatives—all lived in fairly close quarters, where privacy would have been scarce. Thus, Lehi had gone out onto a

hillside somewhere to pray. But, as Jeff Chadwick has especially discussed, that was how domestic life was in those days.

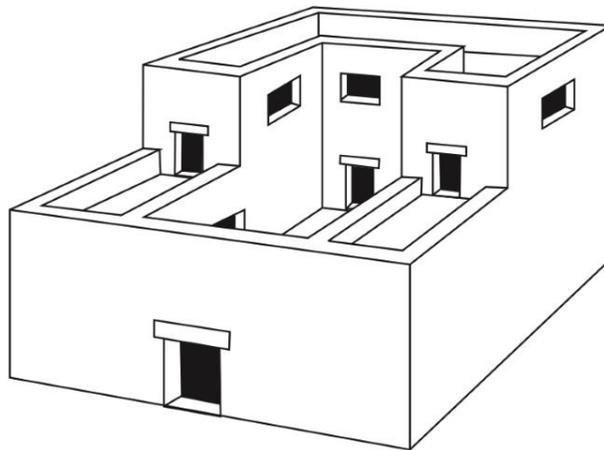


Figure 13. Typical four-room house from the period of Lehi.

Jeffrey R. Chadwick, "[Lehi's House at Jerusalem and the Land of His Inheritance](#)," in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, 81–130.

1 Nephi 2:5 — Why Did Lehi Head toward the Red Sea?

The reaction of some of the leading people in Jerusalem to Lehi's message may seem to us like an overreaction. Why were they going to kill him? Was that justifiable? Actually, in Deuteronomy 18, there is a law against false prophecy, and the punishment is death. Urijah, Jeremiah and others ran into this problem. When Lehi was called to deliver essentially the same message that had gotten others in trouble, one can easily imagine Lehi thinking, "Wait a minute, Lord, haven't we tried this already? And it didn't work out too well last time." But, of course, he went and did it as he was commanded. And then, of course, in a dream, he was told that it was time for him to take his family and depart (2 Nephi 2:2). He woke up in the middle of the night, packed up his family, and was gone.

But where would he go? Lehi needed to flee. He may have wanted to go to Egypt, being familiar with the language and customs there. But he knew what happened with Urijah's extrication. He was not going to go there and have that happen to him. Of course, Lehi would not have wanted to go to Babylon, because Babylon had just conquered Jerusalem, so that would have been going into enemy territory. So, what was left? Only heading south, to the Red Sea and from there on down the frankincense route.

Aston, Warren P. "[Into Arabia: Lehi and Sariah's Escape from Jerusalem.](#)" *BYU Studies Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (2019): 99–126.

1 Nephi 2:9–10 – Lehi's Exhortation to Laman and Lemuel

When Lehi saw a stream emptied into the Red Sea, he said to Laman, "O that thou mightiest be like unto this river, continually running into the fountain of all righteousness." He also spoke unto Lemuel, "O that thou mightiest be like unto this valley, firm and steadfast and immovable in keeping the commandments of the Lord." This is a beautiful little couplet. You have two sons; you have the walls of this valley, firm and steadfast, with the stream coming through. Hugh Nibley spent a lot of time talking about how ancient travelers in the desert would break out into poems like this, relating the circumstances around them to the moral situation in which they found themselves. Lehi's spontaneous lyric builds on Isaiah 48:18 (which will be quoted in 1 Nephi 20), "O that thou hadst hearkened to my commandments—then had thy peace been as a river, and thy righteousness as the waves of the sea."

Traveling in the Middle East, you will hear it said over and over again, "Water is life." Indeed, nothing can live in the desert without water. Lehi may have been trying to teach Laman here to see himself as a river of life, always giving to others, nothing done in selfishness. We too might benefit from seeing ourselves like the river, always giving to the world around us.

And consider Lehi's teaching to Lemuel about becoming firm, steadfast and immovable. Why those three words? This seems redundant. Firm speaks to inner strength, firmness. Steadfast speaks to one's position, standing steadily fastened. Immoveable speaks to not being swayed or moved by outside influences. I love how Lehi says, immovable "like unto this valley." When we think of a valley in our western culture, "firm and immovable" are not words we normally use to describe a valley. That seems more Middle Eastern. In western culture, I think we tend to think, and even sing, of mountains as being firm.

Lehi gave them words and imagery that could stay with them and their posterity forever. Indeed, the words "steadfast and immovable" were reused used by Benjamin in his closing words in Mosiah 5:15 and also by Alma in Alma 1:25. And Mormon used Lehi's wording in 3 Nephi 6:14, speaking of the Lamanites (descendants of Laman and Lemuel) who remained converted unto the true faith and would not depart from it, "for they were firm, and steadfast, and immovable, willing with all diligence to keep the commandments of the Lord." Even though Laman and Lemuel did not respond to Lehi, we see that these blessings were nonetheless extended to some of their faithful descendants and these examples were noted specifically by Mormon.

Lehi could have said to them, “Laman and Lemuel, why don’t you guys just get with the program?” But instead he eloquently spoke to them, hoping the poetry would touch their hearts. He did not want to command them in all things. He let them think, and work out for themselves what this could mean for them. Perhaps, as we provide instruction and encouragement to our loved ones, we will do it, like Lehi, in a way that allows a person more of their own agency. Teaching principles with images allows those taught to riddle things out for themselves, to see in these images something new. When left to peel back the layers of metaphor in imagery, like Lehi’s use of the river and valley, each person can decide for themselves, over and over again, new, worthy goals to accomplish.

1 Nephi 2:12 — Why Did Laman and Lemuel Murmur so Much?

Laman and Lemuel had lived a very nice, very comfortable life up until their father was called to be a prophet and commanded to flee Jerusalem. They were not ready—they were still mourning all they had been asked to give up. How many of us likewise hold onto past things, obsessing over what could have been or should have been? We struggle to let go and move on. It’s understandable. On top of what they were asked to abandon, their father clearly favored Nephi. They knew that. He freely admitted it to them. So, it would be a challenging situation—unless you have the eternal viewpoint, and they did not have that.

That lack of eternal perspective, of faith in God, greatly factored into their fear and frustration when it came to retrieving the plates of brass from Laban. When we have our moments of questioning, moments when we say, “I’m just not so sure that the Lord can do this,” that’s when Satan and his hosts answer back, “You’re right, He can’t. And even if He could, why would He do it for you? You’re alone. You will fail.”

We all know that Satan jumps in the second that we open the door just a little bit; he just blows right through it. That’s what happened with Laman and Lemuel. But that moment of weakness was compounded by their spiritual ignorance. It’s so incomprehensible to me that they could actually rationally think that Laban and fifty men were stronger than the Lord who parted the Red Sea. Put those things up next to each other, and it’s just ridiculous. But, from their limited view and understanding of God, they couldn’t see. As Nephi explained, they knew not the dealings of the Lord. And in that is the lesson. We must come to know the dealings of the Lord.

1 Nephi 2:16–19 — Nephi’s Heart is Softened

One of the great doctrines that we find in 1 Nephi 2 is a road map on how to gain great faith. Nephi’s testimony goes along with the directive we get out of Section 88 of the Doctrine and Covenants, “draw near to me, and I will draw near unto you.” Nephi

explained, in 1 Nephi 2:16, "having great desires to know of the mysteries of God, therefore I did cry unto the Lord and behold, he did visit me and did soften my heart." The Lord said, "Blessed art thou Nephi because of thy faith, for thou hast sought me diligently with lowliness of heart." Here are the requirements for obtaining answers from the Lord: we need great faith resulting from "diligently seeking" and with "lowliness of heart."

We learn from Nephi's words that his own heart also needed "softening." Why? He looked like a true believer from the beginning. He believed what his father was telling him. He wanted to understand the mysteries too. But it would seem, there was still some further refining necessary for him—as there is for all of us, wherever we may be on the journey of faith.

Additionally, we learn from Nephi's words that it doesn't work to be a "cafeteria believer" and just pick and choose certain doctrines and principles that you'd prefer to believe. Nephi says, "The Lord did soften my heart that I did believe *all* the words which had been spoken by my father," not just some of the words which he had spoken, but all of his words. Once you truly believe in God, you believe all of his words. At this point Nephi became a full-fledged believer.

Nephi's words were chosen carefully. He did not have to admit that his heart needed to be softened, that he had had that humbling experience. But I think he mentioned this for a reason. I love it, that from the very beginning, he also mentioned the afflictions, pains, and hardships that he suffered, but quickly moved right on to the blessings and tender mercies he had received, as his focus was always based on his testimony that God delivers His children "because of their faith" (1 Nephi 1:20).

There are troubled times ahead. We're warned over and over that we can't coast along. Every one of us is going to be challenged in one way or another. Not in the extreme ways that our friends in the scriptures have been, hopefully; but we have their examples for a reason. Nephi was inspired to start us off with his experience because his pattern is essential for us to follow. He testified that he knew that he would be blessed, no matter what lay ahead, because God is faithful to those who keep their covenants with Him. It's a beautiful testimony, and it's a good starting point for faith, as we see what's going to happen because his testimony is true.

1 Nephi 2:20–24 — Nephi to Become a Ruler and Teacher over His Brothers

Very early in Nephi's record, he records that the Lord told him that he would become "a ruler and a teacher" over his elder brothers if they rebelled against him (2:21). One may wonder if this blessing was kept confidential by Nephi, at least as first. While this

promise certainly gave Nephi confidence and reassurance, it would not have pleased Laman and Lemuel. Being their “teacher” would be one thing. But being a “ruler” would have been something altogether different.

Examples may be found where younger brothers emerged as chosen spiritual leaders within Israel. Jacob was younger than Esau. Joseph was younger than many of his brothers. Ephraim was younger than Manasseh. David, a youngest brother, became king of all Israel. So, there was precedent for this unusual order of things. Normally the rights of primogeniture gave the firstborn son precedence. But in the law of the Lord, righteousness and calling prevailed over birth order, although understandably not without awkward relations and hard feelings.

In our times, the goodness of Hyrum Smith provides extraordinary exception to the normal problems often generated by this age differential. Hyrum was uncompromisingly loyal to his brother Joseph. Hyrum’s love for Joseph was profound, and his sacrifices were complete. Yet Hyrum was six years older than the Prophet Joseph, his brother and leader. “In life they were not divided, and in death they were not separated!” (D&C 135:3).

1 Nephi 3

How Does Nephi Set the Stage for his Account of the Slaying of Laban?

While the death of Laban is well-known as the outcome at the end of 1 Nephi 4, many important factors in Nephi’s account lead up to that unfortunate but required outcome. However told or explained, any killing is awful. Even packaged in beautifully crafted literature, any killing is disruptive to the fabric of human life. It instills anxieties, horror, and chaos. It throws the normal boundaries of human powers into turmoil, metaphysical uncertainty, and cosmic imbalance. Nephi realizes this. He does not tell his story of the slaying of Laban triumphantly, but as an account of tremendous restraint, repeated warnings, divine interventions, miraculous deliverances, and unimagined developments. The heart of this story is told in 1 Nephi 3–4, but it actually begins in the opening chapters of 1 Nephi, just as its lessons will continue to reverberate throughout Nephite history thereafter.

For example, Nephi was highly favored of the Lord. As Nephi begins his account, he casts his character in a positive light. He was “highly favored of the Lord in all my days,” and was given “a great knowledge of the goodness and the mysteries of God” (1 Nephi 1:1). One of those mysteries was that God would destroy the wicked leaders in

Jerusalem, one way or another, which may presage the slaying of Laban among many others. Nephi was the son of the prophet, Lehi, who was “filled with the Spirit of the Lord” (1:12). That was the same Spirit that spoke on important occasions to Nephi (2:19; 4:11).

As the fourth son in this family, Nephi can also be identified with biblical characters such as David, a beloved younger son of Jesse, whom Samuel called “a man after [the Lord’s] own heart” (1 Samuel 13:14). And just as David beheaded Goliath with his own sword and rose to powerful positions ahead of his elder brothers, Nephi would do likewise. Lehi prophesied that many inhabitants of Jerusalem “should perish by the sword” (1:13). His mention of the generic use of the sword as the principal mode of execution for apostate cities in biblical law (Deut. 13:15) sets the stage for the slaying of Laban to be carried out by the sword, and indeed, by Laban’s own sword (1 Nephi 4:18).

Nephi’s account had quickly turned its attention to Lehi’s domestic situation. When Laman and Lemuel rejected the idea that the great city of Jerusalem could be destroyed, Lehi spoke to them with power, shaking them to the core, and silencing them (2:13-14). Their rejection of Lehi’s patriarchal authority stands in stark contrast to Nephi’s believing “all the words” of Lehi. Nephi’s goodness is then rewarded, and he was promised that if he will keep God’s commandments he will prosper and be led to a land of promise (1 Nephi 2:20). The crucial need to keep God’s commandments will surface again in one of Nephi’s culminating ruminations before slaying Laban, when he remembers that his people “could not keep the commandments” unless they have the plates on which the law was written (4:15-16).

1 Nephi 3:2 — Why Did Lehi’s Sons Have to Return to Jerusalem?

The story continues as Lehi indeed informs Nephi that, in a dream, the Lord had commanded Nephi and his brothers to return from their base camp in the wilderness and go to Jerusalem to obtain the plates of brass (1 Nephi 3:2-3). Lehi specifically directs Nephi to go to the house of Laban (3:4), implying that he and his sons were familiar with Laban and his house, making the task seem at least feasible. Of course, Lehi could not go back himself. He was a wanted man and would have been apprehended and probably executed immediately.

Hearing the word of the Lord, Nephi responds to his father without hesitation and with a solemn promise: “I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded, for I know 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” (3:7). Nephi’s unwavering confidence that the Lord would make a way for this to happen clearly sets the stage for the events that then will unfold. Nephi’s oath certifies

that, come what may, the hand of the Lord would control the crucial steps in accomplishing this “mission: impossible” assigned by God.

1 Nephi 3:3 — Who Was Laban?

Laban was of the tribe of Joseph. After acquiring the Plates of Laban (1 Nephi 5), Lehi and his family studied the record. They looked over the genealogy and Nephi noted that not only Lehi’s family, but also Laban, was of the tribe of Joseph. Laban was their kinsman. Perhaps this changed how Nephi felt about killing Laban. We do not know if this family connection made it easier or harder on Nephi.

Laban was a prominent person in his community. There are several possible positions that Laban could have held in ancient Jerusalem society. His position would have then determined what, exactly, he was in charge of. Laban could have been a commander of the armies of the Kingdom of Judea. At the time of Lehi’s departure from Jerusalem, the northern Kingdom no longer existed—it had been conquered by Assyria and the Ten Tribes were scattered out of the land. Jerusalem was now a city that was teetering on extinction. Poor political choices were made aligning the Kingdom of Judea with Egypt. Egypt and Babylon were at war with each other and Babylon had already conquered Jerusalem. Although it is unknown whether Laban was part of the crowd that had attempted to kill Lehi, he may well be implicated among those who charge Lehi with the crime of false prophecy, as Urijah and Jeremiah had been charged a few years earlier (Jeremiah 26).

Perhaps in this time of turmoil, Laban was a military commander. 1 Nephi 4:22 says that Laban had been away from his home talking to the elders of the Jews. He may have been meeting to discuss what to do about defending Jerusalem—how they planned on dealing with the political, social and economic problems they were facing. That is possible. Nephi’s narrative states that Laban was able to command a garrison of fifty within the walls of Jerusalem. This is a clue that he may have held the archaeologically known title of “commander of the citadel.”

Laban had distinctive armor of some kind. Every man in the community was responsible to serve in the military and be ready to go to war. There was no armory in the city where weapons and armor were issued. Everyone had to own their own armor and weapons. The rich people in the community personally owned better weapons and armor, while the poor people went without proper protection.

1 Nephi 3:3 — What Was on the Brass Plates and why were they in Laban’s Possession?

It appears that the record being kept by Laban was not finished or complete. It was a work in progress. It was being added to as part of an ongoing process. Unlike our Old Testament, the brass plates were not a treasured narrative of events that took place thousands of years before. They contained current words of Jeremiah, a contemporary of Lehi.

This set of plates was likely a sacred temple or royal record. Since this collection contained all five books of Moses, it must have included the book of Deuteronomy. Most scholars believe that the book of Deuteronomy had gone missing for a long period of time and that it was King Josiah who found the Book of the Law when they were cleaning the temple in 628 BC. This resulted in the major reform by King Josiah in 625 B.C., which consolidated all of the worship of Jehovah in the temple of Jerusalem. Lehi would have been well aware of this reformation. We do not know whether Lehi agreed with all of Josiah’s changes. There were things about the Josiah reform that the prophets in Jerusalem did not like. However, there were other parts of the reform that were accepted by all.

Soon after the finding the lost record of Deuteronomy and in conjunction with implementing his reforms, it is likely that King Josiah would have made considerable resources available to make a more permanent set of metal plates with the now complete scriptural record (including the newly-found book of Deuteronomy) so that it would not go missing again. He also would have wanted to be sure that the book of Deuteronomy was firmly established as authoritative.

Regarding ancient records in general, modern people must consider that ancient Israel was a very different world than ours today. Anciently, how could a person even get a copy of the scriptures? You could not simply go to a store and buy it. There were no printing presses at the time. Even if you only wanted a hand-written copy of the scriptures, how would you go about getting or producing it? Acquiring writing materials would have been difficult. One Dead Sea Scroll of Isaiah is 26 feet long. That is a lot of leather. How many ibex hides would it take to make that much parchment? You would then need a master copy. Acquiring a scriptural record would have been an expensive item. Finally, in the ancient world, only a few individuals knew how to read and write. Someone would have to copy the scriptural record word by word. It would have been tedious and labor-intensive to hand-write the entire record. You could pay someone to copy a set of scriptures for you, but it would have been a big job. It would be

costly. You get the picture. These plates of brass would have been very rare and very expensive.

1 Nephi 3:13–14 — Laman Escapes from the House of Laban

In the first attempt of the brothers to obtain the plates, Laman was selected by the casting of lots to go into the house of Laban and talk with him in his house (3:11). Although chosen by divination, Laman was inept in his attempt. At the same time, it is amazing that he got as far as he did.

But turning attention to Laban's blameworthiness, Nephi's narrative tells that Laban soon grew angry. He threatened Laman with a serious indictment: "Behold thou art a robber, and I will slay thee" (3:13). Anger was a strong factor in assigning culpability in homicide cases under biblical law (see Num. 35:20, 22; Deut. 19:4, 6). Samson became angry about the men cheating to get the answer to his riddle and unjustly killed thirty Philistines (Judges 14:19), leading to Samson's own death. Saul threatened Jonathan in anger, wrongly demanding that David be slain (1 Sam. 20:30–33), and Saul in turn died.

Notice that Laban called Laman a "robber." Lehi and his four sons had left Jerusalem and gone out into the wilderness, and at a superficial level that is the kind of thing that bands of robbers did. So, when Laban accused Laman of being a robber, perhaps Laban was hoping that the charge would stick. No wonder Laman was scared. Because robbers were outlaws or bandits, they could be put to death summarily through military channels without a trial. Bandits and brigands, as public enemies who themselves rejected the validity of the central government, could not expect to be given a trial of any kind within the established system. Therefore, Laban's threat was not an idle gesture. Vehemently calling him a robber is, of course, an unfair characterization of Laman. However, he had come with a band of brothers and so he could plausibly be characterized as a robber. At least, he would be terrified by such a threat, and he fled for his life from Laban's house (1 Nephi 3:14).

As a result, the brothers were about to abandon the cause, but Nephi bound himself with another unbreakable oath: "As the Lord liveth and as we live, we will not go down unto our father in the wilderness until we have accomplished the thing which the Lord hath commanded us" (3:15). Making himself subject to a vow of this nature, Nephi in effect pledged his life ("as we live") to obtain the plates of brass. In committing himself and his brothers in this way, he was well aware of the difficulties they would face. He swore that they would succeed, God willing, or die trying, for the plates were needed in order to "preserve unto our children the language of our fathers, and also the words spoken by all holy prophets from the beginning of the world even down to the present" (3:19–20).

Nephi recognized the hand of the Lord in his life. Nephi had great faith when he went forward thinking, “I don’t know what will happen, but I know the Lord can make it work.” A huge part of faith is to recognize the Lord’s hand in your life, acknowledge it and then seek it. Laban had a prominent house. There would be other people as part of the household. And yet, Laman was able to flee and get away when his life was threatened by Laban. Did Nephi and maybe even Laman recognize that the Lord had protected him in helping him get away?

1 Nephi 3:22–24 — Nephi and His Brothers Offer Their Treasure to Laban

So, the brothers tried again. After going from Jerusalem into the land of their inheritance (apparently somewhere in the lands of Manasseh), they collected their father’s wealth and returned with it to Laban’s house (3:22-23). They attempted not to “purchase” the plates, but rather to “give” their gold, silver, and precious gems to Laban hoping that he would then “give” them the plates. The sons of Lehi may have had a deeper motive than a simple trade for the plates. They could have reasoned with Laban, “We will give all of this treasure, we will consecrate everything we have, if you will just let us have that one item—the Brass Plates.” Notice that they did not offer to buy the plates or ask the price. In the ancient world, ordinary people did not buy and sell sacred things. They were trying in righteousness to obtain the plates, but it did not work.

1 Nephi 3:25–26 — Why Wasn’t Laban Punishable for Trying to Kill Nephi and His Brothers?

Under modern law, Laban may have been involved with what we would call an attempted homicide by ordering his guards to kill them. But under ancient Hebrew law, there was no such thing as an attempted crime. In Laban’s world, the only crimes a person could be convicted and punished for was a completed crime. To determine Laban’s culpability, the elders or judges would look to familiar facts and precedents. Here they would find the case of Joseph and his brothers. Initially, Joseph’s brothers threw him in a pit with the intent to kill him. A caravan came by and so they changed plans to make money by selling Joseph. They put blood on Joseph’s garment and returned home to tell their father, Jacob, that his favorite son, Joseph, was dead. Under modern law, these brothers have committed two crimes—first an attempted murder and second a kidnapping or selling of their brother. However, the Bible does not refer to Joseph’s brothers as murderers for their *attempted* murder. So, lawyers of Laban’s time would not have punished Laban since there was no actual murder.

Similarly, in 1 Nephi 7, when Lehi’s sons returned to Jerusalem to get Ishmael and his daughters, Laman and Lemuel, bound their brother Nephi with intent to kill. They left Nephi to die but Nephi was able to break the bands and get away. That also would

appear to be an attempted homicide. Later, in 1 Nephi 17, they will again attempt to kill Nephi and also their father.

But attempted crimes were not the same as completed crimes in Laban's world. Even though Laban sent his servants to kill Nephi and his brothers, they failed and no murder was committed. Laban did not do anything that would be seriously considered criminal in his world. Still, Laban was not a good guy. He broke a commandment by being envious. He coveted. The last of the Ten Commandments says, "Thou shalt not covet."

But thus, the brothers were thus forced to abandon all their property and run for their lives (3:26). The servants of Laban, one of whom may have been Zoram (who will soon figure again in the story), chased the brothers out of the city, where they hid themselves "in the cavity of a rock" (3:27).

1 Nephi 3:28–29 — Believing the Angel

And now it was Laman's turn to become angry, not only with Nephi but also with Lehi (3:28). Lemuel was in league with Laman, and they began to beat Nephi and Sam with a "rod," asserting authority over him. But an angel, with higher authority, rebuked them and importantly announced "that the Lord hath chosen [Nephi] to be a ruler over you, and this because of your iniquities" (3:29), developing yet another incident in the story line of Nephi's ascendance as the legitimate ruler over his brothers. The angel also assured all four of them that "ye shall go up to Jerusalem again, and the Lord will deliver Laban into your hands" (3:29). And what do the four of them do? They go to Jerusalem. They go up to the walls, and maybe Laman and Lemuel said, "The angel just said go to Jerusalem; he didn't he didn't say go *into* Jerusalem." But to be a good commandment keeper you need to keep the spirit and not just the letter of the law. Still, in this case, if all four went in as a gang, they were all more likely to get caught. So Nephi volunteered to go alone.

Reading about Nephi's experience with the angel invites us to think again of our own "reference experiences"—spiritual experiences that we have had that we can go back to throughout our lives. President Henry B. Eyring has spoken about the value of keeping a record of those times when we have been touched by the Spirit and have received personal revelation and help from the Lord—our "tender mercies." It is important to anchor ourselves to a time when we *knew*. This is a pattern that Nephi shows us—remembering those times when he *knew*. When the angel of the Lord delivered the message that He would deliver Laban into their hands, Nephi believed and *knew* that this would happen. In contrast, Laman and Lemuel questioned the words of the angel, "How is it possible for the Lord to deliver Laban? He is a mighty man." Nor had they latched onto the scriptural reality of the Lord's deliverance of Moses.

But why would Nephi record this troubling experience, of his brothers beating him with a rod and the message delivered by an angel? Nephi, himself, had already been told that he would become a ruler and a teacher of his older brothers. But now the angel stated this message in the hearing of Laman and Lemuel and Sam. Nephi then records in detail in 1 Nephi two instances that demonstrate that Nephi deserved to be leader. First, Nephi succeeded in getting the Brass Plates when his older brothers failed and said it could not be done. Second, Nephi's success in building a ship when his brothers, again, said it could not be done. Nephi did not record these stories for political purposes, because he was never running for election as king. Instead, he wrote these stories to reinforce the solidarity of the people who followed him, showing that they could trust that Nephi had indeed heard the word of the Lord, heard the Spirit, seen the visions, and was the righteous leader, chosen of the Lord.

1 Nephi 3:31 – Laban and His Fifty

Of even greater significance, the angel had promised the brothers: “Ye shall go up to Jerusalem again, and the Lord will deliver Laban into your hands” (3:29). Here, the legal language of “deliverance” enters the narrative. In biblical narratives, enemies are said to be “delivered”: Goliath was delivered, and accounts of accidental and unintentional slayings speak of victims being delivered into the hands of the killer. However, it is always unpredictable how and when such a divine deliverance will occur.

But Laman and Lemuel immediately raise the question: “How is it possible that the Lord will deliver Laban into our hands? Behold, he is a mighty man, and he can command fifty, yea, even he can slay fifty; then why not us?” (3:31). In the book of Isaiah, it talks about commanders of fifty (Isaiah 3:3). This would have been the title of a military unit. So, when Laman and Lemuel continue to murmur that Laban could command fifty, they are not using some arbitrary number. They are referring to Laban's actual position as an officer of an unusually sizeable force of soldiers, stationed within the walls of Jerusalem.

Although understandable, this rationalizing, murmuring, and doubting the ability of God to carry out the promise that had just been delivered by his angel now put Laman and Lemuel in the position of rebelling against God. Dishonoring their father had been serious enough (3:28), but dismissing the power of God, who was powerful enough to deliver the Israelites from the hands of the Egyptians, was next to blasphemy.

1 Nephi 4

1 Nephi 4:1–3 — Let Us Be Faithful

When Lehi had given Nephi his assignment from the Lord, Nephi immediately said that he would go and do it, and as soon as they had found out that it wasn't going to be as easy as they thought, Nephi said again with a powerful oath, "As the Lord liveth and as we live, we will not go down to our father in the wilderness until we have accomplished the thing which the Lord hath commanded us" (3:15–16). As he said before, he remained convinced that the Lord would provide a way, and so he said to his brothers, "Let us be faithful in keeping the commandments of the Lord."

And interestingly, whom does Nephi think of as the grand example of obedience and the Lord's deliveries? Moses. I love how connected Nephi feels to Moses. "Let us be strong like unto Moses, for he truly spake unto the waters of the Red Sea and they divided hither and thither and our fathers came through out of captivity onto dry ground and the armies of pharaoh did follow and were drowned in the waters of the Red Sea" (4:2). And I love what he said to Laman and Lemuel. "Now behold, ye know that that is true" (4:3). You know that happened. "You also know that an angel has spoken to you. Wherefore can ye doubt? Let us go up. The Lord is able to deliver us, even as our fathers, and to destroy Laban" (4:3). Little does he know that shortly that's going to be fulfilled in a way that he did not anticipate.

1 Nephi 4:5–18 — Nephi Enters Jerusalem Alone, Stumbles onto Laban, and Slays Him

As the three brothers stayed outside the walls, Nephi crept alone into the city, at night, going back towards the house of Laban (4:5). Perhaps Moses was again on Nephi's mind and should be on the reader's mind here, not only in Nephi's immediate outburst of confidence as the armies of Pharaoh had been justifiably killed in the Sea, but also as Moses himself had not been punished for earlier having killed a brutal Egyptian overlord (Exodus 2:12). By mentioning Moses, Nephi's story is already hinting that someone might likewise justifiably die in the unfolding of Nephi's account.

If a death somehow would occur in Nephi's attempt to get the plates, one of the main legal issues that would have arisen would concern the state of his mind as he slew Laban. Anticipating that issue, Nephi expressly affirmed that he was "led by the spirit, *not knowing beforehand* the things which [he] should do" (4:6). Almost as Moses led the children of Israel through the wilderness by the pillar of fire at night, Nephi becomes an embodiment of the children of Israel as they too had faced mortal dangers themselves. Nephi's testimony that he was led solely by the spirit of God substantiates a lack of pre-

planning, pre-meditation, lying in wait, coming presumptuously, or desiring revenge, or any wish to harm Laban. He had not schemed to find Laban by guile or by positioning himself somewhere around Laban's house hoping to be able to ambush him.

Apparently being completely unarmed, Nephi had hoped somehow to gain access to Laban's treasury and to persuade someone who controlled access to the plates to cooperate with him. But how on earth this was going to happen was still a total mystery to him. When he sat down much later to write his story, Nephi began by saying, "I've been taught by my father. I know of the mysteries of God, nevertheless I have suffered a lot of afflictions in my day" (1 Nephi 1:1). What happened there in the dark corners of Jerusalem that night may well have been one of those mysteries that Nephi must have looked back on and asked himself, how on earth did all that happen?

I think it's really important that Nephi went alone for two reasons. One is, strategically, they didn't want to enter the city like a gang of robbers and have whatever could happen under those circumstances, and if they went in as a group that was a real possibility. Secondly, I think for the purpose of faith and for the legal thing, it wasn't a mob that set about Laban; it wasn't a group of four. It was one person alone. The Lord delivered Laban into Nephi's hand.

As Nephi approached the house of Laban, the narrative tells, he "beheld a man," that "he had fallen to the earth" right on Nephi's path, and that he was "drunken with wine," and finally that Nephi "came to him." It seems that Nephi was still just wondering what he might learn or perhaps even how he might help this fallen person. But he only then discovered "that it was Laban" (4:7-8). No one could have been more surprised than Nephi.

Nephi immediately noticed Laban's personal sword and took it out of its sheath, admired its hilt of pure gold and its blade of precious steel. He may have seen this sword before, but probably had never held it. Considerable irony looms in the fact that Laban would be killed not only by his own sword, after having threatened to kill Nephi and his brothers, but also in the fact that the sword was extremely valuable. The instrument of Laban's death represents Laban's lust for gold and precious things, which was a cause of his own undoing.

At this point, Nephi reports that he "was constrained by the spirit that [he] should kill Laban" (4:10). Nevertheless, he resisted and reflected: "Never at any time have I shed the blood of man. And I shrunk and would that I might not slay him" (4:10). With these words, Nephi certifies that he was "constrained" by some urge (4:10) to do this deed. He was constrained. It was not of his own planning or volition. For several wise reasons, his

preferences surely would have been to somehow take advantage of the situation he had stumbled into but without having to kill Laban. Nephi was inexperienced, not bloodthirsty. Nephi's statements take his ensuing actions out of the legal domain of culpable voluntary homicides.

Hearing words quoted to him from Exodus 21:13, saying, "Slay him, for 'the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands'" (4:11), Nephi paused and reflected further. He debated with himself on three grounds, but none of these reasons were persuasive: (1) Laban had sought to take away Nephi's own life (and the life of his brothers)—but that attempt by Laban was unsuccessful and thus was not legally culpable; (2) Laban would not obey the commandment of God—but Laban had no obligation to consider a demand made by Lehi's sons as tantamount to a divine command; and (3) Laban had taken away their property—but stealing property was not a crime worthy of capital punishment. Although Nephi's situation—being alone, unarmed, and out of options—was different from David's situation as David and his soldier Abishai deliberated and decided not to kill Saul, Nephi and David both agonized over the seriousness of taking such an irreversible action.

To make it unmistakably clear that only one other reason ultimately justified Nephi's action, Nephi then tells that the Spirit repeated the injunction a second time, quoting again from Exodus 21, "Slay him, for the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands" (4:12). These words of the Spirit certify that the Lord had brought together the facts and circumstances, together with the means and methods, necessary for Nephi to slay Laban, and thus it was not so much Nephi, but "the Lord, [who] slayeth the wicked to bring forth his righteous purposes" (4:13). This motivation was similar to that of divine intervention in military combat. Laban, after all, was carrying weapons of war and was wearing armor.

And finally, the word of the Lord explained: "It is better that one man should perish than a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief" (4:13). This expression resonates with another rule of biblical law found in the story of Sheba, a rebel who was guilty of treason against David (2 Samuel 20). When Sheba ran to the city of Abel seeking protection, one of David's commanders named Joab demanded that Sheba be released to him, otherwise Joab would kill everyone in the city. When the people of Abel beheaded Sheba, they set an important legal precedent. It was subsequently invoked over the years under Jewish law to justify, under certain rare circumstances, the killing of one person in order to preserve an entire innocent group. This has been called "the one for many" principle. This rationale was reputedly involved again, when King Jehoiakim was turned over to the Babylonians in order to prevent the city of Jerusalem from being

punished (2 Chron. 36:6). Jehoiakim was then, presumably, to be executed by the Babylonians, and that had happened only a few months before the point at which the account in 1 Nephi begins.

Hearing that twice-repeated command and legal justification from the Spirit of the Lord, Nephi cut off Laban's head. He took him "by the hair of the head" (4:18), as Judith reportedly also did. She cut off the head of Holofernes, whose armies had surrounded Jerusalem. No one witnessed either of these beheadings. Like Phinehas in Numbers 25, Nephi and Judith are portrayed as righteously and justifiably taking the law into their own hands, acting under extreme circumstances solely for the benefit of their entire people.

1 Nephi 4:9 — What Did Laban's Sword Look Like?

People often wonder what Laban's sword looked like. Several studies have dealt with this question.

One thing we know is that this sword had to have been very sharp, because it could, with probably just one swipe, decapitate Laban. They did have swords or knives like that, used for making sacrifices. How did one sacrifice a lamb, a goat, a bull? By slitting its throat, and they knew how to do that. For Passover, for example, men would kill the lamb that would then be blessed, prepared, and the blood properly removed.

Nephi was a metallurgist; he knew how to make plates. He marveled at the workmanship of the Liahona. He also recognized the qualities of Laban's sword, its steel blade, gold hilt. It reminds me of a dagger from King Tut's tomb. I imagine it was a ceremonial sword or sacrificial dagger. There are ancient depictions of soldiers slitting the throat of captives. They knew how to do this.

Book of Mormon Central, "[What was the Sword of Laban Like?](#) (1 Nephi 4:9)," KnoWhy 401 (January 23, 2018).

1 Nephi 4:15–16 — Why Did Nephi Need these Plates?

The turning point of this story and the reason Nephi tells this whole story is so that we can know how important it is to have and read the scriptures, to know the commandments and be better commandment keepers.

When Nephi was trying to convince his brothers to go back, he says, "We need these records, otherwise, how can we preserve our language for our children?" That was one important reason. And if Nephi had said, "We need these plates so we can obey the law of the Lord," that would probably not be something that Laman and Lemuel would be very excited about. But preserving the language was one of the main reasons Nephi

gives. Language is important. Especially authoritative religious and legal language. The loss of language by the Mulekites offers a case in point. There are plenty of reasons why having the scriptures is vitally important, for them and for us. And it was especially important for Lehi, as he journeyed, to have a set of scriptures on durable metal. This is extremely expensive and very unusual, but it would not have done Lehi any good to have scrolls written on parchment with water-soluble ink. They would not have survived.

1 Nephi 4:18 — Was Nephi Justified in Killing Laban?

For forty years, I have written and taught in the BYU Law School about the technicalities of the laws of homicide in the Bible and in the ancient Near East. It is a complicated and technical legal subject. Here are a few brief comments that may be relevant to how the slaying of Laban may have been understood 2700 years ago.

When the Spirit quoted to Nephi words from Exodus 21:13–14, Nephi certainly would have recognized those words as coming from the Code of the Covenant in Exodus 21–23. Those words formed the basic requirements of the Law of Moses in Lehi’s day. Exodus 21:13–14 provided a three-pronged exception to the general law against homicide, if: (1) “a man lie not in wait,” and (2) come not upon him “with guile,” and (3) “the Lord delivers him into his hand” (Exodus 21:13–14). The expression, *to be delivered into your hands*, does not occur very often in the Old Testament, so it would have been rather distinctive. Obviously, Nephi had not been lying in wait, planning what to do. He had not been stalking Laban like a hunter who’s trying to kill an antelope. The details of the homicide law were further developed in Numbers 35, where hatred was a crucial element in finding someone guilty of homicide. Nephi would have been taught these words. He probably could recite these passages by memory. He had probably heard this text read at public gatherings, as required by Deuteronomy 31. His parents must teach their children the law, morning and evening.

In addition, a lot of homicide stories were found in the Hebrew traditions behind the Old Testament. Nephi would have known them, especially the story (found at the beginning of the book of Exodus) of Moses killing an Egyptian, that led to Moses fleeing into the wilderness in Midian for forty years. It will be Moses who almost uniquely in ancient law will provide an exception that differentiated an excusable accidental or unplanned slaying from a culpable presumptuous murder. These stories also were important and memorable. Interestingly, the Bible begins with a homicide, with Cain killing Abel, and the Book of Mormon begins with Nephi killing Laban. Both of these stories tell us something fundamental about God directing the affairs of what’s happening; on the one hand, God protects Cain when he has to be driven out, and on the

other hand, that God values the scriptures enough that blood had to be shed in order that these scriptures could be taken on plates that would endure.

Ultimately, whatever the legal reasoning of the day, Nephi did what he did for one and only one reason, and that was because the Spirit constrained him and said, *the Lord has delivered him into thy hands*.

Welch, John W. "[Legal Perspectives on the Slaying of Laban](#)." *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1, no. 1 (1992): 119–141.

1 Nephi 4:18 — Laban's Death

Maybe Laban should also be seen as a "type" of the wicked people in Jerusalem. Maybe his death was a final warning. It may have helped the people in Jerusalem to be less confident and to repent. The next morning they would have found Laban with his head chopped off. The only punishment under the Law of Moses that was enacted by a sword was in the destruction of an apostate city (Deuteronomy 13:15). Maybe it was a last-ditch warning to say to Jerusalem, the prophecies about the destruction of Jerusalem are really going to happen.

1 Nephi 4:20 — Was Laban's Treasury the Treasury of the Temple?

There was a treasury of the temple. And what is in the treasury? Gold, silver and all the donations, all the tithing. The safest place in every city was in their main temple. The Temple of Saturn in Rome was the treasury of the Roman Empire, and the walls of the temple of Herod were plated with gold. Laban, as the commander of the city guard, might have had charge over the treasury, which would also have contained the sacred records. Laban's house would have been right near the temple.

1 Nephi 4:33–36 — Nephi Swears an Oath to Zoram

Outside the walls, the brothers waited. Remember how scared they were when they saw Zoram coming, with Nephi now dressed in the armor of Laban. They had already been told that Laban was going to come and try to kill them, and as robbers they could be executed on the spot. Their fears, however, were soon settled, when they swore an oath with Zoram. They could not let him go. To keep him from trying to run away, they swore an oath with him, giving a place in the family, having an inheritance right. Indeed, because of this oath there would be Zoramites in the Nephite world. Zoram was treated as if he were a son of Lehi. When Nephi swears, "As the Lord liveth and as I live," he puts his life on this. "If this oath is not fulfilled, then I will die."

When the people in Jerusalem woke up the next morning and saw that the plates were gone, and also that Zoram is gone, they might have now wondered if Zoram had taken the plates, and maybe even Zoram killed Laban. But they have no idea where the plates

have gone. Because there were no witnesses at all, and not even Laman or Lemuel or Sam could stand as witnesses against Nephi, no legal action could be brought against either Nephi or Zoram.

We do not know anything about Zoram's background. If he was a slave, he would not have been an Israelite. At least he was under some conditions of servitude. Nephi's promise not only of family membership, but also freedom and standing within the family was obviously an attractive motivator for Zoram, especially considering the lack of any other viable option. The terms of Nephi's oath were that he would spare Zoram's life if he will "hearken unto our words" (4:32), then he would be "a free man like unto us if he would go down in the wilderness with us" (4:33) and that he shall "have place with us" (4:34), and "that he would tarry with [Nephi and his family] from that time forth" (4:35). This was a good thing. The brothers could scarcely have let Zoram go. He would have immediately sounded the hue and cry.

1 Nephi 4:37–38 — Nephi and the Group Flee into the Wilderness

Nephi's narrative ends as the five of them flee ("our flight," 4:36) to Lehi's tent (or tabernacle) in the wilderness. Having shed blood, Nephi and his accomplices may have faced the legal need to flee to a place of refuge in order find protection and to purge any guilty blood taint. Indeed, in the case of any "unpremeditated" killing, Exodus 21:13 provides that the slayer must take refuge in "a place" which God will appoint. There the slayer was protected from avengers and was to be given a fair trial to determine whether, indeed, he had acted culpably by lying in wait or not.

In times and places where the laws of these cities of refuge were in effect, the "place" of refuge was generally understood to be an altar or place in one of six designated Levitical cities. But the term "place" is ambiguous. It can sometimes refer to the wilderness (as in Deuteronomy 1:33; 9:7; 11:5; 29:6). Thus, it may have been legally sufficient, in such cases of unpremeditated or unplanned slayings, for a killer such as Nephi to go into the wilderness, as was prefigured in the precedents of Cain's banishment and of Moses's fleeing into Midian. Of course, Nephi was prepared, in any event, to leave the land of Israel and never return.

1 Nephi 4 — Chiastic Structure of 1 Nephi 4

This story is clearly structured chiastically. It starts "without the walls" and finishes up "outside the walls." Nephi is in the dark, not knowing what's happening at the beginning, and Zoram is confused and doesn't know what's happening at the end. The sword mentioned twice. The Spirit constrains twice, and so on. The main thing to realize is the central turning point, which is the recognition that decided the matter for Nephi, and this has to do with commandments in general, "Inasmuch as thy seed shall keep my commandments, they shall prosper in the land of promise," but "they cannot keep the

commandments according to the law save they have the law.” To emphasize this crucial middle turning-point, Nephi structured this entire chapter as an extended chiasm.

A *Without the Walls of Jerusalem*

They [my brethren] did follow me up until we came without the walls of Jerusalem (4)
I caused that they should hide themselves without the walls (5)

B *Laban and his House*

I . . . went forth towards the house of Laban (5),
not knowing beforehand the things I should do (6)
near unto the house of Laban was a drunk man (7): it was Laban (8)

C *The Sword*

I beheld his sword, . . . and the hilt was of pure gold
. . . the blade thereof was of the most precious steel (9)

D *Spirit*

I was constrained by the Spirit that I should kill Laban (10)
And the Spirit said unto me again (11)

E *Delivered into thy hands*

Slay him for the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands (12)

F *Perishing*

The Lord slayeth the wicked to bring forth his righteous purposes;
it is better that one man should perish than a nation should dwindle
and perish in unbelief (13)

G *The Law and Commandments*

Inasmuch as thy seed shall keep my commandments, they shall prosper in the land of promise (14)
I also thought they could not keep the commandments of the
Lord according to the law, . . . save they should have the law (15)

F' *Imperishable*

I also knew that the law was engraven upon the plates of brass (16)

E' *Delivered into my hands*

And again, I knew that the Lord had delivered Laban into my hands (17)

D' *The Spirit*

Therefore, I did obey the voice of the Spirit (18)

C' *The Sword*

I . . . took Laban by the hair of the head and
I smote off his head with his own sword (19)

B' *Laban's House—his treasury, his servant, his voice*

I went forth unto the treasury of Laban. . . .

I saw the servant of Laban,

I commanded him in the voice of Laban (20)

He supposed me to be his master, Laban (21),

I spake unto him as if it had been Laban (23)

A' *Without the Walls of Jerusalem*

To my elder brethren who were without the walls (24)

[Zoram] did follow me, as I went forth unto my brethren who were without the walls (26–27)

As this case shows, chiasmus was used in literature to serve several purposes. In Nephi's account of the slaying of Laban, the chiastic structure may serve to doubly emphasize the seriousness of its subject matter, to imbue its outcome with an aura of authoritativeness, and to clarify the logical relationships between the parts of this text. Chiasmus also helps to point and propel Nephi's narrative to its focal conclusion. The balanced format of chiasmus also conveys here implicit sense of balance, justice, orderliness, and retributive justice. It also conveniently enhances the audience's capacities for memorization, which promotes oral retellings and uses of this text in legal context and in public instruction. Ultimately chiasmus adds to a judicial verdict any often needed sense of restoration, peace, closure, and finality.

All of these reasons explain why chiasmus works so well here. Nephi used chiasmus in a lot of other places, but this is one of his prime examples. This is one of his most important stories, and he presented it in the most articulate, persuasive way that he knew how. Jonathan Burnside, a biblical scholar, has said, "The use of chiasmus is important in showing completion when divine intervention is involved because God never does anything that is imperfect or incomplete. This literary form completes it." We have here, particularly, more than in any other story, repeated instances of divine intervention.

What Can We Learn from Nephi's Example in These Chapters?

There are many lessons that we can learn from this foundational story. It's very difficult to read the whole Book of Mormon and everything that happens afterwards without the story of Laban in the background. It tells us the importance of records, of language, of revelation, of obeying the word of the Lord, of following the Spirit, of doing whatever needs to be done to promote the building of the Kingdom, that God will provide, lessons about making oaths and promises. Nephi at one point even says, "As the Lord liveth and as we live, we shall not return to our Father Lehi until we have done this." He is swearing an oath, making a covenant, and what is he saying here? We put our lives on the line, we will die if necessary, we will do everything we can, to make this happen. Lessons of covenant making and oath keeping are told and presumed over and over again throughout the Book of Mormon.

Mormon knows this story. He probably grew up hearing this story. But he did not originally begin with 1 Nephi. He began with the Book of Lehi. Would we not love to know what Lehi wrote about this episode? He was not there, of course. But what did he think about this when Nephi came back and said, "well dad, here are the plates, but oh by the way, we are kind of in trouble in Jerusalem." There was now no going back there

anymore, if there was ever a question in Lehi’s mind. Lehi may have had some mixed feelings about this, especially knowing the next thing he was going to do is say, was to ask his sons to go back and get Ishmael and his family. And the sons may have wondered, what if we run into any of Laban’s relatives in the process? Still, they went forward with courage. If readers keep this story in mind, they will see its influence throughout the whole Book of Mormon and will ultimately know that if we will go and do the things that the Lord has commanded, he will provide a way that we may accomplish those things, no matter how challenging those commandments may be.

1 Nephi 5

1 Nephi 5:1–2 — Sariah Complains in the Wilderness

I personally think Sariah was amazing. The modern-day pioneers who traveled to Utah endured with courage but their journey didn’t last eight whole years in the wilderness—what a difficult thing that must have been for Sariah. When the text mentions that Sariah *complained*, I don’t fault her for that. This was a terrible trial—not knowing whether her sons were coming back, whether they’d been killed or whether they’d done the right thing leaving Jerusalem. As the absence of her sons stretched on and as she envisioned the task they had been given, it was only natural that her fears would begin to mount. The round trip might have been well over 500 miles and through terrible terrain with dangers lurking in many places in addition to the formidable odds within Jerusalem itself. When she finally says, “Now with a surety I know,” that’s the voice of someone who believed and desperately wanted to absolutely know. There is no question that the most important possession for a woman in the ancient world was her sons. Her sons were her social security. They were her status. It was understandable for Sariah to be worried about the loss of her sons—that was really going to the core of who she was. Nephi shows us an unforgettable tender mercy for Sariah that will be an anchor experience for her and her descendants.

Book of Mormon Central, “[Were Any Ancient Israelite Women Named Sariah? \(1 Nephi 5:1\)](#),” *KnoWhy* 8 (January 11, 2016).

1 Nephi 5:4–6 — Lehi Bears His Testimony to Comfort Sariah

The Holy Ghost is called “The Comforter.” If you are a bishop or in any other position of confidence and people come to you who are facing difficult circumstances, people who are agonizing and in need of comfort—they don’t want sympathy as much as they want to hear testimony and feel the Holy Ghost.

1 Nephi 5:8 — Sariah Rejoices as Her Sons Return

Sariah's words to Lehi reflect the same poetic effect of Lehi's exhortations to Laman and Lemuel, "Oh, that thou mightest be like unto this valley, firm and steadfast and immoveable," and "oh that thou mightest be like unto this river." We can only guess what her poem might have looked like in the original language: "Now I know of a surety the Lord hath commanded my husband to flee into the wilderness." Break. "Yea, and I also know of a surety that the Lord hath protected my sons." It's a nice couplet, both beginning with, "Yea I know," and "Know of a surety." And moreover, "He has delivered them out of the hands of Laban," Break. "And given them power by which they can accomplish the thing which the Lord hath commanded them," echoing, of course, Nephi's own words, "For I will go and do the things which I am commanded." This makes a beautiful little four-part poem. It begins with "knowing that the Lord has commanded my husband" and it ends "knowing that the Lord has given them power they might accomplish the thing that he has *commanded* them." We might call it *The Song of Sariah*. In Exodus 15:21, there is a short but poetic expression by the sister of Moses which biblical scholars rave about as being a wonderful statement of joy and success, given as the Children of Israel reach the other side of the Red Sea. It's called the *Song of Miriam* and I think with Sariah we have the same theme of deliverance by the hand of the Lord with a similar, beautiful testimony of gratitude, faith and love.

1 Nephi 5:14–28 — The Brass Plates

We do not know the precise content of the Brass Plates. We know that they included quotations from prophets that are not in our Bible, for example, Zenos, Zenock, Neum, and Ezias, where we see that these prophets testified plainly and specifically about the coming mission and atonement of Jesus Christ and about important elements of the Plan of Salvation, including the nature of the creation and the fall as well as the nature of the Godhead.

In addition to these four prophets the Brass Plates likely contained some version of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, likely some version of the history of Israel from the time of Joshua down to Zedekiah (as in Judges, 1–2 Samuel, 1–2 Kings), books of prophets such as Isaiah, and maybe Hosea, Amos, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah, Jeremiah, some of the Psalms, as well as some lost texts, and others. Certain parts of our Old Testament, such as the books of Daniel and Ezekiel, had not been written at the time of Lehi, so they would not have been on the brass plates.

Book of Mormon Central, "[What Parts of the Old Testament Were on the Plates of Brass? \(1 Nephi 5:10\)](#)," *KnoWhy* 410 (February 22, 2018).

Millet, Robert L. "[The Plates of Brass: A Witness of Christ](#)." *Ensign* 18, no. 1 (1988): 26-29.

1 Nephi 6

1 Nephi 6:1–3 — How Lehi’s Lineage May Explain His Location

Even though Nephi doesn’t give a full genealogy of his fathers, we learn of his tribe in the House of Israel: “For it sufficeth me to say that we are descendants of Joseph” (v. 2). Later on, readers learn that Lehi was specifically “a descendant of Manasseh,” who was one of Joseph’s sons (Alma 10:3). It is possible that Lehi, based on his lineage, was a descendent of refugees from the Northern Kingdom of Israel (where Manasseh’s tribal grounds were situated). When the Assyrians invaded Israel around 732–722 BC, Lehi’s ancestors likely fled to Judah and settled in a precinct of Jerusalem called the “Mishneh.” Familiarity with this historical backdrop can help explain why Lehi was living in Jerusalem around 600 BC, instead of in the tribal grounds allotted to Lehi’s ancestor Manasseh. As refugees they may not have been able to bring records with them, even if they had once had them. They may have had a general knowledge of their northern ancestry through oral tradition, but may have been unable to prove this or know it in full detail running all the way back to Joseph, about ten centuries earlier. After Lehi and his sons obtained the plates of brass, they had proof of what they had previously only believed from oral tradition, hence Lehi then “knew that he was a descendant of Joseph” through Manasseh and could prove his important status as such (1 Nephi 6:2; Alma 10:3).

Jeffrey R. Chadwick, “[Lehi’s House at Jerusalem and the Land of His Inheritance](#),” in *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 81–130.

1 Nephi 6:3 — Lehi’s Words in Nephi’s Record

Nephi’s explanation that he didn’t give a “full account” of his father’s record may leave readers wondering how much of Lehi’s record Nephi *did* record. Careful studies on this matter have been conducted, and they suggest that there is probably quite a bit that Nephi either quoted or paraphrased from his father’s underlying record. Thus, while Nephi’s books may bear his own name, they give readers a window into the personality, teachings, and prophecies of Lehi. Together, as father and son, their teachings and prophecies support, strengthen, and inform one another, working together to persuade readers to come unto Christ.

John W. Welch and J. Gregory Welch, “[Writings of Lehi Quoted or Paraphrased by Nephi and Jacob](#),” in *Charting the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 49–53.

- John A. Tvedtnes, "[Contents of the 116 Lost Pages and the Large Plates](#)," in *The Most Correct Book: Insights from a Book of Mormon Scholar* (Salt Lake City, UT: Cornerstone Publishing, 1999), 37–52.
- S. Kent Brown, "[Recovering the Missing Record of Lehi](#)," in *From Jerusalem to Zarahemla: Literary and Historical Studies of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1998), 28–54.
- S. Kent Brown, "[Nephi's Use of Lehi's Record](#)," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon: Insights You May Have Missed Before*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 3–14.

1 Nephi 6:4 — Nephi's Larger Thesis

Have you ever learned about thesis statements in an English class? They are statements, usually given at the beginning of an essay or article (and often in longer works as well) that summarize an author's main point or purpose in writing. Nephi gives us two important thesis statements. As expected, he gives one of them very close to the beginning of his record, in the very first chapter: "But behold, I, Nephi, will show unto you that 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). Thus, one of Nephi's main points is to show his readers that God is merciful and that if we are faithful, He will deliver us in our trials. Nephi's stories emphasize this theme over and over.

Yet, in 1 Nephi 6:4, Nephi gives another purpose for his record, and this one is even larger in its scope. He declares that the "fullness" of his intent is to help men (and women) come unto God and be saved. We might ask ourselves what Nephi may have meant when he talked about *coming* unto God. For Nephi, this was surely a spiritual concept, indicating that if men will keep God's commandments, they will become spiritually closer and eventually unified in purpose with Him.

However, there is a very physical component as well. Remember, Nephi is writing this many years afterward, so he has already made the arduous journey to the New World, removing himself from the wickedness of the unbelieving people of Jerusalem. He and Lehi have already had their visions of the Tree of Life, where they saw concourses of people pressing forward toward the Tree of Life. Those who are righteous in this life will eventually be resurrected, and be granted the privilege of physically dwelling in the presence of God for eternity. They are saved from the perils of mortal life and literally *have come* to where God is. It is hard to imagine that Nephi, considering his personal experiences with traveling to divinely prepared locations, didn't intend his thesis statement to share with readers the results of both his spiritual and his temporal journeys.

Book of Mormon Central, "[How Can We Be Delivered through the Lord's Tender Mercies?](#) (1 Nephi 1:20)," *KnoWhy* 447 (July 5, 2018).

1 Nephi 6:6 — A Pattern in the Small Plates

In this verse, Nephi speaks in the future tense: "I *shall* give commandment" (1 Nephi 6:6). Evidence that Nephi did indeed pass on this commandment can be found in Jacob 1:1–4, where Jacob gives more details about Nephi's instructions and the sacred nature of the Small Plates. If you carefully read the rest of the writings on the Small Plates, you will see that Nephi's instructions were followed by Jacob's posterity. They passed the record down through their posterity, focused on things of spiritual significance, and only lightly covered the history of their people. These plates give a brief spiritual history that, by divine design, compensates for the loss of the beginning portion of Mormon's record (which was recorded on the 116 pages that were lost by Martin Harris).

Book of Mormon Central, "[Why Do the Authors on the Small Plates Follow a Pattern?](#) (Jacob 7:27)," *KnoWhy* 74 (April 8, 2016).

John W. Welch, "[The Father's Command to Keep Records in the Small Plates of Nephi](#)," *FARMS Preliminary Report* (September 1984), 1–12.

1 Nephi 7

Lehi's Sons Return to Get Ishmael and His Family. Could Laman and Lemuel and the Sons of Ishmael Have Ever Gone Back?

In the heading for Chapter Seven, it says that Nephi and his brothers "return to Jerusalem." However, Nephi specifically wrote that they returned to "the *land* of Jerusalem." It would have been unwise, if not unsafe, for them to go into the city itself. Like Lehi, it is unlikely that Ishmael lived in downtown Jerusalem. So, what was the "land of Jerusalem?" This might reference the entire Judah tribal area, which extended well beyond Jerusalem's city walls.

Why was Ishmael's family chosen to join Lehi and his family in the wilderness? When did one marry in Lehi's culture? Often when the children were very young, fathers put a contract together for the marriage of their children. In the case of Lehi's children marrying Ishmael's children, there may have been a previously established understanding. If not, Ishmael may have supported or had an interest in Lehi's calling as a prophet and trusted Lehi's sons when they came for his family. When Nephi and his brothers went back to get Ishmael's daughters, Ishmael seemed to know that something important had transpired, because they were all willing to go—the whole family.

Laman, Lemuel, and the sons of Ishmael didn't make it far outside of the land of Jerusalem before they wanted to go back to the lives they had left behind. Nephi argued with them, "How could you forget? After all you have seen and experienced, you still lack faith?" And then, in his final argument he says,

"Now behold, I say unto you that if ye will return unto Jerusalem ye shall also perish with them. And now, *if ye have choice*, go up to the land, and remember the words which I speak unto you, that if ye go ye will also perish; for thus the Spirit of the Lord constraineth me that I should speak." (1 Nephi 7:15)

Did they have a choice? Even if they went back to Ishmael's estate, which is probably where the sons of Ishmael would have wanted to go, it wouldn't have been very safe. Jerusalem was becoming more and more dangerous. The people had animosity toward Laman and Lemuel's father, not to mention the fact that they were connected to Laban's death. Nephi essentially said, if you think you have a choice, then go. And they didn't go, so they must not have thought it was much of a choice either.

1 Nephi 7:22 — The Meaning Behind the Sacrifice Offered Upon the Safe Return of Lehi's Sons with Ishmael's Family

We see over and over again, every time they get back to the camp, they make sacrifices, Lehi and his family gives thanks unto the God of Israel. It's the first thing they do: acknowledge God in keeping them safe. What happens to a person who gives thanks immediately and genuinely?

There are often two focuses when we give thanks to God for a gift. One is to focus on how happy we are for the thing itself. "Thanks for giving *that* to me. I'm glad that you—God—were so kind as to do that for me." The other is in an attitude of praise, an acknowledgment of the kindness behind the gift. "You were wonderful to do that, thank you, I reverence you for that." Where, instead of saying, I'm so glad I got *it*, you are saying, *you* are so wonderful to *do* it. They are two sides of the same coin, but interestingly, in Greek and in Hebrew, the word to praise and the word to thank is the same. But in English, there is a difference, thanks and praise are not one and the same. We must pause and remember to worship, to revere God for our blessings, as we see Lehi and Sariah exemplify here.

Book of Mormon Central, "[How Could Lehi Offer Sacrifices Outside of Jerusalem? \(1 Nephi 7:22\)](#)," *KnoWhy* 9 (January 12, 2016).