
1 NEPHI 4-9

Book of Mormon, Adult Institute Class, Tuesday, 8 Sep 2009

Dave LeFevre

INTRODUCTION

In these chapters, Nephi first finishes the task the Lord gave he and his brothers back in the Valley of Lemuel—to get the plates of brass from Laban—then they go back a second time for Ishmael and his family. The plates prove to be a great blessing early on, revealing much to Lehi and Nephi. The conflicts with Laman and Lemuel intensify but are also kept in check for now. Meanwhile, Lehi has a dream of the tree of life that teaches him much about God’s plan of happiness and his own family’s future.

1 NEPHI 4: OBTAINING THE PLATES

4:1-4 NEPHI EXHORT HIS BROTHERS TO FAITHFULNESS

4:1 ***his tens of thousands***. This is hyperbole. This verse and other references show that Laban commanded fifty. Here Nephi is simply contrasting God’s power with mortal forces, so exaggerates Laban’s support to make a point.

4:2 ***strong like unto Moses***. During Lehi’s lifetime, the Passover had been re-instituted in Jerusalem by Josiah, after not being celebrated for many decades (2 Kings 23:21-23). The story of the Exodus thus received renewed attention. Lehi surely would have taught it to his family. Now with the brass plates in hand, they could read it for themselves, and marvel even more at God’s power manifest through this man, Moses. Perhaps they had even recently celebrated the Passover themselves, making the reference to Moses even more immediately relevant.

4:4 ***they were yet wrath***. Laman and Lemuel go along with the plan, but even though they had an angel reprimand them, they still don’t like Nephi being in charge.

without the walls. The word *without* here means ‘outside of.’ More interesting is Emma Smith’s comment relating to this.

...one time while he was translating he stopped suddenly, pale as a sheet, and said, "Emma, did Jerusalem have walls around it?" When I answered, "Yes," he replied, "Oh! I was afraid I had been deceived." He had such a limited knowledge of history at the time that he did not even know that Jerusalem was surrounded by walls. (Emma Smith to Edmund C. Briggs, "A Visit to Nauvoo in 1856," *Journal of History* 9 [January 1916]: 454.)

4:5-19 THE SLAYING OF LABAN

4:5 **it was by night.** That the gates were open at night shows that it was a time of relative peace. Jeff Chadwick (in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, 81) convincingly suggests that Nephi would have entered by the Middle Gate in the northern wall of Jerusalem, constructed by Hezekiah in the expansion of the city about a century previously. That gate was expanded and fortified by Josiah during his reign (during Lehi's lifetime). Lehi's home was likely in this part of town (called the Mishneh, where refugees from the northern kingdom had settled). Laban was probably here, too. At least the brothers are well aware of the location of his house.

4:6 **led by the Spirit.** This young man, surely in his teens, had no idea what he was going to do, but exhibited great faith and moved forward, waiting for direction from God.

4:7-8 **drunken with wine...it was Laban.** Perhaps celebrating a bit too much of his acquisition of Lehi's wealth, Laban drinks too much and doesn't quite make it home before passing out.

4:9 **I beheld his sword.** Seeing Laban's sword, he draws it out to admire it, seeing the fine gold work on the hilt and the quality of the steel blade. This shows two things: 1) That Nephi was probably well-educated in metalworking, perhaps that was even his trade; 2) That the Book of Mormon claims steel swords were being made in this time period. For many years, people argued the latter point was a clear Book of Mormon mistake—steel didn't come until much later. But archaeology has proved this position wrong, including the discovery of a steel sword near Jericho dated to about 600 B.C. Other discoveries show that the technology to work steel came to Judah only in Lehi's lifetime. With that background, Nephi's admiration makes great sense.

4:10 **I was constrained by the Spirit.** Nephi feels prompted by the Spirit to kill Laban. He rejects the idea at first, but the Spirit is persistent, telling him three times in three different ways to do it, and giving reasons why it is justified. This episode actually proves to be an evidence of the antiquity of the Book of Mormon record, because this unlikely activity is represented in ancient Jewish texts with similar results.

A second century Jewish text ('Abot de Rabbi Nathan 20) discusses Moses' killing of an Egyptian taskmaster, as recorded in Exodus 2. In this text, Moses is hesitant to perform the deed until he is divinely instructed to do so. In fact, in this text, Moses was able to interact with a court of angels who rendered the verdict on the Egyptian and told Moses to kill him, so he did. Another text says that as David prepared to slay Goliath, he "lifted up his eyes to heaven and saw angels deliberating on Goliath the Philistine."

These examples demonstrate that even in small details, the Book of Mormon account conforms to ancient traditions about similar experiences, which were not available to Joseph Smith.

4:11 **the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands.** Nephi sees three reasons that justify his killing of Laban: 1) he tried to kill Nephi (and his brothers); 2) he didn't keep God's commandments; and, 3) he had stolen their property. D&C 98 points out that "three testimonies" against an enemy stand against him (v. 27), and that after those three offenses, the Lord says, "I have delivered thine enemy into thy hands" (v. 29). Finally, the Lord explains that "this is the law I gave unto my servant Nephi" (v. 32).

4:14 **thy seed shall keep my commandments.** This is the first reference to this promise, though Nephi is remembering it from a previous experience. He is perhaps referring to what he learned in 1 Nephi 2:20-24, though in those verses it is very personal, talking about Nephi and his brothers, not Nephi's seed.

4:19-38 THE SERVANT OF LABAN

4:19-21 **went forth unto the treasury.** Putting on Laban's clothes and armor, Nephi heads for the treasury (not Laban's house, apparently). He somehow knew the plates were kept there. What was Laban's servant doing there late at night? Whatever the reason, it was fortunate he had the keys, which would have been large wooden keys working very similarly to ours today, with raised teeth that push up pins to unlock the door.

In the dark, wearing Laban's clothing and sword, Nephi was able to sufficiently disguise his voice to fool Zoram (we only learn his name in v. 35).

4:22 **the elders of the Jews.** Laban appears to be part of the city leaders. That they are out at night having meetings, shows the desperateness of the situation and the scheming and plotting going on.

4:28-38 **he also made an oath.** Several oaths are made here. The strongest is Nephi's: "as the Lord liveth, and as I live" (v. 32). Zoram was clearly single and a servant (probably indentured slave) of Laban. He may have been older than the brothers, since he later marries the oldest daughter of Ishmael. Either way, they needed him to leave with them to keep their efforts secret. He apparently had few belongings, since he immediately leaves with no need to return to the city and get anything for the journey. Laban's nearly-naked, headless, and bleeding body lying in the streets was reason enough to hurry on their trip back to their father's tent.

4:31 **large in stature...strength of the Lord.** Nephi begins to explain his strength first because of his size, then humbly acknowledges the Lord's blessing at the same time.

1 NEPHI 5: SEARCHING THE PLATES

5:1-9 THE FAMILY REJOICES

5:1-3 **my mother complained.** Her concerns were quite justified. The boys were sent back to Jerusalem, where people had tried to kill their father. They were on a challenging mission, seeking help from a ruthless man. They were gone for many weeks, traveling through many dangers in the wilderness. And without the sons, Lehi and Sariah were left alone in the valley, which surely made it difficult for hunting, etc., not to mention the potential danger of a couple alone in the wilderness.

5:4-6 **my father spake unto her.** Lehi comforts his wife, reassuring her of the Lord's care in their lives until the sons return with the plates.

5:5 **I have obtained a land of promise.** This intriguing comment illustrates that Lehi seems to have believed that the valley of Lemuel was their 'land of promise.' It's not until later that he and Nephi realize this was only a temporary stopping point.

5:7-8 ***Now I know of a surety.*** Sariah gives a beautiful speech acknowledging the blessings of God and her certainty now of His hand in their lives.

5:9 ***did offer sacrifice and burnt offerings.*** This is the second of three times that Lehi offers sacrifices. The other two are when they arrive in the valley (2:7), in which case Lehi “made an offering” and “gave thanks,” and when they returned with Ishmael’s family (7:22), when they also offered “sacrifice and burnt offerings.”

The Old Testament direction for such offerings is found in the early chapters of Leviticus. Though both are made using fire on the altar, there is an important difference between thank offerings and burnt offerings. A thank offering, called a “peace offering” in Leviticus 3 (because the Hebrew word, *shelem*, is related to *shalom* or peace) refers to ‘well-being’, tying it to giving thanks for health, safety, etc. A “burnt offering,” on the other hand, is described in Leviticus 1, and is done as a sacrifice for sin. (v. 4).

So why the mention of burnt offerings after the two Jerusalem trips? Lehi needed to follow the Law and ask the Lord’s forgiveness for sins along the way. The obvious sins in both trips have to do with rebellion and murmuring, by Laman and Lemuel the first time, and adding sons of Ishmael and others also the second time. But consider other sins, such as Sariah’s complaining, and—most significantly—Nephi’s murder of Laban. To bring such sins into the camp would condemn them all, so Lehi offered burnt offerings to purge them of such sin and cleanse the entire group.

These sacrifices also raise an interesting question: where did they get the animals? Though it’s possible, it doesn’t appear from the account that they brought animals with them—a hasty departure and no mention of ‘flocks.’ Yet they clearly had animals in the valley. It seems likely that they traded for them with local people who were raising flocks in the nearby mountains, as the Bedouin still does today, thus providing another evidence of the family’s interaction with others during their journey.

5:10-16 SEARCHING THE PLATES

5:10 ***he did search them from the beginning.*** Lehi (probably reading to the family) read everything on the brass plates, discovering they contained the *Torah* (five books of Moses), a history of the people, and writings of the prophets. No mention of the Psalms, which tended not to be considered scripture but the hymnal of ancient Israel. The plates also gave Lehi his genealogy, so he discovered—apparently for the first time—that he was a descendent of Joseph, as was Laban. Later (Alma 10:3) we learn that Lehi was from the tribe of Manasseh.

Note that Lehi was not just reading the plates, but searching them, an excellent model of scripture study for all of us.

5:17-22 LEHI’S PROPHECY OF THE BRASS PLATES

5:17-19 ***these plates of brass should never perish.*** They wouldn’t unless deliberately destroyed. Brass is an alloy, made by combining copper and zinc. It does not rust, even in damp climates, like a metal with iron in it. It might turn a little gray or green, but even just minimal cleaning would address that.

More importantly, Lehi prophesied that the brass plates would go to “all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people” (v. 18). While that is partially fulfilled through the Book of Mormon, it appears to be that the brass plates will one day be brought forth, translated, and stand as another ancient witness to God’s plan and the truth of his work. Then we can read the most ancient copy of the books of Moses ever found, as well as writings of prophets not in our current Bible, such as Zenos, Zenock, Neum, and Ezias.

5:20-22 **great worth unto us**. History bears out the value of the brass plates to Lehi’s posterity. The brass plates helped preserve their language. We see this in the example of the Mulekites who had no scriptures and whose “language had become corrupted” (Omni 1:17). More significantly, it gave them a record to search that contained the commandments of God. Again, the Mulekites example is instructive, because “they denied the being of their Creator” (v. 17)—they had lost the knowledge of God.

1 NEPHI 6: WRITING THE THINGS OF GOD

6:1-6 This aside in the record lets us know that these (the small) plates are supposed to be for recording “the things of God”. Nephi knows other things are on the large plates (more in chapter 9) and in his father’s personal record, so he leaves them out of this and commands those who keep these plates after him to do the same—they are not to “occupy these plates with things which are not of worth unto the children of men” (v. 6).

1 NEPHI 7: ISHMAEL’S FAMILY

7:1-5 ISHMAEL AND FAMILY JOIN THE GROUP

7:1-3 No complaining from the brothers this time about a second trip to Jerusalem.

7:4-5 **Ishmael and also his household**. Why Ishmael? For one thing, he had at least five single daughters ready to marry. It could even be that Lehi and Ishmael had worked out the marriages before Lehi left and so now they were fulfilling the contract. This is supported by the fact that Ishmael’s sons were already married to Lehi’s daughters (presumably older than Laman). Another good reason to bring Ishmael is that he was of the tribe of Ephraim, at least according to Erastus Snow, who said that is what Joseph Smith taught them from the 116 lost pages (Journal of Discourses 23:185-186). With Lehi from Manasseh and Ishmael from Ephraim, both sides of the house of Joseph are represented in the New World.

7:6-22 REBELLION ON THE JOURNEY BACK

7:6-7 **they were desirous to return unto the land of Jerusalem**. Going back now, they could still claim their lands and houses, important for a new family starting out. They didn’t believe Lehi or the other prophets anyway about Jerusalem being destroyed, and it’s likely at this time that things appeared very peaceful, that the worst was over. So why go live in a tent in the desert when you go live in Jerusalem in a nice house, or on the land of their inheritance?

7:8-15 ***I spake unto them.*** Nephi is “constrained” (meaning compelled or driven) to chastise them for wanting to give up their quest and go back home. His reminders of God’s blessings and the sins of the people in Jerusalem, however, have no effect on his brothers.

7:16-18 ***that I may burst these bands...the bands were loosed.*** Nephi asks for strength, but instead the Lord simply make the ropes fall off. This is a lesson about at least two things: 1) That we have to listen to the Spirit even as we pray, so we pray for the right things; and, 2) That the grace of God is often to relieve us of our burdens as much as it is to give us strength to bear them.

7:19-22 ***I did frankly forgive them.*** Laman and Lemuel’s anger was stilled by some of Ishmael’s family (was the daughter of Ishmael that pleaded for Nephi end up marrying him?). In fact, something made them so sorrowful that they ended up bowing down to Nephi and begging his forgiveness. That act of humility is not often seen of Laman and Lemuel. Nephi teaches them that they needed to seek forgiveness also from the Lord, and readily forgives them himself. I note that Ishmael is never mentioned in this passage, and wonder where he was and what he was doing.

1 NEPHI 8: LEHI’S VISION OF THE TREE OF LIFE

8:1-20 “I HAVE DREAMED A DREAM”

Note: We will study the meaning of the various parts of the vision in more detail when we cover Nephi’s similar experience and interpretation, but today we’ll cover some things that are unique to Lehi’s account.

8:1 ***seeds...grain...fruit.*** The valley of Lemuel was a fruitful place, with abundant natural food sources. It was an excellent opportunity for the family to stock up. It’s not clear when the family knew they would be departing the valley, but this verse shows signs that they were preparing.

8:2-4a ***I have reason to rejoice...I fear exceedingly.*** Lehi’s first reaction after the vision is one of concern for the welfare of his family. Nephi’s vision, while similar, is concentrated on other things.

8:4 ***a dark and dreary wilderness.*** Lehi’s vision shows many similarities to their journey into the wilderness, and anticipates many of the experiences they will yet have as they continue southward. At night, with no moon, the world around them would definitely be a dark and dreary wilderness.

8:5-6 ***a man...dressed in a white robe.*** Lehi had an angelic tutor and interpreter, as other prophets have experienced (Ezekiel, Daniel, John in the New Testament, and many in apocryphal literature).

8:7 ***a dark and dreary waste.*** This seems to be the same as the wilderness in v. 4. No interpretation is given of this waste/wilderness, but the parallel with what the family was currently experiencing in their wilderness travels must have been striking.

8:8-9 ***a large and spacious field.*** After walking for many hours in the waste, Lehi’s guide finally brought him to a large field. V. 20 hints that this represents the world.

8:10-12 ***a tree, whose fruit was desirable.*** Lehi doesn’t explain the meaning of the tree; we are forced to wait until Nephi’s experience to discover what it is. But he clearly enjoyed eating the fruit, found “great joy” in it, and immediately wished to have his family also eat it.

8:13 **a river of water.** Lehi saw the water but paid little attention to it. Nephi will focus on it much more in his experience. A “river of water” in Arabia is a river that has water all or most of the year, and not just after a rainstorm (which is a wadi).

8:14-16 **they did come...and partake.** At the head of the river, Lehi saw some of his family. He beckons then calls them, and they do indeed make their way to the tree and ate the fruit.

8:17-18 **they would not come.** Laman and Lemuel were also there, but when Lehi tried to persuade them to come to the tree, they refused.

8:19 **a rod of iron.** It is always a “rod of iron” not ‘iron rod,’ as we would say—a Hebraism, since Hebrew puts it in noun-adverb order, the opposite of English. But it is interesting that Lehi doesn’t see the rod until he is already at the tree—he didn’t use it to get there.

8:20 **a strait and narrow path.** Strait, of course, means ‘narrow’ not ‘without bending,’ so the phrase is somewhat redundant. Another synonym is ‘tight.’

8:21-34 FOUR GROUPS OF PEOPLE

In these verses, Lehi saw four different groups of people while he stood at the tree. Many have compared these to the four kinds of seeds in the parable of the sower (Matthew 13:18-30).

8:21-23 **pressing forward...did lose their way.** The first group is a large one who were “pressing forward” toward the path and the tree. They started down the path, but encounter a “mist of darkness” that causes them to lose their way, and they become lost. Compare to Matthew 13:19, where one hears the word and but doesn’t fully understand it, and when Satan comes they fall by the way side.

8:24-28 **they were ashamed.** The second group were also “pressing forward” and did catch hold of the rod of iron. They pushed through the mist of darkness and made it to the tree by “clinging” to the rod of iron. But after partaking of the fruit, they realized they were mocked by those in the “great and spacious building” and felt ashamed. This caused them to fall away “into forbidden paths” and they were lost. Compare to Matthew 13:20-21, where the seed lands on a stony place, received with joy at first, but after tribulation, the person is offended.

8:29 **I do not speak all the words of my father.** Writing this thirty years later, Nephi knows he’s going to share his own experience, so he is summarizing Lehi’s dream just enough to show us the impact it had on him and the warning it was to his family.

8:30 **partook of the fruit.** The third group was also “pressing forward” and “caught hold of the end of the rod of iron.” They pressed forward, “continually holding fast” to the rod of iron. When they arrived at the tree, they “fell down” (exhausted or in an attitude of worship?) and ate the fruit. They seem to have stayed faithful. This is the successful group, yet he says the least about them. Compare to Matthew 13:23, which talks about the seed falling onto “good ground,” taking root, and bearing fruit.

8:31-33 **point the finger of scorn.** The fourth group never found the path or the rod of iron—they didn’t even seem to be looking for it. They are making their way with great difficulty toward the building. Many were lost along the way, drowned or disappeared, and if they did arrive at the building, they joined the crowd mocking those on the path and at the tree. Lehi notes that those at

the tree “heeded them not.” Compare to Matthew 13:22 where the seed falls among thorns, meaning those who are too focused on the cares of the world and riches.

8:35-38 LEHI EXHORTS LAMAN AND LEMUEL

8:35 ***Laman and Lemuel partook not.*** Lehi concludes on this sad note for him as a parent, which circles back to his beginning comment that he had great cause for concern for them.

8:37 ***with all the feelings of a tender parent.*** Lehi does his best to exhort them to righteousness.

1 NEPHI 9: THE PLATES OF NEPHI

9:1-6 ***these plates...other plates.*** Nephi explained the use of “these plates” (the ‘small plates’) and “the other plates” (the ‘large plates’). Both are called the “plates of Nephi” (v. 2). The first (small) are for “an account engraven of the ministry of my people” (v. 3) where the other (large) plates for for “an account of the right of the kings, and the wars and contentions of my people” (v. 4). He doesn’t know why the Lord wants this double record, but since it was commanded, he obeys (vv. 5-6). We, of course, know that it was to cover for the loss of the 116 pages, which was going to happen 2400 years in the future! Indeed, “the Lord knoweth all things from the beginning” (v. 5).

SOURCES

Book of Mormon Reference Companion, Dennis L. Largey, ed.

Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon, Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet.

Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon, Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and John W. Welch, eds.

From Jerusalem to Zarahemla, S. Kent Brown.

Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem, John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely, eds.

Rediscovering the Book of Mormon, John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne, eds.