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Title

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Abstract Review of *The Lehi Tree: A Novel* (1996), by Katherine Myers.

Katherine Myers. *The Lehi Tree: A Novel*. Salt Lake City: Green Star, 1996. 176 pp. \$7.95.

Reviewed by Shirley S. Ricks

This fictional approach to a very specific section of the Book of Mormon, Mosiah 17–23, reminds us that the Book of Mormon is filled with drama and truths that don't get stale in the retelling. The eleven-page prologue to the book introduces the setting and most of the main characters. We see King Noah scrambling with his men as they seek to save their own lives by abandoning their wives and children: "Many of the men turned to flee as King Noah showed them how simple a task it was to sacrifice others for one's self" (p. 1). Below them on the hill, a great slaughter is taking place, while the Lamanites are butchering those who are too slow to escape. In a desperate bid to save at least their own lives, the beautiful Nephite daughters move toward the enemy to plead for mercy. Fearing a brutal death, Kheronai leads these young women toward the fearsome Lamanite warriors.

Never had Kheronai known such fear. Never had she imagined such a terrifying image of death. She knelt before the fearsome warrior and turned her eyes pleadingly toward him. . . . His dark eyes studied her, his impassive face appearing to be carved of stone. . . .

. . . [Zeram's] head pounded and his chest heaved as he gasped for air. Never had he fought so noble a battle against his hated foe, but now he felt uncertain with what he saw before him. At his feet knelt a maiden whose fair face looked up at him beseechingly. (p. 4)

This bold and courageous action saves many Nephite lives, but the ensuing Lamanite bondage and captivity brings bitterness and despair. The Nephites promise to give up one half of their possessions and subsequently one half of their annual gain to their captors in exchange for their lives. This brings a hardness of soul to the Nephite people under King Limhi.

The prologue introduces us to several familiar characters: King Noah and his priests; Gideon, the Nephite captain; and Alma, one of the king's priests, who believed Abinadi's words and fled with his group to the waters of Mormon. Other Book of Mormon characters include Amulon, one of King Noah's priests, and King Limhi, Noah's son. Amid a cast of supporting characters, the main figures of the story emerge—Kheronai, who at the death of her beloved grandfather renames herself Mara, "for my soul is bitter" (p. 10); Zeram, the fearsome, handsome Lamanite warrior; Saphira, his twin sister; and Samuel, son of one of King Noah's priests who fled with them.

The complex action of the story continues in the city of the Nephite captivity and in the surrounding wilderness. We see the guilty priests, afraid to return home, seizing the twenty-four Lamanite daughters from the "place in Shemlon where [they] did gather themselves together to sing, and to dance, and to make themselves merry" (Mosiah 20:1). The intricate nature of the wilderness is made clear through the wanderings of various groups as they seek specific locations or other groups of peoples.

This novel does the reader the service of separating fact from fiction. Approximately twenty-five footnotes leading the reader to specific Book of Mormon verses, mostly from Mosiah 17–23, are sprinkled throughout the text. While the reader may not choose to look them up during the reading of the book, the references serve as a comforting assurance that the main plot is based on the Book of Mormon account. In addition to specific references, the author weaves other familiar Book of Mormon motifs and facts into the telling of her story—Nephite units of value are mentioned (p. 24), the plant *neas* is mentioned (cf. Mosiah 9:9), sacred space is recognized (p. 98), and the tree of life, or Lehi tree, with its fruit is shown to be a symbol of

God's merciful plan for his children. The tree represents his love for us. . . .

The fruit is God's greatest gift, Eternal Life. The Lehi Tree is reverently called the Tree of Life by believers in Christ. It reminds us that we have been offered Eternal Life through God's love for us. But it is up to us to live so as to be worthy to partake of the fruit of the tree. (p. 175)

This gospel message of peace and love is shown to be the only way to overcome the traditions that have long separated the Nephites and Lamanites. Only by accepting the gospel's precepts and challenges can individuals be rid of the effects of generations of hatred. The book ends on this note, but one is led to believe that a sequel is forthcoming to pursue further the activities of these individuals and discover how lives can be changed through gospel living.

This Book of Mormon drama has been fleshed out with believable characters who experience a range of emotions from love, hope, peace, acceptance, and compassion to hate, despair, anger, rejection, and fear. This fast-paced novel makes compelling reading as it creates a plausible world in a Book of Mormon setting. In a fictional medium, which may not be fully acceptable to all people, the author has developed gospel themes of eternal value.