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Lehi as Moses

Noel B. Reynolds

Our understanding of Lehi's leadership comes through the writings of his son Nephi. While it has been previously noted that Nephi chose to tell the story of his "reign and ministry" (1 Nephi 10:1) in such a way that his readers would see Nephi himself as a second Moses, it has not been much observed that it may have been his father, Lehi, who first employed this device to persuade his descendants of his own divine calling.¹

Matthew Grow contributed appreciably to this paper as a research assistant. I am also grateful for the helpful suggestions received from a number of readers, including S. Kent Brown, John W. Welch, James E. Faulconer, and Robert J. Matthews.

¹ 1. For an account of these political aspects of Nephi's small plates, see Noel B. Reynolds, "The Political Dimension in Nephi's Small Plates," *BYU Studies* 27 (fall 1987), 15–37. Not only does Nephi flee into the wilderness after slaying an official of an oppressive regime, but he then leads his people through that wilderness, across the water, and to the promised land. "Like Moses, he constantly has to overcome the murmuring and faithlessness of his people. Like Moses, he secures divine assistance to feed his people in the wilderness. And like Moses, he is caught up into a mountain to receive the word of God" (*ibid.*, 33). Further, on two occasions Nephi explicitly invokes the historical model of Moses laboring with the murmuring Israelites as a device to persuade his brothers to come along and help him in the tasks the Lord has given to him—obtaining the brass plates (1 Nephi 4:1–3) and building the ship (1 Nephi 17:7ff.). See Noel B. Reynolds, "Nephite Kingship Reconsidered," (in *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World*, ed. Davis Bitton [Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998], 172–77), for a list of 21 points of comparison between Nephi and Moses. George S. Tate has demonstrated a pervasive dependence on Exodus typology generally by many Book of Mormon writers. See his

In this paper I will show that Lehi had used this device in an attempt to persuade his descendants to accept his difficult instructions and that in portraying himself as a second Moses, Nephi was following a model established at least two decades earlier by his own father (Nephi's small plates were probably written 20 to 30 years after Lehi's final teachings were given to his family; see 2 Nephi 5:28, 34).² While we do not have Lehi's account of the events reported in the small plates, we know that the leadership was very much a shared thing, with Lehi's role preeminent in the beginning and Nephi's responsibility surfacing quickly in the brass plates episode and repeatedly thereafter at crucial junctures. But it could just as

"The Typology of the Exodus Pattern in the Book of Mormon," in *Literature of Belief: Sacred Scripture and Religious Experience*, ed. Neal E. Lambert (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1981), 245–62. Other writers who have documented extensive connections between the exodus of Israel and its leaders and the Lehiite exodus recorded in the Book of Mormon include Terry L. Szink, "Nephi and the Exodus," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: FARMS and Deseret Book, 1991), 38–51. In the same volume, see also Alan Goff, "Mourning, Consolation, and Repentance at Nahom," 92–99. Stephen D. Ricks and others have made related observations about Benjamin. See, Ricks's "King, Coronation, and Covenant in Mosiah 1–6," in *King Benjamin's Speech*, ed. John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 233–75.

² This must be qualified to the extent that in 1 Nephi 4 and 17 Nephi does refer to the similarity between Lehi's family's experience and that of the Israelites in the wilderness, with implicit reference to the leadership issue. See note 1 above.

easily be said of Lehi that he was a Moses figure,³ for he led his people out of a wicked land because of commands received in visions from God, through the wilderness, across the sea, and to a promised land. And then he died, leaving it to others to establish the covenant people in the promised land.

Our direct evidence that it may have been Lehi who first compared himself to Moses as a rhetorical device to help his children see the divine direction behind his actions comes from Lehi's final speeches to his people, as reported in 2 Nephi 1. Lehi needed to bolster his case, for as his rebellious older sons clearly saw, he had led them out of Jerusalem, not Egypt. It was hard for them to believe that the kingdom of Judah was the wicked and soon-to-be-destroyed place their father described from his visions. The analogy between a thriving and prosperous Jerusalem and an oppressive Egypt of old was not easy for them to assimilate (see 1 Nephi 17:21–22). So in his final words to them, Lehi invokes the very phrases and concepts used by Moses in his farewell address to the Israelites, as recorded in Deuteronomy. In so doing, Lehi casts himself in a role similar to that of Moses, the great prophet revered by all Israel, in an eloquent attempt to bring his murmuring sons to accept and obey the successor leader the Lord had chosen. It was a noble but

³ See Reynolds, "Kingship," 177.

vain attempt, and its inevitable failure almost seems implicit in the awkward logic of the blessings Lehi gave to his sons.⁴ Even so, recorded and perpetuated forever in the family records, Lehi's words would stand for all time—like Deuteronomy for the Israelites—as a witness to his descendants of what the Lord expected them to do.⁵

Comparing Deuteronomy and 2 Nephi 1

⁴ The older brothers are to receive the first blessing only if they accept the leadership of the younger brother. And who is to judge? See a more detailed analysis in Reynolds, "Political Dimension," 32.

⁵ Moses calls "heaven and earth to witness against" Israel this day that they have been instructed in what they should do (Deuteronomy 4:26). John W. Welch and Daryl R. Hague have analyzed eight Book of Mormon farewell sermons, including Lehi's, using the pattern identified in ancient literature by William S. Kurz in "Luke 22:14–38 and Greco-Roman and Biblical Farewell Addresses," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104, no. 2 (1985), 251, 262. See their "Benjamin's Sermon as a Traditional Ancient Farewell Address," in *King Benjamin's Speech*, ed. Welch and Ricks, 103–5. One of Welch's students addresses the larger question of Deuteronomy's impact on the Book of Mormon as a whole. See Julie Stevenson, "Deuteronomy and the Book of Mormon," 25 November 1980, unpublished MS on file in the BYU law library. In the final draft of this paper I was generously assisted by Drew Briney, who gave me access to his comprehensive analysis of Deuteronomic terminology that shows up in the Book of Mormon. His lists demonstrate that later Book of Mormon prophets also used Deuteronomy frequently.

There is good reason to believe that Lehi would have been especially familiar with Deuteronomy.⁶ Two decades before Lehi received the visions and revelations that sent him and his family into the wilderness, a manuscript now generally believed to have included all or part of the book of Deuteronomy was discovered in the temple at Jerusalem. This occurred during the 18th year of the reign of the righteous king Josiah (approximately 621 B.C.). After the discovery, Josiah went up to the temple with “all the people from the least to the greatest” and read the book to them, renewing the covenant contained therein in the presence of the Lord, “and all the people pledged themselves to the covenant” (see 2 Kings 22–23, especially 23:1–3; see 2 Chronicles 34–35). The book and this event then provided the basis for Josiah’s reforms by which he overthrew idol worship and centralized worship of Jehovah at the Jerusalem temple. Some of Lehi’s own understanding of the covenant with Israel might have derived from that memorable event. The discovery of that version of Deuteronomy was without doubt the manuscript find of the century. It occurred while Lehi, an exceptionally literate and learned man in the prime of his life, lived in or near Jerusalem. While I do not want to develop an account of the origin of the brass plates in this paper,

⁶ See Stevenson, “Deuteronomy and the Book of Mormon,” 1.

I would note that it is even possible that the late-seventh-century discovery of this new text provided someone with the motivation to create the brass plates as an enlarged and corrected version of the Josephite scriptural record.⁷

Deuteronomy is a powerful book, containing the final three addresses of Moses given to the people of Israel before they crossed the Jordan into their promised land, leaving him behind. Given the enormous importance of Moses' words, it is most reasonable to assume that they were written out in the first instance and then circulated to ensure that the correct version was made available to all. While scholars generally believe Deuteronomy was given final form during Josiah's reign, some version of the text was definitely included in the brass plates and was believed by Lehi and his people to have been written by Moses (see 1 Nephi 5:11). Certainly, the text presents itself consistently as a first-person account from Moses, with only minimal editorializing to provide context and transitions. I will argue below that Lehi's own final address reflects an intimate knowledge of the text of

⁷ John L. Sorenson argues in his article "The 'Brass Plates' and Biblical Scholarship" (Dialogue 10 [autumn 1977]: 31–39) that the plates of brass would fit best the Elohist (E) northern kingdom version of the Old Testament as that has been hypothesized by Bible scholars. John W. Welch suggests that the plates of brass might have been produced for King Josiah himself, after the discovery of Deuteronomy (see his study "Authorship of the Book of Isaiah," in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch [Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998], 430–32).

Deuteronomy, such that Lehi could allude to it at every turn of his own discourse without letting the references distort or detract in any way from his own message. He thus made Deuteronomy a powerful, though unmentioned, foundation for his own message for any Israelites who knew the Torah.

It may be difficult for modern readers to understand why a prophet like Lehi would choose to compare himself to Israel's great deliverer prophet. But because Lehi and his people understood their own times in terms of types and shadows from the past, he really had no choice but to use historical images. If human history is, as Lehi and Nephi understood it to be, and as their own visions reemphasized, a repetitive revelation of the covenant with Israel, then God's leading the family out of Jerusalem and reinstating his covenant with Lehi in a new promised land can be understood only by comparison with the Exodus and the roles of Lehi and Nephi in terms of Moses.⁸

In this article I identify 14 Mosaic themes and circumstances that Lehi invoked in his sermon recorded in 2 Nephi 1. Illustrations of close parallels in Deuteronomy, particularly chapter 4, will be noted.

Lehi evidently saw himself in the same awkward position as Moses. We read that after years of leading his family through the arduous wilderness

⁸ I owe this clarification to James E. Faulconer.

journey beset with almost impossible obstacles, which they overcame only through divine intervention, Lehi's two oldest sons are still murmuring and rebelling. Lehi knows that they are not going to have a basic change of heart and that they will soon abandon the ways and covenants he has taught them. But the father's time is over. Like Moses, he knows he is near death. All he can do now is leave a blessing and teachings for future generations who may be more receptive.

I emphasize that Lehi sees the contents of Deuteronomy only as a parallel to, not as a source for, his message to the future. Lehi has experienced great visions and other revelations like those Moses received. God himself has shown Lehi the mixed future of his descendants. Lehi has seen in a vision the salvation of all mankind. He has beheld the birth and ministry of the Messiah, the Son of God. He has seen the triumph of God and his people in the last days. And he has beheld God himself on his throne. Lehi does not need nor want simply to repeat Moses' messages. Lehi's visions have made him an independent witness. However, some of his people have consistently failed to recognize the Spirit that bears witness of his revelations. He desires to reach their resistant hearts and minds. Evidently he feels he might touch some by making a rhetorical appeal to Moses as a second witness to Lehi's own prophetic viewpoint. He especially knows that

his rebellious older sons, who specifically rejected his visions, calling him “a visionary man” (1 Nephi 2:11), will not respond to his teaching alone. And so he phrases his message in terms that repeatedly remind his hearers of Moses’ similar message delivered on a similar occasion.⁹

Rehearsal of Blessings

Both Moses and Lehi wanted their people to remember what good the Lord had done for them (2 Nephi 1-2; Deuteronomy 4). Nephi does not include the full record of Lehi’s teaching in 2 Nephi 1. Instead, he summarizes extensively, reporting that Lehi “spake many things unto them” and “rehearsed unto them, how great things the Lord had done for them in bringing them out of the land of Jerusalem,” including the divine warning to flee from Jerusalem before it was destroyed (see 2 Nephi 1:1, 3). In the quoted sections we learn what that list of “great things” might have included. Lehi’s people had received “a knowledge of the creation of the earth, and all men, knowing the great and marvelous works of the Lord from the creation

⁹ I hope it is clear to readers that I am not claiming an isomorphism between Deuteronomy and 2 Nephi. The two texts have far more differences than similarities. Nor do I claim that Deuteronomy is the only possible biblical source for the Deuteronomic themes I identify in 2 Nephi. All I am claiming is that Lehi’s invocation of so many of the themes we find concentrated and repeated in Deuteronomy, combined with the extensive similarity of his life situation to that of Moses at the time of his final speeches to his people, would have provided a powerful connection and rhetorical leverage for Lehi’s immediate audience.

of the world.” The Lord had bestowed power on them to do all things by faith. They possessed all the commandments from the beginning. And the Lord had guided them into “this precious land of promise” (2 Nephi 1:10).

Likewise, Moses rehearsed the blessings that the Israelites had received. Why? “Lest thou forget the things which thine eyes have seen, and lest they depart from thy heart all the days of thy life” (Deuteronomy 4:9). Like Lehi, he reminded his people particularly of their direct experience with God. Moses’ people had met him at Horeb, where they saw the fire and the smoke and heard the voice of the Lord declaring his covenant unto them—“even the ten commandments” (Deuteronomy 4:10–13). As a starting point, Moses referred to the day God created man and asked if there had since been such great things done elsewhere as God had done for Israel. Not only had God let them hear his voice, but he had freed them from the Egyptians, leading them out “by signs and by wonders” and “by a mighty hand,” including the parting of the Red Sea and the driving out of nations to make a “land for an inheritance” for Israel (Deuteronomy 4:32–38).

Appointment of a Successor

Moses declared Joshua explicitly (Deut. 1:38; 3:28; 31:3, 7, 14, 23;) Lehi declared Nephi indirectly (2 Nephi 1:28).

It is in the speeches in Deuteronomy that Moses declares Joshua as his successor (see Deuteronomy 1:38; 3:28; 31:3, 7, 14, 23). “And Joshua the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom; for Moses had laid his hands upon him: and the children of Israel hearkened unto him, and did as the Lord commanded Moses” (Deuteronomy 34:9). Lehi similarly seizes on the occasion of his pending demise to appoint Nephi as his successor, though in a somewhat indirect way.¹⁰ Recognizing the unlikelihood that Nephi will enjoy the same support that the early Israelites gave Joshua, Lehi promises and warns his sons that “if ye will hearken unto the voice of Nephi ye shall not perish” (2 Nephi 1:28).

A Prophet’s Last Words

¹⁰ For an analysis of the awkward logic of Nephi’s appointment, see Reynolds, “Nephite Kingship,” 163.

Both Lehi and Moses knew that they would soon be gone, Lehi to the grave (2 Nephi 1:14) and Moses to be “buried by the hand of the Lord” or translated (Alma 45:19) so that he could participate in the physical confirmation of keys on the Mount of Transfiguration. They both wanted to issue a final warning that their people must obey the commandments or suffer both temporally and spiritually.

Lehi’s perception that his life is near an end drives the timing of his remarks. He describes himself as “a trembling parent, whose limbs ye must soon lay down in the cold and silent grave.” He speaks to his children of those things that are of the deepest importance, for in “a few more days” he will “go the way of all the earth” (2 Nephi 1:14). For Lehi, his own pending demise provides additional rhetorical leverage in his effort to coax his oldest sons to repentance. Death holds no terror for Lehi because “the Lord hath redeemed my soul from hell; I have beheld his glory, and I am encircled about eternally in the arms of his love” (2 Nephi 1:15). But like Laman and Lemuel who are in a deep spiritual sleep, “even . . . the sleep of hell,” those who do not repent and “shake off the awful chains by which [they] are bound” will be “carried away captive down to the eternal gulf of misery and woe” (2 Nephi 1:13).

Even though Lehi invokes his imminent death for a different rhetorical

purpose, it is hard to miss the similarity of his situation to that of Moses in his final address to Israel. Moses regrets that the Lord was angry with him and will not allow him to join his people in crossing the Jordan and entering “that good land,” which the Lord gave them for an inheritance (Deuteronomy 4:21). Thus Moses “must die in this land” and will warn his people one last time of what they will suffer if they fail to keep God’s commandments (Deuteronomy 4:22).

Apostates Will Be Cursed, Scattered, and Smitten

Both the Israelites and the Lehitites were led to lands of promise by the Lord on the condition that once there they would keep the commandments or be swept off (2 Nephi 1:11, 17-18; Deuteronomy 12, 15-18, 25-27; 28:15-20)

The fundamental symmetry in these messages of Lehi and Moses provides the reason for all the other similarities that Lehi incorporates into his prophetic discourse. For, like Moses at a founding moment for the nation of Israel, Lehi most urgently wants to warn his people to avoid sin and to obey the Lord. Both couch their messages in terms of prophetic warnings about future destructions and scatterings of their people among the nations of the earth. Lehi warns that, should the time ever come that a people so blessed “reject the Holy One of Israel, the true Messiah, their Redeemer and their God, behold, the judgments of him that is just shall rest upon them” (2 Nephi 1:10). The Lord will transfer their land to others as a possession and “will cause them to be scattered and smitten” (2 Nephi 1:11). Lehi recognizes that although many of his apostate descendants may be “cut off and destroyed forever,” as a people they will minimally suffer a cursing that will come upon them “for the space of many generations,” be visited by the sword and by famine, and be hated and “led according to the will and captivity of the devil” (2 Nephi 1:17-18). So it is that, as Lehi draws his discourse to a close, he focuses tightly on the choice between receiving a blessing or a “sore cursing”:

And now that my soul might have joy in you, and that my heart might leave this world with gladness because of you, that I might not be brought down with grief and sorrow to the grave, arise from the dust, my sons, and be men, and be determined in one mind and in one heart, united in all things, that ye may not come down into captivity;

That ye may not be cursed with a sore cursing; and also, that ye may not incur the displeasure of a just God upon you, unto the destruction, yea, the eternal destruction of both soul and body. (2 Nephi 1:21-22)

But, he assures his descendants in warm tones, if they will “hearken unto the voice of Nephi,” they will not perish. And Lehi will leave them his blessing—“even my first blessing” (2 Nephi 1:28-29).

Moses foresaw that idol worship would be the downfall of Israel. A central theme of the close of his first discourse (Deuteronomy 4) is that Israel knows God only as a voice that spoke to them “out of the midst of the fire.” Because they “saw no similitude,” they cannot make idols in the likeness of God, neither male nor female, neither beast nor fish nor fowl (see Deuteronomy 4:12, 15-18). He goes on to warn sternly that if they or their descendants “shall corrupt [themselves], and make a graven image,” they will “utterly perish from off the land” and “utterly be destroyed.” The Lord will “scatter you among the nations, and ye shall be left few in number among the

heathen, whither the Lord shall lead you” (Deuteronomy 4:25–27). Moses returns repeatedly to this theme in his closing sermons, warning Israelites that they have been given a choice between a blessing and a cursing (see Deuteronomy 11:26–28); for if they forget the Lord, they will surely perish (see Deuteronomy 8:19–20; 7:4; 30:18). If they choose to serve other gods and fail to hearken to the commandments and statutes, they will be cursed and perish (see Deuteronomy 11:16–17). The following warnings of Moses are mirrored in those of Lehi:

But it shall come to pass, if thou wilt not hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to observe to do all his commandments and his statutes which I command thee this day; that all these curses shall come upon thee, and overtake thee:

Cursed shalt thou be in the city, and cursed shalt thou be in the field.

Cursed shall be thy basket and thy store.

Cursed shall be the fruit of thy body, and the fruit of thy land, the increase of thy kine, and the flocks of thy sheep.

Cursed shalt thou be when thou comest in, and cursed shalt thou be when thou goest out.

The Lord shall send upon thee cursing, vexation, and rebuke, in all that thou settest thine hand unto for to do, until thou be destroyed, and until thou

perish quickly; because of the wickedness of thy doings, whereby thou hast forsaken me. (Deuteronomy 28:15–20)

Remember the Statutes and Judgments

Lehi's most direct and obvious invocation of a dominant theme of Deuteronomy. The need of both peoples to keep the statutes and judgments of the Lord in order to avoid disaster.

For both Lehi and Moses, the way to avoid these frightening consequences is to “remember to observe the statutes and the judgments of the Lord” (2 Nephi 1:16). This message forms Lehi's most direct and obvious invocation of a dominant theme of Deuteronomy.

Moses frames his classic address in Deuteronomy 4 with references to the statutes and judgments of God and refers to them three more times in the exact same wording (see Deuteronomy 4:1, 5, 8, 14, and 40). The editor of Moses' speeches, recognizing their thematic role, uses the same phrasing in his summary and transition to the next discourse of Moses: “These are the testimonies, and the statutes, and the judgments, which Moses spake unto the children of Israel, after they came forth out of Egypt” (Deuteronomy 4:45). Moses begins his second discourse by invoking the same theme: “And Moses called all Israel, and said unto them, Hear, O Israel, the statutes and

judgments which I speak in your ears this day, that ye may learn them, and keep, and do them”(Deuteronomy 5:1). The phrase is frequently expanded to include the commandments of God and appears over 20 times in Deuteronomy alone.¹¹

Keep the Commandments and Prosper in the Land

If obedient, each people would be blessed and prospered in their land of promise. Lehi goes beyond Moses to provide a succinct statement of the promise that is repeated nearly 20 times in the Book of Mormon.

Closely connected to the Mosaic formula enjoining Israel to keep the statutes and judgments is the warning and promise that this obedience is a precondition to the blessings of the covenant and, specifically, prospering. Moses warns that if Israel will “not hearken” and “observe to do all [the] commandments and . . . statutes[,] . . . thou shalt not prosper in thy ways” (Deuteronomy 28:15, 29). Only a few verses later he repeats that warning in the form of a promise: “Keep . . . the words of this covenant, . . . that ye may prosper in all that ye do” (Deuteronomy 29:9).

¹¹ See Deuteronomy 4:1, 5, 8, 14, 40, 45; 5:1, 31; 6:1, 17, 20; 7:11; 8:11; 11:32; 12:1; 26:16, 17; and 30:16. Compare Leviticus 26:46. It was Lehi’s use of this language that gave me the first clue to the Deuteronomic influence.

Lehi does not simply leave that promise in the Mosaic formula. Rather, he reports his own version, as he received it from the Lord, which becomes the formula used by Nephite prophets over the next millennium and repeated (almost 20 times) throughout the Book of Mormon. For the Lord had said, apparently to Lehi directly, “Inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments ye shall prosper in the land; but inasmuch as ye will not keep my commandments ye shall be cut off from my presence” (2 Nephi 1:20; 4:4). Earlier, in his first book, Nephi reports having received the same promise (see 1 Nephi 2:20–21; 4:14). This has become such a classic formulation in Nephite tradition five centuries later that Alma invokes it as a frame for the formal account of his own conversion (see Alma 36:1, 30).

Finally, Moses expresses a differently worded version of Lehi’s mirroring connection between keeping the commandments and prospering in the land:

Thou shalt therefore keep the commandments, and the statutes, and the judgments, which I command thee this day, to do them.

Wherefore it shall come to pass, if ye hearken to these judgments, and keep, and do them, that the Lord thy God shall keep unto thee the covenant and the mercy which he sware unto thy fathers:

And he will love thee, and bless thee, and multiply thee: he will also

bless the fruit of thy womb, and the fruit of thy land, thy corn, and thy wine, and thine oil, the increase of thy kine, and the flocks of thy sheep, in the land which he sware unto thy fathers to give thee.

Thou shalt be blessed above all people: there shall not be male or female barren among you, or among your cattle.

And the Lord will take away from thee all sickness, and will put none of the evil diseases of Egypt, which thou knowest, upon thee; but will lay them upon all them that hate thee. (Deuteronomy 7:11-15)

A Rebellious People

Both Lehi and Moses were dealing with a gainsaying and rebellious people, and they pointed this out.

Lehi opens his final discourse by rehearsing the blessings that his people have received and then creates a rhetorical tension by also rehearsing their rebellions and murmurings, particularly against both him and Nephi during their ocean crossing (see 2 Nephi 1:2). In the part of Lehi's address that Nephi quotes, Lehi even more specifically cites the tendency of Laman and Lemuel to resist Nephi, whom the Lord has chosen as his mouthpiece to them. He pleads with them to "rebel no more against your brother, whose views have been glorious," and portrays the object of their murmuring as Nephi's plainness in "manifesting boldly concerning [their] iniquities" (2 Nephi 1:24–26).

Moses uses the same rhetorical tension in his second address to his own people, repeatedly pointing out their rebellions under his leadership.

Remember, and forget not, how thou provokedst the Lord thy God to wrath in the wilderness: from the day that thou didst depart out of the land of Egypt, until ye came unto this place, ye have been rebellious against the Lord.

Also in Horeb ye provoked the Lord to wrath, so that the Lord was angry

with you to have destroyed you. (Deuteronomy 9:7–8)

A Choice Land

The lands of promise were specifically chosen and prepared by the Lord. Moses clearly declares that it was the Lord who gave the Israelites their new land (see Deuteronomy 5:16; compare 27:2). Moreover, their continued possession of the land was contingent on their keeping the commandments (see Deuteronomy 8:1). Moses also described the superior qualities and abundance of the new land:

For the Lord thy God bringeth thee into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths that spring out of valleys and hills;

A land of wheat, and barley, and vines, and fig trees, and pomegranates; a land of oil olive, and honey;

A land wherein thou shalt eat bread without scarceness, thou shalt not lack any thing in it; a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills thou mayest dig brass.

When thou hast eaten and art full, then thou shalt bless the Lord thy God for the good land which he hath given thee. (Deuteronomy 8:7–10)

But as wonderful as that land and Jerusalem—its now-destroyed capital—might have been, Lehi and his descendants have inherited a land

choice above all others:

Notwithstanding our afflictions, we have obtained a land of promise, a land which is choice above all other lands; a land which the Lord God hath covenanted with me should be a land for the inheritance of my seed. Yea, the Lord hath covenanted this land unto me, and to my children forever, and also all those who should be led out of other countries by the hand of the Lord.

Wherefore, I, Lehi, prophesy according to the workings of the Spirit which is in me, that there shall none come into this land save they shall be brought by the hand of the Lord.

Wherefore, this land is consecrated unto him whom he shall bring. And if it so be that they shall serve him according to the commandments which he hath given, it shall be a land of liberty unto them; wherefore, they shall never be brought down into captivity; if so, it shall be because of iniquity; for if iniquity shall abound cursed shall be the land for their sakes, but unto the righteous it shall be blessed forever.

And behold, it is wisdom that this land should be kept as yet from the knowledge of other nations; for behold, many nations would overrun the land, that there would be no place for an inheritance.

Wherefore, I, Lehi, have obtained a promise, that inasmuch as those whom the Lord God shall bring out of the land of Jerusalem shall keep his

commandments, they shall prosper upon the face of this land; and they shall be kept from all other nations, that they may possess this land unto themselves. And if it so be that they shall keep his commandments they shall be blessed upon the face of this land, and there shall be none to molest them, nor to take away the land of their inheritance; and they shall dwell safely forever. (2 Nephi 1:5-9)

Lehi echoes, but also goes beyond, Deuteronomy in proclaiming the virtues of his land of promise. It is to be a land of liberty and a land protected from all save those whom the Lord should bring into it. These prophetic utterances become oft-repeated themes in Nephite discourse and history and include the recognition that the blessings of the land were given conditionally and could be replaced by cursings if the inhabitants failed to keep the commandments of the Lord.

The Covenant People and Their Land

Connected with the land is a promise that it will be an eternal inheritance to righteous posterity. Lehi explicitly notes that “the Lord God hath covenanted with me [that this] should be a land for the inheritance of my seed” (2 Nephi 1:5). In emphasizing this point, Lehi evokes the foundational Israelite tradition that the Israelites’ possession of a promised land was a consequence of their covenant with the Lord. Moses similarly reminds Israel that God himself declared his covenant unto them; and he warns Israel not to forget the covenant, “for the Lord thy God is a merciful God [and] he will not forsake thee, neither destroy thee, nor forget the covenant of thy fathers which he sware unto them” (Deuteronomy 4:31). Throughout his discourses in Deuteronomy, Moses returns again and again to the covenant theme. He reminds the Israelites that this covenant not only comes from their fathers but was made at Sinai with “even us, who are all of us here alive this day” (Deuteronomy 5:3). He emphasizes that the Lord is faithful and will keep “covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations” (Deuteronomy 7:9). But Israel may one day violate that covenant to such an extent that the Lord will revoke it and heap cursings upon the people. In reviewing such consequences, Moses prophesies what others would observe and say:

Even all nations shall say, Wherefore hath the Lord done thus unto this

land? What meaneth the heat of this great anger?

Then men shall say, Because they have forsaken the covenant of the Lord God of their fathers, which he made with them when he brought them forth out of the land of Egypt:

For they went and served other gods, and worshipped them, gods whom they knew not, and whom he had not given unto them:

And the anger of the Lord was kindled against this land, to bring upon it all the curses that are written in this book:

And the Lord rooted them out of their land in anger, and in wrath, and in great indignation, and cast them into another land, as it is this day.

(Deuteronomy 29:24–28)

A

Choice and Favored People

Notwithstanding their rebellions, each people was choice and favored of the Lord because of the covenant with their fathers. Even faced with the near certainty that his older sons and their associates will suffer the full consequences of rebellion and disobedience, Lehi expresses the wish that they “might be a choice and a favored people of the Lord” (2 Nephi 1:19). In so doing he echoes the prophecies of Moses, who taught the Israelites that they were “an holy people unto the Lord thy God: the Lord thy God hath

chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth” (Deuteronomy 7:6). And if they will keep his commandments, they will “be blessed above all people” (Deuteronomy 7:14). That the Lord had chosen the Israelites was evident in the miraculous way that he liberated them from the grasp of the Egyptians “to be unto him a people of inheritance,” and all this “because he loved [their] fathers” (Deuteronomy 4:20, 37). Moses returns to the initial theme in closing his third discourse: “And it shall come to pass, if thou shalt hearken diligently unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to observe and to do all his commandments which I command thee this day, that the Lord thy God will set thee on high above all nations of the earth” (Deuteronomy 28:1). Further, “the Lord shall establish thee an holy people unto himself, as he hath sworn unto thee, if thou shalt keep the commandments of the Lord thy God, and walk in his ways” (Deuteronomy 28:9). “And the Lord hath avouched thee this day to be his peculiar people, as he hath promised thee, and that thou shouldest keep all his commandments; and to make thee high above all nations which he hath made, in praise, and in name, and in honour; and that thou mayest be an holy people unto the Lord thy God, as he hath spoken” (Deuteronomy 26:18–19).

The Goodness and Mercy of the Lord

In addition to the more immediate blessings of land and substance, Lehi and Moses expound on the plan of salvation and the goodness of God manifested therein.

Lehi is also echoing a persistent Mosaic theme when he consistently explains God's actions toward his people in terms of his mercy and "infinite goodness" (see 2 Nephi 1:3, 10).

Moses explains that God is faithful and keeps "covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations" (Deuteronomy 7:9). And so if the people of Israel will "hearken to these judgments, and keep, and do them, . . . God shall keep unto [them] the covenant and the mercy which he sware unto [their] fathers" (Deuteronomy 7:12).

Choosing between Good and Evil, Life and Death

Moses as well as Lehi are explicitly placing a choice before their peoples by explaining the commandments and consequences for disobedience.

In a statement that is mostly neglected by later biblical authors, Moses tells the Israelites, “See, I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil” (Deuteronomy 30:15). Moses repeats the point at the end of the passage: “I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live” (Deuteronomy 30:19).

Lehi elaborates extensively on this formula¹² by linking it to the transgression of Adam and Eve, which they committed in the hope of gaining a knowledge of good and evil and the difference between them. But, as Lehi goes on to explain, it is the redemption from this transgression accomplished by the Messiah in the fulness of times that makes men free to choose between

¹² I thank Julie Stevenson for noticing that this formulation, which we often credit to Lehi’s originality, is actually present in less developed form in Deuteronomy. That two of John Welch’s students make this same point 14 years apart suggests it was a connection gleaned from his lectures. See Stevenson, “Deuteronomy and the Book of Mormon,” 19–20; see also Dan Packard, “The Influence of Deuteronomy in Lehi’s Farewell Address,” 18 April 1994, unpublished MS on file in the BYU law library, p. 19, on the same issue.

the two (see 2 Nephi 2:18, 26). And so it is that men “are free to choose liberty and eternal life, . . . or to choose captivity and death”—the one through the mediation of the Messiah and the other through the power of the devil, “for he seeketh that all men might be miserable like unto himself” (2 Nephi 2:27). This seems to be the principal implication of Lehi’s version of the Heraclitean principle that “it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things” (2 Nephi 2:11). Given that Lehi is drawing here from the account in Genesis, we might speculate that he is referring directly to Moses as his source when he concludes by stating that he has “chosen the good part, according to the words of the prophet” (2 Nephi 2:30).¹³

¹³ Alternatively, Lehi might have been referring to some later interpreter of Moses, like Zenos, whom Nephi had also referred to as “the prophet” (see 1 Nephi 19:10–14).

Acquittal before God

They absolve themselves of responsibility for their people's future transgressions by declaring that they have taught correct principles and that it would now be up to their people to govern themselves.

Both Moses and Lehi use the occasion of their final speeches to absolve themselves of responsibility for the future lapses of their people. Each asserts that he has done his duty and stands acquitted before God. Moses states, "Behold, I have taught you statutes and judgements, even as the Lord my God commanded me, that ye should do so in the land whither ye go to possess it" (Deuteronomy 4:15).

Lehi is even more explicit. His heart has "been weighed down with sorrow from time to time" because of his people's hard-heartedness and the fear that "God should come out in the fulness of his wrath upon [them], that [they] be cut off and destroyed forever." This has been the "anxiety of [his] soul from the beginning," and he pleads with his family members one last time to repent so "that [his] heart might leave this world with gladness because of [them]" and that they might not "incur the displeasure of a just God . . . unto the destruction, yea, the eternal destruction of both soul and body" (2 Nephi 1:17, 16, 21-22). But as for Lehi's own standing before God,

we read, “Behold, the Lord hath redeemed my soul from hell” (2 Nephi 1:15) and “I have chosen the good part, according to the words of the prophet. And I have none other object save it be the everlasting welfare of your souls” (2 Nephi 2:30).

Address to Future Generations

The promises and council applied to many generations, not just to those to whom the discourses were given.

The final Mosaic theme that Lehi weaves into his own discourse is the idea that, because of these covenants, the blessings and cursings that will come upon the people will affect multiple generations. The righteousness of their ancestors is a source of blessings and opportunities to all Israel, in the present and in the future, and to the descendants of Lehi and his family, with whom the covenant was specifically reestablished. Likewise, if they reject the covenant, “a cursing should come upon [them] for the space of many generations” (2 Nephi 1:18). Similarly, Moses saw the full weight of the cursing falling upon future generations that would corrupt themselves with graven images, “when thou shalt beget children, and children’s children, and ye shall have remained long in the land” (Deuteronomy 4:25). Moses emphasized the everlasting power of the covenant by teaching that its benefits to the faithful would endure “to a thousand generations” (Deuteronomy 7:9). And so he instructs each Israelite:

Keep thy soul diligently, lest thou forget the things which thine eyes have seen, and lest they depart from thy heart all the days of thy life: but

teach them thy sons, and thy sons' sons;

Specially the day that thou stoodest before the Lord thy God in Horeb, when the Lord said unto me, Gather me the people together, and I will make them hear my words, that they may learn to fear me all the days that they shall live upon the earth, and that they may teach their children.

(Deuteronomy 4:9–10)

Conclusions

When Nephi wrote his second record (the small plates) in such a way as to portray himself as a Moses-like figure, he was apparently following the pattern set almost three decades earlier by his father, Lehi. While there is no reason to think that Lehi or Nephi set out with an ambition to be compared to Moses, the circumstances into which the Lord's calls plunged them put them into leadership roles similar to that of Moses. And the connections were not lost on them. Lehi's last address to his people appears consciously to invoke at least 14 important themes and situational similarities from the final address of Moses as recorded in Deuteronomy. In so doing, Lehi added the weight of the testimony of Moses to his own. This is especially important because, as is often the case with the living prophet, his people were more accepting of the teachings of the long-dead Moses than of the living Lehi and his successor, Nephi. Though Lehi's appeal was successful with only part of the people in the short run, it provided a beacon and a witness to his descendants for centuries, giving them clear guidance whenever they were disposed to conduct themselves according to the will of the Lord.

| Theme | Scriptures | Similarities |
|--|---|---|
| Rehearsal of blessings | Deut. 4:9-13, 32-38; 2 Ne. 1:1,3, 10 | Both Moses and Lehi wanted their people to remember what good the Lord had done for them. |
| Appointment of a successor | Deut. 1:38; 3:28; 31:3, 7, 14, 23; 34:9; 2 Ne. 1:28 | Moses declared Joshua explicitly, Lehi declared Nephi indirectly. |
| A prophet's last words | Deut. 4:21-22; 2 Ne. 1:13-15 | Both Lehi and Moses knew that they would soon be gone; They both wanted to issue a final warning that their people must obey the commandments or suffer both temporally and spiritually. |
| Apostates will be cursed, scattered, and smitten | Deut. 4:25-27; 7:4; 8:19-20; 11:16-17, 26-28; 28:15-20; 30:18; 2 Ne.1:10-11, 17-18, 21-22 | Both the Israelites and the Lehites were led to lands of promise by the Lord on the condition that once there they would keep the commandments or be swept off. |
| Remember the statutes and judgments | Deut. 4:1, 5, 8, 14, 40, 45; 5:1; 2 Ne. 1:16 | Lehi's most direct and obvious invocation of a dominant theme of Deuteronomy. The need of both peoples to keep the statutes and judgments of the Lord in order to avoid disaster. |
| Keep the commandments and prosper in the land | Deut. 28:15; 29:9; 2 Ne. 1:20; 4:4 | If obedient, each people would be blessed and prospered in their land of promise. Lehi goes beyond Moses to provide a succinct statement of the promise that is repeated nearly 20 times in the Book of Mormon. |
| A rebellious people | Deut. 9:6-8, 13; 2 Ne. 1:2, 24-26 | Both Lehi and Moses were dealing with a gainsaying and rebellious people, and they pointed this out. |
| A choice land | Deut. 5:16; 8:1, 7-10; 2 Ne. 1:5-9 | The lands of promise were specifically chosen and prepared by the Lord. |
| The covenant people and their land | Deut. 4:13,31; 5:3; 7:9; 29:24-28; 2 Ne. 1:5 | Connected with the land is a promise that it will be an eternal inheritance to righteous posterity. |
| A choice and favored people | Deut. 4:20, 37; 7:6, 14; 26:18-19; 28:1, 9; 2 Ne. 1:19 | Notwithstanding their rebellions, each people was choice and favored of the Lord because of the covenant with their fathers. |
| The goodness and mercy of the Lord | Deut. 7:9, 12; 2 Ne. 1:3, 10 | In addition to the more immediate blessings of land and substance, Lehi and Moses expound on the plan of salvation and the goodness of God manifested therein. |
| Choosing between good and evil, life and death | Deut. 30:15, 19; 2 Ne. 2:18, 26, 27, 30 | Moses as well as Lehi explicitly place a choice before their people by explaining the commandments and consequences for disobedience. |
| Acquittal before God | Deut. 4:15; 2 Ne. 1:15-17, 21-22, 30 | They absolve themselves of responsibility for their people's future transgressions by declaring that they have taught correct principles and that it would now be up to their people to govern themselves. |
| Address to future generations | Deut. 4:9-10, 7-25; 7:9; 2 Ne. 1:18 | The promises and council applied to many generations, not just to those to whom the discourses were given. |

