

Nephi's Use of Lehi's Record

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In many places in the Book of Mormon, the authors refer to writings known to them but not included in the book. One of these is the record of Lehi. Nephi reported that he made “an abridgment of the record of my father” (1 Nephi 1:17), which he included on his own original (large) plates. An English translation of that abridgment was included in the 116 pages of manuscript translation lost by Martin Harris in 1828. Someday we will have that record restored; meanwhile, we can discover some of what it contained because both Nephi and Jacob included parts from it in their records.

The Book of Mormon consistently lets us know that, years after Lehi had died, Nephi had his father’s record before him as he wrote his own record (our books of First and Second Nephi). Wherever bits of Lehi’s record are found scattered throughout Nephi’s account, they reveal a body of language, experience, and teachings so varied and deep and yet so consistent that we must believe that a real man, a genuine prophet named Lehi, was the source.

As we start to read 1 Nephi 1, Nephi tells us that he is making “a record of my proceedings in my days” (verse 1). Yet within a few verses he is borrowing from what Lehi had written:

Now I, Nephi, do not make a full account of the things which my father hath written, for he hath written many things which he saw in visions and in dreams; and he also hath written many things which he prophesied and spake unto his children, of which I shall not make a full account. But I shall make an account of my proceedings in my days. Behold, I make an abridgment of the record of my father, upon plates which I have made with mine own hands; wherefore, after I have abridged the record of my father then will I make an account of mine own life (verses 16-17).

Lehi’s record must have been very important to Nephi, for he not only used it as the basis for part of his record on the small plates, he also presented even more of it on the large plates (see 1 Nephi 19:1). Fortunately, because Nephi, and Jacob, used it as a source, we can learn much about Lehi’s record from their writings. By searching there, we can construct a likely picture of how Lehi’s record was made and what it contained.

When and on What Did Lehi Write?

Most of Lehi’s record must have been completed by the time Nephi made and started writing on the large plates. This would be after arriving in the promised land. Nephi tells us that he recorded on those plates “the [abridged] record of my father, and the genealogy of his fathers, and the more part of all our proceedings in the wilderness” (1 Nephi 19:2). Nephi could have obtained the genealogy from the brass plates, where Lehi had learned about it (see 1 Nephi 5:14). But his father’s own version of the events in the wilderness (for example, 1 Nephi 5:2-6, which happened in Nephi’s absence) would have had to come from another source, most likely Lehi’s own. Lehi probably had begun writing his record while still in Jerusalem so that he could include his visions there while they were still vivid (see 1 Nephi 1:16).

Notice how Nephi talks about their wandering in the wilderness after the discovery of the Liahona (see 1 Nephi 16:9-17:5). He makes a series of statements that feature the word *we* (except for the incident of the broken bow, which he tells in first person singular, interrupting the main story). He seems to be summarizing what happened without giving details. The text simply gives the direction and length of their travels, plus the type of hardships in

general that the family faced. He is satisfied with summaries like “we did sojourn for the space of many years, yea, even eight years in the wilderness” (1 Nephi 17:4). This part of Nephi’s record is likely a summary of a more detailed, diary-like account probably either written or authorized by Lehi.

We have no way of knowing what material Lehi kept his record on, but probably it was perishable. A remark made by his son Jacob supports this view. Jacob notes, “We know that the things which we write upon plates must remain; but whatsoever things we write upon anything save it be upon plates must perish and vanish away” (Jacob 4:1-2). Jacob’s experience with the brass plates had shown him the durability of metal plates. We can well believe that the experience of Lehi’s family concerning records kept on perishable materials included the disintegration of Lehi’s record.

Other hints also suggest that Lehi’s record was not kept on metal. No mention is made of metal plates or engraving tools being brought from Jerusalem. Nor is there mention of ore being smelted in the wilderness to make either plates or tools. On the contrary, the party avoided making any fires (see 1 Nephi 17:2, 12). These hints point to Lehi’s having used something other than metal for his record.

The most likely candidates, according to materials used in Lehi’s day, would be animal skins, clay, wood covered with wax, or possibly papyrus. The Talmud specified the use of the skins of clean animals for writing the law, and the Hebrews were expert at dressing skins (see Exodus 25:5; Leviticus 13:48). Rolls, or scrolls, made from skins were used in Lehi’s day (see Jeremiah 36:2; Ezekiel 2:9-10).

The Content of Lehi’s Record

Nephi describes Lehi’s record as containing “many things which he [Lehi] saw in visions and in dreams” and “many things which he prophesied and spake unto his children” (1 Nephi 1:16). Using this description of Lehi’s record and examining the instances in which Jacob and Nephi either quote from or paraphrase it can give us some idea of its content.

Although we naturally think of Nephi’s book as being by and about himself, much of his record may have come directly or indirectly from Lehi’s record. The beginning of Nephi’s account seems to echo the opening lines of what Lehi had written. A statement telling how the prophet was called was normal for ancient writers; this came near the beginning of the record. He included information about the year, expressed in terms of when the local king took over the throne (for examples, see Jeremiah 1:2-10; Ezekiel 1; Zephaniah 1; and Zechariah 1). Of course, this is what we find in 1 Nephi 1:4-15. Directly after Nephi’s opening statements about himself (verses 1-3), he puts in a note that the beginning of his story came during the first year of King Zedekiah’s reign (1 Nephi 1:4). Next, as expected, we read that God called the prophet (verses 5-15). But, unexpectedly, the prophet is not Nephi but Lehi. It looks as if Nephi has used the standard opening format from Lehi’s book but adapted it slightly to begin his own account. Adaptations of Lehi’s record can be found often in Nephi’s writings.

Nephi later says this about using his father’s record, “Upon the [large] plates which I made I did engraven the record of my father, and also our journeyings in the wilderness, and the prophecies of my father” (1 Nephi 19:1). This verse is intended to describe some of the content of Nephi’s large plates, yet in fact it also describes what is included on the small plates (the first part of our Book of Mormon record) in 1 Nephi and the first three chapters of 2 Nephi.

To illustrate, (a) “the record of my father” corresponds roughly to 1 Nephi 1-10; (b) the “journeyings in the wilderness” appears in 1 Nephi 16-18; and (c) the “prophecies of my father” would include 2 Nephi 1-3 and

possibly 1 Nephi 10. The overall scheme is interrupted only by the account of Nephi's dream (1 Nephi 11-15) and Nephi's discourse to his brothers (1 Nephi 19-22), both of which digress from the main story that notably focuses on Lehi. Note, however, that Nephi's dream was prompted by his father's dream, which Lehi had undoubtedly recorded in his own record. Among items that Nephi apparently borrowed from Lehi's record are the summary of Lehi's wanderings in the desert, paraphrases of and quotations from his dreams and visions, and parts of his teachings, doctrines, and blessings to his children.

Visions and Dreams

Preserved in the Book of Mormon are seven of Lehi's inspired dreams and visions. Nephi mentions Lehi's dreams and visions being in his record: "[Lehi] hath written many things which he saw in visions and in dreams" (1 Nephi 1:16). Lehi himself considered that he was "a visionary man" (1 Nephi 5:4).

The earliest vision recorded in the Book of Mormon is the one that probably began Lehi's own record. Nephi describes it briefly: "As [Lehi] prayed unto the Lord, there came a pillar of fire and dwelt upon a rock before him; and he saw and heard much; and because of the things which he saw and heard he did quake and tremble exceedingly. And it came to pass that he returned to his own house at Jerusalem; and he cast himself upon his bed, being overcome with the Spirit and the things which he had seen" (1 Nephi 1:6-7). Nephi gives nothing more of the vision's content, but it may have included Lehi's call to the role of prophet, for soon afterward Lehi began to preach to the people (see v. 18; also 1 Nephi 2:1).

Nephi begins his summary of Lehi's second vision, the vision wherein he sees a book, by emphasizing that "being thus overcome with the Spirit, [Lehi] was carried away in a vision, even that he saw the heavens open, and he thought he saw God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God" (1 Nephi 1:8). Lehi then saw "One descending out of the midst of heaven" and "twelve others following him" (1 Nephi 1:9-10).

Nephi continues: "The first came and stood before my father, and gave unto him a book, and bade him that he should read" (1:11). Lehi then read of Jerusalem's wickedness and of its impending destruction. This same warning was the core message of other prophets in Lehi's time at Jerusalem (see 1 Nephi 1:4). Although Nephi does not mention it here, at some point in the vision Lehi also learned that the Messiah would come and save humankind: Lehi "testified that the things which he saw and heard, and also the things which he read in the book, manifested plainly of the coming of a Messiah, and also the redemption of the world" (1 Nephi 1:19). Nephi also includes two apparent direct quotations from Lehi's record—his warning to Jerusalem (1 Nephi 1:13) and his psalm rejoicing in God's power and goodness (1 Nephi 1:14).

Speaking of his father's third vision, Nephi includes words from the Lord that were probably quoted from Lehi's record: "The Lord spake unto my father, yea, even in a dream, and said unto him: Blessed art thou Lehi, because of the things which thou hast done; and because thou hast been faithful and declared unto this people the things which I commanded thee, behold, they seek to take away thy life" (1 Nephi 2:1). In this same vision, Lehi also received the command to leave Jerusalem, the first step in the family's long journey (see 1 Nephi 2:2). Lehi's obedience eventually led him and his family to their land of promise halfway around the earth.

Lehi's fourth vision was about his sons returning to Jerusalem for the brass plates (see 1 Nephi 3:2-6). Here Nephi quotes Lehi's own words, "I have dreamed a dream, in the which the Lord hath commanded me that thou and thy brethren shall return to Jerusalem. For behold, Laban hath the record of the Jews and also a genealogy of my forefathers, and they are engraven upon plates of brass" (1 Nephi 3:2-3). Nephi and his brothers were to go to

Laban and “seek the records, and bring them down hither” (1 Nephi 3:4), even though his brothers had already complained about the task.

The fifth vision showed the tree of life and possibly included the Messiah. Much of the vision was written in first person singular (“I saw”). This was thus a long direct quotation from Lehi’s record. When Nephi introduces the story, he clarifies that he is quoting: “He [Lehi] spake unto us [his family], saying: Behold, I have dreamed a dream” (1 Nephi 8:2). In addition, Nephi leaves no doubt when he stops quoting Lehi, for at the end he only summarizes the rest of his father’s vision: “I, Nephi, do not speak all the words of my father. But, to be short in writing, behold, he saw other multitudes pressing forward; and they came and caught hold of the end of the rod of iron” (1 Nephi 8:29-30). This summary includes Lehi’s warnings and urgings to Laman and Lemuel (except for a brief direct quote in 1 Nephi 8:34-35). He closes this paraphrase by saying: “All these things did my father see, and hear, and speak, as he dwelt in a tent, in the valley of Lemuel, and also a great many more things, which cannot be written upon these [small] plates” (1 Nephi 9:1).

In Lehi’s original record, the material in 1 Nephi 10 (Lehi’s teachings about the coming of the Messiah and the scattering and gathering of Israel) may well have followed directly the account of his dream of the tree of life and his exhortation to his sons. This can be seen from two facts: In the first place, just a few lines (1 Nephi 9:2-6) separate these two sections. In those lines, Nephi briefly discusses the plates mentioned in verse one, before resuming his father’s account in chapter ten. In the second place, when we compare the content of these two parts (chapters 8 and 10) with the content of Nephi’s vision of the tree of life (chapters 11-14), we see that the second part (chapter 10) plainly belongs together with the first (chapter 8). In Nephi’s parallel vision, the prophecies regarding Israel’s destiny and the Messiah (1 Nephi 10:1-16) go with his account of the tree of life, suggesting the same pattern for Lehi’s dream of the tree and prophecy of the Messiah. So, we should conclude that the brief segment in 1 Nephi 9:2-6 was inserted between two sections that likely were continuous in Lehi’s narrative.

I believe that the words written upon the compass or Liahona (see 1 Nephi 16:26) constituted Lehi’s sixth specific revelation. (Since it was shared by all the others in the party, perhaps it should not be called a vision, strictly speaking.) On this occasion Lehi had prayed to learn where Nephi should go to find food. The response came as words that appeared miraculously on the sacred ball. The Lord chastised Lehi and his family for complaining about their hardships in the wilderness (see 1 Nephi 16:24-25). Nephi wrote, “When my father beheld the things which were written upon the ball, he did fear and tremble exceedingly, and also my brethren and the sons of Ishmael and our wives” (1 Nephi 16:27). We see that, like the Urim and Thummim among the ancient Israelites, the compass-ball served as a means to receive revelation.

The last recorded vision of Lehi is mentioned in 2 Nephi 1:4: “I have seen a vision, in which I know that Jerusalem is destroyed; and had we remained in Jerusalem we should also have perished.” The Lord, who had earlier told Lehi to prophesy that Jerusalem would be destroyed, now, in the New World, showed him the fulfillment of that prophecy.

The Desert Journal

The description of wandering in the wilderness (1 Nephi 16:11-17, 33; 17:1-6) also seems to have been paraphrased by Nephi from the record Lehi kept. Possibly Nephi himself made the original record of his family’s journey in the desert (perhaps acting as scribe for Lehi), but the way Nephi speaks of this account makes it seem a record originally written by Lehi.

Nephi mentions the desert journal twice in 1 Nephi 19:1-2. In verse one, when listing the sources he used for the large plates, Nephi includes “the record of my father, and also [the record of] our journeyings in the wilderness, and the prophecies of my father.” Note that Nephi mentions the desert journal between the items from Lehi. Only after stating what sources he employed from his father does Nephi say, “and also many of mine own prophecies have I engraven upon them” (1 Nephi 19:1).

Verse two presents a similar picture. Once again Nephi announces the sources he drew from in composing his record on the large plates: “The record of my father, and the genealogy of his fathers, and the more part of all our proceedings in the wilderness.” Again Nephi associates the “proceedings” of the desert period with his father’s account. Consequently, the desert journal almost certainly came from Lehi’s pen. Years later, when Nephi was making his record on the small plates, this desert journal undoubtedly proved helpful in filling out Nephi’s memory of hazy or forgotten details.

Doctrines and Prophecies

The material quoted or summarized from Lehi’s records contains some of the most powerful doctrine and far-reaching prophecies in the entire Book of Mormon. Much of what we know about such basic gospel doctrines as loyalty in the marriage relationship, the Fall, the expected Savior, and the house of Israel, we learn from Lehi.

One doctrine often overlooked as being from Lehi is found in his son Jacob’s teachings on fidelity in marriage (see Jacob 2:23-33). At first glance Jacob appears to be repeating instructions he received directly from the Lord, following the Lord’s direction to declare “the word which I shall give thee unto this people” (Jacob 2:11). However, a more careful look at chapter two shows us that although the counsel concerning one wife indeed came from the Lord, Jacob was not the first to receive it. Lehi was the source for these directions.

For following what must be the Lord’s own words (Jacob 2:23-33, with only the first part of verse twenty-seven being Jacob’s statement), we find this: “My brethren, ye know that these commandments [concerning a husband’s loyalty to his wife] were given to our father, Lehi; wherefore, ye have known them before; and ye have come unto great condemnation; for ye have done these things which ye ought not to have done” (Jacob 2:34). Clearly Lehi was the one who first received these beautiful teachings from the Lord. Jacob, then, mostly likely quoted from Lehi’s record.

As we might expect in a book planned to be a witness of Jesus Christ, many teachings and prophecies that Nephi took from Lehi’s record are about the Savior. For instance, although we have only a short summary of Lehi’s preaching in Jerusalem, we learn that he prophesied not only of the destruction of Jerusalem but also of the coming of the Messiah and the redemption of the world, information gained in his vision of the book (see 1 Nephi 1:19).

A more complete account of the Savior’s life and redeeming role in the plan of salvation is found in Lehi’s later sermons. This knowledge apparently came to him in connection with his vision of the tree of life (see 1 Nephi 10). Nephi recorded an apparent direct quotation from Lehi’s record about what the forerunner of the Messiah would say (see 10:8). Much more detail on this topic was given as part of Lehi’s blessing to Jacob (see 2 Nephi 2). There we learn such important truths as the role of the fall in the plan of salvation, the necessity of commandments, and the reasons for and effects of the Atonement.

Many of Lehi’s teachings and prophecies are found in the record of his last blessings and instructions to his family before his death (see 2 Nephi 1:1-4:12). This account, using Lehi’s own words, is clearly a direct quotation from his

record. Written in the first person, it is doubtless part of what Nephi referred to when he said that Lehi's record contained "many things which he prophesied and spake unto his children" (1 Nephi 1:16). In these last blessings, Lehi taught his children principles for successful living in the promised land and prophesied of a time when his posterity would reject their Redeemer and rebel against the principles of righteousness. They would then lose the lands of their inheritance and be "scattered and smitten" (2 Nephi 1:11).

Even after picturing these difficulties, Lehi assured his family that their descendants would survive the disasters. Eventually, a special seer would bring to pass "much restoration unto the house of Israel, and unto the seed of thy brethren" (2 Nephi 3:24). Lehi also prophesied that the record his people kept would spread to the survivors of his seed and then to all parts of the world (see 2 Nephi 3:18-21).

Another significant teaching, in Lehi's final blessing to his son Jacob, concerned "opposition in all things." Lehi began by indicating that the judgment must lead either to "punishment that is affixed [assigned]" or else to "happiness which is affixed" (2 Nephi 2:10). He then reasoned: "It must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things. If not so . . . righteousness could not be brought to pass, neither wickedness, neither holiness nor misery, neither good nor bad" (2 Nephi 2:11).

Lehi taught that without choices we are unable to be or feel righteous or unrighteous. Note the dramatic result that Lehi said would follow: "If these things are not there is no God. And if there is no God we are not, neither the earth; for there could have been no creation" (2 Nephi 2:13). According to Lehi, all of existence would cease and make no sense if opposition were removed. This observation led Lehi to say: "Wherefore, this thing must needs destroy the wisdom of God and his eternal purposes, and also the power, and the mercy, and the justice of God" (2 Nephi 2:12). Since Lehi had just previously been dealing with the redemption to come through the Messiah (2 Nephi 2:6-10), we should probably understand this series of passages in terms of the Redeemer's work. That is, if there exists no opposition, there is no reason for a redeemer who can bring about God's mercy and justice.

Closely related to the teachings about opposition is Lehi's understanding of the role of Adam and Eve in the drama of salvation (see 2 Nephi 2:15-27). Lehi insisted that two ingredients were essential in our first parents' situation—a choice, along with freedom to choose. There had to be "an opposition; even the forbidden fruit in opposition to the tree of life. . . . Wherefore, the Lord God gave unto man that he should act for himself" (2 Nephi 2:15-16).

For Lehi, the opposition facing Adam and Eve was necessary so that they could make the choice that could bring about mankind's mortal existence. In fact, if they had not been enticed to make that choice, which brought about both mortality and the ability to become parents, the earth would never have been peopled. This would have frustrated God's plan: "If Adam had not transgressed he would not have fallen, but he would have remained in the garden of Eden. . . . They would have had no children. . . . Adam fell that men might be" (2 Nephi 2:22-23, 25). So from Lehi we have the clearest explanation of why the fall was a necessary part of the plan of salvation.

We have seen repeatedly in Nephi's and Jacob's records that Lehi's account was a rich source of the knowledge the sons have given us. They owe to Lehi—and they acknowledge it—many precious items of revelation and instruction about the gospel. Neither son set out consciously to present and interpret his father's record for future readers. But they were so deeply and broadly influenced by their father that much of what we learn from them originated with Lehi. His life and teachings, as preserved in the sons' accounts, beautifully served their purpose in writing—"to persuade our children, and also our brethren, to believe in Christ, and to be reconciled to God" (2 Nephi 25:23). Because they turned to him for light, we benefit by the legacy a great prophet and patriarch left.