

Connections between the Visions of Lehi and Nephi

“And I bear record that I saw the things which my father saw, and the angel of the Lord did make them known unto me.” (1 Nephi 14:29)

Although a simple book in several respects, the Book of Mormon is also marvelously complex, as in the interconnections between several of its texts. No example of this phenomenon is more instructive than the case of Lehi’s and Nephi’s visions.

As reported in 1 Nephi 8, Lehi saw the tree of life, an iron rod, a great and spacious building, and various people reaching the tree or falling away. In 1 Nephi 11–14, Nephi beheld the condescension of God, the twelve apostles of the Lamb, wars between his posterity and the seed of his brothers, a great and abominable coalition of evil, and the eventual victory of God’s people.

The two visions are very different in character. Lehi’s dream is intimate, symbolic, and salvific; Nephi’s vision is collective, historic, and eschatological. Yet both visions embrace the same prophetic elements, only from different angles. Consider the following:

Lehi’s dream began in a dark and dreary wilderness (see 8:4) and Nephi’s on a remote high mountain (see 11:1), and they both saw first a man who guided them into their visions. Lehi saw a man dressed in a white robe (see 8:5), and Nephi saw a Spirit who asked him introductory questions (see 11:2).

Next, the man in white left Lehi alone (see 8:7, original manuscript), and the Spirit likewise departed from Nephi (see 11:12).

Lehi next beheld a dark and dreary waste, causing him personally to pray for mercy (see 8:8). Nephi was historically more explicit: it was Jerusalem that he beheld (11:13), in need of mercy.

Lehi’s vision quickly opened onto a large and spacious field (see 8:9), and then onto the symbolically rich tree of life (see 8:10). Nephi too focused next on the tree, giving its meaning in terms of Jesus Christ (see 11:7, 13–18, 20–25). Lehi saw that its fruit was “desirable to make one happy” (8:10), sweet and white above all (see 8:11); and Nephi similarly recognized the tree and its fruit as the love of God, “most desirable” (11:22), “most beautiful and fair” (11:15).

As Lehi’s soul filled with joy (see 8:12), and Nephi was “carried away in the Spirit” (11:19); Lehi’s attention was drawn to the head of a river near the tree (see 8:14), while Nephi spoke of a “fountain of living waters” (11:25).

Lehi’s intimate attention was on his family, to whom he called with a “loud voice” (8:15). At the same place in the sequence, Nephi’s focus was on the broader human family and the preaching of Jesus Christ, John, and the apostles (see 11:24–31). While Lehi saw that some came and partook of the fruit, Laman and Lemuel did not (see 8:17–18), just as Nephi saw that people would reject the Christ (see 11:32–33).

Both then mentioned the “rod of iron” (8:19; 11:25). For Lehi it extended along the straight and narrow path (see 8:20), which for Nephi was “the word of God” (15:24) and seems to correspond intentionally with the apostles’

preaching (see 11:34).

A “large and spacious field” (8:20) next correlates with a great and spacious building (see 11:35), making Lehi’s numberless concourses (see 8:21) the same as Nephi’s multitudes as numerous as sand (see 12:1). Lehi and Nephi both continued by mentioning the mist or mists of darkness (see 8:23; 12:17) that cause these people to lose their way and become lost on broad roads (see 8:23; 12:17).

In both cases, however, others came to the tree and partook of its fruit (see 8:24). Lehi left these people unidentified, but at the same place in the vision Nephi mentioned the four generations that lived in righteousness after the coming of Christ to the Nephites at Bountiful (see 12:10–12).

A river divided the righteous from the wicked in Lehi’s vision (see 8:26). In more ominous detail, Nephi detailed the great gulf that divides them (see 12:18). And on the other side, both prophets saw a “great and spacious” building (8:26; see also 12:18). Lehi noted the fine dress and mocking attitude of its inhabitants (see 8:27); Nephi, their pride and vain imaginations (see 12:18). Lehi concluded this segment with the fact that these people fell away (see 8:28); Nephi told how the good were overpowered (see 12:19).

At this point in Lehi’s vision the record is interrupted; we do not know what was omitted here (see 8:29). But at this place in Nephi’s vision we learn of the painful prospect of war between the seed of Lehi (see 12:20–23).

Lehi’s vision continued on the happier prospect that other multitudes would partake of the tree (see 8:30), just as Nephi turned his attention to the coming of the gospel among the Gentiles (see 13:1–3).

Soon, however, Lehi saw multitudes going to the great and spacious building (see 8:31), and Nephi charted the rise of the great and abominable church (see 13:4–9). This all suggests that the great and spacious building was the same as the great and abominable church.

Adding a unique historical section to this revelation, Nephi then spoke at length about the restoration of Lehi’s seed through a great and marvelous work (see 13:10–14:7), in contradistinction to the great and abominable.

Finally, both visions ended with the vanquishing of evil. Lehi spoke generally of the wicked being drowned in the depths of the river or becoming lost in strange roads (see 8:32), and Nephi expressed it eschatologically as the whore upon the waters (see 14:11) rising in wars and chaos (see 14:16) and ultimately being defeated by God.

If this comparison is sound, it leads to several intriguing conclusions. Obviously, Nephi meant what he said when he testified that he had seen the same things his father saw (see 14:29). When we set these two visions side by side, they are indeed significantly the same, element for element. Although the casual reader might not see any connection between these two texts at first, the correlation between them is extensive and precise. It is unlikely that this occurred accidentally. Nephi was well aware of his father’s vision, so much so that he desired “to behold the things which [his] father saw” (11:3). As different as these two visions may appear at first glance, Nephi clearly and correctly bore record “that I saw the things which my father saw” (14:29). Thus Nephi spoke from personal experience when he subsequently interpreted the meanings of the tree, the iron rod, and the river of water in his father’s vision (see 15:21–29).

At the same time, Nephi’s vision is not a mere rerun of Lehi’s. The second clearly develops each element of the first, from different perspectives and for different purposes. Nevertheless, it is hard to imagine that Joseph Smith

or others at first were aware of the nature or extent of this development, because the styles of the two texts are so different.

Further analysis will shed additional light on these texts, but for now it is evident that the interrelatedness of 1 Nephi 8 and 1 Nephi 11–14 is very meaningful, subtle, and true as life.

Research by John W. Welch, originally published as a FARMS Update in Insights (July 1993): 2. For a chart comparing Lehi's dream with Nephi's vision, see John W. Welch and J. Gregory Welch, Charting the Book of Mormon: Visual Aids for Personal Study and Teaching (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1999), chart 89.