

Firstborn in the Wilderness

“Thou art my first-born in the days of my tribulation in the wilderness.” (2 Nephi 2:1)

In their book, *Fathers and Sons in the Book of Mormon*, E. Douglas Clark and Robert S. Clark maintain that Lehi named his sons Jacob and Joseph after their distant ancestors, in much the same manner that Helaman the Younger named his sons Lehi and Nephi (see Helaman 5:5–7).¹ The fact that Lehi referred to the patriarchal founder of his tribe when blessing his own son Joseph lends credence to this idea (see 2 Nephi 3). But there seems to be more to the story.

Lehi called Jacob “my first-born in the days of my tribulation in the wilderness” (2 Nephi 2:1–2). The tribulations Lehi suffered in the wilderness were brought on principally by the disobedience of Laman and Lemuel (see 1 Nephi 2:11–13, 18, 21; 3:5, 28; 7:6–7, 16–19; 15:2–5; 16:20, 22, 35–39; 17:17–22, 45; 18:17–18). The use of the term firstborn implies that Lehi may have considered Jacob to be a replacement for his eldest son, Laman, with his younger son Joseph being a replacement for the second son, Lemuel.

We have a parallel to this situation in Genesis 48:5, 16, where Jacob adopted Joseph’s sons Manasseh and Ephraim in place of Reuben and Simeon, who had sinned (see Genesis 34:30; 35:22; 49:3–5). In consequence of Reuben’s sins, he was replaced as firstborn by Joseph (see 1 Chronicles 5:1–2).

Another parallel is found in Genesis 4:25, where we read, “And Adam knew his wife again; and she bare a son, and called his name Seth [Hebrew *shet*]: For God, said she, hath appointed [Hebrew *shat*] me another seed instead of Abel, whom Cain slew.” In this case, we should perhaps understand Seth to mean “replacement.” (Similarly, Abel [Hebrew *habel*] may derive from the Semitic root reflected in Arabic as *hbl*, referring to a woman bereft of a son.)

The name Jacob is explained as “supplanter” in the King James Bible of Genesis 27:36 (compare 25:23–26), but could just as easily be read “successor” or “replacement,” since Jacob replaced Esau as firstborn and received the birthright and the blessing (see Genesis 25:29–34; 27:22–40). Esau was unfit to serve as firstborn. In Hebrews 12:16, he is called a “fornicator” and a “profane person.” He sought Jacob’s life, waiting only for the death of his father to proceed with his plan (see Genesis 27:41). Similarly, after the death of Lehi, Laman and Lemuel sought the life of their brother Nephi, who fled with Jacob, Joseph, and others (see 2 Nephi 5:1–6). It was because of their “rudeness” that Laman and Lemuel were unfit to succeed their father as head of the family. Though “rude” has come to mean “impolite” in twentieth-century English, at the time Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon it meant “wild” or “savage.”² Lehi made a point of mentioning the effect of the rudeness of Laman and Lemuel on Jacob (see 2 Nephi 2:1), as did Nephi, who referred to the “afflictions” caused by his elder brothers (1 Nephi 18:9, 19).

Lehi termed Joseph “my last-born . . . born in the wilderness of mine afflictions” and spoke to him of his inheritance in the New World, calling it “a most precious land” (2 Nephi 3:1–2). He then went on to speak of their common ancestor, Joseph, who had been sold into Egypt (see 2 Nephi 3:4). The original Joseph was the last-born son of the patriarch Jacob (Israel) before he returned to the land promised to him (see Genesis 28:13–15). It is significant, therefore, that Lehi’s son Joseph was born in the wilderness, then went, as his ancestor Joseph, with his father to a land of promise.

While Lehi may have considered Jacob and Joseph to be replacements for the fallen Laman and Lemuel, he did not give the right of the firstborn to Jacob. That blessing fell to Nephi, to whom Jacob and Joseph were to look for leadership (see 1 Nephi 2:21–22; 3:29; 2 Nephi 2:3; 3:25; 5:19–20).

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Notes

1. E. Douglas Clark and Robert S. Clark, *Fathers and Sons in the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991), 32–35, 181–82.

2. See the description of Laman and Lemuel’s “rudeness” and its effects on Jacob and Joseph in 1 Nephi 18:9–19.