

Sam: A Just and Holy Man

“[Lehi] spake unto Sam, saying: Blessed art thou, and thy seed; for thou shalt inherit the land like unto thy brother Nephi.”
(2 Nephi 4:11)

Some of the most notable people in the Book of Mormon are the prophets and men of God: Lehi, Nephi, Jacob, Alma, Mormon, and Moroni. But many others are mentioned in the Book of Mormon of whom we know little. Some of these are witnesses to great events; however, because they are not main characters in the event, they are only mentioned in passing. One of these lesser-known individuals is Nephi’s older brother Sam.

Though Sam is mentioned quite often in the first two books of Nephi, we have only the barest sketch of him as a person. This would not seem out of the ordinary except when we realize that Sam was witness to early Nephite history. Almost every hardship and adventure that Lehi’s family went through—leaving Jerusalem, obtaining the brass plates, voyaging across the ocean, settling the new land—were probably also experienced by Sam. Yet how much do we know of him? Let’s explore the few verses that mention him specifically and those that imply his presence, and from these come to a better understanding of the man called “just and holy” (Alma 3:6) in the book of Alma.

We know nothing of Sam’s childhood, nor do we know how old he was when the events in 1 Nephi began.¹ It has been conjectured that Nephi was in his midteens when his family left Jerusalem.² If so, then Sam must have been in his late teens (or early twenties).³ We can safely assume Sam was given the same parental care and training as Nephi. Sam was probably also taught “somewhat in all the learning of [his] father” (1 Nephi 1:1): languages, customs (see v. 2), vocational and survival skills, and spiritual training.

Sam would also have known, as Nephi did, of the prophets who came “prophesying unto the people that they must repent, or the great city Jerusalem must be destroyed” (1 Nephi 1:4; compare v. 13). As Lehi taught his family, Sam would have learned of the “many things which [Lehi] saw in visions and in dreams” and the “many things which [Lehi] prophesied and spake”—particularly since Nephi writes that Lehi “spake unto his children” of these things (1 Nephi 1:16). Most difficult of all, Sam would have known that the “Jews did mock” his father and sought his father’s life (1 Nephi 1:19–20). Sam was also no doubt an important part of the preparation for Lehi’s exodus into the desert (a familiarity gained, perhaps, from previous desert journeys)⁴ and was part of the caravan that plodded across the desert for eight years. As the division between Nephi and his two oldest brothers widened, it is interesting to consider what influence the two older brothers, Laman and Lemuel, might have tried to exert over Sam. Imagine how Laman and Lemuel must have constantly urged Sam to follow them and their ways, not to listen to their younger brother, and to remember that the oldest is the rightful heir of all the father has. One of Sam’s greatest trials must have been resisting the example and enticements of Laman and Lemuel and, instead, finding the faith and courage to follow Nephi.

Though the journey had barely begun in 1 Nephi 2:8–10, already we find Lehi cautioning Laman and Lemuel because of their “stiffneckedness” (1 Nephi 2:11). Yet no mention is made of a word of warning to Sam; it appears that Sam had made righteous decisions early in life. This is further confirmed in 1 Nephi 2:16–17, where we read of Nephi’s cry: “I did cry unto the Lord; and behold he did visit me.” Significantly, Nephi first shares this experience with his brother Sam. From this, one can deduce a special relationship of trust between these two brothers.

In 1 Nephi 3:1–4, we read of Lehi’s dream commanding Nephi and his brethren to return to Jerusalem to get Laban’s records. Sam is obviously one of the “brethren,” but is he also among the “brothers” who murmur in 1 Nephi 3:5? We do not know, but it would not be extraordinary if he did so—Lehi and Sariah murmured (see 1 Nephi 16:20; 5:2–3). However, if Sam murmured, it doesn’t appear to be for long, for in 1 Nephi 3:28, Nephi writes that “Laman and Lemuel did speak many hard words unto us, their younger brothers, and they did smite us even with a rod.” Sam is verbally and physically abused along with his younger brother Nephi. Yet, oddly enough, the angel who stops Laman and Lemuel mentions only the abuse of Nephi (see 1 Nephi 3:29). We do not know if this is an intentional omission in the record or not.

In 1 Nephi 7:1–3, Nephi and his brothers again return to Jerusalem to get Ishmael and his family. All goes well on the trip to Jerusalem, but on the journey back into the desert, Laman, Lemuel, and others rebel against Nephi, Sam, Ishmael, his wife, and three of Ishmael’s daughters. Two things in this rebellion are noteworthy. First, Sam is mentioned as being on Nephi’s side (see 1 Nephi 7:6). Sam is spiritually strong enough that he can stand with Nephi during the rebellion. The second item is a bit more enigmatic. In verse 16, after the rebels have been called to repentance, Nephi’s brothers “did bind [Nephi] with cords, for they sought to take away [his] life.” One cannot help but wonder where Sam is during this event. Is it simply a matter of being outnumbered? Is Sam restrained in some way? The record does not mention what Sam does, only that the problem is ultimately diffused by pleading from Ishmael’s family.

The next mention of Sam is from Lehi, who says, “I have reason to rejoice in the Lord because of Nephi and also of Sam; for I have reason to suppose that they, and also many of their seed, will be saved” (1 Nephi 8:3). And in verse 14 of the same chapter, Lehi reports that he “beheld . . . Sariah, and Sam, and Nephi”; he beckons to them, and they come and “partake of the fruit also” (1 Nephi 8:16). Sam has made and will continue to make right choices, and his efforts will bring him salvation.

The next few recorded episodes are unfortunately silent about Sam and his role:

- In 1 Nephi 15:2, is Sam part of the “brethren” who are “disputing one with another concerning the things which [their] father had spoke unto them”? Is he one of those who later “humble themselves before the Lord” (1 Nephi 16:5)?
- In 1 Nephi 16:20, has Sam learned his lessons well enough not to murmur? He is not mentioned as being among those who complain because of Nephi’s broken bow.
- In 1 Nephi 17:17–18, Nephi is silent about Sam’s part in this ship-building incident. Did he have other duties to attend to? Was he just not around for this?
- In 1 Nephi 18:9, is Sam part of this group that “began to make themselves merry”? Where is he when Nephi is tied up? Does he try to help Nephi but is stopped?

The next reference to Sam is found in 2 Nephi 1:28: Lehi admonishes him, along with Laman and Lemuel and the sons of Ishmael to “hearken unto the voice of Nephi.” As we find in Lehi’s final patriarchal blessing of Sam’s family, Sam takes Lehi’s exhortation to heart. In 2 Nephi 4:11, Lehi blesses Sam, and though the blessing is short, it is very powerful. Sam is told that he and his posterity shall “inherit the land like unto thy brother Nephi”—implying that all Nephi’s blessings can be Sam’s. This blessing also implies that Nephi is receiving a double portion of inheritance—just as his ancestor Joseph did through Ephraim and Manasseh⁵—and that Sam and his descendants are to be the

second half of that double portion. Sam is told his “seed shall be numbered with [Nephi’s] seed”⁶ and he is to “be even like unto thy brother [Nephi], . . . and thou shalt be blessed in all thy days” (2 Nephi 4:11). Sam must have rejoiced at this great blessing.

The last we read of Sam in the plates of Nephi is found during the time that the Lord warns Nephi that he should flee from his murderous brothers. Second Nephi 5:6 declares that “Sam, [Nephi’s] elder brother and his family,” are part of those who have chosen to go with Nephi. Nephi’s feelings would have been bittersweet: heartbroken over the wickedness of Laman and Lemuel but joyful over Sam’s righteousness. We last see Sam as he embarks on his journey into the wilderness with Nephi. From then on, Sam and his descendants are literally, as prophesied by Lehi, numbered with Nephi’s seed.

One further reference to Sam in the Book of Mormon is found in Alma 3:6. Mormon, in writing of the Lamanites’ wickedness, says they were cursed because of their transgression and rebellion against Nephi, Jacob, Joseph, and Sam, “who were just and holy men.” These four of the original six brothers in Lehi’s family are described as holy and just men—men who are fair and treat others with consideration and who follow God and are sanctified by their efforts. This is the Sam that we should come to appreciate and remember.

Research by Ken Haubrock, originally published in the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 5/2 (1996): 164–68.

Notes

1. See Hugh W. Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 76, indicates that Sam’s name has Egyptian roots and that Sam was probably “born in the days of [Lehi’s] prosperity” (p. 77).
2. See Rodney Turner, “The Prophet Nephi,” in *The Book of Mormon: First Nephi, the Doctrinal Foundation*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1988), 81–82.
3. See John L. Sorenson, “The Composition of Lehi’s Family,” in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 2:193.
4. For further information about Lehi’s familiarity with the desert, see Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 76–82.
5. See Genesis 48:5–6 and Deuteronomy 21:17. Using the latter verse, we can infer that Lehi, in his blessing, has purposefully supplanted Laman with Nephi by giving Nephi a double portion of inheritance as is the firstborn’s (Laman) right.
6. John Welch comments on this verse that “Sam would not have a separate tribal interest. . . . Consequently, there are . . . never any Samites [in the Book of Mormon].” John W. Welch, “Lehi’s Last Will and Testament: A Legal Approach,” in *The Book of Mormon: Second Nephi, the Doctrinal Structure*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1989), 72.