

The Psalm of Nephi as a Post-Lehi Document

“And it came to pass after my father, Lehi, had spoken unto all his household, according to the feelings of his heart and the Spirit of the Lord which was in him, he waxed old. And it came to pass that he died, and was buried.” (2 Nephi 4:12)

Nephi’s masterful meditation in 2 Nephi 4:16–35, known today as the Psalm of Nephi, stands in 2 Nephi immediately after the death and burial of Lehi. Nephi’s words have universal import, but they become even more poignant and vivid if we recognize that this psalm was written while Nephi was feeling painfully vulnerable after losing his father.

Shortly after blessing his posterity, Lehi died in the land of first inheritance (2 Nephi 4:12). “Not many days” later, Laman, Lemuel, and the sons of Ishmael became extremely angry with Nephi (2 Nephi 4:13; 5:1–2). Nephi’s lament that he was “angry because of mine enemy” (2 Nephi 4:27, 29) refers most directly to his rebellious brothers, his only known “enemies,” who, as the psalm recalls, had once been “confounded” and made “to quake before” Nephi (2 Nephi 4:22; see 1 Nephi 17:52–54). As tensions between the brothers mounted again at this time, Nephi hoped for deliverance once more.

In his psalm, Nephi rejoiced that God had preserved him “upon the waters of the great deep” (2 Nephi 4:20). These words recall the group’s safe voyage as well as Nephi’s personal deliverance from his brothers’ evil designs toward him. In previous conflicts with his brothers, Nephi could count on Lehi’s emotional support; but after Lehi’s death, Nephi had to muster courage on his own, and thus his psalm speaks strongly in the first person: “My God hath been my support; he hath led me. . . . He hath heard my cry by day, and he hath given me knowledge by visions in the nighttime” (2 Nephi 4:20, 23).

With Lehi dead, every report in the small plates account that likens Nephi to Lehi (e.g., 1 Nephi 14:29; 17:44) takes on new significance. Every prophecy that Nephi would become a ruler over his brothers, every comment about his brothers’ wickedness, and every prediction of the downfall of his brothers’ posterity helps position Nephi as Lehi’s rightful and righteous successor. Accordingly, Nephi’s psalm reinforces several links between Nephi and his deceased father. Just as Lehi had seen visions, so had Nephi (1 Nephi 1:8; 2 Nephi 4:23). Just as angels had appeared to Lehi, so they had ministered to Nephi (1 Nephi 1:11; 2 Nephi 4:24). And just as Lehi had praised God’s mercy, so had Nephi (1 Nephi 1:14; 2 Nephi 4:26).

Most of all, Nephi’s heartfelt psalm reflects the deep sorrow he felt at the time he composed it (2 Nephi 4:17, 19). While he redirected this grief by speaking of his own “iniquities” (2 Nephi 4:17), it would have been the death of his father that would have made him feel his own mortality and inadequacies so keenly.

Knowing that Lehi’s soul slumbered, Nephi included several powerful couplets emphasizing the reawakening atonement of the Lord. He exclaims, “Awake, my soul!” (2 Nephi 4:28). He praises God, “the rock of my salvation,” and pleads, “O Lord, wilt thou redeem my soul?” (2 Nephi 4:30, 31).

Nephi ended his psalm with strong assurances that God would also deliver him from his enemies (2 Nephi 4:31, 33). After his father’s death, Nephi knew he would have to rely on God alone as he confronted the challenges of securing peace and prosperity for his people (2 Nephi 4:34).

It is a great tribute to the spirituality of Nephi that he could deal with such hardships and mourning by marshaling increased faith in God. The small plates were written to fill many needs that arose after Lehi's death. Nephi's psalm is particularly at home in that post-Lehi context.

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