

Nephi and the Exodus

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One of the best-known sections of the Book of Mormon tells the story of the journey of Lehi and his family from Jerusalem to the new promised land in the American continent. Yet, since the small plates were intended to contain the “things of God” (1 Nephi 6:4), why was this account included on the small plates while other things that seem to be more the “things of God” (such as the “many things which [Lehi] saw in visions and in dreams”—1 Nephi 1:16) were left out?

Quite probably, Nephi, the author of this section, consciously wrote his account of the wilderness journey in a way that would remind the reader of the Exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt. He did this to prove that God loved and cared for the Nephites, just as the Exodus from Egypt was proof of God’s favor for the children of Israel. Therefore, this story of the journey truly is about the things of God and does belong on the small plates.

The Exodus as a Background

It is important to understand that Nephi wrote this record of his family’s journey at least thirty years after they had left Jerusalem (see 2 Nephi 5:28-31). In his writing, he most likely referred to what had been put down on the larger, “historical” plates or on perishable materials. He could pick and choose information from those earlier sources and shape it any way he saw fit. The result was not a day-to-day or even a year-to-year account of what had happened. Rather, it was a record that highlighted certain events and put special emphasis on “the things of God.”

One of the most important “things of God” for the children of Israel was the Exodus from Egypt. That event more than any other defined them as a people. Their journey to the promised land in Canaan is recalled time and again throughout the Old Testament. Not surprisingly, then, Nephi would be reminded of the Exodus while his group made their own wilderness journey through Arabia. He was familiar with the Exodus both in story form as he might have heard it from his father and through annual Israelite rituals such as the Passover as they were acted out. He also knew about it from reading the brass plates, which included “the five book of Moses” (1 Nephi 5:10-12). He taught his brothers from those writings “that they might know concerning the doings of the Lord in other lands, among people of old” (1 Nephi 19:22-23). He might even have referred to the account of the Exodus written on the brass plates as he wrote on the small plates.

With this in mind, let us examine the account of the wilderness journey of Lehi’s party and see how often it is similar to the account of the Exodus in the Bible.

The Voice of Murmuring in the Wilderness

The wilderness of Sinai and the wilderness of the Arabian peninsula were both harsh environments. Both the Israelites and the people of Lehi suffered hunger during their journeys, and they complained about it:

[Nephi:] We did return without food to our families, and being much fatigued, because of their journeying, **they did suffer much for the want of food.** And it came to pass that **Laman and Lemuel and the sons of Ishmael did begin to murmur exceedingly,** because of their sufferings and afflictions in the wilderness; and also my father began to murmur against the Lord his God; yea, and they were all exceedingly sorrowful, even that **they did murmur against the Lord** (1 Nephi 16:19-20).

[Moses:] **The whole congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness:** and the children of Israel said unto them, . . . Ye have brought us forth into this wilderness, to kill this whole assembly with **hunger**. And Moses said, . . . The Lord heareth your murmurings which ye murmur against him: and what are we? **your murmurings are not against us, but against the Lord** (Exodus 16:2-3, 8).

In both cases the uncommon word murmur is used. In both the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon, murmur is used primarily for the exoduses. Forms of the Hebrew root lwn (translated “to murmur” in the King James version) occur eighteen times in the Old Testament. All but one of them are connected with the Exodus. How is the English word murmur used in the Book of Mormon? It appears thirty-three times; of these, nineteen describe events in the Old World wilderness.

Of course we do not know exactly what word Nephi used since we do not have the original text. But this peculiar term is used with unusual frequency to describe the Book of Mormon wilderness experience in the same way that it is used almost exclusively to describe a similar experience . . . in the Old Testament. There are two possible explanations: (1) Joseph Smith consciously copied the King James version, or (2) Nephi used the wording from the brass plates (essentially like our Bible) to remind his audience of the previous Exodus, and Joseph Smith’s translation of this material was literal enough to preserve the similarity. In view of the complicated nature of the parallels between the two stories, the second explanation is far more likely.

Both the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon mention that this murmuring about the lack of food was directed against the Lord himself rather than against his prophet-leaders. The similarity continues in that the problem of food was solved miraculously. For Israel, manna from heaven was the solution. For the group in the Book of Mormon, the answer was no less wonderful. They were instructed by the Lord to look at the Liahona, their miraculous “compass.” When they looked, they saw written directions that led Nephi to a place where he was able to kill game. When the family saw that he had obtained food for them, “how great was their joy! And it came to pass that they did humble themselves before the Lord, and did give thanks unto him” (1 Nephi 16:32; see also verse 39). In both cases, the Lord provided for his people in a miraculous way.

Reasonable Fears and Foolish Desires

The tough life in the two wildernesses led to fear of death, expressed several times in both the Book of Mormon and Exodus:

[Nephi:] This he spake because of stiffneckedness of Laman and Lemuel; for behold they did murmur in many things against their father, because he was a visionary man, and had **led them out of the land of Jerusalem, to leave the land of their inheritance, and their gold, and their silver, and their precious thing, to perish in the wilderness.** And this they said he had done because of the foolish imaginations of his heart (1 Nephi 2:11; see also 1 Nephi 5:2; 16:35).

[Moses:] They said unto Moses, Because there were no graves in Egypt, **hast thou taken us away to die in the wilderness?** wherefore hast thou dealt thus with us, **to carry us forth out of Egypt?** (Exodus 14:11, see also Numbers 21:5).

This fear of death was perhaps justified given the circumstances. It was expressed as the statement that it would have been better to have died before they had gone into the wilderness:

[Nephi:] Thou art like unto our father, led away by the foolish imaginations of his heart; yea, he hath lead us out of the land of Jerusalem, and we have wandered in the wilderness for these many years; and our women have toiled, being big with child; and they have borne children in the wilderness and suffered all things, save it were death; and **it would have been better that they had died before they came out of Jerusalem than to have suffered these afflictions** (1 Nephi 17:20).

[Moses:] The children of Israel said unto them, **Would to God we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt**, when we sat by the flesh pots, and when we did eat bread to the full; **for ye have brought us forth into this wilderness, to kill this whole assembly with hunger** (Exodus 16:3).

All the children of Israel murmured against Moses and against Aaron: and the whole congregations said unto them, **Would God that we had died in the land of Egypt** (Numbers 14:2).

At particularly stressful moments (for example, in the Book of Mormon at the death of Ishmael or in the Bible upon hearing the spies report the risks of attacking the Canaanites in the promised land), an unwise desire was expressed to return to the place they had left:

[Nephi:] The daughters of Ishmael **did mourn exceedingly**, because of the loss of their father, and because of their afflictions in the wilderness; and **they did murmur against my father**, because he had brought them out of the land of Jerusalem, saying: Our father is dead; yea, and we have wandered much in the wilderness, and we have suffered much affliction, hunger, thirst, and fatigue; and after all these sufferings we must perish in the wilderness with hunger. And thus they did murmur against my father, and also against me; **and they were desirous to return again to Jerusalem** (1 Nephi 16:35-36).

[Moses:] All the congregation **lifted up their voice, and cried; and the people wept that night**. And all the children of Israel **murmured against Moses and against Aaron**: and the whole congregation said unto them, Would God that we had died in the land of Egypt! or would God we had died in this wilderness! And wherefore hath the Lord brought us unto this land, to fall by the sword, that our wives and our children should be a prey? **were it not better for us to return into Egypt? And they said one to another, Let us make a captain, and let us return into Egypt** (Numbers 14:1-4).

Note the striking similarity between the two occasions: there was crying and mourning, followed by murmuring, which finally culminated in the desire to return. This desire was irrational because, in both cases, to return could have meant death. The children of Israel likely would have been punished for the death of Pharaoh's host in the Red Sea, while Nephi, Laman, Lemuel, and Sam could well have been punished for the killing of Laban in Jerusalem.

That such fears and desires would be felt during such a difficult journey need not surprise us, but Nephi described these fears and desires in terms that remind us of the experiences of the children of Israel during their flight from Egypt. His purpose was to highlight the spiritual aspects of the events he experienced, and, from the way he highlighted them, it appears as though he was influenced by the wording of the Exodus account.

The Liahona and the Serpent

Perhaps the object that more than any other represents the wilderness journey of Lehi and his family in the minds of modern readers is the Liahona. This "round ball of curious workmanship" (1 Nephi 16:10) showed them which way to go in the wilderness, led Nephi to a source of life-saving food, and gave the group other special instructions

when needed. Nephi commented concerning it, “Thus we see that by small means the Lord can bring about great things” (1 Nephi 16:29).

Much later the prophet Alma turned the Liahona over to his son Helaman, along with other sacred relics. While explaining the history of this object, Alma referred to the story of another brass object, the image of a serpent that the Lord commanded Moses to make in order to save the children of Israel from the bites of “fiery serpents”:

[Alma:] O my son, do not let us be slothful because of the easiness of the way; for so was it with our fathers; for so was it prepared for them, that **if they would look they might live**; even so it is with us. The way is prepared, and if we will look we may live forever (Alma 37:46).

[Moses:] The Lord said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, **when he looketh upon it, shall live**. And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived (Numbers 21:8-9).

The similarity in these cases is in the relationship between the people and the objects. To be healed, they had to act on simple faith. Obviously, both the Liahona and the serpent served as symbols of Christ. In Alma 37:38-47, the Liahona is compared to the words of Christ, which can guide us through our own trials. People must seek, pay attention, and obey to get the benefits. Regarding the serpent image, Christ himself referred to it as a symbol of both his being lifted up on the cross and his being slain. Again, the benefit could be had only by a person’s acting from faith—by obedient “looking” at the object (see John 3:14-15). With both objects, the way was too easy for some to convince them to act. Referring to the metal serpent, Nephi says, “The labor which they had to perform was to look; and because of the simpleness of the way, or the easiness of it, there were many who perished” (1 Nephi 17:41).

Alma makes a similar statement regarding the Liahona: “Because those miracles were worked by small means it did show unto them marvelous works. They were slothful, and forgot to exercise their faith and diligence and then those marvelous works ceased, and they did not progress in their journey; therefore, they tarried in the wilderness, or did not travel a direct course, and were afflicted with hunger and thirst, because of their transgressions” (Alma 37:41-42).

Lead, Kindly Light

The Liahona was not the only help Lehi and his family received from the Lord. In describing this help, Nephi once again drew on the images, and apparently also the language, of Exodus:

[Nephi:] **I will also be your light in the wilderness; and I will prepare the way before you**, if it so be that ye shall keep my commandments; wherefore, inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments **ye shall be led towards the promised land; and ye shall know that it is by me that ye are led**. Yea, and the Lord said also that: After ye have arrived in the promised land, **ye shall know that I, the Lord, am God; and that I, the Lord, did deliver you from destruction; yea, and I did bring you out of the land of Jerusalem** (1 Nephi 17:13-14).

[Moses:] **The Lord went before them by day in a pillar of a cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light; to go by day and night** (Exodus 13:21).

I will take you to me for a people, and I will be to you a God: **and ye shall know that I am the Lord your God, which bringeth you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians** (Exodus 6:7-8).

The similarity of the texts is interesting, but a difference is enlightening as well. In Exodus the concept of a people chosen by God is emphasized, while in the Book of Mormon the idea is reversed—a people choose God through obedience to his commandments. This idea is also a major theme in Nephi’s sermon to his brothers (see 1 Nephi 17:23-43).

Clearly Nephi did not just copy the Exodus story; rather, he adapted it to his purpose, no doubt by inspiration. Perhaps he had seen how the perversion of the idea of being the “chosen people” had contributed to the Israelites’ downfall by making them proud. He may also have worried that his brothers’ belief that “the people who were in the land of Jerusalem were a righteous people” (1 Nephi 17:22) was a sign that they were falling into the same error.

High on a Mountain Top

After the Lehi group had crossed the desert, Nephi received a summons from the Lord to ascend a mountain. Moses faced the same call at Sinai once they had left Egypt:

[Nephi:] **The voice of the Lord came unto me, saying: Arise, and get thee into the mountain. And it came to pass that I arose and went into the mountain, and cried unto the Lord** (1 Nephi 17:7).

[Moses:] **The Lord came down upon mount Sinai, on the top of the mount: and the Lord called Moses up to the top of the mount; and Moses went up** (Exodus 19:20).

The Lord said unto Moses, Come up to me into the mount, and be there: . . . and Moses went up into the mount of God (Exodus 24:12-13).

While on the mountain, Nephi received detailed instructions concerning the ship he was to build, just as Moses received orders regarding the building of the tabernacle:

[Nephi:] The Lord spake unto me, saying: Thou shalt construct a ship, **after the manner which I shall show thee**, that I may carry thy people across these waters (1 Nephi 17:8).

[Moses:] The Lord spake unto Moses saying, . . . Let [the children of Israel] make me a sanctuary. . . . **According to all that I shew thee, after the pattern of the tabernacle, and the pattern of all the instruments thereof, even so shall ye make it** (Exodus 25:1, 8-9).

In both cases a pattern was shown to the prophet, after which he was to build the structure. In both cases the purpose is mentioned.

While the two structures were very distinct, yet some of the words used to describe the craftsmanship involved in the building of each are similar:

[Nephi:] We did work timbers of **curious workmanship**. And the Lord did show me from time to time after what manner I should work the timbers of the ship. Now I, Nephi did not work the timbers after the manner which was learned by men, neither did I build the ship after the manner of men; but **I did build it**

after the manner which the Lord had shown unto me; wherefore, it was not after the manner of men (1 Nephi 18:1-2).

[Moses:] Moses said unto the children of Israel, See, the Lord hath called by name Bezaleel. . . . **He hath filled him with the spirit of God, in wisdom, in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship;** and to devise **curious works**, to work in gold, and in silver, and in brass, and in the cutting of stones, to set them, and in carving of wood, to make any manner of cunning work (Exodus 35:30-33).

In both cases the workmanship was described as “curious.” In Nephi’s case it was not “after the manner of men,” while in Exodus the workmen were uniquely filled “with the spirit of God” in order to do their work.

Nephi’s Powerful Sermon

When Nephi’s brothers saw that he had begun to build a ship, they began to mock him and complain, refusing to help him. Nephi responded by retelling the history of the Exodus, touching on many of the ideas he would later use in writing the story of their own wilderness journey. Near the end, Nephi draws a clear parallel between the two wilderness experiences, directly comparing his brothers to the murmuring children of Israel: “[The Lord] did bring them out of the land of Egypt. And he did straiten them [gave them hardships] in the wilderness with his rod; for they hardened their hearts, even as ye have; and the Lord straitened them because of their iniquity” (1 Nephi 17:40-41).

If his brothers were so much like the children of Israel, then do we not see Nephi in a similar position as Moses? For example, Nephi proclaimed the power that the Lord had given him in a way that brings to mind Moses’ power over the Red Sea:

[Nephi:] I said unto them: If God had commanded me to do all things I could do them. If he should command me that I should **say unto this water, be thou earth, it should be earth:** and if I should say it, it would be done (1 Nephi 17:50).

[Moses:] But lift thou up thy rod, and stretch out thine hand over the sea, and divide it: and the children of Israel **shall go on dry ground through the midst of the sea** (Exodus 14:16).

This sermon, with its references to Moses and the Exodus, is the most direct evidence we have that Nephi was conscious of the similarity of the two situations. At the conclusion of this sermon, Nephi reported that his brothers were so humbled by his speech and fearful that they “durst [not] . . . lay their hands upon [him] nor touch [him] with their fingers, even for the space of many days” (1 Nephi 17:52). This situation recalls the return of Moses from speaking to the Lord on Sinai: “When Aaron and all the children of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone; and they were afraid to come nigh him” (Exodus 34:29-30).

Two Parties, Too Wild

Once the ship was completed, Lehi’s family boarded it and set sail for the promised land. After a while, Laman, Lemuel, and the sons of Ishmael began “to make themselves merry.” Nephi’s description of this partying suggests a comparison to the incident with the golden calf during the Exodus:

[Nephi:] After we had been driven forth before the wind for the space of many days, behold, my brethren and the sons of Ishmael and also their wives began to **make themselves merry**, insomuch that they **began**

to dance, and to sing, and to speak with much rudeness, yea, even **that they did forget by what power they had been brought thither**; yea, they were lifted up unto **exceeding rudeness** (1 Nephi 18:9).

[Moses:] He had made it a molten calf: and they said, **These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt**. . . . The people sat down to eat and to drink, and **rose up to play** (Exodus 32:4-6).

When Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said unto Moses, There is a noise of war in the camp. And he said it is not the voice of them that shout for mastery, neither is it the voice of them that cry for being overcome: but **the noise of them that sing do I hear**. And it came to pass, as soon as he came nigh unto the camp, that he saw the calf, and **the dancing**. . . . Moses saw that **the people were naked** (Exodus 32:18-19, 25).

The singing, dancing, and nakedness before the golden calf were apparently part of a ritual connected with this idol. Is Nephi's mention of "much rudeness" and "exceeding rudeness" comparable to Moses' seeing that "the people were naked"? I suggest a connection. Also interesting is Nephi's statement that "they did forget by what power they had been brought thither." Compare this to the statement in Exodus about the molten calf: "These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt." The children of Israel had also forgotten that God's direct power had saved them to that point. Finally, note that in both cases the prayer of an individual was what saved the people, who were almost destroyed by a justifiably angry God.

A New Credo

Israel followed the custom of retelling the Exodus experience to remind them of their dependence on God. The transplanted Israelites in the New World continued the same kind of memory, but with a twist. They not only remembered the acts of God among the Israelites fleeing Egypt, they also retold the story of the journey of Lehi and his family through the desert and to the new promised land. Eight times in the Book of Mormon, the Exodus was recalled. Lehi's journey from Jerusalem is referred to at least ten times. Even the Lamanites may have followed this custom to an extent (see Alma 22:9).

In two places in the Book of Mormon, the two exoduses are retold together. The first is from a speech by King Limhi to his people; the second is from Alma's instructions to his son Helaman:

[King Limhi:] Lift up your heads, and rejoice, and put your trust in God, in that God who was the God of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob; and also, that God who brought the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt, and caused that they should walk through the Red Sea on dry ground, and fed them with manna that they might not perish in the wilderness; and many more things did he do for them. And again, that same God has brought our fathers out of the land of Jerusalem, and has kept and preserved his people even until now (Mosiah 7:19-20).

[Alma:] For he has brought our fathers out of Egypt, and he has swallowed up the Egyptians in the Red Sea; and he led them by his power into the promised land; yea, and he has delivered them out of bondage and captivity from time to time. Yea, and he has also brought our fathers out of the land of Jerusalem; and he has also, by his everlasting power, delivered them out of bondage and captivity, from time to time even down to the present day (Alma 36:28-29).

In the second pair of verses, note that Alma describes the two situations in identical terms. These two passages indicate that, in the minds of at least some of the Nephite writers, the wilderness journey experienced by Lehi,

Ishmael, and their families had become equivalent in importance to the Exodus of Israel from Egypt.

Conclusions

There are a number of parallels between the stories of these two groups of people, both led by God's hand through trials in a desert wilderness to a new land. Some are general, and others are specific and very clear. It seems to me that such a large body of parallels cannot be accounted for by coincidence. It appears that Nephi purposefully wrote his account in a way that would reflect the Exodus. His intention was to prove that God loved and cared for the Nephites just as he did the children of Israel during the Exodus from Egypt.

Certainly this connection could not have been a product of Joseph Smith's writing. The parallels to Exodus occur at dozens of places throughout the Book of Mormon record. No hasty copying of the Bible could have produced such complex similarities, not to mention the differences that remain. In fact, because they are so quiet and underlying, no Latter-day Saint until our day has even noticed these comparisons. Nephi clearly composed a masterpiece full of subtle literary touches that we are only now beginning to appreciate.