



BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

FARMS Preliminary Reports

The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) was founded in 1979 as a clearinghouse to distribute scholarly articles focused on Latter-day Saint scripture. Within a few years, FARMS began collecting and distributing its own “Preliminary Reports.” These were said to consist of “tentative papers reflecting substantial research [that was] not yet ready for final publication.” FARMS made them available “to be critiqued and improved and to stimulate further research.”

Having since absorbed FARMS into the Willes Center for Book of Mormon Studies, the Maxwell Institute offers the FARMS Preliminary Reports here in that same spirit. Although their quality is uneven, they represent the energy and zeal of those who sought to enrich our understanding of LDS scripture.

If you possess copies of Preliminary Reports that are not included on our website, please contact us at maxwell_institute@byu.edu to help us provide the most complete collection possible.



FOUNDATION FOR ANCIENT RESEARCH AND MORMON STUDIES

Noel B. Reynolds

The Political Dimension in Nephi's Small Plates

Summary:

Noel Reynolds explains how Nephi's writings can be read in part as a political tract that documents the legitimacy of Nephi's rule. He discusses the traditions of the Lamanites and Nephites, the events chronicled in the small plates of Nephi, the typologies of Moses and Joseph in Nephi's writings, and he gives a chiastic analysis of 1 Nephi 3-5.

Preliminary Report
Book of Mormon, Law and Politics

FARMS
Brigham Young University
P.O. Box 7113
University Station
Provo, UT 84602
1-800-327-6715
(801) 373-5111
www.farmsresearch.com

\$3.00
REY-87



7 14861 03830 9

For a complete listing of FARMS publications,
call 1-800-FARMS-15 for a FARMS catalog.

© 1987 by Noel B. Reynolds

This FARMS preliminary report reflects substantial research but is not ready for final publication. It is made available to be critiqued and improved and to stimulate further research.

The Political Dimension in Nephi's Small Plates

Noel B. Reynolds

Every people needs to know that its laws and rulers are legitimate and authoritative. This is why stories of national origins and city foundings are so important to human societies throughout the world. Such stories provide explanations of the legitimate origins of their laws and their rulers. Not untypically, such traditions also deal with ambiguous elements of the founding, explaining away possibly competing accounts. When Nephi undertook late in his life to write a third account of the founding events of the Lehiite colony, it appears that he wanted to provide his descendants with a document that would serve this function. His small plates systematically defend the Nephite tradition concerning origins and refute the competing account advanced by the Lamanites. Several factors indicate that Nephi carefully structured his writings to convince his own and later generations that the Lord had selected him over his elder brothers to be Lehi's political and spiritual successor. Thus, the writings of Nephi can be read in part as a political tract or a "lineage history," written to document the legitimacy of Nephi's rule and religious teachings.¹

THE TRADITIONS OF THE LAMANITES AND NEPHITES

Soon after Lehi's death, his colony split into two groups, the Lamanites and the Nephites. Each of these factions developed its own explanation for Nephi's acquisition of authority. As it was later reported in Nephite records, the oral traditions of the Lamanites included claims that:

Noel B. Reynolds is a professor of political science at Brigham Young University. He writes: "I am greatly indebted to a number of readers who have helped me editorially through numerous drafts of this paper. John Welch, who first set me thinking about the political implications of the rift between Nephi and his brothers, has provided invaluable encouragement and has added a large number of important, substantive contributions to the text. I also received helpful comments from several who attended an informal faculty seminar at Brigham Young University and listened to the argument of the paper."

- (1) "They were driven out of the land of Jerusalem because of the iniquities of their fathers" (presumably Lehi and Ishmael);²
- (2) "They were wronged in the wilderness by their brethren" when Nephi "took the lead of their journey in the wilderness";
- (3) "They were also wronged while crossing the sea";
- (4) "They were wronged while in the land of their first inheritance" when Nephi left and "robbed" the plates of brass from them.

(Mosiah 10:12-13)

Five hundred years after Nephi wrote his record, the Lamanite charge had been simplified by the Zoramite Ammoron: "For behold, your fathers [Nephi et al.] did wrong their brethren, insomuch that they did rob them of their right to the government when it rightly belonged unto them" (Alma 54:17). And Ammoron adds one specifically Zoramite tradition, charging that his ancestor (who had originally been faithful to Nephi) had been "pressed and brought out of Jerusalem" by Nephi (Alma 54:23). In these terms, then, the Nephite record portrays Laman and Lemuel and their descendants and followers choosing to blame their own failings on things done to them by others.

In asserting and defending the Nephite position, Zeniff explains that Nephi took the lead because he was righteous and called of God: "the Lord heard his [Nephi's] prayers and answered them, and he took the lead of their journey in the wilderness" (Mosiah 10:13). Zeniff further claims that Laman and Lemuel had hardened their hearts while on the sea and that Nephi "departed into the wilderness as the Lord had commanded him, and took . . . the plates of brass" (Mosiah 10:16).³ A fairly standardized version of the Nephite tradition seems clearly to have been codified early on and invoked ritualistically on the great occasion when they met under King Benjamin's direction to offer sacrifices and give thanks to the Lord their God. Mormon carefully lists the central elements of the Nephite tradition as the content of their prayers of thanksgiving:

- (1) The Lord had "brought them out of the land of Jerusalem";
- (2) The Lord had "delivered them out of the hands of their enemies";
- (3) The Lord had "appointed just men to be their teachers";
- (4) The Lord had given them "a just man to be their king, who had established peace in the land of Zarahemla, and who had taught them to keep the commandments of God";
- (5) By this means, the Lord had made it possible for them to "rejoice and be filled with love towards God and all men."

(Mosiah 2:4)

But the Lamanites did not respond to the Nephites in this same spirit. From the first, they sought to kill Nephi (1 Ne. 7:16). Hundreds of years later, Zeniff reports that they were still teaching their children to hate the children of Nephi, to murder them, to rob and plunder them, in fine, to "have an eternal hatred" towards them because of these alleged wrongs. From the records of his Nephite fathers, Zeniff knew that all

this was because Laman and Lemuel "understood not the dealings of the Lord" and that they had "hardened their hearts against the Lord" (Mosiah 10:14).

No doubt it was because of such teachings that the first generation of Lamanites had sworn in their wrath to destroy not only the Nephites, but also their records and their traditions (Enos 1:14). One might have thought that destroying the Nephites would have sufficed. But perhaps the Lamanites remembered the prophecies of Nephi and Lehi that the record itself would eventually be instrumental in converting their descendants to the Nephite beliefs (Enos 1:13). The Nephites talked easily and frequently of such a possibility (for example, Jacob 7:24). Alma repeats this conviction when he tells the people of Ammonihah that someday the Lamanites will believe the word of the Lord and "know of the incorrectness of the traditions of their fathers" (Alma 9:17; see also Jacob 4:3). Likewise, the central role of the Nephite record in preserving Nephite traditions is emphasized in the account of the missionary activities of the sons of Mosiah. These four young Nephites undertook their mission to the Lamanites with a prayer that they might be instrumental in bringing the Lamanites "to the knowledge of the truth, to the knowledge of the baseness of the traditions of their fathers, which were not correct" (Alma 17:9; compare Alma 21:17). Ammon's teachings to the Lamanite king Lamoni emphasized the rebellions of the Lamanite progenitors as described in the Nephite record (Alma 18:37-39), and Lamoni, after his conversion, specifically thanked God for sending these men "to preach unto us, and to convince us of the traditions of our wicked fathers" (Alma 24:7; compare Alma 23:3-5, 25:6). A later Nephi explained that the deeds of the Lamanites "have been evil continually . . . because of the iniquity of the tradition of their fathers. But behold, salvation hath come unto them through the preaching of the Nephites" (Hel. 15:4; see also Hel. 15:7).

Statements of apostates from the Nephite tradition further accentuate the political function served by these records. For example, Mosiah's missionary sons encountered the Amalekites, who had apostatized from the Nephite beliefs and were living among the Lamanites. One Amalekite answered Aaron's inquiry into Amalekite teaching about the coming Redeemer by rejecting Nephite traditions in general: "We do not believe that thou knowest any such thing. We do not believe in these foolish traditions. We do not believe that thou knowest of things to come, neither do we believe that thy fathers and also that our fathers did know concerning the things which they spake, of that which is to come" (Alma 21:8). This same sophistic skepticism characterizes declarations of Korihor (Alma 30:14-27), the apostate Nephites just before the coming of Christ (Hel. 16:15-23),⁴ and the Zoramites. In ritual prayer the Zoramites denied belief in the Nephite tradition "which

was handed down to them by the childishness of their fathers.” Rather they believed God had “elected” them to be his “holy children.” They claimed God had revealed to them that “there shall be no Christ.” While they were chosen to be saved, the Nephites were chosen “to be cast by [God’s] wrath down to hell.” They thanked God further that they had not been “led away after the foolish traditions” of the Nephites, which “bind them down to a belief of Christ” (Alma 31:16–17). In answer to Moroni’s letter calling on him to repent, Ammoron, Amalickiah’s brother, defies the Nephite teaching, saying:

And as concerning that God whom ye say we have rejected, behold, we know not such a being; neither do ye; but if it so be that there is such a being, we know not but that he hath made us as well as you.

And if it so be that there is a devil and a hell, behold will he not send you there to dwell with my brother whom ye have murdered, whom ye have hinted that he hath gone to such a place? But behold these things matter not.

(Alma 54:21–22)

Like Amalickiah and his followers, many of “these dissenters” had “the same instruction and the same information of the Nephites,” even “having been instructed in the same knowledge of the Lord.” Yet after dissenting they adopted “the traditions of the Lamanites; giving way to indolence, and all manner of lasciviousness; yea, entirely forgetting the Lord their God” (Alma 47:36). Like Ammoron and Amalickiah, many of them even waged war on the Nephites “to avenge their wrongs, and to maintain and to obtain their rights to the government” (Alma 54:24). In fact, the Nephite apostates “became more hardened and impenitent . . . than the Lamanites” (Alma 47:36). Thus, one of the main factors determining one’s group allegiance and alignment in this society was whether one accepted or rejected the traditions of the Nephite fathers, particularly Lehi’s and Nephi’s prophecies about the coming of Christ.

Indeed, the writers of the Book of Mormon were conscious of the fact that the small plates of Nephi would play this kind of a powerful role. Enos specifically prayed that if the Nephites were to be destroyed, as had been prophesied, their records might still be preserved to bring salvation to the Lamanites. Enos received a positive response to this prayer, together with the interesting information that his fathers and perhaps other prophets had prayed for the same thing and had won the same promise from the Lord (Enos 1:16–18).

Elsewhere, the text repeatedly stresses the importance of the records for the instruction of the Nephites in their traditions (see, for example, 1 Ne. 19:3). Benjamin tells his sons that if they had not had the plates of brass and the plates of Nephi they too, like the Lamanites, would have “dwindled in unbelief,” but that in these records they have the sayings of their fathers from the time they left Jerusalem, which are true,

which they should therefore search diligently (Mosiah 1:3–7). Two generations later, Alma charges his son Helaman to preserve and add to the sacred records. For by this means the Lord “doth confound the wise and bringeth about the salvation of many souls” (Alma 37:7). He tells Helaman that these records “have enlarged the memory of this people” and have “convinced many of the error of their ways, and brought them to the knowledge of their God unto the salvation of their souls” (Alma 37:8). Without these records, Alma explains, “Ammon and his brethren could not have convinced so many thousands of the Lamanites of the incorrect tradition of their fathers.” It was the records that had brought those converts “unto repentance . . . to the knowledge of the Lord their God, and to rejoice in Jesus Christ their Redeemer” (Alma 37:9).

The content of the Nephite tradition is much richer and more affirmative than that of the Lamanites. In fact, it centers on another subject altogether. As Nephi repeatedly states, his purpose is to persuade his children to believe in Christ, that they might be saved (1 Ne. 6:4, 19:18; 2 Ne. 25:23). Mosiah also records that the generation arising after the time of Benjamin did not believe the tradition of their fathers about either the “resurrection of the dead” or the future “coming of Christ.” From statements like these it is clear that the Nephite traditions centered on their religious teachings, as well as on the political.

The first step essential to an acceptance of those teachings was recognition of Nephi as the spokesman and leader chosen by the Lord. Thus, Nephi’s effort to persuade his descendants and us to believe in Christ must include a demonstration that he is the rightful heir to the prophetic office and political authority of his father. This amounts to proving that the Nephite traditions are correct and that the Lamanite traditions are mistaken, and this in turn amounts to proving the central plank of the Nephite tradition, namely the belief about the future that gives meaning to all the rest—that the Son of God will come down to earth and atone for the sins of all men. Nephi intertwines the argument for Christ with the argument for the legitimacy of his own authority. They stand or fall together. It is Nephi who, like Lehi, has seen and heard Christ and who testifies that he will come. Christ has spoken to Nephi, expressly appointing him to be “a ruler and a teacher” to his brothers, and has delivered him from their treacherous schemes (1 Ne. 2:19–23; see also 1 Ne. 11:1–36, 12:6; 2 Ne. 25:13–16, 19, 23–26). Without Christ, the argument for Nephi’s authority has no basis, and without Nephi’s authority the Nephite political claims collapse.⁵

Being a Nephite—politically, religiously, and socially—eventually turned on accepting the Nephite traditions and records, as Mormon summarizes: “Whosoever would not believe in the tradition of

the Lamanites, but believed those records which were brought out of the land of Jerusalem, and also in the tradition of their fathers, which were correct, who believed in the commandments of God and kept them, were called the Nephites or the people of Nephi" (Alma 3:11).⁶

The final confirmation of this Nephite version of things was a physical difference between the Lamanites and the Nephites. The difference in skin color cried out for explanation. Mormon explained the dark skin of the Lamanites as a mark placed on them by God to discourage Nephites from intermarrying with Lamanites, which might lead to believing "in incorrect traditions which would prove their destruction" (Alma 3:8).⁷ By so acting, God himself was seen as vindicating the Nephite position. We never hear what the Lamanite answer to this might have been. With this background in mind, we now turn to the writings of Nephi to see how they serve the important purpose of establishing Nephi as the legitimate ruler and the successor of Lehi.

THE SMALL PLATES OF NEPHI

Nephi received the commandment to write his small plates thirty years after the departure from Jerusalem (2 Ne. 5:28–30). At this time he had already led his followers out of the land of their first inheritance, seeking relief from their bellicose relatives. But the Lamanites soon found them and renewed the earlier wars and contentions (2 Ne. 5:34; compare 1 Ne. 19:4).⁸ At an early date, the traditions of the Nephites and the Lamanites were already firmly in place at the root of their contentions.

In these circumstances, it was inevitable and even necessary that Nephi, now an aging prophet-king, write his new account in such a way that it document fully and coherently the true Nephite tradition and explain the false Lamanite tradition. If we look at Nephi's record closely, we find not the tedious self-assertion of an egotistical and talented younger brother, but the skillful and sensitive account of a mature and even weary prophet. Nephi was determined to convince his posterity of the truthfulness of the wonderful revelations he and his father had received about Christ, and thereby to convince them of the righteousness and legitimacy of their cause.

The testimony of Christ, which had come to them through their fathers and through their own revelations, was under constant attack from their relatives and in-laws who told a different story, a story that did have intrinsic plausibility. Because Nephi's central purpose is to persuade his readers to believe in Christ, he takes every opportunity, both between the lines and by direct statement, to mitigate the awkward fact that this teaching was coming from him as a younger brother, who

by tradition could not easily claim the right to rule and teach the family (2 Ne. 5:3). Sobered by this formidable task, Nephi carefully employs every literary and rhetorical tool at his disposal to justify his position as the righteous and rightful leader of the group. The following pages contain a summary of Nephi's writings and highlight this perspective in its various occurrences.

1 Nephi 1–2

Nephi begins the small plates by establishing his father's credentials as a prophet and the fact that the Lord had directed the family's flight from Jerusalem. The dramatic visions and revelations received by Lehi in answer to his prayers constitute the heart of 1 Nephi 1. It is significant that Nephi then tells how he sought to know the same things Lehi had seen and how the Lord visited him so that he believed his father's words (1 Ne. 2:16). By receiving this visitation, Nephi became Lehi's witness and heir, for at this time he was promised by the Lord, "inasmuch as thou shalt keep my commandments, thou shalt be made a ruler and a teacher over thy brethren" (1 Ne. 2:22).

Nephi also immediately introduces in chapter 2 the origins of the trouble with the older brothers. We learn that Laman and Lemuel took issue with their father Lehi from the outset (1 Ne. 2:12), despite his blessing and wish that they would be righteous (1 Ne. 2:9–10). Nephi's story sets out consciously to contrast the behavior of the prophet Lehi and that of his two rebellious sons, and then to compare those two with Nephi.

The first part of 1 Nephi 2 emphasizes Lehi's obedience to the Lord and his willing abandonment of his lands, gold, silver, and precious things. The second part emphasizes Laman and Lemuel's unwillingness to obey their father and their sorrow for the loss of his lands, gold, silver, and precious things. This characterization of Laman and Lemuel contrasts sharply with the depiction of Nephi given in 1 Nephi 1 and 2:16, which reveals Nephi's knowledge of God's mysteries and his focal interest in Christ and the promise of mercy and deliverance to the faithful. But chapter 2 displays Laman and Lemuel's ignorance on those same points and focuses on their concern for riches. Nephi thus suggests an explanation both for their murmuring and for the rejection of Lehi and other contemporary prophets.

This introduction of the murmuring brothers is appropriately followed by Nephi's strikingly different reaction to his father's teachings. The brothers are primarily concerned for their precious things left in Jerusalem. But because of "the things" (1 Ne. 2:17) that he had learned from the Holy Spirit, Nephi does not rebel.

1 Nephi 3-5

The second story in Nephi's account tells how he obtained the plates of brass from Laban. It appears that this memorable narrative was given such prominence by Nephi because it shows that he succeeded where his brothers failed, making him the rightful possessor of the plates of brass, and because in this episode an angel of the Lord directly informs Laman and Lemuel that Nephi had been chosen to become a ruler over them (1 Ne. 3:29). The story shows Nephi effectively already in that role. Like many other parts of Nephi's account, this story has a chiastic structure that emphasizes some of its key points by purposeful repetition (see table 1).⁹

Some of the key elements in this account can be identified as follows: After receiving a commandment from the Lord to send his sons back to Jerusalem for the plates of brass, Lehi first relays that commandment to the older sons, who resent the difficulty of the task. Nephi, however, announces that he knows the Lord will prepare the way, and the four brothers return to Jerusalem. Laman appropriately first takes the lead in dealing with Laban but fails and barely escapes with his life. They are all sorrowful, and the older sons now want to return to the wilderness. We can hardly miss the irony with which Nephi points out this reversal. But now Nephi asserts his leadership with an oath that they will not return without fulfilling the Lord's commandment. He explains the necessity of the record, foreshadowing what will happen to Laman's and Lemuel's descendants, who will reject this record when they could have had it. The brothers accept Nephi's alternate plan—to buy the plates with their father's abandoned riches. But the plan fails to take full account of their vulnerable position, and Laban seizes their goods, threatens to kill them, and sends them flying again.

Now the demoralization is complete. As Laman and Lemuel vent their frustrations by beating their younger brothers, an angel intervenes to protect the youths and to urge a return to the task, with the promise that the Lord will deliver Laban into their hands. The angel also tells them a most unwelcome thing, that the Lord has chosen Nephi to be a ruler over them. It is important to note the central emphasis placed on the words of the angel by their position at the turning point of this episode. At this crucial point, Laman and Lemuel murmur again! Their murmuring and refusal to respond to their father, their brother, or even an angel, explain why the leadership must pass from them to their younger brother.

Nephi, on the other hand, echoes the angel's encouragement. Why should they be afraid of Laban's fifty guards, or even his tens of thousands, when the Lord was able to deliver Israel from Pharaoh's hosts under Moses' leadership? Nephi practically likens himself to Moses, as a leader chosen by God, when he says, "Let us be strong like

TABLE 1
A Chiastic Analysis of 1 Nephi 3-5

3:2	A Lehi tells Nephi of the commandment he has received in a dream.
3	B Lehi describes the contents of the plates of brass, mentioning genealogy.
4	C Lehi is commanded that his sons should seek this record.
5	D Laman and Lemuel murmur that it is a hard thing.
7	E Nephi testifies that God will "prepare a way."
8	F Lehi is glad, because he knows Nephi has been "blessed of the Lord."
9-10	G The brothers return to Jerusalem and consult with each other.
11-13	H Laban attempts to slay Laman.
14	I The four sorrow; Laman and Lemuel want to return to the wilderness.
15-18	J Nephi makes an oath ("as the Lord liveth and as we live") to keep the Lord's commandments.
19-21	K Nephi's states his reasons for getting the plates.
22-23	L The brothers collect Lehi's gold, silver, and precious things.
24-26	M The brothers attempt to buy the plates, but Laban steals their property and attempts to slay them.
27	N They hide in "the cavity of a rock."
28	O Lemuel "hearkens" to Laman; they are angry, speak harsh words, and "smite" Nephi and Sam with a rod.
29	P An angel announces that Nephi has been chosen to be their ruler and promises that the Lord will deliver Laban into their hands.
31	Q Laman and Lemuel murmur again, for who can deliver them from Laban and his fifty?
4:1	Q* Nephi assures his brothers that God is mightier than Laban and his fifty.
2-3	P* Nephi speaks of Moses and reminds them of the angel's promise to deliver Laban into their hands.
4	O* Laman and Lemuel are still angry, they continue to murmur, but they do follow Nephi.
5	N* Nephi hides his brothers outside the city walls.
6-12	M* The Spirit leads Nephi to find the plates and reminds him of Laban's theft and attempt to kill them; Nephi kills Laban.
20-30	L* Nephi gets the metal plates with Zoram's assistance.
12-19*	K* The Spirit gives reasons for Nephi to kill Laban.
31-34	J* Nephi's oath again ("as the Lord liveth and as I live") used to urge Zoram to join them in following Lehi.
5:2-3	I* Sariah is sorrowful and wishes to be back in Jerusalem.
4:35-38	H* Nephi spares Zoram's life.
5:4-6	G* Lehi comforts Sariah as their sons travel up to Jerusalem.
7	F* Sariah is gladdened by her sons' return as the Lord has delivered them.
8	E* Sariah testifies that God has accomplished this, using Nephi's very words.
9	D* Lehi and Sariah rejoice and offer sacrifices and thanks to God.
10	C* Lehi searches the record.
11-19	B* Lehi summarizes the prophecies and genealogies in the plates of brass.
20-21	A* Lehi and Nephi have kept all the Lord's commandments to them.

⁹This element is advanced one position in the text because of chronology, but the structural parallel is easy to recognize.

unto Moses" (1 Ne. 4:2). Probably not too delighted with Nephi's comparison of their new leadership with that of ancient Israel, the still angry brothers follow Nephi as far as the city wall. Here Nephi hides them while he goes on alone to try once more to obtain the plates—this time at night.

Their own plans have failed, and their riches are gone. Guided only by the Spirit of the Lord, Nephi now goes forth, toward Laban's house. He finds the drunk and unconscious Laban in the darkened street. The Lord has indeed delivered Laban into his hands. The Spirit states this fact twice and directs Nephi to kill Laban.

For a modern reader, this account of Laban's death might leave some taint on the reputation of Nephi. Not necessarily so for the Old Testament audience Nephi knew. When Nephi reports using Laban's own sword to sever his head from his body, his contemporaries would hardly need reminding how David had announced to Goliath, "This day will the Lord deliver thee into mine hand" (see 1 Sam. 17:46). The language of the text also suggests a legal reference that further justifies Nephi's action. Under ancient Israelite law, it would have been unlawful to ambush Laban, even after he had tried twice to kill Lehi's sons and had stolen all their riches. But the law does provide sanctuary cities for anyone who kills a man whom he encounters accidentally, if "God deliver him into his hand" (Ex. 21:12–14).¹⁰ Nephi would know this law, and he finally accedes to the Spirit's demands, emphasizing doubly thereby that he figures in the story as the instrument of the Lord.

A new strategy now occurs to Nephi. He dons Laban's clothing and armor and succeeds in getting Laban's servant Zoram to fetch the plates and carry them outside the city wall where Nephi's brothers are waiting. Seeing what they take to be Laban and one servant (not the fifty guards they claimed to be afraid of), Laman and Lemuel are frightened and begin to run. (Whether or not the reader notices the irony, it is clear who leads effectively and who does not. The story also makes a joke of the later Lamanite complaint that they were entitled to own the plates but that Nephi had stolen the plates from them.) Nephi salvages the situation by calling in his own voice to reassure his brothers and by seizing Zoram and holding him long enough to talk things over. Zoram is reassured by Nephi's oath and invitation to join them in filling the commandments that Lehi had received from the Lord, and Nephi spares his life. They all return to their father in the wilderness with Nephi clearly installed as the successful leader, Laman having fumbled his great chance to lead successfully.

This was undoubtedly one of the most important stories in the tradition of the Nephites. The story's chiasmic structure shown in table 1 emphasizes the murmuring of Laman and Lemuel by reporting it at the center. The center also contrasts their ineffectual and faithless ways with

Nephi's faithfulness and reliance on the Spirit, and it focuses also on the angelic announcement to Laman and Lemuel themselves that the Lord had chosen Nephi to be their ruler.

1 Nephi 7

Given all the concern about the future welfare of their descendants, it is obvious that Lehi's unmarried children needed wives and husbands. Again the Lord commands Lehi to send his sons back to Jerusalem, this time to the house of Ishmael, who has five daughters (1 Ne. 7:6). As they present their case to Ishmael, we are impressed with the difference between Ishmael's response and Laban's. Ishmael, like Laban, may have been a kinsman to Lehi.¹¹ But Ishmael responds positively to Lehi's request, daring—possibly even in his old age—to take his family and follow Lehi into the wilderness.

Each day that passes takes the caravan farther from Jerusalem and Ishmael's property. In the harsh desert environment, Nephi's murmuring brothers enlist two of Ishmael's sons and two of his daughters in a rebellion against Ishmael, Nephi, and the others. That this rebellion is aimed most specifically against Nephi clearly identifies him as their leader, and he responds accordingly, sharply calling them to repentance and stressing his thesis that "the Lord is able to do all things according to his will, for the children of men, if it so be that they exercise faith in him" (1 Ne. 7:12).

This third story emphasizes that Nephi speaks as constrained by the Spirit in defending the commandments and ways of the Lord. We are forcibly reminded of the contrasting murmuring of Nephi's brothers against the commandment of the Lord in the preceding story. The comparison vindicates the Lord's choice of Nephi as ruler and teacher.

As before, the brothers are angered by Nephi's admonitions and now determine a final solution. With intent to kill, they tie him up, leaving him to be eaten by wild animals in the wilderness. The phrasing of this account reminds us of Joseph who was cast into a pit and sold by his elder brothers (who had also received divine indications that their younger brother would rule over them). They determine to rid themselves of Nephi's threat in much the same way. And the similarity is not incidental, for in spite of Nephi's stated determination not to give precious space to genealogies, he does take time to mention one ancestor—the same Joseph (1 Ne. 5:14, 6:1–2).

The events of the story then combine to provide the rebellious brothers with a stunning proof of the Lord's power as just described by Nephi. As their victim prays to God for deliverance, the ropes fall miraculously from his hands and feet, and he speaks to them again. Though his brothers are clearly the slow learners, they think Nephi is the

dunce, and they try again to educate him and subdue him by force of numbers. At this point, three members of Ishmael's family plead effectively with Nephi's assailants and make them realize what they are doing. For the first time in Nephi's account, the brothers' hearts are softened. They actually bow before Nephi and plead for his forgiveness (1 Ne. 7:20). Bowing down would constitute an act of obeisance, most likely having political significance as well as recalling Joseph's dream in which his brothers' sheaves bowed down to him (Gen. 37:7). Nephi accepts their formal submission, forgives them, and directs them to seek the Lord's forgiveness as well. Not only do they submit themselves to Nephi, but they apparently also acknowledge his special standing with God. Nephi is now established by every standard, including consent, as the ruler and teacher over his brothers. After praying to the Lord, they continue their journey and arrive at Lehi's tent where they all give thanks to God and offer sacrifice and burnt offerings to him.

We seem to have reached a high point in the spiritual careers of Laman and Lemuel. Never before have they submitted themselves voluntarily. On each previous occasion, they have been subdued against their will, and to their chagrin. But we should not get our hopes too high, for Lehi soon has a dream that makes it appear that Laman and Lemuel never do taste fully of the love of God, and Nephi reports this next.

1 Nephi 8

In 1 Nephi 2, Lehi had exhorted Laman and Lemuel to repent of their habitual murmuring and evident lack of commitment to the Lord. In 1 Nephi 8, his reservations about his two older sons expand greatly as a result of another vision. Whereas the vision gave him "reason to rejoice in the Lord because of Nephi," it also caused Lehi to "fear exceedingly" for Laman and Lemuel (1 Ne. 8:3-4). In the vision, Lehi comes to the tree of life, the fruit of which is eternal life. Nephi comes and partakes of the fruit at his father's invitation, but Laman and Lemuel refuse altogether (1 Ne. 8:13-18). Nephi's political purpose in relating this vision is evident to the extent that comparisons between him and his faithless brothers are emphasized at the expense of a fuller discussion of its religious significance. As Nephi tells us, he does not have room here to record "all the words" of his father. But he does tell us that according to Lehi, "Laman and Lemuel partook not of the fruit." For that reason, Nephi repeats again that Lehi "exceedingly feared for Laman and Lemuel; yea, he feared lest they should be cast off from the presence of the Lord" (1 Ne. 8:29, 35-36). This then is a direct confirmation by the patriarch Lehi of the specific cursing that the Lord had earlier told Nephi might come on the older brothers (1 Ne. 2:21). The message again is clear: Nephi has received the imprimatur in preference to his brothers.

1 Nephi 10-15

The second section of 1 Nephi 10 seems to be set up as a parallel to the second section of 1 Nephi 2. In 1 Nephi 2:15-17, Nephi's account begins at Lehi's tent in the valley of Lemuel and by stating his "great desires to know of the mysteries of God," specifically the visions of his father. After crying unto the Lord, Nephi is visited, his heart is softened, and he believes what his father has told him. He then tells his brothers what "the Lord had manifested unto [him] by his Holy Spirit." In 1 Nephi 10:16-11:1, Nephi again starts explicitly at his father's tent in the valley of Lemuel and states that after hearing this report of his father's visions he is "desirous also that [he] might see, and hear, and know of these things, by the power of the Holy Ghost" (1 Ne. 10:17). Here Nephi also bears testimony that "he that diligently seeketh shall find; and the mysteries of God shall be unfolded unto them, by the power of the Holy Ghost" (1 Ne. 10:19; see also 1 Ne. 10:17), thus affirming the same point he had presented in chapter 2.

These are the only two passages so far where Nephi articulates this lesson. In each case, Nephi receives a visitation from the Lord in which he is told, "Blessed art thou, Nephi." These two revelations then become coordinate passages. In the first account (1 Ne. 2:19-24), the Lord tells Nephi about the futures of him, his brothers, and their descendants. In the second account (1 Ne. 11:1-14:30), the Spirit of the Lord and then an angel show Nephi all the things his father had seen and explain what they mean, giving special attention to the futures of Nephi, his brothers, and their descendants.

The intended connection of this long passage to chapter 2 is further evidenced by its showing the future fulfillment of the covenant the Lord made to Nephi in chapter 2, for he sees the seed of his brothers overpowering his own descendants because of their pride and their yielding to "the temptations of the devil." He also sees the curse on his brothers' descendants as they "dwindle in unbelief" and become "a dark, and loathsome, and a filthy people, full of idleness and all manner of abominations" (1 Ne. 12:19-23). Here we are again invited to compare Nephi with his brothers.

After receiving the same great vision his father had seen, Nephi returns to his father's tent and finds his brothers "disputing one with another" about Lehi's dream. They had not understood the revelation because they were "hard in their hearts" and did not ask the Lord for understanding (1 Ne. 15:2-3). Nephi is overcome with despair at this point because he has just seen in vision the destruction and fall of his people. And he has seen that one direct cause of this demise would be this same hardheartedness of his brothers. Nephi chastises them for not keeping the commandments of the Lord so that these things could be

made known to them directly. He then satisfies their request and explains to them the various elements of the vision. He ends by again calling them to repentance, telling them they should "hearken to the truth" and "not murmur because of the truth" (1 Ne. 16:1–4). Nephi's prophesied role as teacher over his brethren has already begun to be fulfilled, and at their request.

As in chapter 2, Nephi here portrays his brothers as incapable of communicating with God in the manner of Lehi, and in the manner that Nephi has learned to perfection. At this point in the narrative, Nephi clearly emerges as the spiritual heir to his father, recognized and honored personally by the Lord. And again, the only reason for this is the spiritual recalcitrance of Laman and Lemuel—not anything that Nephi has done to them. On the contrary, he has shared everything with them and has vigorously encouraged them to assume their rightful place by acting properly. They acknowledge the virtue of his position and "humble themselves before the Lord" (1 Ne. 16:5). An element of irony exists in the fact that all this certification of Nephi's preeminence arose in the valley called Lemuel (1 Ne. 2:10, 10:16, 16:6).

1 Nephi 16

The stories in 1 Nephi 16 record a significant turning point in Nephi's account, for it is here that Nephi emerges undeniably as coleader with his father. In the group's distress and hunger, even Lehi begins "to murmur against the Lord" (1 Ne. 16:20). At this critical moment only Nephi keeps perspective. All alone he exhorts the rest of the group, speaking "many things unto them in the energy of [his] soul" (1 Ne. 16:24). They humble themselves sufficiently that the voice of the Lord again speaks to the much chastened Lehi, and the Liahona (which had stopped working) again begins to function (1 Ne. 16:25–28). Alone, Nephi makes a new bow, asks Lehi where to go to find food, goes up the mountain, and obtains food for the families. Significantly, the bow was a symbol of political power in the ancient Near East.¹²

But the reconciliation effected by Nephi's energetic speaking and his success in saving them from starvation does not last for long. This story is followed by the report of Ishmael's death. The grieving family soon degenerates into another round of ominous murmuring against Lehi and particularly Nephi. The brothers now openly accuse Nephi of being politically ambitious, having "taken it upon him to be our ruler and our teacher, who are his elder brethren" (1 Ne. 16:37). They accuse him of wanting to lead them to some strange land where he will "make himself a king and a ruler over us, that he may do with us according to his will and pleasure" (1 Ne. 16:38). The brothers

again undertake to slay Nephi and their father, but the voice of the Lord stops them and speaks "many words unto them, and [chastens] them exceedingly" (1 Ne. 16:39), after which they repent yet again. Each time they repent and humble themselves, they are blessed with peaceful unity and food.

This story demonstrates the emergence of Nephi as a co-leader of the group. Nephi still asks Lehi where he should go to hunt, but Lehi himself is "truly chastened" (1 Ne. 16:25) and only Nephi holds the all-important bow. In the following story the commandment for the next major project comes from the Lord directly to Nephi alone.

1 Nephi 17

All the descendants of Lehi and Ishmael knew that their ancestors had come from Jerusalem, a land that was far away across a great sea. Thus, the story of how these people built a ship and transported themselves to this new land was an inescapable part of their traditions. The tradition of the Lamanites, as it is reported in the Book of Mormon, does not deal with these particulars. The answer would itself be fatal to that tradition. Their tradition focuses instead on charges of usurpation. Nephi's account of how he built a ship, like the account of acquiring the plates of brass, must have been a centerpiece in the Nephite tradition. As supports for Nephi's claim to be the legitimate ruler, they are unanswerable. Each of these stories deals with inescapable historical questions. The plates exist and must be accounted for. The people are in a new world, and the trip that brought them there needs to be explained.

These two stories (1 Ne. 3–5 and 1 Ne. 17) occupy parallel and central positions in the two halves of 1 Nephi and appear to be told in the same chiasmic format.¹³ Both accounts emphasize Nephi's *de facto* leadership and relate divine interventions witnessing that God had chosen Nephi to be the leader even before the group's journey to the promised land. Both accounts show Laman and Lemuel eventually submitting to Nephi and working under his direction, despite their initial skepticism, in an extended project under his divinely attested leadership. Both focus on the murmuring of Nephi's older brothers (compare 1 Ne. 3:31, 17:17–22), and Nephi's immediate answers to that murmuring contain, as structurally central points, Nephi's only two allusions to Moses as deliverer of the Israelites.¹⁴ The comparison between Moses and Nephi is not hard to draw and carries obvious political as well as religious implications. First Nephi 17 ends, like the account of the attempted murder in the desert, with the brothers bowing down, not only to acknowledge Nephi's preeminence, but even to worship him (1 Ne. 17:55).

1 Nephi 18

The juxtaposition of the ship-building story with the account of the ocean crossing again suggests comparisons between Nephi and his brothers. While the story of building the ship focuses on the murmuring of Laman and Lemuel and the divine intervention by which they are subdued, the story of crossing the great sea focuses on Nephi's refusal to murmur—even under the greatest of personal adversity. Again Laman and Lemuel are subdued, this time by the divine power in a storm that threatens them with destruction. This story focuses not only on Nephi's refusal to murmur, but even more precisely on the fact that Nephi praises God "all the day long" (1 Ne. 18:16). This is the climax of Nephi's comparison of himself to his older brothers, and even in some respects to his father, who became sick and very sorrowful.

1 Nephi 19–22

The book of 1 Nephi ends with Nephi firmly in place as the teacher the Lord and the angel had said he would become. The final four chapters record his teachings to his brothers, including materials he has read to them from the plates of brass, and especially from such prophets as Moses, Isaiah, and Joseph (1 Ne. 19:23–24).¹⁵ He further prophesies that "the very God of Israel do men trample under their feet," for they "hearken not to the voice of his counsels" (1 Ne. 19:7). Nephi explains that when Christ comes to the Jews in Jerusalem, they will despise and crucify him. In 1 Nephi 20–21 Nephi records the chapters of Isaiah that he read to his brothers, chapters that correspond closely in content to the great vision he had seen and reported to them at least eight years earlier at their first camp in the wilderness.

The final chapter presents evidence that Laman and Lemuel accept Nephi as their teacher. Echoing their inability to understand their father's vision eight years before, they again come to Nephi asking the meaning of the things that he has read to them (1 Ne. 22:1). Nephi again points out to them (and to us and all Lehi's descendants) that these things are manifest to men "by the voice of the Spirit" (1 Ne. 22:2). Nephi then interprets Isaiah for them, invoking insights derived from his own great vision. He ends this book appealing to his brothers to obey the commandments and witnessing to them that the writings on the plates of brass are true and that those who keep the commandments will be saved.

The Second Book of Nephi: 2 Nephi 1–4

The narrative is continuous between the first and second books written by Nephi. The events described at the end of the first book could

easily have transpired on the same day or hour as those at the beginning of the second. Yet Nephi chose to make his largest structural break at this point. The internal structure of 1 Nephi emphasizes its separate character as a single literary unit. It would seem that 1 Nephi constitutes an elaborate introduction to the final presentation in Nephi's argument, the verbatim accounts of Lehi's blessings to his own and Ishmael's sons and to Zoram, shortly before his own death. These blessings define the subsequent tribal order of these peoples and systematically refute the traditions of the Lamanites as they have emerged by the time of Nephi's writing. In Lehi's own mouth we find the explanations for his choice of Nephi over Laman and Lemuel. These four chapters invoke the authority of the patriarch himself to support (1) the revelations from God describing this land of promise and the role of Nephi as a teacher and ruler in it, (2) the teachings about the Messiah and the redemption he brings to men, which was an essential plank in Nephi's defense of his position, and (3) the authoritative patriarchal designation of Nephi as the one to whom all the others must hearken if they are to realize their patriarchal blessings and the spiritual blessings of a loving God. All of 1 Nephi builds up to these chapters and provides the essential background for them. They constitute Nephi's strongest evidence for his claims.

In the first blessing, Lehi speaks to Laman, Lemuel, Sam, and the sons of Ishmael, and tells them: "Rebel no more against your brother." He strongly endorses Nephi by summarizing Nephi's qualifications: (1) "[Nephi's] views have been glorious"; (2) he has "kept the commandments from the time that we left Jerusalem"; and (3) "were it not for him, we must have perished with hunger in the wilderness" (2 Ne. 1:24). It is little wonder that Nephi would have chosen to begin his second book with this material.

The occasion also provides the earliest codification of Nephite and Lamanite traditions about the reasons for Nephi's succession to his father. On Nephi's side are the virtues listed above; on Laman and Lemuel's side are accusations that Nephi "sought power and authority" over them, and that he has "used sharpness" and "been angry with [them]" (2 Ne. 1:25–26).

Lehi refutes or explains these Lamanite misperceptions. He explains that Nephi was only seeking "the glory of God, and [their] own eternal welfare" (1 Ne. 1:25). He further says that Nephi's "sharpness was the sharpness of the power of the word of God, which was in him; and that which ye call anger was the truth, according to that which is in God, which he could not restrain, manifesting boldly concerning your iniquities" (2 Ne. 1:26). We are to understand that it is not really Nephi who has spoken to them, but "the Spirit of the Lord which was in him" (2 Ne. 1:27).

Lehi's conclusion further strengthens Nephi's leadership position, but unfortunately not unambiguously. Lehi promises the rebellious group, "If ye will hearken unto the voice of Nephi ye shall not perish. And if ye will hearken unto him I leave unto you a blessing, yea, even my first blessing. But if ye will not hearken unto him I take away my first blessing, yea, even my blessing, and it shall rest upon him" (2 Ne. 1:28-29).

This is a curious blessing. From Laman and Lemuel's perspective it must have been very frustrating. In order to obtain the first blessing, they had to obey Nephi; on the other hand, if they did not obey Nephi, the father's blessing would go to Nephi. Either way Nephi wins, although under the first option Laman might preserve the blessing for his posterity by submitting himself during his lifetime to Nephi.¹⁶ Perhaps this alternative contingent blessing was Lehi's rather ingenious, although somewhat desperate and unlikely, final attempt to bring peace among his sons. Lehi's blessing, however, left one critical question unanswered, namely who would arbitrate a dispute between Laman and Nephi, should a dispute arise whether Laman had done enough to satisfy the requirement that he "hearken unto the voice of Nephi" or whether Nephi had required of him only that which was appropriate. Undoubtedly such a dispute soon arose, and, out of the ensuing stalemate, Nephi left the land of first inheritance, according to the Lamanites wrongfully taking with him his people and the plates of brass. It seems clear, however, that Lehi did not intend this outcome. For him, Nephi was the chosen leader. Lehi hoped that all his colony would be able to live under Nephi's teaching and rulership. Thus, Nephi's leadership role has now been announced directly to his older brothers not only by an angel and by the voice of the Lord, but also by their own father, who can choose on whom and in what way he will leave his "first blessing."

The blessings given to Zoram, Sam, Jacob, and Joseph corroborate the fact that Lehi intended Nephi to be the leader. Because Zoram has been faithful and "a true friend" to Nephi, Lehi promises that his posterity will be blessed with Nephi's (2 Ne. 1:30-31).¹⁷ Jacob, too, will be blessed and "dwell safely with . . . Nephi" (2 Ne. 2:3). Joseph is told that if he follows Nephi, he will receive similar blessings (2 Ne. 3:25). Finally, Sam is blessed to inherit land with Nephi. His descendants shall be numbered with Nephi's, and he will be blessed all his days (2 Ne. 4:11). In all the blessings, whether negative or positive, Nephi is explicitly endorsed as the authorized successor to Lehi. As a final reaffirmation of all he has said, Lehi repeats to the children of his rebellious son Laman the Lord's promise that they too will be blessed if they keep the commandments, and that if they lose out the blame will be placed on the head of their father Laman because of his disobedience (2 Ne. 4:3-4).

Just as Lehi had feared, "not many days after his death, Laman and Lemuel and the sons of Ishmael were angry with [Nephi] because of the

admonitions of the Lord" (2 Ne. 4:13). The great split that had been prophesied became an immediate reality and a final tragic witness to the truth of Nephi's claims and prophecies.

TYOLOGIES OF MOSES AND JOSEPH IN NEPHI'S WRITINGS

In his final words to his youngest son, Joseph, Lehi depends heavily on the writings of two ancient prophets in Egypt—Joseph and Moses.¹⁸ The text invites us again to see Nephi as a parallel figure to these two great leaders and deliverers of Israel, who shared Nephi's problem—having to justify unexpected callings to authority. Joseph, one of Jacob's youngest sons, was born to Jacob's second wife; and Moses was a Levite and virtually unknown to the Israelites when he was called. The justifiable killings of Laban and of the Egyptian overseer are not sufficient to make a strong connection between Nephi and Moses. But there is much more. Nephi's description of the death of Laban is preceded by a passage in which Nephi exhorts his brothers to follow him without fear of Laban or his soldiers, because as in the case of Moses leading the Israelites out of Egyptian captivity, the Lord will bless them (1 Ne. 4:1-3). Not only does Nephi lead them successfully in that venture, but from then on he is their leader through the wilderness, over the water, and to the promised land. Like Moses, he constantly has to overcome the murmuring and faithlessness of his people. Like Moses he secures divine assistance to feed his people in the wilderness. And like Moses, he was caught up into a mountain to receive the word of God (1 Ne. 17:7ff.). Nephi explicitly invokes the Moses comparison a second time when his brothers refuse to help him build the ship. On that occasion he lists all the details of the experience of Moses and the Israelites that are similar to their own. He does not explicitly draw a comparison between himself and Moses, but one is plain for all to see.

The comparison with Joseph is less direct. Like Joseph, Nephi is resented by his older brothers, for he also was his father's favorite. As Joseph has his visions of sheaves and stars, God tells Nephi that he will teach and rule over his brothers. While bringing Ishmael's family out of Jerusalem, Nephi's brothers become possessed of the same murderous rage that caused Joseph's brothers to throw him into a pit in the wilderness to die or be eaten by wild beasts (Gen. 37:18-24). Like Joseph, Nephi ascribes his escape to the power of God (compare Gen. 45:5, 7-8 and 1 Ne. 7:17-18).

Should we have failed to make the Nephi-Joseph connection on our own, Nephi helps us out by immediately mentioning that Joseph is their ancestor, in spite of his resolve not to take precious space on these plates with genealogical information. The parallels mount as Nephi, by the *strength of his bow*, provides food and saves his father's family from

starvation (compare Gen. 49:23–24). Jacob of old accuses his older sons of bringing “down [his] gray hairs with sorrow to the grave” (Gen. 42:38). The same phrase is repeated to such an extent in Genesis that it formulaically evokes memories of Jacob.¹⁹ Nephi chooses this exact phrase to describe the effects of family rebellion on his own father (1 Ne. 18:18). And when Lehi, like Jacob, gathers his people together to receive his final blessings, he rebukes the older sons for their faithlessness and promises their birthright to the younger son, who has already become the family’s *de facto* leader as they reside in a strange land (compare Gen. 49, especially v. 26, and 2 Ne. 1, especially vv. 28–29).

CONCLUSION IN 2 NEPHI 5

In 2 Nephi 5, Nephi concludes his case against the Lamanite tradition that challenges his authority over the Lehiite colony. In later chapters in 2 Nephi, he preaches the doctrines of Christ through the teachings of his brother Jacob, the writings of Isaiah, and his own concluding sermons. But the historical part of the argument ends here, as Nephi ties this chapter back to the historical argument in 1 Nephi 2. Here again Nephi draws a favorable comparison between himself and his father, juxtaposed to a striking contrast between himself and his brothers. In 2 Nephi 5 Laman and Lemuel seek to kill Nephi, just as the Jews in Jerusalem had tried to kill Lehi. In 1 Nephi 2, Nephi explicitly compares Laman and Lemuel to “the Jews who were at Jerusalem, who sought to take away the life of [his] father” (1 Ne. 2:13). Like Lehi in that earlier chapter, Nephi is here warned by the Lord to take his family and others and flee into the wilderness. As in that earlier chapter, they take their tents and provisions, travel for days, and then pitch their tents. Just as Lehi eventually led his people to a promised land where they could plant and harvest and find precious metals in abundance, so Nephi’s people now do the same. By doing the things Lehi had done, Nephi further emerges as the heir to his father.

Additional parallels in structure and content link these two chapters even more firmly together. Each includes four short sections that serve to contrast the people of Nephi and the people of Laman or the brothers themselves. Furthermore, in this concluding chapter, Nephi explicitly cites statements of the Lord from the earlier chapter at least three times (compare 2 Ne. 5:19, 20, 25 with 1 Ne. 2:22, 21–23, 24). Here Nephi also reports the fulfillment of prophecies first mentioned in 1 Nephi 2.

The Curse

One of the most important elements of 2 Nephi 5 is the report of the fulfillment of the prophesied curse upon the Lamanites. The physical

effects of the curse were observable empirical facts that would have required explanation. Nephi, and no one else, had an explanation. Nephi makes it clear that the curse consists of being “cut off from the presence of the Lord” and that it results from not obeying the word of the Lord. Nephi’s brothers had “hardened their hearts like flint” against the Lord. To prevent the Nephites from mixing with the Lamanites and bringing the curse upon themselves, the Lord caused the Lamanites to appear “loathsome” to the Nephites by bringing a “skin of blackness” upon them. Note that the dark skin is not the curse, but only a device to help protect the Nephites from also falling under the curse (2 Ne. 5:21–23).

The spiritual consequences of the curse are another matter still. Because of their cursing, the Lamanites became “an idle people, full of mischief and subtlety, and . . . seek in the wilderness for beasts of prey” (2 Ne. 5:20–24). Nephi gives us a picture of the Nephites that sets a clear contrast with the Lamanites. The Nephites are “industrious” and “labor with their hands.” They build buildings and work with wood, iron, copper, brass, steel, gold, silver, and other precious ores. They have built a temple like Solomon’s. John Lundquist tells us that possessing a temple is the archetypal legitimizing characteristic for an ancient Near Eastern political regime.²⁰

This initial description of the cursed Lamanites sets a model followed repeatedly by later writers. “The skin of blackness” and the contrasting lifestyles of the Lamanites and Nephites stand as silent but powerful, objective, and irrefutable witnesses to the veracity of Nephi’s account. The traditions of the Lamanites, as far as we know, offered no alternative theory to explain these simple facts. And so their account focused on Nephi’s wicked rebellion against ancient custom. They left the will of God and his commandments out of the account altogether.

The points raised in 2 Nephi 5 are themes of Nephi’s book as a whole, and they contain Nephi’s final statements on these issues. They show Laman and Lemuel preoccupied with their desire to kill Nephi, who in contrast is preoccupied with making a record that will help bring his people to eternal life. They show the same contrast between the descendants of the unreconciled brothers. Nephi’s people have finally realized all the blessings of abundance and prosperity and favor of the Lord that had been promised to Lehi’s righteous descendants from the first. But the descendants of Laman and Lemuel have gone backwards, abandoning the advantages of the urban Hebrew civilization that their fathers knew in Jerusalem just one generation before. Clearly they had been cursed for their iniquities, and their children exhibited the natural consequences of being cut off from the Spirit of the Lord.

In the final analysis, Nephi ties his case down with simple empirical facts of life known to his descendants and the Lamanites. There exist a

sword of Laban and a compass. There are plates of brass that also tie their people to a distant world, Jerusalem. And there are Lamanites and Nephites who are related by language and lineage, but who have different skin color and lifestyles. All these facts cry out for explanation, and Nephi has explained it simply. The God of their fathers has brought them here and has provided them with a Savior. God has visited Lehi and Nephi, giving them the knowledge and power necessary to bring this people safely to their new land. God has rejected Lehi's older sons for their iniquity, hardheartedness, stiffneckedness, and constant murmuring. In their place, God has installed Nephi, who from the beginning has been faithful, who has never murmured, whose heart has been softened by the Holy Spirit, and who has taken many risks in his determination to keep God's commandments. Though simple, it is an almost unbelievable story. Yet the empirical evidence is before the eyes of all. And there is only one coherent explanation of all the facts available—Nephi's record.

It is too easy to see in Nephi's descriptions of his brothers and their shameful conduct simple manifestations of sibling rivalry. Such a reading fails to take seriously the endless pain and risk of life that Nephi endures in trying to help his brothers and their descendants. Once we take the time to investigate Nephi's full case against his elder brothers, we must recognize that something much more important and systematic is going on. These twenty-seven chapters do serve many purposes. And indeed, their primary purpose is to convince the coming generations to come unto Christ. But one basic strategy in that great effort is to defend Nephi as the authorized spokesman of Christ to this people. The Lamanite traditions had to be refuted, not only because they undermined the political unity of the Nephites, but also because they denied Christ and his power. For Nephi this was all too clear. And his record displays the highly deliberate way in which he went about refuting those traditions.

Nephi does not pretend immunity to the emotional battle with his brothers. He candidly confesses the great anger that has seized his heart from time to time, both because of his enemies (Laman and Lemuel?) and because of the enemy of his soul (2 Ne. 4:27–29). The sturdy Nephi, who has reported his constant faithfulness, also deliberately shows his descendants and us his completely credible humanity. He is a man who sorrows; he grieves for his own iniquities. Yet he is one who still stands confident of the future because of his great trust in the Lord (2 Ne. 4:17–35).

First Nephi is not the travel diary of a youngster. Nor is it possibly a figment of young Joseph Smith's imagination. It is a highly complex and passionate account, purposefully written by a mature man of great culture and vision, to defend those things that he believes most worth

defending. Nephi's writings were composed at a time when Nephi could see the need to provide his people with an account that would explain, document, and justify his ascent to leadership. For Nephi's people, his writings long served both as an extremely sophisticated political tract—something of a founding constitution for the Nephite people—and as an elaborate and compelling witness of Jesus Christ. In all these functions, the books of Nephi call on the reader to believe, as their author does, "that the tender mercies of the Lord are over all those whom he hath chosen, because of their faith, to make them mighty even unto the power of deliverance" (1 Ne. 1:20).

NOTES

¹According to John L. Sorenson, such histories were common among the Guatemala highland Indians when the first Spanish explorers arrived. They were used for many purposes including conferring "legitimacy and sanctity on the rulers" (see John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co. and Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1985], 51).

²Though we might ordinarily expect "fathers" to refer to the larger body of ancestors, it seems to refer in this instance to their immediate parents, whom Laman and Lemuel criticized and rejected for not staying in Jerusalem with their countrymen whom they knew to be "a righteous people" (1 Ne. 17:20–22).

³Jeremiah 36:23 may in fact identify a legitimate Israelite view justifying the destruction of incorrect books.

⁴They are reported to have believed "that it is not reasonable that such a being as a Christ shall come" (Hel. 16:18) and that "we know that this is a wicked tradition, which has been handed down unto us by our fathers, to . . . keep us in ignorance" (Hel. 16:20). Of course, the first defender of this skeptical view among the Nephites was Sherem (Jacob 7:1–7). Compare 3 Ne. 1:11.

⁵There is a ready analogy in the way many people fight Joseph Smith and his account of the origin of the Book of Mormon. If one does not accept Christ, Joseph's account will not make sense. And if one does accept his account, one must take the divine mission and authority of Christ seriously.

⁶We should remember that it was the Nephites who kept the true records of both peoples (see Alma 3:12).

⁷Mormon draws on Nephi's explanation recorded at 2 Ne. 5:20–24.

⁸The date is approximately 560 B.C. or forty years after the flight from Jerusalem.

⁹This table presents a revision of the analysis published in Noel B. Reynolds, "Nephi's Outline," *Brigham Young University Studies* 20 (Winter 1980): 145, reprinted in Noel B. Reynolds, ed., *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins* (Provo: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 1982), 69. Compare also John W. Welch, *A Study Relating Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon to Chiasmus in the Old Testament, Ugaritic Epics, Homer, and Selected Greek and Latin Authors* (Master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1970), 124–25, 159–60.

¹⁰I am indebted to Richard L. Anderson and John W. Welch for calling my attention to the parallels with 1 Samuel and Exodus. Note that in Nephi's record the Spirit uses the precise language of 1 Samuel and Exodus in commanding Nephi to perform the deed. See also F. Essig and D. Fuller, "Nephi's Slaying of Laban: A Legal Perspective" (Provo: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, n.d.), 82.

¹¹See the discussion in Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1952), 43–44, 111.

¹²Nahum M. Waldman, "The Breaking of the Bow," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 69 (October 1978): 82–88.

¹³See Reynolds, "Nephi's Outline," esp. 142, 145–46.

¹⁴Compare 1 Ne. 4:2–3, 17:23–42. These passages are the chiasmic centers of the two stories, which are about equal in length and manifest many similar details (compare 1 Ne. 3:7 with 1 Ne. 17:3).

¹⁵We can see that Nephi is drawing on the writings of Joseph by comparing this passage with 2 Ne. 3:5.

¹⁶Compare Lehi's blessing to Laman's children, 2 Ne. 4:3–7.

¹⁷Notice how Lehi's blessing to Zoram anticipates and refutes the claim of Zoram's distant descendants to the effect that their father had been "pressed and brought out of Jerusalem" by Nephi (Alma 54:23).

¹⁸2 Ne. 3:4–25 contains extensive excerpts and references taken from the writings of Joseph and includes prophecies about Moses. Though the text is not explicit, much of the material in 2 Ne. 2 would ordinarily be attributed to Moses.

¹⁹In Gen. 44:29, Judah quotes Jacob's lament exactly. In verse 31 he repeats the lament again. These statements in Jacob's old age echo his earlier statement when, upon receiving the evidence of Joseph's death, he said, "I will go down into the grave unto my son mourning" (Gen. 37:35).

²⁰John M. Lundquist, "The Legitimizing Role of the Temple in the Origin of the State," in Kent Harold Richards, ed., *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers Series*, no. 21 (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1982).