



BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Transcript

The following transcript represents the views of the speaker and not the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University, or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.



FOUNDATION FOR ANCIENT RESEARCH AND MORMON STUDIES

Noel B. Reynolds

The Political Context of the Book of Mormon

F
A
R
M
S

Summary:

The history of any people has a political dimension. If there is any structure of authority in a society, people will want to control that authority to promote their own interests. Politics is that realm in which this struggle takes place. Nephite and Lamanite politics and wars revolved around the issue of which of Lehi's sons was the legitimate heir to the paternal right to rule.

Transcript
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

\$2.00

REY-T2



7 14861 03120 1

For a complete listing of FARMS publications,
call 1-800-FARMS-15 or (801) 373-5111
for a FARMS catalog.

Other FARMS publications on similar topics

Reexploring the Book of Mormon edited by John W. Welch (WEL-92)

"The Lamanite View of Book of Mormon History" by Richard L. Bushman (BUS-90)

"Beyond Politics" by Hugh W. Nibley (N-BEY)

"The Political Dimension in Nephi's Small Plates" by Noel B. Reynolds (REY-87)

"Ancient Aspects of Nephite Kingship in the Book of Mormon" by Todd R. Kerr (KER-92)

"Warfare and the Development of Nephite Culture in America" by David Palmer (PAL-85)

"The Composition of Lehi's Family" by John L. Sorenson (SOR-90)

Noel B. Reynolds (Ph.D., Harvard University) is Associate Academic Vice President and Professor of Political Science at Brigham Young University. He is a member of the FARMS Board of Trustees.

© 1995 by Noel B. Reynolds. Transcript of a lecture presented as part of the FARMS Book of Mormon Lecture Series.

The Political Context of the Book of Mormon

Noel B. Reynolds

The Book of Mormon tells a story of the Nephites and Lamanites over about a thousand year history. The history of any people has a political dimension, as it does in this case. If there is any structure of authority in a society, people will want to control that authority to promote their own interests, their own dreams, their own visions. Politics is that realm in which this struggle takes place—except when it disintegrates into war. The Bible tells us many stories like this, where the authority of divinely appointed prophets or kings is challenged by others who have different ideas, who don't want to go the way that the Lord has directed, and we see this also in our society today. The underlying political struggle that's recorded in the Book of Mormon involves competing claims to the right to rule among Lehi's descendants. Nephite and Lamanite politics and wars revolved around the issue of which of Lehi's sons was the legitimate heir to his paternal right to rule.

Soon after Lehi's death, the colony he had founded split into two groups: the Lamanites and the Nephites. Each of these factions developed its own explanation for Nephi's acquisition of his father's authority. As it was later reported in a Nephite record, the record of Zeniff, the oral traditions of the Lamanites had come to include the following points: First, that they—that is Lehi and his colony—had been driven out of the land of Jerusalem because of the iniquities of their fathers—that presumably would have been the iniquities of Lehi and Ishmael. Second, that they—that is, Laman and Lemuel—had been wronged in the wilderness by their brethren when Nephi took the lead of their journey in the wilderness. Third, that

they were also wronged while crossing the sea. And fourth, that they were wronged while in the land of their first inheritance when Nephi left and robbed the plates of brass from them.

Five hundred years after Nephi wrote his record, this Lamanite charge had been simplified by the Zoramite Ammoron, who said: "For behold, your fathers [that is, Nephi and others] did wrong their brethren, insomuch that they did rob them of their right to the government when it rightly belonged to 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 asserting and defending the Nephite position, Zeniff explained that Nephi took the lead because he was righteous and called of God, "for the Lord heard [Nephi's] prayers and answered them, and he took the lead of their journey in the wilderness" (Mosiah 10:13). Zeniff further claimed that Laman and Lemuel had hardened their hearts while on the sea and that Nephi departed into the wilderness and took the plates of brass as the Lord and commanded him.

A fairly standardized version of the Nephite tradition seems clearly to have been codified early on, and it was invoked ritualistically on great occasions when the Nephites met together, such as at the time of King Benjamin's address that is recorded in the early chapters of Mosiah. There, Mormon carefully lists the central elements of the Nephite tradition as the content of their prayers and thanksgiving. These include the following: First, the Lord had brought them out of Jerusalem;

second, the Lord had delivered them from their enemies; third, the Lord had appointed just men to be their teachers; fourth, the Lord had given them a just man to be their king, who had established peace in Zarahemla and had taught them to keep the commandments of God; and fifth, by this means, the Lord had made it possible for them to rejoice and to be filled with love towards God and all man.

You will notice, in comparing these two traditions—the tradition of the Lamanites, as reported by Zeniff, and the tradition of the Nephites, as we find it in his prayer of thanksgiving—that the Nephites focus on the role the Lord has played in their history, but the Lamanites ignore that altogether. The Lamanites did not respond to the Nephites in this same kind of spirit. From the first, they sought to kill Nephi. Hundreds of years later, Zeniff still reports that they were 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 the children of Nephi” because of these alleged wrongs (Mosiah 10:17; cf. Jacob 7:24). 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).

The political traditions that we’re talking about focus specifically on different attitudes toward the Lord. 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). Now, you might have thought that destroying the Nephites would be enough, 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 belief. The Nephites talked easily and frequently of such a possibility. 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.

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). Ammon’s teaching to the Lamanite king, Lamoni, emphasized the rebellion of the Lamanite progenitors as described in the Nephite record. And after his conversion, Lamoni 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). A later Nephite explained that the deeds of the Lamanites “have been evil continually, and this because of the iniquity of the tradition of their fathers. But behold, salvation hath come unto them through the preaching of the Nephites” (Helaman 14:4).

Statements of apostates from the Nephite tradition further accentuate the political function served by these records. For example, Mosiah’s missionary sons encounter the Amalekites living among the Lamanites who had apostatized from

the Nephite beliefs. 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 Corihor, the apostate Nephite just before the coming of Christ, 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" (Alma 31:16), as they said. Rather they believed that God had "elected [them] to be [his] holy children" (ibid.), and they claimed God had revealed to them "that there shall be no Christ" (ibid.). While they were chosen to be saved, they said, the Nephites were chosen to be cast by god's wrath down to hell (Alma 31:17). They thanked God further that they had not been "led away after the foolish traditions" of the Nephites, which bound them down to a belief in Christ (ibid.).

In answer to Moroni's letter calling on him to repent, Amaron, 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 54:21-2)

Mormon explains to us, the readers of the Book of Mormon, that “these dissenters” would adopt the traditions of the Lamanites and, in so doing, would give way to “indolence, and all manner of lasciviousness; yea,” he says they would “entirely [forget] 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 obtain and to maintain their supposed rights to the government. In fact, the Nephite apostates became more hardened and impenitent than the Lamanites. Thus, one of the main factors determining one’s group allegiance, or one’s alignment, in this society in the Book of Mormon story was whether one accepted or rejected the traditions of the Nephite fathers, particularly Lehi’s and Nephi’s prophecies about the future 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 powerful role. Enos specifically prayed that if the Nephites were to be destroyed, as had been prophesied, that 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.

Elsewhere, the text repeatedly stresses the importance of the records for the instruction of the Nephites in their traditions. Benjamin tells his son 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 sayings are true, which they should therefore search diligently (see Mosiah 1:5–7). 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, yea, and 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 traditions of their fathers; yea, these records . . . [had] brought [these converts] unto repentance; that is, . . . 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. 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 (see Mosiah 26:1–2). From statements like these, it is clear that the Nephite tradition centered on their religious teachings as well as on the political.

The first step essential to an acceptance of these teachings was recognizing 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 was 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 plague 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 man.

Nephi intertwines the argument for Christ with the argument for the legitimacy of his own authority. These two arguments stand and fall together. It is Nephi who, like Lehi, has seen and heard Christ and who testifies that Christ will come. Christ has spoken to Nephi, expressly appointing him to be a ruler and teacher to his brothers, and He has delivered him from their treacherous schemes. Without Christ, the argument for Nephi's authority has no basis; and without Nephi's authority, the Nephite political claims collapse. 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)

The final confirmation of this Nephite version of things, was a physical difference between the Lamanites and the Nephites. The differences 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 them to believe in incorrect traditions that would prove their destruction. 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 successor of Lehi. We have this record in Nephi's small plates, the books of 1 and 2 Nephi. Nephi received his commandment to write these small plates thirty years after the departure from Jerusalem. At this time, he had already lead his own 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.

At an early date, the traditions of the Nephites and Lamanites were already firmly in place at the root of their contentions with one another. 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 documents fully and coherently the true Nephite traditions and explains the false Lamanite traditions. If we look at Nephi's record closely, we find not the tedious self-assertion of an egotistical and talented younger brother, but rather 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 his posterity of the righteousness and the legitimacy of their cause.

The testimony of Christ that 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 to teach the family. 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. In doing so, he selects six stories from their early experiences and pulls these together in the book of 1 Nephi to emphasize the points I have been listing for you here.

Nephi begins the small plates, 1 Nephi 1, by establishing his father's credentials as a prophet and by establishing 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 in Jerusalem constitute the heart of this first chapter. 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 the words that his father had spoken. 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 Nephi 2:22).

Nephi also immediately introduces, in chapter two, the origins of his trouble with his older brothers. We learn that Laman and Lemuel took issue with their father Lehi from the outset. Despite his blessing and wish that they would be righteous, 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 these two with himself. The first part of this chapter, chapter one, emphasizes Lehi's obedience to the Lord, his willing abandonment of his lands and his gold his silver and his precious things. The second part of the chapter 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 later in this same chapter, which reveals Nephi's knowledge of God's mysteries, his focal interest in Christ, and the promise of mercy and deliverance to the faithful.

In contrast, chapter two displays Laman and Lemuel's ignorance on these same points and focuses on their concern for riches. Nephi then suggests an explanation both for their murmuring and for their 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 older brothers are primarily concerned for their precious things that have been left in Jerusalem, but

because of the things which Nephi had learned from the Holy Spirit, he does not rebel.

The second story Nephi tells is the story of how they acquired the brass plates from Laban. It appears that Nephi emphasized this story because it showed how he succeeded where his brothers had failed, making him the rightful possessor of the plates of brass. And also because in this episode, an angel of the Lord directly informed Laman and Lemuel that Nephi had been chosen by God to be a ruler over them (1 Nephi 3:29). 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 oldest son, who resents the difficulty of the task. Nephi, however, responds saying he knows the Lord will prepare the way, and with that encouragement, the four brothers return to Jerusalem.

Appropriately, Laman takes the lead first in dealing with Laban, but he fails and a barely escapes with his life. They are all sorrowful, and the older brothers want to return to the wilderness. We can hardly miss the irony with which Nephi points out this reversal, but then Nephi inserts his leadership with an oath that they will not return without fulfilling the Lord's commandment. He explains to his brethren the necessity of this record foreshadowing what will in fact will happen to Laman and Lemuel's descendants, who will reject this record when they might have had it. The brothers accept Nephi's alternate plan to buy the plates with their father's

abandoned riches, but this plan fails to take into account 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 on their younger brothers, an angel intervenes to protect the youth and to urge a return to the task with the promise that the Lord will deliver Laban into their hands. The angel tells Laman and Lemuel at this time a most unwelcome thing—that the Lord has chosen Nephi to be a ruler over them (see 1 Nephi 3:29). It is important to note the central emphasis placed on these words of the angel, as they occur at the central turning point of the entire episode. And note, how do Laman and Lemuel respond to this? As Nephi records, they murmur again. Their murmuring and refusal to respond to their father, their brother, and even an angel explains 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 of his tens of thousands, when the Lord was able to deliver Israel from Pharaoh's hosts under Moses' leadership (1 Nephi 3:31). Nephi practically compares himself to Moses as a leader chosen by God when he says, "Let us be strong like unto Moses" (1 Nephi 4:2). The brothers are probably not too delighted with Nephi's comparison of himself to Moses, but they do follow him as far as the city wall. Here, Nephi hides them and goes on alone to try once more to obtain the plates, this time, at night. Their own plans have failed. Their riches are gone.

Guided only by the Spirit of the Lord, Nephi goes forth toward Laban's house without a plan, but he finds the drunk and unconscious Laban in a darkened street. Indeed, the Lord has delivered Laban into Nephi's hands. As directed by the Lord, Nephi dispatches Laban, and a new strategy occurs to him. He dons Laban's clothing and armor and succeeds in getting Laban's servant to fetch the plates and carry them outside the city wall where his brothers are waiting. Now, seeing what they believe to be Laban and one servant, not the fifty guards they had 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 in the promised land that the Lamanites were entitled to own the plates, but that Nephi had robbed the plates from them.)

Nephi salvages the situation by calling in his own voice to reassure his brothers and by seizing Laban's servant 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.

Now, this was undoubtedly one of the most important stories in the tradition of the Nephites, the story's structure emphasizes the murmuring of Laman and Lemuel by reporting it at the very center. The center also contrasts their ineffectual and faithless ways with Nephi's faithfulness and his reliance on the Spirit. It also

focuses also on the angelic announcement to Laman and Lemuel themselves that the Lord had chosen Nephi to be their ruler.

Well, 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 commanded Lehi to send his sons back to Jerusalem, this time to the house of Ishmael, who has five daughters. 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, but Ishmael responds positively to Lehi's request, daring, in his old age, to take his family and follow Lehi into the desert. Each day takes the caravan farther from Jerusalem and Ishmael's property.

Back in the harsh desert environment, Nephi's murmuring brothers enlist two of Ishmael's sons and two of his daughters to rebel against Ishmael, Nephi, and the others. This rebellion—most specifically against Nephi—clearly identifies Nephi as their leader, and he responds accordingly, sharply calling them to repentance and stressing 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 Nephi 7:12). This third story emphasizes that Nephi spoke as constrained by the Spirit (see 1 Nephi 7:15) in defending the commandments and the ways of the Lord. We are forcibly reminded of the contrasting murmuring of Nephi's brothers against the commandments of the Lord in the preceding story. This comparison again vindicates the Lord's choice of Nephi as ruler and teacher.

Well, as before, the brothers are angered by Nephi's admonition, and they determine a final solution. With intent to kill, they tie Nephi up and leave him to be eaten by wild animals in the wilderness (1 Nephi 7:16). This phrasing reminds us of Joseph, who was cast into a pit and sold by his older brothers, who also had received divine indications that their younger brother would rule over them. Laman and Lemuel had determined to rid themselves of Nephi's threat in much the same way.

Well, the events of the story then conspire to provide the rebellious brothers with a stunning proof of the Lord's power, 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 to subdue him by force of numbers (see 1 Nephi 7:19). At this point, three members of Ishmael's family plead effectively with Nephi's brothers 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. Bowing down would constitute an act of obeisance, most likely having political significance, and recalls Joseph's dream in which his brothers' sheaves bowed down to the sheaf of Joseph (see Genesis 37:7).

Nephi accepts his brothers' 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 sacrifices 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 apparent that Laman and Lemuel never will taste fully of the love of God, and Nephi reports this development next.

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. In this vision, Lehi comes to the tree of life, the fruit of which is eternal life. In Lehi's dream, Nephi accepts his father's call and comes to the fruit and partakes of it, but Laman and Lemuel refuse altogether. 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. 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.

The next several chapters record the vision that was given to Nephi in answer to his prayer to know what had been shown to his father earlier. We do not have time to go through the details of this, but we know that at the end of this vision Nephi returns to his father's tent and finds his brothers disputing with one another about what their father had told them (see 1 Nephi 15:2). They had not understood the revelation because they were hard in their hearts, and they didn't ask the Lord for understanding, Nephi explains. Nephi himself is overcome with despair at this point because he has just seen in a vision the destruction and fall of his own people, his own descendants, and he is now seeing the direct cause of that future demise of his people in the hardheartedness of his brothers. Nephi chastises his brothers 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. Nephi's prophesied role as teacher over his brethren has already begun to be fulfilled—and at their request.

The breaking of Nephi's bow and the death of Ishmael produce the next major rebellion in 1 Nephi 16. The brothers openly accuse Nephi of being politically ambitious, having taken upon himself to be a ruler and a teacher over his elder brethren. They accuse him of wanting to lead them to some strange land where he will "make himself a king and a ruler over [them], that he may do with [them] according to his will and pleasure" (1 Nephi 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, after which they repent yet again. Each time they repent and humble themselves, they are blessed with peaceful unity—and this time, with food.

In 1 Nephi 17 we get the story of the building of the ship. 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 tradition. The tradition of the Lamanites, as it is recorded in the Book of Mormon, does not deal with the particulars. (The answer would itself be fatal to that tradition.) The Lamanite 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. They are in a new world, and the trip that brought them there needs to be explained. These two stories occupy parallel and central positions in the two halves of 1 Nephi, and they appear to be told in the same chiastic format.

Both accounts emphasize Nephi's de facto leadership and offer divine interventions witnessing that God chose 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 Nephi's divinely attested leadership. Both focus on the murmuring of Nephi's older brothers. Nephi's immediate answers to that murmuring contain as structurally central points Nephi's only two allusions to Moses as deliverer of the Israelites. The comparison between Moses and Nephi is not hard to draw and carries obvious political as well as religious implications.

First Nephi 17 contains probably the most dramatic evidence of Nephi's rightful position. The refutation of the claim of Laman and Lemuel to be rightful rulers of Lehi's descendants reaches its highest levels in this chapter. We find in this chapter all the formalities of an Israelite coronation ceremony, and the chapter ends with Laman and Lemuel bowing to worship their younger brother Nephi. Let me explain how this works. John Tvedtnes has documented the characteristics of Israelite coronation ceremonies as they are told in the Old Testament. The key elements of that ceremony include rehearsals of the law of Moses, the blessings and cursings, rehearsal of the creation, the covenant with Abraham, and several other elements that are repeated in each of the coronation ceremonies. All of these elements occur in chapter 17, and with the chapter ending as it does—with Laman and Lemuel on their knees attempting to worship Nephi—we have for any Israelite reader an evocation of a coronation ceremony. Now, we know that Nephi was not coronated at this time, nor does he claim that this happened. But to the Israelite reader (the descendants of Lehi), Laman and Lemuel virtually participated in the coronation of Nephi at this point in time.

In the sixth and final story, Laman and Lemuel again challenge Nephi during the ocean crossing, but they are subdued by the power of God in a storm. As in the preceding five stories, Laman and Lemuel murmured against the commandments of God, they were subdued by his power in one form or another, and they finally reconciled themselves to Nephi as their leader.

The book of 1 Nephi ends with Nephi firmly in place as the teacher that the Lord and the angel had said he would become. The final four chapters record his teachings to his brothers. The last chapter of the book 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, Nephi, has read to them. Nephi again points out to them and to all Lehi's descendants (and to us) that these things are manifest to man by the voice of the Spirit. 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 of God will be saved.

Nephi breaks at this point and starts a new book. This book starts with the blessings that Lehi, in his last days, gave to each of his sons. It is important to include these blessings because from Lehi's own mouth, we get the explanation for his choice of Nephi over Laman and Lemuel. These four chapters invoke the authority of the patriarch, Lehi himself, to support three things: First, the revelations from God describing this land of promise and the role of Nephi as a

ruler and teacher in it; second, the teachings about the Messiah and the redemption that will be brought to men, which was an essential plank in Nephi's defense of his position; and third, the authoritative patriarchal designation of Nephi as the one to whom all 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. This 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" (2 Nephi 1:24). He strongly endorses Nephi by summarizing his qualifications: He says Nephi's "views have been glorious"; he has "kept the commandments from the time that [they] left Jerusalem"; and "were it not for him, [they] must have perished with hunger in the wilderness" (ibid.). It is no 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 tradition 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 for power and authority over [them]," that "he . . . used sharpness," and that "he [had] been angry with [them]" (2 Nephi 1:25–6). Lehi refutes, or explains away, these Lamanite misperceptions. He explains that Nephi was only seeking the glory of God and their own eternal welfare. He further tells them, "[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 Nephi 1:26).

We are to understand that it is not really Nephi that has spoken to them, but the Spirit of the Lord, which was in Nephi. 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 Nephi 28–9). But, as Lehi must have feared, this final attempt to hold his descendants together would fail. 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.

In the next chapter, 2 Nephi 5, Nephi concludes his case against the Lamanite tradition that challenges his authority over the Lehite colony. In this chapter Nephi shows us how he, as an heir to his father, leads his people into the wilderness away from the Lamanites and how he establishes a new colony under his leadership and under the direction of the Lord through revelation.

There are many parallels between 2 Nephi 5 and 1 Nephi 2 that show Nephi acting in his role, modeled by his father earlier. One of the most important elements of 2 Nephi 5 is the report of the fulfillment of the prophesied curse that would come upon the Lamanites. The physical effects of the curse were observable, empirical facts that would have required explanation. Nephi and no one else had

the explanation. Nephi makes it crystal clear that this curse consists in 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 (see 2 Nephi 5:21). To prevent the Nephites from mixing with the Lamanites and bringing this curse upon themselves, the Lord caused the Lamanites to appear loathsome to the Nephites, bringing a skin of blackness upon them. Note that this skin of blackness is not the curse, but only a device to help protect the Nephites from falling under the curse.

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 [they] did seek in the wilderness for beasts of prey" (2 Nephi 5:24). Nephi gives us a picture of the Nephites that sets a clear contrast with the Lamanites. The Nephites were "industrious, and . . . labor[ed] with their hands" (2 Nephi 5:17). They build buildings and work with wood, iron, copper, brass, steel, gold, silver, and other precious ores. They have a temple built, like Solomon's. (We know that possessing a temple, in the Middle East, was an archetypal, legitimizing characteristic for a political regime.)

This initial description of the curse the 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. Their

account focuses on Nephi's wicked rebellion against ancient custom. They leave the will of God and his commandments out of their account altogether.

The points raised in this chapter 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 these 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 to the Lamanites. There is 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 Nephites and Lamanites who are related by language and lineage but who have different skin color and different 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, constant murmuring, hardheartedness, and stiffneckedness. 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. 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 time to investigate Nephi's full case against his older brothers, we must recognize that something much more important and systematic is going on here. 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 these false 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 brothers, as enemies, and because of “the enemy of his soul” (2 Nephi 4:28). 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.

It is my testimony that 1 Nephi is not a travel diary of a youngster, nor is it possibly the figment of Joseph Smith’s young imagination. It is a highly complex and passionate account purposely written by a mature and well-educated man who had great vision and defended those things that he believed 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 these things, that would document and justify his ascent to leadership. For Nephi’s people, his writings long served both as an extremely sophisticated political tract—as 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 Nephi 1:20). To Nephi’s testimony I add my own—that Jesus Christ will lead his people and will deliver them when they come unto him. And I say that in Jesus’ name, Amen.