FIVE

I, Nephi

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I wonder if Nephi had the power to return to life to influence human affairs. If so, I wonder if he was responsible for the disappearance of the ill-fated 116 original first pages of the manuscript that became the Book of Mormon. Those pages would have contained his account of his father Lehi's life in the wicked city of Jerusalem, his prayers and sacrifices for repentance and aid, the Lord's answers to his personal pleas, his withdrawal into the wilderness, the beginning of a new life in the Promised Land, and the friction that developed between his descendants. The Book of Mormon should have begun that way, with Lehi's instructions from the Lord and his plans and attempts to carry them out. This would have been a soft narration, full of belief and pleading for mercy for the people.

But we don't get that. The potent Nephi, perhaps returning from the beyond, has snatched that story and replaced it with another of his own stories, a much darker account, written thirty to forty years later, kept on a second set of plates by the Lord's command, as directed in 2 Nephi 5:18–34. In this second account, I suggest, Nephi negotiates back and forth between the account he wrote when he was young, the one of the lost 116 pages, and the account he wrote of the same period thirty to forty years later. In the later account, he recalls the action of the first account, but his narrative reflects the passage of time, the developments that have occurred in the meantime. Lehi's goodness and his effectiveness as a prophet are downplayed. The older brothers, though grudgingly obedient, are portrayed negatively, foretelling the complete break that came later. And the Promised Land has already lost its luster.

The older Nephi recalls his fearless youth. He tells how as a young man, by swearing allegiance to the Lord and to his father, he swept aside his older brothers, and how, uniting physical strength, daring, and acuity, he audaciously carried out an impossible assignment: procuring the pre-

cious family records to justify the escape of a single, small family branch. These records were a symbol of authority as palpable as a scepter. With the records, Lehi's small family, the chosen remnant of Joseph, had the learning and the law of the past. The pen was indeed mightier than the sword here, as Nephi, the pen's possessor, inscribed himself as his people's leader. But Nephi also laid claim to the sword, stolen along with the plates, which he carried along and preserved. He valued this sword for its materials and fine workmanship more than for its power to kill. But the point is that in utilizing the double roles of keeper (and provider) of the record along with the ability to subdue his enemies violently, he took on two of his society's power roles.

The Book of Mormon opens with this strong, action-filled, conflict-ridden story. Nephi, a powerful narrator, who lives in the mythic world of obedience to divine command, immediately takes control and speaks with the authority of his visionary father and of the Lord. He brooks no objections. His brothers, who live in the reasonable, observable world, are wrong. Although scorned by his elder brothers, he surpasses them. The Lord has endowed him with authority and with intellectual and physical power. He is the great man. How do we know? He tells us so.

He greets us imperiously as "I, Nephi," not identifying himself, for all the fuss about his father's record, as the son of Lehi (1 Ne. 1:1). The goodly parents are gone now. He does not identify himself by them. He is talking about himself. He recalls himself as a boy, but chronologically, at the time of writing the record, he is a mature man. This is his second time through this material.

The literary quality of the first chapters of First Nephi is very high. Whatever may have been in the lost 116 pages of Joseph Smith's translation, pages somehow lost by Smith and his friends, could scarcely be of more interest to the reader than the section which now begins the book. Nephi, with much to prove in these first six chapters, convinces us that he speaks for deity through his father's influence, that he justifies violence and crime in the name of the Lord, that a familial and spiritual record—even one with unknown content—is essential, that people who oppose him by choosing the wrong side will suffer, and that if they do not shape up they will perish. He assumes authority. He lays down the law. In this second version of the generational conflict, the characters are polarized from the beginning; Nephi is older and speaks even more severely than he must have done in the earlier account.

As must be clear to all readers by this time, I am speaking about this beginning section of the Book of Mormon in a cool, non-worshipful way. I am reading this account as literature, not as scripture. I am accepting the complicated history as it is available to us, assuming that this text comes to us as its creators, Nephi, Joseph Smith, and the Lord, want us to have it. (There are, moreover, few substantive differences between the earliest text of the Book of Mormon and the text as it now stands.)[1] So, accepting the words and the history, I am giving this scripture the kind of close reading I would to any other text, one in literature or history for instance. I am looking for tone, themes, internal tensions, style, character, and personality.

I am trying to stay within the text as I apply "the willing suspension of disbelief" that Samuel Taylor Coleridge defined to justify a reader's acceptance of fantastic, hard-to-believe stories with non-realistic literary elements. Although there is much room to doubt Nephi's story, his approach to us is straightforward and believable. We can take him seriously, even if we do not always approve of his behavior. I do not question Nephi's story as generally true and factual, but I do suggest that he, like every other writer, has manipulated the record. Even after accepting the truthfulness of his version of the record I see that there is much more to say about it. What I am writing here is revisionist history. I am writing against the grain of the usually accepted meaning of this text.

I long for those first 116 pages, and I want to read them against our First Nephi, to compare the youthful and probably ambitious and optimistic Nephi to the wounded and resentful man who writes two generations later. What did he repeat in his second version of the story? What did he leave out? What did he reemphasize? I'd like to line up the two accounts, to trace the decline of the "Promised Land" to the poor inheritance described in Jacob's eloquent vision of a hostile world: "Our lives passed away like as it were unto us a dream, we being a lonesome and a solemn people, wanderers, cast out from Jerusalem, born in tribulation, in a wilderness, and hated of our brethren, which caused wars and contentions; wherefore, we did mourn out our days" (Jacob 7:26).[2]

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1. See Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

2. According to Nibley, "there is only one direction from which any ancient writing may be profitably approached. It must be considered in its original ancient setting and in no other." Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1964), 6. That may be true if the aim is

Authority

Lehi is apparently a merchant from a wealthy and distinguished family. He lives in Jerusalem, but is comfortable traveling in the desert, a safer place for his family than the city under both the leadership of the "Jews of Jerusalem" and the threat of destruction. Hugh Nibley has described the background of Lehi's isolation in and departure from Jerusalem. Lehi has distanced himself from the "elders of the Jews," the pro-Egyptian group in power. He feels no loyalty to these people, being himself a part of the prophetic pro-Babylonian party. Although Lehi is of the old aristocracy—rich, well-educated, with a noble ancestry and an ancient family—he is unpopular. Lehi is not a villain, but he was an unfriendly member of the opposing party.[3]

Lehi, driven from Jerusalem, has lost his authority. Therefore, Nephi must establish his own authority before he begins his story. He writes our version of First Nephi after the death of his father, an event that causes the final breakup between the two camps of Lehi's sons (2 Ne. 4:12–13). Given that, Nephi needs to establish his authority, leaving no hope of retrieving the lost group. When Nephi lists his credentials, he writes in anger and sorrow. He is experienced. He has suffered. He has seen many afflictions which he does not describe. Nevertheless, he has been highly favored by the highest power, the Lord. He suggests that his knowledge and favor have bypassed Lehi's. He presents himself as a chosen one. Indeed, the Lord is not a figure of fear and dread to Nephi. He has great knowledge of the goodness and the mysteries of God. Nephi, with direct access, has made a record of his proceedings in his days (1 Ne. 1:1).

Nephi goes on to explain that he writes with the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians (1 Ne. 1:2), showing his erudition and moving his record into a new linguistic plane. He stamps his record with authority, saying that it is true, written by himself, and from his own knowledge (v. 3). In three verses, then, and without actually saying very much, Nephi establishes himself as a person of experience and authority with excellent connections. He knows a lot, he knows how to do things,

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to test the document's claim to be ancient, in which case its weaknesses will be revealed by comparison with contemporary documents. But there are many other ways to read a text than to test its ancient authenticity. Here I just accept the ancientness of the text, even as I cast a jaundiced eye on the heroic narrator.

3. Skousen, *The Book of Mormon*, 55, 76–77, 85–86, 96, 99, 201.

and he acts with impeccable credentials. When he says his record is true, he says so with some justification.

But is this the only way to tell the story? Nephi could have told another story. We could have had the narrative of Lehi, told by his son Nephi: Lehi, the trusted prophet of the Lord, received insider information about bad days to come; he devoted himself to the Lord's work and spread the word. Though we can imagine this story, it's not the one we're given. Instead Nephi, writing from the perspective of his later experience, displays (without explicit statement) a Lehi who is an ineffective leader. He shows his mild father suffering from visions of destruction and praising God with humility and rejoicing. He shows Lehi failing to convince the people of their coming destruction. Even when Lehi manages to get his family away into the wilderness, they hold back. Nephi portrays his father as wise, good, and obedient to the Lord, but as anything but a strong leader. Lehi receives much faint praise, and Nephi's authority is therefore all the clearer.

Other Available Narratives

Poor Laman and Lemuel. They would have done better to return to Jerusalem and perish or be driven into captivity by the conquering Babylonians than to oppose Nephi. Then they could have been forgotten in their laziness and sin. Instead, they are skewered forever in Nephi's record as "the bad boys." They are the young Mormons who chose the wrong. From their first appearance they are difficult, disobedient naysayers. Lehi first mentions them as lacking righteousness and steadiness. Nephi upgrades those sins to murmuring and stiffneckedness, but these remain rather minor offenses (1 Ne. 2:8–11). In our First Nephi, these poor boys are never shown as the beloved sons of Lehi and Sariah which they certainly must have been in the first version. Laman and Lemuel complain, but they come along on the journey, generally do what they are told to do, and regularly repent. They were not that bad. But Nephi makes them look as bad as he can: always the other, the undifferentiated bad boys. I propose this as evidence of rewriting after the final family break, after the debilitating battles and wars between the two branches of the family. Nephi shows his resentment against them. All this is sad and ironic because we know that in the final accounting, the bad boys are victorious.

Laman and Lemuel are not allowed to tell their own tale. Damned from the beginning by their arrogant, pen-wielding brother, they get no

respect, and considerable denunciation. They did not want to leave their pleasant lives in Jerusalem. They see their father as old and foolish (1 Ne. 1:11). But, as Nibley notes, they never question his ability to lead them through the wilderness.[4] We know that by the time Nephi writes his second narrative, Laman and Lemuel are not just troublesome boys; they have come to be his sworn enemies. They have repeatedly fought life-and-death battles. I wish that Nephi had played fair with their earlier actions—as well as with those of their mother Sariah. They must have had things to say, cases to make. I wish that these had been included in their own voices. When Nephi speaks to us, he has to be right. According to Nephi, the brothers acted as they did because "they knew not the dealings of that God who had created them" (v. 12). Had they not gotten the teachings and experience that Nephi did? What was the difference between their early educations? Why are they not more alike? They didn't begin as hardened enemies, but as still-malleable boys. When Lehi, "being filled with the spirit," denounces the brothers, he is quite able to scare them silent, or so he says, so that "their frames did shake" (2:14). But shouldn't they have been handled in a more kindly way? The other older brother Sam, persuaded that Nephi truly speaks by the Holy Spirit, believes him. But Sam, another good boy, gets very little mention or quotation. It is all "I, Nephi." The wounded and sorrowful scribe has frozen his discontent and theirs, his righteousness and their otherness, into the record forever.

The Other Other: The Women

What can we say of the invisible women in this text? We do not expect much attention to be given to females, and they do not get much. In the heading at the beginning of First Nephi, likely the work of Mormon rather than Nephi, we get several mentions of women. The "account of Lehi and his wife Sariah" shows both equality and possession in the marital pair. They are named together, but Lehi owns Sariah. Elsewhere, women are not important enough to name. The "daughters of Ishmael" who will provide half of the genes of the chosen people in the Promised Land are always identified by their father. We know they had individual names and a mother, but in the introduction to the book where it says, "they take the daughters of Ishmael to wife," the men appropriate all action, ownership, and identity. Not that Ishmael himself gets much attention. He is not introduced and

4. Ibid., 61.

does not even get his exclusive invitation to the wilderness to intermarry from Lehi, but from the boy Nephi. He seems, however, ready enough to come and moves into the desert as easily as Lehi's family had.

Nephi mentions his father Lehi several times before he is named in the fourth and fifth verses of chapter 1 and then becomes central to the narrative. Sariah is the only female character mentioned by name in Nephi's writings at all. Although Sariah is certainly engaged in such housewifery as is required for a pair who dwell in a tent—the business of food, clothing, cleanliness, caring for animals, and keeping order—she is given only a single scene, that of the household shrew in chapter five when she berates her visionary husband for the loss of her sons and her Jerusalem home. Only her complaints are given space in the narrative. She doubts her husband's visionary nature and blames him for the likely fatal result of following his direction, namely, that the whole family will perish in the wilderness. Nephi indicates that there are more complaints "after this manner" (1 Ne. 6:8).

In her unhappiness and doubt, Sariah serves as a foil for Lehi's faith. The safe return of the sons persuades her that Lehi has been right all along, and she testifies of the Lord's protection of her sons. This "conversion" of Sariah's unifies the family, who all rejoice, sacrifice, burn offerings, and give thanks "unto the God of Israel" (1 Ne. 6:9). Sariah, who had been murmuring along with Laman and Lemuel, serves a didactic purpose, returning to obedience and belief. When the boys return, her conviction and testimony get a full hearing. She is honestly overjoyed and dismisses her doubts as unfounded. But having served her purpose, she does not appear again. One strongly feels that she is given this space only to further Nephi's didactic purposes, to show repentance for her doubt.

No family sisters are mentioned at this point, although a later passage suggests that some might have married Ishmael's sons prior to departure from Jerusalem (see 2 Ne. 5:6). Had there been daughters present, how would they have been treated? They would likely have been quiet and obedient, like Sam, but also like Sam, they would have been scarcely mentioned, if mentioned at all. Women, required to bear the children for the Promised Land, are important enough to authorize a special journey to fetch them. But they are also shown to be an afterthought.

Although this is the section of the Book of Mormon most heavily populated with females, they are largely invisible. What are women to make of this exclusion? Perhaps the New World, like heaven before it, had no female inhabitants. If the men are locked into mortal combat mostly

by generational divides, the women who accompany them are scarcely involved at all.

Three Journeys

In considering Nephi's two accounts, the return journeys take on additional significance. The sons of Lehi make two major journeys and one partial journey back to Jerusalem before they leave for good. These are extensive trips. The boys took their tents with them. How long are they on the road? Grant Hardy suggests that Jerusalem is about a two week journey away from Lehi's tent in the desert.[5] Their first trip is to retrieve the all-important record. The narrative shows Laman, who has been chosen by lot to wrench the record from Laban, its protector, failing twice. These accounts show how very difficult the task is. His failure opens the way for Nephi, on the second journey (they have returned to the wilderness, but not to the family's camp), to save the day in desperate, violent, God-approved behavior. Here is the fairy-tale archetype. The older sons fail before the youngest, strongest, and most noble son succeeds. Nephi did not need to include the first failed efforts in his story this second time through, but again he uses his brothers' behavior to valorize his own remarkable success. We have not only the events, but Nephi's self-serving representation of the events.

The third journey was to acquire wives. Lehi's triumphant prophecies concerning his seed and the record they will keep seem to remind him and the Lord that something else is required to produce the future generations. In considering the value of women here, shouldn't this absence of future mates have been acknowledged in the narrative before? Shouldn't wives have been recruited before leaving Jerusalem the first time? Couldn't they have been picked up by Laman and Lemuel while Nephi was engaged with Laban? Apparently some decision had already been made that Ishmael's daughters were to be married to Lehi's boys. Perhaps prior arrangements had been made. But the boys bring back another family larger than their own. Ishmael and his wife bring two of their sons and their families, and five daughters, allowing wives for the four sons of Nephi and for Zoram. Ishmael's larger family does not seem to challenge the leadership of Lehi and Nephi at all.

5. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 16.

The Expansion and Compression of Time

Time in the story as Nephi tells it is compressed, likely because what Nephi once considered important probably wasn't as important when he looked back. The wars between the Nephites and the Lamanites are not even recounted in the second version of the story. Battles and tactics diminish in importance once victory is achieved. As we know that Nephi has compressed at least some stories, we must give greater attention to the things he has expanded.

Nephi furthers his own interests with this cavalier treatment of time. This many-scened narrative takes place over several years. Nephi draws out the time with much detailed superior lecturing to the elder brothers when they are on the road back to Jerusalem. He details the incident when Laman and Lemuel beat their younger brothers, Nephi and Sam, with a rod (1 Ne. 3:28–29), and the virtuous youngsters are saved by divine intervention. All this is an old story by the time Nephi revisits the incidents and the lectures, but Nephi tells it in detail so that he can set up the climax. The older boys, who have reason and likelihood on their side, are crushingly told, "Know ye not that the Lord hath chosen [Nephi] to be a ruler over you, and this because of your iniquities?" (1 Ne. 3:29). That speech is enough to convince any older brothers that peaceful cohabitation is unlikely.

We see another dramatic example of Nephi's compression and expansion of the narrative in chapter 7. Lehi's sons are returning to the wilderness with Ishmael's family when many of them have second thoughts. They want to go back. Although this account is strongly compressed before this point, Nephi slows down the clock here and expatiates on the lessons to be learned about hearkening "unto the word of the Lord" (1 Ne. 7:9). For more than half of the chapter, we have Nephi's sermon to his brothers. Have they not seen an angel? Didn't they get the record from Laban? Don't they know that faithfulness to the Lord will bring them to the Promised Land? Can't they believe in the future destruction of Jerusalem where the prophets have been rejected and Jeremiah imprisoned? Do they not realize that a return to Jerusalem will result in their deaths? It's well worth asking why Nephi needs to repeat all these arguments at such length.

Nephi's tone here is persuasive. He is reasonable and kind. Yet he stirs his brothers up to wrath and violence. "They did lay their hands upon me, for behold, they were exceeding wroth, and they did bind me with cords, for they sought to take away my life, that they might leave

me in the wilderness to be devoured by wild beasts" (1 Ne. 7:16). This reaction is too strong for the sermon that Nephi has preached to them. What's going on here? My own innocent reading of this section is that in retelling the story Nephi has extended and softened his own words to his brothers, making them sound reasonable to us while he actually irritated his brothers beyond reason. The result is a narrative that further demonizes them. He makes himself look good and them bad. Thus, even as they tie him up, he prays and is freed from his bonds. His brothers, still wroth with him, attempt to retake him and are only dissuaded by the pleas of Ishmael's fair wife, daughter, and son. Defeated again, the brothers "bow down" before Nephi and plead for forgiveness. Nephi, the good, "frankly forgive[s] them," (vv. 20–21), exhorting them to pray to the Lord for forgiveness as well. The chapter ends with uneasy harmony, sacrifice and burnt offerings (v. 22).

My point here is again to mark the power of the record and the recorder to shape events for a certain purpose. Nephi convinces us, especially at first, to see events through his eyes and to accept his story. I suggest that Nephi purposely extends his account of this speech, even while making it less offensive than it probably was, to dramatize his confrontation with his brothers and his successful escape and victory over them.

The Murder

Where else do we see Nephi's cunning hand at work? Surely it is tempting to consider Nephi's fearsome murder of Laban and the story that surrounds it. While Hugh Nibley considers this act of murder completely commonplace within the tradition of the East, it remains shocking to us.[6]

Nephi needs the potent authority that he has established—his obedience to his father and his close communication with God—to explain and justify the bloody and horrifying murder of Laban. Nephi tries to prepare us by carefully setting up the scene. He tells us that Lehi had told only him of the dream in which he is commanded to get the brass plates. Nephi is to tell his brothers and take them to Jerusalem. Lehi may have actually asked the brothers first and been refused because he suggests that the murmuring of the brothers will prevent them from being successful, setting the stage for Nephi's great "I will go and do" speech. This is the speech with which untold young Mormons have attempted to gird up their loins

6. Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 88.

to do the impossible: "I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded, for I know that the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth them" (1 Ne. 3:7).

We know from the thrust of the narrative that Nephi will succeed. But first we see poor Laman suffering the wrath of Laban and the loss of Lehi's treasure to the greedy kinsman. Nephi thus characterizes Laban as a bad man. Nephi's angry brothers are badly scared of the mighty Laban who "can slay fifty" (1 Ne. 3:31). They see the impossibility of this quest. In response to their doubts, Nephi again expands the time of the narrative with a long faithful speech, reminding his brothers that the Lord "is mightier than all the earth" (4:1). He likens them to Moses doing the impossible. He reminds them of the angel. He doesn't really persuade them, but he has written his speech into the record.

Then we come to the awful scene. The setting is night. Think how dark it must have been. I see it as pitch black (though there could have been moonlight). Somehow, Nephi, near Laban's house, comes upon Laban himself, drunken, "fallen to the earth" (1 Ne. 4:7). Here again Nephi stretches out the time, chronicling his gradual decision to do the frightful deed, Laban cooperatively remaining insensible during all these deliberations.

Nephi, having been the mover and shaker, is now led at every step by "the Spirit" (1 Ne. 4:7–18). Who or what is this spirit? Is this the Holy Spirit he mentions above? Is this the Spirit that speaks to Lehi in chapter 1? Is this the Spirit that interprets Lehi's dream to Nephi? That Spirit came in the "form of a man; yet nevertheless, I knew that it was the Spirit of the Lord" (11:11). No identification or description is given here, yet this inner voice or impulse, rather than Nephi himself or the Lord, is credited with the coming violent actions. Although Nephi argues with the Spirit about slaying Laban, saying that he "shrunk" from the task because he had never "shed the blood of man" (4:10), he had already drawn forth Laban's beautiful sword. The narrative time stops as Nephi examines, in the dark, this treasure: "And I beheld his sword, and I drew it forth from the sheath thereof; and the hilt thereof was of pure gold, and the workmanship thereof was exceeding fine, and I saw that the blade thereof was of the most precious steel" (v. 9). Nephi's attention is more fixed on this sword than it is on the record that he has come to get. The inclusion of this description of the sword of Laban in the dramatic murder scene jars the reader. Nephi has been directed to kill a drunken man he comes upon, yet he pauses in the action to describe the beauty of the chosen weapon,

of "pure gold" and the "most precious steel." Nephi's artisanal skills are aroused by the "exceeding fine" workmanship (v. 9). But this pause to look at the sword breaks his concentration and ours.

The Spirit argues for the murder. The Lord has delivered a vulnerable Laban to Nephi. Laban had tried to kill the boys. He wouldn't listen to the commandments of the Lord. Laban had taken Lehi's property. The Spirit tells Nephi that the "Lord slayeth the wicked to bring forth his righteous purposes" and that "it is better that one man should perish than a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief" (1 Ne. 4:13). Persuaded, Nephi begins to justify the deed on his own. The Lord promised prosperity to his seed for obedience. They need the plates. Laban had been delivered into his hands so he could get the records. Nephi again stresses that he is following authority: "I did obey the voice of the Spirit, and took Laban by the hair of the head, and I smote off his head with his own sword" (v. 18).

Nephi repeats this last phrase twice. Beheading a man with his own sword multiplies the power of the defeat. The sword gives ritual importance to this political murder. This is a ceremonial sword, meant to show authority, to be worn with court dress, not a battle weapon. As this sword was for ritual purposes, it was not likely to have a keenly sharpened blade. In that case, even the powerful Nephi would have had to do more sawing than smiting. And that raises the question as to whether the murder was also a ceremony. Nephi changes clothes with the corpse—remember the darkness and imagine the gushing blood—and sets out for the treasury where he impersonates Laban, persuading the servant Zoram to give him the brass plates and to follow him. Nibley describes this scene as "an authentic bit of Oriental romance and of history." He likens Nephi's exploit to Sir Richard Burton's "amazingly audacious masquerades in the East, carried on in broad daylight and for months on end with perfect success."[7] Could Nephi have been playing out some swash-buckling adventure story? Perhaps Nephi's writing is a tale told rather than an actual experience. The inevitability that blood would be everywhere suggests that this might have been a ritual murder, a complete overpowering of one person by another, climaxing with subduing the enemy and the sword moving into the hands of the victor. The decapitation seems particularly theatrical.

What really happened? Nephi might have stripped the drunken Laban before the fatal event. Such smart thinking under pressure is certainly his style. Perhaps he knocked the hapless drunkard on the head and dragged

7. Ibid., 95.

him into an alley. Laban would have been quiet until morning. However, canny as he is, with no witnesses, he is able to make his own story of his obedience to the Spirit immeasurably stronger with this report of his violent, faith-driven action. Whether the event actually happened as he describes it or not, his description gives us the impression of victory for himself and total humiliation for Laban. We have a hearkening back to a primitive and therefore sacred world.

Nephi's skill in writing this scene is much to be admired. Having shown the difficulty of the task, having shown his hesitation, having persuaded himself to kill Laban, being physically large and up to the task, following directions without implicating the Lord, his father, or even himself, Nephi reports that he smote off the head of Laban and got the plates. But how valorous is it to kill a defenseless, unconscious man in this brutal way? Grant Hardy notes here that when Nephi returns to his father's tent, he claims no credit for the deed. The boys do not swagger in triumph. Lehi does not praise them. The murder is not even referred to in the text. The scene switches immediately to Sariah's modest rebellion, berating the visionary Lehi for taking her boys into the desert to die. Their return means that she joyfully forgives Lehi and praises the Lord, allowing for a legitimate celebration. Laban's execution is apparently left out of their rejoicing.[8]

The Brass Plates

We know that Nephi loved the sword of Laban. His description of the sword of Laban stands out in this otherwise barren narrative. It is his strongest declaration of affection in this section. Nephi values this sword, this precious religious artifact, more than he values the record that he kills Laban to possess. The "plates of brass" merit little praise for their looks, their cunning technology, or their handsome metal. In the narrative, the plates serve mainly as an excuse for Nephi to confront and overpower the enemy, establishing his superiority. The brass plates do have, however, religious and historical value. The plates will "preserve unto our children the language of our fathers" (1 Ne. 3:19). They will provide the law of Moses to the people in the Promised Land. But they also provide lineage connections to valorize Lehi as a descendant of Joseph: "even that Joseph

8. Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 18.

who was the son of Jacob, . . . And thus my father, Lehi, did discover the genealogy of his fathers" (5:14–15).

Surely we are surprised that Lehi does not know his genealogy. He knew where to get the record, that Laban was a kinsman. Would he not have known that he was part of this family? Lehi's birth seems to have been included on those records. Perhaps the family had not been interested in or aware of this genealogy prior to their departure from the city. Nephi tells us that they did not know the value of the record and had not felt that it was necessary until "the Lord had commanded us" to obtain the record (1 Ne. 5:20). After they had searched the plates, they found that "they were desirable; yea, even of great worth unto us, insomuch that we could preserve the commandments of the Lord unto our children" (v. 21). The records were valuable, then, for genealogy, for doctrine, and for culture.

Perhaps more important, the presence of these plates allowed Lehi to prophesy, perhaps in the way that the golden plates of Nephi themselves, later exhumed from burial, allowed Joseph Smith to see, prophesy, and write scripture. The presence of the plates allowed Lehi, "filled with the spirit," to "prophesy concerning his seed" (1 Ne. 5:17). Lehi says many things, but two dramatic ones that Nephi quotes are that "these plates of brass should go forth unto all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people" who were of his seed, and that the plates "should never perish; neither should they be dimmed any more by time" (vv. 18–19). These prophecies about what were early books of the Bible have certainly come to pass, although the dissemination of information did not come from the plates of brass but from other early writings of the Bible.

So Nephi justifies the theft of the plates of brass which allowed his seed access to this early record of his people. He asserts that it was "wisdom in the Lord that we should carry [the plates] with us" (1 Ne. 5:22). But couldn't Lehi have gotten the plates while he was a great man in Jerusalem, or, not unreasonably, had them copied? An example of Nephi's changing values between his two narratives is that Nephi does not copy the genealogy of his fathers into his own record. His descent from Joseph is enough for him. The genealogy being available somewhere else, the plates recede in value. To get the plates with the genealogy, the family has risked all. But when Nephi comes to copy material into his second record, he chooses to copy Isaiah rather than genealogy.

Conclusion

In my reading of this important first section of the Book of Mormon, I consider, and accept, its purported history. Having done so, I consider the implications of how a man engaged in a harrowing and life-threatening enterprise might write his story differently over a period of thirty or forty years, how the passage of time might have modified the way he told his story. These people act in history, even as they record their own stories. People frequently retell their stories differently as time passes, selecting, revising, and justifying their accounts. Particularly when the years have passed and other witnesses have disappeared, written accounts tend to become bolder. Writers exaggerate. People make the stories they remember smoother and cleaner. They appropriate the experience of others. Historians privilege contemporary accounts over those written many years later, knowing that while even contemporary accounts are generally told to the benefit of the narrator, later accounts are less reliable. I am proposing that Nephi's intervention in American history to replace his earlier boyish account with a more mature, if disillusioned account of his youthful adventures, changes the Book of Mormon as we might have known it.

I am thus trying to imagine the differences there might be in the two accounts and why changes have been made. I am envisioning the trying experiences the family might have had, even as they attempted to do their best and act in accordance with instructions from Deity. I am trying to envision the mature leader in his wounded state.

Finally, I am paying homage to the writer and the written text. Power follows the author. He can shape and describe his account as he wishes. He has the last word. His is the version that will live. Even if, as is always the case, he has a different agenda than the reader who comes centuries later to his account, his are the words that must be reckoned with. I have been hard on Nephi, but I salute him as our guide through a God-directed world of the past.