

Part 3: Probable Ages of Nephi and Sariah at the Time of Lehi's Escape

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The principal value of the narrative elements of the article by S. Kent Brown and David Rolph Seely¹ is their attempt to identify genuine issues they thought were consistent with Lehi's departure in Zedekiah's first regnal year, but not later in that king's disastrous reign. A rational analysis of the narrative issues they raised is vital for understanding the chronology of Lehi's escape. Two introductory issues deal with the ages of Nephi and his mother, Sariah, when the family left Jerusalem.

First, what was Nephi's age at the time of the escape? Nephi described himself around the time of the escape as "exceedingly young, nevertheless ... large in stature" (1 Nephi 2:16) and, a little bit later, as "a man large in stature" (1 Nephi 4:31). Like his three older brothers (1 Nephi 2:5), he married when Ishmael's daughters joined Lehi's group (1 Nephi 16:7). Thus, Nephi was a large, but very young unmarried man (probably about thirteen or fourteen years of age) when his father escaped from Jerusalem.² No assumptions are required to maintain consistency between this textual information and Lehi's escape either in the first year of, or much later in, the reign of Zedekiah.

One might think that because Nephi "assured readers that he wrote his record 'according to my knowledge' (1 Nephi 1:3)" and because he happened to mention the first year of Zedekiah in introducing his father's calling as a prophet (1 Nephi 1:4), Nephi had to be "old enough to pay attention to events at the beginning of Zedekiah's reign," indeed, "old enough to pay close attention to matters when Zedekiah came to power."³ If Nephi escaped with his father in the first year of Zedekiah, he would have been old enough to have personal knowledge of events in Jerusalem at that time. However, if Nephi was a young teenager when his family left Jerusalem in the ninth, tenth or eleventh year of the reign of Zedekiah, Nephi would have been just a child in Zedekiah's first regnal year. Hence, Nephi would not have been old enough to have acquired a distinct personal knowledge of events at that time.

In interpreting the issue about Nephi's age in the first year of Zedekiah as set forth above, one also would be rational to acknowledge that the interpretation is based on two assumed requirements for Nephi's acquisition of knowledge. The first assumption is that Nephi's knowledge about events in the first year of Zedekiah had to be obtained by Nephi in a limited way (only by paying close attention to such events). The second assumption is that Nephi's knowledge about those events had to be obtained by Nephi at a specific time (only in Zedekiah's first regnal year).

As I apply the principle of thoroughness to my study of the text, I find that the foregoing interpretation is not about the man described in the text, but about a fictional character whose acquisition of knowledge was limited as described in the two unnecessary assumptions. Fiction

¹ S. Kent Brown and David Rolph Seely, "Jeremiah's Imprisonment and the Date of Lehi's Departure," *The Religious Educator* 2/1 (2001): 23-30.

² "A Hebrew lad when he reached the age of twelve was a 'son of the law'.... He had then passed from the days of childhood to youth and was considered old enough to concern himself with the serious work of life." Edwin R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1965), 157.

³ Brown and Seely, "Jeremiah's Imprisonment," 29.

is irrelevant to interpretation. Nephi knew his father (e.g., 1 Nephi 1:1-2; 2:4; 3:1-2) and he knew his father's written record (e.g., 1 Nephi 1:16-17; 19:1). He knew Lehi's record was reliable because he had revelations similar to his father's revelations (compare, e.g., 1 Nephi 1:5-15; 8; 10:1-15 with 1 Nephi 2:16-24; 10:17-14:30). Nephi expressly relied on his father's record for part of what he wrote (e.g., 1 Nephi 1:16-17; 9:1; 19:1-6).⁴ Thus, the two assumptions violate the principles of simplicity (because neither assumption is required for a rational interpretation of the text), thoroughness (because Nephi's reliance on his father's record must be ignored or overlooked) and consistency (because the two assumptions are inconsistent with the text regarding such reliance).

The age of Nephi in the first year of Zedekiah is not a genuine issue. Nephi expressly stated that some of his knowledge came from his father's written record. Whether Lehi escaped from Jerusalem early or late in the reign of Zedekiah, Nephi could have truthfully stated that he wrote the small plates *according to [his] knowledge*—whenever and however he obtained that knowledge.

Second, what was Sariah's age when Lehi escaped? When Sariah left Jerusalem with her family, she had four sons (1 Nephi 2:5) and then she had two more sons in the wilderness (1 Nephi 18:7, 17, 19). There is no record that Sariah had any daughters, but Nephi later mentioned his "sisters" (hence, at least two) who supported him after Lehi's group reached the promised land (2 Nephi 5:6). The sisters may have been the wives of Ishmael's two sons (1 Nephi 7:6).⁵

If I assume that Nephi's sisters were Sariah's children, that they were married to Ishmael's sons and likely older than Nephi and that all of Sariah's children were spaced, on average, one and one-half to two years apart, the ages of her six children then would have ranged from about thirteen or fourteen years for the youngest, Nephi, to about twenty-one to twenty-four years for the oldest. Since Laman was unmarried at the time of the escape, one or both of his sisters also may have been older than he. If I also assume that Sariah began bearing children at age fifteen or sixteen⁶ and had four unmarried sons and two married

⁴ Brown and Seely suggested that they understood these texts. "Nephi hints that he—or perhaps his father Lehi—updated his own record annually, a feature that John Sorenson has pointed out in private correspondence." Brown and Seely, "Jeremiah's Imprisonment," 31 n.11. It is interesting to note that when Brown and Seely speculated along with Sorenson about Lehi's record keeping schedule (seeming to indicate their understanding that Nephi expressly used his father's record), they did not refer to the fact that they had undercut their arbitrary assumptions about Nephi's limited capacity to acquire knowledge.

⁵ Quoting a discourse delivered by Erastus Snow in 1882, Sidney B. Sperry wrote: "The Prophet Joseph Smith informed us that the record of Lehi was contained on the 116 pages that were first translated and subsequently stolen, and of which an abridgment is given us in the First Book of Nephi, which is the record of Nephi individually, he himself being of the lineage of Manasseh; but that *Ishmael was of the lineage of Ephraim, and that his sons married into Lehi's family, and Lehi's sons married Ishmael's daughters.*" Sidney B. Sperry, "Did Father Lehi Have Daughters Who Married the Sons of Ishmael," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4/1 (1995): 236 (emphasis in Sperry's original article). "Just as the unmarried woman was under the authority of her father, so the married woman was under the authority of her husband.... Daughters ... would leave the family when they married, and so the strength of a house was not measured by the number of its daughters." Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, two vols. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), I: 26, 41.

⁶ Brown and Seely, "Jeremiah's Imprisonment," 29, stated that fifteen or sixteen was a "plausible age" for Sariah to begin bearing children. The Hebrew scriptures give "no information about the age at which girls were married. The practice of marrying the eldest first was not universal ([Genesis] 29:26). On the other hand, it seems certain that girls, and therefore presumably boys too, were married very young....

daughters at the time of the departure, she might have been thirty-five to forty years of age. She could have had two more boys within the next three to four years, as the family struggled through the wilderness.

On the other hand, if I assume that Lehi's daughters were born to a wife who did not accompany Lehi (perhaps because she had passed away prior to the departure from Jerusalem) or if I assume that Nephi's sisters were born to Sariah after the departure from Jerusalem, then Laman, as the eldest child of Sariah, might have been about eighteen to twenty years of age at the time Lehi escaped from Jerusalem. If Sariah had just the four young men when she left the city, she might have been about thirty-three to thirty-six years of age. She could have had two more boys (and possibly two girls) within the next six to eight years. Either set of interpretations is plausible. The assumptions are consistent with Lehi's escape either early or late in the reign of Zedekiah.

Of course, if I have arbitrarily assumed that Nephi had a limited capacity to acquire knowledge and, thus, could not have been a small child in Zedekiah's first regnal year, then I might also speculate that Sariah had to be almost beyond child-bearing years if she departed from Jerusalem late in the reign of Zedekiah. Taking into account the fact that Sariah had two sons (1 Nephi 18:7, 17, 19) and, perhaps, at least two daughters (2 Nephi 5:6) in the wilderness, I might conclude, "it is simpler, more plausible, to postulate an earlier departure when Sariah was a younger woman."⁷ However, I should note that such a conclusion about Sariah's age at the time of the escape is no less arbitrary than the two unnecessary assumptions on which it is based. In truth, the fact of the text is "simpler, more plausible," than speculative fiction about Nephi and his mother. Neither Sariah's age, nor Nephi's, is a genuine issue that can be used for determining whether Lehi escaped from Jerusalem early or late in the reign of Zedekiah.

[W]e can deduce that Joiakin married at sixteen, Amon and Josias at fourteen.... In later days the Rabbis fixed the minimum age for marriage at twelve years for girls and thirteen for boys." De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, I: 29.

⁷ Brown and Seely, "Jeremiah's Imprisonment," 29.