

When Was the Messiah Born? An Introduction

Randall P. Spackman

The Book of Mormon describes the time when the prophecies of Lehi and Samuel, concerning the time of the Messiah's birth, were fulfilled. The prophecies were examined in the chapter on chronological structure. According to Nephi's record of his father's prophecy, the Messiah would be born after the expiration of 600 years from the time Lehi left Jerusalem. Lehi, Nephi, Jacob and, eventually, a holy order of prophets taught the doctrine of Christ and measured the 600-year era prophesied by Lehi. They and their followers looked forward to the end of that era when signs of the birth would be given to them by the Lord.¹

In fulfillment of that expectation, an angel sent a Lamanite prophet named Samuel to the Nephites about five years before the end of Lehi's era. Samuel described the signs given to him by the angel. Five more years would pass and then, on the night before the Messiah's birth, there would be no darkness. The sun would be seen to set at evening and to rise the next morning, so that the night would be known to have occurred. A new star would appear, along with other signs and wonders in heaven.²

The initial focus of this chapter is on the texts in the Book of Mormon that describe the fulfillment of Lehi's and Samuel's prophecies. However, the principle of thoroughness also requires relevant information from outside sources to be examined. Hebrew and Christian scriptures, secular history and other relevant information will be studied and, if possible, harmonized or integrated with the chronological details of the Book of Mormon. This is the process I endeavored to use in studying Lehi's escape from Jerusalem and I continue it here. Placing the chronological details of the Book of Mormon in their historical context, in a logically supportable way and using a current calendar for ease of understanding, requires the use of rational principles of interpretation.³

When was Lehi's 600-year Prophecy Fulfilled? The first verse of the Book of Third Nephi records the end of Lehi's 600-year era; however, this verse is one example, among many that could be cited, in which the passage of time or placement of events in the Book of Mormon is not immediately clear. The verse begins: "Now it came to pass that the ninety and first year had passed away...." What "ninety and first year" is meant? The preceding temporal reference (in Mormon's preface to Third Nephi) is to "the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah." Zedekiah reigned about six centuries earlier and his reign only lasted about eleven years;⁴ so, Mormon probably was not referring to the 91st year counted from the commencement or end of Zedekiah's reign.

¹ See part one, "Lehi's 600-year Prophecy," in the chapter on "Chronological Structure."

² See part two, "The Five-year Prophecy of Samuel the Lamanite," in the chapter on "Chronological Structure."

³ The rational principles that establish a logical process for interpreting the Book of Mormon are discussed in "Rational Interpretation of the Book of Mormon" in the first chapter of this source book.

⁴ See part two, "When Was the First Year of the Reign of Zedekiah, King of Judah?" and part eleven, "When Was Jerusalem Destroyed?" in the chapter on "Lehi's Escape."

That inference is supported by other texts. In the last clause of 3 Nephi 1:1, Mormon wrote: “it was in the year that Lachoneus was the chief judge and the governor over the land.” In addition, at the end of the Book of Helaman (which immediately precedes the Book of Third Nephi within the Book of Mormon), Mormon wrote: “And thus ended the ninetieth year of the reign of the judges over the people of Nephi. And thus ended the book of Helaman, according to the record of Helaman and his sons” (Helaman 16:24-25). The clear implications of these texts are that the 91st year was in the era of judges governing the people of Nephi and that the 91st year immediately followed the 90th year of that era.

Three events appear to have occurred in the 91st year of the reign of the judges. First, Mormon mentioned the end of the 90th year just before his reference to the closing of the written record by “Helaman and his sons” (Helaman 16:24-25); so, such a physical closing of the record might have occurred during the 91st year. This inference is supported by the preface of the Book of Third Nephi, which indicates that in its original form (before being abridged by Mormon), a new record began to be written by a grandson of Helaman. Related to the statement in the preface is the note in 3 Nephi 1:2: “Nephi, the son of Helaman, had departed out of the land of Zarahemla, giving charge unto his son Nephi, who was his eldest son, concerning the plates of brass, and all the records which had been kept, and all those things which had been kept sacred from the departure of Lehi out of Jerusalem.” Reading this note and the preface to Third Nephi as consistent with each other indicates that a grandson of Helaman, named Nephi, commenced his record keeping duties prior to the end of the 91st year. Thus, it seems reasonable to infer that the closing of the records of Helaman and his sons, the transfer of the records to one of Helaman’s grandsons, and the departure of Nephi, the son of Helaman, all occurred during the 91st year.

I mention this somewhat convoluted and inferential history to indicate the types of chronological details that must be examined when seeking to interpret the central clause of 3 Nephi 1:1, which presents the completion of Lehi’s 600-year era. The entire passage is complex in its structural design and relates in material ways to many other Book of Mormon passages. This complexity and these relationships cannot be overlooked or ignored when interpreting the preface of Third Nephi⁵ or 3 Nephi 1:1.⁶ Third Nephi 1:1 also will be discussed in the first part of this chapter dealing with the end of Lehi’s 600-year era and the fulfillment of his prophecy.

When was Samuel’s Five-year Prophecy Fulfilled? Following Mormon’s introductory segment of his new book (3 Nephi, preface and 1:1-3), he wrote, “And it came to pass that in the commencement of the ninety and second year, behold … there began to be greater signs and greater miracles wrought among the people. But there were some who began to say that the time was past for the words to be fulfilled, which were spoken by Samuel, the Lamanite” (3 Nephi 1:4). Thus, there appears to have been conflict and perhaps confusion in the 92nd year of the judges as to how Samuel’s five-year period was to be measured and when his prophecy was to be fulfilled. In the midst of that turmoil and with some non-believers planning a religious purge against the believers, the signs prophesied by Samuel appeared (3 Nephi 1:9-21).

The details of the conflict and other aspects of the fulfillment of Samuel’s prophecy will be examined in the second part of this chapter. Based on a rational interpretation of the relevant text, the first two parts of this chapter will construct a sound chronology for the fulfillment of Lehi’s 600-

⁵ See, e.g., the introduction, “When Did Lehi Escape from Jerusalem;” part one, “Mormon’s Statement about the First Year of Zedekiah;” and part twelve, “Seeking to Understand the Proposed Error,” in the chapter on “Lehi’s Escape.”

⁶ See the introduction, “Chronological Structure within the Book of Mormon,” in the chapter on “Chronological Structure.”

year prophecy and the appearance of the heavenly signs associated by Samuel with the night before the Messiah's birth. Having established what the Book of Mormon says about that chronology, I then will examine relevant outside sources.

What About D&C 20:1? Given the topic of this chapter, some Latter-day Saints may question why I do not modify the interpretive process and begin with a discussion of the date set forth in section 20, verse one, of the LDS scripture entitled, *The Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* ("D&C").⁷ One reason is conceptual and, thus, somewhat arbitrary. This source book was conceived to interpret what the Book of Mormon has to say about its own chronology. D&C 20:1 is not in the Book of Mormon, but in an outside source; so, it will be handled as a secondary source of information.

Another reason I do not begin with D&C 20:1 is that the meaning of the date given in that verse seems to be interpreted as if it can be understood best when it is severed from its context. Ignoring or overlooking the textual and historical context of D&C 20:1 is not a rational first step to be taken by those who interpret the date in D&C 20:1 as a revelation from the Lord indicating his actual date of birth, accurate as to the day, month and year.

In reality, the full text of D&C 20:1 is not even a complete sentence. The first sentence of D&C 20 extends over four verses. The sentence is a proclamation of praise to the Lord, followed by a single word sentence, "Amen." An *Anno Domini* date, presented with elaborate formalism, appears in the first of these two sentences. Then, this two sentence paragraph is followed by four other paragraphs, each of which ends with the word, "Amen" (D&C 20:5-12, 13-16, 17-28 and 29-36). Throughout these paragraphs that describe the truths held by the new church are six testatory phrases, either "we know" or "bear witness." Jesus is referred to six times in these 36 verses as "our Lord" or "the Lord," rather than "your Lord" (D&C 20:1, 4, 16-17, 29-31, 35-36). Undeniably, these five paragraphs are statements of praise and testimony made from a human point of view. Any speculation that these statements were made by the Lord to his servants violates the principles of rational reserve, simplicity and consistency.

Nonetheless, among some Latter-day Saints, there exists an innocent belief that the date of the Messiah's birth was revealed by the Lord to his servants in D&C 20:1, exact as to the day, month and year.⁸ My plan is to address this misguided belief again, in an appendix to this chapter, where I intend to update my 1993 discussion and rejection of D&C 20:1 as such a revelation.⁹ The foundation of this chapter, however, will be the texts in the Book of Mormon that report the chronology of the fulfillment of Lehi's and Samuel's prophecies.

⁷ See, e.g., Joseph T. Hepworth, "Dating the Birth of Jesus Christ," *Sunstone* 43 (1984): 9-11; and Jeffrey R. Chadwick, "Dating the Birth of Jesus Christ," *BYU Studies* 49/4 (2010): 5-11.

⁸ See, e.g., John C. Lefgren, *April Sixth* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980); and John P. Pratt, "The Restoration of Priesthood Keys on Easter 1836, Part 1: Dating the First Easter," *Ensign* 15 (June 1985): 59-68; idem, "The Restoration of Priesthood Keys on Easter 1836, Part 2: Symbolism of Passover and of Elijah's Return," *Ensign* 15 (July 1985): 55-64; idem, "Passover: Was It Symbolic of His Coming?" *Ensign* 24 (January 1994): 38-45.

⁹ Randall P. Spackman, "Introduction to Book of Mormon Chronology: The Principal Prophecies, Calendars and Dates" (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies ["FARMS"], 1993), 70-74.