

When Did Lehi Escape from Jerusalem? An Introduction

Randall P. Spackman

Rational interpretation of the internal chronology of the Book of Mormon requires that events mentioned in the text be arranged in the order of their occurrence. Usually, arranging such events in their temporal order is a clear-cut task because Mormon provided the basic arrangement. However, he abridged an extensive record (the “plates of Nephi;” see, e.g., Mormon 1:3-4; 6:6), added a completely separate record (the “small plates” of Nephi; see, e.g., Jacob 1:1) and wove together information from sources such as letters, speeches and other historical reports. As a result, each succeeding verse of the Book of Mormon does not necessarily record events in agreement with the steady flow of time. For example, chapters 1 through 22 of the Book of Mosiah include three distinct and partially overlapping historical reports that, if not understood as such, seem to confuse some readers.¹

For the two principal prophecies and four subsequent prophecies examined in the chapter on “Chronological Structure,” the temporal arrangement of events is simple. Lehi escaped from Jerusalem 600 years before his descendants saw the signs of the Messiah’s birth. Those signs appeared before the signs of the Messiah’s death. The Messiah was resurrected after he died. The Nephites became extinct within 400 years after their ancestors were visited by the risen Redeemer.

My intent is that each of the events associated with the six key prophecies will be examined in this chapter on “Lehi’s Escape,” and in subsequent chapters focused on “Jesus’ Birth,” “Jesus’ Death and Resurrection,” and “Nephite Extinction.” Then, a chapter about my “Proposed Chronology” (summarizing the chronological implications of the earlier chapters) will round out the topics needed to establish an initial level of rational thought about the chronology of the Book of Mormon. With that foundation, detailed studies of the history of dozens of other events in the Book of Mormon can then be undertaken in earnest—and perhaps one day linked with relevant secular information from the Nephites’ land of promise.

To begin, in this chapter on “Lehi’s Escape,” the first of the key historical events of the Book of Mormon will be placed in its temporal context. That might seem to be a relatively undemanding interpretive task because Mormon clearly stated in the heading of the book now known as “Third Nephi” that Lehi “came out of Jerusalem in the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, the king of Judah.” However, more than a decade ago,² I noted a clear conflict between Mormon’s statement and other Book of Mormon texts written by another prophet, Lehi’s son Nephi, a participant in the escape from Jerusalem (particularly 1 Nephi 7:14 and 2 Nephi 25:10). I suggested that such an error could have been one of those inadvertent mistakes that can appear in any written text.³ This chapter is my attempt to provide a detailed examination of the relevant textual issues associated with the date of Lehi’s escape, including the reasons for my conclusion that Mormon incorporated

¹ See Randall P. Spackman, “The ‘Wrong King:’ A Textual Study of Mosiah 21:28 and Ether 4:1” in the “Occasional Papers” chapter of this source book.

² Randall P. Spackman, “The Jewish/Nephite Lunar Calendar,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7/1 (1998): 48-59. My article concerned a chronological theory that the Nephites may have used a strict lunar calendar (twelve lunar months per calendar year) to count Lehi’s 600-year prophecy (1 Nephi 10:4; 19:8; 2 Nephi 25:19).

³ Spackman, “The Jewish/Nephite Lunar Calendar,” 59.

an understandable human error in the heading of Third Nephi when Mormon referred to the year of Lehi's escape more than 900 years after the event.

My proposal in the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* that Lehi's escape from Jerusalem occurred late in the reign of Judah's king Zedekiah (rather than in his first regnal year as Mormon stated) received an immediate, but brief rejoinder from David Rolph Seely and JoAnn H. Seely.⁴ Two years later, S. Kent Brown joined with David Rolph Seely to publish a tradition-driven counter-argument to my proposed time for Lehi's departure.⁵ The willingness of these three scholars to grapple with an issue of Book of Mormon chronology in print is to be applauded. Their textual search and issue identification have value. Regrettably, their "supporting tradition" interpretive process⁶ appears to have led them into badly mistaken conclusions about Nephi's statements in 1 Nephi 7:14 and 2 Nephi 25:10 and the time of Lehi's escape from Jerusalem, as I explain in several of the accompanying parts of this chapter. Lastly, I have included an appendix to this chapter to analyze John P. Pratt's widely disseminated theory concerning the time of Lehi's departure from Jerusalem.⁷

⁴ David Rolph Seely and JoAnn H. Seely, "Lehi & Jeremiah: Prophets, Priests & Patriarchs," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/2 (1999): 28.

⁵ S. Kent Brown and David Rolph Seely, "Jeremiah's Imprisonment and the Date of Lehi's Departure," *The Religious Educator* 2/1 (2001): 14-32.

⁶ The "supporting tradition" process is undependable as a method for interpreting scripture. First, it assumes the validity of earlier interpretation of a text. Next, it identifies contradictory texts and data. Finally, it uses rhetorical techniques, even potentially deceptive ones, to explain away or ignore the contradictory texts and data for the purpose of upholding a questionable tradition. This chapter will identify numerous instances where the "supporting tradition" process produces irrational, unreliable interpretations concerning the time when Lehi departed from Jerusalem.

⁷ See, e.g., John P. Pratt, "Lehi's 600-year Prophecy of the Birth of Christ," *Meridian Magazine*, an online publication accessed at www.meridianmagazine.com/sci_rel/000331sixhundred.html; idem, "The Nephite Calendar," *Meridian Magazine*, accessed at www.meridianmagazine.com/sci_rel/040114nephite.html.