

Mormon's Statement about the First Year of Zedekiah

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Mormon was the next to last custodian of the sacred and historical records of the Nephites (4 Nephi 1:48-49; Mormon 1:1-4; 2:17-18; 6:6; 8:1-4). When he condensed their extensive records into the Book of Mormon, he abridged them into various smaller books (see, e.g., his comment in Helaman 2:13-14). He gave each of these abridged books a title, a heading and a contextual statement of chronology. In the heading of Third Nephi, he also made what might seem to be a simple chronological statement: Lehi “came out of Jerusalem in the *first* year of the reign of Zedekiah” (italics added).

The earliest extant form of the text that makes up the beginning of Third Nephi is a fragment of the original manuscript¹ of the Book of Mormon containing a capital letter “H” (apparently from the name Helaman).² The content of the printer’s manuscript³ for this text is a series of words without punctuation⁴ that, in the first (1830) edition of the Book of Mormon, were split into two sections: a title and subtitle (printed in capitalized regular typeface); and a heading (printed in upper and lower case italic typeface), with a chapter designation inserted between the two sections.⁵

THE BOOK OF NEPHI, THE SON OF NEPHI, WHICH WAS THE SON OF HELAMAN.

CHAPTER I.

*And Helaman was the son of Helaman, which was the son of Alma, which was the son of Alma, being a descendant of Nephi, which was the son of Lehi, which came out of Jerusalem in the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, the king of Judah.*⁶

¹ Of the original manuscript, “about 25 percent of the current text” exists today. The remainder was destroyed by water and mold, between 1841 and 1882, while the manuscript was held in the cornerstone of the Nauvoo House, a hotel in Nauvoo, Illinois. Royal Skousen, ed., *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Extant Text* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies [“FARMS”], 2001), 6-7. A general list of extant text of the original manuscript appears on page 37.

² Skousen, ed., *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*, 35, 37, 512.

³ The printer’s manuscript is a copy of the original manuscript, prepared for use by the typesetter of the first edition of the Book of Mormon. Royal Skousen, ed., *The Printer’s Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Entire Text in Two Parts, Part One: 1 Nephi 1–Alma 17* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001), 3-4.

⁴ Royal Skousen, ed., *The Printer’s Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Entire Text in Two Parts, Part Two: Alma 17–Moroni 10* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001), 777.

⁵ According to Skousen, the term *chapter* “was not original to the Book of Mormon text.” He thought that “Joseph Smith himself specified the placement of the original chapter breaks.” In some manner, Joseph appears to have determined that his dictation of the text should include a chapter designation; so, “Joseph then told the scribe to write the word *chapter*, with the understanding that the appropriate number would be added later.” Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part One* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2004), 43-44 (emphasis in the original).

⁶ Joseph Smith, Jr., author and proprietor, *The Book of Mormon* (Palmyra, New York: E.B. Grandin, 1830; Independence, Missouri: Herald Heritage Reprint, 1970), 452; or Wilford C. Wood, *Joseph Smith Begins His*

The only other Book of Mormon reference to the first year of the reign of Zedekiah (1 Nephi 1:4) appears in the “small plates” written by Nephi and others hundreds of years before Mormon wrote the heading of Third Nephi (see, e.g., 1 Nephi 1:1-4; 9:1-6; Jacob 1:1-4; 7:27; Enos 1; Jarom 1; Omni 1). These small plates came to Mormon’s attention and were read by him when he was about to abridge the Nephite records relating to king Benjamin (Words of Mormon 1:3-7). Thus, two chronological ideas from the small plates were known to Mormon when he wrote the preface of Third Nephi. First, Nephi referred to the first year of the reign of Zedekiah (1 Nephi 1:4) and second, Nephi noted that the historical record his father found on the “plates of brass” ended when Zedekiah’s reign began (1 Nephi 5:11-13).

No portion of 1 Nephi 1 is known to exist from the original manuscript.⁷ In the typographical facsimile of the printer’s manuscript, the passage known as 1 Nephi 1:4 appears as follows:

for it came to pass in th(e) commencement of the ^{f(e)l}rst year of the reig{n} of Zedekiah King of Judah my father Leh{i} having dwelt at Jerusalem in all {h}is days & in that same year there came many prophits prophe[s]e]ying unto the people that they must repent o{<%f%>|r} <tha^{the}> great City Jerusalem must be destroid⁸

Royal Skousen thought that the supralinear insertion of the words *first year of the* in this passage was worthy of comment.

While copying into the printer’s manuscript, Oliver Cowdery initially wrote “in the commencement of the reign of Zedekiah”, but then he corrected the manuscript by supralinearly inserting “first year of the”. There is no change in the level of ink flow, which implies that the correction was immediate and reflects the reading of the original manuscript rather than editing on the part of Oliver. There really would have been no motivation for the scribe to have added this particular information about the year unless these words were in [the original manuscript].⁹

In the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon, this text appears as a single sentence:

For it came to pass, in the commencement of the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah, (my father Lehi having dwelt at Jerusalem in all his days;) and in that same year there came many prophets, prophesying unto the people, that they must repent, or the great city Jerusalem must be destroyed.¹⁰

Work: *Book of Mormon 1830 First Edition Reproduced from Uncut Sheets* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Publisher’s Press, 1958), 452.

⁷ Skousen, ed., *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*, 36-37.

⁸ Skousen, ed., *The Printer’s Manuscript of the Book of Mormon, Part One*: 53. The manuscript text has nine legibility issues and emendations: (1) the letter *e* in the word *the*, just before the word *commencement*, is partially missing due to a lacuna (missing portion) in the physical manuscript; (2) Oliver Cowdery’s insertion of *first year of the* occurs above the line and before the word *reign*; (3) in the supralinear *first*, the letter *e* has been overwritten with the letter *i*; (4) in the word *reign*, the letter *n* has been partially overwritten by another *n*; (5) the letter *i* in *Lehi* has been partially overwritten by another *i*; (6) the letter *h* in *his* has been partially overwritten by another *h*; (7) in the word *prophesying*, the letter *s* may be an *s* or an *e*, with *s* the preferred or intended letter; (8) in the word that immediately follows the word *repent*, the letter *f* has been deleted by erasure or blotting and has been overwritten by the letter *r*, and (9) before the word *great*, the word *that* has been deleted by crossing out and the word *the* has been inserted above the line.

⁹ Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part One*, 56.

¹⁰ Smith, *The Book of Mormon* (1830), 5.

This text directly tells me at least five things about the specified period. First, the period was counted with respect to a king of Judah. Second, the king was named Zedekiah. Third, the period was identified as some sort of an official or regnal year. Fourth, in that year, many prophets came to prophesy to the people of Jerusalem. Fifth, the prophets called for repentance and warned the inhabitants of Jerusalem of the dire consequences if they did not repent.

In the immediate context of 1 Nephi 1:4, which Mormon read before he composed the preface of Third Nephi, I learn that Nephi had just begun to engrave “a record of [his] proceedings in [his] days” (1 Nephi 1:1) that emphasized (by commandment from the Lord) “an account ... of the ministry of [his] people” (1 Nephi 9:3) on a set of “small plates” (Jacob 1:1). Consistent with his intention to write “the more part of the ministry” (1 Nephi 9:4), Nephi then listed his qualifications for writing this record. He was “born of goodly parents” and “taught somewhat in all the learning of [his] father;” he had been “highly favored of the Lord in all [his] days” and “had a great knowledge of the goodness and the mysteries of God;” he understood “the language of [his] father, which consist[ed] of the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians;” and he knew that his record was “true” because he made it “with [his] own hand” and “according to [his] knowledge” (1 Nephi 1:1-3). Then, with the information in 1 Nephi 1:4, Nephi briefly introduced the setting in which his father’s ministry apparently commenced.

Lehi owned land in the kingdom of Judah and a house at Jerusalem (1 Nephi 1:7; 2:4; 3:16, 22-23). He had a treasure of gold, silver and other precious things (1 Nephi 2:4). With his wife Sariah, he had a family consisting of four named sons when they escaped from Jerusalem: Laman, Lemuel, Sam and Nephi (1 Nephi 2:5). Their lives would be changed immensely by the events that occurred during the reign of Zedekiah. Those changes began in the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, when “there came many prophets, prophesying unto the people that they must repent, or the great city Jerusalem must be destroyed” (1 Nephi 1:4).

Wherefore it came to pass that my father, Lehi, as he went forth prayed unto the Lord, yea, even with all his heart, in behalf of his people. And it came to pass as he prayed unto the Lord, there came a pillar of fire and dwelt upon a rock before him; and he saw and heard much; and because of the things which he saw and heard he did quake and tremble exceedingly. And it came to pass that he returned to his own house at Jerusalem; and he cast himself upon his bed, being overcome with the Spirit and the things which he had seen (1 Nephi 1:5-7).

The word *wherefore*, which begins this passage, appears to mean “on account of, because of, in consequence of, or as a result of”¹¹ the message of the prophets. When Lehi became convinced of the truth of this message is not stated explicitly, but he felt it deeply and prayed for his people. At this early moment in Nephi’s narrative, Lehi appears on the side of those who had already been or were immediately in tune with the prophetic message in Zedekiah’s first year.

The conceptual structure of 1 Nephi 1:4-5 provides an additional reason for assuming that Lehi’s vision of the fiery pillar occurred in the first year of Zedekiah. The structure can be outlined in a repetitive couplet form (A₁/B₁, A₂/B₂).

For it came to pass
A₁ in the commencement of the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah,
B₁ (my father, Lehi, having dwelt at Jerusalem in all his days);

¹¹ *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, two vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), II: 3753 (“Wherefore”).

- A₂ and in that same year there came many prophets, prophesying unto the people, that they must repent, or the great city Jerusalem must be destroyed.
Wherefore it came to pass that
- B₂ my father, Lehi, as he went forth prayed unto the Lord, yea, even with all his heart, in behalf of his people.

Each “A” statement includes a reference to Zedekiah’s first regnal year. Each “B” statement provides information about Lehi. “A₁” refers to the king of the land of Judah; “B₁” refers to Lehi dwelling at Jerusalem (the capitol of Judah). “A₂” refers to the prophets who came forth to warn Zedekiah and his people; “B₂” refers to Lehi praying on behalf of his people because of the prophets’ message. The parenthetical idea about Lehi living his whole life at Jerusalem was placed by Nephi between the idea of Zedekiah’s *first year* and that of the *same year*. This suggests that Lehi was there and involved in the events of that year. Nephi’s choice of this form suggests to me that Lehi’s life was associated or in step with the call for repentance delivered by “many prophets” in the first year of the reign of Zedekiah.

Lehi’s vision of the pillar of fire left him quaking, trembling and so overcome that he returned home and took to his bed. Another vision then opened to Lehi.

[H]e saw the heavens open, and he thought he saw God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God. And it came to pass that he saw One descending out of the midst of heaven, and he beheld that his luster was above that of the sun at noon-day. And ... [he] came and stood before my father, and gave unto him a book, and bade him that he should read. ... And he read, saying: Wo, wo, unto Jerusalem, for I have seen thine abominations! Yea, and many things did my father read concerning Jerusalem—that it should be destroyed, and the inhabitants thereof; many should perish by the sword, and many should be carried away captive into Babylon. And it came to pass that when my father had read and seen many great and marvelous things, he did exclaim many things unto the Lord; such as, Great and marvelous are thy works, O Lord God Almighty! Thy throne is high in the heavens, and thy power, and goodness, and mercy are over all the inhabitants of the earth; and, because thou art merciful, thou wilt not suffer those who come unto thee that they shall perish! (1 Nephi 1:8-9, 11, 13-14)

Lehi’s prayer for his people was answered in two ways. First, he saw things that left him shaking and overcome. Then, he also saw things that caused him to praise God. “[H]is soul did rejoice, and his whole heart was filled, because of the things which he had seen, yea, which the Lord had shown unto him” (1 Nephi 1:15).¹² Second, he was called to prophesy; and “behold he went forth among the people, and began to prophesy and to declare unto them concerning the things which he had both seen and heard” (1 Nephi 1:18). He was mocked for his efforts and some people “were angry with him ... and they also sought his life, that they might take it away” (1 Nephi 1:19-20). In a dream, the Lord commended Lehi for his faithfulness in declaring the things he had been directed to speak. He warned Lehi of the plot on his life and ordered him to “take his

¹² Whether Lehi’s joyful vision included a land of promise is not mentioned by Nephi; however, after Lehi escaped from Jerusalem, he fully expected (indeed, believed himself to have already received) a land of promise for himself and his descendants (1 Nephi 5:4-5). The phrase *promised land* first appears in Nephi’s introduction to the small plates (1 Nephi, preface). The phrase *land of promise* first appears in the Lord’s answer to Nephi’s prayers concerning his brothers (1 Nephi 2:20).

family and depart into the wilderness. And it came to pass that he was obedient unto the word of the Lord.” Quickly, he and his family escaped into the wilderness (1 Nephi 2:1-4).

The record of Nephi in the small plates does not state that these events all happened in the first year of the reign of Zedekiah. I am not told how long Lehi preached or how long it took his opposition to congeal into a deadly plot.¹³ A number of other passages written by Nephi refer to king Zedekiah, Jerusalem and the prophets (e.g., 1 Nephi 3:16-18; 5:11-13; 7:13-15; 16:35-36; 17:12-22; 2 Nephi 1:1-4; 25:9-11). From texts such as these and, particularly, from the history told in 1 Nephi 1-2, I might think that just a few days were required for Lehi’s life to be threatened or I might equally well think that several years passed before Lehi and his family escaped from Jerusalem. However, when these texts are read with Mormon’s heading in Third Nephi, the principles of simplicity and consistency seem to require me to interpret all of these events as happening before the end of Zedekiah’s first regnal year.

The chronology I may outline from these and other relevant Book of Mormon texts also must be consistent with the principle of natural uniformity. Lehi’s life unfolded in a fixed sequence, one event following another, no matter how the record-keepers may have recorded them. The simplest order of events is that which is set forth in the dictated and copied manuscripts from which the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon was printed because that chronology requires the fewest assumptions. Chart II at the end of this chapter sets forth the chronology of Lehi’s escape from Jerusalem based on the text of the Book of Mormon. This order of events, in which the text exhibits internal consistency, provides the traditional understanding which S. Kent Brown and David Rolph Seely believed that “most readers of the Book of Mormon have assumed.”¹⁴

That being said, I cannot misjudge the logical effect that may be given to the Book of Mormon chronology, when interpreted in accordance with the principles of natural uniformity, consistency and simplicity. Sticking to those principles does not mean necessarily that Mormon’s statement about the time of Lehi’s escape is accurate. Natural uniformity, consistency and simplicity are not the only principles to be considered and applied.

In fact, the Book of Mormon does not provide all of the relevant information that the principles of rational reserve, thoroughness and uncertain cultural understanding require me to find and consider. The chronology of Lehi’s escape must be consistent with sources outside the Book of Mormon that provide reliable data about such things as the kingdom of Judah, the city of Jerusalem and the reign of Zedekiah. The chronology of Lehi’s escape is different from a chronology of events that are mentioned only in the Book of Mormon. Rational principles require that the chronology of Lehi’s escape must be viewed in the light of other records kept by people who lived while the kingdom of Judah approached destruction. Some of those records have survived. For a thorough chronology of Lehi’s escape, the history in the Book of Mormon must be consistent with information found in sources such as the Hebrew scriptures and Babylonian chronicle. Lehi and Nephi lived in a real world perceived and reported by others. Those ancient reports are relevant.

¹³ The Lord told Lehi that some among “this people ... seek to take away thy life” (1 Nephi 2:1) and I have made the assumption that at least two of those people plotted the murder of Lehi. I agree with Jeffrey R. Chadwick that this was not a governmental conspiracy. Relying on 1 Nephi 1:20, he made the assumption that the risk to Lehi came only from “spontaneous attempts” of isolated angry individuals. Jeffrey R. Chadwick, “The Wrong Place for Lehi’s Trail and the Valley of Lemuel,” *The FARMS Review* 17/2 (2005): 205. I think Lehi was aware of the anger already, but conspiracy had increased the risk of his murder.

¹⁴ S. Kent Brown and David Rolph Seely, “Jeremiah’s Imprisonment and the Date of Lehi’s Departure,” *The Religious Educator* 2/1 (2001): 15.