

The Problem with Nephi's Memory

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Nephi's words in 2 Nephi 25-30 were engraved in the small plates more than forty years after Lehi escaped from Jerusalem (2 Nephi 5:34). At the time of the engraving, Nephi had a choice of diction to make as he engraved the text of 2 Nephi 25:10. Should he use the word later translated by Joseph Smith as the English word *immediately*? Nephi's perspective at the time of engraving was from a significant distance in time. He escaped from Jerusalem as a young teenager, but he engraved this portion of the small plates as a mature man in his fifties, perhaps even his sixties (Jacob 1:1-12). From that perspective, did it merely seem to Nephi that the city was destroyed *immediately* after the escape from Jerusalem or did the Babylonians actually destroy the city *soon* after Lehi's departure (compare 1 Nephi 7:13-14)?

The word *immediately* must be interpreted with a bit of imprecision. The record is clear that after Lehi escaped from Judah, his sons could return twice over a period of perhaps three months,¹ once to obtain the brass plates and then to bring Ishmael's family down to the base camp at the Red Sea. At the time of each of the two expeditions, the city had not been destroyed (1 Nephi 3; 7). When compared with forty or more years, a three-month period would represent an imprecision of about one-half of one percent. However, more than eight years intervened between Zedekiah's first year and the initial siege of the city. It seems unlikely that Nephi would have recollected a period of more than eight years (more than a twenty percent difference) the same way as he would have viewed a three-month period.

More importantly, the problem with any theory that seeks to minimize the logical effect of Joseph Smith's choice of the English word *immediately* is that the sense of temporal proximity in 2 Nephi 25:10 is supported by Nephi's use of the word *soon* and by his report that Jeremiah was cast into prison in 1 Nephi 7:14. The principles of thoroughness, consistency and rational reserve do not permit me to minimize, ignore or overlook the information provided by Nephi in either of these verses. Nor do these principles permit me to assume that Nephi's memory was unclear with either verse or both verses.² If I can speculate that his recollection was unclear with these verses, then what prohibits me from assuming the same with respect to any verse that might disagree with any other subjective view of his writings? The principles of thoroughness, consistency and rational reserve do not permit this type of willy-nilly information manipulation.

A second line of thinking might be that Nephi, in fact, had no idea when the city of Jerusalem was destroyed. If the destruction was confirmed to him only in visions and promptings and by the arrival of Lehi's group in their land of promise, how could Nephi have known that the Spirit would soon cease its work and that the city would be destroyed immediately after Lehi escaped? Perhaps I may assume that Nephi actually used words accurately translated into the English words *soon* and *immediately*, but he only used them as hyperbole to convince the rebellious ones in Lehi's group to leave Judah. The text, however, also states Nephi's claim that

¹ This assumes Jeffrey R. Chadwick's proposal that Lehi's group escaped from Jerusalem and stayed at the base camp near the Red Sea over a period of about four and one-half months. Jeffrey R. Chadwick, "The Wrong Place for Lehi's Trail and the Valley of Lemuel," *The FARMS Review* 17/2 (2005): 211 n.6.

² S. Kent Brown and David Rolph Seely may have skirted the edges of this assumption. Their discussion about when Nephi composed 2 Nephi 25-30 might have been just another way of saying Nephi's memory was clouded. S. Kent Brown and David Rolph Seely, "Jeremiah's Imprisonment and the Date of Lehi's Departure," *The Religious Educator* 2/1 (2001): 22-23.

he wrote the truth, with plainness, according to his knowledge (1 Nephi 1:3; 2 Nephi 25:4, 7). Thus, my interpretive principles prevent me from proposing an interpretation based on the arbitrary assumption that at times (convenient to my subjective view of his writings), Nephi used and recorded ... inaccuracies. Such an assumption would violate the principles of thoroughness (ignoring relevant text), consistency (treating the texts that are inconsistent with my theory as unimportant or unreliable) and rational reserve (imposing my subjective judgments as to which texts contain the truth and which can be dismissed).

Nephi had not learned of the fall of Jerusalem through reports or rumors when he sought to convince his brothers to build the ship (1 Nephi 17:43), but that does not mean he heard no reports or rumors during the family's remaining time in Bountiful. The record is simply silent on that issue. Nephi waited to confirm his knowledge of the fall of the city until near the end of his record (2 Nephi 25:10). He introduced his compilation of prophecies in 2 Nephi 25-30 with the prophecy that started his father's ministry and his own ministry and that had been fulfilled soon after his journey from Jerusalem began. The people of Jerusalem had been warned "concerning the destruction which should come upon them, immediately after my father left Jerusalem; nevertheless, they hardened their hearts; and according to my prophecy, they have been destroyed" (2 Nephi 25:10). These true and important words must be given value and taken into account in any principled interpretation of Book of Mormon chronology. Nephi engraved his truthful story, in his plain words, on his hand-made plates, employing his own narrative structure. Those facts form a foundation for any principled interpretation of what he wrote. In light of the Biblical account of Jeremiah's imprisonment and Jerusalem's destruction, Nephi's chosen words most likely must be interpreted as an unmistakable contradiction of Mormon's reference to Zedekiah's *first* year in the preface of Third Nephi.

My proposed chronology for Lehi's escape from Jerusalem—one that accepts the likelihood of Mormon's unintentional error—appears in [Chart III](#) (with the changes from [Chart II](#) highlighted). This chronology is founded on rational interpretations of Nephi's words in 1 Nephi 7:13-14 and 2 Nephi 25:10, as understood in light of related texts in the Book of Mormon and in books of the Hebrew scriptures, such as 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Jeremiah and Ezekiel.