

## Seeking to Understand the Proposed Error

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From the foregoing discussion, it appears that the chronology of Lehi's escape set forth in the Book of Mormon is consistent with the chronology of Judah's destruction set forth in the Hebrew scriptures and other external sources, *except for* Mormon's specification of Zedekiah's *first* regnal year in the heading of the book of Third Nephi. I am obliged by the principles of rational reserve, natural uniformity and consistency to consider Mormon's specification to be a possible chronological error because it would appear to be contradicted by the words of Nephi, an eye-witness to the events (1 Nephi 7:13-14; 2 Nephi 25:10), when his narrative and prophetic texts are placed in what appears to be their Biblical context. Thus, rational principles of interpretation now require me to seek for understanding about the proposed error.

To begin with, I might consider a way to harmonize the apparently conflicting texts. Perhaps Mormon's heading in Third Nephi has reference not to Lehi's escape commanded by the Lord in the ninth or tenth year of Zedekiah, but instead refers to Lehi's prayer and vision while he was away from the city (1 Nephi 1:5-7). Maybe to Mormon's understanding, Lehi "came out of Jerusalem," spiritually, in the first year of Zedekiah and at that point received the vision of the pillar of fire. That Lehi then returned to the city, received additional visions, preached for eight or nine years and departed from the city when commanded by the Lord to escape for his life—these events could follow at times unconnected to what Mormon stated in the heading of Third Nephi.

The difficulty with this suggestion is that the general concept of "coming out" of a place appears in other passages of the Book of Mormon, where it would appear to refer essentially to a physical departure from a place. For example, Laman and Lemuel argued that because of the things their wives suffered in the wilderness, "it would have been better that they had died before they came out of Jerusalem than to have suffered these afflictions" (1 Nephi 17:20). When Nephi introduced his prophetic compilation in 2 Nephi, he said, "I shall prophesy according to the plainness which hath been with me from the time that I came out of Jerusalem with my father" (2 Nephi 25:4). Prophesying about the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, Nephi stated that "then shall the remnant of our seed know concerning us, how that we came out from Jerusalem" (2 Nephi 30:4). Amaleki wrote in the small plates about the people of Zarahemla, how they "came out from Jerusalem at the time that Zedekiah, king of Judah, was carried away captive into Babylon" (Omni 1:15). Mormon's abridgment of the Nephite record states that a man named Amulek spoke of being "a descendant of Nephi, who was the son of Lehi, who came out of the land of Jerusalem" (Alma 10:3). These texts and others (e.g., Helaman 5:6; 7:7) indicate that this first harmonizing suggestion faces the rational hurdle of textual inconsistency and, therefore, may be an unlikely method for dealing with the apparent conflict between Mormon's heading in Third Nephi and Nephi's two statements in 1 Nephi 7:13-14 and 2 Nephi 25:9-10.

In addition to textual inconsistency, a question of textual interpretation is raised by the foregoing texts. For example, the young women who later became the wives of Laman and Lemuel apparently did not come out of the city itself, but they came (with their parents and other family members) from their residence in "the land of Jerusalem" (1 Nephi 7:2, 7). This detail suggests uncertainty in the interpretation to be given to the word "Jerusalem." That is, when a reference is made to coming out of "Jerusalem," it appears possible that the reference actually may be to "the land of Jerusalem," rather than just to the city itself. This interpretive uncertainty must be considered whenever "Jerusalem" is mentioned, unless the context makes it clear that only the city itself is meant.

This uncertainty is related to a second suggestion for harmonizing the texts. Mormon's heading in Third Nephi might refer to the year when Lehi departed from Jerusalem, physically, in order to commence his work "among the people" (1 Nephi 1:18). The text does not appear to require an interpretation in which Lehi preached only to the inhabitants of the city of Jerusalem. With Jeremiah (and perhaps others) active in the city, Lehi may have relocated from his city house to "the land of his inheritance" (1 Nephi 2:4), where he could preach to the people (including the family of Ishmael) in the cities and towns near his land. For eight or nine years, he may have preached outside the city, until commanded by the Lord to escape from the land of Jerusalem. Thus, Lehi may have left the city in the first year of king Zedekiah's reign, so as to preach to the people of the land, and then he may have left the land of Jerusalem years later when commanded by the Lord to escape.

After the passage of many years, Lehi's descendants may have misunderstood this dual departure from "Jerusalem." They may have linked Nephi's chronological record, which began with the escape from the land of Jerusalem, with the statement about the year of Lehi's calling as a prophet and departure from the city of Jerusalem. Hence, they may have thought of these two separate events as a single departure associated with king Zedekiah's first regnal year. The proposed chronological error in the heading of Third Nephi would not have occurred through Mormon's error, but through the misunderstanding of Nephite record keepers many hundreds of years earlier. The difficulty with this harmonizing approach, of course, is not textual inconsistency or interpretive uncertainty associated with the word *Jerusalem*. Rather, the problem is that this second suggestion requires several speculative assumptions and, thus, violates the principle of simplicity. Given the current state of the Book of Mormon text, it is simpler to see the proposed chronological error in the heading of Third Nephi as having arisen from Mormon's misunderstanding.

*What are the factors that might have been involved in the proposed error?* Mormon was the custodian of the sacred records of the Nephites (4 Nephi 1:48-49; Mormon 1:1-4; 2:17-18; 6:6), which included the brass plates and the small plates (Omni 1:23-30; Words of Mormon 1:3-7; Mosiah 1:16; 3 Nephi 1:2). The 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). Hence, I can assume that two chronological ideas—Nephi's reference to the first year of the reign of Zedekiah (1 Nephi 1:4) and to the termination of the record on the brass plates when Zedekiah's reign began (1 Nephi 5:11-13)—were known to Mormon when he wrote the heading of Third Nephi. Because of the record keeping culture familiar to Mormon,<sup>1</sup> these two chronological ideas may have led him to believe that Lehi escaped from Jerusalem in the first year of Zedekiah. Also, none of the events in the life of Lehi is given a date in the text of the small plates other than the year of his calling as a prophet and, even there, one must infer from Nephi's narrative structure that it occurred in the first year of Zedekiah. In addition, Nephi's chronology of Lehi's escape, as set forth in the small plates, bears an internal consistency that is compatible with Mormon's heading in Third Nephi. The discrepancy only arises when external sources are consulted, such as parts of the Hebrew scriptures and Babylonian chronicle that were written after Zedekiah came to power. Such sources were not available to Mormon.

S. Kent Brown and David Rolph Seely noted that in private correspondence from John Sorenson, they were introduced to his speculation that Nephi or perhaps Lehi "updated his own record annually." They also emphasized that "Mormon had access to the large plates of Nephi on which Nephi wrote 'the more part of all our proceedings in the wilderness' (1 Nephi 19:2). Hence,

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<sup>1</sup> The record keeping culture of Lehi and Nephi in Judah, in the sixth century B.C., probably was significantly different from that of Mormon in the New World, in the fourth century A.D.

presumably Mormon had read a fuller account of the family's flight into the desert, including something akin to the actual date."<sup>2</sup> Speculation about access to "something akin to an actual date," whatever that means, would seem to assume that Lehi's group included someone trained in Jewish calendar keeping. Such a speculation and a further speculation about annual record keeping, tied up with a citation to private correspondence from Sorenson, cannot provide a basis for a rational chronology.<sup>3</sup>

*Did Mormon mistakenly take for granted the idea that the events in Lehi's prophetic career at Jerusalem all occurred within a single year?* I can begin to answer this question by looking briefly at one aspect of the religious context of Mormon's abridgment. More than forty years after Lehi led his family away from Jerusalem, Nephi recorded in the small plates a brief prophecy concerning the life, death and resurrection of the expected Messiah (2 Nephi 25:12-14) and he repeated his father's 600-year prophecy about the advent of this Savior (2 Nephi 25:19). Shortly after leaving Jerusalem, Lehi had prophesied to his followers that a Messiah would be born 600 years after his escape (1 Nephi 10:4; 19:8). In the expectation of this Messiah, the Nephites centered much of their religion on him (e.g., 2 Nephi 25:23-30; Mosiah 3-5; Helaman 8:11-23) and recorded the fulfillment of the prophecy of his coming during the commencement of their 601st year following Lehi's escape, a year that occurred during the days of a prophet named Nephi (3 Nephi 1:1-23). The birth of this Messiah and his visit to the Nephites in the New World after his death and resurrection (3 Nephi 8:1-28:15) are the crucial stories that Mormon set out to report in the book of Third Nephi. These stories are the religious core of Mormon's entire abridgment.

To introduce the book of Third Nephi, Mormon composed a beginning text with a list of six closely-related fathers and sons, men who were important Nephite leaders during the 150 years before the fulfillment of Lehi's 600-year prophecy of the Messiah's birth (beginning with a prophet named Alma in Mosiah 17) and for a large part of the century that immediately followed that fulfillment (continuing through the prophet Nephi who seems to be mentioned inferentially in 4 Nephi 1:14). These were the men whose records detailed the march of time up to, through and away from the fulfillment of Lehi's 600-year prophecy. Mormon focused his Book of Mormon narrative primarily on the time when these men led the Nephites.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> S. Kent Brown and David Rolph Seely, "Jeremiah's Imprisonment and the Date of Lehi's Departure," *The Religious Educator* 2/1 (2001): 26, 31 n.11.

<sup>3</sup> Sorenson's published work dealing with chronology often has been speculative. See, e.g., John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book Company and Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1985), 270-76 (proposing a 360-day Nephite calendar); idem, "Seasonality of Warfare in the Book of Mormon and Mesoamerica," in Steven D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin, *Warfare in the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book and Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1990), 445-77 (suggesting a winter-solstice or spring equinox-based solar calendar, the potential for multiple calendars and an inventive, but inconsistent chronology of warfare in the Book of Mormon); idem, "Seasons of War, Seasons of Peace in the Book of Mormon," in John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne, eds., *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book Company and Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1991), 249-55 (similar to the 1990 ideas about calendars and seasonality of warfare).

<sup>4</sup> A simple, rough example will support this general assertion. If I measure the text of the Book of Mormon (excluding the Book of Ether) according to the number of pages in the printer's manuscript, slightly less than 33% of the Book of Mormon text occurs before Mosiah 17. This text covers a period of about 452 years at an average rate of about 3.2 years per page. Slightly less than 6% of the Book of Mormon text (if the Book of Ether is excluded) occurs after 4 Nephi 1:14 and this text covers a period of about 321 years at an average rate of about 12.8 years per page. However, the text of Mosiah 17 through 4 Nephi 1:14 uses about 267.5 pages (61.1% of the text) and covers about 248 years at an average rate of less than one year (0.93) per page. For the number of pages in the printer's manuscript on which the foregoing comparisons are based, see Royal Skousen, ed., *The Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical*

Alma, a priest of king Noah (Mosiah 17:1-2), became a Nephite prophet and the founder of a Nephite church of Christ (Mosiah 15-16; 18:17; 21:30; 26:8; 29:47). An "account of Alma" was read to the Nephites (Mosiah 25:4-6). This record appears to have been personally recorded, at least in part, by Alma (see Mosiah 17:1-4; 18; 23-24). When his followers desired him to be their king, he declined and convinced them of the dangers of that form of government (Mosiah 23:6-7). His son, also named Alma, became the first chief judge of the Nephites, when the monarchy was eliminated in the realm of king Mosiah (Mosiah 29). The younger Alma also became the keeper of the Nephite records after king Mosiah (Mosiah 28:20) and this record-keeping duty descended on each of the subsequent sons in the list (Helaman, Helaman, Nephi and Nephi), who also served in various capacities as chief judge, prophet, high priest and military leader (e.g., Alma 37:1-2; 46:6; 56-58; 63:11; Helaman 2:2; 3:20, 37; 11:18). The second of these men named Nephi was the record-keeper who witnessed the prophesied signs (e.g., 2 Nephi 26:3-8; Helaman 14; 3 Nephi 8:1-4) of the Messiah's birth (3 Nephi 1:1-23) and death (3 Nephi 8-10). When the resurrected Messiah appeared to the Nephites, as prophesied (e.g., 2 Nephi 26:9), this Nephi was the first to be chosen by the Lord to govern his church in the New World (3 Nephi 11-12). These six fathers and sons named in the beginning texts of Third Nephi all were reliable, prominent leaders of the Nephites and thus, Mormon implies that one could depend on the truthfulness of their records, which he had abridged and was about to abridge concerning the Messiah.

As Mormon began to write Third Nephi, he also knew that he had written many times in the previous books of Alma and Helaman about men named Nephi and Lehi. Someone named Lehi, a son of another man named Zoram, had helped to rescue some captured Nephites (Alma 16:5-8). About seven years later, a Nephite military commander named Lehi (perhaps the same man as Lehi, the son of Zoram) served as a captain to a military leader named Moroni and for many years defended the Nephites against Lamanite aggression (Alma 43; 49:16-17; 52:27-40; 53:2; 61:15-21; 62:3, 13, 37; Helaman 1:28). The second Helaman's two sons, named Nephi and Lehi, were very successful in missionary work to the Lamanites (Helaman 3:21, 37; 4:14; 5:4, 13-14, 18-44; 6:6; 7:1-3; 11:19, 23). Beginning Third Nephi, Mormon introduced another prophet name Nephi (3 Nephi 1:2-3).

When I look at events that occurred after the time of this latter Nephi, I also discover that his descendants continued as record-keepers for the subsequent Nephite history that Mormon abridged (4 Nephi 1:19, 21, 47-49). The last of these record keeping descendants, Ammaron, delivered the responsibility for record keeping and for protecting the engraved history to Mormon (Mormon 1:2-4). Mormon also described himself as a "descendant of Nephi" (Mormon 1:5) and a "pure descendant of Lehi" (3 Nephi 5:20). Mormon noted that he was named (like his father) after "the land of Mormon, the land in which Alma did establish the church among the people" (3 Nephi 5:12).<sup>5</sup> Hence, the first prophet Alma and his descendants in their day constituted an illustrious lineage that provided Mormon with a reliable and valuable military, religious and scribal heritage and with an introduction to, and responsibility for, the sacred Nephite records that Mormon would later abridge. According to Mormon (Mosiah 17:1-2; 3 Nephi, title and heading), this lineage was not only illustrious in its own day, but it descended directly from two remarkable prophets, the

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*Facsimile of the Entire Text in Two Parts, Part One: 1 Nephi 1-Alma 17* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001), 52, 337, 475; idem, *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), 476, 872, 906-8, 957, 977; and for the approximate numbers of years, see the suggested dates at the bottom of each of the pages of the 1981 LDS edition of the Book of Mormon on which are found 1 Nephi 1:1; Mosiah 17:1; 4 Nephi 1:14; and Moroni 10:34.

<sup>5</sup> The record does not state that Mormon was a descendant of the first prophet Alma. Given his respect for, and connection to, this lineage, it seems that Mormon would have mentioned a lineal relationship if there had been one.

original Lehi and Nephi, who escaped from Jerusalem, made the perilous journey to the New World and inaugurated the Nephite nation (e.g., 1 Nephi 1-18; 2 Nephi 1, 5; Jacob 1).

Thus, Mormon may have had two important historical purposes for identifying the man named Lehi in the heading of Third Nephi as the one who came out of Jerusalem in the first regnal year of Zedekiah. First and foremost, this reference tied the events to be reported at the beginning of Third Nephi back 600 years to the time when Lehi left Jerusalem and received the 600-year prophecy of the Messiah's birth. Second, this reference distinguished this particular Lehi and his son Nephi from other men with the same names who appeared often in the preceding two books written by Mormon. It seems plausible that Mormon would have written about his illustrious ancestors leaving Jerusalem in the first year of Zedekiah (as suggested by what appeared to be a consistent narrative in the small plates) without any understanding that Jeremiah was not cast into prison until Zedekiah's tenth year and Jerusalem did not fall until the king's eleventh year. Such inadvertent errors are common in human communication. That fact probably is the reason Mormon's son, Moroni, noted that errors might appear in the Book of Mormon: "And now, if there are faults they are the mistakes of men; wherefore, condemn not the things of God, that ye may be found spotless at the judgment-seat of Christ" (Book of Mormon, title page).

Finally, as I discussed in part 9 of the chapter on Calendars ("Lehi's Calendar in the Book of Third Nephi"), the use of an additional number 1 was required to complete Mormon's data sets, numerical contexts and astronomical connections set forth in Third Nephi. I cannot speculate that the large plates of Nephi included other dates that Mormon might have used. However, the small plates of Nephi unquestionably referred to the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, king of the Jews. That express chronological reference may have provided the additional number 1 that Mormon needed for the data sets in the book of Third Nephi.

As I conclude this chapter, can I claim that Chart III presents an accurate interpretation of the chronology of Lehi's escape from Jerusalem? With both certainty and rational reserve, I can state that an accurate interpretation of the text has been my intention. The reason for my equivocal answer is not any weakness I perceive in the process I have proposed or in the rationality I can perceive in my application of the process. My equivocation is mandated by the principle of thoroughness, which requires me to seek for all of the relevant information.

With respect to a specific time period for Lehi's escape from Jerusalem, several significant topics have not yet been fully examined with the rational process. Lehi's 600-year prophecy has three principal parts. The first, of course, is the time when Lehi came out of Jerusalem (the topic I have addressed in this chapter). The second component is the calendar that Lehi and his descendants used to count the 600-year period. That topic is addressed in the chapter on "Calendars." Lehi's 600-year prophecy was not measured with a calendar that led the Nephites to accumulate something close to 600 years—plus or minus several years. The Nephite record states that the calendar keepers counted a precise 600 years and in the "commencement" of the 92nd year of the reign of the judges (which began some time before the 600th year ended; 3 Nephi 1:1), the signs of the Messiah's birth were seen by Lehi's descendants (Helaman 14:2-13; 3 Nephi 1:5-22).<sup>6</sup> The third part of Lehi's 600-year prophecy, of course, is the birth-date of the Messiah (a matter associated with Hebrew and Christian scriptures and other relevant sources, in addition to the Book of Mormon). Then, the time of the Messiah's birth must be related to the time when the signs of the Messiah's death were experienced by Lehi's descendants (1 Nephi 12:4-6; 19:10-12; Helaman 14:14-29; 3 Nephi 8:1-11:11), a fourth topic that must be examined from the perspective

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<sup>6</sup> See the examination of the chronological order in which years since Lehi's escape were linked to years of the judges in part one of the chapter on "Jesus' Birth."

of information sources inside and outside the Book of Mormon.<sup>7</sup> Only when a rational interpretive process has been applied to all four of these topics might one be able to conclude that the chronology of Lehi's escape from Jerusalem has been interpreted thoroughly (at least until additional relevant information is discovered and analyzed). In the concluding chapter of this source book, "Proposed Chronology," each of these four topics (and their associated general chronological discussions and charts) will be revisited in terms of rational alternatives for linking them into a plausible Book of Mormon chronology.

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<sup>7</sup> See the examination of chronological issues associated with the crucifixion of the Messiah in the chapter on "Jesus' Death and Resurrection."