

Part 6: Faithfulness and Diligence

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Did Lehi and Nephi ever hear news about the destruction of Jerusalem? When Nephi sought to convince his brothers to help him build the ship, he reiterated his prophecy of Jerusalem's destruction.¹ "And now, after all these things, the time has come that they have become wicked, yea, nearly unto ripeness; and I know not but they are at this day about to be destroyed; for I know that the day must surely come that they must be destroyed, save a few only, who shall be led away into captivity" (1 Nephi 17:43). In other words, some eight years after Lehi's escape (1 Nephi 17:4), Nephi did not know if Jerusalem had yet fallen to the Babylonians. If Lehi departed from the city in the first year of Zedekiah, then Jerusalem was not destroyed until about ten years after Lehi's departure; thus, Nephi's comment in Bountiful would make obvious sense. However, if the city was destroyed within a year or two after Lehi's escape, how could Lehi and Nephi not have heard news or, more likely, rumors of that event before they reached Bountiful? Or did they hear rumors in Bountiful that Judah and its fortified capital city continued to exist?

To examine the question of ancient news in the context of Lehi's escape late in Zedekiah's reign, I will first look at the text describing the trek of Lehi's group from the Red Sea to Bountiful. Staying away from Jerusalem protected Lehi from his enemies (1 Nephi 2:1-4; 3:18; 7:14-15); however, the overriding purpose of the journey was for Lehi's group to reach the land promised to them by the Lord (1 Nephi 2:20; 5:5; 7:13; 17:13-14; 2 Nephi 1:3-5). Laman and Lemuel fought against this purpose enough times (e.g., 1 Nephi 2:11-14; 3:14-18, 28-31; 7:6-7; 17:17-22) that the group would not have stayed at any interim camp longer than necessary (e.g., 1 Nephi 16:8-9).

After leaving the base camp, Lehi's group traveled four days and camped at a place they called "Shazer" to hunt and replenish the provisions they had been carrying (1 Nephi 16:11-14). They then traveled for "the space of many days, slaying food by the way" and "keeping in the most fertile parts of the wilderness, which were in the borders near the Red Sea" (1 Nephi 16:15-16). Eventually, they camped near a mountain "for the space of a time, that we might again rest ourselves and obtain food for our families" (1 Nephi 16:17-32). Then the group again "traveled for the space of many days" and camped to "tarry for the space of a time" near "the place which was called Nahom" (1 Nephi 16:33-34). The distance from the base camp by the Red Sea to the camp near Nahom is about 1,150 miles.² The distance could have been traveled, using Jeffrey R. Chadwick's walking speed,³ in a single extended march of sixty days. The actual travel time may

¹ Nephi initially attested to his father's prophecy of the city's destruction during the family's stay at the base camp near the Red Sea (1 Nephi 2:16-18) and then again on the expedition to obtain the brass plates (1 Nephi 3:17-18). Later, during the journey with Ishmael's family to the base camp, Nephi expressed his conviction concerning other prophecies of destruction and stated his own prophecy: "[F]or all things which the Lord hath spoken concerning the destruction of Jerusalem must be fulfilled. For behold, the Spirit of the Lord ceaseth soon to strive with them" (1 Nephi 7:13-14).

² The general locations of the base camp and the camp of tarrying near Nahom (in the northwestern and southwestern parts, respectively, of the Arabian Peninsula) seem to be understood and supported by credible evidence. See, e.g., S. Kent Brown, "Refining the Spotlight on Lehi & Sariah," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15/2 (2006): 47-49; Jeffrey R. Chadwick, "The Wrong Place for Lehi's Trail and the Valley of Lemuel," *The FARMS Review* 17/2 (2005):209-15.

³ Chadwick, "The Wrong Place," 202.

have been as few as fifty-one days if camels were used (which seems likely).⁴ Hence, I may assume the journey from the base camp to the area near Nahom occurred in one trek of four days (seventy-five to eighty miles) and two treks lasting “many days,” each (if I assume equal periods) about twenty-eight days or 540 miles. The treks of “many days” might not have been equal in length, but the data permit me to understand how quickly the group could have reached Nahom.

Nephi states that from Nahom, Lehi’s group “did again take our journey in the wilderness ... nearly eastward from that time forth. And we did travel and wade through much affliction in the wilderness; and our women did bear children in the wilderness” (1 Nephi 17:1). This is the first mention of childbirth and suggests that the journey from the Red Sea (where the marriages took place, apparently just before the departure) to Nahom took much less than nine months,⁵ perhaps something closer to three or four months (less than two months of trekking as described above, and one to two months for resting and hunting at Shazer and near the mountain). In the area of Nahom, the group camped for perhaps another couple of months obtaining food, burying Ishmael and mourning his passing.⁶ However, the desire to reach the promised land, the threat of rebellion and murder, and the need to travel as far as practicable before the time of childbirth drew near probably all influenced Lehi’s group to travel eastward from Nahom as soon as possible.

S. Kent Brown’s interpretation of the Book of Mormon regarding the difficult physical environs that Lehi’s group encountered and the bondage that might have occurred as they traveled eastward seems plausible.⁷ The distance from Nahom to Bountiful was about 700 miles.⁸ At Chadwick’s walking speed,⁹ they could have completed the trek in thirty-seven days, but the group seems to have spent more than seven years covering that distance through the desert (1 Nephi 17:4). While traveling or in hiding, they sometimes ate “raw meat” and were prohibited by the Lord from making “much fire” (1 Nephi 17:2, 12), but it appears that they spent large amounts of time settled at various camps, perhaps working their way through one isolated tribal area after another in some type of bondage or servitude (compare 1 Nephi 17:23-42).

That Lehi’s family spent four to five months at their base camp by the Red Sea seems to be a credible assumption.¹⁰ That they traveled and camped for another five to six months until

⁴ Ibid. Brown referred to two modern sources suggesting similar journeys ranging from at least two months to four months. He also mentioned a Roman military force of 10,000 men who marched a similar route to that taken by Lehi’s group in six months; however, after suffering losses, the army retraced its steps in only two months. Brown, “Refining the Spotlight,” 48-49, 117 n.19.

⁵ Brown saw the journey to Nahom occurring at a slower pace, but “less than a year,” by reading Nephi’s report of childbirths (1 Nephi 17:1) as occurring “at Nahom, not before”—hence, perhaps nine to eleven months after the departure from the Red Sea camp. Brown, “Refining the Spotlight,” 49. However, the childbirths are not described as occurring “at Nahom,” but “in the wilderness” and *after* the group left Nahom. These are facts of the text that contradict Brown’s view and indicate a more rapid journey.

⁶ Brown noted that “mourning customs would have led Ishmael’s family to grieve for ‘many days,’” citing Genesis 37:34 (“many days”); Genesis 50:10 (“seven days”); and Daniel 10:2 (“three full weeks”). Brown, “Refining the Spotlight,” 55. A week of mourning may have been consistent with the brass plates, which would not have included the book of Daniel.

⁷ Brown, “Refining the Spotlight,” 49-53; S. Kent Brown, “A Case for Lehi’s Bondage in Arabia,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6/2 (1997): 207-13.

⁸ Brown, “Refining the Spotlight,” 49.

⁹ Chadwick, “The Wrong Place,” 202.

¹⁰ Ibid., 211 n.6.

prompted to leave Nahom seems equally reasonable.¹¹ When the group headed eastward for their sojourn in what seems to have been mostly hiding or servitude, they could have been less than nine to eleven months away from the time when the siege of Jerusalem was lifted (which seems to have occurred in Zedekiah's tenth year; Jeremiah 32:1-2). If the city did not fall to the Babylonians until about the time when Lehi's group began to journey eastward from Nahom, then after that time the group might not have been able to get reliable reports. News from 1,400 to 2,100 miles away probably was not distributed consistently, if at all, in the depths of the Arabian Desert. At the seashore in Bountiful,¹² information about Jerusalem's destruction seven years earlier also might not have been available or, if available, might not have been accurate. Judah continued to exist for decades as a Babylonian province with a fortified headquarters at Mizpah.¹³ Even if some sort of seafaring along the coast can be assumed,¹⁴ I cannot assume the transmission of reliable reports, perhaps not even rumors, to Lehi's family after they left Nahom.

No record is available today that comprehensively describes the timing of Lehi's journey. What is clear from the existing record is that Lehi's family did not hear reliable reports about the fall of Jerusalem before they commenced building the ship in Bountiful (1 Nephi 17:43). What is equally clear is that such a situation was possible (in accordance with the principle of natural uniformity) even if Lehi escaped from Jerusalem as late as the respite from the Babylonian siege.

Consistent with the rational principles that I think should be upheld when interpreting the Book of Mormon, I cannot simply speculate that Lehi's escape late in the reign of Zedekiah *required* Nephi to have received a reliable report that Jerusalem had fallen. I cannot assume that the lack of evidence about such news in 1 Nephi¹⁵ constitutes proof that news was not received. However, the text does not leave me to speculate on the matter. Nephi indicated that he had not received reliable news by the time he was commanded to build the ship (1 Nephi 17:43), a clear statement that I cannot ignore or overlook. Whether unreliable rumors were received before Nephi's statement (such as Judah continuing to exist and trade with Arabia) or after that statement (while Lehi's group built their ship) is not recorded.

More importantly, the principles of thoroughness and consistency require me not to overlook or ignore the textual evidence indicating that the sure knowledge Lehi's group received about the city's destruction came to them in personal revelations (e.g., 1 Nephi 1:8-13; 2:16; 2 Nephi 6:8). Prophecies about the destruction of Jerusalem are important in the narrative of the small plates; so, a modern reader might be tempted to assume that the receipt of information about the destruction of Jerusalem would have been an event of great significance for the families of Lehi and Ishmael. S. Kent Brown and David Rolph Seely advocated a similar value judgment.

¹¹ Lehi moved when commanded by the Lord (1 Nephi 2:2-3; 16:9-10); so, if he was prompted to move more quickly, these parts of the journey could have taken less time—and vice versa.

¹² "There can be no doubt that the party of Lehi and Sariah emerged from the desert at some point along the south coast of modern Oman. The 100-mile long maritime plain is the only region in southern Arabia that fits Nephi's portrait of 'much fruit,' 'wild honey,' and 'timbers' (1 Nephi 17:5; 18:1)." Brown, "Refining the Spotlight," 56.

¹³ David Noel Freedman, ed.-in-chief, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary, Vol. 4 K-N* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 880 ("Mizpah"); J.D. Douglas, ed., *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Part 2 Goliath-Papyri* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, Inter-Varsity Press, 1980), 1013-14 ("Mizpah"); *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Vol. 3 K-Q* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1962), 407-8 ("Mizpah").

¹⁴ S. Kent Brown and David Rolph Seely, "Jeremiah's Imprisonment and the Date of Lehi's Departure," *The Religious Educator* 2/1 (2001): 28, 32 n.17.

¹⁵ Brown and Seely, "Jeremiah's Imprisonment," 28.

“Because the fall of the city had formed an important part in Lehi’s prophetic ministry ([1 Nephi] 1:13, 18) and because it was also part of Nephi’s prophesying (2 Nephi 25:9-10), it would be an omission of first magnitude if Nephi had failed to record the moment when party members heard the news of Jerusalem’s destruction.”¹⁶ These value judgments violate the principles of thoroughness (they ignore or overlook the texts that indicate a different value system held by Lehi and Nephi, such as 1 Nephi 5:4-5; 17:12-14; 2 Nephi 1:1-4), simplicity (they assume the transmission of news to Lehi’s group must have occurred if they escaped from Jerusalem late in Zedekiah’s reign) and uncertain cultural understanding (they arbitrarily impose a modern expectation that Nephi’s narrative does not fulfill).

According to these types of cultural assumptions, if news of the destruction had been received, Lehi’s group then would have known with certainty that Lehi, Nephi, Jeremiah and many other prophets had spoken the truth. The text, however, does not contain clear evidence that Lehi’s group learned of the destruction of Jerusalem through reliable reports. Instead, apparently during the wilderness journey, Lehi (or perhaps Nephi) received a prophecy of nurture and knowledge (1 Nephi 17:12-14) to encourage group members to “faithfulness and diligence” (1 Nephi 17:15), the two critical issues the group faced as they struggled through the desert. The text of this prophecy is available in the original manuscript¹⁷ and printer’s manuscript.¹⁸ With what I think is a distinctive repetitive form, the prophecy speaks directly to the issue of Lehi’s group not gaining knowledge of the city’s destruction during their wilderness journey.

A_{1A} for the Lord had not hitherto suffered that we should make much *fire*,
 B as we journeyed in the *wilderness*;
 A_{1B} for he saith, I will make that thy food become sweet, that ye *cook* it not;
 A_{2A} and I will also be your *light*
 B in the *wilderness*;
 A_{2B} and I will *prepare* the way before you,
 C if it so be that ye shall *keep my commandments*;
 C wherefore, inasmuch as ye shall *keep my commandments*,
 D₁ ye shall be *led* towards the promised land;
 E and ye *shall know* that it is by me
 D₁ that ye are *led*.
 D₂ Yea, and the Lord said also, that after ye have *arrived* to the promised land,
 E ye *shall know* that I, the Lord, am God;
 D₃ and that I, the Lord, did *deliver you* from destruction;
 D₄ yea, that I did *bring you out* of the land of Jerusalem....¹⁹

Lehi and Nephi certainly knew the Lord was God prior to their reaching the promised land. Lehi’s vision of the heavenly court and prophetic book opened the heavens to him early in the reign of Zedekiah (1 Nephi 1). Nephi’s visions of the Spirit of the Lord and the Lamb of God were received years before the dispute over building the ship (1 Nephi 11-14). However, other members

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Royal Skousen, ed., *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Extant Text* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001), 138-39.

¹⁸ 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 1-17* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001), 114-15.

¹⁹ The suggested repetitive form is mine. Capitalization, punctuation and spelling are as set forth in Joseph Smith, Jr., author and proprietor, *The Book of Mormon* (Palmyra, New York: E.B. Grandin, 1830; Independence, Missouri: Herald Heritage Reprint, 1970), 43 (emphasis added).

of Lehi's group were not so certain. Laman and Lemuel had serious doubts about the leadership of their expedition and they entertained murderous thoughts (1 Nephi 2:8-14; 7:6-7, 16-19; 16:35-39; 17:17-55).

The central repetition of the prophecy is the heart of its message. To be blessed they must keep God's commandments. Physical needs (fire and cooked food) and spiritual needs (enlightenment and direction) were answered in the wilderness with God's blessings, when they kept the commandments. The last two stanzas balance the first two and are about blessings yet to be given on the way to the promised land. The geographic references in these stanzas (wilderness, promised land and land of Jerusalem) indicate that the revelation occurred during the wilderness journey. The contrast and connection between the stanzas is vital to the issue of knowledge. Out of the wilderness that faith must traverse would come a sure knowledge. When they kept God's commandments and reached the promised land, they would then know that he had directed their journey from its beginning.

Nephi recorded this prophecy in the context of his report about the steps being taken to prepare for building a ship that would carry them to the promised land (1 Nephi 17:8-11, 16), but the prophecy says nothing about the sea or the ship. They might not have been contemplated when the prophecy was first given, presumably in the desert. Despite the lack of any reference to the sea or ship, Nephi's placement of the prophecy in the small plates makes his message clear. God will help them build a ship and bring them through their perilous ocean voyage, just as he brought them through their hazardous desert passage, if only they will be faithful and diligent in keeping his commandments. The prophecy may be read to imply that the Lord required Lehi's group to travel the entire distance to the promised land relying on faith in him and his prophets.

In Lehi's value system, reliable reports or rumors evidently would have been pointless. For him, the city had already fallen when his family was camped by the Red Sea. When Nephi and his brothers did not return from their first expedition by the time Sariah thought they should have, she "complained against [Lehi], telling him that he was a visionary man" (1 Nephi 5:2). Lehi responded, "I know that I am a visionary man; for if I had not seen the things of God in a vision I should not have known the goodness of God, but had tarried at Jerusalem, and had perished with my brethren. But behold, I have obtained a land of promise" (1 Nephi 5:4-5). For Lehi, the people at Jerusalem had already perished even though the walls were still standing. He had already obtained a land of promise even though he was thousands of miles and years away from that new land. Early in Zedekiah's reign, the Lord gave Lehi the heavenly book to read; so, he had no need to hear rumors or even reliable reports. He just had to be faithful and diligent in obeying the Lord.

Shortly before his death, Lehi drew his followers together after they had reached the promised land. Nephi recorded his father's words in what I will present in another repetitive format (2 Nephi 1:1-4). This passage is available in the original manuscript,²⁰ from which it can be seen that in producing the printer's manuscript²¹ on which the 1830 Book of Mormon was based,²² the scribe, Oliver Cowdery, dropped one phrase: *and rehearsed unto them*.²³ The complete text is as follows:

²⁰ Skousen, ed., *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*, 164-65.

²¹ Skousen, ed., *The Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon, Part One*: 143-44.

²² Smith, *The Book of Mormon* (1830), 59-60.

²³ See Skousen, ed., *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*, 164; idem, *The Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon, Part One*: 143; Smith, *The Book of Mormon* (1830), 59. The phrase was not added

A₁ And now it came to pass after I, Nephi, had made an end of *teaching* my brethren,
 A₂ our father, Lehi, also *spake* many things unto them:
 A₃ and *rehearsed* unto them
 B₁ how *great things the Lord had done* for them,
 C₁ in *bringing them*
 D₁ out of the *land of Jerusalem*.
 A₂ And he *spake* unto them
 D_{2A} concerning their rebellions upon the *waters*,
 B_{2A} and the *mercies of God*
 C₂ in *sparing their lives*,
 D_{2B} that they were not swallowed up in the sea.
 A₂ And he also *spake* unto them
 D₃ concerning the *land of promise*, which they had obtained:
 B_{2B} how *merciful the Lord had been*
 C₃ in *warning us* that we should flee
 D₁ out of the *land of Jerusalem*.
 A₄ For, Behold, *saith* he,
 B₃ I have seen a *vision*,
 D₄ in the which I know that *Jerusalem* is destroyed;
 D₄ and had we remained in *Jerusalem*, we should also have perished.²⁴

This is Lehi's testament about the most powerful experiences of his life, his testimony of God's mercies to him and his extended family. The Lord warned them to flee from the land of Jerusalem, spared their lives and brought them to a land of promise. In addition to these great mercies, Lehi had experienced the wonders of God: in the physical world, great lands and seas; and in the spiritual realm, the vision that changed his life entirely. "I have seen a vision," he told his followers. At any time after his vision at Jerusalem early in Zedekiah's reign, Lehi could have factually proclaimed, "I have seen a vision in which I know that Jerusalem is destroyed." Rebellion had destroyed it, but he had been faithful and diligent (1 Nephi 2:1). He did not need rumors, reports or even more visions to confirm the city's destruction. Lehi had read the heavenly book and he knew the city was destroyed (1 Nephi 1:8-18).

Brown and Seely assumed that "neither [Lehi] nor anyone else in the party had known for certain that the city had fallen" until Lehi received "a vision, after they had reached the New World."²⁵ This claim is inconsistent with the text (e.g., 1 Nephi 5:4-5) and would also appear to violate the principles of thoroughness (ignoring or overlooking the content of Lehi's earliest visions) and uncertain cultural understanding (requiring Lehi's certainty to be based on a vision that, according to their speculation, could only have occurred after the destruction and after Lehi reached the New World). The text can be interpreted without these assumptions.

Perhaps Nephi hoped at times for reliable reports of the city's destruction to help him motivate his rebellious older brothers because they did not believe the city could be destroyed (1 Nephi 2:12-18; 17:43). However, I should be careful not to assume that Nephi and Lehi must have received such news if they left Jerusalem late in Zedekiah's reign or, further, that Nephi was

to printed versions of the Book of Mormon until 1981. Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part One* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2004), 475-76.

²⁴ The suggested repetitive form is mine. Capitalization, punctuation, and spelling (except for the phrase that was dropped) are as set forth in Smith, *The Book of Mormon* (1830), 59-60 (emphasis added).

²⁵ Brown and Seely, "Jeremiah's Imprisonment," 30-31.

required to record such news at the point of its arrival, even though a modern reader might expect to find it in the small plates.²⁶ Such assumptions would violate the principle of uncertain cultural understanding (by confusing modern values about data and news with the values of Nephi and Lehi, who prized spiritual promptings and visions to give them certainty) and the principle of rational reserve (by imposing the reader's assumptions about appropriate narrative structure on Nephi's personal record).

The text in the small plates does not tell us explicitly whether the group heard any rumors about their homeland while they traveled in the wilderness or built their ship or, if so, whether they recorded such news as part of their history. If any of such events occurred (which seems unlikely in light of 1 Nephi 17:14), Nephi did not make it part of his narrative in the small plates. Nephi made it plain that the small plates would contain an abridgment of the existing historical record and that he would be recording the content of this new book, the truth as he knew it, in a manner that fulfilled a directive from the Lord (1 Nephi 1:1-3, 15-17; 9; 19:1-6).

Nephi's reiteration of his Jerusalem prophecy (1 Nephi 7:13-14) in 1 Nephi 17:43 implies that even after Lehi's group had arrived in Bountiful, no reliable reports of Jerusalem's destruction had yet been received. One scenario describing how the group might have missed hearing such information has been set forth above in accordance with the principle of natural uniformity. This scenario is not a required assumption for the late-departure theory. Other possibilities might be devised that could be consistent with the text. What is important to understand is that the Lord required his prophets and their followers to exercise faith and follow his commandments with diligence for the entire journey (e.g., 1 Nephi 2:1, 19-20).

²⁶ Brown and Seely relied on these assumptions. Brown and Seely, "Jeremiah's Imprisonment," 28.