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Godfrey J. Ellis

Abstract: *Nephi started as the youngest son of Lehi and Sariah and ended up as the king or king-like leader of the Nephite nation. While he, in some sense, obviously grew into the role over time, there was likely some key time or event when the transition from the leadership guidance of the prophet Lehi transferred to the restrained leadership guidance of his son, Nephi. A low-key leadership style was necessitated by the absolute imperative that the group be held together. This article briefly discusses four possible time frames for that transition but favors the idea that it happened in an area often called “the Camp of the Broken Bow.” This choice is based on (1) the symbolic meaning of Nephi breaking his bow, (2) the importance of Lehi murmuring “against his God,” (3) Nephi’s ascension to the “top of a mountain,” and (4) the subsequent near disappearance of Lehi from the narrative. These four critical events all occurred at the Camp of the Broken Bow. Evidence appears to suggest that it may have been at that time that there was a replacement of Lehi’s tenure, not as a prophet, but as the recognized leader of the expedition.*

There have been several recent publications concerning the journey of the Lehiters through the Arabian Peninsula and into Bountiful.¹ Recent research has identified 1) the *Wadi Tayyib al-Isma* as the Valley of Lemuel, 2) the likely setting of Shazer, 3) the burial area of

1. See, for example, Warren P. Aston, Godfrey J. Ellis, and Neal Rappleye, *Into Arabia: Anchoring Nephi’s Account in the Real World* (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2024).

Nahom and 4) the location of Bountiful in the Dhofar region of southern Oman — most likely at Khor Kharfot.² However, there is another Lehiite camping halt about which we know much less. Yet, it may prove to be of immense importance and a major turning point in Nephiite social and political history. It concerns the location and events where Nephi's steel bow failed.

At the surface level, Nephi's account of the events at what is often called the "Camp of the Broken Bow" are simple and well known.³ In brief, the exiles follow Lehi to a rest area to replenish the food supply. Then Nephi's bow catastrophically breaks, leaving the family with no food. Nephi then constructs a new bow, asks his father where he should go for food, and returns with "beasts which I had slain" (1 Nephi 16:32). They then move on.

As is often true of scripture, there may be multiple layers of meaning below that surface story. The typical lesson that is drawn from their stay at the Camp of the Broken Bow is that of Nephi's example of humble submission to his father's prophetic and parental authority. Even though his father, the great prophet Lehi, had startlingly joined with the others in murmuring ("all . . . did murmur against the Lord"—1 Nephi 16:20), Nephi still respected the seniority of his father. Compliance with the will of one's father played a greater role in family life at that time and place than it appears to play today. Thus, many teachers and speakers have appropriately pointed to his deference for his father's position as a much-needed pattern for readers in modern times. However, in addition to this masterful lesson on respect, the story of the broken bow offers other information that has not yet been fully explored.

2. Some writers consider Khor Rori as another possibility, but that candidate has serious limitations, thus making Khor Kharfot more likely. Aston provides an excellent comparison of the two; see Warren P. Aston, "Nephi's 'Bountiful': Contrasting Both Candidates," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 55 (2023): 219–68, journal.interpreterfoundation.org/nephis-bountiful-contrasting-both-candidates/. Also see Aston, Ellis, and Rappleye, *Into Arabia*.

3. Although some scholars have speculated about a modern specific geographical location for where Nephi broke his bow, I will follow the lead of Book of Mormon Central in utilizing the more conservative name, the "Camp of the Broken Bow." See Jasmin Gimenez, "Archaeological Evidence for 7 Locations on Lehi's Journey to the Promised Land," *Book of Mormon Central* (blog), 28 January 2020, bookofmormoncentral.org/blog/archaeological-evidence-for-7-locations-on-lehi-s-journey-to-the-promised-land.

Definitions and Sequences

One important consideration hints of the succession of leadership. Specifically, when did the transfer of leadership from Father Lehi to his youngest son, Nephi, actually occur? Could it have been at the Camp of the Broken Bow?

Definition of leadership

Before taking up this question, it is important to consider the meaning of the complex word *leadership*. This is a multi-faceted term. Entire books have been written to explain the meaning of this concept with its various nuances and permutations.⁴ One set of scholars has noted the astonishing existence of "more than 4,000 documented definitions of leadership."⁵ Indeed, many entire higher-education graduate programs exist that are based solely on training for *leadership*.⁶ Therefore, defining this term for this paper is somewhat difficult.

I will begin by saying that I will not use the words *monarch*, *king*, or *sovereign*, at least for the trip through Arabia and across the sea. It's worth pointing out that others do use those terms. For example, Val Larsen, in an article exploring the "birth of sovereignty" among the Nephites, uses such language over sixty times, arguing that Nephi in effect became the rightful king as early as his slaying of Laban in Jerusalem.⁷ Benjamin McGuire uses such terms over thirty times in an article comparing Nephi and Goliath.⁸

I do not see that level of leadership in Nephi's account of their travels. The word *sovereign* is never used in his account, and the word *king* appears only *one time* in the entire description of their travels, and that was when Laman falsely accused Nephi of having that future goal

4. For example, Peter G. Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, 9th ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2022).

5. Neelam Azad et al., "Leadership and Management Are One and the Same," *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education* 81, no. 6 (2017): 102, [ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5607712](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5607712).

6. For just three examples: the Chicago School's "Organizational Leadership," Gonzaga University's "School of Leadership Studies," and Brigham Young University's "Educational Leadership."

7. Val Larsen, "Killing Laban: The Birth of Sovereignty in the Nephite Constitutional Order," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 16, no. 1 (2007): 26–41, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1416&context=jbms&fbclid=IwAR3OIR4OOcdPlyE0wCfDxpC75Zurvsb8D8mvnXfJFn1dtsEa4hy7zHHkK8E.

8. Benjamin L. McGuire, "Nephi and Goliath: A Case Study of Literary Allusion in the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 18, no. 1 (2009): 16–31, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1535&context=jbms.

in mind (1 Nephi 16:38). In fact, that accusation seems to demonstrate that Nephi was *not* a king, at least until after the settlement of the City of Nephi (2 Nephi 5:18), and possibly not even then (see below).

Webster's 1828 dictionary provides the definition that was in use at the time of Joseph Smith. A *leader* is "one that leads or conducts; a guide."⁹ This definition appears to fit well. Considering the first part, "one that leads or conducts," Lehi himself credits his son Nephi as the one responsible for "bringing us forth into the land of promise" (2 Nephi 1:24–26). That sounds like *leading*. And Mosiah tells us that Nephi "took the *lead* of their journey" (Mosiah 10:13). As for the second aspect of Webster's definition, "a guide," Neal Rappleye, head of research at Book of Mormon Central, asserts that Nephi "used the Liahona to guide him."¹⁰ Timothy Gervais and John Joyce agree, writing that Nephi "took the compass, and it did work whither [he] desired it" and, further, "he was the one working the compass" (1 Nephi 18:21).¹¹ Nephi may well have also been the one to lead, conduct, or guide such things as travel stops (although that is never stated), decisions of directions of travel (using the Liahona), and worship services (with Lehi presiding). The latter seems significant because Alma knew that "the preaching of the word had a great tendency to *lead* the people" (Alma 31:5), and Nephi was noted for preaching, exhorting, and admonishing Laman and his followers (for example, 1 Nephi 7:21; 16:1–4; 17:15, 25; 19:22; 2 Nephi 4:14).

For this paper, my working definition of a *leader* is based on Webster's statement. I thus define a leader (of a group) as *the principal person who conducts and guides others*.

With this definition, I am not considering a natural charismatic presence — there is no question that Nephi was overflowing with that. I am talking about the named or readily identifiable role of guiding his fellow exiles and conducting the travel of the group. Before the Camp of the

9. Noah Webster, *American Dictionary of the American Language* (1828), s.v. "leader."

10. Neal Rappleye, "The Nahom Convergence Reexamined: The Eastward Trail, Burial of the Dead, and the Ancient Borders of NIHM," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 60 (2024): 22, journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-nahom-convergence-reexamined-the-eastward-trail-burial-of-the-dead-and-the-ancient-borders-of-nihm. See also, Aston, Ellis, and Rappleye, *Into Arabia*.

11. Timothy Gervais and John L. Joyce, "'By Small Means': Rethinking the Liahona," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 30 (2018): 223, journal.interpreterfoundation.org/by-small-means-rethinking-the-liahona/.

Broken Bow, that was clearly the role of Father Lehi. He was named as, and acted as, the group's guide. At some point, that leadership role transferred to Nephi. The question is when exactly that happened. There are four times when Nephi could have assumed the named leadership (conducting and guiding) of the group. They are:

1. At the time Nephi's people established the City of Nephi.
2. At the time of Lehi's death and burial in the New World.
3. At the time of the execution of Laban in Jerusalem by the young Nephi.
4. At the time of the breaking of Nephi's bow with its likely symbolic meaning.

1. In the City of Nephi

The chronology of the founding of the City of Nephi is quite clear in Nephi's account. Following the split between the two factions, which occurred at the time immediately following Lehi's death, the ones who left with Nephi "did journey in the wilderness for the space of many days" before they "did pitch [their] tents" (2 Nephi 5:7). Elsewhere, I have given the logic for the space of many days to be approximately two months.¹² There is absolutely no question that Nephi was the one who guided and directed their travel to that spot, almost certainly using the Liahona. Upon their arrival, "My people would that we should call the name of the place Nephi . . . and did take upon them to call themselves the people of Nephi" (vv. 8–9), whereupon "I, Nephi, did cause my people to be industrious, and to labor with their hands" (v. 17). Undoubtedly under his direction, the small group planted and then "reaped in abundance" (v. 11) over at least one growing season. They also raised "flocks, and herds" (v. 11). As a proven metal worker, Nephi would have been the one who guided the manufacturing of numerous reproductions of Laban's sword (v. 14). He also conducted the construction of numerous buildings using wood and metal. Some of those buildings were decorated with precious materials (v. 15). Additionally, this building boom included an undoubtedly impressive temple constructed "after the manner of the temple of Solomon" (v. 16). Although we are told of this in just three verses, all this production would have

12. Godfrey J. Ellis, "Nephi's Eight Years in the 'Wilderness': Reconsidering Definitions and Details," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 57 (2023): 326–27, journal.interpreterfoundation.org/nephis-eight-years-in-the-wilderness-reconsidering-definitions-and-details/. See also Aston, Ellis, and Rappleye, *Into Arabia*.

taken considerable time — likely years — during which he was viewed and understood to be the guide and leader. He guided the people; he conducted the activities — he led in every way.

But he was not yet their king. Nephi's account clearly states that these many significant and time-consuming activities occurred *before* "it came to pass that they would that I should be their king" (v. 18).

This is Benjamin McGuire's position. Although he notes that "killing Laban has significant implications for his [future] kingship," the position and title of *king* was not yet in play. Prior to the separation of the sons, the question of who would assume that future role "was a particularly divisive issue between the two separate factions of Lehi's children. And the issue of who had the right to be king is brought up frequently in the text."¹³ McGuire is clear that Nephi did not "accept the role of king" until he was requested to do so by the people (v. 18). Even then, he "seems to show some hesitancy" with that title.¹⁴ In fact, Nephi may *never* have been a king, per se. This question of whether Nephi actually became a king or not has been debated by scholars for years. Taylor Halverson points out that "Nephi aspired to emulate the prophet Moses while downplaying or eschewing the kingly aspects and actions of David. . . . Nephi did *not* want to be a king like David."¹⁵ Nephi's brother, Jacob, tells us that *later* kings were anointed (Jacob 1:9) and took upon themselves the name of Nephi (v. 11), but that does not necessary mean that Nephi was similarly anointed and coronated. True, Nephi "did for them according to that which was in my power," and that could be taken as a capitulation to their request, but that is an assumption. Larsen asserts that he was already the *sovereign* but was formally anointed and crowned a *king* at this time, but that is speculation.¹⁶ We are only told that his people desired a coronation and that Nephi did not desire that (v. 18). Pointedly, Grant Hardy writes that the Nephites were "establishing a monarchy over his [Nephi's] explicit objections."¹⁷ It is true that, whether Nephi "eschewed" or rejected the title of king or not, the people *considered* Nephi "a king or a protector" (2 Nephi 6:2). Whether

13. McGuire, "Nephi and Goliath," 25

14. McGuire, "Nephi and Goliath," 25.

15. Taylor Halverson, "Nephi Wanted to Be a Prophet Like Moses, Not a King Like David," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 59 (2023): 290, journal.interpreterfoundation.org/nephi-wanted-to-be-a-prophet-like-moses-not-a-king-like-david/.

16. Larsen, "Killing Laban," 29.

17. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 35.

Nephi accepted that title for himself at that time is simply not known. Reynolds states, “While Nephi may not have been formally installed as a king, he clearly performed the important functions served by kings in the world known to the Nephites.”¹⁸ In other words, it seems clear that Nephi had already been the group’s acknowledged leader—and had been for many years. All of this is to say that item #1 on the list cannot be correct. He had *already* been acting as the named leader long before his people in the City of Nephi desired to give him the title of *king*. In Halverson’s words, he had already fulfilled “God’s expectations of kingship” as defined in the book of Deuteronomy “in an exemplary fashion.”¹⁹ So, he did not become the leader at this late time; he had clearly acted as their leader long before this question of the title arose.

2. At the death of Lehi

That brings us to item number two: the proposal that Nephi transitioned to replace Lehi as the leader (conducting the affairs, guiding the people) at the death of his father—as Lehi’s replacement. According to this proposal, prior to Lehi’s passing, Nephi was presumably just one of the sons. This seems to be a common assumption among casual readers of the Book of Mormon: Lehi died; Nephi replaced him as leader. But that does not appear to be correct.

It is true that, in a patriarchal society such as theirs, a father generally binds a family together, and that seems to be particularly true for Lehi, whose sons formed two disparate groupings who were usually united in action, if not in attitude and belief. Once the emotional glue that had held the Lehiters together died, the bond was broken, and the family quickly collapsed. However, to say that Lehi was the emotional hub and even the *spiritual* leader of the group does not preclude the possibility that the transfer of logistical leadership (defined in this paper as leading, guiding, and directing) had not occurred much earlier. One cannot seriously read First Nephi without seeing that Nephi was much more than just “one of the boys.” He was central to the activities in Nahom, in Bountiful, crossing the sea, and during the brief period of settling into the New World. He was the leader much

18. Noel B. Reynolds, “Nephite Kingship Reconsidered,” *BYU Faculty Publications* (1997): 18, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/1488.

19. Taylor Halverson, “Deuteronomy 17:14–20 as Criteria for Book of Mormon Kingship,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 24 (2017): 5, journal.interpreterfoundation.org/deuteronomy-1714-20-as-criteria-for-book-of-mormon-kingship/.

earlier than the death of their father, as I will discuss later in this paper. This is not to say that Nephi exercised sovereign control, was the ruler of the exiles, and issued binding directives and commands to Laman or anyone else. Clearly, that was not the case. His leadership had, by necessity, to be low key and in the background. It is my thesis that his leadership was usually executed with suggestions, persuasion, and encouragements — but it was clearly leadership, nonetheless. Later I will provide evidence that he was named and recognized as the logistical leader — albeit quite reluctantly — by Laman and his followers years earlier. As Mosiah later stated, Nephi “took the lead of their journey” (Mosiah 10:13), and that journey was well before Lehi’s passing in 2 Nephi 4:12.

Immediately following Lehi’s passing, the tension between the brothers boiled over, creating an imminent crisis. If Laman had believed that his father’s demise would finally become his time to rise to the top, he would have been sorely disappointed. Nephi was already there. He had been for many years, although apparently leading from behind as much as he could. Lehi’s death only made Nephi’s ongoing shadow leadership more difficult to ignore; it brought it to the forefront. It was “not many days after his [Lehi’s] death” (2 Nephi 4:13) that Nephi felt “constrained to speak unto them . . . many things” (v. 14) and those “things” were primarily “admonitions” (v. 13). This fueled an immediate backlash and intense resistance, as it had earlier in Nahom, again in Bountiful, and yet again on the ocean crossing. What was different at the passing of the figure head, Lehi, was that Nephi’s all-too-familiar admonishing with “many words” appears to have been seen by Laman and his followers as a final insult and escalation — their proverbial last straw. It confirmed what Laman already knew: he was not going to emerge as the leader of the people. Nephi reports, “Their anger did increase against me, insomuch that they did seek to take away my life” (2 Nephi 5:2). While Nephi may have been leading from behind prior to Lehi’s death; with that sudden void, his leadership was now on full display. With Lehi gone, Nephi must have appeared as a usurper trying to replace their father. Although Nephi was in no way trying to do that, his leadership could no longer be denied. However, abundant evidence exists that nothing really had changed other than cosmetics; Nephi did not suddenly become, but had already been, the leader — and for a long time. Thus, item number two on the list does not appear to be correct.

3. At the execution of Laban as early as Jerusalem

Item number three in the list above maintains that Nephi became the leader, indeed the "sovereign," at the time of his execution of Laban in Jerusalem. A chief proponent of this position is Val Larsen²⁰ who asserts that:

A close reading of the text makes it abundantly clear that the killing of Laban was not an individual act, but rather a sovereign act that had a clear political purpose. That Nephi acts as a sovereign is an overdetermined fact in the text. It is demonstrated by multiple layers of implication.²¹

The principal symbols of his sovereignty were the sword of Laban and the brass plates. Thus, it would have been obvious to the original audience that Nephi's status or lack of status as a sovereign would be in play in the moment when he acquired the national symbols of sovereignty.²²

In killing Laban, Nephi acted not as an individual but as a sovereign. . . . Multiple indicators mark Nephi as being sovereign at the moment when he kills Laban. . . . [H]e has become emblematically sovereign, a crown prince whose actions are not those of an ordinary private citizen but rather the governing and protecting acts of a king.²³

By such statements, Larsen has promoted possibility three: that Nephi became the leader (defining leader as a *sovereign king*) when he executed Laban as the "lawful act of a sovereign lawgiver."²⁴ While it is true that Nephi was told by the Lord that he, Nephi, would *eventually* be "led to a land of promise" and that he "shalt be made [future tense] a ruler and a teacher over thy brethren" (1 Nephi 2:20, 22), Larsen appears to be saying that it happened much earlier in the story: on the sons' first return to Jerusalem to obtain the brass plates.

The Oxford dictionary defines a *sovereign* as "a supreme ruler, especially a monarch."²⁵ During the Old World travels and on the

20. To repeat an important nuance: although McGuire asserts that the killing of Laban had "significant implications for his [future] kingship," he does not assert that Nephi became their king at that time (McGuire, "Nephi and Goliath," 25).

21. Larsen, "Killing Laban," 28–29.

22. Larsen, "Killing Laban," 29.

23. Larsen, "Killing Laban," 30–31.

24. Larsen, "Killing Laban," 37.

25. *Oxford Reference*, s.v. "sovereign," [oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093](https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093)

sea crossing, Nephi was far from “a supreme ruler” and definitely did not act as a *monarch*. He did not command anyone, issue any royal edicts, sentence anyone to punishment, sit on any kind of throne, create any legislation, command any military operations, or rule over the Lehighes in any way. If he had the right and ability to make decisions that were binding on the entire colony of Lehighes, and that is questionable, he did not exercise that right. At least one reason for that is because Laman, Lemuel, and the sons of Ishmael (likely supported by their wives) would never have accepted such behavior. The travelers were already severely divided in many ways, and anything approaching those behaviors on the part of Nephi would have shattered any semblance of their fragile unity. Laman and his followers would have immediately pushed back even harder than they already had. They would have likely rebelled, mutinied, and returned to Jerusalem.

Supporting my interpretation that Nephi was not a sovereign at that early time is that Nephi did not claim to have obtained the brass plates for his own kingdom. Instead, he *reported back* to his father and *delivered* the brass plates to him, neither of which sounds like the acts of a sovereign. Neither did Nephi initially search the records himself; that was undertaken by Lehi. Plus, he credits the success of the mission to their joint obedience to the directives of the Lord. He writes,

And when we had *returned to the tent of my father* . . . my father, Lehi, took the records which were engraven upon the plates of brass, and *he did search them* from the beginning . . . Thus far I and my father had kept the commandments wherewith the Lord had commanded us. And we had obtained the records which the Lord *had commanded us*.
(1 Nephi 5:7, 10, 20–21)

For these reasons, and the absence of any king-like behavior on the part of Nephi during the journey, it does not seem correct to suggest that Nephi became the sovereign at the time of the execution of Laban. Readers can judge the credibility of Larsen’s idea for themselves. His article is certainly well-written and well documented. The bottom line is that Larsen offers one interpretation and defends it very well. I am merely offering a different interpretation.

4. At the Camp of the Broken Bow

This brings us to the fourth possible timing of Nephi's assuming leadership over the colony. The remainder of this paper will attempt to support the idea that the transition of leadership happened, not as early as the execution of Laban and not as late as the death of Lehi in the New World. It happened at the breaking of the symbolic bow and the visit to the top of the mountain while they were sojourning at the Camp of the Broken Bow.

Foreshadowing of Nephi's Future Leadership

We begin with the assertion that Nephi was not *the* leader, or even *a* leader, *prior* to the events of the Camp. Some readers, familiar with the final outcome, may think they see leadership on the part of Nephi prior to the Camp but that was nothing more than future foreshadowing and a charismatic and outgoing personality. The leader was Lehi. In 1 Nephi 2:1, we read, "The Lord spake unto my father (Lehi): . . . *Blessed art thou Lehi . . . because thou hast been faithful* . . . [now] take [your] family and depart into the wilderness." This implicitly appears to be recognizing Lehi's leadership role based on his faith. Later, in the same chapter, we read parallel wording: "The Lord spake unto me (Nephi), saying: *Blessed art thou, Nephi, because of thy faith . . . ye shall prosper* [and] thou *shalt be made* a ruler and a teacher" (1 Nephi 2:19–22). "Shall prosper" and "shalt be made" are stated in the future tense. However, the proximity and similarity in these pronouncements of the Lord, suggest that the parallel wording may be intended to highlight the similarity between Lehi and Nephi and to point to Nephi's forthcoming roles. In the case of Lehi, the Lord was referring to the things which Lehi had already done in his *teaching and prophetic roles*. In the case of Nephi, the Lord is referring to things that lie ahead for him: a future *teaching and prophetic role* and serving as a future ruler. Prior to the events at the Camp of the Broken Bow, specifically during the two trips back to Jerusalem, Nephi was only obeying his father's instructions. It was Lehi who made all decisions that were binding on the colony, not Nephi. Even when events pushed the younger son into persuading and admonishing his brothers, any leadership activity, as defined in this paper, was simply not there. Another way of saying this is that "no autonomous decision making was going on at this time — his activities

were being carried out on behalf of Lehi. Nephi was only seeking to carry out Lehi's commands and decisions."²⁶

A brief summary of those early events and trips back to Jerusalem may demonstrate this point. On the sons' first trip back in Jerusalem, Lehi made the decision, based on revelation, that his sons should return to Jerusalem to obtain the brass plates (1 Nephi 3:1–7). Once there, Nephi did not issue any directives or commands. In fact, following a mutual discussion and the casting of lots (vv. 10–11), it was *Laman* who was given the opportunity to assume the leadership position for this action. Although modern readers may assume that casting lots reflects random luck, that was not how they would have seen it.

In the ancient world, however, casting lots was universally viewed as a form of divination by which the will of God was revealed. The book of Proverbs assures us that “the lot is cast (‘goral’) into the lap (of the diviner); but the decision (‘mishpat’) is from the Lord” (16:33). That is to say, the result of the casting of lots is controlled or manipulated by God so that his will is manifest through the lot-taking. . . . Casting lots was intimately connected with Israelite temple practice and with assigning temple duties. The high priest was selected by lots at the time of David (1 Chronicles 24:31); the selection of Matthias as an apostle by casting lots (Acts 1:26) is undoubtedly based on this ancient temple practice. . . . Ancient Jews and Christians believed that, when invoked with proper purpose, method and authority, lot-taking was a mechanism for determining the will of God.²⁷

The brothers may have considered the choice of Laman as providential since it was consistent with the law of primogeniture. However, Laman's attempt was a near fatal failure (1 Nephi 3:13). Discouraged, and possibly concluding that the Lord did not mean them to have the plates after all, Laman and Lemuel were ready to abandon their father's command and return to the Lehi camp empty handed. Note that Nephi did not take over at that point and begin making decisions for the incalcitrant older brothers. Nor did he attempt to control their

26. I am indebted to Jeff Lindsay for this wording and for his noting the parallel between the Lord's wording vis-à-vis Lehi and his wording to Nephi—both were sent to the author in May and August 2024.

27. William Hamblin and Daniel Peterson, “Casting Lots: Definition, Biblical References and Context in Ancient Israel,” *Deseret News*, 27 January 2023, deseret.com/2015/10/2/20573546/the-casting-of-lots-in-ancient-israel/.

actions or act in any way as a sovereign. He is clear that he "did *persuade* my brethren" (v. 21) to try again — and this time as a group. (Note that verses 22 through 27 use the words *we*, *our*, or *us* 22 times; Nephi never uses the words, *me* or *I* in describing this second attempt to buy the plates.)

This second foray also failed, and Laman became furious, with Lemuel backing him up as usual (v. 28). But Laman's intense anger had nothing to do with any decision-making leadership on the part of Nephi. Rather, Laman and Lemuel were upset at the loss of their anticipated inheritance.²⁸ As Grant Hardy puts it, "Apparently, they had already begun to think of the family property as '*their* inheritance, and *their* gold, and *their* silver.'" In their sideways-directed fury, Laman and Lemuel began to beat Nephi. But note that, tellingly for this discussion, they also beat Sam. Why Sam? He was nobody's leader. In fact, they were angry "also with my father" who was not even present (v. 28). It appears that Lehi was recognized as the actual, though absent, leader who was waiting back in the Valley of Lemuel.

At the point of the beating of Nephi and Sam, an angel intervened to prophesy about Nephi becoming a ruler over them — again at some point in the future. "Know ye not that the Lord hath chosen him to be a ruler over you, and this because of your iniquities?" (v. 29). While it is true that the angel used the past tense, "hath chosen," that is true of all prophets and leaders who were foreordained to their future positions long ago in the Divine Council of the premortal spirit world. That was the timing of "the intelligences that were organized before the world was; and among all these there were many of the noble and great ones; And God . . . stood in the midst of them, and he said: These I will make my rulers" (Abraham 3:22–23). That Nephi was foreordained, likely at that premortal time, to eventually become the ruler does not indicate that he became their ruler then and there during the trip to procure the brass plates. Abundant evidence indicates that that was not the case.

As a group, the sons returned to the walls of Jerusalem, whereupon Nephi succeeded in securing the brass plates in a dramatic and well-known account. Unlike a sovereign or even a decision-making leader, young Nephi had nothing in mind when he started on this third approach to Laban — no plan, no strategy (1 Nephi 4:6). He had faith. In the beheading of Laban, which both Larsen and McGuire point out

28. Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 35.

parallels the story of the young David, he accomplished his mission, but he did not suddenly take over as king. Continuing the parallel with the young David, Larsen writes that “though he [David] did not formally assume the throne *for some years*, David became king in the people’s hearts when he chopped off Goliath’s head.”²⁹

Even if Larsen is correct that the execution of Laban fell under the sovereign rights of a new state, those rights would have belonged to his father, not to Nephi. Nephi certainly did not become a king in the hearts of Laman and Lemuel. The fact that nobody thought of Nephi as a new king, or even a leader, is further illustrated in the invitation Nephi extended to Zoram after obtaining the plates. He did not invite Zoram to *join me*, or even *join us*. He tells Zoram, “if thou wilt go down into the wilderness *to my father* thou shalt have place with us” (1 Nephi 4:34). Later, Nephi summarized the event by saying that “thus far I *and my father* had kept the commandments . . . and had obtained the records” (1 Nephi 5:20–21). Nephi had been operating under the decision-making direction of his father. He still had no leadership position over his brothers. I cannot see textual evidence that he became a king at that time.

For the second return to recruit Ishmael and his daughters as wives for Lehi’s sons, everyone knew exactly what to do, where to go, and even whom to ask—the Lord had named the exact family. There is every indication that Lehi and the sons already knew Ishmael. In fact, the children of the two families may have been first cousins. Hugh Nibley suggests that Lehi and Ishmael could have even been brothers. In Nibley’s words, “it has ever been the custom among the desert people for a man to marry the daughter of his paternal uncle (*bint ‘ammi*).”³⁰ Nibley may have gotten that idea from Sidney Sperry, who quotes Erastus Snow. Snow claimed that not only did Lehi’s sons later marry Ishmael’s daughters (which was the main goal of the trip), but that Lehi’s unnamed daughters had already married Ishmael’s sons. He writes, “Joseph Smith says the record of Lehi in the 116 missing manuscript pages refers to at least two of Ishmael’s sons marrying Lehi’s daughters. . . . In other words, Lehi was the father-in-law of Ishmael’s

29. Larsen, “Killing Laban,” 35, emphasis added.

30. Hugh W. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies [FARMS], 1988), 40, archive.org/details/lehiindesertworl0000nibl.

sons."³¹ Some writers have claimed that these daughters are the same "sisters" who followed Nephi much later — at the time of the final separation following the death of Lehi (2 Nephi 5:6). That seems unlikely and Nephi never refers to those later sisters who followed him as the wives of Ishmael's sons. On the contrary, those older, and already married sisters, had rebelled along with the sons of Ishmael from the time they first came out of Jerusalem. It is unlikely that they would have suddenly supported Nephi, abandoned their husbands and possibly their children, to flee with Nephi. Nephi would have mentioned that, had it been the case. A more likely explanation is that the later sisters in 2 Nephi 5:6 were additional, unmarried, younger maidens. They may have filled the otherwise huge birth gap of some twenty or more years between Nephi's birth in Jerusalem and Jacob's and Joseph's births later in Bountiful.³²

The point, though, is that Nephi was still not in any decision-making or guiding position; the four sons acted together in rare harmony. On their way home, Laman and Lemuel apparently experienced a change of heart and "were desirous to return unto the land of Jerusalem" (1 Nephi 7:6–7). Noel Reynolds writes, "They were not far into the journey before the rigors of desert travel brought Ishmael's sons and Laman and Lemuel to their citified senses. Grasping the seriousness and even insanity of this life-changing flight, they made a stand and insisted on returning to the good life in Jerusalem."³³ Note that Laman and Lemuel did not rebel against *Nephi*. They "did rebel against *us*" (v. 6). Who is "us?" Nephi answers that question when he adds that it was "against me, Nephi, and Sam, and their father, Ishmael, and his wife, and his three other daughters" (v. 6). (Note that the "us" did not include Ishmael's sons, who may have been married to Lehi's older daughters, if Erastus Snow is correct, and who all presumably backed Laman and Lemuel.)

The abrupt reversal seems to have come as a shock to Nephi who recognized Laman's and Lemuel's superior birth status but cries out

31. Sidney Sperry, "Did Father Lehi Have Daughters Who Married the Sons of Ishmael?," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4 (1995): 235–36, scholars.archive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1109&context=jbms.

32. The idea that Jacob and Joseph were born in Bountiful is based on Jeffrey Chadwick's commentary on 1 Nephi 18:19 that they were still breast feeding during the ocean voyage. See Jeffrey R. Chadwick, "An Archeologist's View," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15, no. 2 (2006): 75, scholars.archive.byu.edu/jbms/vol15/iss2/8/.

33. Reynolds, "Nephite Kingship Reconsidered," 7.

in disbelief, “Ye are mine *elder brethren* . . . how is it that ye . . . have need that I, your *younger brother*, should . . . set an example for *you*?” (v. 8). He is obviously not claiming to be their leader. In fact, deferring to their agency, Nephi acknowledged their “*choice [to] go up to the land*” but is “constrained” by the Spirit of the Lord to add that, “*if ye go ye will also perish*” (v. 15). Laman and Lemuel were instantly infuriated, not with Nephi having made any binding decision for them since he clearly had not, but *with Nephi’s negative warning*, which may have sounded like a prophetic curse. They were so angry that they bound him and would have abandoned him to die. This development echoes another set of older brothers who left another younger brother, Joseph, to die (Genesis 37:20–34). In the case of Nephi, others in the company interceded with passionate pleas on his behalf. Consequently, and in yet another startling change of attitude, Laman and Lemuel “did bow down before me, and did plead with me that I would forgive them” (1 Nephi 7:20). That extreme reversal, almost unbelievable in our day, had nothing to do with Nephi exercising any kind of leadership over his brothers. Hugh Nibley makes that abundantly clear, teaching that,

When you’ve done a serious wrong to someone, the only way to apologize is to bow down to them. That’s another custom. Bowing down was an act of apology and not of submission. They were not bowing down in submission at all. They were still the older brothers, but they apologized for the wrong they had done. They reversed it, and they pleaded with him that he would forgive them. You ask, ‘Is that plausible?’ Well, this happens all the time; it’s classic.”³⁴

Supporting Nibley’s contention was Nephi’s immediate response to his brothers. “I did frankly forgive them all they had done, and I did exhort them that they would pray unto the Lord for forgiveness” (1 Nephi 7:21).

During the next eight chapters, we again read nothing about Nephi making decisions for the colony or even conducting or guiding it. Lehi tells the family about his doctrinally rich dream or vision, and Nephi experiences his own amazing follow-up theophany on “an exceedingly

34. Hugh W. Nibley, *Teachings of the Book of Mormon, Semester 1: Transcripts of Lectures Presented to an Honors Book of Mormon Class at Brigham Young University, 1988–1990* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1993), 133, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/mi/70/.

high mountain" (1 Nephi 11:1). Nowhere in either vision is Nephi given, or even promised, leadership authority.

Following his sacred theophany, Nephi returned not to *his own tent*, and not even just *to the camp*, but "to the tent of my father" (1 Nephi 15:1). This is an important detail that is easy to miss, yet it may add appreciably to our understanding. Hugh Nibley notes that "Nephi . . . refers constantly to his father's tent as the center of his universe. To an Arab, 'My father dwelt in a tent' says everything."³⁵ This implies, again, that Lehi, not Nephi, was the recognized and acknowledged decision-making leader. Nephi refers to the "tent of my father" thirteen times prior to the Camp of the Broken Bow, and most of them (ten) are *after* the execution of Laban.

- "He [Lehi] pitched his tent in a valley" [of Lemuel] (1 Nephi 2:6)
- "My father dwelt in a tent" (1 Nephi 2:15)
- "I, Nephi, returned from speaking with the Lord, to the tent of my father" (1 Nephi 3:1)
- "[We] journeyed unto the tent of our father" (1 Nephi 4:38)
- "When we had returned to the tent of my father" (1 Nephi 5:7)
- "Down into the wilderness to the tent of our father" (1 Nephi 7:5)
- "We did again travel on our journey towards the tent of our father" (1 Nephi 7:21)
- "We did come down unto the tent of our father" (1 Nephi 7:22)
- "And all these things did my father see, and hear, and speak as he dwelt in a tent" (1 Nephi 9:1)
- "And all these things . . . were done as my father dwelt in a tent" (1 Nephi 10:16)
- "I returned to the tent of my father" (1 Nephi 15:1)
- "All these things were said and done as my father dwelt in a tent" (1 Nephi 16:6)
- "My father . . . went forth to the tent door" (1 Nephi 16:10)

It seems significant that, when Nephi returned from the top of the mountain at the Camp of the Broken Bow with his game, he no longer referred to the tent of his father as he had been adamant about specifying prior to the Camp. Instead, he wrote, "I did return to *our tents*, bearing the beasts which I had slain" (1 Nephi 16:32). Is the change from "the tent of my father" to "our tents" just a meaningless wording

35. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 51.

difference, or is it one small hint that the base of authority and guidance of the colony had shifted at the Camp of the Broken Bow? Moreover, after the events at the Camp, Nephi never again refers to his father's tent.

Returning to the narrative, after the Valley of Lemuel, the family then traveled to Shazer. There is still no special mention of Nephi. The sons of Lehi, and presumably of Ishmael, hunted as equals along the way and again at Shazer. "We did take our bows and our arrows, and go forth into the wilderness to slay food for our families; and after we had slain food for our families we did return again to our families . . . slaying food by the way, with our bows and our arrows" (1 Nephi 16:14).

Changes at the Camp of the Broken Bow

The Lehtes eventually arrived at the Camp of the Broken Bow, located somewhere in a much more arid section of the Arabian desert. The young men again went hunting for food but, this time, as Nephi went forth to slay game, his "fine steel" bow broke (1 Nephi 16:18). It is at this point that everything changed. It is the thesis of this article that the power structure also changed. This can be seen in the concrete and symbolic meanings of a broken bow, in the behavior and possible consequences of Lehi's murmuring, in Nephi's concrete and symbolic solo climb to the top of the mountain, and in Lehi's virtual disappearance from the narrative. Each will be discussed below.

The catastrophe and symbolism of the broken bow

Nephi tells us that the bows of the other men also lost their springs around this same time (1 Nephi 16:21). A scholarly consensus is that the loss of the spring in the wooden bows was due to a radical change in the humidity and heat between the two desert ecosystems.³⁶ But that was only the beginning of the crisis. It was bad enough for the wooden bows to fail, but it was absolutely devastating that "as I, Nephi,

36. Warren Aston wrote that the loss of the bows was "almost certainly the result of the change from the milder, moister climate of Jerusalem to the dry desert heat." Warren P. Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia: The Old World Setting of the Book of Mormon* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris Publishing, 2015), 48–49. In an interesting website discussion, Ron Smith explains how "the movement of moisture into or out of the wood can cause it to shrink, expand, warp, or crack." Ron Smith, "How Wood Responds to Changes in Temperature and Humidity Wood's Tumultuous Relationship with the Elements," *Wagner Meters* (website), 17 October 2023, wagnermeters.com/moisture-meters/wood-info/how-temp-affects-wood/.

went forth to slay food, behold, I did break my bow, which was made of steel" (v. 18). Note the specific mention of the composition of his bow as opposed to the bows of the others. When engraving on metal, every word must be considered important.

Although artistic representations of this event may dramatically portray Nephi's "fine steel" bow as having snapped in half, that is likely just artistic license. Nibley points out that "a steel bow was not necessarily a solid piece of metal, any more than the Canaanites' 'chariots of iron' were solid iron."³⁷ Hamblin points out that Nephi's bow was almost certainly also a wooden bow though "reinforced in certain parts . . . with bronze. . . . A pure steel bow . . . would be essentially impossible to break by human muscle power alone."³⁸ Warren Aston concurs, writing, "When the Old Testament refers to bows of 'steel' (2 Samuel 22:35) the phrase should probably be translated as bows of 'bronze.' Nephi's account of his bow made of "fine steel" (16:18) may actually refer to a *wooden* double-convex, or composite, bow that had bronze parts or plating for extra strength."³⁹ The point is that Nephi's composite bow appears to have been the main bow, the most powerful weapon, for which the other all-wooden bows were merely appendages. It is interesting that Nephi called it "*my* bow," an ownership phrase that he emphasized three times in 1 Nephi 16:18, and once in verse 21. The likely explanation for why it was Nephi who owned the most powerful bow is not that he was already their king — he was not — but only that he fabricated this composite bow himself. Scholars have asserted that Nephi, and possibly also Lehi, were both skilled metal workers.⁴⁰

37. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 59.

38. William J. Hamblin, "The Bow and Arrow in the Book of Mormon," in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1990), 374.

39. Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia*, 48–49.

40. This claim is supported by the observation that Nephi was enamored by and highly appreciative of fine metal working. Evidence for that was that he took the time and space on the precious plates to laboriously engrave his admiration for the fine workmanship of Laban's sword (1 Nephi 4:9) as well as the workmanship of the Liahona (1 Nephi 16:10). Note also that Nephi's first question when the Lord revealed that he was to construct a ship in Bountiful was not, "Where can I find *tools*?" but "Whither shall I go that I may find ore to smelt, that I may *make tools*" (1 Nephi 17:8–10). He apparently "already knew how to make tools that were capable of standing up to constant use in heavy construction over several years." Ellis, "Nephi's Eight Years," 343. See also John Tvedtnes, *The Most Correct Book: Insights from a Book of Mormon Scholar* (Springville, UT: Horizon, 2004), 93–95, storage.googleapis.com/scripturecentral-prod-strap1-uploads/john_a_tvedtnes_the_most_correct_book_1999_db028ec87f

Nephi immediately set about replacing his steel bow with a home-made wooden one. The first problem was that he could not use just any wood. Building a lethal bow required a particular kind of wood. In fact, as Hugh Nibley notes, “According to the ancient Arab writers, the only bow-wood obtainable in all Arabia . . . grew only” in an area “situated in the very region where, if we follow the Book of Mormon, the broken bow incident occurred.” He adds that “the finding of bow-wood [was] viewed as something of a miracle by the party.”⁴¹

But finding the right wood was only the first problem. Next, he had to know how to construct a bow. A replacement bow had to be lethal at a distance, i.e., it had to be more than just a bent branch with a string of animal gut. The record does not indicate that anyone other than Nephi, and possibly Lehi, had the knowledge to create a suitable weapon. Still, constructing a lethal bow in a workshop in the large city of Jerusalem was not the same thing as constructing a lethal bow in a temporary camp in the middle of a desert. If Nephi had been the one who originally built his “fine steel [or composite] bow,” he already knew something about making a workable weapon. Even so, Nibley continues quite dramatically: “Though it sounds simple enough when we read about it, it was almost as great a feat for Nephi to make a bow as it was for him to build a ship, and he is justly proud of his achievement.”⁴²

In addition to the new bow, Nephi constructed at least one arrow to match the weight of the new bow (1 Nephi 16:23). Warren Aston notes, “There is another significant detail that only an archer would appreciate: Nephi . . . also reports making a new arrow. The arrows for a heavier ‘steel’ bow would have been unsuitable for a lighter wooden

/john_a_tvedtnes_the_most_correct_book_1999_db028ec87f.pdf; Warren P. Aston, “Into Arabia: Lehi and Sariah’s Escape from Jerusalem—Perspectives Suggested by New Fieldwork,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (2019): 10, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol58/iss4/4/; Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in the Wilderness*, 12; Warren P. Aston, “Across Arabia with Lehi and Sariah: ‘Truth Shall Spring Out of the Earth,’” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15, no. 2 (2006): 20, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol15/iss2/4/; and Jeffrey R. Chadwick, “Lehi’s House at Jerusalem and the Land of His Inheritance,” in *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 81–130, scripturecentral.org/archive/books/book/glimpses-lehis-jerusalem?searchId=8d12a2450a3f2b3a0238b782a4cd56b09c68f3c880b1713cf9d612ccd0305c2c-en-v=e32bc4b.

41. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 61.

42. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 60–61.

bow, thus the need to match a new arrow to the new bow."⁴³ Hamblin marvels that this added detail was "another bull's-eye for the Book of Mormon."⁴⁴ That the combination was lethal is proven by Nephi's two-time use of the plural: "I did slay wild beasts" (1 Nephi 16:31) and "I did return . . . bearing the beasts which I had slain" (v. 32).

In addition to whatever miracles were involved in finding the right wood and constructing a lethal bow, there are also significant symbolic meanings to a broken bow. Ample documentation explains that, in the Ancient Near East, a bow was a powerful symbol of leadership, decision-making, and even royalty. Joseph Russo notes that, "Symbolic use of the bow as a royal weapon is frequent in traditional narratives" and that "the bow is by far the weapon most characteristic of royalty."⁴⁵ Richard Wilkinson adds that "In Mesopotamia the bow . . . was used as an attribute of immediate and potential power fit for gods and kings. . . . Literary evidence also suggests a close symbolic connection between the bow and the institution of kingship."⁴⁶ This symbolism especially applied to a composite bow like Nephi's "fine steel" bow (1 Nephi 16:18).

"For a considerable period after the composite bow was introduced, it remained primarily a weapon of royalty." Relatively few composite bows have survived from the ancient Near East. . . . [A]midst the treasures of Tutankhamun's tomb, 27 composite bows were found. . . . One of these, the so-called "Bow of Honour" was beautifully decorated . . . Howard Carter, who first discovered and excavated the tomb, described it as a "work of almost inconceivable fineness," reminding us of Nephi's description of his own bow of "fine steel."⁴⁷

43. Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia*, 49.

44. William J. Hamblin, "Nephi's Bows and Arrows," in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 41–43, scholars archive.byu.edu/mi/66/.

45. Joseph Russo, "Odysseus' Trial of the Bow as Symbolic Performance," in *Antike Literatur in neuer Deutung*, ed. Anton Bierl, Arbogast Schmitt, Andreas Willi (Leipzig: K.G. Saur Munchen, 2004), 98, 100; classics.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/downloads/parry/Odysseus__trial.pdf.

46. Richard H. Wilkinson, "The Representation of the Bow in the Art of Egypt and the Ancient Near East," *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 20, no. 1 (1991), 83, janes.scholasticahq.com/article/2366-the-representation-of-the-bow-in-the-art-of-egypt-and-the-ancient-near-east.

47. Scripture Central Staff, "Why Did Nephi's 'Fine Steel' Bow Break?," KnoWhy

Further, conquerors often broke the bows that belonged to the leaders of their enemies in an act that symbolically destroyed their reign and authority. “In the ancient Near East, kingly status, military power, and the right to rule were all symbolized by the bow. Thus ‘to break the bow’ was a common idiom which meant to bring an enemy or ruler into submission.”⁴⁸ Example from the Old Testament include Jeremiah 49:35, 51:56; Psalm 37:15; and 1 Samuel 2:4.

Noel Reynolds has convincingly demonstrated that part of Nephi’s intent in writing the small plates some thirty years after the actual events was to validate Nephite claim to the leadership of the people. In Reynold’s words,

The writings of Nephi can be read in part as a political tract or a “lineage history,” written to document the legitimacy of Nephi’s rule and religious teachings. . . . Nephi carefully structured his writings to convince his own and later generations that the Lord had selected him over his elder brothers to be Lehi’s political and spiritual successor.⁴⁹

If that is the case, could the account of the breaking of the bow have been seen and presented by Nephi, written many years later, as symbolic of the transfer of leadership at the Camp of the Broken Bow? Scholars at Book of Mormon Central support both this symbolic interpretation of the new bow as well as the idea of Nephi’s leadership occurring as early as the Camp of the Broken Bow where, in their words, Nephi was “taking the lead.” They write:

Although this story [of the broken bow] may seem rather unremarkable, it may actually be loaded with symbolic importance. . . . [It] helps confirm the Lord’s promise that Nephi would be a teacher and ruler over his brothers. . . . Nephi’s newly created bow symbolized that he was Lehi’s rightful prophetic successor. . . . And it demonstrated that, according to divine appointment, *he was* [present tense]

548, 19 January 2024, scripturecentral.org/knowhy/why-did-nephis-fine-steel-bow-break.

48. Scripture Central Staff, “Why Did Nephi Include the Story of the Broken Bow?,” *KnoWhy* 421, 21 August 2019, scripturecentral.org/knowhy/why-did-nephi-include-the-story-of-the-broken-bow. See also Noel Reynolds, “The Political Dimension in Nephi’s small plates,” *BYU Studies* 27, no.3 (1987): 28, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol27/iss4/3.

49. Reynolds, “The Political Dimension,” 15.

"taking the lead of their journey in the wilderness" (Mosiah 10:13).⁵⁰

In the breaking of the bow, which was a *literal* event, Nephi may have recognized an embedded *symbolic* event. The breaking of authority gave him an opportunity to symbolically demonstrate the validity of Nephite government when that validity was later vigorously challenged by the Lamanites who saw Nephi as nothing more than a thief and a usurper (see Mosiah 10:16).

A clarification is needed here. Does this symbolic meaning support the idea that Nephi became the king earlier—as early as when he executed Laban? I don't believe so. Even though it was Nephi's bow, its climate-related breaking could not be taken as a symbol of the breaking of his *own* authority. At the point when the bow broke, Nephi does not appear to have had any authority. In fact, this detail, that it was not Lehi's bow but his own bow that broke, adds another sprinkling of authenticity. If the account of the journey through Arabia had been mere fiction by Nephi writing a political tract thirty years later, he might have claimed that it was his father, Lehi's, bow that broke since it was Lehi who was the leader. But the account is not fiction.

Nephi may have seen, in the breaking of a bow and the replacement by another bow, an overall metaphor for a general transition of leadership—not a perfect metaphor, as metaphors never are, but useable nonetheless. Nephi's remaking of a new, replacement bow, then, could be used as a symbolic representation of a new structure of logistical leadership under Nephi. Symbolically, the breaking of the old bow and the replacement with a new bow may have been a useful and convenient way to express that transfer of leadership. This is not my observation only. In addition to the scholars at Book of Mormon Central, as mentioned above, Noel Reynolds also asserts that "this story demonstrates the *emergence of Nephi*" (emphasis added). In Reynolds's words, "only Nephi holds the all-important bow."⁵¹ Yes, symbolically, only Nephi held the new bow. And he used it immediately in the service of his people.

The chastisement of Lehi

Returning to the concrete story level, we know that following the

50. Scripture Central, "Why Did Nephi Include the Story of the Broken Bow?," emphasis added.

51. Reynolds, "The Political Dimension," 29.

breaking of the composite bow, the hunters returned to the camp with no meat. Laman and Lemuel predictably began to complain bitterly (1 Nephi 16:20). In fact, the entire colony “were *all* exceedingly sorrowful, even that they did murmur against the Lord” (v. 20). That is not surprising; it must have seemed as if all hope was suddenly gone and that this was truly the end of the line. As dire as that situation appeared, Nephi then drops the surprising additional news that “and also my father began to murmur against the Lord his God” (v. 16). The phrase, “and *also* my father” could reasonably be understood as “and *even* my father” (v. 16). This faith crisis of the spiritual and psychological leader, Lehi, was a major and totally unanticipated blow. Worse, with Lehi now joining Laman and Lemuel in murmuring, there was an immediate leadership vacuum. That left Nephi with a major dilemma. One response was for him to follow suit, join in a rebellion against the Lord, and follow the decisions of the leader, Lehi, who had now murmured “against the Lord his God” (v. 16). That would have spelled the end of the exiles. The other option was to allow himself to be thrust into the unwanted position of assuming *de facto* control of the colony, find some solution to the crisis when no solution seemed possible, and presume to guide the other members of the colony, something he had not yet ever done. In the face of starvation, and the entire company—including his father—murmuring, he had little choice but to rise to the challenge and fill the leadership vacuum. Nephi had to “speak much unto my brethren” (v. 22) to try to buoy them up in the face of what appeared to be a devastating and life-ending crisis.

Nephi’s initial intervention was to try what Alma later used among the poorer Zoramites in Antionum. Alma knew that “the preaching of the word had a great tendency to lead the people to do that which was just—yea, it had had more powerful effect upon the minds of the people than . . . anything else . . . therefore Alma thought it was expedient that they should try the virtue of the word of God” (Alma 31:5). Apparently, Nephi knew that as well because he recalls, “I, Nephi, did speak much unto my brethren” (1 Nephi 16:22)—and to great effect—for “they . . . humbled themselves because of my words; for I did say many things unto them in the energy of my soul” (v. 24).

Of course, what his not-yet-born younger brother, Jacob, later called “the pleasing word of God” (Jacob 2:8) is always best combined with, or leads to, action and behavior. So, as mentioned above, along with his exhortations and admonishings, Nephi began constructing a replacement bow. He then consulted with his father as to where to

go to hunt game. This was the same Lehi who had, in Nephi's words, "began to murmur against the Lord his God" (1 Nephi 16:16). That Laman and his followers murmured is hardly surprising but that "and *also* my father," (or "and *even* my father") implies that Nephi was surprised and surely disappointed. The use of the phrase "*his* God" and not "*our* God" may also be meaningful. It suggests the possibility that murmuring from all of the others was unfortunate but understandable given their own progress on what President Russell M. Nelson calls, "the covenant path."⁵² However, murmuring by the prophet and presiding priesthood holder—well, that crossed a line. It is worth noting the exact wording. Lehi had not murmured against the breaking of the bow—and he had not murmured against hunger. He had murmured against "his God."

Nephi is quite clear about what put an end to the murmuring in the group. It was *not* Nephi's bringing home meat and it was *not* his asking his father where to go to hunt—Nephi had not yet done either of those. It was Nephi's admonitions and reprimands. This is important; they were humbled because of Nephi's preaching to them as their *de facto* leader. "They [the entire company] had humbled themselves *because of my words*" (1 Nephi 16:24). And Lehi was particularly humbled. Nephi reports that his father was now "truly chastened because of his murmuring against the Lord, insomuch that he was brought down into the depths of sorrow" (v. 25). With a surface reading, it is easy to conclude that everything was now just fine, and everything had returned to normal. However, a deeper examination suggests a different conclusion.

Much has been made of Nephi's humbly acknowledging his father's position as the decision-making leader of the colony. He went to his father and asked him, "Wither shall I go to obtain food?" (1 Nephi 16:23). This deference to his father is often pointed out in talks and lessons as an outstanding act of humility, trust, and respect—and rightly so. However, more may be going on. Nephi did not say that the *others* were chastened—rather that it was the leader, *Lehi*, who "was truly chastened" (v. 25). An example had to be set when it was the leader who lost faith in the Lord. Now, in modern usage, the phrase "was truly chastened" would mean that he was emotionally humbled and undoubtedly embarrassed. Many modern readers might word this situation as, "he felt chastened" rather than "he was chastened."

52. Russell M. Nelson, "As We Go Forward Together," *Ensign*, April 2018, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2018/04/as-we-go-forward-together.

There is a subtle but significant difference between the two phrases. According to the dictionary in use in Joseph Smith's day, *chasten* was defined as "to correct by punishment; to punish."⁵³ The first and main definition in the more modern Merriam-Webster similarly expresses that the verb, *chasten*, is "to correct by punishment or suffering: to discipline."⁵⁴

In a three-volume commentary on the Book of Mormon, McConkie and Millet assert that Nephi's humble deference "had [1] the *desired effect* on Lehi, who [2] *felt truly chastened* [3] by *his son's request*" (emphases, mine).⁵⁵ The three italicized phrases may exhibit very important misreadings.

- First, the phrasing of "had the desired effect" implies that Nephi's main goal in turning to his father was not to defer to his father's authority and wisdom after all. Rather, it implies that Nephi was somehow trying to manipulate his father in order to achieve a "desired effect." That kind of manipulation on the part of Nephi would be totally out of character. It would place Nephi in a superior position as his father's teacher or spiritual superior, which is an unacceptable reading of the text.
- Second, the phrase, Lehi "*felt* truly chastened" implies an internal emotion like regret and sorrow; and it implies a *feeling*. Yes, Lehi was "brought down into the depths of sorrow" (16:25)—he had disappointed his family as well as disappointed the Lord and himself. But that leaves out any external consequences beyond Lehi merely feeling sorry. Nephi does not say that his father "*felt* truly chastened" (implying an internal feeling). He says his father "*was* truly chastened" (implying an external consequence).
- Third, the phrase, "by his son's request" implies that Nephi's deference to him is what caused Lehi to pick himself back up spiritually. But that is not correct. Nephi clearly pointed out that the group *already* "had humbled [past tense]

53. Webster, *American Dictionary* (1828), s.v. "chasten," webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/chasten.

54. Merriam-Webster, s.v. "chasten," merriam-webster.com/dictionary/chasten.

55. Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, vol. 1, *First and Second Nephi* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 126.

themselves because of my [previous] words" (v. 24). That had happened *prior to* Nephi's deferential and respectful question to his father about where to go to hunt.

The implication is that everything then returned to normal. However, that conclusion ignores that, in addition to just feeling sorrow, there needed to be an example made. It is reasonable to believe that the entire colony needed to visibly see that there are consequences for a leader to "murmur against the Lord his God" (v. 20) and to essentially lose trust in the Lord.

In considering the idea that Lehi faced very public chastisement for joining Laman and Lemuel in murmuring, it is worth noting that this situation is not without precedent. Other prophets or leaders were also chastised by the Lord. Just a few of many examples include:

- **Moses.** Received chastisement when he assumed the credit for producing water out of a rock at Meribah-Kadesh (Numbers 20:10–12; Deuteronomy 32:51). Although he continued as a great prophet, his very public chastisement was that Moses was not allowed to lead his people into the promised land (Numbers 20:12). An object lesson had to be shown as an essential teaching tool for his people who were transitioning from the servitude in Egypt to the service of the God of Israel.
- **Eli, the high priest.** Received chastisement when he failed to rein in his own wild adult sons who "knew not the Lord" (1 Samuel 2:12). Although he continued as the high priest, Eli's chastisement was that he lost his future place and was to physically lose his children and his posterity "for ever" (vv. 27, 30, 35; 1 Samuel 3:13–14). Significantly, Eli's chastisement served as a public object lesson for the people. Said the Lord, "I will do a thing in Israel, at which both the ears of every one that heareth it shall tingle" (1 Samuel 3:11 - KJV) or "ring" (New American Standard), or "be stunned" (Good News),⁵⁶ or "shudder" (Christian Standard Bible).⁵⁷ The

56. Good News Translation Bible, c.v. 1 Samuel 3:11, biblehub.com/1_samuel/3-11.htm.

57. Christian Standard Bible, c.v. 1 Samuel 3:11; read.csbbible.com/?book=1%20samuel&chapter=3.

emphasis was on a public object lesson for parents to “set thine house in order” (Isaiah 38; D&C 93:44).⁵⁸

- **King Saul.** Divinely anointed as the first king of Israel and who received chastisement when he made a burnt offering without priesthood authority and spared the king of the Amalekites (1 Samuel 15:3). The prophet, Samuel, proclaimed Saul’s public chastisement: Although he continued as the king, his kingdom was to be given to another—to David, of the house of Jesse (1 Samuel 16:12–13).
- **King David.** Saul’s successor and who received chastisement because of his well-known sin with Bathsheba, including the murder of Uriah. The entire country needed to see an object lesson: “For thou didst it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun” (2 Samuel 12:12). Although David continued as king, “he hath fallen from his exaltation” (Doctrine and Covenants 132:39).
- **Joseph Smith.** Received chastisement when he failed to trust the will of the Lord in the case of Martin Harris and the lost 116 pages of transcript. Although Joseph continued to receive revelations and restore the Church (Doctrine and Covenants 3–10), he lost his ability to translate for some nine months, which was publicly revealed (Doctrine and Covenants 10:1–3).⁵⁹ He, along with his current and future followers needed an object lesson to learn to trust in, and accept, the will of the Lord.

In all of this, our God has no desire to punish; he wants to teach. “Whom I love I also chasten that their sins may be forgiven, for with the chastisement I prepare a way for their deliverance in all things out of temptation” (Doctrine and Covenants 95:1). There is no question that Lehi fully repented and was fully forgiven. And there is no question that Lehi continued as a great prophet of God. He still heard “the voice of the Lord” (1 Nephi 16:25), was able to read the directions in the Liahona (1 Nephi 16:26), and received the command to board the ship for the promised land (1 Nephi 18:5). Once in the Promised Land, Lehi shone

58. See also then-Elder Russell M. Nelson, “Set in Order Thy House,” *Ensign*, October 2001, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2001/10/set-in-order-thy-house.

59. See also, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Lost Manuscript of the Book of Mormon,” *Church History Topics*, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/topics/lost-manuscript-of-the-book-of-mormon.

as a great prophet who received direct revelation in a vision (2 Nephi 1:4), revealed some of the most doctrinally rich teachings in the Book of Mormon (especially 2 Nephi 2–3), and pronounced powerful blessings on the members of the colony (2 Nephi 2–4). However, there still needed to be some kind of public chastisement or consequence in the eyes of all the exiles. McConkie and Millet also recognized that there would be “consequences” that went beyond just feeling sorrow. They wrote that the words in the Liahona contained “a very sobering message, possibly foreshadowing the *consequences* of their faithless and disobedient behavior.”⁶⁰ Although they use that word, *consequences*, they do not attempt to identify what those consequences were.

Of course, nobody knows what those consequences were because we don’t know what was written on the Liahona. All Nephi tells us is that “when my father beheld the things which were written upon the ball, he did *fear and tremble exceedingly*, and also my brethren and the sons of Ishmael and our wives [did *fear and tremble exceedingly*]” (1 Nephi 16:26–27). Their trembling is reminiscent of the people at the time of Eli (see above) whose ears “tingled, rang, and shuddered” at the news. Although we don’t know what the writing on the Liahona said, one speculation is that the wording may have had something to do with Lehi’s logistical leadership of the colony. Lehi had broken the trust of the faithful members of the group and challenged their faith when he joined Laman and Lemuel in murmuring. He had also emboldened those who were already not faithful by essentially agreeing with Laman and Lemuel in their lack of trusting the Lord. It was to Lehi that the entire colony, both the faithful as well as the complainers, looked for decisions and for logistical leadership. Lehi’s murmuring affected every member of the colony. Even though specific consequences and chastisements are not outlined in the text, it seems clear that something significant happened at the Camp of the Broken Bow. It is a reasonable speculation, as noted by Scripture Central and Noel Reynolds (discussed above) that the consequence changed Nephi’s position from one of Lehi’s followers to a position of making at least some, if not all, of the guiding decisions for the camp.

Noel Reynolds convincingly explains that the events that happened at the Camp of the Broken Bow were “a *significant turning point* in Nephi’s account, for it is here [at the Camp] that Nephi emerges *undeniably* as co-leader with his father.”⁶¹ That is a bold assertion. I

60. McConkie and Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary*, 126, emphasis added.

61. Reynolds, “The Political Dimension,” 28.

obviously concur that the “turning point” occurred at the Camp of the Broken Bow, although I would not frame it as *co-leader*. The evidence suggests, at least to me, that Nephi transitioned to replace Lehi as the logistical leader, but the recognition of that change, which was initially shocking to the whole party (1 Nephi 16:26–27) was softened, even downplayed, by Lehi’s continuing presence. It was also mitigated by Nephi’s extraordinary tact and desire to maintain unity among the travelers. We have already seen that scholars at Book of Mormon Central have connected the breaking of the bow with Nephi’s taking the lead and guiding the trek. In addition, Neal Rappleye quotes these same verses and concludes that “From a narratological perspective, these complaints appear to allude . . . [to] where Nephi’s bow broke, the family suffered from hunger and fatigue, and Nephi made himself a new bow—a symbol of kingship in the ancient Near East—and used the Liahona to guide him.”⁶² If becoming the leader and conducting much of the action and guiding the group was, in fact, the divinely stated consequence of Lehi’s murmuring, it may well have caused the ears of everyone to “tingle, ring, shudder” or “tremble exceedingly.”

If Lehi’s chastisement was a public change of leadership, was that truly a “punishment”? It may or may not have felt like that for Lehi. On the one hand, having the whole camp tremble because of one’s behavior would have seemed a very public humiliation. On the other hand, having a righteous son “take the baton” of leadership is something that might, after time and upon reflection, have actually brought Lehi and Sariah much joy. It seems clear that, for the members of the small colony who were essentially alone in the desert, a transfer of leadership would have been a powerful object lesson that would have changed everything.

The continued presence of Lehi would have softened the blow but in the case of Laman and Lemuel, having Nephi named as the leader, even if the leadership were expressed with incredible reticence and tact, would have engendered intense resentment, bitterness, and “eternal hatred.” And that is apparently what happened. Those negative emotions lasted not only for the rest of their lives but became an

62. Neal Rappleye, “The Nahom Convergence Reexamined: The Eastward Trail, Burial of the Dead, and the Ancient Borders of NIHM,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 60 (2024): 22, journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-nahom-convergence-reexamined-the-eastward-trail-burial-of-the-dead-and-the-ancient-borders-of-nihm. See also, Aston, Ellis, and Rappleye, *Into Arabia*.

overarching manifesto that they "taught their children" for hundreds of years (see Mosiah 10:16). In fact, Zeniff recounts this Lamanite "tradition of their fathers, which is this — Believing that they were driven out of the land of Jerusalem because of the iniquities of their *fathers*, and that they were wronged in the wilderness by their *brethren* because he had *taken the ruling of the people* out of their hands" (v. 12). The blame apparently shifted from the "fathers" (presumably Lehi and possibly Ishmael) and was placed on the "brethren" (presumably Nephi and possibly Sam) and this all happened "in the wilderness" prior to the New World, but well after the slaying of Laban in Jerusalem.

Zeniff continues that the Lamanites were "wroth with him" (Nephi, not Lehi) "upon the waters" (v. 14) and were "wroth with him [Nephi, not Lehi] when they arrived in the promised land, because they said that he [Nephi] had *taken the ruling* [past tense] of the people out of their hands" prior to the Nephite and Lamanite separation (v. 15). In other words, the Lamanite tradition saw Nephi as the primary leader even before the death of Lehi. Although I have defined a leader as just someone who conducts and guides, the Lamanites appear to have gone beyond that to claim that Nephi was a decision-maker for the group, although they defined that as being a usurper. That is why they taught their children to have "an eternal hatred towards the children of Nephi" (v. 17).

Notice, also, Zeniff's wording and description of the wilderness journey — all in past tense: "*Nephi* was . . . faithful in keeping the commandments of the Lord — therefore *he* [Nephi] was favored of the Lord, for the Lord heard *his* prayers and answered them, and *he* [Nephi] *took the lead* of their journey *in the wilderness*" (Mosiah 10:13). That seems clear; taking the lead meant that he guided the group — although by necessity very gently and tactfully. His leadership was recognized in a very limited way, buffered by the continued presence of Lehi. It could still be ignored by Laman and his followers, and it apparently was at least to some degree, because Nephi's leadership was nothing like an overt sovereign whose decisions are binding. Nephi had to hold the group together, but he may have been named by the Lord to assume the leadership of the colony and that, stated on the Liahona. Again, Zeniff does not say that *Lehi* took the lead, with Nephi as his able-bodied assistant, or proxy, or even co-leader — one who was gradually learning to become a future leader after Lehi died. No, Zeniff says that *Nephi*, not Lehi, *took the lead* of their journey *in the wilderness*.

Zeniff was an outstanding record-keeper and there is no reason to doubt his contemporary assessment of the traditions of the Lamanites.

It is also worth reminding the reader that, as stated earlier, Nephi was never seeking such leadership. Even later, after the final separation and in the City of Nephi when his followers wanted him to be their king, Nephi's desire was to only serve as a prophet and teacher, not a king who gave orders, made laws, and commanded his subjects.

Thus far, the evidence suggests that Lehi may have *lost* his place as the logistical leader of the colony as a public chastisement or consequence of his murmuring. However, that is only half of the equation. The other half of the equation requires evidence that Nephi *received* his place as the new group leader. We turn to that evidence now.

Nephi's calling to the "top of the mountain"

Let's begin with Nephi leaving the Camp alone (1 Nephi 16:30). In every other activity, the young men all worked as a group. This time, Nephi left alone. He did not even take his faithful brother, Sam. One reasonable explanation is that the writing on the Liahona may have directed him to go alone, and he "did go forth . . . according to the directions which were given upon the ball" (v. 30). The Lord may have intended to give him another personal and individual spiritual theophany. With only a few exceptions, prophets are usually alone at the time of significant holy experiences.⁶³ Examples include Jacob who was alone when he wrestled/embraced an angel (Genesis 32:24), Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:1–4), Elijah in the cave on Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:4–9), Christ in Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36–45), Moroni for 36 or 37 years,⁶⁴ and Joseph Smith in the Sacred Grove (Joseph Smith—History 1:15).

In addition to leaving alone, Nephi "did go forth up *into the top of the mountain*, according to the directions which were given upon the ball" (1 Nephi 16:30). Significantly, he was not directed *down* to the relatively

63. As stated, there were exceptions such as the appearance of the Lord to Saul/Paul on the road to Damascus, which his traveling companions could not see (Acts 9:3–7), the appearance of divine messengers to Joseph Smith when he was with Oliver Cowdery and others who were to receive a divine ordinations (Doctrine and Covenants 13:1), and the appearances to the Three Witnesses of the Book of Mormon (Doctrine and Covenants 17 Headnote).

64. Glen L. Rudd, "The Angel Moroni," Brigham Young University—Idaho Devotional, 11 March 2003, byui.edu/Presentations/transcripts/devotionals/2003_03_11_rudd.htm#:~:text=We%20know%20that%20Moroni%20lived,except%20that%20he%20did%20die.

fertile and watered Camp oasis to find the game that certainly lived down there. Instead, he was to make an *ascent* and "go forth up into the top of the mountain" (1 Nephi 16:30). Skyler Smith has written convincingly that "Book of Mormon prophets (at least Jacob and Nephi) viewed the plan of salvation within a heavenly ascent model. In other words, whether an ascension occurs in mortality (2 Nephi 11:2–3) or after death at the Final Judgment (2 Nephi 28:23), salvation in the Book of Mormon should likely be interpreted as redemption from the fall by entering back into the presence of God."⁶⁵

To be sure, there was also game at the top of the mountain, so the account also works well at the level of a simple story. The most likely kosher animal to be found high in the barren terrain of an Arabian mountain was the ibex, or mountain goat.⁶⁶ The desert-dwelling Nubian goat (*Capra nubiana*) is native to northwestern Arabia where the exiles were sojourning.⁶⁷ This Nubian ibex was a small breed so Nephi, a strong young man, could have carried at least two cleaned and trimmed carcasses, or possibly one goat and rabbits or other animals down to the camp (1 Nephi 16:31–32).

Although the immediate crisis was to procure meat protein, which Nephi did, that does not preclude the possibility of other significant events also occurring at that same time and place. What else might have happened on that mountain top? That may be another example of what Grant Hardy calls "gaps (conspicuous absences)" in the record. He refers to these gaps as places where Nephi intentionally omitted information in his text.⁶⁸ If this is, in fact, one of those gaps, we may justifiably wonder what might fill that gap. According to Hardy, such speculation is justifiable. In his words, "ordinary readers take it for granted that inferences beyond what is explicit are not just permissible but indispensable in understanding."⁶⁹ His own methodology is

65. Skyler Smith, "Heavenly Ascent in Jacob's Writings in Second Nephi: Addressing the Question of What the Plan of Salvation is in the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 60 (2024): 182, journal.interpreterfoundation.org/heavenly-ascent-in-jacobs-writings-in-second-nephi-addressing-the-question-of-what-the-plan-of-salvation-is-in-the-book-of-mormon/.

66. AZ Animals, s.v. "Ibex," a-z-animals.com/animals/ibex/.

67. Sandro Lovan, "Ibex: mammal," *Britannica* (2020), britannica.com/animal/ibex#ref241041.

68. For example, Hardy asserts that "Lehi's response to the killing of Laban is a gap." Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 20.

69. Hardy, *Understanding*, 24.

that he “tries to make sense of the actions and thoughts of the narrators in order to provide a coherent, comprehensive reading of the Book of Mormon as a whole (all the while acknowledging that other interpretations are possible).”⁷⁰

What strongly invites just such a search for the filling of a gap is the wording of the “top of the mountain” (1 Nephi 16:30). It may be noteworthy that the word *mountain* is singular. That specific and divine directive, which appeared on the Liahona (v. 30), has a particular meaning for people of faith — it is often a kind of code phrase for a temple experience. Going forth into the tops of mountains, when there was not a physical building to enter, often suggests temple imagery, as numerous scholars have pointed out. Here are just a few such statements:

- “The visions in the ancient ascent apocalypses often involved mountains . . . [because] ancient Jewish understanding [was] that the earthly temple was . . . modeled on the god’s house in heaven or on a sacred mountain.”⁷¹
- “The top of the sacred mountain is typically depicted as the most holy place, and the degree of holiness decreases in proportion to the distance from the center (or the top).”⁷²
- “The link between divine presence and mountain tops is a well-documented phenomenon.⁷³ . . . [It was] the place where god meets man, a place of theophany.”⁷⁴
- “The mountain peak represents a pristine and therefore

70. Hardy, *Understanding*, 25.

71. Barry R. Bickmore, “‘Show Them unto No Man’: Part 2. The Book of Moses and the Early Jewish Christian Esoteric Tradition,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (2023): 122. (See his entire discussion of “The Sacred Mountain” on pp. 122–23.)

72. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and Matthew L. Bowen “Jacob’s Temple Journey to Haran and Back,” forthcoming.

73. Richard J. Clifford, “The Temple and the Holy Mountain,” in *The Temple in Antiquity: Ancient Records and Modern Perspectives*, Truman G. Madsen, ed. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University [BYU], 1984), 108.

74. Richard J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 5, books.google.com/books?id=egD1DwAAQBAJ&pg=PA5&dq=%22the+mountain+can+be+a+center+of+fertility,+the+primeval+hillock+of+creation%22&hl=en&newbks=1&newbks_redir=0&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjEzNaOjo6EAxWvj4kEHWcrBGgQ6AF6BAglEAl#v=onepage&q=%22the%20mountain%20can%20be%20a%20center%20of%20fertility%2C%20the%20primeval%20hillock%20of%20creation%22&f=false.

undesecrated region. It is a 'natural temple' a place of altar, of consecration, of ordination, even of *coronation*."⁷⁵

Nor is the gospel as taught in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints the only one to offer such lofty ideas. Mountains have been seen as holy places throughout antiquity and in many religious traditions all over the world. That may be why so many Buddhist monasteries, Hindu temples, and Asian pagodas are built on the tops of mountains around the world and why architecture intended for religious rituals, such as pyramids, ziggurats, and even the Rameumpton (Alma 31:13–14), often assume the shape of mountains.

It therefore seems improbable that Nephi was commanded to "go forth into the top of the mountain" merely to obtain meat, although that is the story-level emphasis in these verses. Factor in also that Nephi received instructions from the Lord multiple other times on the tops of mountains, and all the other times had divine significance. The first was his theophany in 1 Nephi 11:1, 11, 21, another was his receiving the commandment to build the ship (1 Nephi 17:7); and there were frequent additional occasions where he "did go into the mount oft" and where "the Lord showed unto me great things" (1 Nephi 18:3). Later, in his Psalm of Nephi, he writes that "upon the wings of his Spirit hath my body been carried away upon exceedingly high mountains. And mine eyes have beheld great things, yea, even too great for man" (2 Nephi 4:25). In fact, if Nephi's being called to ascend the mountain near the Camp of the Broken Bow and, specifically, to the "top of the mountain," did *not* include a sacred experience, that would be the only time it did not. Thus, it is reasonable to believe that more happened at the top of the mountain than merely the slaying of ibex goats as meat for the Lehighes. Was it on top of this mountain that Nephi learned God's will about him taking over as the leader of the exiles? Could Nephi have received a divine commission—what Blake Ostler calls a "throne-theophany"⁷⁶—to become the leader of the colony on this mountain, confirming what might have been written on the Liahona?

75. Truman G. Madsen called a mountain "a natural temple" in his introduction to Clifford, "The Temple and the Holy Mountain," in *The Temple in Antiquity*, 107, emphasis added.

76. Blake Thomas Ostler, "The Throne-Theophany and Prophetic Commission in 1 Nephi: A Form-Critical Analysis," *BYU Studies* 26, no. 4 (1986): 67–95, scripturecentral.org/archive/periodicals/journal-article/the-throne-theophany-and-prophetic-commission-in-1-nephi-a-form-critical-analysis?searchId=8c633a3707513a66777aafa30691b5f30fd6209244ee00b93b56711a8b95b000-en-v=e32bc4b.

A scriptural reference to going up to a mountain, and especially, up to the top of a mountain, is usually a temple text, not only in the Book of Mormon but throughout all scripture and Restoration writing. Table 1 presents references to a prophet being called up into high mountains or the tops of mountains. The table demonstrates that, in most cases, that calling is to a sacred, temple-like experience.

Table 1. Sacred experiences of prophets on the tops of the mountains.

Prophet	Textual Wording	Reference
Abram	"And he removed from thence unto a mountain on the east of Beth-el"	Genesis 12:8
Abraham	"And get thee into the land of Moriah . . . upon one of the mountains"	Genesis 22:2
Moses	"Came to the mountain of God . . . and the angel of the LORD appeared unto him"	Exodus 3:1–2
Moses	"This shall be a token unto thee . . . Ye shall serve God upon this mountain"	Exodus 3:12
Moses	"The Lord called Moses up to the top of the mount; and Moses went up"	Exodus 19:20
Moses	"Come up to me into the mount . . . and Moses went up into the mount"	Exodus 24:12–13
Elisha	"And, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire"	2 Kings 6:17
Psalms	"Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? or who shall stand in his holy place?"	Psalms 24:3
Psalms	"Great is the Lord . . . in the city of our God, in the mountain of his holiness"	Psalms 48:1
Isaiah	"The mountain of the Lord's house shall be . . . in the top of the mountains"	Isaiah 2:2–3
Isaiah	"O Zion . . . get thee up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem"	Isaiah 40:9
Jesus	"And seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain"	Matthew 5:1
Peter, James, John	"Jesus . . . leadeth them up into an high mountain and was transfigured"	Mark 9:1
John the Revelator	"He carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain"	Revelation 21:10
Brother of Jared	"Went forth . . . upon the top of the mount, and cried again unto the Lord"	Ether 3:1
Moses	"Moses was caught up into an exceedingly high mountain . . . and he saw God"	Moses 1:1–2

Prophet	Textual Wording	Reference
Enoch	“Get ye upon the mount . . . [and] I saw the Lord; and he stood before my face”	Moses 7:2–4
Nephi	“I was caught away in the Spirit of the Lord, yea, into an exceedingly high mountain”	1 Nephi 11:1
Nephi	“Arise, and get thee into the mountain . . . I arose and went up into the mountain”	1 Nephi 17:7
Nephi	“I, Nephi, did go into the mount oft . . . [and] the Lord showed unto me great things”	1 Nephi 18:3
Nephi	“Carried away upon exceedingly high mountains . . . [and] beheld great things”	2 Nephi 4:25
Joseph Smith	“A sacred cosmic mountain” ⁷⁷ “most elevated . . . not far from the top”	JS — H 1:51
Spencer Kimball ⁷⁸	“The mountain-top experience in which . . . I knew that I was an apostle” ⁷⁹	Journal
Nephi at the Camp	“Did go forth up into the top of the mountain according to the directions”	1 Nephi 16:30

If it is correct that Nephi had a significant spiritual experience or theophany at the top of the mountain, this is yet another time, among several, in which he shadows the great prophet, Moses. As an interesting aside, it would also be a time when he shadowed the great prophet, Abraham, as well.

77. George Mitton writes that, “Although Cumorah is a substantial hill, it is, of course, nowhere near the height of Sinai. But there was nothing like Sinai in the area where Joseph lived.” George Mitton, “Joseph Smith at the Veil: Significant Ritual, Symbolism, and Temple Influence at Latter-day Saint Beginnings,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 58 (2023): 61, journal.interpreterfoundation.org/joseph-smith-at-the-veil-significant-ritual-symbolism-and-temple-influence-at-latter-day-saint-beginnings/.

78. Dennis Horne calls Spencer W. Kimball’s apostolic calling a “mountain-top experience in which Elder Kimball received, after much mental anguish, spiritual confirmation and assurance.” Dennis B. Horne, “Elder Spencer W. Kimball’s Apostolic Call Experience from his Own Writings,” *Interpreter Blog*, 15 April 2023, interpreterfoundation.org/blog-elder-spencer-w-kimballs-apostolic-call-experience/#:~:text=He%20climbed%20up%20a%20mountain,that%20%20was%20an%20apostle.

79. See Oscar W. McConkie Jr.’s interview by Mark L. McConkie, 26 June 2017, in Horne, “Elder Spencer W. Kimball.”

A Abraham went up into a mountain

B and had a spiritual experience

C after which the Lord provided a ram goat

D for a sacrifice

E and possibly to also eat

(Genesis 22:13)

A Nephi went up into a mountain

B and may have had a spiritual experience

C after which the Lord provided ibex goats

E to eat

D and possibly to sacrifice as they “gave thanks”

(1 Nephi 16:32)⁸⁰

Returning to our discussion, it is fair to question why Nephi did not speak more directly about his experience at the top of the mountain. If Nephi did downplay a spiritual experience on that mountain top, there are at least three reasons that could account for his creating what Hardy calls intentional gaps that are “deliberately omitted.”⁸¹

- Nephi may have wanted to avoid any appearance of self-aggrandizement and/or any risk of tarnishing his father’s good name and marvelous legacy. The focus of the ever-humble Nephi was never on claiming credit but rather to write about Christ.
- Claiming that he had been given the right to make decisions for the travelers, including for Laman and his followers, would have risked further stoking his brothers’ jealousy and anger. Nephi would not have emphasized a significant and divine “assignment” at a time when the colony members needed to be as united as possible.
- Nephi may have been specifically commanded not to detail a sacred experience. Like other prophets before and after him, he was commanded to not reveal sacred situations and events (see, for just a few examples, 1 Nephi 14:28, 2 Nephi 4:25, Ether 3:27–28, and Doctrine and Covenants 19:21).

80. Although I have underscored the wording similarities with letters, I am *not* trying to suggest that there is any kind of Hebrew parallelism going on here because, clearly, there is not.

81. Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 23.

Changes After the Camp of the Broken Bow

If the discussion about his experience on top of the mountain is correct, we would expect to see other significant changes *following* the events at the Camp of the Broken Bow. And that is, indeed, what we do see.

Nahom and the death of Ishmael

Although Nephi did not tell us exactly what happened on the top of that mountain, other members of the colony seem to have been well aware of some kind of change. The very next verse following Nephi's return with meat, the colony left to travel south "for the space of many days" where "Ishmael died, and was buried in the place which was called Nahom" (1 Nephi 16:33–34). Ishmael's daughters "did mourn exceedingly . . . and they did murmur against my father because he "had brought them out of the land of Jerusalem" (v. 35). Inevitably joined by Laman and Lemuel, the group also murmured against Nephi. While the complaint against Lehi was an old one — namely, taking them away from their comfortable homes in Jerusalem — the complaint against Nephi was an entirely new one. No mention of Nephi claiming to be a sovereign was made at the time of the killing of Laban or at any time prior to the Camp of the Broken Bow. However, just after the Camp of the Broken Bow, Laman and his followers now claim that Nephi has suddenly, "taken it upon him to be *our ruler* and . . . has thought to make himself *a king and a ruler* over us, that he may do with us according to his will and pleasure" (vv. 37–38). The words in that new, and false, accusation are particularly meaningful in light of the symbolism of a bow representing royalty. It was their perception that Nephi had suddenly, immediately following the events at the Camp, become not just a leader of the group, which would have been bad enough in their eyes, but also intended to become a king and, presumably, to render directives over his "subjects."

This is the first textual association of Nephi with the word *king*, and it occurs long after he executed Laban. It occurs immediately following the events at the Camp of the Broken Bow. This may be the reason why, many years later, Laman and Lemuel's descendants taught their children the remarkably similar accusation (discussed earlier) that they "were driven out of the land of Jerusalem because of the iniquities of *their fathers*" (Mosiah 10:12), presumably Lehi and Ishmael. The scripture then adds that they were "wronged in the wilderness by *their brethren*" (v. 12) because Nephi "had *taken the ruling of the*

people out of their hands” (v. 15). Since Laban was killed in the streets of Jerusalem, it is hard to reconcile that Nephi took the ruling of the people at that time. It seems to have been later, in the wilderness (i.e., the Camp of the Broken Bow), where that occurred.

In this same new and false accusation by Laman, notice the verb tenses. The angel had earlier prophesied to Laman and Lemuel that Nephi was chosen to one day be a ruler over them (1 Nephi 3:29) and the Lord had told Nephi the same thing: “thou *shalt be* made a ruler [future tense]” (1 Nephi 2:22). By contrast, this new accusation is not stated in the future tense but in the present tense. “*Now*. . . he *worketh* many things . . . *thinking*, perhaps, that he may *lead us away* into some strange wilderness; and after he has led us away, he has thought to *make himself* a king” (1 Nephi 16:37–38). This implies a new and immediate reality and neither a past nor a future event. Something important had clearly happened at the Camp of the Broken Bow and some writing on the Liahona had caused the entire camp to fear and tremble exceedingly (1 Nephi 16:26–27). Could it have been a divinely written announcement on the Liahona of a new leadership position for Nephi and a reduced position for Lehi? We obviously do not know.

How else can we understand Father Lehi’s apparent inaction in Nahom? Although the daughters of Ishmael blamed Lehi for the death of their father, Ishmael, we hear nothing of Lehi mounting any defense to that accusation. Why not? He was right there. Nor do we hear of Lehi offering any consolation to those daughters in their grief. Again, why not, if he were their leader? And what of Lehi’s own grief and mourning? Ishmael was at least his good friend, if not his cousin and possibly, as discussed earlier, his brother. Nephi writes nothing of that. Even more pointedly, there is no mention of Lehi confronting the horrific threats to “slay our father and also our brother” (16:37). Would we not expect some reaction or correction if he were still the principal leader of the colony? Perhaps some of that was included in the large plates or the lost plates of Lehi, but at this point, we simply do not know.

The disappearance of Lehi from the record

This lack of mention of Lehi in Nahom is only the beginning of Lehi’s disappearance from the record. He is barely mentioned anywhere else, either. In fact, the narrative reads as if there were two “Father Lehis” who made the trek from Jerusalem on into the New World. The first Father Lehi is featured prominently and powerfully *prior* to the Camp of the Broken Bow. Up to that time, he was front and center in

all the action. But we find a second, and quite different, Father Lehi, following his murmuring. After the events at the Camp of the Broken Bow, Lehi’s presence and voice diminish sharply. A second Father Lehi is very much in the background of the narrative. Even if he is less mentioned because it is, after all, Nephi’s account, that doesn’t explain Lehi’s leadership being so noticeably absent. Had Lehi acted as the colony leader, Nephi would likely have mentioned that. He didn’t. In the very few times that Lehi does appear in the narrative, he is noticeably ineffectual. Although he continues to be a faithful prophet of God, nowhere after the events at the Camp of the Broken Bow, is he described, or does he act, as the effective leader of the group. Following the Camp of the Broken Bow, it is all Nephi.

This assertion of Lehi’s lesser presence in Nephi’s narrative is not merely conjecture; it can be seen statistically in the number of references to him. *Prior* to the Camp he is mentioned or quoted 128 times. However, during all the years *following* the Camp and through the remainder of First Nephi, Lehi is mentioned in the text by name only *one time*. And he is never quoted directly after the Camp (prior to the New World), not even once. Moreover, he is mentioned indirectly (by reference only) just eight times. We never again hear directly *from* Lehi, only *about* Lehi—and not much of that. Table 2 provides the breakdown of verses related to Lehi. The table reveals significant differences between Lehi’s degree of prominence prior to the Camp and his lack of prominence in events that follow the Camp.

Table 2. References to Lehi in First Nephi.

Location and Time During the Trek	Mention by Name	Directly Quoted	Mentioned Indirectly and in the Third Person ⁸²	
Jerusalem up to the Broken Bow incident	8	10	110	
After Broken Bow and to Nahom area	0	0	2	1 Nephi 16:35–37 1 Nephi 17:49
Travel to entrance to Bountiful	0	0	1	1 Nephi 18:7
Living in Bountiful, building the ship	0	0	1	1 Nephi 18:5
Crossing the ocean	1	0	3	1 Nephi 18:17–18

82. Three references to “father” during the later portion of the trek refer to activities prior to the Camp of the Broken Bow. See 1 Nephi 17:20, 22, 44.

As table 2 demonstrates, other than the sprinkling of brief, third-person references to Lehi, we hear absolutely nothing of him doing anything significant following the events at the Camp. The latter time frame includes the journey down to Nahom, the events surrounding Ishmael's death, the deadly desert crossing to Bountiful, and the myriad activities in Bountiful where they may have lived for as many as six years.⁸³ That begs to be explained.

Some have suggested that the explanation for Lehi's "absence" is simply that Nephi, who was the one writing the record, does not mention his father after the Camp because that did not suit Nephi's writing objectives. They point out that we are reading the account of the trek from Nephi's small plates, not Lehi's own account, an abridgment of which would have been included on the missing large plates (1 Nephi 1:17).⁸⁴ Nephi makes it clear that "I, Nephi, do not make a full account of the things which my father hath written, for he hath written many things . . . of which I shall not make a full account [on the small plates] (v. 16) and that "a more history part are written upon mine other plates [the large plates]" (2 Nephi 4:14). This suggests the possibility that Lehi's activities may have had a greater presence on the large plates.⁸⁵ Scholars are somewhat divided on the question of the role of Lehi's record. S. Kent Brown gives it as his understanding that "Lehi's record . . . served as a source for Nephi's two accounts, those on the large and small plates."⁸⁶

Even granting the obvious fact that we are reading Nephi's record, not Lehi's record, that does not fully explain the abundance of references to Lehi prior to the Camp and the paucity afterwards. Nephi seemed happy to include his father as a major presence *prior to* the events at the Camp. Why would he drop that emphasis afterwards,

83. Ellis, "Nephi's Eight Years," 281–356; Chadwick, "An Archeologist's View," 75.

84. Manuscript pages were much larger than our own 8½ x 11 pages as Don Bradley points out in Bradley, *The Lost 116 Pages: Reconstructing the Book of Mormon's Missing Stories* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford, 2019), 155.

85. Bradley clearly points out that, "To the extent that Lehi's story is told in this account, it is first filtered through Nephi's perspective. . . . Thus, the kind of detail regarding Lehi that Nephi says he is *not* including from his father's record . . . the details of his exodus—very likely *were* included in the lost manuscript." See Bradley, *The Lost 116 Pages*, 113.

86. S. Kent Brown, "Recovering the Missing Record of Lehi," in *A Book of Mormon Treasury: Gospel Insights From General Authorities and Religious Educators* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, BYU, 2003), 148, scripturecentral.org/archive/books/book-chapter/recovering-missing-record-lehi-0.

only to pick it back up in the first chapters of Second Nephi, where he is still not mentioned as a logistical leader but as a prophet giving revelations and final patriarchal blessings? In addition, Noel Reynolds has demonstrated that one of Nephi's agendas in creating his record was not just bringing people to Christ but also "establishing Nephi as the legitimate ruler and the successor of Lehi."⁸⁷ Lehi would have been a major part of Nephi's authority chain. Why did Nephi not pick that low-hanging fruit?

The unforgiving desert from Nahom to Bountiful

The changes *following* the events at the Camp continue during the especially arduous leg of the journey as they headed eastward through the sand desert toward Bountiful. Lehi is again absent from the record. It should be clearly noted that the record that we have in the small plates was Nephi's record, not Lehi's writings. Nevertheless, it seems noteworthy that Nephi writes nothing that alludes to leadership by his father during this period. There is no mention of Lehi marveling at the Lord's protection and grace during that torturous final leg of the trek and the Lord's providing means for their survival. There is no mention of Lehi praising the women in the group for being strong, which seems a comment befitting a group leader. There is no mention of Lehi's rejoicing at the dramatic change from the sand desert to the oasis of Bountiful with its fruit and wild honey. Even granted that this is Nephi's record, the absence of Lehi's comments seems conspicuous.

The building of the ship in Bountiful

The exiles had been in the lush inlet of Bountiful "for the space of many days" when Nephi tells us, "the voice of the Lord came unto me, saying: Arise, and get thee into the mountain . . . And it came to pass that the Lord spake unto me" (1 Nephi 17:7). The profound revelation to construct, by hand, a seemingly impossible ocean-going vessel in the inlet of Bountiful did not come to Lehi to then be executed by Nephi as a delegated assignment. The latter was the chain of command for the earlier trips back to Jerusalem. No, this time the stunning command to build a ship that would carry the colony, their seeds, and their supplies across many thousands of miles of ocean to a New World came directly to Nephi. One might have expected that such a momentous decision — one that affected every single member of the

87. Reynolds, "The Political Dimension," 36.

colony — would have still come to Lehi if he were the leader of the group. It did not. It was a direct revelation to Nephi — and merely one of many revelations where the “Lord did show me from time to time after what manner I should work the timbers” (1 Nephi 18:1). Indeed, Nephi “did go into the mount oft, and I did pray oft unto the Lord; wherefore the Lord showed unto me great things” (v. 3). In this regard, yet again, Nephi does not sound like merely one of several young men, and this was long before the final separation of the brothers in the New World.

When the brothers heard that Nephi had received a vision to hand-build a ship, that brought instant ridicule and mockery. They not only discounted it; they refused to labor on the project.

Our brother is a fool, for he thinketh that he can build a ship . . . and [they] were desirous that they might not labor . . . and now when they saw that I began to be sorrowful they were glad in their hearts, insomuch that they did rejoice over me, saying . . . thou art like unto our father, led away by the foolish imaginations of his heart. (1 Nephi 17:17–18)

It was Nephi, not their father, who handled that latest rebellion. Nephi’s response was a long admonition and comparison with Moses, which ended by his warning to Laman that “I fear lest ye shall be cast off forever” (1 Nephi 17:47). That statement brought about impetuous Laman’s instant fury and an attempted murder. There is nothing written about any response from their patriarch father. However, Nephi came as close as he ever did to issuing anything like an overt directive statement. “In the name of the Almighty God, I command you that ye touch me not . . . [and] I, Nephi, said unto them that they should . . . [not] withhold their labor from me” (1 Nephi 17:49). That “command” to an older brother, an unthinkable insubordination in Hebrew culture, shows a voice of authority that is without precedent in Nephi’s record. That unequivocal command, and the Lord shocking or shaking them (vv. 53–54), was enough that “they fell down before me, and were about to worship me, but I would not suffer them” (v. 55). Instead, Nephi says, “I am thy brother, yea, even thy *younger* brother; wherefore, *worship the Lord* thy God, and *honor thy father* and thy mother” (v. 55). This was Nephi’s first (and only) “command,” and the follow-up admonition, redirecting Laman and Lemuel to God, does not sound like one we might expect a king to say. And this also did not come from Lehi.

Nor is Lehi mentioned as providing any kind of physical help for Nephi in the building of the ship even though we might speculate that

Lehi was in good physical shape from the rigors of the brutal desert trek. We do not know Lehi's age, but Chadwick estimates that Lehi may have only been in his mid-fifties by that time.⁸⁸ Lehi did not even supply direction for the project “from the sidelines,” which Nephi would surely have acknowledged had that been the case. And we are told that it was not constructed with the help of Arabian ship builders; we are told that the ship was constructed under the direction of the Lord (1 Nephi 18:2).

In fact, Lehi is so nearly absent in the up-to-six-years in Bountiful⁸⁹ that many scholars speak of the oasis as “Nephi's Bountiful,” not “Lehi's Bountiful.” For a few examples among several, Warren Aston includes that wording distinction in the title of his video: “Lehi in Arabia: The Search for Nephi's Bountiful.”⁹⁰ He similarly titles at least three of his other articles: “Identifying Our Best Candidate for Nephi's Bountiful,”⁹¹ “Nephi's Bountiful: Contrasting Both Candidates”⁹² and “Accessing Nephi's Bountiful.”⁹³ George Potter refers to “Nephi's Harbor”⁹⁴ and Scott and Maurine Proctor call their article, “Nephi's Archaeological Dig: Was There a Holy Place of Worship at Nephi's Bountiful?”⁹⁵

Later, upon completion of the ship-building project, Nephi, who is usually a model of humble deference to his beloved father, does not

88. Chadwick, “An Archeologist's View,” 75.

89. See Ellis, “Nephi's Eight Years,” 281–356; Chadwick, “An Archeologist's View,” 75.

90. Aston, “Lehi in Arabia: The Search for Nephi's Bountiful,” *Living Scriptures Streaming*, 15 December 2015, stream.livingscriptures.com/movies/lehi-in-arabia.

91. Warren P. Aston, “Identifying Our Best Candidate for Nephi's Bountiful,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, 17, no. 1–2 (2008): 58–64, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol17/iss1/7/.

92. Warren P. Aston, “Nephi's Bountiful: Contrasting Both Candidates,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 55 (2023): 219–68, journal.interpreterfoundation.org/nephis-bountiful-contrasting-both-candidates/.

93. Warren P. Aston, “Accessing Nephi's Bountiful: A New Proposal for Reaching Irreantum,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 62 (2024), 429–38.

94. George D. Potter, “Khor Rori: A Maritime Resources-Based Candidate for Nephi's Harbor,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 51 (2022): 254, journal.interpreterfoundation.org/khor-rori-a-maritime-resources-based-candidate-for-nephis-harbor/.

95. See Scott and Maurine Proctor, “Nephi's Bountiful: Archaeological Dig: Was There a Holy Place of Worship at Nephi's Bountiful?,” *Meridian Magazine*, 29 February 2016, ldsmag.com/day-2-was-there-a-holy-place-of-worship-at-nephis-bountiful.

hesitate to state the fact that he built the ship himself (with labor assistance from the others). At the completion of that monumental task, he says, “after I [not “we” but “I”] had finished the ship, according to the word of the Lord, my brethren beheld that it was good” (1 Nephi 18:4). Those sound like the words of a leader, not merely one of the workers, but neither does that sound like a king, who might have merely commanded others to build the ship. And it was Nephi and, surprisingly, the brothers — not Lehi — who admired the completed project (v. 4). One would expect that, if Lehi were still the leader, he would have complimented Nephi, and that Nephi would have acknowledged that compliment, especially given that he was writing, in part, to justify the legitimacy of a Nephite government as Reynolds has explained.⁹⁶ But Lehi, once again, seems silent on the matter.

Navigating the crossing of the ocean

The next major change in tone following the Camp of the Broken Bow took place during the ocean crossing. Demonstrating that Lehi was still very much a prophet of God is that the revelation to board the ship came to Lehi along with a specific, structured manner of boarding. This does not sound as much like a decision that Lehi made as a leader as much as a revelation he transmitted as a prophet. Further, it sounds as if it could have been an ordinance of some kind. We read, “And it came to pass that the voice of the Lord came unto my father, that we should arise and go down into the ship. . . . everyone according to his age, wherefore, we did all go down into the ship, with our wives and our children” (1 Nephi 18:5–6). But while Lehi was still a prophet, he did not appear to be functioning as a logistical decision-maker during the many months of ocean crossing any more than he had functioned as a decision-maker after the Camp of the Broken Bow in the desert portion or in the six or so years in Bountiful. During the ocean voyage, Laman and his followers “began to make themselves merry, insomuch that they began to dance, and to sing, and to speak with much rudeness, yea, even that they did forget by what power they had been brought thither” (1 Nephi 18:9) — perhaps a drunken revelry. There was still no response from Lehi, but Nephi again began to exercise his leadership more overtly and directly. He “began to speak to them with much *soberness*” (v. 10). Interesting, they were drunk; Nephi was sober.

96. Reynolds, “The Political Dimension.”

Similar to the time that Nephi shared his intent to build the ship, Laman and Lemuel flew into another rage. They shouted, "We will not that our younger brother shall be a ruler over us" (v. 10). They clearly saw his admonitions as the voice of a leader and ruler. They seized him and bound him so tight that he "could not move" (v. 12) and his wrists and ankles became "much swollen, and great was the soreness thereof" (v. 15). It was at that point that the Liahona stopped working and "there arose a great storm, yea, a great and terrible tempest" (v. 13).

At this point, and to his credit, Lehi then tried to exercise his parental authority, but that was an abject failure. It was immediately shut down by Laman's group who "did breathe out much threatenings" (v. 17) against Lehi. So much so that he and Sariah "were brought down, yea, even upon their sick-beds . . . near even to be carried out of this time to meet their God; yea, their grey hairs were about to be brought down to lie low in the dust; yea, even they were near to be cast with sorrow into a watery grave" (v. 17). Laman's intransigence was a significant turn of events. Threatening the authority of a father in a patriarchal society was rare. Threatening his life was unthinkable (although it had also happened at Nahom). It displayed their utter disregard for cultural tradition and revealed the depths of their disrespect. It also demonstrated that they did not consider their father as the colony's leader. By any rubric, Lehi was not the leader at this time.

A second indicator that Nephi was already the leader of the group, albeit leading very tactfully, comes from another easily missed detail. While it is true that Nephi, like his father, was ineffective in controlling Laman on the ship, he had at least resisted strongly enough that he had to be tightly bound hand and foot and likely gagged to restrain him. Lehi was neither tied up nor gagged.

After four days, the storm had escalated to become so violent that the ship almost broke apart and capsized. The exiles were "about to be swallowed up in the depths of the sea" (v. 20). Nephi's brothers were forced to "repent of the thing which they had done, insomuch that they loosed [him]" (vv. 15, 20). It was only "after they had loosed [him] . . . [that] the winds did cease, and the storm did cease, and there was a great calm" (v. 21). These events again sound as if Nephi was the ship's leader, not a secondary player to Lehi.

A third indicator of Nephi's leadership at this time was suggested by the work of Timothy Gervais and John Joyce (noted earlier). They claim that "shortly after Nephi is released from his bondage, he states:

‘Behold, I took the compass, and it did work whither *I desired it*’ (1 Nephi 18:21, emphasis added).⁹⁷ They continue, “The usually deferential Nephi is careful to detail that he was the one working the compass after his release.” Notably, they add, “The compass worked only for him.” They conclude by emphasizing that it was Nephi who was the sole and only one in charge of navigation at the time of the great tempest. Later, after the storm had died down and during the remaining crossing of the Pacific, “Nephi states: *‘I Nephi, did guide the ship, that we sailed again towards the promised land.’*”⁹⁸ This wording sounds as if Nephi was the leader and guide for the company, as I proposed. He was directing the ship and possibly making smaller decisions such as when to stop for water and supplies. Note that although the steering of the ship involved the Liahona, this was not primarily spiritual guidance but rather navigational guidance. “Nephi appears to have had a much more integral role in manipulating the compass than a casual reading of the text would suggest.”⁹⁹

Past-Tense Indicators of Nephi’s Leadership in the New World

Similar to the situation in the Old World (at least, after the Camp of the Broken Bow), Lehi stands out as a prophet of God in the New World but no longer as a logistical decision-maker. His marvelous visions, prophecies, and powerful blessings are beautifully presented in 2 Nephi 1–4. However, the new spiritual prophecies and blessings are all presented in the capacity of a prophet and family patriarch giving death-bed final blessings. They were not presented in the capacity of a functioning logistical leader of an establishing colony. Although, as said earlier, many readers of the Book of Mormon believe Nephi took over as leader only after Lehi’s death in 2 Nephi 4:12, essentially everything written about Nephi’s leadership is consistently in the past tense.

Past-tense in Lehi’s dying blessing and admonition

During his dying blessing and admonition to his sons, Lehi does not promote Nephi’s leadership as a *future* condition. Rather, he praises Nephi’s *previous* leadership in the Old World. His verbs are written in the past-tense and refer to Nephi’s previous guidance and discrete

97. Gervais and Joyce, “By Small Means,” 223.

98. Gervais and Joyce, “By Small Means,” 224.

99. Gervais and Joyce, “By Small Means,” 224.

decision-making that were subtly demonstrated in past events. He admonishes the young men and women:

Rebel no more against your brother, whose views *have been* glorious, and . . . who *hath been* an instrument in the hands of God, in bringing us forth into the land of promise; for were it not for him, we must *have perished* with hunger in the wilderness, nevertheless, ye *have sought* to take away his life . . . ye *have accused* him that he sought power and authority over you; but I know that he *hath not* sought for power nor authority over you, but he *hath sought* the glory of God, and your own eternal welfare. . . . And ye *have murmured* because he *hath been* plain unto you. Ye say that he *hath used* sharpness; ye say that he *hath been* angry with you; but behold, his sharpness *was* the sharpness of the power of the word of God. (2 Nephi 1:24–26)

That seems crystal clear. Nor does Lehi assume even shared credit for “bringing us forth” out of the Old World; he gives all the credit to Nephi.

The wording of Lehi’s blessing could not have gone down well with Laman and Lemuel, but it seems certain that Lehi is presenting his son, Nephi, as the one who had already been in charge, even if somewhat transparently, not just the one who was to take over after his death. It does not sound like he is granting new authority to Nephi after his imminent passing. Lehi’s endorsement sounds like a reiteration of an existing status—one that evidence suggests could have happened at the Camp of the Broken Bow. It is not a new coronation and not a passing on of authority, as is often presented in talks and books. To the contrary, Lehi’s blessings and admonitions reiterate Laman’s earlier observation that Nephi had, indeed, led the colony, even if that was resented and resisted. Lehi is essentially saying that Nephi had been the functioning leader of the exiles for many years.

Past-tense leadership at the final separation

After Lehi dies (2 Nephi 4:12), and Laman and Lemuel again threaten Nephi’s life, the justification given by the brothers is notably also written in the past tense. Only a few days after their patriarch father’s death, the one who had been the emotional glue that had held the fragile family together, Laman and Lemuel reasoned one to another: “We *have had* much trial because of him [Nephi]” (2 Nephi 5:3). There is no

mention of trials because of their father. They continue, “wherefore, now let us slay him, that we may *not be afflicted [any] more* because of his words” [again, no mention of the words of Lehi]. “For behold, we will not have him to be our ruler” (v. 3).

Their wording is again all in the past tense. This may strongly indicate that the transfer of leadership had previously happened.

Past-tense leadership in the Psalm of Nephi

The full weight of now being totally alone appears to fall upon Nephi at this point. Much has been written about the Psalm of Nephi. In this psalm, which seems a clearly parallelistic, even chiasmic, baring of his heart, Nephi tells the reader that “upon these [small plates] I write the thing of my soul” (2 Nephi 4:15). In discussing the psalm, the emphasis is often placed on Nephi recognizing his own sins and then calling upon God in repentance. For example, Noel Reynolds states, “Nephi does not pretend immunity to the emotional battle with his brothers. He candidly confesses the great anger that has seized his heart from time to time . . . because of his enemies (Laman and Lemuel?).” He continues, “The sturdy Nephi, who has reported his constant faithfulness, also deliberately shows his descendants and us his completely credible humanity.”¹⁰⁰ McConkie and Millet assert that,

The idea that prophets or their writings are infallible is an old sectarian notion and is false. “All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). . . . Never has there been a prophet who has been excused from the frailties and temptations of the flesh. We see in Nephi a keen sensitivity to his weaknesses.¹⁰¹

While these interpretations are surely also valid, an interesting additional take on the Psalm of Nephi may come from a psychological perspective. It is highly unlikely that Nephi had anything close to a major depressive *disorder* as described in the latest edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5-TR), the manual used to diagnose mental health issues.¹⁰² However, some of Nephi’s wording in the psalm could be seen as meeting the DSM

100. Reynolds, “The Political Dimension,” 36

101. McConkie and Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary*, 217.

102. American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th ed., Text Revision* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2022). Hereafter referred to as *DSM*.

symptomology of a single depressive *episode*.¹⁰³ The DSM requires "five (or more)" of nine symptoms, "at least one of the symptoms is either (1) depressed mood or (2) loss of interest or pleasure. Of course, it is impossible to make a diagnosis from the limited material available in the psalm, but Nephi's wording could be seen as matching seven of the nine symptoms. Some symptoms are obviously more apparent than others, as noted in table 3.

Table 3. DSM symptoms and the Psalm of Nephi.¹⁰⁴

DSM: Major Depression	Wording in 2 Nephi 4:17–29
Symptom #1: Depressed mood most of the day, nearly every day . . . (e.g., feels sad, empty, hopeless)	My heart sorroweth (v. 17); My soul grieveth (v. 17); my heart weep[s] and my soul linger[s] in the valley of sorrow (v. 26)
Symptom #2: Markedly diminished interest or pleasure in all, or almost all, activities	I am encompassed about (v. 18); When I desire to rejoice, my heart groaneth (v. 19)
Symptom #3: Significant weight loss . . . or weight gain	The consuming of my flesh. (v. 21); my flesh waste away (v. 26)
Symptom #4: Insomnia or hypersomnia nearly every day	The evil one have place in my heart to destroy my peace and afflict my soul (v. 27)
Symptom #5: Psychomotor agitation . . . or irritable mood ¹⁰⁵	Why am I angry? (v. 27); do not anger again (v. 29)
Symptom #6: Fatigue or loss of energy nearly every day	My strength slackens (v. 26); slacken my strength (v. 29)
Symptom #7: Feelings of worthlessness or excessive or inappropriate guilt . . . (not merely self-reproach)	O wretched man that I am! (v. 17); temptations and sins do so easily beset me (v. 18); I yield to sin (v. 27); give way to temptations (v. 27); droop in sin (v. 28)

Nephi's depressive feelings likely reflected his grieving over the loss of his father combined with a reaction to now bearing the overwhelming load of leadership totally alone. He was able to climb out of that temporary depression by using what is often referred to by psychologists as "positive self-talk."¹⁰⁶ During that self-talk, he reflected

103. The symptom list is from *DSM*, 177.

104. The symptoms that Nephi does not exhibit include symptom #8 ("diminished ability to think or concentrate, or indecisiveness" and symptom #9 "thoughts of death or suicidal ideation . . . or suicide attempt"), *DSM*, 183.

105. "Irritable mood" is added as a "common feature" (see *DSM*, 177).

106. See, for one example, Elaine Mead, "What is Positive Self-Talk? (Incl.

on the many blessings he had received from the Lord who he saw as “my rock and mine everlasting God” (2 Nephi 4:30–35).¹⁰⁷ Important for our discussion, those blessings involved events that all took place in the Old World and during the crossing of the oceans (“in the wilderness; and . . . upon the waters of the great deep,” 2 Nephi 4:20). They were all events that occurred after they left Jerusalem and before his father died. He writes about these events completely in the past tense:

My God *hath been* my support; he *hath led* me through mine afflictions in the wilderness; and he *hath preserved* me upon the waters of the great deep. He *hath filled* me with his love. . . . He *hath confounded* mine enemies [presumably Laman and his followers]. . . . Behold, he *hath heard* my cry by day, and he *hath given* me knowledge by visions in the night-time. And by day *have I waxed* bold in mighty prayer before him; yea, my voice *have I sent* up on high; and angels *came down* and ministered unto me. And upon the wings of his Spirit *hath my body been* carried away upon exceedingly high mountains [see 1 Nephi 11:1]. And mine eyes *have beheld* great things, yea, even too great for man; therefore I *was bidden* that I should not write them. (2 Nephi 4:20–25)

After his psalm, Nephi notes that the two factions separated permanently. Now living in the newly settled land of Nephi and in a final summary of his leadership in the Old World, he wrote, also in the past-tense:

And behold, the words of the Lord *had been fulfilled* unto my brethren, which he spake concerning them, that I [not his father] should be their ruler and their teacher. Wherefore, I *had been* their ruler and their teacher, according to the commandments of the Lord. (2 Nephi 5:19)

Could that be any clearer?

In Conclusion

This paper is not meant to disrespect or disparage Lehi or Nephi in any way—just the opposite. They were two of the greatest prophets

Examples),” *PositivePsychology*, 26 September 2019, positivepsychology.com/positive-self-talk/.

107. One is reminded of a favorite LDS hymn: “Count Your Blessings,” *Hymns*, no. 241.

in all of scripture. Neither should this article be read as suggesting or implying that Lehi, the great prophet, lost his place as a prophet of God. Lehi's prophetic legacy and eternal glory is certain. To remove any doubt of that, consider Lehi's own final and moving testimony, with its clear suggestion of temple language and the divine embrace: "Behold, the Lord hath redeemed my soul from hell; I have beheld his glory, and I am encircled about eternally in the arms of his love" (2 Nephi 1:15).¹⁰⁸ Likewise, nobody is suggesting that Heavenly Father stopped loving Lehi. Joseph Smith was told by the Lord, "Whom I love I also chasten . . . [and] with the chastisement I prepare a way for their deliverance" (Doctrine and Covenants 95:1). Lehi's chastisement seems to have primarily been a public example for the people who had seen his murmuring against his God; it was not about punishment. However, just as other great prophets received chastisements because of the "foolish errors . . . and the foibles of human nature" (Joseph Smith — History 1:28), so Lehi appears to have lost his place, not as a prophet of God, but as the functional leader of his own people, the Lehites.

The reader can decide if this paper has added in some small measure to our understanding of Lehi's and Nephi's leadership. In an attempt to follow the admonition of Nephi to "liken all scriptures unto us, that it might be for our profit and learning" (1 Nephi 19:23), this paper hopefully strengthens our commitment to trust in the Lord even as we face great challenges just as the Lehites did because of the breaking of the bow in the desert. One of the great joys of the Gospel in general, and the Book of Mormon specifically, is that there is always so much more to see and so much more to learn, even about passages that we have read so often. There are still more lessons left to learn from the account of the trek through Arabia and on to the promised land and we may look forward with anticipation to future discussions and discoveries.



108. Matt Bowen has written an inspiring and extremely well-documented treatment of the divine embrace in a recent issue of *Interpreter*. See Matthew L. Bowen, "Encircled About Eternally in the Arms of His Love: The Divine Embrace as a Thematic Symbol of Jesus Christ and His Atonement in the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 59 (2023): 109–34, journal.interpreterfoundation.org/encircled-about-eternally-in-the-arms-of-his-love-the-divine-embrace-as-a-thematic-symbol-of-jesus-christ-and-his-atonement-in-the-book-of-mormon/.

[Author's Note: *This paper started out as merely a footnote in my article on Nephi's eight years in the wilderness.¹⁰⁹ It mushroomed as I tried to explain and defend the idea of Nephi's transition to the leadership occurring at the specific time of the Camp of the Broken Bow. Several people offered caveats and objections to parts of the logic, which I then tried to elaborate and defend. The footnote became a short paper and then a long paper. Others contributed fascinating ideas and even some specific wording. I especially wish to thank T. Woodrow Huntamer, Newell Wright, Jeff Lindsay, and several anonymous reviewers for significant help along the way.]*

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109. Ellis, "Nephi's Eight Years." Also see Aston, Ellis, and Rappleye, *Into Arabia*.

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