

Prophetic Perspectives: How Lehi and Nephi Applied the Lessons of Lehi's Dream

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Occasionally in history and in scripture we have multiple eyewitness accounts of the same revelatory event. These can help us understand the nature of revelation and the intersection of the human and the divine that takes place during such moments. This was the case with Lehi's dream and Nephi's vision. Nephi reported, "I bear record that I saw the things which my father saw" (1 Nephi 14:29), though his own version exhibits a few significant differences from his father's account. While Nephi's testimony certainly confirms his father's experience, according to the familiar law of witnesses (see Deuteronomy 17:6, 19:15; cf. 2 Nephi 11:3), the places where their accounts seem to diverge can also be instructive.

We can begin, however, with another example a bit closer to home—with the last few pages of the current edition of the Pearl of Great Price. Joseph's 1839 account of the visit of John the Baptist describes how he appeared to Joseph and Oliver Cowdery on May 15, 1829, while they were praying in the woods and ordained them, saying, "Upon you my fellow servants, in the name of Messiah, I confer *the Priesthood of Aaron, which holds the*

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keys of the ministering of angels, and of the gospel of repentance, and of baptism by immersion for the remission of sins; and this shall never be taken again from the earth until the sons of Levi do offer again an offering unto the Lord in righteousness" (Joseph Smith—History 1:69; italics used to show variations between quotations).¹

And then on the next page is a long footnote containing Oliver Cowdery's 1834 record of the same visionary experience, with a few differences. According to Oliver, John the Baptist's words were more along the lines of: "Upon you my fellow-servants, in the name of Messiah, I confer *this Priesthood and this authority, which shall remain upon earth, that the Sons of Levi may yet offer an offering unto the Lord in righteousness!*"

Basically, the two accounts are in harmony, yet Joseph's provides more details, and there is at least one puzzling variant. Would the Aaronic Priesthood remain on the earth *until* the sons of Levi offered an offering? Or was it bestowed *so that* the sons of Levi could again resume their ancient responsibilities?

In addition to the divergent wording, the experience itself seems to have held different meanings for the two men. For Joseph, the main issue was the authority to baptize—this was the subject of his and Oliver's prayer, and immediately after they received the priesthood they went to the river and baptized each other, as John had commanded. Oliver, by contrast, saw the visitation of John as a tangible example of new revelation. He mentions in passing that they had questions about who had authority to administer the ordinances of the gospel, but when he describes his reaction, it is all about religious certainty: "'Twas the voice of an angel from glory, 'twas a message from the Most High! . . . Where was room for doubt? Nowhere; uncertainty had fled, doubt had sunk no more to rise, while fiction and deception had fled forever!" And the next paragraph goes on at some length about how deceit and falsehood were struck into insignificance by their shared vision, which brought assurance, certainty, and truth.

So, was the visit of John the Baptist more about ecclesiastical authority or about religious certainty? It is not hard to imagine why the two men, reflecting on the same experience, may have focused on different aspects. Conflict within the Church in 1838–39 could have made Joseph particularly sensitive to the issue of authority. On the other hand, we might note that this was Oliver's first experience with an angelic visitation, while Joseph had

seen heavenly beings on numerous occasions previously. Historians often give more credence to the earlier of two divergent accounts, but in this case Latter-day Saints have canonized Joseph's version—even though it followed Oliver's by five years—because Joseph was the prophet. But what if two prophets, with equal spiritual authority, each offered their own version of the same spiritual experience? This is exactly what we find in 1 Nephi, and, as with Joseph and Oliver, Lehi and Nephi seem to have discovered different meanings in their shared vision.² The historiographical issues are somewhat more complicated since Nephi is ultimately the source for both his own and his father's experiences (though he tells us that he is adapting Lehi's personal record; see 1 Nephi 1:17), yet a close reading can reveal some intriguing distinctions in their prophetic perspectives.

Lehi's Dream: Family Matters

In 1 Nephi 8, Lehi relates a recent dream to his sons, and then in chapter 10 he adds additional information on the destiny of the Jews and the coming Messiah. Nephi, describing himself as “desirous also that I might see, and hear, and know of these things” (1 Nephi 10:17), received his own visionary experience as he was pondering Lehi's words. When Nephi is taken to a high mountain and asked by the Spirit what he desires, he replies, “I desire to behold the things which my father saw” (1 Nephi 11:3). His request is granted and, as we have seen, he ends the account of his vision with the assertion, “I bear record that I saw the things which my father saw, and the angel of the Lord did make them known unto me” (1 Nephi 14:29). The report of Nephi's vision is more extensive than Lehi's (or at least Nephi's retelling is more extensive—it is always worth a sigh when we remember how much was lost in the book of Lehi, in the 116 pages that disappeared with Martin Harris), but they saw the same imagery, more or less. Even so, they seem to have perceived things slightly differently.

Nephi tells his brothers at one point that “the water which my father saw was filthiness; and so much was his mind swallowed up in other things that he beheld not the filthiness of the water” (1 Nephi 15:27). Apparently, even prophets sometimes notice things they are looking for, while missing other details. Nephi's observation naturally leads to two questions: (1) what else might Lehi have overlooked that Nephi later perceived (or vice versa), and (2) what had so preoccupied Lehi? It is impossible to answer the first question

without more information from Lehi and Nephi themselves, but the current text of the Book of Mormon gives some indication of what was on Lehi's mind at the time.

Lehi's dream followed on the heels of his sons' second journey to Jerusalem, when they brought back Ishmael's family and when the older brothers nearly killed Nephi in the wilderness.³ Lehi would have been worried about his two older sons, and his dream only increased that anxiety.⁴ He begins his account with the admission, "Behold, because of the thing which I have seen, I have reason to rejoice in the Lord because of Nephi and also of Sam. . . . But behold, Laman and Lemuel, I fear exceedingly because of you" (1 Nephi 8:3–4; note that he is speaking directly to the older sons by the beginning of the next sentence).

Lehi then retells the well-known story of how, in his dream, he saw a great open field with a beautiful tree on one side and a large, tall building on the other. In between were crowds of people trying to get to the tree. Many could not see the path, and their confusion became more acute when a mist of darkness rolled in. The solution was an iron rod that ran along the path, which they could grasp and then follow to the tree. Numerous individuals did just that, though some later left when they saw the jeering of the well-dressed, haughty inhabitants of the building. Other people were more interested in the large building in the first place, but in making their way there they got lost or even drowned in a nearby river. When Lehi tells his family of his dream, he notes that Sariah, Nephi, and Sam joined him at the tree, while Laman and Lemuel ignored his shouts and gestures of encouragement.

As Lehi ends his dream narrative, his mind is in exactly the same place as when he began: "And it came to pass after my father had spoken all the words of his dream or vision, which were many, he said unto us, because of these things which he saw in a vision, he exceedingly feared for Laman and Lemuel; yea, he feared lest they should be cast off from the presence of the Lord. And he did exhort them then with all the feeling of a tender parent, that they would hearken to his words, that perhaps the Lord would be merciful to them, and not cast them off; yea, my father did preach unto them" (1 Nephi 8:36–37). Apparently, Lehi felt that the point of his dream was obvious. He does not offer allegorical interpretations or universalizing commentary; instead, he goes straight to exhortation, pleading, and preaching. For Lehi, the dream of the tree is about his own family.

Nephi's Vision: Allegory and Prophecy

Nephi wanted to see and know for himself the things which his father had spoken of, and accordingly, he was granted an apocalypse-style vision—complete with a spirit journey, an angelic guide, and a tour of the end times—that cleverly combined elements of his father's dream with a vision of future events, thus transforming a family drama into an allegory of Everyman and an outline of the future history of the world.⁵ Lehi may have originally seen more than just the vision of the tree; in fact, 1 Nephi 8 concludes by noting that Lehi “prophesied unto them [Nephi's brothers] of many things.” But whatever Lehi's additional explanations and prophecies may have been, he does not seem to have explained his dream as an allegory; Nephi needs an angel to provide the key interpretive identifications.

Lehi, according to Nephi's account, had presented a simple contrast. He said that after he had tasted the sweet fruit of the tree, he looked around for his family and saw Sariah, Sam, and Nephi. When he beckoned to them and shouted, they joined him, but Laman and Lemuel, a little farther off, did not. Nephi, with some guidance from an angel, discerns larger significance in the particular elements of the dream. In his new allegorical interpretation, the tree represents the “love of God” (particularly as manifest in Jesus), the great and spacious building is the “vain imaginations and pride of the children of men” (later the persecutors of the faithful), and the iron rod is the “word of God” (exemplified in the still-to-be-written Christian Bible). The allegorical keys in 1 Nephi 11–12 are matched by visions of future events in world history. I would line them up in this way.

Dream	Allegory	Future Events	Verses
Tree (and fountain)	Love of God	Life of Jesus	11:21–32
Rod of Iron	Word of God	Bible and Book of Mormon	11:25; 13:38–41
Great Building	Pride of the world	Persecutors of the Apostles; great and abominable church	11:34–36; 12:18; 13:4–6
Mists of Darkness	Temptations of the devil	Literal mists of darkness at Jesus' coming to the Americas; missing scriptures and covenants	12:4–5, 17; 13:26–29

Dream	Allegory	Future Events	Verses
River (filthy water)	Depths of hell	Wars between the Nephites and Lamanites; wars among the Gentile nations	12:13–16; 14:16

Nephi goes on to give specific prophecies about the coming of Jesus to the Nephites, the fate of the descendants of Lehi in the promised land, the restoration of the gospel, and the interactions of Jews and Gentiles in the last days.⁶

Obviously, Nephi’s vision is much more extensive than Lehi’s dream, at least as presented in the small plates, but several times Nephi informs his readers that he has greatly abridged Lehi’s words (see 1 Nephi 8:29, 36–38; 9:1; 10:15). There is also a hint that Lehi may have seen more than what was reported in 1 Nephi 8 and 10. When he began his discourse, he observed that “because of the thing which I have seen . . . I have reason to believe that they [Nephi and Sam], *and also many of their seed*, will be saved” (1 Nephi 8:3; emphasis added). Neither chapter 8 nor chapter 10 explicitly mentions the descendants of Nephi and Sam, but Lehi seems to have been aware of some of the righteous generations that would follow. (Though if he also witnessed the seed of Laman and Lemuel eventually destroying the descendants of Nephi, he did not mention it.)

So Lehi and Nephi apparently saw much the same thing, though perhaps in slightly different contexts (i.e., with or without angelic commentary) or with different emphases (immediate family with some prophecy vs. universal meaning, descendants, and future world events). What is perhaps more striking, however, are the different ways in which the two men apply what they have learned through revelation.

Divergent Applications and Understandings

As we noted earlier, Lehi follows up his retelling of his dream with urgent preaching aimed at Laman and Lemuel. In Nephi’s words, he was “exhorting them to all diligence” (1 Nephi 10:2). Given the fact that Lehi’s beckoning and shouting had succeeded in bringing Sam and Nephi to the tree, he may have wondered whether he might have been partly to blame for Laman and Lemuel’s failure. Could he have called out more loudly or gesticulated more emphatically to them? This is probably the reason he concludes his dream

narrative with impassioned pleas, “exhort[ing] them with all the feeling of a tender parent.” Lehi has not given up on them (as we will later see in 2 Nephi 1 and 4). But Nephi treats his older brothers in a very different fashion.

Nephi picked up the story of sibling interactions after he had returned from his visionary experience: “And it came to pass that after I, Nephi, had been carried away in the spirit, and seen all these things, I returned to the tent of my father. And it came to pass that I beheld my brethren, and they were disputing one with another concerning the things which my father had spoken unto them” (1 Nephi 15:1–2). There were some sharp words about inquiring of the Lord and hardness of hearts, but it is sometimes surprising to modern readers that the brothers’ first question was not about the dream of the tree, but rather about their father’s description of the olive tree and the Gentiles, that is, the information from 1 Nephi 10. Nephi had skimmed over those things quickly, giving much more attention in his edited account to Lehi’s dream, but for some reason, the brothers are mostly interested in those other prophecies. Nephi gives them an explanation, along with supporting scriptural references from Isaiah, and then they are finally ready to ask about the dream.

Yet what Nephi does not say speaks almost as loudly as his actual words: “And it came to pass that they did speak unto me again, saying: What meaneth this thing which our father saw in a dream? What meaneth the tree which he saw? And I said unto them: It was a representation of the tree of life” (1 Nephi 15:21–22). Then they ask about the images of the rod and the river (apparently, they already have a good idea of what the great and spacious building might be). Notice that Nephi never mentions the “love of God,” a concept that played such a prominent role in his own perception of the meaning of the tree (1 Nephi 11:17, 22, 25). Instead, he introduces a much harsher, more judgmental reading of the allegory. In his defense, we might observe that Nephi was devastated by his discovery that his descendants would be destroyed by the Lamanites (something else he apparently did not tell his brothers): “I was overcome because of my afflictions, for I considered that mine afflictions were great above all, because of the destructions of my people, for I had beheld their fall” (1 Nephi 15:5). Evidently, the prophecies of the future were grimmer than Lehi had led him to believe, and that does not instill in him a feeling of generosity toward his stubborn, rebellious brothers.

Latter-day Saints usually refer to 1 Nephi 8 as Lehi's dream of the tree of life, but it is striking (and significant) that Lehi himself never uses that term from the Garden of Eden story.⁷ Rather, it is Nephi who first introduces the label at 1 Nephi 11:25, and the identification does not fit exactly. Lehi's tree is not in a garden, there is no angel guarding it, and it does not confer eternal life (according to 1 Nephi 8:25–28, it is possible to eat of its fruit and then fall away), but Nephi is reminded of the Genesis account of a tree kept off limits from the unrighteous by a “flaming sword which turned every way” (Genesis 3:24). As he explains to his brothers the meaning of their father's dream, it becomes clear that the two prophets interpreted the same imagery somewhat differently. Nephi generally emphasizes the connotations of judgment and justice that might be associated with the “tree of life.” Note the way that he interprets for them the meaning of the river (and how he adds more details on the eternal nature of the consequences, which expand upon the family significance of Lehi's telling and the historical implications of Nephi's vision):

And they said unto me: What meaneth the river of water which our father saw? And I said unto them that the water which my father saw was filthiness; and so much was his mind swallowed up in other things that he beheld not the filthiness of the water. And I said unto them that it was an awful gulf, which separated the wicked from the tree of life, and also from the saints of God.

And I said unto them that it was a representation of that awful hell, which the angel said unto me was prepared for the wicked.

And I said unto them that our father also saw that the justice of God did also divide the wicked from the righteous; and the brightness thereof was like unto the brightness of a flaming fire, which ascendeth up unto God forever and ever, and hath no end. (1 Nephi 15:27–30)

Royal Skousen's recent work on the text of the Book of Mormon highlights the connection between this passage and the tree of life in Genesis. In all printed editions of the Book of Mormon, the angel's explanation at 1 Nephi 12:18 has read, “a great and a terrible gulf divideth them, yea, even the word of the justice of the Eternal God.” The original manuscript, however, clearly has “the *sword* of the justice of the Eternal God”—an image more reminiscent of the “flaming sword” of Genesis 3:24.⁸

Nephi is not exactly improvising here, some of his description is derived from the narration provided by his angel guide (see 1 Nephi 12:16–18). Yet this is apparently the first time the brothers have heard their father’s dream portrayed with words such as *hell*, *gulf*, and *justice*. It is an open question as to whether people are more motivated by promised rewards or by the threat of punishment. Perhaps it depends on the person, but Nephi obviously feels that the latter approach is the right one to take with Laman and Lemuel.

In Lehi’s gentle account, the invitation was open to all to come and partake of the fruit of the tree, and the only thing hindering anyone was his or her inability to find the path or a refusal to grasp the iron rod. The water was a hazard, but it seemed more of a danger for those trying to get to the spacious building (see 1 Nephi 8:31–33), and in any event, the iron rod was there to guide wanderers safely through the mists. By contrast, when Nephi offers his interpretation of the dream imagery, the river becomes a barrier set up to keep the wicked away from the tree. It sternly separates the occupants of the spacious building from the saints of God, and there is a brightness associated with it “like the brightness of a flaming fire.” Lehi was concerned about how the building might entice people away from the tree; Nephi apparently worries that the tree might attract people from the building who are not worthy to eat of its fruit.

For Lehi, the wicked tragically refuse what is freely offered by God; Nephi reverses this and has God refuse the wicked. He elaborates for his brothers the eternal consequences implied by the allegory, how those people whose “works have been filthiness . . . cannot dwell in the kingdom of God,” and how “the final state of the souls of men is to dwell in the kingdom of God, or to be cast out because of that justice of which I have spoken.” And then he concludes with a stark warning: “Wherefore, the wicked are rejected from the righteous, and also from the tree of life, whose fruit is most precious and most desirable above all other fruits; yea, and it is the greatest of all the gifts of God” (1 Nephi 15:33–36).⁹

Of course, God is both merciful and just, and some prophets may stress one aspect of his character while others emphasize different features. Lehi spoke as a concerned father, Nephi as a frustrated, reproofing younger brother. Both men loved Laman and Lemuel, and both feared that the two brothers would ultimately be “cast off from the presence of the Lord” (Lehi’s words at 1 Nephi 8:36), or be numbered among those who “if they should die in their

wickedness . . . must be cast off also, as to the things which are spiritual, which are pertaining to righteousness” (Nephi’s phrasing at 1 Nephi 15:33). So Nephi joins his father in exhorting, perhaps even cajoling, his brothers: “Wherefore, I, Nephi, did exhort them to give heed unto the word of the Lord; yea, I did exhort them with all the energies of my soul, and with all the faculty which I possessed, that they would give heed to the word of God and remember to keep his commandments in all things” (1 Nephi 15:25). Yet the tone the two prophets use is so strikingly different! No wonder Laman and Lemuel’s response was to complain that Nephi had “declared unto us hard things, more than we are able to bear” (1 Nephi 16:1).

Prophetic Perspectives

Prophets, as we are often reminded, are *fortbtellers* as well as *foretellers*. That is to say, they do not just predict the future, but they speak for God generally and mediate his words to people at large. They certainly tailor their message to different audiences at different times; yet in this case, Lehi and Nephi are both speaking to the same people—Laman and Lemuel—within days of each other. Why does Lehi interpret his dream as an expression of God’s mercy, while Nephi, who also understands the “condescension of God” implicit in its imagery, nevertheless explains its meaning in terms of divine judgment and the separation of the wicked from the righteous? Let me suggest some possibilities.

As I mentioned at the beginning, it seems that prophets bring their own personalities, questions, and preoccupations to any encounter with the divine. It appears from Lehi’s and Nephi’s visionary experiences that revelation is not simply a matter of opening one’s mind to be passively filled; they look here and there, they ask questions, they perceive some elements of the dream/vision, while others may escape their notice. In this particular instance, one of the crucial factors seems to be that Lehi and Nephi have quite different relationships with Laman and Lemuel.

As long as Lehi was alive, he always held out hope that his older sons might eventually see the light (or taste the fruit in this case). He was not blind to their weaknesses and follies, but he never gave up on them either. He continues to respect the significance of birth order; when the family entered the ship, they did so in order, “every one according to his age” (1 Nephi 18:6), perhaps signaling to Laman and Lemuel that their precedence in the family

was not irretrievably lost (they had just recently “humble[d] themselves again before the Lord”; 1 Nephi 18:4).¹⁰ Lehi’s final blessings also appear to have been given in order, from oldest to youngest and then to the next generation (with the sons of Ishmael and Zoram inserted in Nephi’s place, between Sam and Joseph). Even on his deathbed Lehi continues to exhort his sons to unify in righteousness: “And now, that my soul might have joy in you, . . . arise from the dust, my sons, and be men, and be determined in one mind and in one heart, united in all things,” specifically telling Laman and Lemuel, “If ye will hearken unto the voice of Nephi ye shall not perish” (2 Nephi 1:21–28). He urges them to “choose eternal life,” as if this were still a real possibility (2 Nephi 2:28).

At this point in the small plates, we tend to see Lehi’s hope for a change of heart in his older sons as wishful thinking, while we see Nephi writing as a disappointed, reviled-against younger brother, not as a “tender parent.” Years of unpleasant interactions had led Nephi to a more judgmental, harsher view. While Lehi held out a hope for repentance, Nephi had a much more realistic assessment of Laman and Lemuel’s spiritual state. He was frustrated with their murmuring, their rebellions, the times they had rejected his father’s pleas and had even lightly dismissed the words of an angel, although there was a moment, not long after his explanation of Lehi’s dream, when Nephi tells us that he believed that Laman and Lemuel might have a chance: “It came to pass that they did humble themselves before the Lord; insomuch that I had joy and great hopes of them, that they would walk in the paths of righteousness” (1 Nephi 16:5; apparently Nephi’s strong criticisms had the desired effect). When they threaten him again, shortly after Lehi’s death, he takes them at their word and flees with whoever will follow him; in fact, just as with Lehi’s flight from Jerusalem, God himself warned Nephi to leave (see 2 Nephi 5:5).

Because we are working from a single account, that is, Nephi’s second version of his family history written some thirty to forty years after Lehi’s dream (see 2 Nephi 5:28–34), the historiographical chronology is not as clear as it was with Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, and John the Baptist. In that earlier example, the date of the angelic visitation was 1829 and the two separate documents were composed in 1834 and 1839. We know who wrote what, and we have a good idea of the situations in all three time periods. First Nephi, by contrast, is related by a single narrator, and we do not have much background information. (The historical details virtually stop after Lehi’s family arrives

in the promised land; after 1 Nephi 19 we get sermons, prophecies, and scriptural exegesis, but we know next to nothing about Nephi's immediate family, his settlements and building projects, or his reign as king.)¹¹

Nevertheless, Nephi chooses to tell the story with a great deal of direct quotation. Lehi's dream is recounted in 1 Nephi 8, mostly in Lehi's own words, which Nephi probably took, to some extent, from Lehi's own first-person account (1 Nephi 1:17).¹² The record of his own vision and subsequent conversation with Laman and Lemuel includes quite a bit of direct quotation and even dialogue, perhaps recalled a couple of decades later but also derived from an earlier written version. Stories, even true stories, are often reshaped over time as they are told and retold, written and rewritten for different audiences and under different circumstances. For instance, in 1 Nephi 15, Nephi's explanation of the dream imagery to his brothers can be read aloud in three or four minutes; in my experience, family discussions generally take somewhat longer. Nephi is radically editing, as he so often reminds us (see 1 Nephi 9:1, 4; 10:15; 14:28; 19:2; 2 Nephi 4:14; 5:33). In addition, he is writing his final version—the small plates—for the benefit of his posterity and, as he eventually realizes, for generations far in the future; that is, for us. All this can make it difficult to determine whether Nephi's attitudes towards his brothers from chapter to chapter reflect his feelings when he was a teenager or when he was middle-aged, yet it is certainly possible to discern the contours of Lehi's and Nephi's different perspectives on Laman and Lemuel.

Lehi was speaking to his still living, still redeemable sons. By contrast, although Nephi may be reporting old conversations accurately, at the time he composed this particular account he knew that his family had irrevocably split and the two sides had gone to war with each other, and that perspective may have colored the way he tells his story.¹³ He was also thinking of the needs of future readers. Thus Nephi offers a double meaning as he explicates the details of his father's dream: for those of us who still are in a position to choose life and come to Christ, he includes his own perceptions of the tree as "the love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men" (1 Nephi 11:22); yet his remembrances of how he explained things to his brothers stress the consequences of rejecting that love: "And there is a place prepared, yea, even that awful hell of which I have spoken, and the devil is the proprietor of it. Wherefore the final state of the soul of man is to dwell in the kingdom of God or to be cast out because of that justice of which

I have spoken. Wherefore the wicked are separated from the righteous, and also from that tree of life, whose fruit is most precious and most desirable of all other fruits; yea, and it is the greatest of all the gifts of God. And thus I spake unto my brethren. Amen" (1 Nephi 15:35–36).¹⁴ In speaking to Laman and Lemuel, this was a rather harsh note to end on. Latter-day readers will have access to more information about God's plan, both in previous and later chapters, yet this passage still presents an ominous warning.

Prophetic Prerogative

It is a prophetic prerogative for those called by God to choose how best to express the truths they have received through revelation: to decide when it might be appropriate to highlight the open-ended nature of God's invitation to come unto him and enjoy the blessings that he has prepared; or when a harsher, more judgmental voice of warning is required. Both are probably necessary in different circumstances, though the personalities and histories of particular prophets may incline them to take one approach more often than the other. In relating to Laman and Lemuel what was essentially the same visionary experience, Lehi urgently emphasized the rewards for righteousness and the possibility for change, while Nephi offered a stern reminder of the fate that awaits the wicked.

In similar fashion, in our own callings as leaders, and especially as parents, there are times when it is best to hold out hope, to offer second (and third and fourth) chances, and not to give up on the wayward and weak. Yet there are also situations in which stern admonitions and imposing strict consequences may be the better course. It is undoubtedly a blessing that different bishops and relief society presidents and mission presidents bring their own particular sensibilities to their callings; some may be able to touch the hearts of some members, while a different style of leadership may work better for others. Indeed, it is probably a good thing that such positions are rotated regularly.

Mothers and fathers may also balance the principles of mercy and justice in slightly different ways, depending on the child and the circumstances (though the two principles are not, in themselves, gendered—there are plenty of strict mothers and kindhearted fathers and vice versa). Finding the right balance is one of the great challenges in life, one that requires us to seek personal revelation. Fortunately, we have the examples of both Lehi and Nephi, who demonstrate how prophets are able to take the lessons they need from

their encounters with the divine. Lehi shows what it means to express wholehearted love and concern, while Nephi may give us the courage to articulate sometimes difficult truths with boldness. Yet both men, despite their different approaches, speak for God sincerely and authoritatively.

It is also worth noting how Nephi, in recording many years later the experiences of both his father and himself, does not entirely rewrite the former. It is still possible to recover Lehi's original words and perspective from Nephi's record. This is significant because it highlights the process by which Nephi's history was written—based on prior accounts, exhibiting unfolding understanding, and responding to different stages of life. (In my opinion, coming to see Nephi as a narrator or an author is a crucial step in recognizing him as a real, historical person.) Rather than an abstract discussion of the contrasting principles of justice and mercy, which might only be reconciled by ranking one above the other, 1 Nephi offers a narrative in which gospel values are applied by different prophets, in different circumstances, and within different sorts of relationships. This narrative perspective—of true principles in action—makes the Book of Mormon a rich source not only of truth but also of wisdom.

Notes

1. See *The Papers of Joseph Smith: Autobiographical and Historical Writings*, ed. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Shadow Mountain, 1989), 1:265–67, for an explanation of the dating and manuscript history.

2. Much of this paper is based on material from my *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 49–55.

3. S. Kent Brown has suggested that Lehi's burnt offerings of 1 Nephi 7:22 may have been Lehi's attempt to make propitiation for Laman and Lemuel's sins. See S. Kent Brown, "What Were Those Sacrifices Offered by Lehi?" in *From Jerusalem to Zarahemla: Literary and Historical Studies of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1998), 1–8.

4. It is odd that Ishmael's family does not figure at all in Lehi's dream, even though according to Nephi's account they would have just arrived. Is it possible that Nephi has inserted an earlier dream—from a time when Lehi's concerns were limited to his own family—into this point in his narrative to make certain points clearer? In any event, by this time in the story we know that Lehi has good reason to worry about Laman and Lemuel.

5. Note how well 1 Nephi 11–14 fits John Collins's classic definition of an apocalypse:

"Apocalypse' is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a

transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.” John J. Collins, ed., “Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre,” *Semeia* 14 (1979): 9. The part of this definition that does not fit is the absence in 1 Nephi 11–14 of a cosmic journey through the heavens to “another, supernatural world.” That would have to wait until Joseph Smith’s vision in 1832 of the three degrees of glory in Doctrine and Covenants, section 76.

6. For other attempts to connect the specific symbols of Lehi’s dream with the events foreseen in Nephi’s vision, see Corbin T. Volluz, “Lehi’s Dream of the Tree of Life: Springboard to Prophecy,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 2 (1993): 14–38; John W. Welch and J. Gregory Welch, “A Comparison of Lehi’s Dream and Nephi’s Vision,” in *Charting the Book of Mormon: Visual Aids for Personal Study and Teaching* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), chart 92; and John W. Welch, “Connections between the Visions of Lehi and Nephi” in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 49–53. My approach is most similar to the last of these articles.

7. Brant Gardner has also noted this fact in his *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 172.

8. Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part One* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 257–58.

9. However, in Royal Skousen’s reconstruction of the original text, the verse should read “the wicked are separated from the righteous and also from that tree of life.” Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants*, 334.

10. See S. Kent Brown, *Voices From the Dust: Book of Mormon Insights* (American Fork, UT: Covenant, 2004), 54–55.

11. The only exception from 1 Nephi 19 to the end of 2 Nephi is 2 Nephi 5, which sketches out a few historical events.

12. The most careful reconstruction of Lehi’s own writings is S. Kent Brown’s “Recovering the Missing Record of Lehi,” in *From Jerusalem to Zarahema*, 28–54. Note that 1 Nephi 8:2–28 consists of a single extended quotation from Lehi; Nephi shifts to third-person paraphrase at v. 29 with the explanation, “And now I, Nephi, do not speak all the words of my father. But to be short in writing . . .”

13. Gardner offers a similar reminder that Nephi’s account was written later and was undoubtedly influenced by his strained relationship with his now alienated brothers. See Gardner, *Second Witness*, 260–62.

14. The reading here is from Royal Skousen’s reconstructed version, based on the original manuscript, as found in Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 45. The key differences from the 1981 text are “proprietor” instead of “preparator,” “soul of man” rather than “souls of men,” “separated from the righteous,” as opposed to “rejected from the righteous,” and “most desirable of all other fruits” for “most desirable above all other fruits.” For full discussions of these variants, see Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants*, 330–36.