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THE LIFE OF NEPHI

George Cannon
The Life of Nephi

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George Q. Cannon

The Life of Nephi / The Son of Lehi

PREFACE

Some years since the desire took possession of me to write the life of Nephi, the son of Lehi, and, as time and opportunity should permit, the lives of other prominent men of his race of whom we have an account in the Book of Mormon, so as to form a series of biographies for the perusal of the young. My aim was to make the children of our Church familiar with the events described in the Book of Mormon, and with some of the prominent men of that mighty people of which Nephi was one of the greatest progenitors. Various causes – the principal one of which has been the pressure of other and more exacting labors – have prevented me from carrying my design into execution until the present time. I have felt that, as I owed so much of my own success in life to the important and interesting lessons contained in that precious record, it was a duty incumbent upon me to do all in my power to have it read and appreciated as widely as possible by every member of our Church, but especially by the rising generation.

The age in which we live is one of doubt and unbelief. Skepticism is spreading. All faith in divine things, as taught by the ancient servants of God, is being unsettled. Man's reason is being extolled as a higher standard than God's revelations. The personality of God, the origin of man and his fall, the atonement of the Savior the places of reward and punishment, known as heaven and hell, and the existence of a personal devil, are all questioned, and, by many members of religious sects denied. The Bible is no longer accepted as a reliable standard, only so far as its teachings may agree with the new and fashionable views entertained respecting religion and science.

Fortunately for us, we are in a position to stem and turn this tide of infidelity, so that it shall not overwhelm our young people. We are not dependent upon the Bible alone for our knowledge concerning these grand, cardinal truths over which the world is stumbling and debating. We have other records – among the most important of which is the Book of Mormon – which corroborate and furnish ample proofs of their heavenly origin. We have the teachings and knowledge of men living in lands far apart and of races widely separated; and they agree in their testimonies, and sustain the divinity of the truths which are taught by the Son of God Himself, and by His inspired servants.

The Prophet Nephi, whose life we here present, was one of the greatest and most advanced of these teachers of heavenly truths. There have been but few men, so far as we know, who comprehended, and spoke, and wrote about them as plainly as did he. He had a personal knowledge of the doctrines, principles and facts respecting which men now dispute. He has written fully upon them. His testimony, therefore, is worth more to the world than any number of men's opinions and theories. And, best of all, it carries within itself the highest evidence of its truth. This is characteristic of his writings, and of all the writings in the Book of Mormon. To every humble, prayerful soul the perusal of that book is a solace. It produces peace and joy, and brings the clear conviction that it is God's word. No arguments are required to prove this. Men have assailed and denounced it; but the indisputable truth still remains that, when read with a meek spirit and a prayerful heart, the testimony of its divine origin descends like refreshing dew from heaven, upon the reader, and he knows, by the Spirit and power of God, that it is His word.

That THE LIFE OF NEPHI may have the effect to increase faith, and stimulate inquiry and the more careful perusal of the divine records which the Lord has given to us, is the most earnest desire of THE AUTHOR.

CHAPTER I

Nephi's Character – He Gives God the Glory – Born at Jerusalem – Probable Time of Birth – His Education – Kings Known to Lehi – Ezekiel and Jeremiah and other Prophets – Familiarity of Nephi with Writings of Prophets

Of all the lives which have come down to us in the ancient records, there is, probably, not one, excepting our Savior's, which can be studied with more profit than that of Nephi, the son of Lehi. The influence which he exerted over his associates was most wonderful; but it did not end there. We think we do not overrate it when we say that no man of the nation of which he was the founder did so much as he towards giving shape to the methods of government, to the forms of worship and to the mode of life which prevailed for about a thousand years among that people. He was to them what Moses was to the children of Israel, and though the Nephite nation was prolific in great men, there was not one, it seems to us, who exceeded, if indeed he came up in every particular to, the full measure of his greatness. So far as the record of his life has come down to us, it presents the picture of a man of such perfections as has rarely been seen on earth. He does not leave us in doubt as to why this was the case. The success which attended all his undertakings he claimed no credit for. At no time does he indulge in self-glorification; but in all that he says the disposition to give God the glory is very apparent. He gives Him the glory for it all. To this, more than any other cause, do we attribute the prosperity which attended him through life, and which made him the truly great man that he was. Speaking of himself, he says that he had been highly favored of the Lord in all his days.

Nephi, the son of Lehi, was born at Jerusalem. The exact year of his birth is not given; but we can form a very good idea of the time from what he says respecting himself. His father, Lehi, and family left Jerusalem six hundred years before the coming of the Savior. Nephi, alluding to himself soon after this, while they were in the wilderness, describes himself as "exceeding young, nevertheless large in stature." The record leads us to the conclusion that he was a man in size, though a boy in years – probably not more than fifteen years old. From the language of his brother Jacob in the beginning of his book we infer that Nephi did not live long after the year fifty-five of their exodus from Jerusalem. Jacob says, "he began to be old." He was doubtless at least seventy years old at that time. We judge, therefore, that he was born not far from the year 615 B.C. This would be in the reign of Josiah, the father of Zedekiah, and whose reign closed between eleven and twelve years before the latter was put upon the throne of Judah by the conqueror, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon.

We are not told as to how his childhood was spent. It is evident, however, that his father was in affluent circumstances; for besides his house and land, he had gold, silver and other precious things in abundance; in fact, so much of this kind of personal property did he have, that upon one occasion, it was coveted, as we shall see as we proceed with his history, and was the cause of an attempt to kill Nephi and his three older brothers. Nephi, himself, says he was "born of goodly parents," and he doubtless received an education suitable to his station; he "was taught somewhat in all the learning" of his father.

Lehi had always lived at Jerusalem. He was a descendant of Manasseh, the oldest son of Joseph, who was sold by his brothers. He must have witnessed stirring times in his native city; for though he doubtless shared in the peace and prosperity which prevailed during the long and successful reign of the faithful king, Josiah, he saw no less than four kings on the throne of Judah in the brief space of eleven or twelve years. King Josiah was succeeded by his son Jehoahaz, whose reign of three months was brought to a close by the king of Egypt carrying him to Egypt and laying the land of Judah under tribute and making Jehoiakim, his brother, king in his stead. Jehoiakim reigned eleven years, and

in the first part of his reign was a tributary to the king of Egypt, who had put him on the throne. Afterwards he fell into the power of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, and for three years he acknowledged him as his superior; then he rebelled. But there was a curse upon him and his family, because of his wickedness; the Lord had taken their strength from them; they could not break the yoke of the foe which was raised up against them. Josephus informs us that:

"The king of Babylon made an expedition against Jerusalem and was received by the king Jehoiakim into the city. But he slew such as were of the flower of their age and such as were of the greatest dignity, together with their king Jehoiakim, whom he commanded to be thrown before the wall without any burial."

Jehoiakim was succeeded by his son Jehoiachin, whose inglorious reign of a little over three months, was terminated by the siege of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, and his marching out of the city and surrendering himself, his wives, his mother, his princes and officers to that king. He and they were all carried prisoners to Babylon. The king of Babylon also took as prisoners upwards of ten thousand of the nobility and leading men of the land, among whom was the prophet Ezekiel. Nebuchadnezzar then made Zedekiah, the uncle of the last king, and brother of his father, king of Judah.

It was in the midst of scenes like these that Nephi's childhood was spent. His father must have been familiar with the predictions of the Prophet Jeremiah, who for upwards of thirty years before Lehi and family left Jerusalem, had been declaring the word of the Lord unto the people. It is more than likely that he knew him personally. At the time of Nephi's last visit to Jerusalem the Prophet Jeremiah was in prison. There were other prophets also, whom Lehi either knew personally, or, at least, was acquainted with their predictions. Nephi, as a child, was trained in the knowledge of the prophecies. This is apparent in his teachings. He quotes the words of three prophets, of whose predictions we have no record – Zenock, Neum and Zenos – except the quotations from them which appear in the Book of Mormon. Their predictions and the predictions of another prophet – of which none have yet come to us – Ezais by name, as well as those of Moses, Joseph, Isaiah, and all the prophets from the beginning down to his own day, they brought with them upon plates of brass to this land. Nephi, in speaking of the prophecies of Isaiah, from which he quoted largely, says that the Jews understood the things of the prophets spoken unto them as no other people not taught after their manner could. That he was trained in these things at Jerusalem is easily perceived from what he says; for he understood their style, and their predictions were plain to him. This was an advantage to him afterwards in teaching his people.

CHAPTER II

True and False Prophets – Lehi's Vision – He Warns the People – They Persecute and Try to Kill Him – Commanded in a Dream to Take His Family into the Wilderness – Came to Red Sea – Camped near it – Built an Altar and Made Offering to the Lord – Laman and Lemuel – Their Unbelief – Shaken and Confounded Before their Father

In the beginning of the first year of Zedekiah's reign there were many prophets in Jerusalem. The events connected with the recent siege of that city were of such a character as to arouse thought and prompt men who feared God to feel after Him. We learn from another source than Nephi's record that there were many false prophets at those times who misled the people and were the means of causing them to harden their hearts against the truth. The prophets of God told the people of Jerusalem they must repent, or that great city must be destroyed. These predictions had their proper effect upon Lehi. He undoubtedly believed them, and he went out and called upon the Lord with all his heart in behalf of his people. While praying there came a pillar of fire and rested upon a rock before him. We are told by Nephi that he saw and heard much, which caused him to quake and tremble exceedingly. After this he returned to his house, and being overcome by the Spirit and the things which he had seen he was carried away in a vision. He saw the heavens open, and he thought he saw God sitting upon a throne, surrounded by numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising Him. He saw one descending out of heaven, whose lustre was above that of the sun at noon day. He was followed by twelve others, whose brightness exceeded that of the stars. They all came down and went forth upon the face of the earth. The first, however, came and stood before Lehi and gave him a book, and told him to read. As he read he was filled with the Spirit of God. And he read, "Wo, wo unto Jerusalem; for I have seen thy abominations." He read many things concerning Jerusalem, that it should be destroyed, and that many of its inhabitants should perish by the sword, and that many should be carried away captive into Babylon. He read and saw many marvelous things, which caused him to praise the Lord in the following language: "Great and marvelous are thy works, O Lord God Almighty! Thy throne is high in the heavens and thy power and goodness, and mercy are over all the inhabitants of the earth; and because thou art merciful, thou wilt not suffer those who come unto thee that they shall perish!" The soul of Lehi rejoiced and his whole heart was filled, because of the things which the Lord had shown him.

This is the feeling which every one has to whom the Lord reveals Himself as He did to Lehi. There is a pure and heavenly joy rests upon him that language cannot describe or express, and in the presence of which the afflictions which he has to endure, because of the persecutions of men, appear trifling and are easily borne. Having had these visions Lehi could not rest without warning his neighbors and the people of the city. He described to them their wickedness and abominations, and testified that the things which he had seen and heard, and also that which he had read in the book, manifested plainly of the coming of a Messiah and also the redemption of the world. To tell wicked people of their sins and of the destruction of their government or city makes them angry. It wounds their self-love; it insults their personal and national pride, and it scarcely ever fails to arouse their hatred. There was an exception to this which occurs to us. Upon one occasion the wickedness of the people of Nineveh, the Lord said, had come up to Him. He sent the Prophet Jonah to warn them, and they believed God; and from the king on his throne to the lowest in the city, including all their animals, they were sackcloth, and fasted. They turned every one from his evil way, and from the violence that was in his hands, and cried mightily unto the Lord. Their repentance was pleasing unto

the Lord, and He turned from them the judgment he had threatened. Unfortunately for the people of Jerusalem, they did not have that spirit. Their hearts were hard. They would not believe Lehi; but they mocked him, grew angry with him, just as they had with other prophets before him whom they had cast out, stoned and slain, and they tried to kill him. Had he remained among them, and continued his prophesying, they doubtless would have killed him. But the Lord had chosen him for another work, and he escaped from their plots. The Lord spoke unto him in a dream, and after blessing him for what he had done, in faithfully declaring unto the Jews that which He had commanded him – for doing which they had sought to take his life – He commanded him that he should take his family and depart into the wilderness.

Lehi's family consisted at that time of his wife Sariah and four sons – Laman, Lemuel, Sam and Nephi – that we know of. Nephi, some years after this (*II. Nephi v., 6*) speaks of his sisters. He does not mention them as members of the family at the time of leaving Jerusalem, and we are left to conjecture whether they were born before leaving Jerusalem or afterwards.

Lehi did not hesitate about obeying the commandment. It was probably a matter of life or death with him. He had either to leave, or be killed if he continued to prophesy. Hence it was that among his descendants the expression was used, "Our father, Lehi, was driven out of Jerusalem." (*Helaman viii., 22*) Nephi himself, in speaking of the people of that city said: "They have driven him out of the land." Lehi did not load himself down with his gold and silver and other valuables these he left with his house and land. He took his family, his provisions and tents, and started. After traveling in the wilderness he came to the Red Sea, and he continued his journey near its borders. He soon reached a valley by the side and near the mouth of a river, which emptied into the Red Sea. Here he pitched his tent, and the family remained encamped some time. He built at this place an altar of stones and made an offering unto the Lord and gave Him thanks. The river he called Laman, the name of his oldest son; the valley he called Lemuel, the name of his second son. Up to this point we are told nothing of the character of Lehi's family. But Nephi tells us that after stopping at this river and in this valley and giving to them these names, his father took occasion to say to Laman:

"O that thou mightest be like unto this river, continually running into the fountain of all righteousness."

And to say to Lemuel:

"O that thou mightest be like unto this valley, firm and steadfast, and immovable in keeping the commandments of the Lord."

Nephi gives the reasons why his father talked in this way to his two oldest sons. They were young men who had no faith in the things which their father had taught. They had the same spirit of unbelief which the Jews had who sought to kill their father. They called him a visionary man, and they murmured against him because he had taken them away from Jerusalem, from the land of their inheritance, and their gold and silver and other precious things and led them into the wilderness. They did not believe that Jerusalem could be destroyed as the prophets had predicted. Before we get through with this life of Nephi we shall have occasion to dwell more at length upon their spirit and conduct. But upon this occasion Lehi became aroused. He was filled with the Spirit of the Lord to such an extent, and spoke unto them with such power, that their frames shook before him, and they were so confounded they dare not say anything against him; but they did as he commanded them.

CHAPTER III

Faith of Nephi and its Effects – Sam's Belief – Revelation with Promise to Nephi – Land of Promise, Choice Above other Lands – Nephi to be a Ruler and a Teacher to his Brethren – Required to Return to Jerusalem – His Willingness – Lehi Gratified at His Faith – Laban and Brass Plates – Angry and Refused to Give Them to Laman – Threatened His Life – Laman and Lemuel Discouraged – Nephi's Proposition – His Brothers Agree to it

It is at this point we begin to get an insight into Nephi's character. He was, as he tells us, exceeding young, though large in stature, yet he had great desires to know of the mysteries of God, and he cried unto the Lord. The Lord visited him and softened his heart, and he believed all the words of his father. This kept him from rebelling against his father as his two brothers had done. He told his brother Sam what the Lord had manifested unto him by His Holy Spirit, and he believed his words. From all that has come down to us concerning this older brother of Nephi's, Sam, he was a man of great worth, not an aspiring, jealous, envious man, but humble, believing, obedient, steadfast, true and faithful. He was not gifted like his brother Nephi; but, though older, he recognized Nephi's authority, submitted to his direction and counsel, received his teachings and always stood by him in all the dissensions and difficulties which the unbelief, jealousy and envy of their two oldest brothers created.

Nephi also told Laman and Lemuel that which the Lord had shown him; but it was of no avail. They did not believe him. Their unbelief grieved him, and he cried unto the Lord for them. The Lord then blessed him because of his faith, and said to him that he had sought Him diligently with lowliness of heart. He told him further that, if they would keep His commandments, they would prosper, and they should be led to the land of promise, a land which He had prepared for them, and which was choice above other lands; but if his brethren should rebel against him, they should be cut off from the presence of the Lord; if he, Nephi, would keep His commandments he should be made a ruler and a teacher over his brethren. He also told him at this time that in the day his brethren should rebel against Him, the Lord, He would curse them with a sore curse, and they should have no power over the children of Nephi, except they should also rebel against Him; and if they should rebel against Him, they should be a scourge unto them to stir them up in the ways of remembrance. From this we see that the Lord had chosen Nephi to be the ruler and teacher of his brethren, and this in consequence of his faith in seeking Him, and because of their iniquities.

In this revelation to Nephi appears for the first time in the record any allusion to the land of promise, the choice land above all others, which He destined them to inhabit. Doubtless the Lord had already revealed this to Lehi. But it does not appear. Nephi informs us that there were many things his father had written that he had seen in visions and dreams and that he had prophesied about, which he, Nephi, had not given a full account of.

The selection by the Lord of Nephi to be their ruler and their teacher was always a cause of anger and trouble to Laman and Lemuel. They themselves never lived in a way to entitle them either to rule or teach; and yet they were never heartily willing that Nephi should do so. Laman had the birthright as the oldest son, but he did not put himself in a position to exercise the rights which belonged to it. It was with him as with Cain, to whom the Lord said: "If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? And if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his (speaking of Abel) desire and thou shalt rule over him."

Laman would not do well. The Lord could not, consistently with His attributes and laws, sustain him in his wrong-doing and make him the ruler; and because Nephi did obey the Lord, and thereby obtained the leadership, both Laman and Lemuel hated him.

After communing with the Lord Nephi returned to his father's tent. Then Lehi told him of a dream which he had had, in which the Lord had commanded him to send Nephi and his brothers back to Jerusalem to get the record of the Jews and the genealogy of their forefathers which were engraven upon plates of brass, and were in the possession of a man by the name of Laban, who was, as well as Lehi, a descendant of Joseph. Lehi told Nephi that his brothers murmured at this request, and said it was a hard thing which he had required of them; but, he added, "I have not required it of them; it is a commandment of the Lord." He told Nephi to go and he should be favored of the Lord, because he had not murmured. Nephi replied that he would go and do what the Lord had commanded.

"For," said he, "I know that the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth them."

There is a volume of meaning in this memorable remark of Nephi's, and it furnishes us the key to the actions of his entire life and the unfailling success which attended all his movements. Though he was but a youth, this expression shows that already he was full of faith. When God commanded him, all hesitation and doubt disappeared. He was ready to do his part, perfectly satisfied that the Lord would make up all that was necessary. The record informs us that when Lehi heard these words, he was exceedingly glad, for he knew that his son had been blessed of the Lord. This must have been a great comfort to him under the circumstances. However rebellious and hard the older ones might be, now he was not entirely alone; for here was one, at least, who could understand and sustain him.

The four sons, Laman, Lemuel, Sam and Nephi, took their tents and started for Jerusalem. After reaching there they held a consultation, and decided to cast lots to know which of them should have an interview with Laban. The lot fell upon Laman, the oldest. He now had the opportunity to show his ability. But he had weakened himself before he started by his murmuring and calling this a hard thing to do. One could therefore guess beforehand how his attempt would result. He saw Laban in his house and had a talk with him, during which he asked him for the records which were engraved upon the plates of brass, and which also contained his father's genealogy. Laban got angry and would not let him have the records; but thrust him out, and called him a robber, and threatened to kill him. Laman ran away from him, glad doubtless to escape without injury. His account to his brothers of his reception made them all feel sorrowful, and the older ones concluded it was no use to try any more to get the brass plates, and they would return to their father. This was not Nephi's feeling. He had been sent for those records; the Lord had given the command; and he was determined to get them before he returned. He told his brothers that, as the Lord lived and they lived, they would not go back to their father until they had accomplished that which the Lord had commanded them. It was at this juncture, when obstacles had to be overcome and the others were ready to succumb to them, that Nephi's superiority began to exhibit itself. He had been humble and sought unto the Lord; now the Lord was giving him strength and bringing into exercise those qualities which made him the leader among his brothers. Instead of returning, he proposed they should go and gather up the gold and silver and other riches which their father had left, when he moved out, and take these to Laban in exchange for the plates. He pointed out to his brothers how necessary it was they should have these records. They needed them to preserve for their children the language of the fathers, as well as the words of their holy prophets which had been delivered to them by the Spirit and power of God from the beginning of the world up to that time. His reasoning and arguments had weight with them and they agreed to his plan.

CHAPTER IV

Lehi's Riches – Laban Covets Them – Sent his Servants to Kill Laman and his Brothers – They flee for their Lives – Nephi Whipped by Laman and Lemuel – Visited by an Angel – Laman and Lemuel still Murmur – Nephi Leads Them to the City Walls – Laban Lying Drunk – His Sword – Most Famous Weapon in the World – Those who have Seen it – Nephi Constrained to Kill Laban – Personates Him and Obtains Plates – His Brothers Frightened – Laban's Servant, Zoram – Promises to go With Nephi into the Wilderness

The record does not inform us in what position Lehi had left his riches. We may reasonably conclude that he had left them in a place of security; for his sons found gold and silver and other valuable things, and carried them to Laban's house, and proposed to him to give him these in exchange for the records. Laban would not consent to give up the plates; but the property the young men offered for them was so very valuable that, as the record says, he lusted after it and was determined to have it. He therefore thrust them out, and sent his servants to kill them, so that he might obtain their property. To save their lives they had to leave their valuables and make the best of their way out of the city. They fled into the wilderness and thus escaped and hid in the cavity of a rock. Laman by this time got angry. We are not told that he got angry at Laban; but at his father and Nephi; and he made Lemuel angry also. They said a good many hard things and then they whipped Nephi with a rod, and we should infer that Sam got a share of the beating. It is very probable that he stood up for Nephi and defended him, and in that way incurred their anger. While they were beating Nephi, an angel of the Lord came and stood before them, and he said to them:

"Why do ye smite your younger brother with a rod? Know ye not that the Lord hath chosen him to be a ruler over you, and this because of your iniquities? Behold ye shall go up to Jerusalem again, and the Lord will deliver Laban into your hands."

After speaking to them the angel departed. We have heard of a good many people who have thought if they could only see an angel, and he should tell them anything, they would believe it, and never afterwards doubt it. Yet here were these two young men who had seen and been spoken to by an angel, and he had scarcely gone when they began to murmur. They did not believe that which the angel had told them; for they said:

"How is it possible that the Lord will deliver Laban into our hands? Behold, he is a mighty man, and he can command fifty, yea even he can slay fifty; then why not us?"

We can judge from this language how little they knew about God, or His power. Nephi again had to become their teacher. He encouraged them to go up again to Jerusalem, and to be faithful in keeping the commandments of the Lord; for, said he, He is mightier than all the earth, and of course mightier than Laban and his fifty, or even his tens of thousands. He quoted to them what Moses had done, and asked them how they could doubt when an angel had spoken to them. After all that he said they were still angry and still murmured, yet they followed him until they came to the outside of the walls of the city. Nephi got them to hide themselves outside the walls. Then he, by himself, crept into the city. He had no plan arranged beforehand as to what he would do. He trusted entirely to the Lord and was led by the Spirit. He went in the direction of Laban's house. As he drew near there he saw a man lying on the ground, who proved to be Laban, full of wine, and drunk. He had on a sword, which Nephi drew from the sheath and examined. He has given us a description of this weapon, the most famous of any that we have any account of. It served afterwards as his model when he found himself under the necessity of manufacturing swords with which to arm his people to defend themselves

against the attacks of his brothers and their children: he also wielded it on more than one occasion in battle; and it was handed down among his descendants from generation to generation, being kept with their sacred records. It is still in existence, and besides being seen by the Prophet Joseph, it was shown to the three witnesses of the Book of Mormon – Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer and Martin Harris – with the plates, the breastplate, the Urim and Thummim and the miraculous directors which were given to Lehi, and of which we shall say more as we proceed. The hilt of this sword was of pure gold and the workmanship was exceedingly fine; the blade was of the most precious steel.

After drawing the sword, Nephi was constrained by the Spirit to kill Laban. But he said in his heart: "Never at any time have I shed the blood of man," and he shrunk from the thought, and desired that he might not kill him. The Spirit said unto him again: "Behold the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands." Nephi knew that Laban had sought to take his and his brothers' lives; that he was a murderer at heart; he knew that he would not hearken to the commandments of the Lord, and that he also had robbed them of their property. All these thoughts would pass through his mind at such a time. The Spirit said unto him again: "Slay him, for the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands. Behold, the Lord slayeth the wicked to bring forth his righteous purposes. It is better that one man should perish, than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief." These words brought to his mind the words of the Lord to him in the wilderness, to the effect that inasmuch as his seed should keep His commandments, they should prosper in the land of promise. He also thought that they could not keep the commandments of the Lord according to the law of Moses, unless they should have the law. Nephi knew that that law was engraved upon the plates of brass. He also knew that the Lord had delivered Laban into his hands that he might obtain the records as He had commanded. His reluctance to shed blood was strong; but the voice of the Spirit was stronger, and he obeyed it. He took Laban by the hair of the head, and he cut off his head with his own sword. He then took his garments and put them upon himself and girded his armor about his loins. Then going forth to the treasury of Laban he saw Laban's servant who had the keys of the treasury. Him he commanded in the voice of Laban to go with him. The servant, seeing the dress and the sword, supposed it was Laban, and addressed him accordingly. He spoke to him about the elders of the Jews, for he knew that Laban had been out by night among them. Nephi replied to him as though he was Laban, and he also spoke to him about carrying the plates of brass to his brethren who were outside the walls, and ordered him to follow him. The servant thought he spoke of the brethren of the church, and still thinking it was Laban, followed him. While they were going to where Nephi's brothers were outside the walls, the servant kept up his conversation concerning the elders of the Jews, and it was not until they came in sight of Laman, Lemuel and Sam that he found out his mistake. When these latter saw two men coming towards them, and one of them Laban, as they supposed, they were frightened and ran. They imagined that Laban, having killed Nephi, had now come to kill them. It was only when Nephi called to them and made himself known to them, that they stopped. In the meantime, Laban's servant began to tremble, and he would have run back into the city, had not Nephi prevented him. Nephi was a large man and he had received much strength from the Lord, and when he saw the man's inclination to run away, he seized him and held him fast. Nephi gave him his oath that he need not be afraid, that if he would listen unto them, they would spare his life, and that if he would go down with them into the wilderness, he should be a free man such as they were. He told him that the Lord had commanded them to do what they had done; and should they not be diligent in keeping the commandments of the Lord? He said to him again, that if he would go with them into the wilderness to his father he should have a place among them. Zoram was this servant's name. Nephi's words gave him courage; he promised he would go with them, and he gave them his oath that he would remain with them from that time forward. Faithfully was that oath kept. At no time do we hear anything respecting Zoram faltering in his devotion to Nephi. He was ever his true friend, and his descendants were numbered with the descendants of Nephi.

CHAPTER V

The Status of Zoram – Law of Moses Respecting Bondmen – Character of Laban – Advantages of Taking Zoram into the Wilderness

There was one expression used by Nephi, which would lead us to suppose that Zoram was a bondman. He promised him freedom if he would go with them into the wilderness. This was evidently said to him as an inducement to comply with their wishes. There would be no special attraction in such a proposition to a man already free; but, to a bondman, the promise of being made as free as they were, would go a long way towards reconciling him to submit to their wishes. It may be asked, then, was Zoram one of the heathens or a son of one of the strangers who sojourned in the midst of Israel? for these only were the children of Israel permitted by the law of Moses to make perpetual bondmen.

We are aware that the law of Moses expressly commanded the children of Israel to keep no Hebrew servant whom they might buy, because of his poverty, for any longer period than six years; in the seventh year he should go out free for nothing, and be furnished liberally, by his master that had been, out of all the property the Lord had given him. There was only one condition, under the law of Moses, upon which one of the children of Israel could keep his brother in his service as a bondman; and that was by the free consent of the man himself. The law said that if in the seventh year, the man who had been bought, and who was at that time entitled to his release, should plainly say he would not go away from his master because he loved him and his family and was satisfied with him, then the master should take an awl and "thrust it through his ear unto the door," and he should then be his servant forever. The Lord was strict upon this point, for He viewed all the children of Israel as His servants, and they were not to be bought and sold as bondsmen, nor to be ruled over with rigor by their brethren. If, therefore, Zoram was an Israelite, as we fully believe he was, and the law of Moses had been strictly observed in Jerusalem at that time, the offer made by Nephi to make him a free man would have had no particular inducement to him; for, in any event, he would have been free at the end of six years, or if he had surrendered himself for life to Laban as his servant, and his ear had been bored with an awl, he had done so for love of Laban and his family and because he was pleased with the service. But, as we shall show, the law of Moses was not observed on this point in Jerusalem at that time. Laban was just such a man as would violate that law. He was a greedy, rapacious, cruel man, ready to take any advantage to gain his ends, even to shedding blood. Laman, Nephi's brother, must have known him well, and he said, "he can command fifty, yea even he can slay fifty." If he would not hesitate to murder these four young men, whom it is but reasonable to conclude he must have known were his kindred, being of the same lineage as himself, for their property, he would not scruple to enslave his poor brethren, or even to kill them on some pretext, if it suited his purpose to do so. The glimpse which Nephi gives of the condition of affairs in that city is sufficient to show us how little human life was valued. Men were stoned, and killed in other ways, were treated as though they had no rights which ought to be respected, because they warned the people to repent and prophesied if they did not, they would be visited by terrible judgments. There can be little doubt from Laban's character that he was one of these vindictive persecutors. It is very likely that he was a man who prided himself on his zeal for religion; for it is plain he went into the society of the elders of his people; yet he could get drunk, he could rob and try to murder, and still justify himself for such conduct as persecutors of the righteous do in these days. There can scarcely be any doubt about Lehi and he being acquainted. They were of the same lineage, residents of the same city, and Lehi knew that he had the records on the brass plates. Was not the repugnance of Laman and Lemuel to obey the command of the Lord through their father for them to return to Jerusalem and get these records from Laban, and their

remark that it was "a hard thing" which their father required of them, due, in part at least, to the fact that they knew Laban and knew how he felt towards the family because of their father's predictions? And is it not probable that one reason for his treating Nephi and his brothers as he did, and trying to kill them, was that he knew them as the sons of Lehi, and was satisfied he could justify himself for anything he might do to them, even if he murdered them? His conduct towards them was not that of a novice in crimes against innocent people; but whether he had helped shed innocent blood or not, the Lord knew that he had only failed in killing Nephi and his brothers through the inability of his servants to catch them, and He deemed him unfit to live and commanded Nephi to kill him. If he had been accessory to murder, the law of the Lord through Moses was very plain as to what his fate should be. The Lord says (*Numbers xxxv., 33*), "For blood it defileth the land; and the land cannot be cleansed of the blood that is shed therein, but by the blood of him that shed it." Such a man as he would be a hard master, and it is scarcely improper to suppose that Zoram was the more content to accompany Nephi, because of the promise held out to him of a release from servitude. The Prophet Jeremiah, who knew all about the condition of affairs at Jerusalem during these days, speaks thus:

"Thus saith the Lord, the God of Israel; I made a covenant with your fathers in the day that I brought them forth out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondmen, saying,

"At the end of seven years let ye go every man his brother an Hebrew, which hath been sold unto thee; and when he hath served thee six years, thou shalt let him go free from thee: but your fathers hearkened not unto me, neither inclined their ear.

"And ye were now turned, and had done right in my sight, in proclaiming liberty every man to his neighbor; and ye had made a covenant before me in the house which is called by my name:

"But ye turned and polluted my name, and caused every man his servant, and every man his handmaid, whom he had set at liberty at their pleasure, to return, and brought them into subjection, to be unto you for servants and for handmaids."

For breaking this covenant Jeremiah, inspired of the Lord, pronounced upon the nation, from the king down, terrible curses, and they were all fulfilled. From Jeremiah's words it is clear that Israelites were made bondmen by their brethren, and from Zoram's subsequent marriage and life we think it safe to assume that he was not an alien but an Israelite. Elder Orson Pratt thought that, from his being worthy to hold the keys of the treasury and of the sacred brass plates, Zoram was probably of the same tribe as Laban.

The determination of Nephi to take Zoram with them was clearly a matter of necessity. Nephi says they were desirous he should tarry with them that the Jews might not know concerning their flight into the wilderness, lest they should pursue and destroy them. When Zoram had made an oath to stay with them, their fears concerning him ceased. Two results were accomplished by having Zoram go with them. Their company was strengthened by the addition of one who proved himself a worthy man, and all clue to the cause of Laban's death and to the person who slew him was completely removed beyond reach of the Jews. The disappearance of Zoram, of Laban's clothing, armor, sword and records left the people of Jerusalem at liberty to frame whatever theory they chose respecting his death. There is no room to suppose that Nephi or his brothers were suspected of having had anything to do with it, for it does not appear that any of Laban's servants were present when they requested him to give them the records in exchange for their property, though they were afterwards told to chase and kill them. Had the names of Nephi and his brothers been associated with the death of Laban and the taking of the records, he was so prominent a man, and the circumstances of his death so widely known that they could not have visited Jerusalem again (which they did shortly afterwards) and induced another family to accompany them in the wilderness, with the least safety.

CHAPTER VI

Return into Wilderness – Joy of Lehi and Sariah – Lehi a Visionary Man – Sariah's Grief and Murmuring – Her Subsequent Testimony – Sacrifice and Burnt Offerings – The Brass Plates – Their Contents – Lehi a Descendant of Joseph – Value of These Records to his Descendants – Another Colony of Jews – Lost Knowledge of Hebrew Language and of God – Nephi a Great Benefactor – He and Brothers Again Required to Visit Jerusalem – Ishmael and Family – Laman and Lemuel Stir up Mutiny – Want to Return to Jerusalem – Bind Nephi – Intend to Leave him to Perish – Nephi's Prayer – His Bands Burst – The Others Plead for him – Revulsion of Feeling on Part of his Brothers – Beg his Forgiveness – Rejoin Lehi and Sariah – Thanksgiving and Sacrifices and Burnt Offerings

The return of the young men to the tent of Lehi in the wilderness, was a cause of great joy to their parents, and especially to their mother, Sariah. She had mourned with all a mother's anxiety for them, supposing that they had perished in the wilderness. Possessed of this idea, and thinking doubtless of the comforts they had left at Jerusalem, she had, while they were gone, complained against Lehi and called him a visionary man, accused him of bringing them from their home, and now her sons were dead, and they themselves would perish in the wilderness. This style of talk must have been very unpleasant for Lehi. It was bad enough to endure the taunts and persecutions of the Jews, and the unbelief and stubbornness of his eldest sons; but how very painful to witness the tears and deep grief of his wife, and to hear her make such accusations as these! He did what he could to comfort her; for, like others who yield to such a spirit – she felt as badly over the imaginary loss of her sons and over her own and husband's death, as if she would never see her sons alive again, and as if she and Lehi were about to perish. He told her he knew he was a visionary man; for if he had not seen the things of God in a vision, he would not have known the goodness of God, but had remained in Jerusalem and perished. Now he rejoiced in having obtained a land of promise. As for their sons, he knew that the Lord would deliver them from Laban, and bring them safely back to them in the wilderness.

The return of her sons comforted Sariah: she saw that her reproaches and fears had been without cause, and she bore testimony that she knew the Lord had commanded her husband to come into the wilderness, and that He had also protected her sons and delivered them out of the hands of Laban, and given them power to accomplish that which He had commanded them. No doubt all were happy – Lehi and Sariah in having their children restored to them alive and well, and their sons at their escape and safe return with the brass plates for which they had been sent, and Zoram that he was a free man. Sacrifice and burnt offerings were offered unto the Lord by them and they gave thanks unto Him. An examination by Lehi of the records upon the plates disclosed their great value. They contained the five books of Moses, including an account of the creation of the world, and of Adam and Eve, our first parents; also a record of the Jews from the beginning to the commencement of King Zedekiah's reign; also the prophecies of the holy prophets during the same period, and also many prophecies which had been spoken by Jeremiah. He also found upon them a genealogy of his fathers. He was, as this proved, a descendant of Joseph, who was sold by his brethren and carried as a bondman into Egypt. Laban also was of the same descent. He and his father had kept the records, and probably because they were an older branch of the family. While looking at these things the spirit of prophecy rested upon Lehi concerning his seed, and he predicted many things in relation to them;

among others, that these plates of brass should go forth unto all nations, kindreds, tongues and people who were of his seed; therefore they should never perish, nor be dimmed any more by time.

These records proved invaluable to that portion of Lehi's family who strove to keep the commandments of the Lord; for by their means they were kept from falling into many errors, and a knowledge of the things of God was kept before them. Another colony of Jews left Jerusalem eleven years after Lehi, and they were also led to this continent; but they had no records with them. Their language became so corrupted that when they were found by the descendants of Nephi, sometime near the close of the fourth or the beginning of the fifth century, after Lehi left Jerusalem, they could not understand their language. Not only had they lost the knowledge of the Hebrew language; but they had lost the knowledge of God and denied His being. We find several allusions throughout the Book of Mormon, by prominent men among the Nephites, to the great value of these plates and to the benefits the records they contained had been to the nation. Thus it is that the faith and energy of one man has frequently been of immense importance to future generations and peoples. To Laman and Lemuel the possession of these plates was not worth struggling or taking any risks for; so far as they were concerned posterity could go without them. But not so with Nephi. His willingness to do as the Lord commanded, and his determination not to be baffled, even though he incurred the risk of losing his life, opened his eyes to see the importance of these records. He was a great benefactor in this respect to his posterity, and the descendants also of his brothers reaped many advantages from them, and in days to come they will still prove a great blessing to them. It is frequently the case that, by apparently small and insignificant means, the Lord brings to pass great and important results. The obtaining of these plates was of incalculable benefit in maintaining and spreading the true civilization of the Nephite nation.

Shortly after the return of Nephi and his brothers to their parents, the Lord again spoke to Lehi, and gave him a commandment that they should proceed once more to Jerusalem and bring down Ishmael and his family into the wilderness. The reason for this was that it was not proper that Lehi should take his family into the wilderness alone; but that his sons should have wives, so that they could have children in the land of promise. Their mission was successful. They spoke the word of the Lord unto Ishmael, and the Lord gave them favor in his sight and softened the hearts of himself and household, and they returned with them to Lehi's camp. We are not informed exactly what the number of Ishmael's family was; but we are led to suppose that it consisted of himself and wife, two sons who also had families, and five unmarried daughters. There may have been more than these; but if so they are not mentioned. It is believed by many, upon the authority of a remark which the Prophet Joseph is said to have made, that Ishmael was a descendant of Joseph. We did not hear the Prophet make this statement, but we feel assured it is so from the testimony of Elder Franklin D. Richards, who heard him say that such was the case. The blood of Ephraim was thus brought to this continent.

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