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Mourning, Consolation, and Repentance at Nahom

Author(s): Alan Goff

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Chapter 9

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The death and burial of Ishmael at Nahom (see 1 Nephi 16:34–39) can puzzle readers who are uncertain about how the story fits into Nephi's overall account or uncertain about why the incident is included at all. This section, however, is one of those parts of the Book of Mormon that contain hints of a deeper meaning than what appears on the surface. At least one important meaning of the Nahom episode is connected with the word *Nahom* itself.

The journey of Lehi's party in the wilderness of Arabia is marked by the mention of this place-name, which Joseph Smith did not translate into English. It turns out that the word connects earlier biblical traditions with the rebellion of Laman and other members of the party against Lehi and Nephi. In order to see these connections, let's break down the narrative verse by verse and compare these links with older Hebrew traditions:

34. "Ishmael died, and was buried in the place which was called Nahom."

A connection with the Hebrew verb *naham* is suggested in a footnote to this verse in the 1981 edition of the Book of Mormon. The Hebrew word means "to mourn or to be consoled." But a much stronger connection with biblical tradition unfolds in the account that follows the verse. The scholar Damrosch says this about the word:

It [the root for *naham*] appears twenty-five times in

the narrative books of the Bible, and in every case it is associated with death. In family settings, it is applied in instances involving the death of an immediate family member (parent, sibling, or child); in national settings, it has to do with the survival or impending extermination of an entire people. At heart, *naham* means "to mourn," to come to terms with a death; these usages are usually translated . . . by the verb "to comfort," as when Jacob's children try to comfort their father after the reported death of Joseph.[1]

The idea of mourning is obvious in the events that occur at Nahom. But Nephi goes beyond the obvious at this point. In the following verses, he uses connotations of the word *naham/ nahom* in the story of the rebellion by members of the party. Those subtle references deepen the meaning of the whole incident.

35. *"The daughters of Ishmael did mourn exceedingly, because of the loss of their father, and because of their afflictions in the wilderness; and they did murmur against my father, because he had brought them out of the land of Jerusalem, saying: Our father is dead; yea, and we have wandered much in the wilderness, and we have suffered much affliction, hunger, thirst, and fatigue; and after all these sufferings we must perish in the wilderness with hunger."*

Thus we learn that at Nahom Ishmael's daughters mourned, not only because of their father's death, but also because of the difficulty of life in the wilderness. We find a parallel in the use of the word *murmur* in the story of the children of Israel rebelling against Moses. Every time (except once) the Old Testament used the Hebrew root *lwn,* translated as some form of *murmur,* it was in stories of wilderness trials (see, for example, Exodus 15:24; 16:7; Numbers 14:2; Deuteronomy 1:27). They rebelled against their prophet's leadership and complained about their hard life in the wilderness in the same way that Lehi's party both rebelled and complained at Nahom. So Nephi used this technical term accurately to describe their particular case of trouble and rebellion in the wilderness.

From this parallel, we understand that Nephi saw their journey as following a type or model. He considered their flight from dangerous Jerusalem through harsh wilderness to be similar to the Exodus of the Israelites from oppression in Egypt. He constantly described the flight of Lehi's party in terms used hundreds of years earlier to describe Israel's forty-year journey from Egypt to their promised land. *Nahom/naham* is one of those words that reminds us of the connection Nephi saw.

Mircea Eliade has spent a lifetime analyzing myths and religions around the world. He concluded that "archaic man" (ancient peoples) felt that life was most significant at moments when the people were repeating ancient types or symbolic patterns. In contrast, they considered mere day-to-day happenings as much less important. Further, they felt a need to reenact the events that they thought had occurred at the foundation of their nation. Eliade believes that they repeated in their ceremonies those foundational events because these were thought of as pivotal.[2]

Latter-day Saint youths who occasionally pull handcarts across a part of a pioneer trail for even a few days may realize the powerful hold such reenactment can exercise even on us. In light of this human tendency to recall and act out history, I would be surprised if Nephi had not chosen to use the language of the Exodus to express what was happening to his own group, for the parallels were obvious.

Note that the plight of the children of Israel had been to "wander in the wilderness" (Numbers 14:33; 32:13) for forty years. In Nephi's record the daughters of Ishmael complained that they have had to "wander much in the wilderness." The brief, pointed language is very appropriate, for with this little phrase Nephi not only described their situation, but also recalled a basic idea or theme in Israelite life — the Exodus.

Later generations frequently recalled that image of flight into the wilderness and applied it to their own circumstances. For example, the book of Job proclaims that all people are in God's hands, for "he taketh away the heart of the chief of the people

of the earth, and causeth them to wander in a wilderness where there is no way" (Job 12:24). The Psalmist also recalls God's power over all the earth by saying that God "poureth contempt upon the princes, and causeth them to wander in the wilderness, where there is no way" (Psalm 107:40). The entire Seventy-eighth Psalm dwells on the great deeds God performed for the children of Israel while they wandered in the wilderness, although "how oft did they provoke him in the wilderness, and grieve him in the desert!" (verse 40). The daughters of Ishmael couldn't speak of wandering in the wilderness without recalling this ancient pattern or type.

At Nahom the complaint against Lehi and Nephi was that they had led the daughters of Ishmael and their families into the wilderness "[to suffer] much affliction, hunger, thirst, and fatigue" and probably to "perish in the wilderness with hunger." This murmuring reminds us again of an incident involving Moses and his people: "The whole congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness: and the children of Israel said unto them, Would to God that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh pots, and when we did eat bread to the full; for ye have brought us forth into this wilderness, to kill this whole assembly with hunger" (Exodus 16:2–3).

The rebellion was not limited just to murmuring, however. It expressed itself in another way also evident in the Exodus account:

36. *"They did murmur against my father, and also against me; and they were desirous to return again to Jerusalem."*

The daughters of Ishmael's murmuring was accompanied by a desire to return to the land they had left. Again, that mirrors a similar aspect of the Exodus centuries earlier. After some Israelite spies had scouted the land of promise, they returned to the camp in the wilderness. There they described the power of the inhabitants.

When the children of Israel heard that, they "murmured against Moses and against Aaron: and the whole congregation

said unto them, . . . Wherefore hath the Lord brought us unto this land, to fall by the sword, that our wives and our children should be a prey? were it not better for us to return into Egypt? And they said one to another, Let us make a captain, and let us return into Egypt" (Numbers 14:2-4). In seeing in the pattern of his family's wanderings the pattern of the Exodus, Nephi not surprisingly mentioned this parallel, the desire to return that accompanied murmuring.

But Laman and Lemuel had a different complaint and a distinct idea of what would pay them back for the injuries they had supposedly suffered:

37. *"Laman said unto Lemuel and also unto the sons of Ishmael: Behold, let us slay our father, and also our brother Nephi, who has taken it upon him to be our ruler and our teacher, who are his elder brethren."*

The Israelites had rebelled against Moses in the wilderness under the leadership of three men, Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. These men complained that Moses had taken too much of the leadership for himself: "Is it a small thing that thou hast brought us up out of a land that floweth with milk and honey, to kill us in the wilderness, except thou make thyself altogether a prince over us?" (Numbers 16:13). This charge recalls the still earlier moment, in Egypt, when a Hebrew slave accused Moses, "Who made thee a prince and a judge over us?" (Exodus 2:14). The elder brothers' charge against Nephi was the same—he had usurped power. Laman and Lemuel found consolation at Nahom in the thought that they could get even by killing both Lehi and their younger brother.

Damrosch tells us some interesting things about the connection of "consolation" and killing:

> From this basic meaning of regret following the death of a family member, the term [*naham*] becomes applied to other cases of regret or change of heart, . . . almost always when the repenter is meditating murder. "Repentance" [or change of heart] then involves either the decision to kill, or conversely, the decision to stop killing.

> The term can be used in quite ignoble circumstances, as when Esau comforts himself for the loss of his birthright by deciding to kill Jacob (Gen. 27:42), but usually it is God who repents, either negatively or positively; negatively, by deciding to destroy his people; positively, by commuting a sentence of destruction.[3]

Verse thirty-seven identifies an additional theme found in Israelite history: the theme of the younger brother surpassing the elder. It is a recurring thread that unifies the stories of the Old Testament patriarchs. As early as Cain and Abel, and down to Ephraim and Manasseh, the younger brother found favor not only in the father's eyes (or sometimes the mother's), but also in God's. Abraham favored his son Isaac over his older half-brother (see Genesis 21:9–14), while Isaac's younger son, Jacob, took the birthright and blessing from his brother Esau (Genesis 27:22–35). Further, Joseph ended up being honored by his elder brothers when he saved them in Egypt, and Jacob crossed his arms to give the chief blessing to Joseph's youngest son, Ephraim. The same theme continues in the story of Samuel choosing David to be king instead of his older brothers (see 1 Samuel 16:10). In the Book of Mormon the pattern is repeated, for Laman claimed that Nephi wanted to usurp the rightful authority of the elder brothers:

38. "Now, he says that the Lord has talked with him, and also that angels have ministered unto him. But behold, we know that he lies unto us; and he tells us these things, and he worketh many things by his cunning arts, that he may deceive our eyes, 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 and a ruler over us, that he may do with us according to his will and pleasure. And after this manner did my brother Laman stir up their hearts to anger."

In spite of the fact that Laman had seen an angel and heard him proclaim Nephi's eventual rule (1 Nephi 3:29), he claimed that Nephi was unrighteously trying to rule over them. A parallel with the Bible again comes to mind. Joseph, whom the Nephites looked to as their forefather, had dreams and visions. His broth-

ers complained to him, "Shalt thou indeed reign over us? or shalt thou indeed have dominion over us? And they hated him yet the more for his dreams, and for his words" (Genesis 37:8). "When they saw him afar off, even before he came near unto them, they conspired against him to slay him. And they said one to another, Behold, this dreamer cometh" (Genesis 37:18–19). The term *dreamer* in particular is derogatory—the "master of dreams," the "baal of dreams."

In the Book of Mormon, Laman and the others conspire to kill both dreamers in their family, for Nephi is "like unto our father, led away by the foolish imaginations of his heart" (1 Nephi 17:20). Earlier they "did murmur in many things against their father, because he was a visionary man, and had led them out of the land of Jerusalem" (1 Nephi 2:11).

Chapter seventeen begins with the group departing Nahom. A reader sensitive to Hebrew narrative recognizes that a change of scene also signals the end of one story and the beginning of another. Just as Esau repented of (that is, regretted) his murderous desire, and just as Joseph's brothers eventually repented of their conspiracy to kill him, at Nahom "they" (the complainers) "did repent" and "were chastened." They "did turn away their anger." The word *naham* is used in the Hebrew Bible even to describe Yahweh's "changing his mind" or "repenting," as when he was sorry in Noah's day for having created mankind.

We see that the biblical parallels to Nephi and his family are many and pointed. It seems impossible that Nephi was not aware of them and did not intend that we see them in the story as he wrote it for us to read. We are just beginning to understand the complexity of Book of Mormon narratives. What Nephi wrote for us about his life and his relations with his family is a complex account. Merely reading the text may not be enough to allow us to understand it fully. If the Book of Mormon was written as a sophisticated text, then we must be sophisticated readers to understand it.

This situation in trying to understand Nephi may be similar to the Nephites' situation as they tried to understand Hebrew

prophets. The Nephites had difficulty understanding Isaiah, so Nephi gave them two rules: (1) be filled with the spirit of prophecy as they read and (2) try to understand the symbolic meanings of the text "after the manner of the things of the Jews" (2 Nephi 25:4–5).

Nephi said that he had "not taught [the Nephites] many things concerning the manner of the Jews" (2 Nephi 25:2). This lack of knowledge of the way Jews prophesied and phrased the revelations did have the advantage of keeping the Nephites free of the Jews' "works of darkness, and their doings" (2 Nephi 25:2). But it also made more difficult the Nephites' task of understanding Isaiah and the other Hebrew prophets because "there is none other people that understand the things which were spoken unto the Jews like unto them" (2 Nephi 25:5).

Nephi's writings, though "plain," still rely on his knowledge of the manner of Jewish prophecy and the meanings of the Hebrew expressions he used. The brief narrative of what happened at Nahom turns out to be deeper in meaning than we might have thought. The narrative is far richer if we take into account Nephi's background when he wrote his record. At the same time, it points to a great many more complexities that await our probings as we continue to focus on this keystone scripture.

Notes

1. David Damrosch, *The Narrative Covenant* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 128–29.

2. See Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, tr. Rosemary Scheed (New York: New American Library, 1958).

3. Damrosch, 129.