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The Foundational Doctrines of 1 Nephi 11–14

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My suggestion is simple but important—Father Lehi’s visions and Nephi’s summary vision of all that Lehi had seen form the foundation upon which most everything in the Book of Mormon is built, doctrinally and spiritually. Positioned where they are, describing what they do, teaching the way they teach, and, most importantly, presenting the doctrines they present, these panoramic dreams and visions of a father and son prophet-duo are the fountain from which all else flows in the Book of Mormon. They inaugurate a new gospel dispensation much like our own dispensation, where revelations of the Godhead counter the decay of an apostate world. We have a grand opportunity to help our students understand the powerful lessons presented in these opening visions and revelations of the Book of Mormon.

Four important questions naturally arise out of this assertion:

1. How do we know Lehi received many visions and manifestations, and where is the summary description of those visions?
2. What precepts and doctrines are taught in that sweeping summary?
3. How do we know that Lehi’s and Nephi’s dreams and visions constitute the foundation on which most everything else rests, doctrinally and spiritually, in the Book of Mormon?
4. How can and should Lehi’s and Nephi’s visions and revela-

tions impact our teaching of the Book of Mormon?

Question 1: How do we know Lehi received many visions and manifestations, and where is the summary description of those visions?

Lehi's experience is described in the opening verses of the first chapter of the Book of Mormon:

Wherefore it came to pass that my father, Lehi, as he went forth prayed unto the Lord, yea, even with all his heart, in behalf of his people.

And it came to pass as he prayed unto the Lord, there came a pillar of fire and dwelt upon a rock before him; and he saw and heard much; and because of the things which he saw and heard he did quake and tremble exceedingly.

And it came to pass that he returned to his own house at Jerusalem; and he cast himself upon his bed, being overcome with the Spirit and the things which he had seen.

And being thus overcome with the Spirit, he was carried away in a vision, even that he saw the heavens open, and he thought he saw God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God.

And it came to pass that he saw One descending out of the midst of heaven, and he beheld that his luster was above that of the sun and noon-day.

And he also saw twelve others following him, and their brightness did exceed that of the stars in the firmament.

And they came down and went forth upon the face of the earth; and the first came and stood before my father, and gave unto him a book, and bade him that he should read.

And it came to pass that as he read, he was filled with the Spirit of the Lord. (1 Nephi 1:5–12; emphasis added)

We note at least three significant teaching points in this passage. First, Lehi prayed “with all his heart, in behalf of his brethren” (1 Nephi 1:5). Great things happen when we pray for others, especially when we pray with all our hearts. Prayer unlocks the powers of heaven, just as Lehi, Enos, and others teach us (1 Nephi 8:12; Enos 1:9). As the Lord’s brother James explained, “The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much” (James 4:16).

Second, as Lehi prayed, a pillar of fire came and dwelt before him “upon a rock” (1 Nephi 1:6). Why a rock? What is the symbolic significance of a “rock” in the scriptures? It refers to none other than the Messiah, Jesus Christ, who is the “Rock of Heaven” (Moses 7:53; see also Helaman 5:12 and 1 Corinthians 10:1–4). Could it be that this symbolic image was intended to point Lehi to the very being who would occupy center stage in Lehi’s subsequent visions and revelations?

Third, note the phrase “saw the heavens open” (1 Nephi 1:8). God works through patterns and parallels throughout history, and we ought to teach our students to look for them. Lehi’s experiences fit a pattern and parallel the experiences, even the very language, of other great prophets in various dispensations:

- In the Old Testament, Ezekiel says, “The heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God” (Ezekiel 1:1).
- In the New Testament, Stephen says, “I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God” (Acts 7:56).
- In the Book of Mormon, Alma says, “Methought I saw, even as our father Lehi saw, God sitting upon his throne” (Alma 36:22).
- The Prophet Joseph Smith begins D&C 137 with the statement, “The heavens were opened upon us, and I beheld the celestial kingdom of God” (D&C 137:1).

After telling readers about Lehi’s inaugural visions, Nephi describes the intensity of his father’s visionary experience: “And now I, Nephi, do not make a full account of the things which my father hath written, for he hath written many things which he saw in visions and in dreams; and he also hath written many things which he prophesied and spake unto his children, of which I shall not make a full account” (1 Nephi 1:16; emphasis added). Here we are told that Lehi received many visions and dreams early on—too many to be summarized at this point. What is the content and focus of these first visions and personal writings, particularly those involving the book from which Lehi symbolically read (1:11–12)? These visions center on none other than Jesus Christ, just as 1 Nephi 1:19 plainly teaches: “And it came to pass that the Jews did mock him [Lehi] because of the things which he testified of them; for he truly testified of their wickedness and their abominations; and he testified that the things which he saw and heard, and also the things which he read in the book, manifested plainly of the coming of a Messiah, and also the

redemption of the world” (emphasis added).

All the visions and manifestations that Lehi received point to one overarching truth—that a Messiah would come into the world to redeem the world. In other words, these founding revelations of the Book of Mormon center on the Messiah. Father Lehi was a mighty prophet who taught first and foremost of Jesus Christ, who is a universal redeemer—one who would save the whole human family. This is a different kind of Messiah than He in whom the Jews were accustomed to believing. Lehi’s message was revolutionary to many minds of his day—a message of a Messiah who was not a military conqueror or a political deliverer but rather a Messiah who would conquer sin and death and redeem the whole world!

We do not emphasize this enough in our teaching. Some students think that Nephi honored Lehi because he saved his family from destruction. This is true, but Lehi was more than just a messenger of truths that saved his family. He was a messenger of the fundamental truth that will save the entire human race from destruction.

Lehi was Judaism’s seventh-century EF premier witness of and mouthpiece for the Lord Jesus Christ. Lehi was one of the great prophets of the ancient world, and we can only imagine the truths that were recorded in his own book—the 116 lost pages of manuscript, the book of Lehi. Lehi was to the people of his day what Joseph Smith is to us. Each prophet was the head of a new gospel dispensation, and that new dispensation was founded on revelations of the Godhead and new scripture. Lehi’s vision parallels Joseph Smith’s first vision as well as Paul’s. Again, it is important to point out these parallels to our students.

Nephi helps us understand how and why he not only became like his father but also became a witness for his father: “And it came to pass after I, Nephi, having heard all the words of my father, concerning the things which he saw in a vision, and also the things which he spake by the power of the Holy Ghost, which power he received by faith on the Son of God—and the Son of God was the Messiah who should come—I, Nephi, was desirous also that I might see, and hear, and know of these things, by the power of the Holy Ghost, which is the gift of God unto all those who diligently seek him, as well in times of old as in the times that he should manifest himself unto the children of men”(1 Nephi 10:17; emphasis added).

Here we see that Nephi knew about the Messiah through his father’s testimony and that his father had done such a thorough and

powerful job of instructing him that he now wanted to see, hear, and know for himself. Nephi was no longer content to rely solely on his father's sure witness; he wanted a sure witness of his own. Thus, Lehi was not only the model father but also the model teacher. Now notice what follows:

For it came to pass after I had desired to know the things that my father had seen, and believing that the Lord was able to make them known unto me, as I sat pondering in mine heart I was caught away in the Spirit of the Lord, yea, into an exceedingly high mountain, which I never had before seen, and upon which I never had before set my foot.

And the Spirit said unto me: Behold, what desirest thou?

And I said: I desire to behold the things which my father saw.

And the Spirit said unto me: Believest thou that thy father saw the tree of which he hath spoken?

And I said: Yea, thou knowest that I believe all the words of my father.

And when I had spoken these words, the Spirit cried with a loud voice, saying: Hosanna to the Lord, the most high God; for he is God over all the earth, yea, even above all. And blessed art thou, Nephi, because thou believest in the Son of the most high God; wherefore, thou shalt behold the things which thou hast desired. (1 Nephi 11:1–6; emphasis added)

After receiving a heavenly tutor, Nephi reiterates his desire to know for himself all that his father knew and had seen (see 1 Nephi 11:3). We are struck by how the angel frames the question that follows Nephi's stated desire. The angel asks, "Believest thou that thy father saw the tree of which he hath spoken?" (11:4; emphasis added). Nephi wants to know the things of heaven. He wants to know about the Messiah, the heart of his father's manifestations, and the angel starts by asking about trees.

Nephi answers his heavenly guide with "Thou knowest that I believe all the words of my father" (1 Nephi 11:5). Does the angel then say, "Hosanna, we have someone who believes in trees?" No, the angel exclaims, "Hosanna, . . . blessed art thou, Nephi, because thou believest in the Son of the most high God" (11:6; emphasis added). What is, or rather, who is the tree? The tree is Jesus Christ. And what is the core of Lehi's visions and dreams? The center of all that Lehi saw and experienced is the Son of the Most High God!

The summary of Lehi's visions begins with 1 Nephi 11:8. It is important to note that immediately after Nephi is told he will be able to see all that his father saw, he is told in no uncertain terms by his personal heavenly guide that, of necessity, the focus of this summary will also be "the Son of God": "And behold this thing shall be given unto thee for a sign, that after thou hast beheld the tree which bore the fruit which thy father tasted, thou shalt also behold a man descending out of heaven, and him shall ye witness; and after ye have witnessed him ye shall bear record that it is the Son of God" (1 Nephi 11:7).

Though chapter 11 will now be the focus of attention, note that the panoramic summary of Father Lehi's visions received by his son Nephi on this separate occasion did not end with chapter 11, as indicated in the subsequent chapters:

1 Nephi 12:1—And it came to pass that the angel said unto me: Look, and behold thy seed, and also the seed of thy brethren. And I looked and beheld the land of promise.

1 Nephi 13:1—And it came to pass that the angel spake unto me, saying: Look! And I looked and beheld many nations and kingdoms.

1 Nephi 14:5—And it came to pass that the angel spake unto me, Nephi, saying: Thou hast beheld that if the Gentiles repent it shall be well with them; and thou also knowest concerning the covenants of the Lord unto the house of Israel; and thou also hast heard that whoso repenteth not must perish.

In these chapters, Nephi makes it clear that his grand, panoramic vision of all that his father had seen and heard took him through the latter days. His vision did not stop with the founding of America and the Restoration of the gospel; rather, it included a clear view and description of the end of the world as well as an understanding that those images were the same ones that John the Revelator would also see and write about in the book of Revelation. In other words, the times in which we are now living are those that Nephi saw near the close of his summary vision. And these times are those that Father Lehi saw as well, six hundred years before the first coming of the Messiah, the Son of God, the Almighty Jehovah in the flesh.

Thus, Nephi concludes the description of his vision as follows:

And behold, the things which this apostle of the Lamb shall write are many things which thou hast seen; and behold, the remainder shalt thou see.

But the things which thou shalt see hereafter thou shalt not write; for the Lord God hath ordained the apostle of the Lamb of God that he should write them. . . .

And I, Nephi, heard and bear record, that the name of the apostle of the Lamb was John, according to the word of the angel.

And behold, I, Nephi, am forbidden that I should write the remainder of the things which I saw and heard; wherefore the things which I have written sufficeth me; and I have written but a small part of the things which I saw.

And I bear record that I saw the things which my father saw, and the angel of the Lord did make them known unto me.

And now I make an end of speaking concerning the things which I saw while I was carried away in the spirit; and if all the things which I saw are not written, the things which I have written are true. And thus it is. . . .

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. (1 Nephi 14:24–25, 27–30, 15:1; emphasis added)

Question 2: What precepts and doctrines are taught in that sweeping summary?

The chapter headings of 1 Nephi 11, 12, 13, and 14 give an idea of the sweeping nature of Lehi's and Nephi's visions. The list of doctrines and principles included in these chapters is staggering in its breadth.

1 Nephi 11—Nephi sees the Spirit of the Lord and is shown in vision the tree of life—He sees the mother of the Son of God and learns of the condescension of God—He sees the baptism, ministry, and crucifixion of the Lamb of God—He sees also the call and ministry of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

1 Nephi 12—Nephi sees in vision: the land of promise; the righteousness, iniquity, and downfall of its inhabitants; the coming of the Lamb of God among them; how the twelve disciples and the twelve apostles shall judge Israel; the loathsome and filthy state of those who dwindle in unbelief.

1 Nephi 13—Nephi sees in vision: the church of the devil set up among the Gentiles; the discovery and colonizing of America; the loss of many plain and precious parts of the Bible; the resultant state of gentile apostasy; the restoration of the gospel, the coming forth of latter-day scripture, and the building up of Zion.

1 Nephi 14—An angel tells Nephi of the blessings and cursings to fall upon the Gentiles—There are only two churches: the Church of the Lamb of God and the church of the devil—The Saints of God in all nations are persecuted by the great and abominable church—The apostle John shall write concerning the end of the world.

Frankly, these headings constitute an impressive description of the history of salvation as it has unfolded on this earth.

Does a central thread run through all of this? The Lord's direct involvement in the affairs of the human family is at the heart of all that Lehi and Nephi experienced. And what is the single greatest act of God in human history? Is it not that He literally entered human history by becoming a human being? Both Lehi and Nephi not only saw the first coming of the Lord Jesus Christ in the flesh and the appearance of the resurrected Lord to their descendants at the land Bountiful but also, according to the Apostle John, as recorded in the book of Revelation, saw the end of the world, the second coming of Jesus Christ, the millennial reign of the Savior, and the celestialization of the earth.

Remember, Nephi was forbidden to record everything he saw, but the angel told him that John the Revelator would do so (1 Nephi 14:25). This record of John the Revelator, the Apocalypse, or the book of Revelation, even preserves the symbol of the tree of life, a symbol forcefully emphasized by Lehi and Nephi in their reports of their visions of the earth's salvation history (see Revelation 2:7). And we know that other great prophets also saw the same things as Lehi, Nephi, and John the Revelator. In 1 Nephi 14:26, the Lord told Nephi that others had also been "shown all things," that they had written down those things, and that they were "sealed up to come forth in their purity . . . in the own due time of the Lord, unto the house of Israel."

We do not have a complete list of those "others" who were "shown all things"; but we do know who some of them are: the brother of Jared (see Ether 3); Moses (see Moses 1); and Adam (see D&C 107), to name a few examples. And we know that there are many records to be brought forth by the Lord in His own time. Many records have been discovered in the twentieth century: the Nag Hammadi manuscripts from Egypt, the Dead Sea Scrolls from Qumran, the Ras Shamra tablets from Ugarit in modern Lebanon, and others. If these records have taught us anything, it is that we can expect other scriptural records to come forth from the ground. Helaman 3:15 tells

us that “there are many books and many records of every kind, and they have been kept chiefly by the Nephites” (emphasis added).

The famous “cave story” told by President Brigham Young in 1877 while in Farmington, Utah, teaches that many ancient records will come forth in the latter days. In the story, President Young related an incident from the life of Oliver Cowdery wherein Oliver said that after the Prophet Joseph Smith received the plates, he was instructed by a heavenly messenger to carry them back to the Hill Cumorah. Oliver accompanied Joseph, and when they arrived, they walked into a large and spacious cave. They saw a pile of plates at least two feet high under a table, and “there were altogether in this room more plates than probably many wagon loads; they were piled up in the corners and along the walls.”¹

Elder Heber C. Kimball also referred to the cave story and then stated the following: “Joseph and others . . . went into a cave in the hill Cumorah, and saw more records than ten men could carry[.] There were books piled up on tables, book upon book. Those records this people [the Latter-day Saints] will yet have, if they accept of the Book of Mormon and observe its precepts, and keep the commandments.”²

With this background, contemplate the words of Elder Bruce R. McConkie:

We are in the process of receiving all that God has spoken by the mouths of all his holy prophets since the world began. Only a small portion has come to us so far; we do not, as yet, begin to know what the ancients knew. . . .

Except for a few things relative to salvation for the dead, we have not yet received one syllable of scripture, one trace of truth, one gospel verity, one saving power, that was not had anciently.

The time is yet future—it will be Millennial—when the Lord reveals to us those things which have been hidden from the foundation of the earth and which have never as yet been given to man. . . .

What we have so far received is to test our faith. When we repent of all our iniquity and become clean before the Lord, and when we exercise faith in him like unto the brother of Jared, then the sealed portion of the ancient word will be translated and read from the housetops.³

Before becoming engrossed in idle speculation about the additional records we will be given, note that the primary pur-

pose behind the creation and preservation of these records is to testify of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the Holy Lamb of God, the great Jehovah who condescended, who came to earth as the babe of Bethlehem to work out the infinite and eternal Atonement and make possible Heavenly Father's great plan of happiness. Prophets kept records, saw visions, and received manifestations to teach of Jesus Christ and His relationship to the whole human family that we may know that people in all ages knew of the need for and reality of the infinite and eternal Atonement. As members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we know that the Atonement of Jesus Christ is the most important event in all eternity. According to Elder McConkie, "from creation's dawn through all the ages of a never-ending eternity," nothing ever has or ever will be as important or significant as the infinite redemptive sacrifice that was wrought by the shedding of the blood of God.⁴

As a discussion of the Savior's monumental act of mercy, which is the central doctrine of the Book of Mormon, few chapters in all scripture equal the beauty, majesty, and depth of 1 Nephi 11. Since this chapter has so many foundational doctrines and principles that could be discussed, what should we point out to our students?

First, chapter 11 gives us a window of insight into the role of symbols and metaphors in the Lord's economy of teaching (such things as trees, fountains of pure water, the iron rod, rocks, and so forth). Undoubtedly, the Lord uses symbols and metaphors for many reasons, at least two of which must surely be to conceal or reveal depending upon the spiritual capacity of the student (and we are all students) and to convey multiple layers of meaning associated with a single image. Nothing will help our students more than teaching them to start thinking in symbols and metaphors. We sometimes assume the development of the "metaphorical mind" will happen automatically, but like Nephi, each of us needs personal tutors and guides to help us through the revelations of God. The Holy Spirit and gifted teachers are some of these mentors. They help us understand why the Lord frequently uses symbols.

Second, chapter 11 teaches that the role of prophets is to learn and testify of Christ and His Crucifixion, whether before or after His coming in the flesh. Nephi wanted to know all that his father saw and heard, yet how does the Lord begin teaching Nephi? He begins with the foundation: God and His Only Begotten Son. Reflect on this for a moment. A knowledge of God and His Only Begotten Son,

the Messiah, constitutes the inaugural revelations of the Book of Mormon. It is this knowledge that is revealed to a father and his son (perhaps also a pattern to show that heavenly things have an earthly likeness).

Third, chapter 11 teaches that prophets sometimes have heavenly guides as their tutors and mentors. This follows the ancient Near Eastern pattern found in several apocryphal and pseudepigraphical accounts of manifestations, as well as patterns in Jewish mysticism.

Fourth, chapter 11 teaches that the Spirit of the Lord is in the form of a mortal man (see 1 Nephi 11:11). I take this to mean that the Holy Ghost is in the form of a man, though I am aware that others have believed it to be the preexistent Christ, such as is described in Ether 3:14–17.⁵

Fifth, chapter 11 teaches that the tree in Lehi's vision is the great symbol of the earthly Messiah. As reported in verses 8–20, after Nephi sees the tree and desires to know "the interpretation thereof," he is first shown the cities of Jerusalem and Nazareth; next, a beautiful virgin; then, the condescension of God; and finally, the virgin bearing a child in her arms. These are the words that immediately follow: "And the angel said unto me: Behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son of the Eternal Father! Knowest thou the meaning of the tree which thy father saw? And I answered him, saying: Yea, it is the love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men; wherefore, it is the most desirable above all things" (1 Nephi 11:21–22). From the Apostle John's New Testament witness, we come to understand that God's love became tangible in the gift of His Only Begotten Son, born into mortality as the babe of Bethlehem (John 3:16).

Thus, chapter 11 teaches the doctrine of the condescension of God like no other book or chapter of scripture in our collection. Reflect on the word condescend: con means with and descend means come down. In other words, to condescend is to come down with the people. How can we be anything but awed and humbled when we realize that God Himself gave up His celestial abode to come down to this terrestrial earth, to be born a mortal human being just as you and I. President Joseph Fielding Smith stated, "Our Savior was a God before he was born into this world."⁶ Thus, the all-powerful one became a helpless baby, to bruise His shins and stub His toes, to learn to crawl, walk, and run, to relearn what He had forgotten as a result of His human birth and the veil of forgetful-

ness, and to suffer hardship and injustice though He was exquisitely and perfectly sensitive to unfairness and sin. This condescension is so majestic and profound as to be incomprehensible to the finite mind. I hope we give this doctrine its full due when we teach.

In fact, the doctrine of condescension in its true and complete sense, as taught in 1 Nephi 11, encompasses two aspects of God. Elder Bruce R. McConkie wrote:

The condescension of God (meaning the Father) consists in the fact that though he is an exalted, perfected, glorified Personage, he became the personal and literal Father of a mortal Offspring born of mortal woman. And the condescension of the God (meaning the Son) consists in the fact that though he himself is the Lord Omnipotent, the very Being who created the earth . . . yet being born of mortal woman, he submitted to all the trials of mortality, suffering “temptations, and pain of body, hunger, thirst, and fatigue” . . . finally being put to death in a most ignominious manner.⁷

This twofold nature of the condescension of God is comprehended in verses 18–21 and 26–33 of chapter 11.

Sixth, chapter 11 teaches that the symbolic rod of iron is the word of God, which leads unalterably to the “fountain of living waters.” This was a significant image to people living in the arid Middle East, where iron-age technology was the unmitigated reflection of strength and power and the cool water of unpolluted springs meant, quite simply, life and well-being. But more importantly, 1 Nephi 11:25 recounts the deepest meaning of the fountain for God’s people. It is the same as the tree of life or the love of God; and all these images, in God’s economy, were made to be representations of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the Rock, the Tree of Life, the Living Water, and many other things (see John 4:10, 14).

Seventh, chapter 11 teaches that prophets, many hundreds of years before the earthly advent of the Savior, foreknew and foresaw—literally saw—the Savior’s earthly ministry, including the following:

- The baptism of Jesus (11:27)
- The rejection of Jesus by unappreciative multitudes (11:28)
- The calling of twelve apostles (11:29)
- The reality of angels who minister to humans (11:30)
- The healing power of the mortal Messiah (11:31)
- The atoning crucifixion of the Son of God (11:33)

It should not surprise us that Nephi saw all these things, for such things have been shown to ordained servants of the Lord in modern

times. Elder David B. Haight described such a personal experience in his general conference address of October 1989. During a catastrophic health crisis in which he lapsed into unconsciousness for several days, Elder Haight witnessed the eternal mission of the Son of God. In language paralleling the very descriptions of the prophet Nephi, he stated, “I was shown a panoramic view of His earthly ministry: His baptism, His teaching, His healing the sick and lame, the mock trial, His crucifixion, His resurrection and ascension. . . . During those days of unconsciousness I was given, by the gift and power of the Holy Ghost, a more perfect knowledge of His mission. I was also given a more complete understanding of what it means to exercise, in His name, the authority to unlock the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven for the salvation of all who are faithful.”⁸

And so it was that Elder Haight’s experience paralleled Nephi’s experience, as well as that of others who have witnessed such scenes while still living in the mortal state. Elder Haight’s experience helps us relate to the experiences of Book of Mormon prophets.

Elder Haight concluded his general conference address with words of testimony that echo the sentiments by which we began our discussion: “I cannot begin to convey to you the deep impact that these scenes have confirmed upon my soul. I sense their eternal meaning and realize that ‘nothing in the entire plan of salvation compares in any way in importance with that most transcendental of all events, the atoning sacrifice of our Lord. It is the most important single thing that has ever occurred in the entire history of created things; it is the rock foundation upon which the gospel and all other things rest,’ as has been declared.”⁹

Finally, 1 Nephi 11 teaches a significant lesson about the nature of rebellion against the Son of God in historical times and even in our day: “And after he was slain I saw the multitudes of the earth, that they were gathered together to fight against the apostles of the Lamb; for thus were the twelve called by the angel of the Lord. And the multitude of the earth was gathered together; and I beheld that they were in a large and spacious building, like unto the building which my father saw. And the angel of the Lord spake unto me again, saying: Behold the world and the wisdom thereof; yea, behold the house of Israel hath gathered together to fight against the twelve apostles of the Lamb” (1 Nephi 11:34–35).

Regarding this passage, note that Nephi was shown two groups of people who rebel against the Apostles of the Lamb, and thus against the Savior. The first group is composed of the prideful multi-

tudes of the earth. We know that they are filled with pride precisely because they fill the large and spacious building, which is “the pride of the world” (1 Nephi 11:36). This is no surprise because we have come to expect those of the world to be opposed to the things of God. The second group mentioned in verse 35 is the house of Israel that has gathered together to fight against the twelve Apostles of the Lamb. This ought to be a sobering warning to all of us. We who are members of the Church are of the house of Israel—either by birth or adoption—and we must be ever vigilant to keep ourselves out of the destructive position seen by Nephi.

Question 3: How do we know that Lehi’s and Nephi’s dreams and visions constitute the foundation on which most everything else rests, doctrinally and spiritually, in the Book of Mormon?

Look at how the doctrines discussed in 1 Nephi 11–14 relate to the purpose of the Book of Mormon and the place they hold in the rest of the Book of Mormon.

Clearly, the coming of Jesus Christ, His life, His Ministry, His atoning mission, and His relationship to the house of Israel are at the heart of all the doctrines and prophecies revealed to Lehi and Nephi. The stated purposes of the Book of Mormon are to convince Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ and to show the remnants of the house of Israel the great things the Lord has done for their fathers. In fact, most of the other purposes of the Book of Mormon (to serve as a spiritual tutor, to teach us to hear the voice of the Spirit, to show us how we should live and how we will be judged, to serve as a pattern for the future, and so on) could also be said of 1 Nephi 11–14.

The true doctrine laid out in the Book of Mormon issues forth from the correct foundation established by Lehi and Nephi through their inaugural visions and revelations. If the visions received by Lehi constitute his formal call to be a prophet to his people, then it surely is true that Nephi’s vision in 1 Nephi 11–14 constitutes his formal call to be a validation of his father’s teachings and a second prophetic witness to his people. As it turns out, their visions and manifestations become the founding revelations of an entire civilization. Succeeding generations of prophets remembered Lehi and Nephi, invoked their names, and taught their doctrines.

Helaman told his sons Nephi and Lehi that he had given them their names so they would remember their first parents: “Behold, my

sons, I desire that ye should remember to keep the commandments of God; and I would that ye should declare unto the people these words. Behold, I have given unto you the names of our first parents who came out of the land of Jerusalem; and this I have done that when you remember your names ye may remember them; and when ye remember them ye may remember their works; and when ye remember their works ye may know how that it is said, and also written, that they were good” (Helaman 5:6).

In that same speech, Helaman exhorts his sons to remember the foundational doctrine taught by their ancient fathers Lehi and Nephi: “It is upon the rock of our Redeemer, who is Christ, the Son of God, that ye must build your foundation” (Helaman 5:12; emphasis added).

Mormon, the great prophet-editor of the Book of Mormon, was very aware of his prophetic heritage and the religious and doctrinal foundation on which his culture rested. He made a special point of declaring that he was a descendant of both Lehi (3 Nephi 5:20) and Nephi (Mormon 1:5). In fact, he wanted it known that he was a “pure” descendant of Lehi, and he knew of the special relationship the Savior established with his forefathers. He states: “I am Mormon, and a pure descendant of Lehi. I have reason to bless my God and my Savior Jesus Christ, that he brought our fathers out of the land of Jerusalem, (and no one knew it save it were himself and those whom he brought out of that land) and that he hath given me and my people so much knowledge unto the salvation of our souls” (3 Nephi 5:20).

Indeed, the visions and heavenly manifestations of Lehi and Nephi were on the minds of many prophets hundreds of years after Lehi and Nephi had died. For example, Alma said he had an experience exactly like Father Lehi’s (Alma 36:22). And, of course, the contents of Lehi’s and Nephi’s revelations were repeated many times by other great prophets years later. For example, King Benjamin taught the doctrine of the condescension of Jesus Christ as well as the panoramic overview of His mortal ministry in images that take us back to Nephi’s descriptions (see Mosiah 3:5–10).

Question 4: How can and should Lehi’s and Nephi’s visions and revelations impact our teaching of the Book of Mormon?

Although such things as the story line, the principle of obedience, the demonstrations of faithfulness, and the nature of righ-

teous living (all of which are principles demonstrated in the first fourteen chapters of the Book of Mormon) are important and should be taught, Lehi's and Nephi's revelations help us understand and teach the importance of the foundational doctrines summarized in 1 Nephi 11–14 in a powerful way. The most important of all these doctrines is a correct knowledge of God, followed by a correct knowledge of the life and mission of the Lord Jesus Christ and His role in the Father's great plan of happiness. These chapters show that true prophets are first and foremost witnesses of the reality of Jesus Christ—that at the heart of prophecy is a testimony of Jesus Christ (see Revelation 19:10).

We can draw parallels between the founding revelations of Lehi's and Nephi's visions and revelations and those of the Prophet Joseph Smith, especially the First Vision. All three prophets witnessed for themselves the nature of the three Gods who constitute the Godhead, even the Presidency of Heaven as it has been called. All three prophets came to understand the nature of Christ's atoning mission and its central role in the Father's plan. All three prophets saw our day. And all three prophets were the leaders of new gospel periods or dispensations. As teachers of the Book of Mormon living in the very day seen and longed for by all the prophets, we can make Nephi's supreme instructional principle a vivid reality. As Nephi said, "I did liken all scriptures unto us, that it might be for our profit and learning" (1 Nephi 19:23).

Everything we say and do as Church educators can somehow be geared toward bringing our students to a correct knowledge of God and the atoning mission of Jesus Christ. Perhaps we can figure out how to daily turn our students' thoughts to the life, ministry, majesty, and place of Jesus Christ in Heavenly Father's eternal plan of happiness. Chapters 11–14 of 1 Nephi place the significance of the Atonement of Jesus Christ at the center of the earth's panoramic history. If we become serious about trying our best to bring each of our teaching sessions back to Christ and His crucifixion, tremendous, unspeakable spiritual experiences will occur.

President Hinckley gave the following counsel in 1997:

With all of our doing, with all our leading, with all of our teaching, the most important thing we can do for those whom we lead is to cultivate in their hearts a living, vital, vibrant testimony and knowledge of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of the world. . . . I would hope that in all we do we would somehow constantly nourish the testimony of our people concerning the

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Savior. I am satisfied—I know it’s so—that whenever a man has a true witness in his heart of the living reality of the Lord Jesus Christ, all else will come together as it should. . . . That is the root from which all virtue springs among those who call themselves Latter-day Saints.¹⁰

Nephi is an independent witness of all that his father, Lehi, saw and heard regarding the mortal ministry of the Holy Messiah; and because their witnesses and testimonies are found in the beginning pages of the Book of Mormon, the book itself becomes its own best example of the law of witnesses. That is, in the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word of saving doctrine be taught. That saving doctrine centers on God sending His Son to earth to accomplish the infinite and eternal Atonement. Each of us can be the fulfillment of the ancient law of witnesses to our students as we teach of the Savior.

Just as Lehi exhorted his children and Helaman encouraged and exhorted his sons, so we must teach our sons and daughters to build upon the same rock of our Redeemer—the only sure foundation.

Notes

1. Journal of Discourses (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–86), 19:36–39.
2. Ibid., 4:105; emphasis added.
3. Bruce R. McConkie, “The Doctrinal Restoration,” in *The Joseph Smith Translation*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Robert L. Millet (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, Religious Studies Center, 1985), 19–20.
4. Bruce R. McConkie, “The Purifying Power of Gethsemane,” *Ensign* 15, no. 5 (May 1985): 9.
5. For further discussion of this point, see Sidney B. Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968), 116–17.
6. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954–56), 1:32.
7. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 155.
8. David B. Haight, “The Sacrament—and the Sacrifice,” *Ensign* 19, no. 11 (November 1989): 60.
9. Ibid.
10. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Inspirational Thoughts,” *Ensign* 27, no. 8 (August 1997): 3.