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THE PROPHET NEPHI

Rodney Turner

Some men are “morning stars” of the first magnitude, possessing a luminescence so unique, so compelling, that lesser mortals bask in their reflected glory like so many planets orbiting the sun. This eternal principle of attraction functions like a spiritual law of gravity (D&C 88:40). It originates in that God whose dominions forever flow unto him “without compulsory means” (D&C 121:46).

For the spiritually minded, the foremost of such men in this world are those towering figures comprising the prophets, seers, and revelators of the ages. Few in number, they are heaven’s pillars on earth, upholding the various gospel dispensations. One of these was Nephi, a truly superlative man. Indeed, he was the prototype of those renowned Book of Mormon prophets and kings who came after him. These and many unidentified prophets reflected Nephi’s faith, courage, and commitment.

Nephi not only set the prophetic tone for his people for a thousand years, but his voice rings out to the children of Lehi and

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all mankind in our day. Indeed, his words and those of his fellow prophets in the Book of Mormon render that volume of scripture the keystone of salvation in this last gospel dispensation. Elder Bruce R. McConkie testified: "It is the book that will save the world and prepare the sons of men for joy and peace here and now and everlasting life in eternity."¹

The House of Joseph

Lehi's lineage was foreordained. Upon acquiring the plates of brass, he learned that he was a descendant of Joseph through Manasseh (1 Nephi 3:3, 12; 5:14–16; 6:2; Alma 10:3). This knowledge inspired him to prophesy that the contents of the plates (comprising much of the Old Testament) would "go forth unto all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people who were of his seed" (1 Nephi 5:17–19). In the times of the Gentiles, the Bible was to be the scriptural Elias, or forerunner, of the Book of Mormon.

Lehi and Nephi inaugurated the American branch of a line of prophets descending from Joseph.² Joseph was Jacob's covenant son who, through Manasseh and Ephraim, received a double portion in Israel (Genesis 48:8–22). More important, "Joseph" was the one to whom the other tribes would look for both temporal and spiritual salvation (Genesis 37:5–10).

It was "Joseph" who was to spread abroad in the Americas (Genesis 49:22). It was "Joseph" who would write "Another Testament of Christ"—the Book of Mormon (see Ezekiel 37:16–20; 2 Nephi 3:12). It was "Joseph" whose descendant and namesake Joseph Smith was to be a choice seer and an "ensign" for the gathering of Israel in the latter days (JST, Genesis 50:30–33; 2 Nephi 3:6–8, 11, 16; D&C 113:6). It was "Joseph" who would bestow the ordinances of the house of the Lord upon redeemed Israel prior to the Savior's millennial reign (D&C 133:30–35).

Through Lehi, "Joseph" came to America. He did so for at least three reasons: (1) that his posterity might lay claim to the choicest of the lands of promise, the Americas, (2) that the Book of Mormon—the "stick of Ephraim" (D&C 27:5)—might be written as the Western Hemisphere's witness of Jesus Christ, and (3) so that the restored Church might be established in the land of Zion from whence the message of salvation would go forth to all nations (D&C 58:13).

“Joseph’s” latter-day work was to be directed by his younger son, Ephraim, who received the blessing of the firstborn from his grandfather Jacob (Genesis 48:17–20). The Lord told Jeremiah: “I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn” (Jeremiah 31:9). As Jesus is the elder brother of the human family, so is Joseph, through Ephraim, the elder brother of Israel.

Lehi and his prophet-descendants were in a very real sense forerunners of the Restoration. As the Bible was an Elias for the Book of Mormon, so was the Book of Mormon an Elias for the restored Church. They are inseparably connected; they stand or fall together.

The Chronicle Begins

The Nephite chronicle began in Jerusalem six hundred years before the birth of Christ. Nephi’s father, Lehi, a lifetime resident of the land,³ had amassed a large fortune—probably through trade with Egypt, which had been a dominant influence in the Middle East for many centuries and controlled Palestine and Syria between 609 and 605 B.C.

But in 604 Nebuchadnezzar conquered these lands and, in the first of three major deportations, exiled a number of prominent Jewish citizens to Babylon. It was a time of great political turmoil. One faction favored submission to Babylon, another sought alliance with Egypt. It was under these conditions that many prophets, including Jeremiah (whose ministry began about 627), warned of the imminent destruction of Jerusalem.

Deeply concerned, Lehi prayed in behalf of his people. The visions that followed (1 Nephi 1:5–15, 19) establish the central theme of the Book of Mormon—the redemptive mission of Jesus Christ. Lehi testified publicly of his visions and of the Messiah’s future coming. Incensed, the Jews sought his life, and, warned by the Lord, Lehi fled with his family into the wilderness. His first major encampment was in the valley of Lemuel near the Gulf of Aqabah—approximately two hundred miles south of Jerusalem. “Joseph’s” American odyssey had begun.

Nephi was “exceedingly young” but “large in stature” (1 Nephi 2:16; 4:31) at the time. This suggests that he was born around 615 B.C., during the turbulent period preceding the fall of the Assyrian empire in 612 and the rise of Babylon in 605. (Jerusalem would be destroyed in about 587.)

Nephi was the fourth son of Lehi and Sariah. Two younger brothers, Jacob and Joseph, would be born during the eight or more years of wilderness sojourning. He also had two or more sisters (2 Nephi 5:6).

He must have been in his late teens when he married one of Ishmael's five daughters (1 Nephi 16:7; 18:19). The only specific incident involving his own family he mentions occurred at sea when he was bound by Laman and Lemuel. He writes: "My wife with her tears and prayers, and also my children, did not soften the hearts of my brethren that they would loose me" (1 Nephi 18:19). He later states that he and his children were actually hated by these brothers (2 Nephi 5:14).

Nephi and His Brothers

As prophesied, Nephi became the teacher of his brothers (1 Nephi 2:22). He explained to them Lehi's allegorical vision (1 Nephi 8:2-38; 15:2-36; 16:1-5), as well as his teachings concerning Israel and the prophecies of Isaiah (1 Nephi 10; 15:20; 19:22-24; 20-22).

But in spite of all they were taught, Laman, the archvillain, and his tag-along brother Lemuel emerge as fundamentally corrupt men. Their record was dismal: they were materialistic, faithless, disloyal, cowardly, complaining, cruel, lazy, untruthful, and, like Jacob's son Reuben, "unstable as water" (Genesis 49:4)—humbling themselves one day and breathing out threats the next (1 Nephi 7:20; 16:5, 32, 39; 18:4, 15, 20). The only thing that really impressed them was power (1 Nephi 18:20). Above all, they were would-be murderers of their own father and brother. In the end, they polluted their posterity with their lies and brought a curse upon them that was not to be removed for more than a half a millennium.

On the other hand, Nephi was a man of astonishing faith, profound humility, and consistent steadiness. In the latter, he was unequaled even by his parents. Fearful that her sons had perished in the wilderness, Sariah complained against Lehi in language reminiscent of that used earlier by Laman and Lemuel (1 Nephi 2:11; 5:2). And at the time of the broken bow incident even Lehi "began to murmur against the Lord his God" (1 Nephi 16:20). Chastened by the Lord, Lehi "was brought down into the depths of sorrow" (1 Nephi 16:25). These very human lapses in

no way diminish the greatness of Lehi and Sariah; would that we stumbled but once on so long and arduous a journey!

Had Nephi sought the power he was accused of seeking (1 Nephi 16:38), he might then have assumed leadership over his father. Instead, he honored and sustained his patriarch by asking: "Whither shall I go to obtain food?" (1 Nephi 16:23).

But why the striking contrast between Nephi and his two brothers? Was one so good, and the others so bad? Is it a case of self-serving manipulation of the facts on Nephi's part? Hardly. If anything, Nephi has moderated his own virtues. I believe that Nephi and Laman symbolize that essential opposition between good and evil drawn so vividly in the Book of Mormon. They represent the two extremes found therein: life versus death, heaven versus hell, the kingdom of God versus the kingdom of the devil, the spiritually minded versus the carnally minded, the saved versus the lost—those sealed up to Christ and those sealed up to the devil (Alma 34:34–36; 40:23–26).

Lehi knew that Laman and Lemuel slept "the sleep of hell" (2 Nephi 1:13). He pleaded with them to repent lest they suffer "the eternal destruction of both soul and body" (2 Nephi 1:22). Nephi also grieved over them: "Behold, my soul is rent with anguish because of you, and my heart is pained; I fear lest ye shall be cast off forever" (1 Nephi 17:47).

They had seen an angel (1 Nephi 3:29; 4:3; 7:10; 17:45), had experienced the power of God (1 Nephi 7:18; 17:48, 52–55), and had heard the voice of the Lord and received of his Spirit (1 Nephi 16:39; 17:45). Yet they plotted Nephi's murder on at least four occasions (1 Nephi 7:16; 16:37; 17:48; 2 Nephi 5:2; compare 1:24), and their father's at least once (1 Nephi 16:37). Nephi accused Laman and Lemuel of being "murderers in their hearts" (1 Nephi 17:44). They were prepared to shed innocent blood.

These were not ignorant men; they stood self-condemned. When literally shocked by the Spirit, they testified: "We know of a surety that the Lord is with thee, for we know that it is the power of the Lord that has shaken us" (1 Nephi 17:55; compare 2 Nephi 4:22). Nephi adds that he had to prevent them from worshipping him at the time (1 Nephi 17:55).

The Laban Affair

Nowhere are the contrasting characters of Nephi and Laman better revealed than in the Laban affair. Unlike Laman and

Lemuel, who doubted both the source and the feasibility of the idea of getting the plates of brass, young Nephi was convinced that not only should Laban's record be obtained, but that it *would* be obtained. "I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded, for 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" (1 Nephi 3:7; compare 17:3).

He then led his reluctant, murmuring brothers back to Jerusalem. Laman's subsequent abortive encounter with Laban convinced him that the mission was futile. But Nephi, having been blessed with the gift of faith (1 Nephi 3:8), swore an oath: "*As the Lord liveth, and as we live*, we will not go down unto our father in the wilderness until we have accomplished the thing which the Lord hath commanded us" (1 Nephi 3:15; italics added). His former testimony had not been idly spoken.

Hoping that Laban would be willing to exchange the plates of brass for their father's treasure, the four brothers went down to the land of their inheritance, obtained the treasure and brought it to Laban. And "he did lust after it" (1 Nephi 3:25). Threatened and driven out, the brothers fled for their lives. Filled with rage and humiliation, Laman and Lemuel whipped Sam and Nephi with a rod. It was then that a divine messenger appeared and revealed that the rod of authority belonged in Nephi's hand, not theirs. By their misconduct, they had forfeited the traditional right of leadership. The Lord had chosen Nephi instead; he would rule the Lehite nation. (1 Nephi 3:29.) That choice rankled the Lamanites for over five hundred years.

Assured of success by the angel and angrily yielding to Nephi's persuasive arguments, Laman and Lemuel reluctantly accompanied Sam and Nephi back to Jerusalem where they hid themselves outside its walls while Nephi crept into the darkened city alone. Faith and doubt, courage and cowardice, had parted company. "And I was led by the Spirit, not knowing beforehand the things which I should do" (1 Nephi 4:6). What, indeed, could he do? Laban had stolen his father's wealth; Nephi had nothing his adversary wanted but his life.

Approaching Laban's house, Nephi discovered him "drunken with wine" and lying in the street. As he drew Laban's magnificent sword, the Spirit that led Nephi said, "Kill him." Appalled, Nephi resisted the command: "Never at any time have I shed the

blood of man” (1 Nephi 4:10). The Spirit spoke again: “The Lord hath delivered him into thy hands.”

Nephi reflected on the fact that Laban was a would-be (if not actual) murderer, that he defied God’s commandments, and that he had stolen Lehi’s property. Confirming Nephi’s thoughts, the Spirit repeated the command: “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.” (1 Nephi 4:12–13; italics added.) Commitment overruled conscience; Nephi obeyed the “voice of the Spirit;” he beheaded Laban.

Some critics maintain that Nephi simply rationalized a justification for what was, in fact, an act of murder. They argue that a God of love would never be a party to such a crime, that it is a contradiction of his true nature as revealed by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Using the same logic, they also deny that the Lord commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac.⁴

However, Nephi’s rationalizations did not precede the Spirit’s command; they *followed* it. Then, too, Nephi was over forty years old when he wrote this account. He had become well acquainted with the Holy Ghost and knew the difference between his own thoughts and divine revelation. His action had been totally unpremeditated; he had gone to Laban’s house “*not knowing* beforehand the things which I should do” (1 Nephi 4:6; italics added).

As for his account, he could just as well have written that Laban was already dead when he found him, or provided some other plausible explanation. We would be none the wiser. But Nephi was a truthful man; he wrote it as it happened.

The affair was a trial of faith. The Lord could easily have procured the record some other way, but he deliberately placed Nephi in a dilemma: obtain and safeguard the plates as commanded, or let Laban live. If Laban lived, the mission would fail. For even if the plates could be obtained by strategem, Laban would certainly know who had taken them. And without the plates of brass, Lehi’s posterity would, like the later Mulekites, “perish in unbelief” (1 Nephi 4:13; Omni 1:17). Their history, if any, would have been far different. Above all, there would be no Book of Mormon as we know it. The “keystone of our religion” would be missing, and the Lord’s purposes frustrated, a thing he will not tolerate (D&C 3:1).

Nephi was also justified from a personal standpoint. Nine hours before he was shot to death, Joseph Smith wrote his wife, Emma: "There is one principle which is eternal; it is the duty of all men to protect their lives and the lives of the household, whenever necessity requires, and no power has a right to forbid it, should the last extreme arrive."⁵ If the principle of self-preservation applies to a "household," how much more does it apply to an entire nation!

But there is a larger issue: the moral nature of God. What are its bounds? Who can say what the Almighty can and cannot do? The Prophet Joseph Smith observed: "It is the constitutional disposition of mankind to set up stakes and set bounds to the works and ways of the Almighty."⁶ Yet he "willeth to take even them whom he will take, and preserveth in life them whom he will preserve" (D&C 63:3). He judged Laban, found him guilty, and ordered his execution. Nephi was but the instrument of divine justice. Did Jehovah have a right to do this? Of course. The agency of man cannot delimit or circumscribe the agency of God.

As Joseph Smith noted:

That which is wrong under one circumstance, may be, and often is, right under another. God said, "Thou shalt not kill;" at another time He said, "Thou shalt utterly destroy." This is the principle on which the government of heaven is conducted—by revelation adapted to the circumstances in which the children of the kingdom are placed. Whatever God requires is right, no matter what it is, although we may not see the reason thereof till long after the events transpire.⁷

Thus we see that God cannot be bound even by his prior words or commandments. For example, he told Joseph Smith: "Abraham was commanded to offer his son Isaac; nevertheless, *it was written*: Thou shalt not kill. Abraham, however, did not refuse, and it was accounted unto him for righteousness." (D&C 132:36; italics added; compare Jacob 4:5.)

The spoken word of the Lord takes precedence over the written word of the Lord. The will of the Lord today takes precedence over the will of the Lord yesterday. That is precisely why a living prophet is indispensable, and why his inspired word supersedes written scripture. The God who proved Abraham is the God who proved Nephi, and, like Abraham, Nephi obeyed and it was accounted unto him for righteousness.

Nephi's Records

The Adamic "book of remembrance"—the pattern of which was given "by the finger of God" (Moses 6:5, 46)—was the prototype of subsequent scripture. It contained genealogical, historical, and inspirational materials. The plates of brass reflected the divine pattern and probably determined the form Nephi adopted for his own two records—known as the large and small plates of Nephi.⁸ (Large and small refer to their number, not their dimensions.)

Upon arriving in America, Nephi began his record on the large plates. In addition to purely historical data, they contained certain prophecies of Lehi and Nephi as well as genealogical data (1 Nephi 9:2, 4; 19:1–2; 2 Nephi 4:14; 5:33). These plates were kept by the Nephite kings until 92 B.C. when they were transferred to a descendant of Nephi, Alma the son of Alma (Mosiah 28:11, 20). Four hundred twenty-seven years later, in A.D. 335, the large plates were retrieved from the hill Shim by Mormon who, in 385, hid them up in the hill Cumorah (Mormon 1:2–4; 2:17; 6:6). Presumably, they are still there.

The small plates (1 Nephi through Omni) were prepared in 569 B.C. when Nephi was about forty-five years old (2 Nephi 5:28–33). They were devoted to spiritual matters, especially those pertaining to the gospel. Upon discovering them, Mormon was so pleased with their Christ-centered orientation that he decided to continue that emphasis throughout the remainder of his own abridgement of the large plates (Words of Mormon 1:3–5).

The Great Vision

Like Abraham, Nephi was spiritually ambitious; he wanted to know the mysteries of God (1 Nephi 2:16; Abraham 1:2). He wanted to see what his father had seen. His desire was realized; he joined Adam, Enoch, the brother of Jared, and the Apostle John as one of the very few men God has ever granted a panoramic vision of things to come.

While still a youth, prior to his marriage, Nephi was "caught away in the Spirit of the Lord" into "an exceedingly high mountain" where he briefly conversed with the Spirit [the Holy Ghost?] face to face (1 Nephi 11:1, 11; compare 2 Nephi 4:25).

The Spirit was soon replaced by an angelic guide who explained to Nephi all that followed.

The vision spanned well over three thousand years, from the birth of Jesus to the celestialization of the earth. However, Nephi was forbidden to write that portion of the revelation reserved for John the Revelator (1 Nephi 14:24–25; 2 Nephi 4:25).⁹

He was shown the same things his father had seen: the tree of life, the rod of iron, the river, the spacious building, and so forth. These symbols reappear as the different scenes of the vision unfold, binding together its component parts like the recurring themes of a symphony.

Nephi first beheld Mary, “most beautiful and fair above all other virgins” (1 Nephi 11:15) “carried away in the Spirit for the space of a time” (1 Nephi 11:19; compare Luke 1:35). When he beheld the virgin again, she was bearing the infant Son of God in her arms. His baptism, ministry, and crucifixion followed. (1 Nephi 11:20–33.) These redeeming events were revealed in the context of the rod of iron and the tree of life or fountain of living waters which symbolize the love of God as embodied in the mission of Jesus Christ (1 Nephi 11:25).

In the vision, after Jesus’ death the proud world—represented by the spacious building—was arrayed against the Apostles and the Church. In time, the building collapsed, signifying the end of all nations that fight against God. (1 Nephi 11:34–36.)

Nephi next beheld ancient America (1 Nephi 12). He saw the wars and general wickedness of Lehi’s posterity end in the devastating destructions accompanying Jesus’ crucifixion—an example of the “mist of darkness” (1 Nephi 12:4).

These upheavals were followed by the ministry of the resurrected Savior, the era of righteousness, the final destruction of the Nephite nation in the fifth century, and the long period of spiritual darkness thereafter (1 Nephi 12:6–23). In these latter scenes the river of filthy water, the mists of darkness, and the spacious building return again like so many somber themes.

Europe, Asia Minor, and the Middle East as they were in the early centuries of the Christian era were then seen by Nephi (1 Nephi 13). He beheld the “formation of a great church” which his angelic guide described as “most abominable above all other churches” (1 Nephi 13:4–5). Historically, this diverse “church” consisted of those vicious elements of Judaism, heathenism, apostate Christianity, and civil government which persecuted, tortured, and slew the Saints of God both before and after the

passing of the ancient church. But it is yet to be destroyed. It exists today among the nations of the earth and will continue to “fight against the Lamb of God” (1 Nephi 14:13) almost until the end of the world.

Nephi then saw the discovery of America, its settlement by the Gentiles, the revolutionary war, and the white man’s prophesied depredations against the Lamanites (1 Nephi 13:1–19). He saw the Gentiles bring the Bible to America—the land of Joseph. But “plain and most precious” doctrines and ordinances had been lost when certain inspired writings were “taken away” and “kept back” by that “abominable church” (1 Nephi 13:26, 32). Because of this, the Gentiles, blessed temporally, stumbled spiritually (1 Nephi 13:25–30).

However, their spiritual blindness was not to continue. Many of the “plain and most precious” things lost to them were to be recovered in the writings of the forefathers of the very peoples being “smitten” by the Gentiles.

The Church of Jesus Christ, established among the Gentiles in America, would be the instrument through which the Book of Mormon and other latter-day scriptures would restore those “most precious parts of the gospel of the Lamb” (1 Nephi 13:32) which had been deliberately omitted from the Christian canon of scripture. The combined testimonies of these new witnesses for the true Christ and the true gospel would lift the mists of spiritual darkness enveloping the world. Thus, in due time, righteous Israel—Jew and Gentile—would be saved (1 Nephi 13:31–42).

The final scenes of Nephi’s vision pertained to these latter days (1 Nephi 14). Repentant Gentiles were adopted into the house of Joseph and all Israel was gathered to “no more be confounded” (1 Nephi 14:2).

Nephi saw the great and abominable church fall during the climactic judgments poured out upon the nations prior to Christ’s world advent. The anti-Christ church, “the whore of all the earth,” would fight against Zion no longer (2 Nephi 10:16).

The “marvelous work” of the latter days was to be “everlasting” in its consequences; the choice between salvation and damnation would be final and irrevocable (1 Nephi 14:7). For, in the final analysis there have been but two paths lying before the family of God. All walk one or the other (2 Nephi 2:27–29).

Such is the “opposition in all things” (2 Nephi 2:11), so essential to the plan of salvation. We first encountered it in our premortal estate (D&C 29:39; Abraham 3:27–28). It was there

that the “two churches” came into being. They constituted the opposing powers in the war in heaven, a war which rages with ever-increasing intensity as we approach the end of telestial time. Nephi’s angelic guide summed up this ongoing cosmic struggle between good and evil when he stated: “Behold there are save two churches only; the one is the church of the Lamb of God, and the other is the church of the devil; wherefore, whoso belongeth not to the church of the Lamb of God belongeth to that great church, which is the mother of abominations; and she is the whore of all the earth” (1 Nephi 14:10).

Between now and the last judgment, billions of men and women will be transferring their memberships from one church to the other! Those who repent, bow the knee, and confess that Jesus is the Christ will be numbered with the church of the Lamb of God (Mosiah 27:31; D&C 76:110–11).¹⁰

Those who absolutely refuse to repent will remain “filthy still”; they will retain their memberships in the church of the devil. They are sons and daughters of Perdition, suffering the damnation of the second death. (Alma 12:12–18; D&C 88:35.) Happily, the vast majority of the human family will eventually repent and obtain a measure of salvation in one of the “many mansions” comprising the Father’s kingdom (John 14:2; D&C 76).

Nephi saw that enemies of the Lord’s latter-day work would arise in every nation. But the “saints of the church of the Lamb” and the scattered “covenant people of the Lord” would be “armed with righteousness and with the power of God” (1 Nephi 14:14; compare D&C 45:66–69). The “wrath of God” (divine justice) would then be poured out upon the “abominable church” as wars swept through the nations belonging to it.

This condition will mark the beginning of the final phase of the Father’s work in fulfilling his covenant with Abraham (1 Nephi 14:16–17; compare 3 Nephi 16:5, 17–20; 20:11–13). Nephi ended his account of the vision at that point.

The Rod of Iron and the Liahona

The marriages of Ishmael’s daughters to Zoram and to Lehi’s four sons marked the end of the long encampment in the valley of Lemuel. On the very day of the colony’s departure, “to

his great astonishment" (1 Nephi 16:10), Lehi found a ball of curious workmanship lying at his tent door. The next phase of the journey would take the colony through a more arid and dangerous country. In addition to locating food and water, they would need to avoid encountering robbers or others who might prove a threat, or even a temptation, to them. The Lord had prepared the way for them to do so—the Liahona (so called in Alma 37:38), the divine companion to the rod of iron.

The rod of iron is the "word of God" (1 Nephi 15:23–24), as found in revealed scripture. It consists of those general doctrines, ordinances, and commandments—those "correct principles"—identified with the Lord's church in every dispensation. Jesus Christ is "the Word, even the messenger of salvation" (D&C 93:8). Holding fast to the rod of iron is holding fast to him. In doing so, the Saints are united in a common bond of light and truth.

The Liahona represents the constant guidance of the Holy Spirit needed by us all as we confront the ever-changing circumstances of life (1 Nephi 16:26–27). The living prophet embodies the Liahona principle for the entire Church. He provides the Church with the word of the Lord pertaining to current matters of general concern. Because of him, revelation is an open-ended principle.

The suggestion that the rod of iron and the Liahona represent two different approaches to gospel living is unfortunate.¹¹ They cannot be dichotomized without seriously impairing both. Scripture is not subject to the individual interpretations of millions of Church members (2 Peter 1:20). When we interpret the word of the Lord in terms of our own predilections, the rod of iron becomes a very unstable, unreliable rubber band.

The Liahona worked "according to the faith and diligence and heed" of the people (1 Nephi 16:28; compare Mosiah 1:16). Can we transform or, worse, let go of the iron rod and still have the requisite faith needed for the Liahona to point the way "we *should* go" rather than the way we *want* to go?

Plainly, the rod of iron and the Liahona are not two contrary ways of looking at the Church or the gospel, but two sources of divine revelation—general and specific, long range and immediate—designed to guide and sustain the Saints under all circumstances. Honoring *both* led Lehi's people to the land of promise (Alma 37:45). Honoring *both* will do the same for us.

The Nephite Kingdom

Twenty-odd years after fleeing Jerusalem, Lehi died (2 Nephi 4:12). The great division that split his family into Nephites and Lamanites followed almost immediately thereafter. Nephi's divine mandate to succeed Lehi was rejected: "We will not have him to be our ruler; for it belongs unto us, who are the elder brethren, to rule over this people" (2 Nephi 5:3; compare 1 Nephi 18:10). His life sought, Nephi fled with his family and supporters a considerable distance to the north to what became known as the land of Nephi where he established the Nephite nation.

Although opposed to a monarchy, Nephi acceded to his people's desire and became the first in a dynasty of kings, all of whom were his descendants and bore his name (2 Nephi 5:18; Jacob 1:9–11; Mosiah 25:13). His dynasty lasted for almost five hundred years—from about 570 to 91 B.C. when it was replaced by a system of judges (Mosiah 25:13; 29:41–47). At least four Book of Mormon prophets and an unknown number of kings were called Nephi.

Since Nephi served as both spiritual and temporal leader, his government was essentially theocratic in nature. He held the Melchizedek Priesthood and consecrated his younger brothers, Jacob and Joseph, priests and teachers. He also built the first Nephite temple, patterned after that of Solomon (2 Nephi 5:16).

The life of Nephi vindicated his divine appointment and exposed the falsity of the charge that he sought power over the people. He sought their salvation, not their subservience. Nephi forged a righteous and industrious nation which he led with spiritual intelligence and practical skill.

Nephi was about seventy years old when he passed away. He left behind a treasure of truth written upon plates of gold that neither time nor circumstance can tarnish, a treasure which will enrich the lives of countless millions in the dispensation of the fulness of times.

The Psalm of Nephi

Nephi attributed his every virtue to God; he never took glory unto himself. Nowhere is his heart better revealed or his life better summarized than in the prayerful psalm he wrote in his middle years (2 Nephi 4:16–35).

Before quoting extracts from it, may I suggest a caveat. As with Joseph Smith in his account of the First Vision, Nephi's references to personal sins should not be taken to imply any serious moral transgression on his part. No man could have seen and known God as he did who was not pure in heart.

Rather, he is almost surely alluding to the negative emotions of anger, impatience, and frustration he must have felt at times in dealing with his enemies, his own family, and others who lacked his singleness of purpose in carrying out the Lord's will. We know little of his later years and the trials they brought him. Jacob describes him as the "great protector" of his people, "having wielded the sword of Laban in their defence, and having labored in all his days for their welfare" (Jacob 1:10).

He was keenly sensitive to the negative feelings his enemies, especially the devil, engendered in his soul. It is paradoxical that the more godly a man becomes, the more he is prepared to excuse the sins of others, and the less he is prepared to excuse his own.¹² Tolerance for any imperfection diminishes as we approach the character of that God who "cannot look upon sin with the least degree of allowance" (Alma 45:16; D&C 1:31). Now the psalm.

Behold, my soul delighteth in the things of the Lord; and my heart pondereth continually upon the things which I have seen and heard. Nevertheless . . . my heart exclaimeth: O wretched man that I am! Yea, my heart sorroweth because of my flesh; my soul grieveth because of mine iniquities. I am encompassed about, because of the temptations and the sins which do so easily beset me. And when I desire to rejoice, my heart groaneth because of my sins; nevertheless, I know in whom I have trusted. My God . . . hath filled me with his love, even unto the consuming of my flesh . . . upon the wings of his Spirit hath my body been carried away upon exceedingly high mountains. And mine eyes have beheld great things, yea, even too great for man. . . . O then . . . why should my heart weep and my soul linger in the valley of sorrow. . . . Why am I angry because of mine enemy? Awake, my soul! . . . Rejoice, O my heart. . . . May the gates of hell be shut continually before me, because that my heart is broken and my spirit is contrite! . . . O Lord, I have trusted in thee, and I will trust in thee forever. . . . Yea, I know that God will give liberally to him that asketh. . . . Behold, my voice shall forever ascend up unto thee, my rock and mine everlasting God. (2 Nephi 4:16–35.)

The Prophet Joseph Smith was the first to utter these words in modern times. How congenial are these two prophets! How

Joseph's heart must have resonated to the words of Nephi! For the prayer of Nephi is the prayer of every righteous soul who, conscious of the frailties of the flesh, looks to God in faith and gratitude for the strength to overcome.

Conclusion

The closing testimony of Nephi rings with the fervor of a pure heart:

I glory in plainness; I glory in truth; I glory in my Jesus, for he hath redeemed my soul from hell. . . . I have charity for the Jew. . . . I also have charity for the Gentiles. But behold, for none of these can I hope except they shall be reconciled unto Christ, and enter into the narrow gate, and walk in the strait path which leads to life, and continue in the path until the end of the day of probation. (2 Nephi 33:6–9.)

There is not a soul anywhere who does not, or will not, know that Nephi spoke the solemn truth. For he has sealed that truth upon us (2 Nephi 33:15). Each of us will respond to it in our own way. And how we respond will make all the difference.

A thoughtful observer of our times asked:

Who are our heroes, and how can they make us happier? Heroes are a fading memory in our times, but we can still recall a little about them. We know, at least, that what sets the hero apart is some extraordinary achievement. Whatever this feat, it is such as to be recognized at once by everyone as a good thing; and somehow, the achieving of it seems larger than life. The hero, furthermore, overcomes the ordinary and attains greatness by serving some great good. His example very nearly rebukes us; telling us that we fail, not by aiming too high in life, but by aiming far too low. Moreover, it tells us we are mistaken in supposing that happiness is a right or an end in itself. The hero seeks not happiness but goodness and his fulfillment lies in achieving it.¹³

He has described Nephi. How grateful we should be for the heroes God has given us! How grateful we should be for such men as Nephi! How worthy they are of emulation! May we, and especially our youth, aspire to their immortal company.

Nephi and You

If you ask me to speak of courage,
I'll tell you of Nephi's fame.

If you ask me to speak of honor,
My answer is Nephi's name.

If you bid me read of a boundless faith
Born of virtue and truth from on high,
I'll turn from the worldly journals of men
To the writings of ancient Nephi.

There are his words as he wrote them;
There in those sacred pages
Is the story of one man's greatness
Writ in the dust of the ages.

Up from the dust of the ages,
A challenge hurled by the past,
A gauntlet flung by the prophet of God
To those who were summoned the last.

What will you do, will you drop it?
Let it slip from your hand to the earth?
Shrink from the call like a craven,
Pretending the prize has no worth?

What then's the meaning of birthright,
What then, the gospel plan,
If you'll turn from the duty before you,
Forsaking what others began?

Will you answer the challenge of Nephi?
Will you catch the gauntlet he's thrown?
Will you meet the world with its taunting doubts
With a shining faith of your own?

Then follow the pathway he followed,
Make his life a guide for your soul,
Set your hands to the present work to be done,
Put your heart on its heavenly goal.

And someday when others are speaking
Of those who were valiant and true,
Someone will tell them of Nephi,
And someone will tell them of you.
(Rodney Turner)

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Conference Report, October 1983, p. 107.
2. At least two of their forebears, missing from the Old Testament, were Zenock and Zenos (3 Nephi 10:16). They are quoted in 1 Nephi 19:10–17 concerning the death and resurrection of Christ, and the scattering and eventual redemption of the Jews. The complex allegory of Zenos (Jacob 5) treats the overall history of Israel vis-à-vis the Gentiles. Neum (1 Nephi 19:10) and Ezias (Helaman 8:20) may also have been ancestors of Lehi.
3. Although Lehi seems to have had a home in or near Jerusalem, his wealth was located elsewhere in a place his sons called “the land of our inheritance” (1 Nephi 3:22).
4. The fact remains that Jacob 4:5 and D&C 132:36 support the Genesis 22 account.
5. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1976), p. 391; hereafter *TPJS*.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 320.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 256.
8. Nephi briefly summarized his father's Jerusalem experiences in 1 Nephi 1 and 2, having abridged Lehi's own record on the large plates (1 Nephi 1:17; 6:1). The first book on the large plates was called the Book of Lehi. It covered the period from about 585 to 150 B.C. and constitutes the 116 pages of manuscript lost by Martin Harris in 1828.
9. The revelation or apocalypse of John is primarily concerned with those events which will transpire in the time of the seventh seal and beyond. See D&C 77:6–7.
10. Unlike the Doctrine and Covenants, the Book of Mormon does not distinguish between the three heavens or degrees of glory comprising the eternal kingdom of God. As used by the angel, the term “church of the Lamb of God” is relative. It necessarily includes, but is not limited to, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.
11. Referring to this tendency on the part of some members of the Church, President Harold B. Lee said: “There are many who profess to be religious and speak of themselves as Christians, and, according to one such, ‘as accepting the scriptures only as sources of inspiration and moral truth,’ and then ask in their smugness: ‘Do the revelations of God give us a handrail to the kingdom of God, as the Lord's messenger told Lehi, or merely a compass?’ Unfortunately, some are among us who claim to be Church members but are somewhat like the scoffers in Lehi's vision—standing aloof and seemingly inclined to hold in derision the faithful who choose to accept Church authorities as God's special

witnesses of the gospel and his agents in directing the affairs of the Church" (Conference Report, April 1971, p. 91).

12. See *TPJS*, p. 241.

13. George Roche, "A World Without Heroes," *Imprimis* (Hillsdale, Mich.: Hillsdale College, August, 1986).