

1 Nephi 2

Lehi and His Family Leave Jerusalem

1 Nephi 2:1–3

1 For behold, it came to pass that the Lord spake unto my father, yea, even in a dream, and said unto him: Blessed art thou Lehi, because of the things which thou hast done; and because thou hast been faithful and declared unto this people the things which I commanded thee, behold, they seek to take away thy life.

2 And it came to pass that the Lord commanded my father, even in a dream, that he should take his family and depart into the wilderness.

3 And it came to pass that he was obedient unto the word of the Lord, wherefore he did as the Lord commanded him.

Comments

The closing sentence of what is now the last verse in Chapter 1 was “But behold, I, Nephi, will show unto you that the tender mercies of the Lord are over all those whom he hath chosen, because of their faith, to make them mighty even unto the power of deliverance” (1 Nephi 1:20). Nephi had just mentioned the anger of those at Jerusalem toward his father, and that sentence served as a transition from Lehi’s mission as a prophet to Jerusalem and his new call to depart with his family. Nephi ended one part of the story and began a new one with that transitional sentence.

Lehi is still a prophet, even though his mission is changing. Yahweh speaks to Lehi in a dream and tells him to take his family and depart into the wilderness. Laman and Lemuel will call their father a visionary man, and that epithet was related to the way that Lehi received revelation. Nephi will be a different type of prophet, less often receiving his information in dreams and visions. For Lehi, dreams and visions were repeatedly the way Yahweh communicated with him.

When Lehi “did as the Lord commanded him,” he took his family south. Although his ancestral lands were north, so were the Babylonians. Heading north did not improve his position. In this time, another prophet named Uriah also fled Jerusalem. He went south to the typical land of refuge, Egypt. He was followed, caught, and brought back. To be safe, Lehi had to head south, but not to Egypt.

1 Nephi 2:4–5

4 And it came to pass that he departed into the wilderness. And he left his house, and the land of his inheritance, and his gold, and his silver, and his precious things, and took nothing with him, save it were his family, and provisions, and tents, and departed into the wilderness.

5 And he came down by the borders near the shore of the Red Sea; and he traveled in the wilderness in the borders which are nearer the Red Sea; and he did travel in the wilderness with his family, which consisted of my mother, Sariah, and my elder brothers, who were Laman, Lemuel, and Sam.

Comments

There were four ways to travel south out of Jerusalem. There are no real hints in the text to tell us which one they chose. One was significantly farther out of the way, and there is no reason to believe that they would take the more difficult journey. Although Yahweh told Lehi to flee, it does not appear that there was an active pursuit. We must also remember that in antiquity it was much more difficult to identify a stranger. There were no photos. To be recognized, someone would have to know who you were. This suggests that there was probably no reason not to take the more expeditious route.

The difference in Lehi's journey is that rather than continuing to Egypt as was the historical destination of those fleeing Jerusalem for whatever reason, Lehi headed down the Sinai Peninsula. Even that path, however, was well known. Lehi would have followed the Frankincense trail, a generalized path that linked watering locations for the trading caravans. The scarcity of water in the region required that Lehi's family follow the trail rather than attempt to blaze their own.

Hugh Nibley noted that it was possible that Lehi had done business in the region. It is interesting that it was no problem for Lehi to acquire the needed provisions and tents. Either through Yahweh's coaching, or his previous experience, Lehi appears to have known what would be required for their journey and accumulated it before they departed.

1 Nephi 2:6–7

6 And it came to pass that when he had traveled three days in the wilderness, he pitched his tent in a valley by the side of a river of water.

7 And it came to pass that he built an altar of stones, and made an offering unto the Lord, and gave thanks unto the Lord our God.

Comments

Of most interest in these two verses is the combination of having traveled for three days, and then creating an altar of stones on which to offer a thanks offering.

The three days first tells us that they were only a certain distance south of Jerusalem. They were far enough away that it was unlikely that anyone would bother looking for them, but close enough that it would be possible for the two return trips that the sons took to Jerusalem (for the plates of brass and Ishmael's family).

The three days time period is also of interest because a Dead Sea Scrolls text declares that sacrifices should not be made within a three days' journey from the temple in Jerusalem. In Lehi's day, there was a continuing process of centralization of worship in the physical location of the Jerusalem temple. It was a process that would eventually prohibit other temples.

However, during Lehi's day, it appears that there was the ability to sacrifice when far from the Jerusalem temple. In fact, an Israelite temple has been discovered in Elephantine, Egypt that dates near this period. Thus, both sacrifices could be performed, and even another temple built, if they were far enough away from the Jerusalem temple. The absolute prohibition came later in history.

Lehi built an altar of stones. Nephi may have intentionally phrased the construction of the altar in just this way. It is possible that Nephi is referencing Exodus 20:25, where Moses is told to make an altar of stone. Nephi will insert other references to Israel's Exodus into his story of his family's Exodus. We must remember that Nephi is writing some thirty or more years after the fact, so the stories he elects to tell may have more significance than simply stating facts. In this case, the story of Lehi's family's journey to a new land will be mirroring the story of Moses leading the children of Israel through the wilderness to a land of promise.

1 Nephi 2:8–10

8 And it came to pass that he called the name of the river, Laman, and it emptied into the Red Sea; and the valley was in the borders near the mouth thereof.

9 And when my father saw that the waters of the river emptied into the fountain of the Red Sea, he spake unto Laman, saying: O that thou mightest be like unto this river, continually running into the fountain of all righteousness!

10 And he also spake unto Lemuel: O that thou mightest be like unto this valley, firm and steadfast, and immovable in keeping the commandments of the Lord!

Comments

One of the essential requirements for any camp that would be used for longer than a day is access to water. Thus, the first camp occurs near a river. It has been assumed that this must be a river that flowed all year round. That requirement is difficult to fill in that region, although there is a good candidate in the Wadi Tayyib al-Ism. However, it may not actually be a requirement for the physical location.

Hugh Nibley noted that Lehi is using what has been recorded from Bedouin poetry. It is inspired by the site of running water, is addressed to one or two traveling companions (who are admonished to be like the thing beheld) and is typically quite short, consisting of two couplets.

The literary function of this prayer, or blessing, is to encourage Laman and Lemuel to become something that they are not yet. Certainly, the steadfast valley supports that imagery. What then of the continually running river? Since Lehi probably could not have known if it was a year-round river, the imagery is apt for any river. All rivers run continuously—until they have no water. While there is water, the river is defined by that water running.

If Lehi is intent on this poetic form and its lessons for his sons, the continually running water is the metaphor extracted from the current scene, and not necessarily a physical qualification of the river he saw.

For Nephi, who is including this poem, the function is to begin to paint the picture of how Lehi's two eldest sons eventually become the sworn enemies of those who follow Nephi. It is the poem, not the geography, that is important.

Nevertheless, research has found a river in the region that does flow continuously, although it does not currently reach the sea. It is a possible candidate for the river that Lehi referenced.

1 Nephi 2:11–12

11 Now this he spake because of the stiffneckedness of Laman and Lemuel; for behold 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, to leave the land of their inheritance, and their gold, and their silver, and their precious things, to perish in the wilderness. And this they said he had done because of the foolish imaginations of his heart.

12 And thus Laman and Lemuel, being the eldest, did murmur against their father. And they did murmur because they knew not the dealings of that God who had created them.

Comments

After recording Lehi's desert poem, or his admonition to Laman and Lemuel, Nephi tells us why he recorded it. Lehi hoped to turn his sons from what Nephi called their stiffneckedness. Nephi defined stiffneckedness as the complaints that the brothers had against their father.

Nephi's message about his brothers is that they are not in accord with Yahweh's will. This is evident because they do not believe their father, Lehi, and Lehi was called of God. Nephi included the account of those visions, so Nephi's readers would be clear that Lehi really was a prophet. Nevertheless, Laman and Lemuel did not believe.

In addition to not believing, Nephi has Laman and Lemuel express dissatisfaction with the family's clear change in social and economic standing. In Jerusalem, they had an inheritance. They had the means

to accumulate gold and silver to be used in Lehi's plausible business. They probably had some social status. Now, they were three days into a journey to an unknown location, living in tents and having left behind all that they had valued. For Laman and Lemuel, it was all for the foolish imaginations of their father, because they did not believe Yahweh had spoken to him. It is quite probable that the idea of a visionary man had fallen from favor, and one claiming visions was deemed outside of proper, educated, society.

Nephi uses the word *murmur*. The brothers were doing more than just grumbling. Nephi has them enacting part of the Israelite Exodus, when the people of Moses murmured in the wilderness. Apart from the literary theme, however, Laman and Lemuel's disagreement with their father's course of action would include darker intent. Nephi declares that they did not know the dealings of God.

1 Nephi 2:13–15

13 Neither did they believe that Jerusalem, that great city, could be destroyed according to the words of the prophets. And they were like unto the Jews who were at Jerusalem, who sought to take away the life of my father.

14 And it came to pass that my father did speak unto them in the valley of Lemuel, with power, being filled with the Spirit, until their frames did shake before him. And he did confound them, that they durst not utter against him; wherefore, they did as he commanded them.

15 And my father dwelt in a tent.

Comments

Nephi provides the ultimate condemnation of Laman and Lemuel. Just as did those in Jerusalem, they sought Lehi's life. Nephi gives us no more information than this. Apparently, Lehi spoke to them in the power of the Spirit at a time sufficient to prevent their attempted patricide. The description of them shaking before Lehi as the result of the power of the Spirit will be reprised when Nephi must employ the same power of the Spirit to thwart their murderous attempts, but at that time against Nephi rather than Lehi. Nephi wants his readers to remember this incident when they read the later one, because it is one of the ways that Nephi begins to show that he is the rightful heir of his father's prophetic mantle, and his father's role as the leader of the extended family.

There is also a literary function in tying Laman and Lemuel to those in Jerusalem. Lehi called those in Jerusalem to repentance, else Jerusalem would be destroyed. When Nephi specifically notes that Laman and Lemuel do not believe that Jerusalem could be destroyed, he defines their ideology as that of the Jerusalem against which Lehi preached. Nephi has Laman and Lemuel carry that disbelief and distrust in God's message and messengers across the ocean, where it will define the relationship between Lamanites and Nephites. Again, the fact that Nephi is writing some thirty years after these events gives a different

perspective to the way he constructed the story. He was not reiterating facts, he was creating a specific setting for the family story.

Verse fifteen is a seeming anomaly. We know that it is not, because Nephi will use that statement, or something similar, more times during his record. In this case (as in most others), it marks a shift in the narrative. One story ends and another begins. See the comments following 1 Nephi 3:1 for more information on this literary device.

Nephi Receives the Covenant Promise

1 Nephi 2:16–18

16 And it came to pass that I, Nephi, being exceedingly young, nevertheless being large in stature, and also having great desires to know of the mysteries of God, wherefore, I did cry unto the Lord; and behold he did visit me, and did soften my heart that I did believe all the words which had been spoken by my father; wherefore, I did not rebel against him like unto my brothers.

17 And I spake unto Sam, making known unto him the things which the Lord had manifested unto me by his Holy Spirit. And it came to pass that he believed in my words.

18 But, behold, Laman and Lemuel would not hearken unto my words; and being grieved because of the hardness of their hearts I cried unto the Lord for them.

Comments

Nephi ended a section where Lehi had attempted to encourage Laman and Lemuel, but Laman and Lemuel showed that they followed Jerusalem rather than their father. That segment ended with the statement that “my father dwelt in a tent.”

The new part of the story contrasts Nephi with both Laman and Lemuel. Nephi will begin to build his case that even though he is a younger son, it will be he who fulfills the expected roles of family leadership. Nephi is the antithesis of Laman and Lemuel. It is possible that Nephi also had periods of melancholy on their difficult journey in the wilderness, but he will not write that part of his story. Nephi is writing with a purpose that pushes gray into darker black and makes white whiter.

Where Laman and Lemuel call their father a visionary man, Nephi instead calls upon Yahweh to verify their father’s mission. The message is simple, he says “I did not rebel against him like unto my brothers.” Nephi tells Sam, and Sam believes. That will be Sam’s narrative function. He will recognize the truth and support Nephi. We hear little more of him than that.

In expected contrast, Nephi says the same to Laman and Lemuel as he did to Sam. Sam believed. Laman and Lemuel would not.

1 Nephi 2:19–20

19 And it came to pass that the Lord spake unto me, saying: Blessed art thou, Nephi, because of thy faith, for thou hast sought me diligently, with lowliness of heart.

20 And inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments, ye shall prosper, and shall be led to a land of promise; yea, even a land which I have prepared for you; yea, a land which is choice above all other lands.

Comments

The statement that his father lived in a tent (1 Nephi 2:15) marks a shift in Nephi's story. From this point on, it is the story of Nephi much more than the story of his father or family. This is highlighted by beginning the story with Nephi's own experience with Yahweh. Nephi had prayed to learn of the truth of his father's prophetic mission. Now he receives his own.

First, Yahweh declares that Nephi is blessed because of his father. That is an essential beginning for what will become the Nephite people. Yahweh's blessing is upon them from the beginning. Next, Nephi receives the promise that there is a promised land. More importantly, he is told that it is "a land I [Yahweh] have prepared for you." The entire family is going to this land of promise, but it was prepared for Nephi, and presumably his descendants. Lehi received that same blessing of a land of promise, but Nephi doesn't have Lehi speak of the land of promise until 2 Nephi 1, though he does suggest that his father knows that they are going to a land of promise in 1 Nephi 7. All of the references to the land of promise in 1 Nephi (there are seven of them) come when Nephi is directly speaking, or narrating.

Verse 20 presents the essential Nephite promise. They will prosper if they keep the commandments. The Israelites had been led to a promised land which they believed had been granted them in perpetuity. Yahweh made no such promise to Nephi. A choice land was prepared for them, but it was theirs only on conditions of faithfulness to God's commandments. Much of the Book of Mormon demonstrates both the affirmative and negative versions of that promise. The Nephites do prosper when they are righteous. When they are not, they are subject to different types of destruction—until their disobedience finally culminates in their total destruction.

1 Nephi 2:21–24

21 And inasmuch as thy brethren shall rebel against thee, they shall be cut off from the presence of the Lord.

22 And inasmuch as thou shalt keep my commandments, thou shalt be made a ruler and a teacher over thy brethren.

23 For behold, in that day that they shall rebel against me, I will curse them even with a sore curse, and they shall have no power over thy seed except they shall rebel against me also.

24 And if it so be that they rebel against me, they shall be a scourge unto thy seed, to stir them up in the ways of remembrance.

Comments

One of the major subplots in 1 Nephi is the contrast between Laman, Lemuel, and Nephi. Nephi begins with a distinct division witnessed by the way the brothers receive their Father's prophetic call. Laman and Lemuel reject it, following Jerusalem. Nephi prays to receive a confirmation from Yahweh, and follows Lehi.

Yahweh codifies this essential division by declaring that Nephi will be the divinely sanctioned ruler and teacher over his brothers. Notice that the verses that define the relationship between Laman, Lemuel, and the Nephi who is the appointed ruler and teacher over them are all negative. Yahweh describes what will happen when they rebel against Nephi. There is no provision for repentance.

By the time Nephi is writing, this is fulfilled prophecy. Certainly, Yahweh allowed for repentance, but by the time Nephi wrote, it was clear that they not only had not repented, but that they would not. Therefore, Nephi subtly declares the next subtheme for all of Nephite history. In Yahweh's words: "and if it so be that they rebel against [God], they shall be a scourge unto thy seed, to stir them up in the ways of remembrance." That prophecy was repeatedly fulfilled over the next nearly one thousand years. It ended when the scourging no longer stirred them to remembrance, and repentance.