

# 2 Nephi 5

---

## Establishment of the City of Nephi

### *2 Nephi 5:1–4*

1 Behold, it came to pass that I, Nephi, did cry much unto the Lord my God, because of the anger of my brethren.

2 But behold, their anger did increase against me, insomuch that they did seek to take away my life.

3 Yea, they did murmur against me, saying: Our younger brother thinks to rule over us; and we have had much trial because of him; wherefore, now let us slay him, that we may not be afflicted more because of his words. For behold, we will not have him to be our ruler; for it belongs unto us, who are the elder brethren, to rule over this people.

4 Now I do not write upon these plates all the words which they murmured against me. But it sufficeth me to say, that they did seek to take away my life.

### *Comments*

With the close of Lehi's blessings, Nephi has completed laying out the divine mandate behind the creation of the people who will be named Nephites. In the Old World, there was a promise that Nephi would be a ruler and a teacher over his brethren. In the Old World he was mostly a teacher. In the New World, he is a ruler, and the blessings Lehi gave lay out the relationships among the various descendants of those who came with Lehi.

From this point on, Nephi originally intended that his story might continue with a more historical view, explaining the spiritual events relevant to his people. That purpose will change. Nephi gives us only one chapter of what might have been his original intent. That shift will be discussed when we move to 2 Nephi 6.

At this point, the important historical point is the division of the spiritual and political world into what would come to be called Lamanites and Nephites. As Laman and Lemuel had done before, they seek Nephi's life. Now that they are in the New World, Yahweh does not intervene to keep the family together, but this time tells Nephi to flee. The tensions with his brothers that Nephi had traced throughout their

journey from Jerusalem to the New World have continued, and without Lehi to hold the family together, it will separate.

In one sense, when Laman and Lemuel say that they “will not have [Nephi] to be our ruler,” they get their desire. Nephi will become a ruler, but not over Laman and Lemuel.

## **2 Nephi 5:5–6**

5 And it came to pass that the Lord did warn me, that I, Nephi, should depart from them and flee into the wilderness, and all those who would go with me.

6 Wherefore, it came to pass that I, Nephi, did take my family, and also Zoram and his family, and Sam, mine elder brother and his family, and Jacob and Joseph, my younger brethren, and also my sisters, and all those who would go with me. And all those who would go with me were those who believed in the warnings and the revelations of God; wherefore, they did hearken unto my words.

### *Comments*

The split in the family comes when Yahweh warns Nephi to flee. He takes people with him. Some people stay. How many people are we talking about?

When Nephi identifies names, we have families with their family head. Thus, there is Nephi, Zoram, Sam, Jacob, and Joseph, and associated families. Nephi mentions sisters. This is the first that we know that he has sisters, and there are at least two. That leaves Laman and Lemuel and the sons of Ishmael with their families. Not knowing who might not be named in addition to Nephi’s sisters, that leaves perhaps twelve to fifteen adults who will form the foundation of the Nephites (if Jacob, Joseph, and the sisters were of adult age at the time). There are perhaps eight to ten adults who found the Lamanites. That isn’t very many people. Were they alone in a New World, not knowing the local flora and fauna, their long-term survival would be suspect.

The most important hint is that after naming all of the people that we might expect to go or stay, Nephi adds that he would also take “all those who would go with me.” That unnumbered set of people is also not only unnamed, but otherwise unmentioned. What Nephi never clearly states is that they did not arrive in a vacant world. If they arrived, as assumed, on the Pacific coast of modern Guatemala, archaeology knows that there were communities already living the foothills. Even accepting a different geography for the Book of Mormon, the point remains the same. If there was habitable land, it was already inhabited when the Lehites arrived.

The rapid expansion of a single family into two smaller pieces which rapidly begin to build a city (in the case of the Nephites), suggests that Lehi’s family was met by these New World inhabitants and had already merged into one of their villages. Thus, the definition of “all those would go” with Nephi would be some of those native populations with whom they had already merged.

## **2 Nephi 5:7–9**

7 And we did take our tents and whatsoever things were possible for us, and did journey in the wilderness for the space of many days. And after we had journeyed for the space of many days we did pitch our tents.

8 And my people would that we should call the name of the place Nephi; wherefore, we did call it Nephi.

9 And all those who were with me did take upon them to call themselves the people of Nephi.

### *Comments*

These actions begin the formation of the place and the people called Nephi. Nephi says that they journeyed many days in the wilderness. Nephi doesn't define wilderness. If we use the basic geography of the lands that depends upon later descriptions, this wilderness would be the mountainous range separating the coast from highland Guatemala. Later descriptions will fit with the description of a people living in that region, so this assumption of what the wilderness was seems plausible.

The fact that this new people were separated by many days and a mountain range probably meant to them that they were relatively safe from pursuit. In Mesoamerica, major rival cities were, at times, only three days journey from one to the other. Thus, that distance was a reasonable separation for enemy populations.

What is important from Nephi's words is that his name is supplied to the place and to the people. We will see that this tradition of naming the city for the leader who establishes it will persist through the Book of Mormon.

At this point, there is certainly no nation that might be called Nephite, but there is a collection of people living in the same place who identified Nephi as their leader.

## **2 Nephi 5:10–11**

10 And we did observe to keep the judgments, and the statutes, and the commandments of the Lord in all things, according to the law of Moses.

11 And the Lord was with us; and we did prosper exceedingly; for we did sow seed, and we did reap again in abundance. And we began to raise flocks, and herds, and animals of every kind.

### *Comments*

Nephi has claimed a new land. He declares that they follow the law of Moses, which declares that they are a people attempting to live Yahweh's commandments. The promise of the land is that should they be faithful, they will prosper. Therefore, right after stating that they are, and at least are attempting to be faithful, they "did prosper exceedingly."

Prosperity is defined by reaping in abundance and having flocks and herds. Notice how similar this is to Nephi's statement of the benefit of the land after they landed:

And it came to pass that after we had sailed for the space of many days we did arrive at the promised land; and we went forth upon the land, and did pitch our tents; and we did call it the promised land. And it came to pass that we did begin to till the earth, and we began to plant seeds; yea, we did put all our seeds into the earth, which we had brought from the land of Jerusalem. And it came to pass that they did grow exceedingly; wherefore, we were blessed in abundance. And it came to pass that we did find upon the land of promise, as we journeyed in the wilderness, that there were beasts in the forests of every kind, both the cow and the ox, and the ass and the horse, and the goat and the wild goat, and all manner of wild animals, which were for the use of men. (1 Nephi 18:23–25)

Nephi clearly sees the ability to provide for a people as the definition of prospering in the land. Both after their arrival in the New World and after their arrival in a new part of that land that the Nephites will claim as theirs, Nephi declares that they prospered and had abundance to eat. It is important for the nature of society that he mentions tilling first, and animal husbandry second. That is the relationship that stable communities have. Agriculture will be the basis for their increasing population, with animal husbandry an important, but perhaps distant, supplement.

## ***2 Nephi 5:12–13***

12 And I, Nephi, had also brought the records which were engraven upon the plates of brass; and also the ball, or compass, which was prepared for my father by the hand of the Lord, according to that which is written.

13 And it came to pass that we began to prosper exceedingly, and to multiply in the land.

### *Comments*

Nephi brings with him an important set of artifacts from the Old World. They are the plates of brass, the Liahona, and, as will be noted in verse 14, the sword of Laban. These items will form an important set of physical markers of authority. They represent an ancient authority from another land. Such things were respected and expected in the ancient world.

In later Mesoamerican history, leaders of cities in Maya lands would travel to Central Mexico to be endowed with symbols of power from that government. Physical items that were imbued with power through their age or provenance were important supports for rulership. Thus, we will see these items preserved and passed from Benjamin to his son Mosiah as part of the enthronement ceremony (Mosiah 1:16).

It is possible that the possession of these artifacts was one of the reasons that Nephi was accepted as a leader for the new community. Perhaps his skill with metalworking also provided an economic incentive,

though that is never clearly stated. The fact that these artifacts rise to the level of specific mention only underscores their importance.

Thus, with the prosperity to feed themselves, and the symbols of rulership, the new community of Nephi “began to prosper exceedingly, and to multiply in the land.”

## **2 Nephi 5:14**

14 And I, Nephi, did take the sword of Laban, and after the manner of it did make many swords, lest by any means the people who were now called Lamanites should come upon us and destroy us; for I knew their hatred towards me and my children and those who were called my people.

### *Comments*

Nephi separated his mention of the sword of Laban from the other artifacts because he uses it for an introduction to their need for defense. Regardless of how far away they had traveled, they had not escaped everyone who might wish them harm. The new community had to defend itself. Nephi declares that it is from the Lamanites, but it is the Lamanites in their function as the generic ancestral enemy. The actual threat might have been more likely for other populations who had no genetic relationship to Laman, Lemuel, or the sons of Ishmael.

When Nephi says that he makes swords after the manner of the sword of Laban, we find one of the early possible anachronisms in the text. There is no evidence of the required metallurgy in Mesoamerica during Book of Mormon times.

The first issue is what “after the manner” might mean. It cannot mean replicas, because Laban’s sword had a hilt of gold and was thus ceremonial. The weapons made for war would be more pragmatic. Thus, “after the manner” never meant a precise copy, but something similar.

The second issue is the type of metal used. We simply do not know and cannot reconstruct what it was. Iron ore was known, but the more commonly mentioned metals of gold, silver, and copper would not have made strong weapons. Regardless of what these initial swords might have been, they did not become the sword that was used in Mesoamerican warfare. Those swords were a wooden shaft into which obsidian blades were set. That weapon could be more easily built, and the obsidian blades were much sharper than the metal swords. It was also a more common technology to use obsidian.

Thus, whatever Nephi made, whatever those swords were, they did not alter the basic military technology. It is probable that soon after Nephi mentioned making these swords, they fell into disuse. Not only is it probable that the obsidian blades were a better technology at the time, but the method of using the swords differed. Thus, Nephi’s swords required not only a new construction technology, but the development of new ways to fight. The only thing that can be said for sure is that Nephi’s swords “after the manner [of Laban’s]” didn’t last.

## **2 Nephi 5:15–17**

15 And I did teach my people to build buildings, and to work in all manner of wood, and of iron, and of copper, and of brass, and of steel, and of gold, and of silver, and of precious ores, which were in great abundance.

16 And I, Nephi, did build a temple; and I did construct it after the manner of the temple of Solomon save it were not built of so many precious things; for they were not to be found upon the land, wherefore, it could not be built like unto Solomon's temple. But the manner of the construction was like unto the temple of Solomon; and the workmanship thereof was exceedingly fine.

17 And it came to pass that I, Nephi, did cause my people to be industrious, and to labor with their hands.

### *Comments*

It is easy to get the wrong idea when we read that Nephi taught his people to build buildings. That seems to say that they taught them to build something that they had not done before. That is certainly untrue. If Nephi was the leader over the indigenous people who had joined with those of his family, he was living with people who had made buildings for centuries. They were not unaware of how to work wood. The best way to read these statements is to see them as parallel to the conclusion that Nephi “did cause my people to be industrious, and to labor with their hands.” That is, Nephi is not telling us that he taught an ignorant people to be civilized, but rather that a fundamental principle of this new community was industrious labor. We will see Nephi leaders emphasizing egalitarian principles of working with their own hands in Benjamin's speech.

Nephi also builds a temple. This temple is after the manner of Solomon's temple in a similar way to the swords that were after the manner of the sword of Laban. Very specifically, it could not be just like Solomon's temple because they didn't have the same precious things. Nevertheless, the important part was that he built a temple that was after the manner of Solomon's temple, and doubtless was intended to similarly become the focal point of their religious service.

When Israelites built Solomon's temple, and later Zerubbabel's temple and Herod's temple, the architectural style was borrowed from surrounding cultures. It was not unique to Israel. It is therefore plausible that Nephi also built a temple to function as Solomon's did, but not specifically follow its architectural plan any more than it replicated its decorations.

## **2 Nephi 5:18–19**

18 And it came to pass that they would that I should be their king. But I, Nephi, was desirous that they should have no king; nevertheless, I did for them according to that which was in my power.

19 And behold, the words of the Lord had been fulfilled unto my brethren, which he spake concerning them, that I should be their ruler and their teacher. Wherefore, I had been their ruler and their teacher, according to the commandments of the Lord, until the time they sought to take away my life.

## *Comments*

For Nephi, this is a simple statement. He had been prophesied to become a ruler and a teacher. His people desired that he be their king, and so it fulfilled Yahweh's prophetic promise. That answers Nephi's purpose for including this statement, but it leaves open some very important anthropological questions.

In the study of human populations, it has been noted that there is a certain set of requirements before we have a king. One of the requirements is population. If there were no indigenous peoples expanding the remnants of Lehi's family, there is no way that a communal structure such as a temple could have been built, and there certainly were not sufficient people for a king.

Smaller populations must spend more time making sure they are fed. Only with a larger population's agriculture to create a stable basis could people spare the time to volunteer time to communal building projects. Only after societies have that number of people would they move from village headman to a leader that might be called a king.

Thus, one point is that this tells us that there was a reasonable sizable population. The next question is why the people wanted a king if Nephi didn't want to be a king. That answer relies upon the archaeology of the area of the Maya culture in which they likely found themselves. This was the time period when surrounding communities were also raising up kings. Thus, it was in the air. The people wanted Nephi to be a king, not just a ruler, because kings were what other communities wanted at that time period.

## **Lamanites Are Cursed**

### ***2 Nephi 5:20–21***

20 Wherefore, the word of the Lord was fulfilled which he spake unto me, saying that: Inasmuch as they will not hearken unto thy words they shall be cut off from the presence of the Lord. And behold, they were cut off from his presence.

21 And he had caused the cursing to come upon them, yea, even a sore cursing, because of their iniquity. For behold, they had hardened their hearts against him, that they had become like unto a flint; wherefore, as they were white, and exceedingly fair and delightsome, that they might not be enticing unto my people the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them.

## *Comments*

In Lehi's blessing to Laman and Lemuel he had promised that if they would not listen to Nephi that they would be cut off. They didn't. Nephi declares that they were cut off according to that divine promise.

What follows is what it means to be cut off. It is a passage that has been read as highly prejudiced and racially charged in many modern readings. The Nephites clearly were prejudiced against the Lamanites, but we must understand the reasons as they understood them, not the meanings that we impose on the text.

Modern readers, including perhaps the majority of the early saints, interpreted a skin of blackness as an indication of a pigmentation change. The context of the sentence itself argues against that. We are quite comfortable with saying that a heart of flint is a metaphor, but somehow the contrast between white and black must be physical. The very fact that neither white nor black describe any actual skin color in the New World should warn us that this is metaphorical.

Of course, the problem is the mention of skin of blackness. Had it been a face of blackness, as imaged in Joel 2:6 or Nahum 2:10, it wouldn't have been a problem. However, modern racial prejudice has centered on skin color and the word *skin* triggers those modern issues. They were not ancient issues.

A study of all of the uses of black and white in the Book of Mormon strongly suggests that they should be seen as metaphorical opposites. Even more importantly, there is never a single event in the Book of Mormon where skin color can be seen in the action of the text. In fact, the story told in Alma 55:4–7 relates that Captain Moroni had to search for a Lamanite among his troops and found one. He sent that one with some Nephites to trick the Lamanite guards. If there were one man with black skin, and several with white skin, the deception would have failed immediately. That event underscores that there was no pigmentation change.

## **2 Nephi 5:22–23**

22 And thus saith the Lord God: I will cause that they shall be loathsome unto thy people, save they shall repent of their iniquities.

23 And cursed shall be the seed of him that mixeth with their seed; for they shall be cursed even with the same cursing. And the Lord spake it, and it was done.

### *Comments*

The cursing of the Lamanites was that they were cut off from Yahweh's protection. They no longer had the promise of the land. However, that also made them dangerous marriage partners. Thus, the result of the curse was an extension of the curse to those who would marry and have children with them. This follows Deuteronomic proscriptions:

When the Lord thy God shall bring thee into the land whither thou goest to possess it, and hath cast out many nations before thee, the Hittites, and the Girgashites, and the Amorites, and the Canaanites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and mightier than thou; and when the Lord thy God shall deliver them before thee; thou shalt smite them, *and* utterly destroy them; thou shalt make no covenant with them, nor shew mercy unto them: neither shalt thou make marriages with them; thy daughter thou shalt not give unto his son, nor his daughter shalt thou take unto thy son. For they will turn away thy son from following me, that they may serve other gods: so will the anger of the Lord be kindled against you, and destroy thee suddenly. (Deuteronomy 7:1–4)



As with Israel, the Nephites had been brought into the land, and were instructed in how to deal with the inhabitants of the land. Nephi has set up his brothers to represent the ancestral enemies, and Jacob will inform us that the term Lamanite refers to all enemies, not simply those descended from Laman, or any of Lehi's family (Jacob 1:14). Thus, this prohibition of marriage is not more surprising than that given to Israel. The Lamanites were loathsome as enemies, not because of what they looked like. Even at this early date, the Lamanites are only loathsome until they repent. That was all it took to reverse the curse.

## **2 Nephi 5:24–25**

24 And because of their cursing which was upon them they did become an idle people, full of mischief and subtlety, and did seek in the wilderness for beasts of prey.

25 And the Lord God said unto me: They shall be a scourge unto thy seed, to stir them up in remembrance of me; and inasmuch as they will not remember me, and hearken unto my words, they shall scourge them even unto destruction.

### *Comments*

Because this statement is written in the scriptures, we are tempted to read it as history. Perhaps it might have applied to the Lamanites at one point, but this is a pretty typical statement about people who do not belong to the group defined as “us.” We are civilized. They are barbaric. In fact, the description of barbarian is itself a remnant of such *us* versus *them* thinking. The Greeks used *barbarous* to describe anyone who didn't speak Greek. It is a word for outsiders, and the connotation of being less than *us* is intentional, even when it wasn't strictly true.

Thus, Enos will also say of them, that the Lamanites “were led by their evil nature . . . [to] become wild, and refocus, and a blood-thirsty people, full of idolatry and filthiness; feeding upon beasts of prey” (Enos 1:20). Feeding on beasts of prey is the opposite of the civilized and agricultural Nephites.

Mosiah 10:12 says that “They were a wild, and ferocious, and a blood-thirsty people.” In Alma 17:14 they are a “wild and a hardened and a ferocious people.” Helaman 3:16 notes that after Nephites mixed with the Lamanites, “they are no more called the Nephites, becoming wicked, and wild, and ferocious, yea, even becoming Lamanites.”

This is the definition of Nephite prejudice. It is not against how people look, but whether they are *us* or *them*. It is the most common prejudice of human history, and it is rarely related to actual observable behavior.

As the quintessential enemy, they will become a scourge to the Nephites. In good times, the Nephites will repent and remember Yahweh. Eventually, when the Nephites will no longer repent, this enemy will destroy them.

## **2 Nephi 5:26–27**

26 And it came to pass that I, Nephi, did consecrate Jacob and Joseph, that they should be priests and teachers over the land of my people.

27 And it came to pass that we lived after the manner of happiness.

### *Comments*

Nephi continues to give details about how his community was established. Nephi was king, but there were sufficient people that others could have public positions. Thus, Jacob and Joseph were appointed priests and teachers. These should be understood as descriptive, and not as priesthood titles. The modern understanding of those terms would not have described what Jacob and Joseph did.

Nephi gives us too little information to know if priest and teacher were a single position or two separate ones. It is probable that they were combined functions for the same person, or persons. Thus, Jacob and Joseph would be priests when they officiated in the sacrifices, and teachers of the gospel to the people. The Israelite religion was new enough in the New World that it is probable that there was a lot of instruction required that would have simply been cultural heritage for those who were raised in the land of Judah in the Old World.

Nephi concludes his description of the new community with the functional equivalent of the Genesis statement that “it was good.” He has listed the conditions of the new people, and notes that it is good. The evidence that it was good comes from the fact that they were able to live after the manner of happiness.

The manner of happiness must be a synonym for living the gospel. Living the commandments was the condition upon which the promise of the land was bestowed. That they received the blessings is an indication that they lived according to Yahweh’s commandments.

## **Nephi Makes a Second Record**

### **2 Nephi 5:28–34**

28 And thirty years had passed away from the time we left Jerusalem.

29 And I, Nephi, had kept the records upon my plates, which I had made, of my people thus far.

30 And it came to pass that the Lord God said unto me: Make other plates; and thou shalt engraven many things upon them which are good in my sight, for the profit of thy people.

31 Wherefore, I, Nephi, to be obedient to the commandments of the Lord, went and made these plates upon which I have engraven these things.

32 And I engraved that which is pleasing unto God. And if my people are pleased with the things of God they will be pleased with mine engravings which are upon these plates.

33 And if my people desire to know the more particular part of the history of my people they must search mine other plates.

34 And it sufficeth me to say that forty years had passed away, and we had already had wars and contentions with our brethren.

### *Comments*

The narrative arrived at the point where thirty years had passed since they left Jerusalem. It is tempting to suggest that the command to create the second set of plates came sometime soon after that thirty-year anniversary, because Nephi speaks of creating plates right after.

Nephi says that he had made plates and kept a record, and then that Yahweh commanded him to make other plates. Thus, we do not know when the other plates were begun, just as we do not know when the people of Nephi began. What does appear to have happened is that after they had been gone for thirty years, probably twenty-one to twenty-two of them in the New World, Nephi begins the project of writing on the plates the text that we are reading.

Nephi ends the chapter by indicating that forty years had passed since they left Jerusalem. He does not provide the details of what happened in the intervening ten years, but it appears that at this point Nephi's writing catches up to real time. From this point on, Nephi isn't writing according to a story that he needs to tell, but according to stories or instructions he wants to tell for the future.

