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Joseph and Nephi: Rivalry and Reconciliation

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Abstract: Sometime after Lehi’s death, rivalry drove his sons apart. Those who took his advice and chose to follow Nephi had been directed by God to abandon the land of their first inheritance and flee into the wilderness where they founded a new settlement, known later as the city of Nephi. They made “many swords” in preparation for the day when their kinfolk, the Lamanites, would come to battle against them. Nephi was named king and commanded by the Lord to write a second account of his family’s history, focusing on sacred events, to supplement the more comprehensive record he had already prepared. Now that the family enterprise of becoming a righteous branch to restore Israel’s fortunes in a new land of promise has apparently failed, Nephi is unsure how to proceed with these smaller plates. He has stalled for a decade and tells us twice that although he will continue to write out of obedience, the “wise purpose” of this second account remains a mystery to him. In the conversation which follows, Nephi turns to his forefather Joseph of Egypt, whom he has just recorded Lehi quoting at length in his final blessings, for guidance and encouragement.

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NEPHI: I grew up with fraternal resentments of the usual sort, but not until my father Lehi began having dreams did the intense rivalry begin. When Lehi's prophecies against Jerusalem met with strong resistance, Laman and Lemuel were embarrassed by his visions and resented the notoriety and animosity they brought; while I, believing the warning, cried to the Lord to soften their hearts.³ In response, the Lord spoke to me by

1. 2 Nephi 5:14.

2. See 1 Nephi 9:5 and 19:5.

3. 1 Nephi 2:18.

name, blessing me and calling me to one day teach and rule over these unruly brothers.⁴ That moment of revelation marked the beginning of my clear sense of God's favor. Your experience, Joseph, came immediately to mind, beginning with the prophetic dreams you, too, received when you were about my age. I learned from my familiarity with the unfortunate turns of your story to keep this revelation to myself. It was obvious that news of my blessing (to say nothing of my brothers' simultaneous cursing) would hardly be well received.

JOSEPH: As you well know, rivalry was my family's enduring tradition, maintained through the generations by repeatedly bestowing birthright blessings on younger siblings. For my father Jacob it began early, as he and his twin Esau struggled for preeminence within Rebekah's womb. She helped him cheat his older brother out of the birthright, as Jacob was, in turn, cheated out of his chosen wife by his interfering father-in-law. God blessed Leah, Jacob's first but unloved wife, with an auspicious week's worth of children—six sons and a daughter—in the first fourteen years of their marriage. Meanwhile, to her shame, my mother Rachel remained childless.

Despite her pleadings, Jacob (already the father of many sons) refused to intervene with God on Rachel's behalf as his fathers had done for their barren wives. And so Rachel, in her unwearying desperation, petitioned Him directly for a son of her own. Finally, God responded to her cries, and I was born. From that day, Jacob favored me as the first son of his chosen wife, and my status only increased after she died following hard labor with Benjamin. Needless to say, I was resented by Leah's sons long before the dreams began.

To my brothers, these dreams were obviously self-serving. And while the images became more grandiose—shifting from pastoral contexts to cosmic ones—the message remained the same: I was bound for greatness! My family would one day bow down to me! It's no surprise that sharing this with my brothers brought their simmering resentment to a full-boiled hatred. Even Jacob was peeved.

I can admit now that, at the time, I relished the self-importance of it all. I took both comfort and delight in imagining what it might mean to rule over those who had so often demeaned me. But mostly I was thrilled that God had chosen me from all of Jacob's sons for blessing.

4. 1 Nephi 2:22–26.

NEPHI: I can't deny that I too was thrilled by the prospect of being specially known to God, with promises that linked me to my greatest heroes—you and Moses. By this time our family had fled Jerusalem at the Lord's command, and Lehi instructed my three older brothers and me to return to the city to secure scriptures from our kinsman. My willing obedience to the difficult journey (and my father's acknowledgment of it⁵) was not lost on Laman and Lemuel, but my optimism, courage, and resourcefulness along the way won me some level of respect. It was an angel who started the real trouble. When things got tense, he arrived to chastise them, only to reveal what I had deliberately kept hidden: that the Lord had chosen me to be their ruler.⁶

JOSEPH: At least an angel verified your blessing to others, so that you would know with certainty that you hadn't somehow invented it yourself as an expression of your insecurities! I was only vindicated in my belief that I had been chosen by God decades later, when all that I had dreamed finally came to pass.

NEPHI: There's no doubt that the Lord's special favor increased the tension between my brothers and me. It took a while for me to realize just how deep and long-lasting their resentment would prove to be at my apparent usurping of their leadership birthright. I know that God prepares the way to accomplish His purposes—is bestowing his favor one of those ways? What do you think—does the Lord's favor cause the afflictions that follow in its wake, or does it somehow prepare its recipients for other events to come?

JOSEPH: An interesting question. While I would answer that both divine and paternal favoritism did, in fact, cause many of my subsequent afflictions, perhaps they also gave me confidence to do things that would otherwise have seemed impossible.

NEPHI: And the strength to endure the growing fraternal hatred, which—for both of us—soon escalated to physical mistreatment. On more than one occasion, my brothers bound me with cords and threatened to kill me.⁷

5. 1 Nephi 3:8.

6. 1 Nephi 3:29.

7. See 1 Nephi 7:16, 19; 16:37; 18:11; 2 Nephi 5:2 and 19.

JOSEPH: And mine threw me into a pit and sold me into captivity! Eventually, our siblings' enmity was such that they were willing to bring suffering upon the gray hairs of their aged fathers to satisfy their jealousy.⁸

In my case, Jacob's actions fueled my brothers' resentment, most notably in presenting me with that elaborate coat (that I wore, no doubt, with too much pride). He often told me in their hearing that he couldn't look at me without seeing and longing for his beloved Rachel. I learned soon enough that inheriting her beauty was a mixed blessing: it caused me to be favored a bit too much by Potiphar's wife—which led to imprisonment, where I found myself (incredibly) favored yet again. But so much for favor—a favored slave is still a slave.⁹

NEPHI: My initial rivalry with Laman and Lemuel was based on the ordinary issues of age and temperament; at least we shared the same mother! Although I felt Lehi's favor as a consequence of my faithfulness, I think he tried not to express it openly (maybe he, too, had learned from your family's story). It was only as Lehi neared his death that he finally praised and defended my leadership.¹⁰ Truth be told, I was a bit hurt when he named my youngest brother Joseph, after you. By the time he was born, I thought I had taken on your redemptive role within our family, a fact that Lehi eventually did acknowledge.¹¹

I think the most serious disadvantages I experienced from favoritism were of a private nature (and this is probably where I should have paid more attention to your story). I truly expected that it was my lot to prosper in every situation. Being singled out as the recipient of the Lord's blessing led me to believe that things would not only go well for me (and my posterity) but that they would go better for me than for my less-faithful brothers. What a shock it was when I received a vision that showed just the opposite.

I was anxious to see and know the things Lehi had been shown about the future of the House of Israel. I rejoiced in the vision of the coming of the Messiah and eagerly followed the course of my people. But from the things Lehi had shared, I had no reason to expect that this vision would include the fall of my posterity at the hands of Laman and Lemuel's off-

8. See Genesis 42:38, 44:29, 31 and 1 Nephi 18:18.

9. See Genesis 39:2–4, 21–23.

10. 2 Nephi 1:25–28 and 3:25.

11. See 2 Nephi 1:24; compare 1 Nephi 5:15.

spring! I was struck with horror and grief beyond compare to witness the destruction of my children! My seed was cut off—I was cut off—from the promises of the patriarchs before I had even taken a wife. What then was the point of my blessing and the Lord’s favor? How was this just? How was it to be endured? I was undone. I had failed before I had even begun and felt the sort of pain your mother expressed in her now familiar plea, “Give me children,”—faithful children—“or I die.”

JOSEPH: I’ve never before imagined her pain so exquisitely—I suppose because I was born, after all, and her prayer was answered. But Lehi saw the same vision that you did. He knew what was to become of his descendants, and still he had reason to rejoice. Do you remember what he said?

NEPHI: I went to seek him out for explanation—or at least consolation—but he was nowhere to be found.

JOSEPH: No, I mean before your vision. When he first told you about the Tree of Precious Fruit.

NEPHI: He said that he had reason to rejoice because of me and my brother Sam, because we, and many of our seed, would be saved.¹²

JOSEPH: And have you seen this faithful seed? In your vision I mean.

NEPHI: Some of them, yes. Especially when the Lamb of God will come among us.

JOSEPH: So prophecy can give us reason to hope as well as to despair. Would you rather not have seen?

Expectations, truly, can be dangerous things. We have to be careful not to fill in our own desires beyond what is actually promised. But you know this already. As you’ve said: being singled out for favor doesn’t mean that we are destined to prosper in every situation.

My expectation that my brothers would offer me their willing submission was dashed when I found myself captive in a caravan on the way down to Egypt. Later, during my two years’ imprisonment, I had plenty of time to reflect on what “dominion” might mean. Only in those abject circumstances did I come to realize that I was called by God not for my

12. 1 Nephi 8:3.

own (or even my posterity's) aggrandizement, but for the preservation and establishment of His covenant people. During that time, the remarkable promises made by the Lord to our fathers (and frequently recounted to me by Jacob) often came to my mind: "Do not fear. I am your God. I will be with you and keep you wherever you go. The land promised to Abraham will be an inheritance for you and your offspring forever. Your posterity will be as innumerable as stars and will be a blessing to all the families of the earth."¹³

NEPHI: And Jacob eventually extended amazing promises to you as well.

JOSEPH: Yes. After I saved our family from the great famine, Jacob lavished his father's blessing upon me. Not only was I given the birthright, but I also received a double portion as he claimed my sons Ephraim and Manasseh (your ancestor) as his own.

Later, when he pronounced his final blessings, mine excelled those of my brothers and even of our ancestors. I was to be as a fruitful bough with branches of posterity running "over the wall." I would continue to have strength amidst persecution, and was promised blessings of heaven and the deep, and of the breast and the womb. As my posterity, your family has received all of these in abundance.¹⁴

NEPHI: My soul delights in the covenants of the Lord to my fathers!¹⁵ And in the many tender mercies my family continues to receive.¹⁶

JOSEPH: Although many may be lost, Nephi, many others will be saved. And we have been called to be instruments of their salvation. I think both of us were chosen by God to use whatever power or influence we might attain not to dominate our brothers but to serve them, even at the cost of their resentment for doing so. To the best of our abilities, and with God's assurance of ultimate success, we are to insure physical survival for them and their posterity, to unify them in goodwill and brotherhood, and to promote their cohesion as a righteous and obedient covenant nation.

13. Genesis 28:13–15.

14. See Genesis 49:22–26, 2 Nephi 3:5, 1 Nephi 11–14; 18:22; and 17:1–2.

15. See 2 Nephi 11:5.

16. See 1 Nephi 1:20.

NEPHI: Lehi expressed a similar ambition when he called his sons to be “determined in one mind and in one heart, united in all things. . . [and girded in] the armor of righteousness.”¹⁷ My family was chosen to be a righteous remnant of Israel—to remain in the right way this time around. Lehi considered it my responsibility to bring this to pass, but within less than a generation of his death such unity is already impossible to imagine. I’m afraid I have failed again!

JOSEPH: It is true that Lehi exhorted his family to embrace your leadership. But he also instructed them on agency and reminded them of their individual responsibility to choose. This applies to both your brothers and your posterity. He saw the same vision you did, Nephi. Perhaps God’s idea of success is larger than yours.

NEPHI: As I mentioned, immediately after prophetically witnessing the destruction of my people, I sought Lehi for guidance. I knew he had remained hopeful, and all I could feel was overwhelming despair. But who did I encounter instead? The last people I wanted to see! Laman and Lemuel were at hand asking questions, actually inviting me to be their teacher. The timing of this unlikely fulfillment of my blessing brought me pain rather than satisfaction. It seemed only to reinforce the inevitability of the fulfillment of the other prophecy—the one about their seed overpowering mine.

JOSEPH: But you did teach them and explain the meaning of the allegories of the two trees—of Zenos’s prophecy and Lehi’s vision of God’s plan for the salvation of Israel, both collectively and individually.

NEPHI: Yes.

JOSEPH: Your father did well there, framing the fullness of God’s salvation in such memorable and related images. You explained to your brethren the meaning of the Olive Tree and the Tree of Precious Fruit—and you were successful: they repented. But you missed an important teaching opportunity nonetheless.

NEPHI: What was that?

17. 2 Nephi 1:21, 23.

JOSEPH: An opportunity for reconciliation . . .

NEPHI: Reconciliation? With Laman and Lemuel? How could that possibly have happened?

JOSEPH: You've made a transcript. Shall we look at it together?

Note the emphasis you put on judgment, beginning with the first series of questions you asked,¹⁸ and later emphasizing details your father chose to leave out.¹⁹ You taught by fear, Nephi, rather than by love. Next, see your repeated use of the term “our seed.” It was the right move, expanding the circle of concern beyond your own interest, though made, I sense, from the wrong motivation? But it is easy for me to judge! You, after all were still very young (at an age that I was only capable of boasting of my self-important dreams), and you were no doubt reeling from that most unexpected revelation of deep personal loss.

But how might things have been different if you had explained to Laman and Lemuel what you then knew: That both you and they—your posterity and theirs—are each blessed and cursed. Yes, you have been called as a ruler and teacher over them, in the context, I think, of the kind of leadership we've already discussed. You also have clearly been blessed with sacred voices and visions from heavenly messengers, as your fathers Lehi, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob have been before you. And you have all been chosen for restoration as a remnant of Israel, to recapitulate its sacred history in a choice land under the watchful care of the God of your fathers. But what of Laman and Lemuel? What have they been blessed with? And what cursings apply to each of you as well?

NEPHI: Their blessing is my curse—

JOSEPH: That they are blessed at all? I'm surprised to hear that from you, Nephi! I know you have a good heart, softened by the Lord, by your own admission,²⁰ and capable of generosity. You've prayed for your brothers before and recognized that their limited vision is due in part to not knowing the dealings of God.²¹

18. 1 Nephi 15:8–11.

19. 1 Nephi 15:24, 27–36.

20. See 1 Nephi 2:16.

21. See 1 Nephi 2:1.

NEPHI: Excuse my ambiguity! You misunderstand. I meant only that my great curse—the destruction of my posterity—is only magnified in being matched precisely by their most significant blessing: the promise of persistence. As long as there is life, there is the possibility for repentance.

JOSEPH: Let me share with you the moment in my life that changed everything. It was in Egypt during the famine, at the time when I chose to reveal my identity to my brothers who had come to purchase grain. Years before, these brothers had done me a great wrong, led on by jealousy and their own hardened hearts. But I had learned much in the years since I had lived with them in Canaan, schooled not just by my service to Pharaoh but also by my many afflictions. I understood that God's favor had sustained me in order that I, in turn, could sustain others. When I recognized them on their first visit, the Lord let me know that my calling was to preserve them, the bearers of Abraham's covenant and inheritors of his blessing, regardless of any justified animosity I might still have held.

I want you to listen carefully to what I told them: It was not you who sent me here, but God. He sent me before you to preserve life . . . to preserve a posterity for you in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance.²² Although they had meant evil against me, "God meant it for good, to save many people alive."²³

I suggested the possibility of reconciliation earlier. Your first reconciliation, Nephi, is to the will of God. To both His justice and His mercy. Don't resent the future He has blessed you to see because you do not yet fully understand it. The God of your fathers will help you and bless your efforts in bringing salvation to His covenant people. Trust His providential design—it is larger than we can imagine. He will open the gates of righteousness and clear the way before you.²⁴ You, too, are called to do a great work to preserve your brothers' posterity "by a great deliverance" and to "save many people alive."

NEPHI: But what can I do now? My family has split, irreconcilably I fear. Instead of a restored remnant, we have begun Israel's cycle of enmity anew. Isn't it too late?

22. Genesis 45:5–8.

23. Genesis 50:20.

24. See 2 Nephi 4:14, 32–33.

JOSEPH: Perhaps not. We are saved, it seems, not by doing it right the first time but by suffering through having gotten it wrong. “As long as there is life, there is the possibility for repentance,” isn’t that what you said? We come to God through our weakness, Nephi, and He will make us strong.²⁵ Pray for God to again soften your heart. Pray for the charity to frankly forgive your brothers now as you did long ago.²⁶ Although you are currently separated from them, you still can love them, rejoice in their promised blessings, and wait for the fulfillment of those blessings in the Lord’s time.

You can also pray for your brethren. Plead with the Lord on their behalf as Rachel continued to weep for her absent children. The Lord rewarded her labor. God’s blessing was initially extended to you as you were pleading on behalf of your brothers’ hardened hearts.²⁷ Don’t stop crying for them and their posterity as well as for your own. Embrace the promises to the patriarchs and leave judgment to God. Your prayers, like those of your dear foremother, can also become an effectual voice from the dust.²⁸

You know the story of Rachel’s tears. She died in childbirth with Benjamin, on our journey back to the promised land. Jacob buried her on the way, in Ramah, rather than travel half a day to place her body in the family tomb at Machpelah, the final resting place of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and eventually Jacob and Leah. In death, Jacob’s beloved wife, the mother of the northern tribes, was separated from the rest, as her sons would likewise be separated when the Assyrians came. But Ramah, it turns out, was on the way to Israel’s exile. Rachel saw it all and, practiced at weeping from pleading for her sons’ birth, she wept again as she saw her posterity carried off. God heard her prayers: Your labor shall be rewarded, He said. There is hope in your future; your children shall come back from the land of their enemies, back to their own borders.²⁹ Rachel’s weeping brought redemption for her sons. And Laman and Lemuel are her sons, too.

Rachel could only cry from the dust, but you, Nephi, can also write! Lehi was right when he taught that I saw your day. Read my prophecies again, and find yourself in them. Cry not only for God’s merciful inter-

25. See 2 Nephi 3:21.

26. See 1 Nephi 7:15–16.

27. See 1 Nephi 2:18–19.

28. See 2 Nephi 3:19b.

29. See Jeremiah 31:15–22.

cession, but also preach repentance to those who will come after you.³⁰ Teach your children, and your brothers' children, and the descendants of the patriarchs, and all the families of the earth, how to come unto God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and be saved.³¹ Teach the points of his doctrine plainly, so they cannot err. You are to be a teacher, Nephi, not only to Laman and Lemuel but to an audience as numerous as the sand and the stars. Teach them of the two trees and of the expansive sense of salvation that Israel's God has revealed to you.

Through God's design I was able to save many from physical starvation, and you, my son, will provide the means to save them from spiritual death. Sometime, somewhere, some will listen. The Lord has promised me that your words will be preserved and many shall hearken in bringing to pass much restoration of Israel.³² For my part, I believe Him. Write, Nephi, write! Save your brothers' posterity. Save many.

* * * * *

The final section of Second Nephi (chapters 25–33) is notably different from Nephi's prior writings. Here he clearly identifies an expanded audience³³ whom he addresses for the first time—and then repeatedly—as his “beloved brethren.”³⁴ He recounts his earlier vision and the anguish that witnessing the destruction of his posterity has caused him, but this time he is able to concede the justice of God's actions.³⁵ In a clearly framed depiction of the “doctrine of Christ,”³⁶ Nephi reveals the interpretation of key elements from Lehi's Dream that were not specified earlier—including the identity of the man bidding him to follow, as well as the meaning of the strait and narrow path and how one “presses forward” along it.³⁷ He indicates in plainness how one is to come unto Christ—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—and be saved.³⁸

30. 2 Nephi 3:20.

31. 1 Nephi 6:4 and 15:14.

32. See 2 Nephi 3:24.

33. Compare 1 Nephi 19:3, 5 and 2 Nephi 33:10, 13.

34. See 2 Nephi 26:1, and fifteen times thereafter.

35. See 1 Nephi 12:19–20, 15:1–5, 2 Nephi 26:6–7, 10–11.

36. 2 Nephi 31:2, 21; compare 1 Nephi 15:14.

37. 2 Nephi 31:9–10, 18–20; compare 1 Nephi 8:20, 24, 6.

38. 2 Nephi 31:19–21; compare 1 Nephi 6:4.

Nephi also alludes to several distinctive phrases from Joseph's prophecies regarding the sacred words his posterity will write, thereby claiming their fulfillment for himself. He describes his efforts as crying in faith on behalf of his brethren, and, specifically, as crying to them from the dust.³⁹ Nephi further describes the words he has written as being of great worth to these brethren;⁴⁰ as being written in weakness, so that they may subsequently be made strong in the Lord;⁴¹ and as proceeding forth from the mouth of the Lord himself.⁴² There is little doubt of Joseph's influence on the final form of Nephi's small plates.

Nor is there doubt that, in the end, Nephi finally comes to an understanding of the purpose of his second record, despite the fact that he has also chosen to keep this "wise purpose" hidden. By beginning and ending the small plates with accounts of his crying to the Lord because of his people's hardened hearts, Nephi highlights his persistent concern about fraternal rivalry and the possibility for reconciliation.⁴³ In the conversation related above, Joseph encourages Nephi to reconcile with his brothers, despite the current hostility, by directing the small plates to Lamanites of a later day, thereby bringing Lehi's (and Joseph's) surviving descendants to a knowledge of the covenants made by the Lord to their fathers. Joseph further suggests that through his writings, Nephi, too, was sent by God to save his brothers' posterity "by a great deliverance" and to save many more besides.⁴⁴

A close reading of subsequent small plates' authors suggests that an oral tradition to this effect accompanied the transfer of the record from one guardian to the next. Jacob all but admits that he, too, knows that the Nephites will one day be destroyed and that the record of sacred, saving truths they are keeping is ultimately for the benefit of their rivals.⁴⁵ His son Enos addresses this possibility more openly, but still as a hypothetical scenario, albeit one for whose outcome he cries unto the Lord continually.⁴⁶ Enos also discloses the reason for his indirection: the Lamanites had sworn in their wrath that "if it were possible, they would destroy our

39. 2 Nephi 33:3–4, 13; compare 3:19b–21.

40. 2 Nephi 33:3; compare 3:7.

41. 2 Nephi 33:10, 14; compare 3:21.

42. 2 Nephi 33:10, 14; compare 3:21.

43. 1 Nephi 2:18 and 2 Nephi 33:2–3.

44. See Genesis 45:7 and 50:20.

45. Jacob 1:1–5 and 7:27.

46. Enos 1:14–18.

records and us.”⁴⁷ For Enos’ son Jarom, the secret is out: “These things are written for the intent of the benefit of our brethren the Lamanites.”⁴⁸

Recognizing Nephi’s Small Plates as a record kept and preserved, and perhaps even titled, “for the Lamanites” clarifies a few long-standing puzzles in the Book of Mormon. It can account for why Mormon was unfamiliar with the text until late in his editing process.⁴⁹ His own long-standing and well-justified enmity with the Lamanites coupled with the recognition that they would destroy any Nephite records they came upon could certainly have reduced the priority of the text for his limited attention.⁵⁰ It may also explain Alma’s initial unfamiliarity with explicit small-plates’ prophecies about the coming of the resurrected Christ to the Nephites.⁵¹ While Alma would have had possession of Nephi’s small plates for perhaps a decade at this point,⁵² given his preaching efforts, he, too, may have given priority to scriptures specifically addressed to the Nephites. The timing of a seeming contradiction at Alma 16:20, when the church is informed that the Son of God “would appear unto them after his resurrection” is of particular note. It coincides with Alma’s reunion with the Sons of Mosiah returning from their mission “to impart the word of God to their brethren, the Lamanites.”⁵³ There thus may be reason to believe that they had taken the small plates with them in their endeavor.⁵⁴ Once the Sons of Mosiah return, with deep familiarity with a text they have been studying for fourteen years,⁵⁵ the good news is widely disseminated.

47. Enos 1:14.

48. Jarom 1:2.

49. See Words of Mormon 1:3–5.

50. See Mormon 6:6.

51. See Alma 7:8; compare 1 Nephi 12:6, 2 Nephi 26:1, 9.

52. See Omni 1:25 and Mosiah 28:20.

53. Mosiah 28:1.

54. See the similar wording in Mosiah 28:1–2, Alma 21:17, 26:24, and Alma 37:1–2, 8–12, 14—noting especially the reference to God’s “wise purpose” and allusions to notable small-plates’ texts, including 1 Nephi 10:19, in verse 12, and similarities, as well, to Joseph of Egypt’s prophecies about his descendants’ writings at 2 Nephi 3:11–12.

55. Alma 17:2.

