

1 Nephi 3

1 Nephi 3:1

¹ And it came to pass that I, Nephi, returned from speaking with the Lord, to the tent of my father.

Comments

When Nephi wrote his record, this sentence came immediately after his discussion of Yahweh's instructions to him. There was no chapter break. Nevertheless, when Orson Pratt broke up Nephi's longer chapter into smaller ones, he recognized that there is a change in the story at this point. What Orson Pratt missed was that Nephi used his father's tent as a dividing phrase.

In 1 Nephi 2:15 we saw the short sentence "and my father dwelt in a tent." That phrase ended the section of Nephi's writing where the main figure had been his father, Lehi. After that transition, Nephi becomes the focus of all the stories.

The first introduction to these Nephi-oriented stories is found in 1 Nephi 2:16–24, when Nephi indicated that he had prayed for confirmation of his father's prophetic call. Nephi received a revelation in response, and it was a revelation that served to call Nephi as the prophet of the new people in the new world. The prophetic revelation spoke of the choice land promised to Nephi. It spoke of Nephi as the ruler and teacher over his brothers. It spoke of how, when the Lamanites would not accept him, they would be a scourge to Nephi's people. At the end of that content, Orson Pratt ended both the revelation and the chapter.

Nephi ended that story one verse later—a verse that simply says "And it came to pass that I, Nephi, returned from speaking with the Lord, to the tent of my father." We can tell that Nephi made his conceptual division at this point because he mentions his father's tent. He finishes speaking with Yahweh. That is important information. Where he went after that would generally be less interesting.

Nephi uses the return to his father's tent as a literary phrase marking the boundary of a story. Returning to the tent ends the story of the revelation. It is also a transition, because it places Nephi before his father. With Nephi at his father's tent, he is in place to begin the next story, which will be the story of the retrieval of the plates of brass.

Retrieving the Brass Plates

1 Nephi 3:2–6

2 And it came to pass that he [Lehi] spake unto me, saying: Behold I have dreamed a dream, in the which the Lord hath commanded me that thou and thy brethren shall return to Jerusalem.

3 For behold, Laban hath the record of the Jews and also a genealogy of my forefathers, and they are engraven upon plates of brass.

4 Wherefore, the Lord hath commanded me that thou and thy brothers should go unto the house of Laban, and seek the records, and bring them down hither into the wilderness.

5 And now, behold thy brothers murmur, saying it is a hard thing which I have required of them; but behold I have not required it of them, but it is a commandment of the Lord.

6 Therefore go, my son, and thou shalt be favored of the Lord, because thou hast not murmured.

Comments

When Nephi comes to his father's tent, his father has had another dream. In this dream, Lehi is commanded to have his sons return to Jerusalem to retrieve the plates of brass. This will be a long story, and Nephi will use that story to emphasize the ways in which he is becoming the ruler and teacher over his brothers, as Yahweh prophesied.

The command to retrieve the plates of brass begins with the emphasis that they contain the genealogy of Lehi's forefathers. After the brothers return with the plates of brass, Nephi will record (in 1 Nephi 5:14) that Lehi does learn of his genealogy, a genealogy which ties him to Joseph of Egypt.

For Nephi, this was an important aspect of the story of the plates of brass. The plates of brass will be kept with Nephi's people. For that new people, the genealogy traces the antiquity of Nephi's claim to rulership. As a descendant of an illustrious ruler, substance was given to Nephi's New World claim to rulership. When this record was written, those were important concerns.

The final two verses continue the theme which contrasts Laman and Lemuel with Nephi. It is a contrast that Lehi had already acknowledged when he prayed that Laman be like the river and Lemuel as the valley. In this case, Laman and Lemuel murmur (again recalling the rebellious Israelites as Moses led them in the wilderness). Nephi is favored of Yahweh because he has not murmured.

1 Nephi 3:6–8

6 Therefore go, my son, and thou shalt be favored of the Lord, because thou hast not murmured.

7 And it came to pass that I, Nephi, said unto my father: 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.

8 And it came to pass that when my father had heard these words he was exceedingly glad, for he knew that I had been blessed of the Lord.

Comments

The previous commentary ended with 1 Nephi 3:6, and this one begins with that same verse. The reason is that it is a transition in the story. It provides the literary concluding contrast between the murmuring brothers and the not-murmuring Nephi.

It is a transition because there is an important literary connection between: “therefore go, my son” in verse 6 and Nephi’s reply in verse 7 that: “I will go and do.” The literary parallelism continues with the statement in verse 6 that Nephi shall be favored of Yahweh because he hasn’t murmured. Then, in verse 8, the literary unit is completed when Lehi is glad: “for he knew that [Nephi] had been blessed of the Lord.”

Beyond the literary structures, Nephi’s statement that “I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded” becomes a leitmotif throughout the book of 1 Nephi. Nephi will be shown doing things. There is an implicit contrast between the murmuring, which is a vocal indication, and the doing, which is a physical manifestation. Nephi sets up the subtle contrast between what one might say, and the more important contrast with what they do. Even when the brothers are more positive in what they say, they cannot sustain the good sayings. They will return to murmuring and to not doing what Yahweh requires.

Modern readers are comforted by Nephi’s declaration that when we are doing God’s commandments, that we may be assured that they are possible. God will not require anything of us that we cannot accomplish. That does not mean that everything will be easy. Lehi will later teach an important sermon on the necessity of opposition in all things. At this early point, however, Nephi reminds us that opposition does not mean impossibility.

The First Attempt

1 Nephi 3:9–12

9 And I, Nephi, and my brethren took our journey in the wilderness, with our tents, to go up to the land of Jerusalem.

10 And it came to pass that when we had gone up to the land of Jerusalem, I and my brethren did consult one with another.

11 And we cast lots—who of us should go in unto the house of Laban. And it came to pass that the lot fell upon Laman; and Laman went in unto the house of Laban, and he talked with him as he sat in his house.

12 And he desired of Laban the records which were engraven upon the plates of brass, which contained the genealogy of my father.

Comments

In case any of his readers forgets who the focus of the story is, Nephi begins by stating that “I, Nephi, and my brethren took our journey.” It is certain that Laman was in charge of this expedition. Laman is the eldest, and it is his rightful position.

That rightful position is emphasized when they consulted with each other on what to do. They cast lots. Casting lots is a method of using chance as a way to decide. Modern readers easily see it as random. However, in the ancient world, the presence of what everyone knew to be chance was a mechanism to invite Yahweh’s intervention.

In this case, they cast lots. Rather than a random outcome, the brothers expected to receive the quiet revelation of Yahweh’s will. The lot fell upon Laman. That would have been confirmation that it was not chance. Although there were four brothers, there was only one eldest. Everyone knew that, by right, this task should fall to the eldest. When it does through the mechanism of casting lots, it is confirmed both that Yahweh wanted Laman to lead, and that Yahweh was behind the selection—precisely because Yahweh chose the eldest.

Other than cultural expectations, why did Yahweh have the lot fall to Laman, if Yahweh knew (as he must) that Laman would fail? God’s foreknowledge does not cause an outcome. The agency we exercise in this life is for our own benefit, and we get that benefit only if we are the ones choosing to exercise our agency. Thus, God provides us opportunities despite our past choices.

1 Nephi 3:13–14

13 And behold, it came to pass that Laban was angry, and thrust him out from his presence; and he would not that he should have the records. Wherefore, he said unto him: Behold thou art a robber, and I will slay thee.

14 But Laman fled out of his presence, and told the things which Laban had done, unto us. And we began to be exceedingly sorrowful, and my brethren were about to return unto my father in the wilderness.

Comments

Laman made a request and it was denied. There is no explanation for why Laban was angry enough that he threatened to kill Laman, other than the accusation that Laman was a robber.

Of course, Laman had made no attempt at robbery, and this was a false accusation. It is possible that Nephi made sure to enter this exchange to give his readers a picture of Laban’s character. By the time Nephi wrote, Nephi’s slaying of Laban was decades in the past. Showing Laban as an unprincipled man, who would accuse Laman of robbery when there was only a request, gives the reader a picture of an unrighteous leader. By the time we reach Laban’s end at Nephi’s hands, we (as readers) will not be sorry to see him go.

The aftermath of this event is important. Yahweh himself had chosen Laman to go to Laban. Laman had failed. If Yahweh's choice had failed, it must have been seen as an impossible task. It was certainly seen as a dangerous task, because Laban had threatened Laman's life.

The heavy melancholy of failure hovered over the brothers, and the desire was to accept defeat and return to their father.

1 Nephi 3:15–18

15 But behold I said unto them that: 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.

16 Wherefore, let us be faithful in keeping the commandments of the Lord; therefore let us go down to the land of our father's inheritance, for behold he left gold and silver, and all manner of riches. And all this he hath done because of the commandments of the Lord.

17 For he knew that Jerusalem must be destroyed, because of the wickedness of the people.

18 For behold, they have rejected the words of the prophets. Wherefore, if my father should dwell in the land after he hath been commanded to flee out of the land, behold, he would also perish. Wherefore, it must needs be that he flee out of the land.

Comments

Following the disappointing and apparently final failure of Laman's attempt to obtain the plates of brass, Nephi takes it upon himself to convince his brothers to try again. As he begins, he pronounces an oath. He says, "as the Lord liveth, and as we live." In the ancient world, oaths were the equivalent of contracts, and an oath made on one's own life was superseded by the oath on the Lord's life. It was an oath made on the highest a man could offer, which was his life. The commitment to the oath might end with their life. To add the oath upon the Lord's life did not permit any escape clause.

Nephi is certain that the task is possible in spite of Laman's experience that made it seem doomed. The language he uses in verse 15 intentionally reprises his commitment to Lehi made in verse 7. In that verse Nephi declared that he knew that the Lord would not command, save a way were made possible. Here, in verse 15, he reprises that sentiment in an exhortation to his brothers rather than a promise to his father. Here, he says "we will not go down . . . until we have accomplished the thing which the Lord hath commanded us."

Verse 16 presents an interesting argument. Nephi declares that they should be faithful in keeping Yahweh's commandments. He then uses his father as an exemplar of faithfulness to Yahweh's commandments. Knowing the story as we do, we jump ahead to the use to which Nephi will put that gold and silver. However, at this point, Nephi uses the wealth left behind as a testament to his father's faithfulness. He uses his father's examples as another reason that the brothers should also keep Yahweh's

commandment to them, even though it was as difficult as leaving behind the family's wealth and departing into the wilderness. Nephi certainly knew that it was almost as hard for his parents to leave their wealth behind as it was for Laman and Lemuel. Yet, Lehi obeyed. It was hard to fail before Laban, but they must continue to obey.

1 Nephi 3:19–21

19 And behold, it is wisdom in God that we should obtain these records, that we may preserve unto our children the language of our fathers;

20 And also that we may preserve unto them the words which have been spoken by the mouth of all the holy prophets, which have been delivered unto them by the Spirit and power of God, since the world began, even down unto this present time.

21 And it came to pass that after this manner of language did I persuade my brethren, that they might be faithful in keeping the commandments of God.

Comments

In the first part of Nephi's exhortation to his brothers, he focused on the need to fulfill Yahweh's commandments. In this part, he emphasizes the reason for the commandment. Yahweh did not have them return for the plates of brass as a test of faithfulness. It was a mission with a critical objective, one that had to be accomplished.

The first argument is that the plates of brass would "preserve unto our children the language of our fathers." We do not know if Nephi ever received a revelation that let him know of the fate of the people of Zarahemla, who had not preserved the language of the Jews. Assuming that Nephi had training in a scribal school, it would have been part of his training to see the records of the past as preserving both language and culture.

The second argument is that the plates of brass contain the teachings of the prophets. They contained the revelations of Yahweh's relationship and covenants with his chosen people. Nephi certainly saw his New World people as inheritors of that covenant, and that had to have been present when he wrote of this story that had occurred decades before.

When we, as modern readers, approach the record that Nephi created, we must remember that he created it for a particular purpose and that it was created long after the events of 1 Nephi had ended. Thus, we may look to the world in which Nephi was writing to see the purpose in the selections he made, of which stories to tell, and how to tell them. In the case of dialogues, the lack of recording devices means that all dialogue was recreated from memory. It is possible that when Nephi wrote of the need to preserve their language, he was living in the example of the reason why it was essential.

The Second Attempt

1 Nephi 3:22–26

22 And it came to pass that we went down to the land of our inheritance, and we did gather together our gold, and our silver, and our precious things.

23 And after we had gathered these things together, we went up again unto the house of Laban.

24 And it came to pass that we went in unto Laban, and desired him that he would give unto us the records which were engraven upon the plates of brass, for which we would give unto him our gold, and our silver, and all our precious things.

25 And it came to pass that when Laban saw our property, and that it was exceedingly great, he did lust after it, insomuch that he thrust us out, and sent his servants to slay us, that he might obtain our property.

26 And it came to pass that we did flee before the servants of Laban, and we were obliged to leave behind our property, and it fell into the hands of Laban.

Comments

Nephi's exhortation to his brothers resulted in their willingness to try again. Simply requesting the plates had not worked. Now, the brothers will attempt to purchase them. To retrieve the gold, silver, and other precious goods, they would have needed to travel to their ancestral lands and then return. This added even more time to their task, explaining why their mother feared them dead because they delayed returning for longer than Sariah had estimated.

What the brothers proposed was an exchange. They would give the wealth to Laban, and he would give them the plates of brass. There was an expectation that since Laban was not an honorable man, he might be susceptible to the purchase of a sacred record—or at least of a bribe. Laban was even less honorable than that. He did covet Lehi's wealth, but didn't want to exchange for it. He again threatened them with death. He had, in essence, become the robber he had accused Laman of being.

The brothers now have two failed attempts. In both, Laban has shown himself to be an unsavory character. Again, the brothers must flee for their lives. When Nephi suggests that the servants were sent to slay them, he must have had some indication of their pursuit.

1 Nephi 3:27

27 And it came to pass that we fled into the wilderness, and the servants of Laban did not overtake us, and we hid ourselves in the cavity of a rock.

Comments

The brothers are forced to flee again. They do not even hide in the city, but leave the city and, somewhere in the wilderness, hide in a cave. Again, assuming Nephi's scribal training, it is probable that Nephi saw

himself in the light of Isaiah 2:10: “Enter into the rock, and hide thee in the dust, for fear of the Lord, and for the glory of his majesty.” Of course, they hid for fear of Laban, not of the Lord, but they were on Yahweh’s mission, hiding for fear in a cave. The reason for Isaiah’s reference is that there are a number of caves in Palestine, which have historically been used as places of temporary sanctuary.

A 1961 excavation uncovered a cave tomb that has been named Khirbet Beit Lei, or the ruins of the House of Lei. There were carvings on the wall which held a poem to Yahweh, and had drawings of ships. One scholar, Joseph Naveh, dated the inscriptions to before 587 B.C. The eminent scholar Frank Moore Cross suggested that the inscription was from a refugee. All those things are tantalizingly close to the story that Nephi tells. Unfortunately, the finer details make it impossible that this cave had anything to do with Nephi and his brothers.

BYU scholar Dana Pike notes that the tomb is too far from Jerusalem to have been the brothers’ refuge. There is no indication that it was known at that time that they would be required to travel by sea; so, while we know that they did, they would not have known to draw the ships. Finally, the destruction of Jerusalem would have been the cause of a number of people fleeing, many of whom might have taken temporary shelter in this cave.

It is tempting, but there is insufficient evidence to link it to the Book of Mormon.

1 Nephi 3:28–30

28 And it came to pass that Laman was angry with me, and also with my father; and also was Lemuel, for he hearkened unto the words of Laman. Wherefore Laman and Lemuel did speak many hard words unto us, their younger brothers, and they did smite us even with a rod.

29 And it came to pass as they smote us with a rod, behold, an angel of the Lord came and stood before them, and he spake unto them, saying: Why do ye smite your younger brother with a rod? Know ye not that the Lord hath chosen him to be a ruler over you, and this because of your iniquities? Behold ye shall go up to Jerusalem again, and the Lord will deliver Laban into your hands.

30 And after the angel had spoken unto us, he departed.

Comments

After two disastrous attempts, and two threats on their lives, Laman and Lemuel were understandably angry. They expanded their anger into action, beating both Nephi and Sam with a rod.

The incident is stopped by the interference of an angel. The underlying ancient words in the Bible that have been translated as angel typically meant a messenger. At times, it needed be a divine messenger. In this case, we do not know how the messenger appeared, but regardless of what the angel looked like, he (or she?) delivered a message that had to come from Yahweh. No one else would have known the reasons for the beating.

Importantly for Nephi's story, the angel confirms to Laman and Lemuel that Nephi is chosen to be the ruler over them. The angel stops this beating, but lays the foundation for all future animosity between the brothers. It will be repeated hundreds of years later, when the Lamanites will still indicate that Nephi stole their right of rulership.

The angel tells the brothers that they are to return to Jerusalem. He does not explicitly tell them that this time Nephi will be in charge, but Nephi has been developing this story precisely to lead to this moment. There is a divine declaration that Nephi will be the ruler, and teacher. From this point on, we will see Nephi in more of a leadership role, and when not leading, we will see him teaching his brothers.

Now, however, he will return to Jerusalem where Yahweh would deliver Laban into their hands.

1 Nephi 3:31

31 And after the angel had departed, Laman and Lemuel again began to murmur, saying: How is it possible that the Lord will deliver Laban into our hands? Behold, he is a mighty man, and he can command fifty, yea, even he can slay fifty; then why not us?

Comments

The children of Israel could see miracles and yet return to murmuring. Laman and Lemuel had seen an angel, yet they quickly returned to murmuring. In this case, however, the murmuring might be more of Nephi's literary license than what they were doing. Their objection was really quite reasonable. Laban had twice sent servants to slay them. Even though the angel had promised that Laban would be delivered into their hands, they couldn't see how it would happen. After all, Laban was a powerful man who could "command fifty, yea, even he can slay fifty." The implication of being able to slay fifty, is that he would not be held accountable for it.

Hugh Nibley noted that this command of fifty was quite reasonable in an ancient context. He notes that while a military leader would have thousands in the field, he might command fewer in the city. He compares this account to the letters from Amarna which also suggest a smaller than expected number in the Amarna garrison.

The number fifty is, itself, significant. At that time, Jerusalem was under Babylonian domination, the Babylonians having been the ones who installed Zedekiah as king. A Babylonian platoon consisted of fifty men. Thus, Laban and his fifty represented Laban as having a standard military platoon at his command.

This ends a chapter in our current edition of the Book of Mormon. Prior to 1879, the text continued without interruptions. The brothers' question, and Nephi will begin to respond in the next modern chapter.

