

1 Nephi 5

1 Nephi 5:1–3

- 1 And it came to pass that after we had come down into the wilderness unto our father, behold, he was filled with joy, and also my mother, Sariah, was exceedingly glad, for she truly had mourned because of us.
- 2 For she had supposed that we had perished in the wilderness; and she also had complained against my father, telling him that he was a visionary man; saying: Behold thou hast led us forth from the land of our inheritance, and my sons are no more, and we perish in the wilderness.
- 3 And after this manner of language had my mother complained against my father.

Comments

Sariah is only mentioned five times in the Book of Mormon. The first is in the book header for First Nephi. One comes in the list of the members of Lehi's family. Two of them are in this chapter, and this particular story. It is not unusual for women to be underrepresented in Hebrew scripture. The nations of Israel and Judah were both extremely patriarchal, and the men wrote the stories. When we do see named women in Hebrew or in Hebrew-descended scripture, we should pay attention.

In this case, Sariah still serves as the foil for her husband, but at least we get an honest glimpse of her as a concerned mother. Lehi has led the family away from everything she had known, away from the home where she would have been an important organizer and task master over servants that were probably helping in the home. On top of that privation, the glory of a Hebrew mother was in her sons, and Lehi had sent them all away on an errand that Sariah must have known would be difficult.

The sons had to travel three days to return to Jerusalem, and three days back. Sariah might have given them another three days there. After her mental count of when she expected them—she certainly looked for them. Each day longer increased her worry. She had no way of knowing that her sons had to travel to the ancestral lands, she had no way of knowing the number of attempts. She only knew waiting. And worrying.

It is understandable that in her grief she would rail against Lehi, telling him that he was a visionary man, certain now that her sons were no more. Understandable, and perhaps understated, was Nephi's description that she was exceedingly glad for their return.

1 Nephi 5:4–7

4 And it had come to pass that my father spake unto her, saying: I know that I am a visionary man; for if I had not seen the things of God in a vision I should not have known the goodness of God, but had tarried at Jerusalem, and had perished with my brethren.

5 But behold, I have obtained a land of promise, in the which things I do rejoice; yea, and I know that the Lord will deliver my sons out of the hands of Laban, and bring them down again unto us in the wilderness.

6 And after this manner of language did my father, Lehi, comfort my mother, Sariah, concerning us, while we journeyed in the wilderness up to the land of Jerusalem, to obtain the record of the Jews.

7 And when we had returned to the tent of my father, behold their joy was full, and my mother was comforted.

Comments

Sariah had repeated the accusation that Laman and Lemuel had made against Lehi, that he was a visionary man. It was an epithet intended to paint him as foolish, and deny his prophetic calling. In Sariah's case, the death she had imagined for her sons was more than proof that Lehi was not inspired.

Lehi's response was measured, and loving. Yes, he was a visionary man. That vision had told them to leave Jerusalem, and he believed that it would save their lives. Jerusalem would be destroyed. Yahweh had told him so, therefore he knew it.

Yahweh had called his sons on this mission. The promise of their safe return was at least implicit. Therefore, Lehi believed it. At that point, he would have been mild comfort. Certainly, she wanted to believe, but Sariah could not truly rejoice until her sons had returned.

Verse 5 is also important because it confirms that Yahweh had given Lehi the land of promise. Even though Nephi mentions the promised land before his father did, it is certain that it would have come to Lehi first. As the prophet and head of the family, we should expect that he should be first for that promise.

1 Nephi 5:8–9

8 And she spake, saying: Now I know of a surety that the Lord hath commanded my husband to flee into the wilderness; yea, and I also know of a surety that the Lord hath protected my sons, and delivered them out of the hands of Laban, and given them power whereby they could accomplish the thing which the Lord hath commanded them. And after this manner of language did she speak.

9 And it came to pass that they did rejoice exceedingly, and did offer sacrifice and burnt offerings unto the Lord; and they gave thanks unto the God of Israel.

Comments

After her sons return safely, Sariah is sure that her husband is a prophet. That was the confirmation she needed. It wasn't a confirmation based on her own situation, but based upon the fulfilled promise to have her sons return safely. This statement comes after the stories have been told. Nephi ends the story of the brothers' journey with this declaration of the journey's effect upon their mother.

After returning, Nephi mentions that they "did offer sacrifice and burnt offerings unto the Lord." When Lehi arrived at this first camp, he offered a thanks offering on the altar that he built of stones (1 Nephi 2:7). Certainly the safe return of his sons was sufficient reason for another thanks offering, but Nephi specifies that there was also a burnt offering. Burnt offerings were usually made for atonement purposes, or for reconnecting with Yahweh after some sin, or possible sin.

The brothers had returned safely, but they had murmured against Yahweh's commanded task. Of course, Nephi had killed Laban. Even though Nephi could argue the legality of what he did, it was probably deemed prudent to offer a burnt sacrifice, just in case. A burnt sacrifice might be made of different animals, according to the family's means. It is not known what kind of animal was sacrificed. Some burnt offerings burned the fat of the animal, and left the skin and meat for the sustenance of the priests. A more serious sacrifice, perhaps for a more serious sin, would require the complete sacrifice of the animal. Nephi does not say which type of burnt offering was made, but the nature of the possible sin—even though justified and commanded by Yahweh—may have suggested the complete sacrifice of the animal.

1 Nephi 5:10–13

10 And after they had given thanks unto the God of Israel, my father, Lehi, took the records which were engraven upon the plates of brass, and he did search them from the beginning.

11 And he beheld that they did contain the five books of Moses, which gave an account of the creation of the world, and also of Adam and Eve, who were our first parents;

12 And also a record of the Jews from the beginning, even down to the commencement of the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah;

13 And also the prophecies of the holy prophets, from the beginning, even down to the commencement of the reign of Zedekiah; and also many prophecies which have been spoken by the mouth of Jeremiah.

Comments

As the object of such a perilous mission, of course Lehi would carefully examine the plates of brass. Modern readers get their best description of those plates in these verses. We learn that they contain the Torah, the essential five books of Moses. They also include at least some of the books that the Jewish collection of sacred books calls the histories. Finally, it includes at least some of the books of the prophets. We learn later that they contain two prophets not mentioned in the Old Testament as we have received it; Zenos and Zenock.

How are there books that we do not have? We have lived with the scriptures in their current format for so long that it is easy to assume that they have always been that way. That is certainly not the case. Before they were officially collected into a bible (a word derived from the Greek plural word for books), they were individual books. Some of the preservation of scripture depended upon what preservations different communities might have made.

John L. Sorenson has suggested that there are elements of what we can learn of the plates of brass that point to an origin in the northern tribes, those lost in the Assyrian invasion one hundred years before Lehi's call. The plates of brass may have contained records of prophets from the northern kingdom, whose teachings were never recorded in the southern kingdom. Our Old Testament is primarily a southern kingdom document.

Even if it had originated in the northern kingdom and had been brought south by those who fled the Assyrians, it was still a living document. Someone was adding to it, as it also contained records up to the reign of Zedekiah, the king at the time that Lehi left Jerusalem.

1 Nephi 5:14–16

14 And it came to pass that my father, Lehi, also found upon the plates of brass a genealogy of his fathers; wherefore he knew that he was a descendant of Joseph; yea, even that Joseph who was the son of Jacob, who was sold into Egypt, and who was preserved by the hand of the Lord, that he might preserve his father, Jacob, and all his household from perishing with famine.

15 And they were also led out of captivity and out of the land of Egypt, by that same God who had preserved them.

16 And thus my father, Lehi, did discover the genealogy of his fathers. And Laban also was a descendant of Joseph, wherefore he and his fathers had kept the records.

Comments

In addition to books we know from the Bible, the plates of brass also contained specific genealogical records. Lehi learned that both he and Laban were descendants of Joseph. That tells us why Laban had this particular set of scriptures. He was appointed, or perhaps self-appointed, guardian of a lineage record. That lineage record included the sacred writings that others were also protecting, but it was specialized for that lineage.

It would be surprising had Lehi not known his tribal affiliation. The importance of that record on the plates of brass was to make it real, and definable. When Lehi's family would arrive in a new world, it is likely that this relic of lineage authority became important in the Nephite community. This scene does bookend Nephi's statement from before the journey to retrieve the plates in that there was a genealogy of his forefathers on them (1 Nephi 3:3).

More importantly for the current story, tying the family to Joseph also tied them to the Exodus. They would be paralleling their ancestor's journey through a wilderness. Nephi uses this as another occasion to make a reference connecting his family's journey and that of the children of Israel who were led to their promised land.

1 Nephi 5:17–22

17 And now when my father saw all these things, he was filled with the Spirit, and began to prophesy concerning his seed—

18 That these plates of brass should go forth unto all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people who were of his seed.

19 Wherefore, he said that these plates of brass should never perish; neither should they be dimmed any more by time. And he prophesied many things concerning his seed.

20 And it came to pass that thus far I and my father had kept the commandments wherewith the Lord had commanded us.

21 And we had obtained the records which the Lord had commanded us, and searched them and found that they were desirable; yea, even of great worth unto us, insomuch that we could preserve the commandments of the Lord unto our children.

22 Wherefore, it was wisdom in the Lord that we should carry them with us, as we journeyed in the wilderness towards the land of promise.

Comments

Seeing the history of his lineage, Lehi turns to the future of his lineage. As a prophet, he prophesies of the role that this record would have. This record for which they had worked so hard to obtain, would benefit nations. He promised that the plates themselves would not perish, and that they would not be dimmed by time. This promise is reiterated almost five hundred years later when Alma tells his son, Helaman, that “they will retain their brightness” (Alma 37:3).

Nephi will finally end his first chapter. His chapter began by introducing himself. He told the bare essentials of his father's story, and then moved to tell his own. In this first major episode, Nephi gives his readers the Lord's promise to him, and the angel's confirmation to his brothers, that Nephi would be a ruler and a teacher over them. The journey to retrieve the plates of brass demonstrates Nephi in that leading and teaching role.

At the end of the chapter, Nephi concludes the story of the plates of brass, noting their importance to the future of his people, and simply declaring that: “it was wisdom in the Lord that we should carry them with us, as we journeyed in the wilderness towards the land of promise.”

