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A PASSOVER SETTING FOR LEHI'S EXODUS

Don Bradley

Abstract: *Later in his life, former Palmyra resident Fayette Lapham recounted with sharp detail an 1830 interview he conducted with Joseph Smith Sr. about the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. Among the details he reports that Lehi's exodus from Jerusalem occurred during a "great feast." This detail, not found in the published Book of Mormon, may reveal some of what Joseph Sr. knew from the lost 116 pages. By examining the small plates account of this narrative in 1 Nephi 1–5, we see not only that such a feast was possible, but that Lehi's exodus and Nephi's quest for the brass plates occurred at Passover. This Passover setting helps explain why Nephi killed Laban and other distinctive features of Lehi's exodus. Read in its Passover context, the story of Lehi is not just the story of one man's deliverance, but of the deliverance of humankind by the Lamb of God. The Passover setting in which it begins illuminates the meaning of the Book of Mormon as a whole.*

[Editor's Note: This article is an excerpt from Chapter 7 of the author's new book, *The Lost 116 Pages: Reconstructing the Book of Mormon's Lost Stories* (Salt Lake City: Kofford Books, 2019).]

This chapter examines the narrative of 1 Nephi 1–5 as a series of events occurring at the Passover season, beginning with Lehi's theophany (vision of God) at the start of the Passover month of Nisan and culminating with Nephi's slaying of Laban on the final day of the Jewish Passover celebration.¹ Although this text comprises five chapters in the current Latter-day Saint edition of the Book of Mormon, it

1. I am grateful to my friends Joe Spencer and Kirk Caudle for helping me link the feast mentioned by Fayette Lapham with the Passover. Kirk also provided valuable assistance in researching the biblical Passover and mapping out early efforts to present this research.

constitutes just one chapter — the original 1 Nephi Chapter I — in the first edition of the Book of Mormon and presents a single overarching narrative of the escape of Lehi’s family from destruction in Jerusalem and the beginning of their exodus to a new promised land. Read against the backdrop of the Passover season, the narrative of Lehi’s exodus is not merely a narrative of one family’s deliverance from temporal destruction but also a typological narrative of the redemption of humanity by the divine Lamb of God.

Fayette Lapham’s Interview with Joseph Smith Sr.

In early 1830, shortly before the Book of Mormon came off the Grandin press, Palmyra businessman Fayette Lapham and his brother-in-law Jacob Ramsdell called at the Joseph Smith Sr. home in Manchester to get information on the forthcoming book.² As Palmyra residents, Lapham and Ramsdell would have heard the considerable buzz in town about the Book of Mormon but were not yet able to satisfy their curiosity by reading its pages. Instead, the two young men enjoyed the rare privilege of hearing the Prophet’s father relate the story of the Book of Mormon’s emergence, and they were given an oral sneak preview of its contents. Four decades later, Lapham published an extensive account of this interview

2. Lapham dates his interview with Joseph Smith Sr. to 1830 but does not specify a month. However, his narrative enables us to place the interview more precisely. Lapham reports that his curiosity about the Book of Mormon was aroused by the hubbub surrounding its printing in Palmyra. That Lapham journeyed to neighboring Manchester in order to learn more rather than examining one of the five thousand printed copies of the book in Palmyra indicates that such copies were not yet available, as well as the fact that Lapham does not describe Joseph Sr. attempting to sell or show him a copy. In recounting the emergence and contents of the Book of Mormon, Joseph Sr. was fulfilling the instructions of an earlier revelation given for his benefit. As Colby Townsend explains, the February 1829 revelation (D&C 4) that instructed him to thrust in his sickle and reap souls for the Lord “nudged Joseph Sr. to engage in the work of spreading the story about Smith’s discovery of the plates and the forthcoming book based on those plates.” Colby Townsend, “Rewriting Eden with the Book of Mormon: Joseph Smith and the Reception of Genesis 1–6 in Early America” (master’s thesis, Utah State University, 2019). The connection of Doctrine and Covenants 4 with Fayette Lapham’s interview with Joseph Sr. was suggested to me by Colby Townsend, personal communication, July 19, 2019.

in an 1870 issue of *The Historical Magazine*.³ Despite the lapse of years and the account's occasional garbling of fact, Lapham's narration is filled with firsthand information that demonstrates his reliance on a primary source with knowledge of the actual information and events, indicating that he may have written his newspaper account from detailed notes of his interview with Joseph Sr.⁴ Whether Lapham's source was interview notes or an extraordinary memory, his accuracy on many obscure but confirmable details, such as the order in which Joseph Smith translated Mormon's abridgement and Nephi's small plates after the manuscript loss, lends credence to additional, unique details he provides.⁵

In relating Nephite history, Lapham's account largely retells familiar Book of Mormon stories. Yet at key points it also adds to the existing narrative some story elements not found in the published Book of Mormon. These additional pieces of Nephite narrative, though new or unknown, fit remarkably well into the familiar, known narrative, suggesting that they are not errors but echoes of narrative from the lost pages. Surprisingly, the interview account gives nearly five times as much

3. Fayette Lapham, "Interview with the Father of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet, Forty Years Ago. His Account of the Finding of the Sacred Plates," *The Historical Magazine and Notes and Queries concerning the Antiquities, History, and Biography of America* [second series] 7 (May 1870): 305–9, in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents* 1:462.

4. The scholar who has given Lapham's interview account the finest level of analysis is Mark Ashurst-McGee, who identifies some errors in Lapham's account but concludes from Lapham's reporting of "remarkable details (several of which can be corroborated) four decades later" that "Lapham must have had some notes of his conversation with Joseph Smith Sr." Mark Ashurst-McGee, personal email message to the author, September 26, 2017.

5. Lapham's account is notable for the detail it provides regarding the emergence of the Book of Mormon and for its surprising accuracy on a number of points in that narrative. For instance, he reports that after the manuscript theft Joseph Smith Jr. resumed translating at the point in the narrative "where they left off," rather than immediately shifting over to replacing the purloined manuscript with the small plates of Nephi. Modern textual criticism confirms Lapham's report — that Joseph Jr. resumed translating where the current Book of Mosiah begins rather than start over with the First Book of Nephi at the head of the small plates. As the earlier of only two historical sources reporting this detail of the translation process order (the other being another member of the family, the Prophet's sister Katharine Smith Salisbury), Lapham's interview with Joseph Sr. appears to have, indeed, been informed by a close insider. Kyle R. Walker, "Katharine Smith Salisbury's Recollections of Joseph's Meetings with Moroni," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (2002): 16.

space to the period of the narrative covered by the lost pages as it does to the period that follows the lost portion. One wonders if the Prophet's father, realizing his interviewers would not be able to read the fuller Nephite narrative given in the lost manuscript, attempted to provide more of that early narrative than the published book would provide. This seems to be the most probable explanation for the additional Nephite narrative given in Lapham's account.

Despite his intellectual interest, Lapham was never a believer in Joseph Jr. as a prophet and appears to have never even read the Book of Mormon. In fact, Lapham came away from his interview with Joseph Sr. believing the Book of Mormon to be a hoax, which obviated his need to read it. Given this lack of familiarity with the book, and especially its missing pages, it is unlikely that Lapham could have identified what was missing from lost manuscript narrative and constructed elements that fill those gaps and fit the pattern of Book of Mormon narrative.

Fayette Lapham's Account of Nephi's Quest for the Brass Plates

Among the stories Fayette Lapham relates from Joseph Smith Sr.'s narration are those of Lehi's flight from Jerusalem and Nephi's quest for the brass plates. The interview account of these events is as follows:

In answer to our question as to the subject of the translation, he said it was the record of a certain number of Jews, who, at the time of crossing the Red Sea, left the main body and went away by themselves; finally became a rich and prosperous nation; and, in the course of time, became so wicked that the Lord determined to destroy them from off the face of the earth. But there was one virtuous man among them, whom the Lord warned in a dream to take his family and depart, which he accordingly did; and, after traveling three days, he remembered that he had left some papers, in the office where he had been an officer, which he thought would be of use to him in his journeyings. He sent his son back to the city to get them; and when his son arrived in the city, it was night, and he found the citizens had been having a great feast, and were all drunk. When he went to the office to get his father's papers he was told that the chief clerk was not in, and he must find before he could have the papers. He then went into the street in search of him; but every body being drunk, he could get but little information of his whereabouts, but, after searching a long time, he found him lying in the street, dead

drunk, clothed in his official habiliments, his sword having a gold hilt and chain, lying by his side — and this is the same that was found with the gold plates. Finding that he could do nothing with him in that situation, he drew the sword, cut off the officer's head, cast off his own outer garments, and, assuming those of the officer, returned to the office where the papers were readily obtained, with which he returned to where his father was waiting for him. The family then moved on, for several days, when they were directed to stop and get materials to make brass plates upon which to keep a record of their journey.⁶

Readers familiar with the opening narratives of the present Book of Mormon will immediately note the several garbled elements of the familiar story: (1) it mistakenly identifies Lehi's family as beginning the narrative already separate from the main body of Jews; (2) while accurately affirming the presence of "brass plates" in the story, it identifies the object of Nephi's quest as "papers" rather than those plates; (3) it describes only one of Lehi's four sons (obviously Nephi) seeking this record; (4) it implies that the record's possessor was the "chief clerk" of an "office"; (5) it implies that Lehi had once worked at this office; and (6) it reports that Laban was absent when Nephi first went to acquire the record from him.

In making the errors he does, Lapham is often responding to authentic features of the story. His first error, identifying the Book of Mormon as the story of a group of Jews who separated from the main body of the Jews at the time of the biblical Exodus, conflates two different exodus narratives. While the Book of Mormon is indeed "the record of a certain number of Jews, who . . . left the main body and went away by themselves," Lapham's timetable is confused because he confuses *Lehi's* exodus near the Red Sea with *Moses's* Exodus across it. Lapham's third error, describing only one son making the quest for the record, is unremarkable given that one son plays the lead role in that story and acquires the record single-handedly. And Lapham's fourth error, making the record's possessor a "chief clerk" is probably not a blatant misidentification but a conflation of the record's two possessors: Laban and Zoram. While Laban, who was the record's *owner*, appears to be an "officer" of a military sort — one who can "command fifty" (1 Ne. 3:31)

6. Lapham, "Interview with the Father of Joseph Smith," 305–9.

— Zoram, who was the record’s *custodian*, might fittingly be identified as a “clerk.”

Even with its demonstrable confusions, the essence of Lapham’s account and a number of its details clearly echo an encounter with the accurate story. It and the present Book of Mormon text share this core narrative in common: A wicked Israelite nation is about to be destroyed, but God warns a righteous man in that nation by a dream to take his family and flee into the wilderness. Notably, in both cases there are opening journeys by the Red Sea. They travel three days in the wilderness. God then commands him to send his son, here highlighting the main protagonist Nephi, back to retrieve a document. The son makes multiple attempts to obtain the record and ultimately succeeds when he finds the record’s current possessor lying drunk in the street. He draws the man’s sword, the fine workmanship and gold hilt of which are noted, and then, out of necessity, beheads the man with it. He then takes the sword and dresses in the man’s clothes. In this disguise he obtains the record, which he takes to his father in the wilderness, immediately after which the narrator in each case discusses the “brass plates.”

Lapham’s account adds a crucial new story element that suggests that the officer who possessed the brass plates was drunk when Nephi found him *because of a feast being celebrated at the time*, one which would fit the characterization of a Jewish festival. While the published Book of Mormon does not mention such a feast being celebrated at the time of Lehi’s departure from Jerusalem, it does provide details that would fit naturally in such a festival context:

- Laban had been out that night with “*the elders of the Jews*” prior to Nephi finding him drunk in the street (1 Ne. 4:22).
- Zoram appears to find nothing suspicious in Laban (actually Nephi in Laban’s clothing) wanting to go out again late that night, this time with the precious sacred record, to meet with the elders by the city gates (1 Ne. 4:26).
- Lehi offered sacrifice — a requirement for many of the feasts — both before his sons went to retrieve the brass plates and after their return (1 Ne. 2:7; 5:9).

Each of these details would fit well into a festival context reported by Lapham.

Lapham’s plausible report of a festival context for the Book of Mormon’s opening narrative (1 Nephi 1–5 and its lost pages counterpart) raises the question of which festival best fits that narrative. The evidence presented below will demonstrate that the celebration of *Passover* closely

fits this narrative's details, enabling us to draw fresh insights about both the available Book of Mormon text and its lost pages. The value of these new insights will, in turn, confirm one of the central premises of the present book — that mining nineteenth century sources about the content of the lost Book of Mormon text helps illuminate the Book of Mormon text we already have.

At the outset of our examination, a question naturally arises: if the narrative of 1 Nephi 1–5 occurs during the Passover season, why doesn't the text explicitly mention such a celebration? The "great feast" in Lapham's account suggests that the lost manuscript did, in fact, mention this festival. According to Terrence L. Szink and John W. Welch, the extant Book of Mormon possibly omits explicit mentions of Jewish celebrations because of the assumptions its authors have about its readers:

While the Book of Mormon never mentions Passover, the Feast of Tabernacles, or any other religious holiday specifically by name, several reasons can be suggested to explain this omission. The ancient writers may have assumed that their readers would naturally understand. A person does not have to say the word *Christmas* to refer implicitly to that special day. Even a casual mention of "wise men" or "decorating a tree" is enough. In just the same way, the words *Passover* or *Pentecost* do not need to appear in the Book of Mormon to evoke images alluding to the Israelite holidays.⁷

However, while the extant Lehi and Nephi narrative never mentions the celebration of the Passover festival explicitly, it refers to it implicitly through action in the narrative. Evidence from Nephi's small plates account dovetails perfectly with the lost manuscript having situated Nephi's acquisition of the brass plates in the context of a Jewish festival and helps to identify that festival as Passover. Recognizing this evidence requires having in mind certain features of the Jewish Passover celebration and its origin in the Israelites' Exodus out of Egypt, as described in the Hebrew Bible.

7. Terrence L. Szink and John W. Welch, "King Benjamin's Speech in the Context of Ancient Israelite Festivals," in *King Benjamin's Speech: That Ye May Learn Wisdom*, ed. John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 153.

Historical and Biblical Context of Passover

Passover is a spring festival that commemorates Israel's exodus out of Egypt. As prelude to the Exodus, Moses is confronted by God at the burning bush on Mt. Sinai and told to go and ask Pharaoh to let the Israelites travel three days into the wilderness to make sacrifices. Moses and Pharaoh repeatedly negotiate on the issue, but Pharaoh refuses to yield despite a series of divine curses on his land (Ex. 8–10). He is at last persuaded by the final curse — the coming of “the angel of death” for each firstborn male in the land. The Israelites were told to protect themselves and their children by offering the divinely commanded sacrifice of an unblemished lamb and marking their door posts with the lamb's blood. Those who complied were “passed over” by the angel of death, but those who did not saw the death of their firstborn. Surrendering to Moses and the Lord, Pharaoh finally gave permission for the Israelites to go (Ex. 11–12).

Before leaving, the Israelites took advantage of the situation and implored their former Egyptian overlords for gold and silver, which the Egyptians, now eager to be rid of them, were willing to give (12:35). The Egyptian surrender was only momentary, however, and when Pharaoh changed his mind and ordered his armies to pursue the Israelites, God parted the Red Sea for the Israelites to pass over on dry ground but closed it on the armies of Pharaoh, swallowing them up (Ex. 12–14).

In commemoration of the Lord redeeming Israel from Egyptian bondage, God commanded that subsequent celebrations of the Passover begin on the fifteenth day of the first calendar month, Nisan, and then last seven days (Ex. 13:3–4). Each family was to collect one unblemished lamb “in the tenth day of [Nisan]” and keep that lamb until it was time to sacrifice it on “the fourteenth day of the same month” (12:3, 6). The lamb was to be killed, the blood was to be put over the door posts, and in turn the angel of death would again pass over Israel (vv. 5–13, 23). Finally, pointing to the urgency of the original Passover, the meal was commanded to be eaten “in haste” so that the participants could be ready to leave in a moment's notice (v. 11), symbolizing an immediate deliverance from sudden destruction.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread

While the Passover feast was to be observed in perpetuity, it was not always observed in the same way. King Josiah (reigned ca. 641–609 BC), who initiated the first stages of the Deuteronomic reform, held a vast Passover celebration that apparently marked an innovation in how

the feast was celebrated (2 Chron. 35:1–19). Happening just over two decades before Lehi's family left Jerusalem, Josiah's notable Passover was punctiliously patterned on the Law, centering the celebration on "the word of the Lord by the hand of Moses" (v. 6). Despite so scrupulously focusing on the Law in celebrating Israel's deliverance from Egypt, Josiah tragically did not obtain a similarly miraculous deliverance. In an ironic reversal of Israel's deliverance from the armies of Pharaoh at the Red Sea, Josiah eventually died facing Egyptian armies (vv. 19–27). Josiah's Passover itself, however, was still remembered as an unparalleled success:

And there was no passover like to that kept in Israel from the days of Samuel the prophet; neither did all the kings of Israel keep such a passover as Josiah kept, and the priests, and the Levites, and all Judah and Israel that were present, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. (2 Chron. 35:18)

It is this Passover, and the Deuteronomic reforms of which it was part, that comprise the most immediate biblical background for Lehi and Nephi's Passover some twenty years later.

A Passover Setting for Lehi's Exodus

Although a Passover context is never made explicit in our available Book of Mormon, on a close examination of the text of 1 Nephi 1–5 we can see that it already points to Lehi's calling from God having both a Passover *context* and Passover *content*. The chronological context of Lehi's calling vision, disclosed by close reading of the text, is that of the Passover season. And the content Lehi receives in that vision reveals the Book of Mormon's ultimate meaning behind the Passover: the sacrifice of the messianic Lamb of God. After this Passover-themed vision, the narratives of Lehi's exodus and Nephi's brass plates quest continue to reflect their Passover context by reenacting events of the original Passover, reflecting the observance of the festival of Passover, and verbally referencing Passover events in the Bible.

All of these echoes of Passover support Lapham's account that "a great feast" was being celebrated in Jerusalem during early events of this first narrative of the Book of Mormon.

The Passover Context of Lehi's Vision

Close attention to the detail of Lehi's initial calling and theophany in 1 Nephi 1 places that event, and therefore the beginning of the Book

of Mormon itself, early in the Passover month of Nisan, setting Lehi's vision and the events that follow in the Passover season.

The familiar account of Lehi's calling theophany, in the opening verses of the extant Book of Mormon, puts it "in the commencement of the first year of the reign of Zedekiah" (1 Ne. 1:4). This phrase's familiarity to the Book of Mormon's readers may obscure its significance. When was "the commencement of the first year of the reign of Zedekiah," and how, exactly, was his reign commenced? In the biblical narratives, Zedekiah's reign begins during an invasion of Jerusalem by the forces of Babylonian emperor Nebuchadnezzar II, and Jerusalem reportedly fell to Babylon's siege in Adar, the twelfth month in the Jewish calendar. As a result, Jehoiachin, king of Judah at the time of the siege, was dethroned and replaced by the Babylonians at the end of the calendar year. As the Chronicler puts it, "[W]hen the year was expired, king Nebuchadnezzar sent, and brought him [Jehoiachin] to Babylon, with the goodly vessels of the house of the LORD, and made Zedekiah his brother king over Judah and Jerusalem" (2 Chr. 36:10). The inauguration of the first year of Zedekiah's reign was therefore timed to coincide with the ringing in of the new calendar year with the month of Nisan.

The Book of Mormon offers multiple clues for determining when Lehi's warning and prophetic call occurred. The specific meaning of the phrase "in the commencement of the [nth] year" can be gleaned from its use elsewhere in the Book of Mormon, and, in fact, in one instance, the phrase is used in conjunction with an exact calendar date, enabling us to discern how literally "in the commencement" can be taken: Alma 56:1 narrows "the commencement of the . . . year" to a specific date — "the second day in the first month" (i.e., the second day of the entire calendar year) — suggesting that such phrasing is meant to be taken quite literally. When the narrative places Lehi's calling and warning vision "in the commencement of" Zedekiah's first year, this should be taken at face value: it means in the very first days of Zedekiah's reign, which coincidentally were the very first days of the new calendar year (2 Chr. 36:10). Thus, coming "in the commencement" of that year, Lehi's calling theophany should have occurred shortly before Passover, which began on the fourteenth of Nisan.⁸

8. Given the common dating of Zedekiah's reign as commencing in 597 BC, the relevant Passover would have begun on April 26 of that year, placing the final day of Passover on May 3 or 4, 597 BC, depending on whether the celebration was ended on the biblical seventh day or a later traditional eighth day.

Additional dating within the Book of Mormon provides further support for such timing. The occurrence of Lehi's exodus during the Passover season is implied by the date on which Jesus was crucified in the Nephite calendar system. According to 3 Nephi 8:5 this happened on "the first month, the fourth day of the month." What this means can be best understood by pulling together various Book of Mormon data points about the Nephite calendar.

1. Nephite calendar dates were marked from when Lehi left Jerusalem (Jacob 1:1; Enos 1:25; Mosiah 6:4, 29:46; 3 Ne. 1:1, 2:6, 5:15).⁹
2. The time of Lehi's exodus is also used as a benchmark to predict the coming of the Messiah, and in Passover language that symbolically connects Lehi's exodus to the birth of Jesus, the "Lamb of God" (e.g., 1 Ne. 10:4–10).¹⁰
3. The time of Jesus's crucifixion — at Passover — aligns closely with the beginning of the Nephite calendar year. In the Gospel of John, the Crucifixion occurs on the fourth and final day of the Passover preparatory period (John 19:14); in 3 Nephi it occurs on the fourth day of the Nephite calendar year (3 Ne. 8:5).

Collectively, these three points establish that the Nephite calendar year began with the Passover season: if Jesus's crucifixion was on the fourth day of the preparatory period preceding Passover *and* on the fourth day of the Nephite calendar year, then that would mean that *the Nephite calendar began with the opening of the four-day preparation for Passover*. And given that the Nephite calendar was based on Lehi's departure from Jerusalem, this, in turn, would mean that Lehi and his family began their exodus from Jerusalem at the beginning of the preparation for Passover.¹¹

9. See Randall P. Spackman, "The Jewish/Nephite Lunar Calendar," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7, no. 1, (1998): 48–59.

10. John P. Pratt, "Passover: Was It Symbolic of His Coming?" *The Ensign*, January 1994, 38–45n7; John P. Pratt, "Lehi's 600-year Prophecy of the Birth of Christ," *Meridian Magazine* (March 31, 2000), available at <http://johnpratt.com/items/docs/lds/meridian/2000/lehi6apr.html>; John P. Pratt, "The Nephite Calendar," *Meridian Magazine* (January 14, 2004), available at <https://www.johnpratt.com/items/docs/lds/meridian/2004/nephite.html#4.2>.

11. This timetable is complicated by the question of whether the Nephite calendar was re-centered on a new initial day when its year count was restarted at the time Jesus' birth was portended by the appearance of a new star. However,

A less technical and more typological reading of scripture and sacred history similarly implies a Passover timing for Lehi's exodus: in a pattern of redemptive events preceding and following Lehi's exodus, Passover is the time at which the Lord redeems His people. Crucial redemptive events in the history of Israel share this same precise timing.

- **The Mosaic Exodus.** Lehi's exodus echoes the contours of Moses's Exodus in the Bible. That exodus, *the* Exodus, began with Passover. There is thus no more natural time for Lehi's exodus to begin.
- **The Crucifixion of Christ.** The ultimate redemptive event, the Crucifixion of the Lamb of God, was made at the time of Passover.
- **The coming of Elijah to the Kirtland temple.** As pointed out by Stephen Ricks, Elijah's restoration of the sealing keys on April 3, 1836, happened precisely when Jews were inviting Elijah to join their Passover celebration.¹²

The original Passover was the time the Lord set His hand to deliver Israel from bondage in Egypt. The much later Passover following Zedekiah's enthronement would have been, on our argument here, when the Lord set His hand to deliver Israel *again* by leading Lehi's family preemptively from bondage to Babylon. The Passover some six centuries later was when Christ, the Lamb of God, was offered up as *the* Passover lamb. And it was again on Passover in 1836 that the keys to seal and redeem the living and the dead were restored in the Kirtland Temple. Again and again, Passover has been a time at which God delivers His people.

3 Nephi indicates that despite the new year count, time — including time for the purposes of calculating when the Messiah would come — was still being marked “from the time that Lehi left Jerusalem” (3 Ne. 1:1–9; cf. 1 Ne. 10:4; 19:8; 2 Ne. 25:19). It seems remarkable for the purposes of assessing the timing of Lehi's exodus relative to Passover that the 1 Nephi evidence places the beginning of Lehi's narrative “in the commencement” of the traditional Jewish calendar year (i.e., just before Passover) and the Nephite New Year began just days before the Passover at which Jesus was crucified.

12. Stephen D. Ricks “The Appearance of Elijah and Moses in the Kirtland Temple and the Jewish Passover,” *BYU Studies* 23, no. 4 (1983): 1–4. As suggested in Chapter 3, another major event in the redemption of Israel that may have been timed to coincide with Passover is the beginning of Joseph Smith's work of translating the Book of Mormon in March 1828.

The Passover Content of Lehi's Vision

The visionary *content* of Lehi's theophany carries Passover themes, revealing the divine reality behind the symbols of Passover to be the messianic Lamb of God, further placing Lehi's exodus in the context of the Passover month. The available Book of Mormon text opens with Lehi seeing God sitting on his throne surrounded by angels and being shown the impending destruction of Jerusalem (1 Ne. 1:8–14). Shortly after this vision, Lehi preached to the people that he had seen in his vision not only Jerusalem's coming demise but also “the coming of a Messiah, and also the redemption of the world” (1 Ne. 1:19). Furthermore, there were many other things that Lehi saw that Nephi did not include in his abridgement of his father's vision (v. 16). One of these things that Lehi saw is later discussed in his sermons to his children and almost certainly further detailed in lost Book of Lehi: the Messiah as the Passover lamb.

That the Lamb of God was part of the fuller account of Lehi's vision is subtly revealed later in the narrative when Lehi expounds to his sons the content of his vision and when Nephi seeks to have his own repetition of that vision. After relating to his sons a dream of the tree of life, Lehi expounds to them again what he learned in his vision, using nearly identical language to that theophany — that Jerusalem would be destroyed and that the Lord would raise up “this *Messiah*, of whom he had spoken, or this *Redeemer of the world*” (10:2–5). While Lehi does not, in the terse extant account of his discourse, identify his calling vision as the source of his information, the vision account itself makes clear that it was the source: “the things which he saw and heard, and also the things which he read in the book, manifested plainly of the coming of a *Messiah*, and also the *redemption of the world*” (1:18–19).

As he continues expounding, Lehi describes to his sons in some detail how a future prophet would “baptize the Messiah with water” and how “after he had baptized the Messiah with water, he should behold and bear record that he had baptized the *Lamb of God*, who should take away the sins of the world” (10:9–10). Given that Lehi could only have learned such detail by a vision or comparable revelation, and that Lehi has to this point used this discourse to expound to his sons the contents of his calling vision, Lehi is probably here continuing to expound contents from his vision — and among these were the Messiah's baptism and his identity as the sacrificial Lamb of God.

That these “Lamb of God” themes were part of Lehi's vision is further confirmed by Nephi's personal reiteration of the vision. Immediately after Lehi concluded teaching his sons about the destruction of Jerusalem, the

Redeemer of the world, and the baptism of the Lamb of God, Nephi petitioned God: “I desire to *behold* the things which my father saw” (1 Ne. 11:3). Tellingly, he was answered with, “*Behold the Lamb of God*” (v. 21). He was shown more than merely the destruction of Jerusalem; he was also given a vision of the life of the Messiah, identified explicitly as the Lamb. Nephi’s vision, given so he could see “the things which my father had seen” (v. 1) is so thoroughly imbued with Passover themes, referring some fifty-six times to the Lamb, that one author, unaware of the Passover context of these events, has suggested that Nephi’s vision “might be called a paschal [i.e., Passover] vision.”¹³

If Nephi’s echo of his father’s visionary experiences could be called a Passover vision, then it seems all the more certain that his father’s original experience was itself a Passover vision. And such Passover content best fits in a Passover context. Lehi’s visionary identification of the Messiah as “the Lamb of God, who should take away the sins of the world” (1 Ne. 10:10) *belongs* in the context of the Passover month of Nisan. As the inhabitants of Jerusalem, including Lehi’s family, made ready to select an unblemished lamb to be sacrificed as their Passover, what was revealed to Lehi was that the Messiah *was* the “Lamb slain from before the foundation of the world” (Rev. 13:8).

This visionary identification for Lehi of the Messiah as the Lamb of God during Passover season may help explain a puzzling feature of the Lehi narrative. When Lehi teaches his fellow Jerusalem citizens of the coming of a Messiah, they are incongruously angry and seek to kill him (1 Ne. 1:19–20), a strange reaction to the promise of a Messiah and redemption. But if Lehi taught, during the Passover season, that this coming redeemer was *God’s lamb* — plainly implying that his role was to be sacrificed rather than to deliver Israel from Babylon — this could account for the anger against him. In the immediate wake of a Babylonian invasion that had humiliated the Jews by dethroning their king, plundering their temple, and carrying their nobles in exile to Babylon, they would have wanted Lehi to promise a liberating conquering Messiah and not a spotless lamb intended for slaughter.

Finally, there is a third way in which Lehi’s theophany may have involved the heavenly Lamb of God. Lehi’s vision follows the pattern of heavenly-ascent throne theophanies, in which someone sees God sitting on His throne surrounded by singing, worshipping angels, a pattern

13. George S. Tate, “The Typology of the Exodus Pattern in the Book of Mormon,” in *Literature of Belief: Sacred Scripture and Religious Experiences*, ed. Neal E. Lambert (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1981), 249.

reported not only by Lehi but also by Enoch, Ezekiel, John the Revelator, and Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon. Note the similarity of the visions of Lehi, John, and Joseph Smith:

- **Lehi:** “And being thus overcome with the Spirit, he was carried away in a vision, even that he saw the heavens open, and he thought he saw *God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels* in the attitude of singing and praising their God. And it came to pass that he saw One descending out of the midst of heaven, and he beheld that his luster was above that of the sun at noon-day. And he also saw twelve others . . . and the first came and stood before my father, and gave unto him a book, and bade him that he should read” (1 Nephi 1:8–11).
- **John the Revelator:** “And I beheld, and, lo, *in the midst of the throne . . . stood a Lamb* as it had been slain. . . . [A]nd, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood *before the throne*, and before *the Lamb*, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands; And cried with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to *our God which sitteth upon the throne*, and unto *the Lamb*. And *all the angels stood round about the throne . . .* and fell before the throne on their faces, and worshipped God, Saying, Amen: Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honour, and power, and might, be unto our God for ever and ever.” (Rev. 5:6, 7:9–12)
- **Joseph Smith:** “And we beheld the glory of the Son, on the right hand of the Father, and received of his fulness; and saw *the holy angels*, and them who are sanctified before *his throne*, worshiping God, and *the Lamb*, who worship him forever and ever.” (D&C 76:20–21)

These heavenly-ascent theophanies all follow the same pattern. Each involves seeing God sitting on his throne surrounded by worshipping angels. However, note that Joseph Smith’s and both of John the Revelator’s theophanies include not only God on this throne and angels but also the Lamb of God, as Lehi’s exposition to his sons implies his theophany had as well. Furthermore, Lehi’s throne theophany is immediately followed by Lehi seeing “One” descending and carrying a book. This, of course, parallels John’s Revelation, wherein he sees in heaven one bearing a book whom he also identifies as the Lamb (Rev. 5:1–9; 21:27). Lehi’s calling theophany is thus echoed by three other theophanies that center on the

Lamb of God. So when Lehi himself expounds his heavenly-ascent theophany by describing to his sons the Lamb of God, he is not changing to an unrelated subject but is instead recounting one of the aspects of Lehi's experience that Nephi did "not make a full account" of in his abridgement (1 Ne. 1:16).

Passover Themes in Lehi's Exodus

After Lehi's vision, the Book of Mormon's narrative of Lehi, Nephi, and Laban continues to provide evidence for its Passover context by (1) *reenacting the original Passover in their lives*, (2) *reflecting their observance of the Passover festival under celebration at the time*, and (3) *rehearsing words spoken to and by them that evoke Passover*. These various reflections of the Passover, in re-creation, celebration, and reference are spread through the narratives of Lehi's exodus and Nephi's quest for the brass plates.

The story resumes with Lehi's exodus, which promptly begins to echo some of the circumstances of the biblical Passover. Upon Lehi's arrival at his home after witnessing an Exodus-like pillar of fire descend on the rock before him, the Lord came to him in a dream and warned him to get his family out of Jerusalem in order to avoid destruction and those in the city that sought to kill him (1 Ne. 2:1). Lehi did not delay in acting on this commandment, leaving so quickly that they failed to bring their most valuable possessions (3:22). This escape from the city then took them toward the Red Sea (2:2, 5).

Lehi's exodus both recapitulates and reverses the biblical Exodus and the setting for the original Passover. With Lehi as their Moses, his family traveled *away* from the biblical Promised Land rather than toward it. Similarly reversing the Exodus narrative, Lehi and his family did not receive gold and silver as they set out on their journey; rather, leaving in haste and taking only the true essentials, they left behind the gold and silver they already had. Their "three day's journey" in the wilderness then took them toward the Red Sea — the final boundary the Israelites crossed to free themselves from Egypt. After thus evoking the original Exodus narrative, the Lehi narrative then describes him offering a sacrifice to God. The occasion for the sacrifice is not specified, but it is consistent with the observance of Passover. Soon thereafter, Lehi was commanded to send his sons back to Jerusalem to acquire the scriptural brass plates that contained the Hebrew scriptures written in Egyptian script (Mosiah 1:2–4).

In the biblical Exodus narrative, the brothers Moses and Aaron negotiated with Pharaoh to allow them to lead the Israelites into the wilderness, ultimately taking with them the remains of the patriarch Joseph. Mirroring this, Lehi's sons sought to bargain with Laban to allow them to take the brass plates into the wilderness — plates Laban possessed because of his descendancy from Joseph (1 Ne. 5:16). They even offered their gold and silver for trade, reversing the Israelites' Passover request for the Egyptians' riches before leaving Egypt. This failed, however, with Laban seizing their gold and silver, keeping the brass plates, and chasing Nephi and his brothers out of the city. Hiding in a cave outside the walls of Jerusalem, Nephi then exhorted his discouraged brothers by turning to sacred history. In Jewish tradition, the first day of the week-long Passover festival commemorates the “passing over” of the Israelites by the angel of death and the final day of Passover commemorates the “passing over” by the Israelites of the Red Sea.¹⁴ Nephi refers directly to this latter passing over or deliverance at the Red Sea to persuade his brothers that God would deliver them as he had their ancestors:

[L]et us go up, let us be strong like unto Moses, for he truly spake unto the waters of the Red Sea and they divided hither and thither, and our fathers came through, out of captivity, on dry ground, and the armies of Pharaoh did follow and were drowned in the waters of the Red Sea. Now behold ye know that this is true; and ye also know that an angel hath spoken unto you; wherefore can ye doubt? Let us go up; the Lord is able to deliver us, even as our fathers, and to destroy Laban, even as the Egyptians. (1 Ne. 4:2–3)

As we have seen, the story recounted in 1 Nephi implicitly connects Laban to both Joseph and Egypt by his inheriting the Egyptian brass plates as a descendant of Joseph of Egypt. Laban thus plays a dual role in the story as both Jew and Egyptian.

Likewise, Lehi's exodus has the dual role of recreating yet reversing the ancient exodus, in both particular and thematic elements. The dual passing-overs that are celebrated during the holiday give parallel significance to the sequence of Lehi's sacrifice (possibly the Passover lamb) followed several days later by Nephi comparing Laban to the Egyptians at the Red Sea and then, later that night, slaying him. If Lehi's wilderness sacrifice was a Paschal lamb, then Nephi's comparing

14. Eliyahu Kitov, *The Book of Our Heritage: The Jewish Year and its Days of Significance* (Jerusalem: Feldheim Publishers, 1978), 666–68.

Laban to the Egyptians at the Red Sea and then slaying him would have come near the end of the Passover week — the time at which Jews were celebrating the Israelites' deliverance from the Egyptians at the Red Sea.

A Passover Setting for Nephi's Quest for the Brass Plates

After exhorting his brothers, Nephi was “led by the Spirit” as he sneaked into the city to find Laban, who he found passed out drunk in the street. According to Fayette Lapham, this was because of a great feast being celebrated in the city at the time. As Nephi recounted, Laban was “drunken with wine” after being “*out by night among the elders*” (1 Ne. 4:7, 22). Passover was not merely a family celebration but a communal celebration. This was especially the case following the reign of Josiah, who changed the nature of the celebration to place more emphasis on Passover as a community rite with the Law at the center of the celebration (2 Kgs. 23:21–23). As Karen Armstrong summarizes the change, “Passover had been a private, family festival, held in the home. Now it became a national convention.”¹⁵ A prominent man like Laban who could “command fifty” (1 Ne. 3:31) would, indeed, have celebrated the Passover with other Jewish elders and elites.

Laban's connection with the Passover in this instance would have extended beyond it merely being an occasion for community socializing and drinking. Laban died at Passover, and this echoes the original, biblical Passover under Moses, when God destroyed those who tried to oppose his people. Laban had been celebrating with the Jerusalem elders, wearing full military dress and carrying a finely crafted sword. In the commandment in the Book of Exodus instituting the celebration of Passover, observance of the feast includes two ceremonial occasions or “holy convocations” (Ex. 12:16). One was on the first day of Passover, related to death passing over Israel's children and landing instead on the Egyptians' firstborn, the other was on the festival's final day, related to passing over the Red Sea and the destruction of the Egyptians.¹⁶ If Lehi's sacrifice before sending his sons for the plates was a Passover observance accompanying the first convocation, commemorating the deliverance of the Israelites' firstborn, then the occasion of Laban celebrating with the elders would have been the final convocation, commemorating the Israelites' deliverance at the Red Sea and the Egyptians' destruction.

15. Karen Armstrong, *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of our Religious Traditions* (New York: Knopf, 2006), 195.

16. Kitov, *The Book of Our Heritage*, 666–68.

Viewed from the perspective of God's chosen faithful, Passover was a miraculous deliverance — being passed over by calamity, by the angel of death. But viewed from the perspective of the Egyptian oppressors, it was an occasion of destruction. At the biblical Passover under Moses, the families of the Egyptians were not passed over by death at all, but struck squarely and painfully: the firstborn of each family was slain. While the firstborn in this biblical narrative will not be envied, being a firstborn was generally an enviable thing in the Bible: the firstborn or birthright son was the special inheritor of family property. As inheritor of the brass plates from “his fathers,” Laban himself would have likely been the firstborn son of his family (1 Ne. 5:16). As such, he shared the fate of the Israelites' oppressors' firstborn. As firstborn heir, a military leader, and a symbolic proxy for Pharaoh and the Egyptian armies (1 Ne. 4:3), Laban parallels both sets of Egyptians destroyed at the first Passover: those slain by the angel of death on the first evening and those destroyed at the Red Sea on the last day.

When we read 1 Nephi in a Passover festival context, the Spirit's words to Nephi become clearer: “Behold the Lord slayeth the wicked to bring forth his righteous purposes. It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief” (1 Ne. 4:13). Upon hearing this, Nephi again “remembered the words of the Lord which he spake unto me . . . inasmuch as thy seed shall keep my commandments, they shall prosper in the land of promise” (v. 14). Just as the firstborn of the Egyptians needed to die in order for the Lord's people to be delivered, so now Laban needed to die for Lehi's people to be delivered. Nephi learns that Laban must be destroyed, “even as the Egyptians,” and then becomes “the angel of death” to Laban, slaying the firstborn in order to lead God's people out of bondage and to the Promised Land.

A final and crucial clue to a Passover setting for the brass plates narrative comes from words spoken at Nephi's killing of Laban. The Spirit's words to Nephi that it is better “that one man perish than that a nation dwindle and perish in unbelief” are striking because they echo Caiaphas' New Testament words about Jesus at the beginning of the Passover week in which Jesus was crucified. Caiaphas, acting as high priest, “prophesied that Jesus should die for” the nation of the Jews, saying, “[I]t is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not” (John 11:50).

The implicit juxtaposition in these parallel phrases of the wicked Laban and humanity's sinless Passover lamb Jesus is perplexing. Yet a

clear parallel does exist between the 1 Nephi 4 and John 11 passages. The rationale given for Nephi's beheading of Laban is the same as that given by Caiaphas for the crucifixion of Jesus: it is better that one man perish than that a whole nation perish. So the parallel is in the role of a scapegoat, or one who stands in for all. Although Laban clearly should not be understood as a Passover "sacrifice," he nonetheless plays a role in Lehi and Nephi's Passover that echoes Moses's Passover and may parallel Caiaphas's justification of Jesus's death. If Caiaphas — a skeptic of Jesus's divine mission — intended to compare Jesus to anyone from the Passover narrative, it would not have been the lamb. Rather, it would have been the firstborn among the Egyptians who had to die in order that the nation of Israel might not perish. Similarly to those Egyptian firstborn, here, in the Spirit's words, it is Laban who must die to save a nation.

When Laban's drunkenness, which enables Nephi to acquire the brass plates, is placed in context of a Passover feast, then the Nephite nation can be seen to have been saved from dwindling and perishing because of Passover. *Because* Laban thus celebrated the Passover, Nephi's nation was delivered. The Passover was not only the occasion of the Nephites' deliverance; it also made their deliverance possible.

Implications of a Passover Setting for Lehi's Exodus

Returning to the Passover theme, the clues within 1 Nephi, along with Lapham's account of a "great feast" being celebrated at the time, are strong indications that the lost manuscript story of the Lehite exodus contained more information about its Passover context. Reading the Book of Mormon's opening chapters in light of this Passover festival setting can thus bring greater meaning to those narratives, to the Book of Mormon as a whole, and even to the Passover itself.

The major Passover celebration under King Josiah's rule focused on the Law. The Book of Lehi Passover narrative appears also to have focused on the Law, in the sense that it is primarily about acquiring the Law recorded on the brass plates. Yet the Lehite narrative also introduces some major contrasts to Josiah's Passover. First, Lehi's Passover season begins with a vision equating the Passover lamb with the Messiah, making the latter the "Lamb of God." This would have contrasted with the Josian reform's effort to put down idolatry in Israel and emphasize strict monotheism — something that would have disallowed the existence of multiple divine persons, like a divine Son or a messianic Lamb of God. Second, while Lehi's family sought the Law contained in

the brass plates, they did not do so because they privileged the Law above all else but because they were commanded to by prophetic revelation through the Spirit and “wisdom in God” (1 Ne. 3:19; 4:10–12). One of the most basic of the Law’s commandments was “Thou shalt not kill”; yet the Spirit overrode this, commanding Nephi to violate the Law in order to acquire it for his descendants, so they might retain their covenants with God.

The meaning of the Passover to the reformers under Josiah is thus contrasted greatly with the meaning of the Passover in the Book of Mormon. Josiah’s Passover centered tightly and literally on the Law, “the word of the Lord by the hand of Moses” (2 Chron. 35:6), while Lehi and Nephi’s Passover centered on acquiring the Law by acknowledging a greater importance of the Spirit, which in this case commanded the Law to be seemingly violated. The Lehite Passover also understood the Law as a system of signs pointing *beyond* itself, to the redemption of the world by a divine Messiah, who was also the sacrificial “Lamb of God.”

So while the Josian Passover centered on the divine word — the Law — Lehi and Nephi’s Passover centered, not on the divine Law, but on the divine Persons. Heading into the Passover season, Lehi saw God sitting upon His throne — i.e., the Father — and then the Son descending to earth (cf. Acts 7:55–56). And during that Passover, Nephi was commanded to contravene or counter the Law by the Spirit of the Lord. Lehi and Nephi’s Passover was not a Passover of the Law of God, but a Passover of the Spirit of God, and, more fully, a Passover of the Father, Son, and Spirit, the persons of the Godhead who “are one God” (2 Ne. 31:21; D&C 20:27–28).

Thus, Lehi and Nephi paradoxically rely upon yet also transcend the Law. This is a pattern we will see repeated later, such as in the building of a temple without a Levitical priesthood (see Chapter 10) and in the narrative of King Mosiah (see Chapter 14) — that the Book of Mormon echoes the Josian pattern in *form* but differs from it in emphasis and substance. This simultaneous embrace and transcendence of Josian law in the Book of Mormon narratives is crucial. It reveals a key pattern and significant contribution of the Book of Mormon as an interpretive lens for the Bible. Perhaps one of the most important features of the Book of Mormon resides here — that as a book of scripture, it both embraces and transcends the Bible. It does this as it magnifies and clarifies, reiterates and complicates, revisits and deepens, and recreates and explains the messages in the Bible — in a complex, sophisticated, and unequalled way.

The Passover context of Lehi's vision also provides a further window into the Book of Mormon itself. Lehi's vision of the Lamb of God in the context of the preparation for Passover provides a narrative bridge from a low Christology — a relatively unexalted view of the Messiah that, rightly or wrongly, can be read out of the Hebrew Bible — to the Book of Mormon's inarguably high Christology — its fully divine view of the Messiah, of a Christ who "is THE ETERNAL GOD" (Title Page). If Lehi and Nephi came from the same context as the Jews just before the Exile, why did they have a precocious conception of a Messiah, and of a divine Messiah at that? Lehi's vision of Messiah as Lamb at the Passover season offers an explanation. Given in the context of Passover, Lehi's vision would have provided Lehi and his family a clear notion of a self-sacrificing, divine Messiah. The revelation that the Messiah was the divine Lamb of God, the substance of which the Passover lamb was a mere shadow, would have given the Nephites the radical understanding of a divine Messiah — and of the Passover and the entire Law of Moses as symbols pointing to that divine Messiah.

The Passover setting for the Book of Mormon's opening narrative also recasts the book's opening message. The Book of Mormon begins with the story of Lehi's personal temporal deliverance — from potential captivity and death. Viewed in the context of its Passover setting, this narrative of Lehi's deliverance becomes also an echo or reiteration of Israel's deliverance at the original Passover. And viewed in context of Lehi's revelation about the messianic Lamb of God, it becomes still more: a type of the spiritual deliverance to be wrought by the Messiah. Framed by the festival of Passover and by a revelation of what that Passover means, the story of the temporal deliverance of a family of pre-Exilic Jews becomes a representation of the larger deliverance of humankind, one celebrated in a Passover that points to the Lamb of God.

The Book of Mormon is not just a book about a particular family. Like the heavenly book Lehi saw in his original theophany, from the beginning the Book of Mormon manifested "plainly the coming of a Messiah, and also the redemption of the world" (1 Ne. 1:13–16, 19). Our present brief abridgement of the Book of Mormon's opening events, greatly condensed from the initial manuscript, may appear to be simply about the family of a certain Israelite man of the sixth century BC and their deliverance from temporal destruction. However, when these narratives are placed within their original context, once offered by Mormon's intended fuller account in the Book of Lehi, the significance of the events changes dramatically.

Read in light of their Passover context, these narratives prove not to be merely or even mostly about the temporal deliverance of one man; they are about the spiritual deliverance of all men, of humanity as a whole, through “the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world” (Rev. 13:8). The divine Messiah waits six centuries into Nephite history to make his physical appearance, yet from its very beginnings “in the commencement of the first year of the reign of Zedekiah” (1 Ne. 1:4), the Book of Mormon is already a witness of Jesus Christ.

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