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## The Nephite Metaphor of Life as a Probation: Rethinking Nephi's Portrayal of Laman and Lemuel

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## **The Nephite Metaphor of Life as a Probation: Rethinking Nephi's Portrayal of Laman and Lemuel**

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# THE NEPHITE METAPHOR OF LIFE AS A PROBATION: RETHINKING NEPHI'S PORTRAYAL OF LAMAN AND LEMUEL

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Noel B. Reynolds

**Abstract:** *Commentaries on Nephi's first book tend to interpret the fraternal struggles it reports as historical facts that are meant primarily to invite readers' evaluative responses. While recognizing the historical character of the facts marshalled by Nephi, this paper will argue that the author transposes that history into an allegory meant to inspire his readers in all times and places to abandon prevailing metaphors of life that are focused on the attainment of worldly goods and pleasures. In their place, Nephi offers the revealed metaphor of life as a day of probation taught to him and his father in their great visions. God's plan of salvation revealed to them made it clear that the welfare of each human being for eternity would be determined by a divine judgment on how effectively their lives had been transformed by their adherence to the gospel of Jesus Christ in mortality. The message of 1 Nephi is that all men and women are invited to let the Spirit of the Lord soften their hearts and lead them into his covenant path wherein he can prepare them to enter into his presence at the end.*

From the time Lehi and his family fled from Jerusalem, Nephi kept their record on what we now call *the Large Plates of Nephi*, an enormous record that was maintained by Nephi's successors for a thousand years — with the final pages being written by Mormon and Moroni at the end of Nephite times.<sup>1</sup> But after thirty years, the mature prophet-leader Nephi tells us that “the Lord God said unto me: Make

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1. The scribal tradition that preserved the Large Plates throughout the Nephite dispensation is described and documented in Noel B. Reynolds, “The Last Nephite Scribes,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 53 (2022): 95–138.

other plates” which would focus on the divine revelations and spiritual teachings of the Nephites (2 Nephi 5:30). It took at least a decade for Nephi to compose and inscribe this second record on what we call *the Small Plates of Nephi* (cf. 2 Nephi 5:34). Nephi’s purposes and guidelines for writing in these Small Plates are mentioned several times but are most fully articulated in a transitional explanation penned by Nephi’s younger brother Jacob, who inherited the responsibility of maintaining and extending them after Nephi’s death.<sup>2</sup>

The ten years or more that Nephi devoted to writing the Small Plates gave him ample time to think carefully through both the content and the rhetorical structure of this 154-page composition. While scholars have commented on Nephi’s writing from a variety of perspectives, we do not yet have a serious investigation of the following question: Why does Nephi begin this second record by recounting six stories of the earliest years of the family’s flight from Jerusalem — in which the rebellions of Laman and Lemuel are repeatedly featured — only to shift in the second half to a collection of prophetic teachings that feature the plan of salvation, the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the prophesied salvation histories of the Nephites and Lamanites, the house of Israel, and the Gentiles down to the end of times?<sup>3</sup>

As I attempt to address that question in the following essay, I will lean on the 1980s insights of George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, and Mark Turner, who challenged the traditional western perspective on human knowledge as derived from the tradition of Greek philosophy. They proposed that most human understanding derives from culturally based metaphors that are grounded, in various ways, in actual experience.<sup>4</sup> These recent

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2. Jacob 1:1–8. For a comprehensive discussion of Nephi’s repeated explanations and the rhetorical purposes they served by their careful placement in Nephi’s Small Plates, see Noel B. Reynolds, “Nephi’s Small Plates: A Rhetorical Analysis,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 50 (2022): 99–122.

3. For example, see two of my contributions to the study of Nephi’s composition in Noel B. Reynolds, “Nephi’s Outline,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (1980): 131–49; and “Chiastic Structuring of Large Texts: 2 Nephi as a Case Study,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 41 (2020): 193–210. Further exploration of Nephi’s rhetorical structures can be found in Noel B. Reynolds, “Nephi’s Small Plates” and “Lehi’s Dream, Nephi’s Blueprint: How Nephi Uses the Vision of the Tree of Life as an Outline for 1 and 2 Nephi,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 52 (2022): 231–78.

4. Though I will not bring the theoretical framework of these scholars into my analysis explicitly, my argument does draw in many ways on their presentations in two important volumes: George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press), 1980; and George Lakoff and Mark Turner,

studies recognize that the Western tradition “has excluded metaphor from the domain of reason.” But they have gone on to conclude “that metaphor is anything but peripheral to the life of the mind. It is central to our understanding of our selves, our culture, and the world at large.”<sup>5</sup>

I will argue that Nephi’s writing is not aimed at criticizing his rebellious brothers or justifying his responses to them. Rather, Nephi and Lehi had been visited by the Lord and had been shown great visions that completely transformed their world views — their understandings of the nature and possibilities of human life and the true relationship of human beings to one another and to God. Nephi’s writing counterpoises those prophetic understandings with the comparatively shallow and mistaken world view of the Jews in Jerusalem, which his brothers shared. By telling those early stories of their rebellions and his conversion, he can introduce the basic metaphor of life as a probation. Because that metaphor underpins the plan of salvation, it can help his readers understand their own divine potentials and the way God has provided for them to transcend the limited world views of Laman, Lemuel, the Jews at Jerusalem, and most peoples — and to enter into fellowship with the gods.

Nephi also enlists the power and logic of allegory in the telling of his own family history. While most allegories feature fictional characters and stories, Nephi structures his account of his own experiences to illustrate and buttress the understanding of the universal purpose and meaning of life that has been revealed to him. Nephi describes himself as one who has seen God’s grand plan for all his human children and who is fully engaged in an attempt to persuade present and future generations to reconcile themselves to God that they might be prepared by him for eternal life. In Nephi’s allegory, his brothers Laman and Lemuel represent that segment of humanity that prioritizes its own vision of the good life over the revealed understanding that this mortal life is a probationary state in which anyone can choose to repent and follow Jesus Christ as he molds and shapes them in preparation for eternal life with him.

### Scholarly Interpretations

Before proposing this new approach to 1 Nephi, I will briefly review three other proposals advanced by established Book of Mormon scholars. In 2007, Brant Gardner speculated that the division that had developed in

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*More Than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1989).

5. Lakoff and Turner, *More than Cool Reason*, 214.

Lehi's family as a result of his newly received visions might reflect the late seventh-century BCE divide in Jewish ideology that Bible scholars now recognize between those who endorsed Josiah's recent reforms and those who maintained their loyalty to traditional religious understandings and practices.<sup>6</sup> Gardner's insight has been significantly extended and updated in a 2015 article written by Neal Rappleye.<sup>7</sup> Grant Hardy helpfully emphasizes the literary features of Nephi's composition and their importance in divining the author's intent.<sup>8</sup> Joseph Spencer devoted Chapter Five of his theological essay on 1 Nephi to the problematic relationship of Laman and Lemuel with their younger brother Nephi. Spencer's more detailed exploration of the multiple textual references to this theme, "the source for the book's action and intrigue," leads him to interpret the book as the author's honest account of his own gradual development and preparation as a prophet, complete with his weaknesses and failures.<sup>9</sup> In the following paragraphs I will briefly describe these interpretations of Nephi's treatment of his brothers in 1 Nephi and state why I see a need for an explanation grounded in the plan of salvation revealed to him and his father more than in the actual historical facts he reports.

### **Brant Gardner and Neal Rappleye: Harnessing Margaret Barker's Account of the Josianic Reforms**

Since Latter-day Saint scholars became aware of the work of Old Testament scholar Margaret Barker in the late 1990s, several of them have observed that the ideological divide that Josiah's reforms created in Jerusalem in the late seventh century BCE might underlie the division in Lehi's family as portrayed in Nephi's writings. Brant Gardner put the question bluntly: "Suppose that [the reformist ideology] constituted a firm faith

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6. Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 1:92.

7. Neal Rappleye, "The Deuteronomist Reforms and Lehi's Family Dynamics: A Social Context for the Rebellions of Laman and Lemuel," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 16 (2015): 87–99. See also the recent extensions and reinforcements to Rappleye's argument in Val Larsen, "Josiah to Zoram to Sherem to Jarom and the Big Little Book of Omni," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 44 (2021): 217–64. I do not engage these excellent papers but simply offer a different approach.

8. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 31–57.

9. Joseph Spencer, *1st Nephi: a brief theological introduction* (Provo, UT: Maxwell Institute, 2020), 82.



and that they [Laman and Lemuel] saw Lehi as stubbornly espousing parts of their religion that they sincerely believed needed reformation.”<sup>10</sup> Neal Rappleye has helpfully assembled the comments of several other scholars who have pointed to this possibility in one way or another and has gone on to explore other dimensions of Nephi’s writing that might reinforce the hypothesis that Gardner had proposed previously — with the caveat that it was “absolute speculation on the thinnest of data.”<sup>11</sup>

Neal Rappleye has effectively fleshed out this Barkeresque analysis by collecting a number of details in the text that might be seen as compatible with it. As he concludes,

I have attempted to illustrate how the social context surrounding the Deuteronomic reforms, as reconstructed by Margaret Barker, not only explains the actions of Lehi and Nephi, as other commentators have observed, but also illuminates our understanding of Laman and Lemuel and their interactions with the prophetic duo formed by their father and younger brother.<sup>12</sup>

The new interpretation that I will propose below agrees that Laman and Lemuel, as portrayed by Nephi, may be invoking reformist perspectives to justify their rebellions. But I interpret Nephi to be portraying these invocations as convenient rationalizations and as evidence of their assimilation into Jerusalem’s elite culture, which the Jewish prophets were declaiming as so wicked that their God would find it necessary to discipline them with a Babylonian captivity. Nephi, on the other hand, does not credit their rebellion as sincere or faithful opposition. Rather, he explains their rebellions by pointing to their lack of faith, to their resistance to the Holy Spirit, and to their longing for the affluent lifestyle of contemporary Jerusalem elites. He quotes Laman

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10. Gardner, *Second Witness*, I:92.

11. Rappleye, “The Deuteronomist Reforms” and Gardner, *Second Witness*, I:92.

12. Rappleye, “The Deuteronomist Reforms,” 98. A thorough review of Barker’s work on this topic from a Latter-day Saint perspective can be found in Kevin Christensen, “The Temple, The Monarchy, and Wisdom: Lehi’s World and the Scholarship of Margaret Barker,” in *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 2004), 449–522; and from Barker’s perspective in Margaret Barker, “What did King Josiah Reform” in *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, 523–42.



complaining, “we might have enjoyed our possessions and the land of our inheritance; yea, and we might have been happy” (1 Nephi 17:21).<sup>13</sup>

The popularity of Gardner’s speculation among current Book of Mormon scholars is such that I should provide a more developed explanation of my reasons for looking elsewhere. Margaret Barker has provided a great service in her exposé of the intent of the Josianic reforms, which was to supplant the traditional Abrahamic temple theology. I also accept the possibility that Laman and Lemuel went along with the Jerusalem elites in accepting those reforms. I will even go one step beyond that by suggesting that Lehi and Nephi may very well have also joined in their support of Josiah’s reforms. But we should also note that the troubling new messages of Jeremiah, Lehi, and other prophets are not framed in Nephi’s writings as reactionary defenses of the old religion against the reform agenda. Rather, they are based in the new visions and possibly unprecedented perspectives these prophets have just received.

Thanks to Nephi’s Small Plates, we know a lot more about Lehi’s visions than we do about Jeremiah’s. But Lehi and Nephi seemed to think they were being given the same revelations that had come to Jeremiah and others. Lehi’s visions featured both negative and positive content. On the negative side, they confirmed the coming destruction of Jerusalem, the last stronghold of the elites of Israel, because of the wickedness of the people. That wickedness was measured more by its violations of commandments guiding personal conduct given to Moses than by its rejection of the old Abrahamic religion.

In the vision given to Lehi and Nephi, the positive content dominated. Nephi wants his readers to be shocked and captivated by the fact that Lehi responded to the vision that confirmed his worst fears about the looming destruction of Jerusalem with effusive praise and expressions of gratitude to the Lord:

Great and marvelous are thy works, O Lord God Almighty.  
Thy throne is high in the heavens, and thy power and  
goodness and mercy is over all the inhabitants of the earth.  
And because thou art merciful, thou wilt not suffer those who  
come unto thee that they shall perish. (1 Nephi 1:14)

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13. All quotations from the Book of Mormon in this paper are taken from the Yale critical edition. See Royal Skousen, *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022). In some cases, italics have been added to call attention to key terminology.

Nephi's readers will soon learn that Lehi's positive response derived from a vision of the future coming of Jesus Christ, his atonement, the plan of salvation, and the gospel of Christ as the divinely provided way by which all humankind could choose to repent and qualify for eternal life.

Nephi sees this new message as pre-eminent and also as fulfillment — not as rejection — both of the prophets and of the law. Nephi's explanation would not seem clearly to favor or disfavor either side of the theological divide Barker describes in late seventh-century Jerusalem:

For we labor diligently to write, to persuade our children and also our brethren to believe in Christ and to be reconciled to God, for we know that it is by grace that we are saved after all that we can do. And notwithstanding we believe in Christ, we keep the law of Moses and look forward with steadfastness unto Christ until the law shall be fulfilled, for for this end was the law given.

Wherefore the law hath become dead unto us, and we are made alive in Christ because of our faith, yet we keep the law because of the commandments. And we talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ; and we write according to our prophecies that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins.

Wherefore we speak concerning the law, that our children may know the deadness of the law. And they, by knowing the deadness of the law, may look forward unto that life which is in Christ and know for what end the law was given — and after that the law is fulfilled in Christ, that they need not harden their hearts against him when the law had ought to be done away.

And now behold, my people, ye are a stiffnecked people. Wherefore I have spoken plain unto you, that ye cannot misunderstand. And the words which I have spoken shall stand as a testimony against you, for they are sufficient to teach any man the right way. For the right way is to believe in Christ and deny him not, for by denying him ye also deny the prophets and the law.

And now behold, I say unto you that the right way is to believe in Christ and deny him not. And Christ is the Holy

One of Israel; wherefore ye must bow down before him and worship him with all your might, mind, and strength, and your whole soul. And if ye do this, ye shall in no wise be cast out. And inasmuch as it shall be expedient, ye must keep the performances and ordinances of God until the law shall be fulfilled which was given unto Moses. (2 Nephi 25: 23–30)

In this most complete statement of his purpose in writing, Nephi does not take sides in the cultural division identified by Barker. Rather, he endorses both the prophets and the Mosaic law. Even more importantly, he introduces prophecies of the coming Messiah and his plan for the redemption of all those who will choose to follow him in the way laid out in his doctrine or gospel. These new teachings require their hearers to give up their previous ways of understanding human life as a time to take enjoyment in pleasures — to minimize pain and maximize pleasure. In addition, they require replacement of these understandings with a guiding metaphor of life as a probation — a time to prove their faith in and commitment to their creator and father in heaven.

### **Grant Hardy**

Probably the most thorough and comprehensive attempt to interpret Nephi's portrayals of himself vis-a-vis his older brothers is found in Grant Hardy's 2010 reader's guide to the Book of Mormon. His approach also introduces and maintains a sensitivity to the literary elements in Nephi's writing. He recognizes the flatness of Nephi's characterization of Laman and Lemuel and describes them as "stock characters, even caricatures."<sup>14</sup> Hardy leverages that insight as an invitation to explore the text in search of clues that can fill out a reasonable and more complete characterization of Nephi and his brothers.

In this paper, I borrow that same insight but to go a different direction. I will argue below that Nephi flattens these characterizations because he is not writing about Laman and Lemuel as historical figures. Rather, they are intentionally presented as stock characters — those he can authoritatively describe and interpret based on extended personal experience — who lived their lives wedded to the wrong metaphor of life. Nephi sees all his readers being confronted with the same choice between life metaphors. And he knows that future readers will not know him or his brothers or care which of them is superior. Nephi was not engaged in an effort of self-justification in his writing. He was presenting an

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14. Hardy, *Understanding*, 33.

allegory and an experience-based argument for distinguishing between two metaphors of life and for recognizing that only one of them offers human beings a way to reach eternal life.<sup>15</sup> The essence of that choice was featured by Lehi in his final teaching to his sons:

And now my sons, I would that ye should look to the great Mediator and hearken unto his great commandments and be faithful unto his words and choose eternal life according to the will of his Holy Spirit, and not choose eternal death according to the will of the flesh and the evil which is therein, which giveth the spirit of the devil power to captivate, to bring you down to hell, that he may reign over you in his own kingdom. (2 Nephi 2:28–29)

### Joseph Spencer

Spencer's essay on Nephi and his brothers targets two very different misreadings which can be corrected with the same interpretation. On one hand, readers who see Nephi (and other prophets) as always right and righteous can learn to follow the prophets more effectively if they will recognize and accept that prophets, like all humans, need to develop toward spiritual perfection throughout their lives. On the other hand, he resists the tendency in some quarters to reject Nephi and other prophets because of their imperfections. Spencer acknowledges that many readers have judged Nephi to be self-righteous and insensitive — even “pathologically faithful” in comparison to normal, fallible mortals.<sup>16</sup> He defends Nephi because he has been open in his writing by being “honest about his youthful ambition and his fiery temper” and about “how his zeal sometimes outstripped his knowledge.”<sup>17</sup> But Nephi and the other prophets should not be rejected for being human but should be

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15. A reviewer of this paper suggested that the “stock character” hypothesis in Nephi's writings might help explain the lack of attention to the women in Nephi's account who are unnamed, except for his mother. His sisters and his wife may not have served the roles of the stock characters he was using for an allegorical account. Thus, while they clearly existed, he had no need to develop them or provide details that would not serve his exhortative purposes. This could be a topic for further investigation.

16. Spencer, *1st Nephi*, 83. He draws on Eugene England, “Why Nephi Killed Laban: Reflections on the Truth of the Book of Mormon,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 22, no. 3 (Fall 1989): 40, for this characterization of the critical literature.

17. Spencer, *1st Nephi*, 96.

appreciated for their ability to overcome shortcomings while seeking the welfare of others — even their enemies.<sup>18</sup>

Spencer consciously skips over the great vision that Nephi reports in the central chapters of 1 Nephi and focuses on direct interactions between Nephi and his brothers in formulating his interpretation. But, as I will argue below, the vision provides the true grounding of the difference between Nephi and his brothers. As Spencer notes, Nephi may previously have shared some of the same “hardness” that his brothers exhibit throughout the account. But the great vision given to him and his father, after their prayers for enlightenment, gave them a whole new picture of the origin and purpose of human life on this earth — a vision that undercuts the life views of most people as they seek social approval and the comforts and pleasures of this world.

As with Spencer’s perspective, some interpretations of Nephi’s writings try to be more sympathetic to Laman and Lemuel by interpreting Nephi as a mature prophet acknowledging and apologizing for his judgmental and self-righteous mistreatment of his older siblings during his youth. But even this more sophisticated reading fails to appreciate the systematic way in which Nephi portrays these older brothers as real-life examples of the basic failings that prevent so many of God’s children from accepting his continuing invitation to repent and return to him. Such approaches do not sufficiently recognize that Nephi’s reporting of his brothers’ murmurings, their refusals to listen to prophets or the Spirit or angels or the voice of God, and their threats or even attempts to kill Nephi and Lehi are not presented as self-justifications for the author.<sup>19</sup> Rather they are deliberately featured in Nephi’s stories to illustrate the conduct of all those without faith, for whom the deliverance promised to the faithful will not be provided in God’s great plan of salvation.

This interpretation of Laman and Lemuel is presented simply and convincingly in Nephi’s report of his conversation with them just after he was shown the same great vision his father had described to the family. At this point, Nephi understood that “great things” such as Lehi’s vision and his subsequent teachings are “hard to be understood save a man should inquire of the Lord.” Nephi was “grieved [that] because of the hardness of their hearts” Laman and Lemuel “did not look unto the Lord

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18. Ibid., 96–97.

19. The complaints from Laman and Lemuel included in Nephi’s text are listed and explained in John W. Welch and J. Gregory Welch, “Chart 77,” *Charting the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), <https://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/sites/default/files/archive-files/pdf/welch/2016-03-01/77.pdf>.

as they had ought” (1 Nephi 15: 3–4). When they complained to Nephi about the difficulty of understanding Lehi’s vision, he simply asked,

Have ye inquired of the Lord? And they said unto me: We have not, for the Lord maketh no such thing known unto us. Behold, I said unto them: How is it that ye do not keep the commandments of the Lord? How is it that ye will perish because of the hardness of your hearts? Do ye not remember the thing which the Lord hath said? — if ye will not harden your hearts and ask me in faith, believing that ye shall receive, with diligence in keeping my commandments, surely these things shall be made known unto you. (1 Nephi 15:8–11)

Both Lehi and Nephi can foresee that Laman and Lemuel and all others that harden their hearts, refusing to humble themselves and ask the Lord in faith, will be cut off from the presence of the Lord with damning consequences in this life and in the next — “the eternal destruction — of both soul and body” (2 Nephi 1:22). And as Nephi will reiterate multiple times when in allegorical mode, the same spiritual dynamic obtains for every man and woman born into this world.

### **Nephi’s Struggle with Laman and Lemuel**

In what follows, I offer an interpretation that emphasizes the close connection between the spiritual teachings of Nephi’s writings and the selected family stories featuring the murmuring and rebellions of his brothers in opposition to the way that leads to eternal life. Nephi’s proffered evidences for his thesis have both a positive and a negative dimension. And the distinction comes down to faithfulness, as is demonstrated in Nephi’s six stories. Each story shows how the faithful Nephi is delivered from various dangers. And each story shows the rebellion of Laman and Lemuel who are always subdued and who even repent a few times. But the repentance never lasts, and in his final admonition to them, Lehi fears for them and their progeny and foresees that they will be cut off from the presence of God (2 Nephi 1:20–22).

### **Fraternal Conflict Determines Rhetorical Structure**

While it may seem odd that the mature prophet Nephi would choose to feature the early conflicts with Laman and Lemuel in his writings, the rhetorical structures Nephi devises to tell his story are deliberately grounded in that conflict. We cannot ignore Nephi’s decision to place that conflict at the center not only of the history of their family but



also of his theological teachings — grounded in that history and in the prophecies he repeatedly advances about the future of their family and of the entire human race.

The same essential conflict surfaces first in Nephi's opening chapter in another form — in the violent negative reaction of the Jews to the prophets who warned of the imminent destruction of Jerusalem and “testified of their wickedness and their abominations” (1 Nephi 1:19). Because of the visions he had received, Lehi was also able to testify to them of “the coming of a Messiah and also the redemption of the world” (1 Nephi 1:19). But the prophets' calls to repentance only made the Jews angry, “even as with the prophets of old, whom they had cast out and stoned and slain. And they also sought his [Lehi's] life that they might take it away” (1 Nephi 1:20).

This stark divide between those who believe and those who will not believe the prophets and their messages from the Lord provides the basic context for the good news for all peoples that Lehi announces to the Jews and that Nephi adopts as the thesis for his book. After receiving two visions, Lehi exclaimed: “Because thou art merciful, thou wilt not suffer *those who come unto thee* that they shall perish” (1 Nephi 1:14). Following suit, Nephi rephrases this as a thesis for his first book: “I Nephi will shew unto you that the tender mercies of the Lord is over all them whom he hath chosen *because of their faith* to make them mighty, even unto the power of deliverance” (1 Nephi 1:20). With these universal declarations now on the table, Nephi moves immediately to shift the focus from Jerusalem's recurring conflicts with the prophets to one specific case — his brothers' rebellions against him and their father.

### **Wilderness Trials Test Lehi's Family Members**

At the Lord's command, Lehi led his family into the wilderness. After duly noting the offering and thanksgiving Lehi made to the Lord at their first camp in the wilderness, Nephi next reports Lehi's wishful comparison of his rebellious oldest sons to the geographical features of their campsite — hoping that Laman could be “like unto this river, continually running into the fountain of all righteousness,” and that Lemuel could be “like unto this valley, firm and steadfast and immovable in keeping the commandments of the Lord” (1 Nephi 2:9–10).

Nephi then helps his readers by providing some backstory for Lehi's wishfully stated similes:

Now this he spake because of the stiffneckedness of Laman and Lemuel. For behold, they did murmur in many things against



their father because that he was a visionary man and that he had led them out of the land of Jerusalem, to leave the land of their inheritance and their gold and their silver and their precious things, and to perish in the wilderness. And this they said that he had done because of the foolish imaginations of his heart. And thus Laman and Lemuel, being the eldest, did murmur against their father. And they did murmur because they knew not the dealings of that God who had created them. Neither did they believe that Jerusalem, that great city, could be destroyed according to the words of the prophets. And they were like unto the Jews which were at Jerusalem, which sought to take away the life of my father. (1 Nephi 2:11–13)

It is important to recognize that Nephi's portrayals of Laman and Lemuel are designed primarily to create a contrast between the two perspectives that is grounded in real-life experience. These portrayals are never aimed at demonstrating his personal superiority to his brothers on any dimension. Rather, he repeatedly urges them to choose repentance and obedience to God's commandments. At no point does Nephi dismiss them as lost causes or announce permanent rejection or recriminations. He repeatedly expresses his concern for the inevitable negative judgments they will face at the future bar of God because of choices they have made — choices which all men and women must face as individuals. In the six stories Nephi chose to include in 1 Nephi, his brothers chose to harden their hearts against the Spirit of the Lord. With this characterization of Laman and Lemuel as classic murmurers (unbelievers) and potential patricides clearly in place, Nephi moves immediately to document how he and other members of their party had their hearts softened and came to believe Lehi's prophecies. But as Lehi and Nephi make clear, their continuing hope for Laman and Lemuel is that they will finally take that step in their lives and repent.

In contrast, Nephi documents the precise moments when the other family members as individuals chose to soften their hearts and to accept the Spirit of the Lord as the guiding force in their lives. Lehi demonstrates that change of heart in his response to the second vision as cited above. Nephi, following his father's example, also turned to prayer. An answer came "by his Holy Spirit:"

Having great desires to know of the mysteries of God, wherefore I cried unto the Lord. And behold, he did visit me and did soften my heart that I did believe all the words which had been spoken by my father; wherefore I did not

rebel against him like unto my brothers. And I spake unto Sam, making known unto him the things which the Lord had manifested unto me by his Holy Spirit. And it came to pass that he believed in my words. But behold, Laman and Lemuel would not hearken unto my words ... because of the hardness of their hearts. (1 Nephi 2:16–18)

Sam believed on the words of Nephi. And their mother Sariah came to believe when, in spite of her fears, her sons returned from their dangerous but successful mission back to Jerusalem. She then declared:

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 gave them power whereby they could accomplish the thing which the Lord hath commanded them. (1 Nephi 5:8)

And finally, when Lehi sent his sons to recruit Ishmael and his family to join their flight from Jerusalem, “the Lord did *soften the heart* of Ishmael and also his whole household, insomuch that they took their journey with us down into the wilderness to the tent of our father” (1 Nephi 7:5).

### **From Family Experience to Universal Theology**

Nephi’s first book is often described as a history because of the stories it includes. But these are presented side-by-side with accounts of the great visions and prophecies Lehi and Nephi received concerning the futures of their own descendants, the Gentiles, and the house of Israel — of all God’s human creations.<sup>20</sup> Those revelations provide the universal truths about the divine plan for all people in this mortal probation and how the choices they make individually in this life determine the eternal rewards and punishments they will receive at the final judgment. The stories Nephi borrows from his family experiences give us a ground-level picture of the experiences of all men and women who come into this mortal world and teach us what we must do to be saved. But it will be the same for all. What Nephi says about his own family members applies equally to all men and women everywhere. It is in this sense that 1 Nephi offers Nephi’s readers an allegory for the key choices facing all people in this mortal life. By its very nature, allegory claims universal applicability.

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20. For example, see Reynolds, “Lehi’s Dream, Nephi’s Blueprint.”

By framing the selective stories of his struggles with Laman and Lemuel as allegory, Nephi transforms them into universal teaching about the nature of human life as a probationary state. Because 1 Nephi references two other allegories, I will distinguish this one by calling it the allegory of the prophet and his sons.

### **Three Allegories in 1 Nephi**

It seems that Nephi advances this allegory of the prophet and his sons to provide an answer to a basic question not clearly answered in the two other allegories about human life that are referenced in 1 Nephi. In his report of his great vision to his family, Lehi invoked the allegory of the olive tree to explain the vision he had seen of the futures of his own descendants, the Gentiles, and the house of Israel (1 Nephi 10:12–14). Nephi also saw those futures when the Lord gave him the same great vision Lehi had received earlier. And when his brothers sought his help in understanding Lehi's report, questions about the allegory of the olive tree were on the top of their list. Nephi's response to his brothers provides the simplest and most straightforward explanation of this allegory that we have in the Book of Mormon. And it was drawn directly from Nephi's own vision. Unstated is the fact that both Lehi and Nephi were also drawing on their knowledge of the original formulation of the allegory of the olive tree in the writings of the prophet Zenos in the Brass Plates. Fortunately, Jacob seems to have realized that future readers of Nephi's book would not have that background, and he inserted the original Zenos text into his own extension of Nephi's writing (Jacob 5:2–77).

The second allegory in 1 Nephi is Lehi's vision of the tree of life reported in chapter 8. This allegory clearly represents the character of human life as a probation in which men and women are confronted with choices which will affect both their experience in mortality and their eternal welfare. Only those who grasp the iron rod and follow it and the straight and narrow path can reach the tree of life and partake of its fruit. Those who wander into strange or forbidden paths or take up residence in the great and spacious building will become eternal captives of the devil if they do not repent. For all humans, this allegory describes the structure of their probationary state. And because of the plan of redemption and the gospel of Jesus Christ, the way to the tree is provided as a straight and narrow path defined by the commandments of God and marked by the iron rod which represents the guidance of the Holy Ghost offered to all who seek the Lord and enter into his covenant path.

The unanswered question raised by these two allegories is this: What determines for each person whether they will choose to follow Jesus Christ? In his allegory of the prophet and his sons, Nephi addresses that question directly by making it clear that every person that entered into his way had allowed their heart to be softened by the Spirit so that they could bow in repentant humility before the Lord and receive his gospel as the way to salvation. But those who hardened their hearts against the Spirit and stiffened their necks in determination to follow their own chosen paths would end up as captives of the devil in hell, unless they should repent. Nephi's allegory draws on his personal experience with his family members and others, all of whom had experienced strong encounters with the Spirit, inspired prophets, and even an angel. But for some, these divine encounters could not change their chosen course in life.

### **Nephi's Allegory as Universal Teaching**

The choice to welcome or reject the softening influence of the Lord's Spirit in one's life leads eventually to an eternal judgment. The theological principles taught in Nephi's stories also explain the future cycles of blessing and cursing that will come upon Lehi's descendants, the house of Israel, and the Gentiles. Nephi is writing to promote the salvation of all God's children and not to justify his own conduct in relationship to his siblings. This primary purpose in writing provides the energy and direction for all the varied components of his two books — including the stories of his brothers' rebellions. The universal teachings that emerge with clarity in Nephi's second book — which includes no dialogue between Nephi and his older brothers — are (1) God's great plan of redemption and (2) the gospel or doctrine of Christ.<sup>21</sup>

As I have shown elsewhere,<sup>22</sup> the first half of chapter 10 simply lists the sixteen additional prophecies that Lehi reported to his family that derived from the great vision that is reported in Lehi's voice in chapter 8. Nephi's response after that echoes his response in chapter 2 when he expressed a desire "to know the mysteries of God" (1 Nephi 2:16). But

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21. For documentation and discussion of the first see Noel B. Reynolds, "The Plan of Salvation and the Book of Mormon," *Religious Educator* 21, no. 1 (2020): 31–52. For the second see Reynolds, "The Gospel according to Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 29 (2018): 85–104; "The Gospel According to Nephi: An Essay on 2 Nephi 31," *Religious Educator* 16, no. 2 (2015): 51–75; and "This is the Way," *Religious Educator* 14, no. 3 (2013): 79–91.

22. Reynolds, "Lehi's Dream, Nephi's Blueprint," 260–62.

this time, his stated desire to “see and hear and know of these things by the power of the Holy Ghost,” is immediately extended into a doctrinal explanation of the universal availability of such revelation to all peoples in all times and places. For the Holy Ghost

is the gift of God unto all those who diligently seek him as well in times of old as in the time that he should manifest himself unto the children of men, for he is the same yesterday and today and forever. And the way is prepared for all men from the foundation of the world if it so be that they repent and come unto him. For he that diligently seeketh shall find, and the mysteries of God shall be unfolded to them by the power of the Holy Ghost as well in this time as in times of old and as well in times of old as in times to come; wherefore the course of the Lord is one eternal round (1 Nephi 10:17–19).

This universal availability of the Holy Ghost and the gospel of repentance explains why the metaphor of life as a probation defines the purpose of life for all men and women and gives them opportunity to prepare for a judgment that will come to all:

Therefore remember, O man: for all thy doings thou shalt be brought into judgment. Wherefore if ye have sought to do wickedly in the days of your *probation*, then ye are found unclean before the judgment seat of God. And no unclean thing can dwell with God; wherefore ye must be cast off forever. (1 Nephi 10:20–21)

### **Isaiah Provides Scriptural Backup**

This way of understanding Nephi’s first book provides a straightforward explanation for his insertion of two Isaiah chapters at its end. While Isaiah had addressed these words to wayward Israel, they fit perfectly with Nephi and Lehi’s words to Laman and Lemuel — confirming again that Nephi’s recitation of family stories always has the bigger picture in mind.<sup>23</sup> These chapters and Nephi’s following commentary to Laman and Lemuel provide a summary and renewed exhortation of the same principles Nephi has embedded in the family stories. This is all foreshadowed in Isaiah’s opening lines:

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23. I am indebted to my daughter Rebecca Reynolds Lambert for this insight, which she plans to develop in a future essay. Note how Jacob later quotes Isaiah 49:22–23 as an instructive comparison for his people (2 Nephi 6:6–7).

Hearken and hear this, O house of Jacob,  
 which are called by the name of Israel ...  
 which swear by the name of the Lord and make mention of  
 the God of Israel;  
 yet they swear not in truth nor in righteousness.  
 Nevertheless they call themselves of the holy city,  
 but they do not stay themselves upon the God of Israel.  
 (1 Nephi 20:1–2; cf. Isaiah 48:1–2)

### **Nephites and Lamanites**

Matthew Bowen has shown that a comprehensive review of the writings of Nephi and Mormon supports the hypothesis that the decision to believe or not to believe the prophets and the scriptures is what fundamentally distinguished the Nephites and their culture from the Lamanites and their traditions. The Nephite writers may have invented and seem to have promoted a linguistic practice that identified the names *Nephi* and *Nephites* with all that is good. Similarly, the consonants in Laman's name (*lmn*) may have been exploited in Nephite discourse for their easy association with the Hebrew term indicating negation of believing.<sup>24</sup> As Nephi made clear in quotations provided previously, failure to believe was the inevitable result of stiff-neckedness and resistance to the Spirit, which could soften the heart and enable belief.

### **Rhetorical Structures Emphasize the Murmuring of Nephi's Brothers**

In previous studies, I have shown how Nephi divided his first book (1 Nephi) into two chiastically structured and parallel halves labeled “Lehi's account” and “Nephi's account” respectively.<sup>25</sup> Each of these accounts is built around three of the six stories Nephi relates in his first book and is centered on the principal story of that account.

As composed by Nephi in his first nine chapters, Lehi's account is centered on the trip back to Jerusalem to retrieve the Brass Plates

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24. Matthew L. Bowen, “Laman and Nephi as Key-Words: An Etymological, Narratological, and Rhetorical Approach to Understanding Lamanites and Nephites as Religious, Political, and Cultural Descriptors,” (presentation, FAIRMormon Conference, Utah Valley Convention Center, Provo, UT, August 7-9, 2019), <https://www.fairlatterdaysaints.org/blog/2020/03/17/fairmormon-conference-podcast-53-matthew-bowen-laman-and-nephi-as-key-words-an-etymological-narratological-and-rhetorical-approach-to-understanding-lamanites-and-nephites-as-religious>.

25. See Reynolds, “Nephi's Outline.”



and concludes with his vision of the tree of life and a brief listing of all his teachings to the assembled entourage. The Brass Plates story is told chiastically and centers on the premier example of the murmuring of Laman and Lemuel. At the moment when their mission was in total disarray, “an angel of the Lord came and stood before them, and he spake unto them,” calling them to repentance and commanding them to return to Jerusalem, promising that “the Lord would deliver Laban into [their] hands” (1 Nephi 3:29). Their response was to murmur again — questioning how the Lord could possibly do this. Nephi must have seen this as murmuring *par excellence* (1 Nephi 3:31).

Nephi’s account centers on the story of mobilizing the family work force to build a ship and concludes with a report of the visions of the future that Lehi and Nephi had received in their great vision. As in the other five stories, the dramatic tension in the ship-building story is provided by Laman and Lemuel and their murmuring. They refuse to work and even threaten to throw Nephi into the sea. This provokes the most detailed response to their murmuring as Nephi is filled with a divine power that his attackers can actually see and delivers a long speech answering all their stated concerns. He goes even further by calling them “murderers in their hearts” and declaring their exposure to “eternal damnation” (1 Nephi 17:44 and 47).

These two stories feature Laman and Lemuel’s strongest murmuring in the Brass Plates incident and Nephi’s strongest rebuttal of their murmuring in the ship-building incident. The two are also tied together by their central locations in parallel rhetorical structures and by their inclusion of Nephi’s only two references to Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt.<sup>26</sup> In Nephi’s book, as in the biblical account of the Israelite exodus, faithless people murmur, but the Lord supports his prophets and delivers his people when they repent.

### Verbal Themes Employed by Nephi

Even though the key terminology Nephi uses to present the rebellions of his brothers is obvious, it is worthwhile to assess it more systematically. Nephi repeatedly reports the *murmuring* of his brothers against himself, Lehi, and the Lord. This murmuring characterizes those who are *stiff-necked* and *hard-hearted* because of their unwillingness to *humble* themselves and allow the *Spirit* to *soften their hearts* and help them *believe the words* of the prophets. Their resentment against prophets who

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26. Cf. Reynolds, “Nephi’s Outline” and 1 Nephi 4:2 and 1 Nephi 17:26–30.



call on them to repent leads to thoughts and even efforts to *seek to kill* or *murder* their brother Nephi and even their father Lehi.

### Laman and Lemuel Murmured

Twenty-four of the thirty-three occurrences of some form of *murmur* in the Book of Mormon are found in Nephi's writings and seem to deliberately echo accounts of the murmurings of Israel against Moses in the wilderness.<sup>27</sup> Almost all Old Testament occurrences of the verb *lûn* (murmur) or the noun *te lûnnâ* (murmuring) with the preposition 'al (against) are in Exodus 15–17 or Numbers 14–17 where they describe the complaining or rebellion of suffering Israelites against Moses, Aaron, or even the Lord.<sup>28</sup> By using the same term so consistently to describe the complaining and rebellions of Laman, Lemuel, and others during their travels in the wilderness, Nephi adds one more literary dimension to his implicit comparisons of the Lehite exodus to the ancient Israelite exodus and of himself and his father Lehi to the prophet Moses.<sup>29</sup>

Technical linguistic studies agree on how to interpret *murmuring* in the Pentateuch.<sup>30</sup> Citing Coats, one theological dictionary explains:

[T]he verb [lûn, murmur, rebel] means to express resentment, dissatisfaction, anger, and complaint by grumbling in half-muted tones of hostile opposition to God's leaders and the authority which he has invested in them. . . . [I]t is an open act of rebellion against the Lord (Numbers 14:9) and a stubborn

27. 1 Nephi 2:11, 12 (2x), 3:5, 6, 31, 4:4, 16:3, 16:20 (3x), 25, 35, 36, 17:2, 17, 22, 49, 18:16, 2 Nephi 1:26, 5:3, 5:4, 27:35 and 29:8.

28. Exodus 16:7, 8; Numbers 14:27 (2x), 36, 16:11 and 17:5. For *te lûnnâ*, Strong's H8519, see Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: Coded with Strong's Concordance Numbers* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publ., 2003), 534, s.v. "לָלַן," <https://archive.org/details/browndriverbrigg0000brow/page/534/mode/2up>. For *lûn*, Strong's H3885, see *ibid.*, 534, s.v. "לָלַן."

29. See Noel B. Reynolds, "The Israelite Background of Moses Typology in the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (2005): 4–23 and "Lehi as Moses," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9, no. 2, (2000):26–35. For an earlier treatment of this question, see George S. Tate, "The Typology of the Exodus Pattern in the Book of Mormon," in *Literature of Belief: Sacred Scripture and Religious Experience*, ed. Neal E. Lambert (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 1981), 245–62.

30. The classic 1968 study by George C. Coats is still the standard linguistic investigation. See his *Rebellion in the Wilderness* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), 21–28.

refusal to believe God's word and God's miraculous works  
(Numbers 14:11, 22, 23).<sup>31</sup>

*te lūnnâ* (murmuring) is “always used of Israel's murmurings ... against the Lord; an act of rebellion, disbelief, and disobedience to duly constituted authority.”<sup>32</sup>

### **Laman and Lemuel Sought to Take Away My Life**

Nephi includes twenty references to *murder* or the synonymous *seeking to kill* and *take away life* either in descriptions of the desires of Laman and Lemuel or other Israelites who have rejected the prophets or in the God-given prohibitions on murder.

The Decalogue's prohibition on murder in Exodus 20:13 uses the Hebrew word *râtsach* (murder, slay, kill): “Thou shalt not murder” (NIV). Scholars today agree that *murder* is a more precise translation here than the KJV's *kill*.<sup>33</sup> Nephi may be using this term when he accuses Laman and Lemuel of being “murderers in your hearts” (1 Nephi 17:44). He and Jacob also seem to use the same term when they refer to the sixth commandment. Jacob declares, “Woe unto the murderer who deliberately killeth, for he shall die,” (2 Nephi 9:35), and Nephi echoes the Exodus mandate “that men should not murder” (2 Nephi 26:32). They also appear to associate the same term with the devil “who ... stirreth up the children of men unto secret combinations of murder” (2 Nephi 9:9) and who is “the founder of murder and works of darkness” (2 Nephi 26:22).

The term *hârag* occurs in the Hebrew Bible more than three times as frequently and is usually translated *slay*, but it also can be translated *destroy*, *kill*, or *murder*. The wicked Jews slay the prophets, and the Lord slays the wicked. *Hârag* is never used for the killing of sacrificial animals and only rarely for killing animals for food.<sup>34</sup> While we can never know for sure which original-language term might lie behind the English words of the Book of Mormon, here again the Old Testament pattern seems consistent with Nephi's usage. Nephi invokes *slay* six times in the account of Laban's killing. The abominable church “slayeth the saints of God” (1 Nephi 13:5). While sojourning in the wilderness, Lehi's party

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31. Walter C. Kaiser, “1097,” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute of Chicago, 1980), 475, hereafter referred to as *TWOT*.

32. *Ibid.*

33. William White, “2208,” in *TWOT*, 860.

34. Harold G. Stigers, “514,” in *TWOT*, 222.

“did slay wild beasts” for food (1 Nephi 16:15, 18, 31). On one occasion when there had been much suffering for want of food in the wilderness, Laman said to Lemuel and the sons of Ishmael: “Behold, *let us slay* our father and also our brother Nephi, who hath taken it upon him to be our ruler and our teacher, who are his elder brethren” (1 Nephi 16:37).

The Hebrew Bible has a distinctive phrasing to describe the efforts of would-be murderers. Elijah twice tells the Lord “the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and *slain thy prophets* with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and *they seek my life, to take it away*” (1 Kings 19:10 and 14, KJV). Nephi borrows this same phrasing first to describe the efforts of the Jews in Jerusalem to kill his father Lehi (1 Nephi 1:20, 2:1, 13, 7:14, and 17:44), and then repeatedly to describe the efforts of Laman and Lemuel to slay Lehi and Nephi.<sup>35</sup>

- A But behold, their anger did increase against me, insomuch that *they did seek to take away my life*.
- B Yea, *they did murmur against me*, saying: Our younger brother thinketh to rule over us, and we have had much trial because of him.
- C Wherefore now *let us slay him*, that we may not be *afflicted more because of his words*.
- 1 For behold, we will not that he shall be our ruler,
- 2 for it belongeth unto us which are the elder brethren to rule over this people.
- B\* Now I do not write upon these plates all the words which *they murmured against me*,
- A\* but it sufficeth me to say that *they did seek to take away my life*. (2 Nephi 5:2–4)

The murderous desires and efforts of Laman and Lemuel to kill their father and brother in the hope of making their own lives easier are emphasized repeatedly in Nephi’s account to contrast them explicitly with those who believe in Christ and follow him in their lives. In Nephi’s composition, they are also implicitly contrasted with the supreme sacrifice of Jesus Christ who would “lay down his life for the salvation of his people” (2 Nephi 2:8). And they are implicitly compared with future Jews at Jerusalem who will crucify the God of Israel (see 1 Nephi 19:7–13).

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35. In addition to the passages quoted in the text, see 1 Nephi 7:16, 19, 2 Nephi 1:24, and 5:19.

## The Spirit and the Two Ways

Nephi's writings repeatedly invoke the metaphor of the Two Ways between which every human being must choose — to follow the Lord or the devil.<sup>36</sup> The vision of the tree of life and the presentation of the gospel describe the straight and narrow path that is the only way that leads to eternal life. The vision also speaks of “forbidden paths” and “strange roads” which Lehi later characterizes as the devil's way of captivity that leads to eternal death (1 Nephi 8:28 and 32; 2 Nephi 2:26–29). By listening to the Spirit and following its guidance, Lehi, Nephi, and the other prophets are able to receive revelation for themselves and others as they are filled with or carried away by the Spirit and as it shows them “all things which [they] should do” (2 Nephi 32:5). Further, they invite all others to repent with contrite spirits and broken hearts that they may receive those same blessings of the Spirit (see 1 Nephi 2:7 and 2 Nephi 4:32).

Nephi also features Laman and Lemuel repeatedly as his personal-life examples of people who harden their hearts and refuse to listen to the prophets or the Holy Ghost (1 Nephi 15:10–11). Nephi compares them explicitly to the Jews at Jerusalem who sought to kill Lehi and to the rebellious Israelites under Moses, and implicitly to the future Jews who will kill the Lamb of God and persecute his apostles (1 Nephi 2:9–13; 11:28, 32–33; and 17:30, 41, 44). Nephi holds them responsible for leading their posterity astray and establishing a dispensation-long division between Lehi's descendants in which so many will be destroyed. Lehi sums up the same case against Laman and Lemuel in defense of Nephi in his final words with them (2 Nephi 1:13–27).

It is obvious that Nephi is far from apologizing for teenage immaturity and harshness towards his rebellious brothers. Rather, he is teaching his descendants and his future readers that life is serious, that choices have consequences, and that if their own eternal welfare matters to them, they must repent and follow Jesus Christ who will lead them to eternal life. If they refuse to let the Spirit soften their hearts and insist on choosing their own paths in this life, they will find themselves in the devil's thrall and suffer eternally for those choices. Like Lehi, Nephi's driving desire is for the eternal welfare of the souls of his family and of

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36. For a comprehensive account of this theme in Nephi's writings and in the rest of the Book of Mormon, see Noel B. Reynolds, “The Ancient Doctrine of the Two Ways and the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (2017):49–78.

all peoples. He has dedicated his life to that pursuit. He fully endorses the words of Jacob to the Nephites:

Therefore cheer up your hearts and remember that ye are free to act for yourselves, to choose the way of everlasting death or the way of eternal life. Wherefore, my beloved brethren, reconcile yourselves to the will of God and not to the will of the devil and the flesh. And remember that after ye are reconciled unto God that it is only in and through the grace of God that ye are saved. (2 Nephi 10:23–24)

From this perspective, readers should not see the mature Nephi writing to justify or to apologize for his youthful actions to unknown and distant readers that do not know him or his brothers.

All of Nephi's writing is dominated by the visions he has been given that show how all men and women will be judged at the last day. He is driven almost exclusively by his desire to inspire his descendants, as well as the Gentiles and the house of Israel, to humble themselves in repentance before the Father and take up the gospel of Jesus Christ — the only path that can lead them to eternal life. Nephi clearly believes that only those readers who turn to Christ and seek eternal life in this way will be benefitted by his writings. And there is nothing any mortal can do now to help Laman and Lemuel or anyone else who goes to the grave with their heart hardened and their neck resolutely stiffened against the Spirit that testifies of God's love, goodness, and plan of redemption for them.

Nephi's summary of his prophecies of the last days as set forth near the end of his second book echoes the same concerns that distinguish the two ways. Nephi foresees that his writings will be "of great worth" and warn "the children of men and especially ... our seed, which are a remnant of the house of Israel" of the evils of "that day." Numerous competing churches will claim to be the Lord's but will teach their own learning and denying the Holy Ghost and the power of God.

There shall also be many which shall say: Eat, drink, and be merry, nevertheless fear God. He will justify in committing a little sin. ... And at last we shall be saved in the kingdom of God. [Many] shall be puffed up in their hearts. ... And the blood of the saints shall cry from the ground against them. Yea, they have all gone out of the way. They have become corrupted because of pride. ... They wear stiff necks and high heads ...

[W]oe, woe, woe be unto them, saith the Lord God Almighty, for they shall be thrust down to hell. (2 Nephi 28:8–15)

Here again, Nephi seems to treat his own writing as an allegory that will warn all peoples of the importance of following the right way and not allow the devil “to pacify and lull them away into carnal security [and lead] them away carefully down to hell” (2 Nephi 28:21).

### A Perspective from Literary Theory

Scholars have found that the literary and linguistic theories of metaphor may open important windows for understanding the conceptual world of the ancient Near East<sup>37</sup> and especially in the Bible.<sup>38</sup> In the introduction to their edited collection, Pallavidini and Portuese assert:

Metaphor ... constitutes the only means of communicating the otherworldly or extraordinary experience. It forms the bridge between direct and mediate experience, between the religious and the human, and furnishes a common bond of understanding between people.”<sup>39</sup>

Because metaphors are conceptual, they may be presented either verbally in speech or text or graphically in a work of art.

### Metaphors for Life

Nephi employs many metaphors, but as argued throughout this paper, the conflict with his brothers is used deliberately to counterpoise the culturally prevalent metaphor of *the good life* — as desired by Laman and Lemuel — with the metaphor of *life as a probationary state* — as a basic plank of the plan of salvation that was taught to Lehi and Nephi in their visions.

Metaphors for *life* are known to and assumed in most cultures. Perhaps the most common metaphor for life in western cultures portrays it as a journey as exemplified in various strains of Judeo-Christian tradition. Life has also been seen as a day with its hours or as a year with its seasons. Life can also be conceptualized as a play, as bondage, or as a burden.<sup>40</sup> Shared cultures include vast numbers of metaphors

37. See, e.g., Marta Pallavidini and Ludovico Portuese, eds., *Researching Metaphor in the Ancient Near East* (Wiesbaden, DE: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2020).

38. P. Van Hecke, ed., *Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible* (Leuven, BE: Peeters, 2005).

39. Pallavidini and Portuese, *Researching Metaphor*, 1.

40. Examples of all of these are discussed in the opening chapter of Lakoff and Turner, *More than Cool Reason*.



which can be used almost without thought to convey meaning in human interactions. While the potential metaphors in a language community may be infinite, only a relatively small number tend to be invoked regularly.

### Primary Metaphors

While this paper is not the place for a deep dive into linguistic theories of metaphor, the concept of a *primary metaphor* deserves attention because of the way it applies to Nephi's metaphor of life as a probation. Primary metaphors "form the basis for widely shared if not universal patterns of language and conceptualization, linking one idea (and element of experience) to another."<sup>41</sup>

The fundamental concepts in primary metaphors are basic concepts "grounded in universal (rather than culturally determined) aspects of human experience" and "should ultimately be grounded in what can plausibly be conceived as basic parameters of human physical, social, emotional, or intellectual experience."<sup>42</sup> It seems obvious that Nephi's linked concepts of life and probation both meet these requirements for primary metaphors. We are also reminded that "metaphors are nothing but mappings across conceptual domains, where each mapping is not arbitrary but grounded in the body and in everyday experience and knowledge."<sup>43</sup> Herein lies the genius of Nephi's first book as he establishes the metaphor of life as a probation through a carefully structured recounting of his family's experience and received revelations that feature their conflict over that new metaphor.

Lakoff and Turner emphasized three of the many ways in which metaphors may differ from one another.<sup>44</sup> The Nephite metaphor of life as a probation is clearly *conceptual* rather than poetic. The whole

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41. Joseph E. Grady and Giorgio A. Ascoli, "Sources and Targets in Primary Metaphor Theory: Looking Back and Thinking Ahead," in *Metaphor: Embodied Cognition and Discourse*, ed. Beate Hampe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 27.

42. Ibid., 29. In their study of metaphor, Lakoff and Johnson concluded that "no metaphor can ever be comprehended or even adequately represented independently of its experiential basis." See Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 19.

43. Pallavidini and Portuese, *Researching Metaphor*, 4.

44. See Lakoff and Turner, *More Than Cool Reason*, 49–56. For an extended technical analysis see Dedre Gentner et al., "Metaphor is Like Analogy," in *The Analogical Mind: Perspectives from Cognitive Science*, ed. Dedre Gentner, Keith J. Holyoak, and Boicho N. Kokinov (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001), 199–253.



point is to change understanding of what is important in this life. But secondly, the Nephite metaphor is innovative and even possibly unique and is clearly not already *conventionalized* in Israelite culture. Lehi, Nephi, and the prophets faced a significant challenge in getting people to accept this new metaphor as a guide in understanding the purpose of life and in adjusting their approach to life accordingly. Thirdly, metaphors may vary in considerable degree in how basic they may be to human understanding of what matters in human life. The radicalness of the new Nephite metaphor is made even more challenging by its high degree of *basicness*. It changes everything when taken seriously. This particular difference is what made the metaphor of life as a probation so challenging for contemporary Israelites to accept. It demanded repentance and complete obedience of the Lord's commandments in all things. It dramatically upset the comfortable cultural accommodation that had been established between the law of Moses and the lifestyle of Israelite elites.

### **Individual and Group Salvation**

It would be a mistake to analyze the struggle between Nephi and his brothers as its own phenomenon in isolation from the great prophecies of Lehi, Isaiah, and Nephi himself that constitute a major portion of Nephi's books. Rather, Nephi's personal experience with the spiritual rebels in his own family provided him with the model of individual rebellion that enabled him to understand the rejection of current prophets by the Jews and the future cycles of apostasy and repentance that would occur among his own descendants as well as the opposition of many Israelites and Gentiles to the prophesied restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the last days. Throughout his writings Nephi repeatedly invokes resistance to the Spirit, hardness of heart, and stiff-neckedness to explain the apostasies of present and future peoples. His final prophecies provided the opportunity to rehearse and reemphasize this explanatory approach in the presentation of his prophecies that are drawn from his own visions and from the revelations reported by Lehi and Isaiah as cited earlier in Nephi's writing.<sup>45</sup>

### **Methodological Individualism and Holism**

Social scientists have been debating the relative merits of competing approaches to the explanation of social phenomena for many decades.

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45. Nephi's prophecies begin at 2 Nephi 25:7 and are pronounced to be at an end at 2 Nephi 31:1.

Should the events and movements in human societies be understood in terms of general laws and tendencies or as consequences of the aggregation of choices made by individual members of a society? While *methodological holists* believe that social phenomena such as organizations, social processes, cultures and traditions, and norms and rules are indispensable for adequate explanations of social phenomena, *methodological individualists* maintain that all such group phenomena can ultimately be reduced to the choices and actions of individuals.<sup>46</sup>

A version of this philosophical debate in the social sciences might seem to apply to Nephi's teachings in his two books. On the one hand, Nephi and Lehi refer repeatedly to holistic phenomena in their understandings of this world and the future. All mankind is God's creation and has been sent to this mortal probation to be tested and prepared for a final judgment where the righteous and the wicked will be rewarded as groups. The future has been seen in terms of groups that will go through cycles of faithfulness and apostasy: the house of Israel, the remnant of Joseph (Nephites and Lamanites), and the Gentiles. On the other hand, the gospel they teach focuses constantly on individuals as the ones who must choose or refuse to believe and repent. The stories Nephi tells always feature choices made by individuals in his explanations of individual and group outcomes.

As has been explained in this paper, the founding Nephite prophets saw all men and women as agents who are free to choose to follow Jesus Christ or to follow their own path. Further, as they display a humble desire for guidance, God will bless them with his Holy Spirit, which can soften their hearts and guide them to make choices and do what is necessary to become righteous followers of Christ. From that perspective, the cycles of faithfulness and wickedness that are foreseen in Nephite prophecy would seem to reflect an aggregation of righteous or evil choices by individuals belonging to different groups of people — among whom there could be many exceptions.

This explanatory perspective may illuminate Nephi's decision to begin his final writing with stories about his personal experience with his own family members. We read Nephi backwards if we interpret him as being primarily concerned to set the record straight on his own

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46. Karl Popper framed this issue clearly in his early writings on scientific explanation. For a well-informed and current account of this debate, see Julie Zahle, "Methodological Holism in the Social Sciences," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Archive* (March 21, 2016), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/holism-social/>.

problematic relationships with other family members. What makes more sense is that he uses his own experience at the level that all his readers will understand to explain the great prophecies that he and Lehi and other prophets such as Isaiah have received about the futures of all humankind. Israel will be scattered among all nations. The Nephites will be destroyed. The Lamanites will eventually receive the gospel. The Gentile nations will play an important role as they provide shelter for the restoration of the gospel in the latter-days and for the gathering of scattered Israel.

Nephi's stories explain how human beings raised in the same families can bring individual choice differences to the table in ways that explain the endlessly mixed results of sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ. Outcomes will depend on choices made by individuals. Some, like Lehi and Nephi, upon hearing prophetic warnings, will humble themselves, turn to prayer, and be blessed by the softening visitation of the Lord's spirit. So blessed, many will put their very lives at risk in following God's directions for them. Others will resist the prophetic warnings with stiff necks, find sufficient justification in how they conform their lives to current cultural standards, and will harden their hearts against spiritual warnings and even descend to the persecution and murder of the prophets who are calling them to repentance. So even though the prophecies speak in terms of wholes — the Gentiles, the house of Israel, etc., those prophecies can only be understood in terms of choices by individuals — as would be required by methodological individualism.

### **What Determines Individual Choices?**

Nephi's narratives never provide environmental explanations for these differences between those who respond to prophetic warnings positively and those who react against them, seeing them as threats to the lives they have chosen. Rather, it seems that individuals have some strength or weakness in their spiritual core that moves them to seek the goodness of God, even at great risk, or to accept the seductive rationalizations whispered to them by the devil as they are gradually drawn into his captivity. Laman and Lemuel can only be drawn into a repentant mode when confronted by immediate and overwhelming spiritual power. But as Lehi's vision and the family experience pointedly show, they are never enticed by the fruit of the tree of life. They will not even reach out to taste it when invited (1 Nephi 8:17–18). Lehi, Nephi, and Isaiah seem to see this variety of inward dispositions in human beings as the source of the aggregated choices that will lead groups to act in the ways their

prophecies describe. Those internal dispositions, possibly unique to each person, would appear to be what is being tested or proved in this mortal life understood as a probationary state.

From this explanatory perspective, Nephi's readers can see that his selected stories about his family's internal struggles are told in a way that features choice-making by individuals. Nephi shows them how those choices when aggregated between Nephites and Lamanites provide an explanation for the social phenomena described in prophecies about their own future and the future of the Gentiles and the house of Israel. These prophecies are described repeatedly in both of Nephi's books.<sup>47</sup> The second book moves on from family storytelling to the explanations of God's plan of salvation and the gospel of Jesus Christ, which also focus on individual choice. These choices also lie behind the great prophecies and make their happy conclusions possible.

### **Back to Allegory**

At the same time, Nephi's grounding of the prophecies in the real-life experience of his own family also provides, through the logic of allegory, the grounding for the eventual judgment of all men and women. As they meet God on that day, there will be no place for lies or rationalizations. Their mortal choices and actions will justify either a reward of eternal life or a condemnation to the captivity of the devil — both of which will reflect the core desires of individuals that led them to humble themselves and accept the guidance of the Holy Spirit or to stiffen their necks and harden their hearts against that spiritual invitation. That is why the metaphor of life as a mortal probation, as the basic condition of the plan of salvation, is so critical in the teachings that Lehi and Nephi were given in their visions. The centrality of this Nephite teaching persists down to the last days of Mormon:

For this cause I write unto you, that ye may know that ye must all stand before the judgment seat of Christ, yea, every soul which belongeth to the whole human family of Adam — and ye must stand to be judged of your works, whether they be good or evil ... And I would that I could persuade all ye ends of the earth to repent and prepare to stand before the judgment seat of Christ. (Mormon 3:20, 22)

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47. See the documentation in Reynolds, "Lehi's Dream, Nephi's Blueprint," Appendix.

### Lehi and Nephi Lament Their Own Sins and Weaknesses

It is important to see that both Lehi and Nephi recognized their own weaknesses and sins for which they sought forgiveness and divinely given strength to overcome. From the beginning, Lehi was portrayed by Nephi as one who prayed for guidance and then mobilized and executed a positive response to the Lord's surprising and possibly terrifying command that he flee with his family into the wilderness. Only once did Lehi's resolve flag as misfortune led to serious hunger for his entire party. Powerless to provide for the basic need of his family for food, he "began to murmur against the Lord his God." The whole company was "exceeding sorrowful" and "did murmur against the Lord" (1 Nephi 16:20).

In this instance, it was Nephi who rose to the occasion: "And it came to pass that I Nephi did speak much unto my brethren because that they had *hardened their hearts* again, even unto complaining against the Lord their God" (1 Nephi 16:22). And they "humbled themselves because of my words; for I did say many things unto them in the energy of my soul" (verse 24). Lehi repented and prayed for direction. "And it came to pass that the voice of the Lord came unto my father, and he was truly chastened because of his murmuring against the Lord, insomuch that he was brought down into the depths of sorrow" (verse 25).

Later, in deeply pained language, Nephi lays out his own sense of weakness and vulnerability to the temptations of the enemy of his soul. Reflecting on "the great goodness of the Lord" he acknowledges his own sins:

O wretched man that I am! Yea, my heart sorroweth because of my flesh. My soul grieveth because of mine iniquities. I am encompassed about because of the temptations and the sins which doth so easily beset me. And when I desire to rejoice, my heart groaneth because of my sins. (2 Nephi 4:17–19)

### What was the Spiritual Status of Lehi and His Family before His First Vision?

Those who may be looking for a softer judgment on Laman and Lemuel in Nephi's writings might do better to look at their filial relationship to their father Lehi than to focus on their fraternal battles. The clearest statement of family influence on the choices made by family members occurs in Lehi's blessing to the children of Laman when he states his own mature belief "that if ye are brought up in the right way that ye should go, ye will not depart from it" (2 Nephi 4:5; cf. Proverbs 22:6).

Behold, my sons and my daughters which are the sons and the daughters of my first born, I would that ye should give ear unto my words. For the Lord God hath said that inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments, ye shall prosper in the land. And inasmuch as ye will not keep my commandments, ye shall be cut off from my presence.

But behold, my sons and my daughters, I cannot go down to my grave save I should leave a blessing upon you. For behold, I know that if ye are brought up in the right way that ye should go, ye will not depart from it.

Wherefore if ye are cursed, behold, I leave my blessing upon you, that the cursing may be taken from you and be answered upon the heads of your parents. (2 Nephi 4:3–6)

So what about their fathers, Laman and Lemuel? Were they not “brought up in the right way?” They were introduced first as lacking in faithful following of the commandments. They were characterized by their “stiff-neckedness” and their “murmuring” against their father and his visions that had brought them into this wilderness. They attributed Lehi’s revelations to “the foolish imaginations of his heart” ... “because they knew not the dealings of that God who had created them.” In these ways, “they were like unto the Jews which were at Jerusalem, which sought to take away the life of my father” (1 Nephi 2:9–13). At one point in the story, Nephi quotes Laman’s proposal to the others: “Let us slay our father and also our brother Nephi” (1 Nephi 16: 37). Their resentment was deeply personal because of the good life they had lost. For Lehi “had led them out of the land of Jerusalem, to leave the land of their inheritance and their gold and their silver and their precious things, and to perish in the wilderness” (1 Nephi 2:11). Years later they would reformulate this same complaint: “Behold, these many years we have suffered in the wilderness, which time we might have enjoyed our possessions and the land of our inheritance; yea, and we might have been happy” (1 Nephi 17:21).

Though descended from a refugee Manassite scribal family, Lehi grew up comfortably in seventh-century Jerusalem.<sup>48</sup> He was highly educated, wealthy, and possessed of a noteworthy inheritance.<sup>49</sup> Nothing he or Nephi tells us would refute the supposition that the attitudes displayed

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48. 1 Nephi 1:4, “my father Lehi having dwelt at Jerusalem in all his days.”

49. See the extended discussion in Reynolds, “Lehi and Nephi as Trained Manassite Scribes.”



by Laman and Lemuel in Nephi's text may have characterized the whole family in their lives before Lehi received his life-changing visions. We should not be surprised if many of the refugee Manassite scribal school families had assimilated themselves over the preceding century to the same wealthy and educated society of Judahite scribes in Jerusalem — the “elders of the Jews” that Lehi's cousin Laban was so comfortably ensconced with — as evidenced by his night-time carousing.<sup>50</sup> Before Lehi received his first visions, they may all have shared the attitude expressed repeatedly by Laman and Lemuel:

And we know that the people which were in the land of Jerusalem were a righteous people, for they keep the statutes and the judgments of the Lord and all his commandments according to the law of Moses; wherefore we know that they are a righteous people. (1 Nephi 17:22)

Lehi may have been referring to a recent dramatic shift in his spiritual perspective when explaining to Sariah his confidence in the Lord's command to send their sons back to Jerusalem to retrieve the Brass Plates:

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. (1 Nephi 5:4)

But Lehi had been sufficiently shaken by the recent prophecies of Jerusalem's looming destruction:

Wherefore it came to pass that my father Lehi, as he went forth, prayed unto the Lord, yea, even with all his heart, in behalf of his people. And it came to pass as he prayed unto the Lord, there came a pillar of fire and dwelt upon a rock before him, and he saw and heard much. And because of the things which he saw and heard, he did quake and tremble exceedingly. (1 Nephi 1:5–6)

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50. See 1 Nephi 4:22. In Reynolds, “Lehi and Nephi as Trained Manassite Scribes,” I have explained why Lehi and Laban should be seen as members of the same Manassite family scribal school that had maintained the Josephite scriptural tradition for centuries and had manufactured the Brass Plates in Lehi's day to preserve their unique collection of inspired writings.



Returning to his home, Lehi was “carried away” in a second vision which may have provided a dramatic turning point in his life. After receiving the dreaded confirmation that Jerusalem would be destroyed and its people “carried away captive” into Babylon, Lehi exclaims:

Great and marvelous are thy works, O Lord God Almighty. Thy throne is high in the heavens, and thy power and goodness and mercy is over all the inhabitants of the earth. And because thou art merciful, thou wilt not suffer those who come unto thee that they shall perish. And after this manner was the language of my father in the praising of his God, for his soul did rejoice and his whole heart was filled because of the things which he had seen, yea, which the Lord had shewn unto him. (1 Nephi 1:14–15)

So what had Lehi seen in the second vision that evoked such an effusively positive response to a vision that had also confirmed his worst fears? In a previous paper I have advanced several reasons for concluding that Lehi’s second vision received at his house in Jerusalem may have been the same great vision of the tree of life described to the first assembly of his emigrant group in the wilderness.<sup>51</sup> It was in that vision that Lehi and Nephi were first taught the gospel of Jesus Christ and the plan of salvation that spelled out the great things the Father and the Son have done to provide for the eternal salvation of mankind — as well as the path men and women must choose and follow if they would receive eternal life. These teachings dramatically expanded the understanding of these newly commissioned prophets beyond their traditional understanding of the Abrahamic covenant. These visions showed Lehi and Nephi what the Lord was doing to bring salvation to all humans who would choose to follow him and give up the worldly perspective of Jerusalem’s elites.

### **The Vision of the Tree of Life**

We should not follow Laman and Lemuel in interpreting Nephi’s youthful actions and attitudes as manifestations of personality defects or immaturity.<sup>52</sup> Nephi and Lehi are trying to persuade all their listeners

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51. Reynolds, “Lehi’s Dream, Nephi’s Blueprint.”

52. Lehi provides the best summary of the accusations and complaints that Laman and Lemuel have lodged against their younger brother in 2 Nephi 1:25–26. As indicated in the abstract and in footnote 7 above, I will not engage here the critical literature and the interpretations of Nephi that have been proposed in some of those writings.

to abandon the perspectives of this fallen world in which life's values are usually judged in terms of creature comforts, social status, or power relationships. As a result of their great visions, Lehi and Nephi recognize that the eternal welfare of their own beloved family members and all peoples depends on their willingness to transcend that temporal perspective as they repent and come to Christ. Nephi and Lehi have seen the heavens opened, have been called as prophets, have become part of the heavenly council, and have spoken in person with the Father and the Son.<sup>53</sup> They understand the possibility of eternal life that is extended to every human being and the awful hell that awaits those who choose to follow the devil while in this probationary state.

From the time they received that great vision they have been changed fundamentally by this eternal, heavenly perspective that trivializes all worldly values. It no longer matters to them whether they have social status, worldly wealth, or even that they be treated fairly by others. They have seen the beginning from the end. They know that the only important issue for all of humanity is salvation — or damnation. This life is a probation that will pass quickly. There will be a judgment and a division between those who have chosen Christ's proffered path to eternal life and those who have surrendered to the captivity of the devil and the eternal suffering to which his path leads. God has provided a way for all to be saved — according to their works. But each individual must choose between pursuit of worldly values or righteousness in following Christ with all the sacrifices and suffering, injustices and disappointments that might entail. Understood in this way, Lehi's vision of the tree of life is also an allegory that describes the choices men and women have in this probationary state and the good and bad consequences associated with those choices.

In their visions, Lehi and Nephi have seen (1) the impending destruction of their Jerusalem, (2) the future coming of Jesus Christ to make salvation possible for every human being, the more distant futures of (3) their own descendants, (4) the nations of the world, and (5) of the house of Israel. They know of the destruction and damnation that awaits those who refuse the blessings of the atonement. They have seen the destruction of their own wicked descendants. They no longer have the option to humor the wicked — to be politely tolerant of all ways of life. While all have equal rights to choose, the ways of life they can choose between are not of equal value. Lehi and Nephi labor diligently to help others choose the right way. But any such efforts will always be offensive

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53. Reynolds, "Lehi's Dream, Nephi's Blueprint," 244.

to those who choose to pursue worldly values. The choice to repent entails a judgment or recognition that the other options are inferior and wrong. For that reason, many people do not appreciate being called to repentance, to give up their own ways and to take up the covenant path provided in Christ's gospel.

In the visualization of this teaching provided in Lehi's vision, we see people (1) who come to the tree of life and endure to the end in righteousness, (2) who taste the fruit and are then embarrassed and shamed by worldly ridicule and return to their worldly pursuits, (3) who are blinded by mists of darkness or the temptations of the devil and never make it to the tree, and (4) who never respond to the invitation, who never seek the tree or its fruit — like Laman and Lemuel in Lehi's dream. For Lehi and Nephi this is all about salvation, and they desperately want that eternal blessing for their family members.

Lehi begins his report on the vision by saying he has “reason to rejoice in the Lord because of Nephi and also of Sam.” But he then tells Laman and Lemuel, “I fear exceedingly because of you” (1 Nephi 8:3–4). He concludes his report on the vision by repeating and expanding on his fears for Laman and Lemuel:

And it came to pass that after my father had spoken all the words of his dream or vision, which were many, he said unto us, because of these things which he saw in a vision, he exceedingly feared for Laman and Lemuel. Yea, he feared lest they should be cast off from the presence of the Lord. And he did exhort them then with all the feeling of a tender parent that they would hearken to his words, in that perhaps the Lord would be merciful to them and not cast them off. Yea, my father did preach unto them. And after that he had preached unto them and also prophesied unto them of many things, he bade them to keep the commandments of the Lord. And he did cease speaking unto them. (1 Nephi 8:36–38)

At the end of his life, Lehi expanded on this vision-based fear in a more detailed expression of his fears for them based on the “hardness of heart” they had displayed repeatedly in their lives to that point:

My heart hath been weighed down with sorrow from time to time, for I have feared, lest for the hardness of your hearts, lest the Lord your God should come out in the fullness of his wrath upon you, that ye be cut off and destroyed forever, or that a cursing should come upon you for the space of many

generations and ye are visited by sword and by famine and are hated and are led according to the will and captivity of the devil. ( 2 Nephi 1:17–18)

Lehi then went on at length calling on Laman and Lemuel to “arise from the dust ... and be men.” He plead with them to “rebel no more against” Nephi as he summed up the list of their offenses against Nephi who was only seeking “the glory of God” and their “own eternal welfare” as “the Spirit of the Lord which was in him ... opened his mouth to utterance, that he could not shut it.” These years of sad experience led Lehi once again to “exceedingly fear and tremble because of” these two rebellious sons (see 2 Nephi 1:19–29). Lehi’s interpretations of his visions and revelations directly reinforce the core message of the allegory Nephi has constructed using their family history.

### **Timeframes Visualized and Verbalized in the Vision Given to Lehi and Nephi**

In a previous paper I have explained Nephi’s use of three important timeframes and their accompanying visual images to convey the teachings of his visions and prophecies.<sup>54</sup>

The eternal perspective is visualized for Lehi as he sees God on his throne in the heavenly council and verbalized as the plan of salvation. The perspective of salvation history and the future of God’s covenant peoples on the earth is visualized in the allegory of the olive tree and verbalized as God’s covenants with Abraham, Lehi, and the founding prophets of other dispensations. The perspective of individual lifetimes is visualized in the vision of the tree of life with a straight and narrow path that leads to salvation and with many strange and forbidden paths that lead to the great and spacious building and eventually to death. This perspective is visualized further in the ancient doctrine of the two ways — the way of light and life that leads to Christ and eternal life, and the way of darkness and death that leads to the eternal captivity of Satan. The former is verbalized throughout the Book of Mormon as the way or as the gospel or doctrine of Christ which men and women can follow back to the presence of God and constitutes the primary message of the Nephite prophets.<sup>55</sup>

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54. See Reynolds, “Lehi’s Dream, Nephi’s Blueprint.”

55. *Ibid.*, 232–33, emphasis added.

Each of these three pairs of visualizations and verbalizations provided Nephi and his readers with helpful metaphors and allegories for understanding different perspectives on this mortal life. Behind all three of them is the fundamental metaphor of *life as a probationary state*.

### **Life as a Probationary State in a Specified Time**

Visions and prophecies were given to Lehi and Nephi to teach them God's perspective on this life as a tiny slice, though essential part, of eternal life. From that divine perspective, they could understand and teach others that other perspectives that focused only on this mortal life were inadequate and would make those who based life decisions in such worldly outlooks vulnerable to the deceptions and temptations of the devil. As Lehi summarized what he had learned from his visions,

Therefore remember, O man: for all thy doings thou shalt be brought into judgment. Wherefore if ye have sought to do wickedly in the days of your *probation*, then ye are found unclean before the judgment seat of God. And no unclean thing can dwell with God; wherefore ye must be cast off forever. (1 Nephi 10:20–21)<sup>56</sup>

Lehi's final appeal to his children to choose the right way was grounded in a recital of the fact and purposes of the creation.

For there is a God and he hath created all things, both the heavens and the earth and all things that in them is, . . . and to bring about his eternal purposes in the end of man . . . wherefore the Lord God gave unto man that he should act for himself. (2 Nephi 2:14–16)

Lehi went on to explain that Adam and Eve first chose to follow the guidance of the devil and ate the forbidden fruit which led to their being cast out and placed in a state of probation where they could choose to repent and keep the commandments.

And after that Adam and Eve had partaken of the forbidden fruit, they were driven out from the garden of Eden to till the earth. And they have brought forth children, yea, even the

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56. The metaphor of life as *a time* or *state* or as *day(s) of probation* is stated explicitly seven times in the words of Lehi and his sons and twice more by later prophets. Cf. 1 Nephi 10:21, 15:31 and 32, 2 Nephi 2:21 and 30, 9:27, 33:9, Helaman 13:38, and Mormon 9:28. See below for a discussion of Alma and Amulek's parallel language describing life as *a probationary state*.

family of all the earth. And the days of the children of men were prolonged, according to the will of God, that they might repent while in the flesh. Wherefore their state became a *state of probation*, and their time was lengthened according to the commandments which the Lord God gave unto the children of men. For he gave commandment that all men must repent, for he shewed unto all men that they were lost because of the transgression of their parents. (2 Nephi 2:19–21)

Lehi and Nephi had been instructed repeatedly in their visions of the redemption offered to all men and women through the atonement of Christ. With that perspective, Lehi went on to plead with his sons to follow “his Holy Spirit,” and not continue in following “the will of the flesh.” This final plea provides the most comprehensive explanation of the metaphor of life as a probation that we have in the Book of Mormon:

But behold, all things have been done in the wisdom of him who knoweth all things. Adam fell that men might be, and men are that they might have joy. And the Messiah cometh in the fullness of time that he might redeem the children of men from the fall. And because that they are redeemed from the fall, they have become free forever, knowing good from evil, to act for themselves and not to be acted upon, save it be by the punishment of the law at the great and last day, according to the commandments which God hath given.

Wherefore men are free according to the flesh, and all things are given them which is expedient unto man. And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death according to the captivity and power of the devil, for he seeketh that all men might be miserable like unto himself.

And now my sons, I would that ye should look to the great Mediator and hearken unto his great commandments and be faithful unto his words and choose eternal life according to the will of his Holy Spirit, and not choose eternal death according to the will of the flesh and the evil which is therein, which giveth the spirit of the devil power to captivate, to bring you down to hell, that he may reign over you in his own kingdom. (2 Nephi 2:24–29)



## Laman and Lemuel Understood the Metaphor Conceptually and Even Repented Episodically

It would be a mistake to think that Laman and Lemuel were somehow incapable of grasping Nephi's metaphor of life as "the days of probation." Their questioning of Nephi about their father's vision comes down to exactly that topic (1 Nephi 15:31–32). Nor would it be correct to think that they were incapable of seeing the error of their recurring impenitence and the reality of God's imbuing Lehi and Nephi with divine power. Nephi's selected stories repeatedly detail ways in which they were forced to acknowledge that divine power or even humbled themselves voluntarily.<sup>57</sup> But these instances of repentance never last. In the long section that bridges the ending of 1 Nephi and the beginning of 2 Nephi, Nephi and then Lehi teach Laman and Lemuel and their families in great detail about the gospel, the plan of salvation, and the importance of using their days of probation wisely (1 Nephi 19 — 2 Nephi 4:12). But then Lehi dies, and Nephi eventually has to lead his faithful followers to a new location to avoid his brothers' plans to take control of their growing colony by murdering him (2 Nephi 5:1–5).

## The Gospel Applies the Plan of Salvation to Individual Lives

Nephi and Lehi had learned in the divine revelations given to them that this life is a time given to men and women to prepare them to return to the presence of God as his covenant sons and daughters. That insight is the fundamental principle behind the plan of salvation as revealed to Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob. Nephi echoed Lehi's summary at the end of his own writings: "But behold, for none of these I cannot hope except they shall be reconciled unto Christ and enter into the narrow gate and walk in the straight path which leads to life and *continue in the path until the end of the day of probation*" (2 Nephi 33:9).<sup>58</sup>

After reporting the part of the great vision in which the Father and the Son taught him the gospel or doctrine of Christ, Nephi concluded by pointing out that the gospel was given to all mankind as the only and true way by which any man or woman could accomplish this:

A And now behold, my beloved brethren, *this is the way*.

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57. Examples of both responses are featured in 1 Nephi 2:14, 3:21, 4:4, 7:20–21, 15:20, 16:5, 16:20–24 and 32, 16:39, 17:44:1–18:1, 18:15–20, 19:22–23.

58. Papers documenting this concept of the path or the gospel of Jesus Christ in the Book of Mormon are listed above in footnote 21.

- B        And *there is none other way* nor name given under  
          heaven
- C        whereby man can be saved in the kingdom of *God*.
- A\*      And now behold, *this is the doctrine of Christ*,
- B\*        and *the only and true doctrine* of the Father and of the  
          Son and of the Holy Ghost,
- C\*        which is one *God* without end. (2 Nephi 31:21)

### **Support for the Metaphor of Life as a Probation from the Brass Plates**

Lehi's final teaching appears to draw on the creation account restored to Joseph Smith in the Book of Moses that features language not present in biblical Genesis and appears to have been included in the Brass Plates.<sup>59</sup> Like Lehi, that account portrays the devil as an enemy to "*the agency of man*" who seeks "to deceive and to blind men, and to *lead them captive at his will*, even as many as would not hearken unto my voice" (Moses 4:3–4). Through the Holy Ghost men are taught that this life is a time to believe and repent that they may be redeemed and prepared for eternal life:

And in that day the Holy Ghost fell upon Adam, which beareth record of the Father and the Son, saying: I am the Only Begotten of the Father from the beginning, henceforth and forever, that as thou hast fallen thou mayest be redeemed, and all mankind, even as many as will.

And in that day Adam blessed God and was filled, and began to prophesy concerning all the families of the earth, saying: Blessed be the name of God, for because of my transgression my eyes are opened, and in this life I shall have joy, and again in the flesh I shall see God. And Eve, his wife, heard all these things and was glad, saying: Were it not for our transgression we never should have had seed, and never should have known good and evil, and the joy of our redemption, and the eternal life which God giveth unto all the obedient. And Adam and

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59. See Jeff Lindsay and Noel B. Reynolds, "'Strong Like unto Moses': The Case for Ancient Roots in the Book of Moses Based on Book of Mormon Usage of Related Content Apparently from the Brass Plates," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 44 (2021): 1–92, for a demonstration of the high probability that the creation account available to the Nephites in the Brass Plates was very similar or equivalent to the Book of Moses as restored to Joseph Smith.

Eve blessed the name of God, and they made all things known unto their sons and their daughters. (Moses 5:9–12)

This concept — that in the divine perspective mortal life is a probationary period in which men and women can prove themselves as faithful followers of the Lord — never surfaces clearly in the Bible, though it could easily be posited as a background explanation for the creation and the repeated calls to obedience. While the Bible does not explicitly advance the metaphor of life as a probation, it can be read easily as being consistent with that metaphor.

The Book of Moses cited above was likely the version of Genesis contained in the Brass Plates. While the Book of Moses does not use the word *probation*, it clearly uses the concept in multiple explanations of the plan of salvation given to the earliest prophets. The preceding quotation reports the teachings of an angel to Adam. The contrast between those who would and would not hearken to God’s voice was framed by Moses in the same chapter (see Moses 5: 55–59). In Chapter Six, the Lord spoke to Enoch from heaven describing the decree “sent forth from the beginning” by which the wicked have been warned of “a hell I have prepared for them, if they repent not” (Moses 6:26–30). As Enoch undertook the mission to preach the divinely given message, he began by asking people “why counsel ye yourselves, and deny the God of heaven?”<sup>60</sup> After Enoch’s great success in establishing Zion, the Lord spoke to him again about his brethren who have rejected the prophet’s message and their heavenly Father: “And unto thy brethren have I said, and also given commandment, that they should love one another, and that they should choose me, their Father; but behold, they are without affection, and they hate their own blood.”<sup>61</sup> The Book of Moses may well have been an important source that reinforced Lehi’s and Nephi’s newly discovered metaphor for human life. From beginning to end it expands and reinforces the theme announced in the opening chapter: “This is my work and my glory — to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39).

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60. This opening line in Moses 6:43 sets up the long explanation of God’s plan of salvation that was prepared to overcome the inadequacies of all the competing understandings of life invented by men in Moses 6: 43–62.

61. This sentence in Moses 7:33 anchors the longer passage about the choice that God has given to all men and women between God and Satan as their father, between the sins of their own ways and repentance and returning to the Lord. See Moses 7: 32–39.

The Book of Abraham given to Joseph Smith sometime after the translation of the Book of Mormon, and also likely included in the Brass Plates, does point explicitly to this concept as the purpose for creation:<sup>62</sup>

And there stood one among them that was like unto God, and he said unto those who were with him: We will go down, for there is space there, and we will take of these materials, and we will make an earth whereon these may dwell; And we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them. (Abraham 3:24–25)

### **Mormon's Abridgment Extends Nephi's Metaphorical Model**

The binary understanding of the doctrine of the two ways as taught by Lehi and Nephi persists in Mormon's abridgment in quotations taken from the teachings from later prophets and from the Lord himself. A few examples will be sufficient to support this point.

#### **Abinadi**

The wicked king Noah ordered the prophet Abinadi to be burned to death for teaching this to his people:

And then shall the wicked be cast out, and they shall have cause to howl and weep and wail and gnash their teeth — and this because they would not hearken unto the voice of the Lord. Therefore the Lord redeemeth them not. For they are carnal and devilish; and the devil hath power over them, ... But remember that he that persists in his own carnal nature and goes on in the ways of sin and rebellion against God, he remaineth in his fallen state, and the devil hath all power over him. Even this mortal shall put on immortality, and this corruption shall put on incorruption and shall be brought to stand before the bar of God to be judged of him according to their works, whether they be good or whether they be evil: if they be good, to the resurrection of endless life and happiness; and if they be evil, to the resurrection of endless damnation, being delivered up to the devil, who hath subjected them

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62. In a previous article, I have argued that there are good reasons to conclude that the Book of Abraham was included in the Brass Plates, which the Nephites regarded as their "holy scriptures." See Noel B. Reynolds, "A Backstory for the Brass Plates," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 53 (2022): 199–254.

— which is damnation — having gone according to their own carnal wills and desires, having never called upon the Lord while the arms of mercy was extended towards them — for the arms of mercy was extended towards them and they would not — they being warned of their iniquities, and yet they would not depart from them. And they were commanded to repent, and yet they would not repent. (Mosiah 16: 2–3, 5, 10–12)

### **The Lord Instructs Alma**

When Alma sought divine direction in prayer on how to deal with unrepentant sinners in the church at Zarahemla, he received this direction from the Lord:

And he that will hear my voice shall be my sheep; and him shall ye receive into the church, and him will I also receive. For behold, this is my church. Whosoever that is baptized shall be baptized unto repentance; and whosoever ye receive shall believe in my name, and him will I freely forgive. For it is I that taketh upon me the sins of the world, for it is I that hath created them. And it is I that granteth unto him that believeth in the end a place at my right hand. For behold, in my name are they called; and if they know me, they shall come forth and shall have a place eternally at my right hand. And it shall come to pass that when the second trump shall sound, then shall they that never knew me come forth and shall stand before me. And then shall they know that I am the Lord their God, that I am their Redeemer, but they would not be redeemed. And then will I confess unto them that I never knew them, and they shall depart into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels. Therefore I say unto you that he that will not hear my voice, the same shall ye not receive into my church, for him I will not receive at the last day. (Mosiah 26:21–28)

While other prophetic statements could be cited, these two adequately demonstrate that Nephi's despair for those, who like his brothers, Laman and Lemuel, would not hear the word of the Lord because of the hardness of their hearts, echoed powerfully down through the Nephite dispensation. The great sorrow of Lehi and Nephi was the knowledge that their own descendants would be divided between these two kinds of people, both in life and at the final judgment.

### **Alma in Ammonihah**

Lehi and Nephi's introduction of the metaphor of life as a probation persisted successfully throughout the Nephite dispensation. On two different occasions, Alma used a review of creation and the subsequent fall of Adam and Eve to explain the fact that ever since that fall, their descendants have been in a probationary state. Preaching to the apostate Nephites in Ammonihah, Alma explained:

Nevertheless there was a space granted unto man in which he might repent. Therefore this life became *a probationary state*, a time to prepare to meet God, a time to prepare for that endless state which has been spoken of by us, which is after the resurrection of the dead. (Alma 12:24)

### **Amulek to the Zoramites**

The effectiveness of Alma's teaching was nowhere more evident than in the teaching of his follower and eventual missionary companion, Amulek, as they undertook to reclaim the apostate Zoramites. Amulek's sermon was possibly the clearest of the Nephite explanations of the teaching that this life is a day of probation:

And now my brethren, I would that after ye have received so many witnesses, seeing that the holy scriptures testifies of these things, come forth and bring fruit unto repentance. Yea, I would that ye would come forth and harden not your hearts any longer. For behold, now is the time and the day of your salvation. And therefore, if ye will repent and harden not your hearts, immediately shall the great plan of redemption be brought about unto you.

For behold, this life is the time for men to prepare to meet God. Yea, behold, the day of this life is the day for men to perform their labors. And now as I said unto you before, as ye have had so many witnesses, therefore I beseech of you that ye do not procrastinate the day of your repentance until the end. For after this day of life, which is given us to prepare for eternity, behold, if we do not improve our time while in this life, then cometh the night of darkness wherein there can be no labor performed. ...

For behold, if ye have procrastinated the day of your repentance even until death, behold, ye have become



subjected to the spirit of the devil, and he doth seal you his.<sup>63</sup> Therefore the Spirit of the Lord hath withdrawn from you and hath no place in you, and the devil hath all power over you. And this is the final state of the wicked. ...

And now my beloved brethren, I desire that ye should remember these things and that ye should work out your salvation with fear before God and that ye should no more deny the coming of Christ, that ye contend no more against the Holy Ghost, but that ye receive it and take upon you the name of Christ, that ye humble yourselves even to the dust and worship God in whatsoever place ye may be in, in spirit and in truth, and that ye live in thanksgiving daily for the many mercies and blessings which he doth bestow upon you. (Alma 34:30–38)

### **Alma's Blessing to His Son Corianton**

Sometime later, Alma was blessing and teaching his sons and took the opportunity to explain these things in much greater detail to his wayward son, Corianton:

And thus we see that there was a time granted unto man to repent, yea, a *probationary time*, a time to repent and serve God. For behold, if Adam had put forth his hand immediately and partook of the tree of life, he would have lived forever, according to the word of God, having no space for repentance. Yea, and also the word of God would have been void, and the great plan of salvation would have been frustrated...

And now remember, my son, if it were not for the plan of redemption — laying it aside — as soon as they were dead, their souls were miserable, being cut off from the presence of the Lord. And now there was no means to reclaim men from this fallen state, which man had brought upon himself because of his own disobedience. Therefore according to justice the plan of redemption could not be brought about, only on conditions of repentance of men in this *probationary state*, yea, this preparatory state. (Alma 42:4–5 and 11–13)

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63. Twenty years ago, John Gee explained the ancient-world meaning of the verb *seal* as declaring personal possession. See John Gee, “Book of Mormon Word Usage: ‘Seal You His,’” *Insights* 22, no. 1 (2002): 4.

In the long passage from which these statements are excerpted, Alma links the metaphor of life as a probationary state six times to “God’s great plan of salvation” using four of its names before summing these up as “his great and eternal purposes, which was prepared from the foundation of the world” (Alma 42:26).<sup>64</sup> The understanding of human life as a probationary state given to Lehi and Nephi in their early visions clearly dominated Nephite teaching of the plan of salvation across multiple centuries down to the time of Alma and his successors.

### Occurrences of the Metaphor in Modern Cultures

While the metaphor of life as a probationary state has not been featured broadly in Christian or Jewish theologies, it has been promoted by some Bible scholars, moralists, and philosophers. After an extensive but not exhaustive survey of the Early English Books Online database, I can say that the term *probation* appears in English writings from the sixteenth century onward reflecting earlier usages in Latin and French literature.

Because the Book of Mormon translation was largely rendered in what we now recognize as Early Modern English,<sup>65</sup> I investigated sixteenth- and seventeenth-century usage most thoroughly. Three usages predominate in that period. The first is the legal concept of probation that we still use today. The second has long since disappeared; the *day of probation* on academic calendars was the scheduled day for exams. And third, the word *probation* was also used extensively to refer to proofs in arguments, mathematics, and philosophy.

However, the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* also lists a handful of early statements in which the word was used to refer to periods of “testing of the character, conduct, or abilities of a person” so that one could speak of “a period or state of trial.” Even today, we hire people “on probation.” By 1685 this blossomed into a metaphor of life as a probation in the writings of Isaac Barrow (1630–1677) who clearly stated that “this life is a state of probation and exercise, like to that . . . of God’s people in the wilderness.”<sup>66</sup>

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64. These six references occur in Alma 42:4–5, 8, 10–11, 13, 15, and 16.

65. See Stanford Carmack, “A Look at Some ‘Nonstandard’ Book of Mormon Grammar,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 11 (2014): 209–62. An updated adaptation of this original paper is now included as Stanford Carmack, “The Nature of the Nonstandard English in the Book of Mormon,” in *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon: Part One, Grammatical Variation*, ed. Royal Skousen (Provo, UT: FARMS and BYU Studies, 2016), 45–95.

66. Isaac Barrow, *Of Contentment, Patience and Resignation to the Will of God Several Sermons* (London: M. Flesher for Brabazon Aylmer, 1685), 4:133. See

The *OED* lists a very few similar usages before William Paley (1743–1805) who asserted in a sermon over a century later that “Of the various views under which human life has been considered, no one seems so reasonable as that which regards it as a state of probation.”<sup>67</sup> Over a century after Paley, the philosopher A. E. Taylor (1869–1945) articulated an equally clear version of this metaphor while observing that its day of popularity was over: “We clearly may have to reconsider the worth of a once familiar conception which is now very much out of general favour, the conception of our earthly life as one of *probation*.”<sup>68</sup>

These investigations show that while we cannot claim that the Nephite metaphor advanced by Lehi and Nephi is unique, it has never captured modern English-speaking theological theorizing. This may be because the metaphor suggests a pre-mortal existence of individual humans and a post-mortal existence which will be blessed positively according to the good works of individuals in their mortal probation. As comfortable as that concept may have been for Barrow, Paley, and Taylor, it has not fit easily with prevailing Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish theologies. For that reason, the Book of Mormon and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints may well be the most prominent proponents of this metaphor in contemporary religious culture.

### **Laman and Lemuel Again**

Lehi and all his family may well have shared the more worldly perspective of the Jews in Jerusalem that led the Lord to send them into Babylonian captivity. But when he sent Jeremiah and other prophets to warn them, Lehi’s heart was softened sufficiently that he turned to prayer, and the Lord gave him great visions. He and other prophets who warned of the impending catastrophe were driven out of Jerusalem or even killed. Laman and Lemuel were essential to this story as the individuals Lehi and Nephi knew best who were repeatedly humbled into obedience by the overwhelming power of the Lord’s interventions in their lives but who repeatedly returned to their vision of this life as a time to enjoy their riches, their comfortable and elite social position, and be happy.

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many other similar examples of this obsolete or rare usage listed there such as B. Whichcote (1683), Bf. J. Butler (1736), and J. R. McDuff (1858) from the same sixteenth- to nineteenth-century time period.

67. William Paley, “This Life a State of Probation,” Sermon 33 in *The Works of William Paley, D. D.* (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Peter Brown, 1829), 706–709.

68. A. E. Taylor, *The Faith of a Moralist: Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of St. Andrews* (London: Macmillan, 1930), 422.

Nephi's writing was devoted to convincing his descendants and other readers down to the last days of this newly revealed or restored metaphor that *life is a probation*. It was grounded in his personal experience of visions and revelations on the one hand and the rebellions of his murmuring brothers on the other. We do not get the full benefit of Nephi's account when we see him focused on the spiritual failings of his brothers so that we will condemn them and use Nephi as our exemplar. Rather, Nephi wants his readers to see themselves in Laman and Lemuel's conduct to the extent that they are stiff-necked and harden their hearts in resistance to the Lord's Spirit. Nephi wants his readers to accept the Lord's continuing invitation to all men and women to repent and take up the covenant path through which he can prepare them to return to him. Like Lehi before him, Nephi could have concluded, "I have none other object save it be the everlasting welfare of your souls" (2 Nephi 2:30).

### Conclusions

Nephi's stories of the murmuring of Laman and Lemuel play an essential role in his presentation of God's teachings that goes far beyond documenting the brothers' mistreatment of Lehi and Nephi. The behavior of Laman and Lemuel provided Nephi with real-life examples of the binary structure of human possibilities in this probationary state. Their life-long resistance to the softening influence of the Spirit exemplified the hardness of heart and stiffness of neck that characterizes those in all generations who will not humble themselves before the Father and believe in him and the gospel of his Son as the only way that leads to meaningful salvation.

Because of his personal experience with Laman and Lemuel, Nephi could explain in universal terms why their descendants would go through cycles of belief and apostasy and finally be destroyed. Lehi, Nephi, and their faithful successors labored in every way to bring salvation to Laman and Lemuel and their descendants. But over their dispensation, both Nephites and Lamanites would divide repeatedly between choosers of righteousness and of wickedness. Nephi taught that those choices would determine which ones would be raised to eternal life at the final judgment and which would be condemned to hell as captives of the devil.

Undergirding it all is the revealed metaphor of this life as the/their "*days of probation*" (1 Nephi 15:31–32). The great visions of Lehi and Nephi showed them that this life is but a moment in the eternity that God has prepared for all his children. In the first book of his final writings,

Nephi has composed an allegory based in his own life's experience that shows how all people can rise above limited understandings or metaphors of life and engage the eternal vision that characterizes mortal life as a probationary state "according to the great plans of the Eternal God" (Alma 34:9). Nephi's life efforts and writings were devoted to convincing his own people and his future readers that they too should pursue eternal life by following the covenant path spelled out for them in the gospel or doctrine of Christ. Nephi's first book not only reports the revelations and spiritual teachings received by him and his father Lehi, but it also goes to the next literary level by transforming their family experiences into an allegory that promotes the new metaphor of life as a probationary state that grounds the plan of salvation as revealed to them.

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