Type: Journal Article

# The Deuteronomist Reforms and Lehi's Family Dynamics: A Social Context for the Rebellions of Laman and Lemuel

Author(s): Neal Rappleye
Source: *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, Volume 16 (2014), pp. 87-99
Published by: The Interpreter Foundation

**Abstract:** Over the last few years, several Latter-day Saint scholars have commented on how the socio-religious setting of Judah in the late-seventh century bc informs and contextualizes our reading of the Book of Mormon, especially that of 1 and 2 Nephi. Particular emphasis has been placed on how Lehi and Nephi appear to have been in opposition to certain changes implemented by the Deuteronomists at this time, but Laman's and Lemuel's views have only been commented on in passing. In this paper, I seek to contextualize Laman and Lemuel within this same socio-religious setting and suggest that, in opposition to Lehi and Nephi, they were supporters of the Deuteronomic reforms.

INTERPRETER
A Journal of Mormon Scripture

Volume 16 · 2015 · Pages 87-99

# The Deuteronomist Reforms and Lehi's Family Dynamics: A Social Context for the Rebellions of Laman and Lemuel

Neal Rappleye

Offprint Series

ISSN 2372-1227 (print)
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

The goal of The Interpreter Foundation is to increase understanding of scripture through careful scholarly investigation and analysis of the insights provided by a wide range of ancillary disciplines, including language, history, archaeology, literature, culture, ethnohistory, art, geography, law, politics, philosophy, etc. Interpreter will also publish articles advocating the authenticity and historicity of LDS scripture and the Restoration, along with scholarly responses to critics of the LDS faith. We hope to illuminate, by study and faith, the eternal spiritual message of the scriptures—that Jesus is the Christ.

Although the Board fully supports the goals and teachings of the Church, Interpreter Foundation is an independent entity and is neither owned, controlled by nor affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or with Brigham Young University. All research and opinions provided are the sole responsibility of their respective authors, and should not be interpreted as the opinions of the Board, nor as official statements of LDS doctrine, belief or practice.

This journal is a weekly publication. Visit us at MormonInterpreter.com
You may subscribe to this journal at MormonInterpreter.com/annual-print-subscription

# The Deuteronomist Reforms and Lehi's Family Dynamics: A Social Context for the Rebellions of Laman and Lemuel

**Neal Rappleye**

*Over the last few years, several Latter-day Saint scholars have commented on how the socio-religious setting of Judah in the late-seventh century BC informs and contextualizes our reading of the Book of Mormon, especially that of 1 and 2 Nephi. Particular emphasis has been placed on how Lehi and Nephi appear to have been in opposition to certain changes implemented by the Deuteronomists at this time, but Laman's and Lemuel's views have only been commented on in passing. In this paper, I seek to contextualize Laman and Lemuel within this same socio-religious setting and suggest that, in opposition to Lehi and Nephi, they were supporters of the Deuteronomic reforms.*

In his book *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, Grant Hardy observed, "In the Book of Mormon, Laman and Lemuel are stock characters, even caricatures. They don't develop much, and it seems that their sole mode of communication is complaining." Hardy argues that Nephi does this deliberately; he "flattens his older brothers by treating them as a single unit rather than as individuals."[1] Nephi, in other words, creates a context (or lack thereof) wherein his brothers merely become oppositional props in his own repeated successes. Using modern scholarship on the religious and social milieu of Judah just before the Babylonian exile, we can create a differen context for Laman's and Lemuel's actions and attitudes that will flesh out what Nephi flattens.[2]

1 Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 33.

2 On the role of the historian or scholar as a *creator* of context, see Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 2001), 17–22.

## Socio-Religious Tension in Seventh Century BC Jerusalem

Lehi raised his family in Jerusalem in the late-seventh century BC before taking his family from that world to the deserts of Arabia early in the sixth century BC (see 1 Nephi 1:4). The seventh century BC was a time of social unrest and uncertainty in Judah. According to John W. Welch and Robert D. Hunt, "This has been a time of momentous turmoil. Civil wars, international conflict, rising and falling fortunes, and shifting cultural pressures and loyalties have raised anxieties and uncertainties throughout the region."[3] Both the political and religious landscape were being transformed in ways that heightened certain social tensions — tensions that were reflected in the family dynamics described in 1 Nephi.

In the mid-seventh century BC, King Josiah instituted sweeping political and religious reforms throughout Judah. "During this turbulent period," explains Mordechai Cogan, "Josiah's home-front reputation was made." Cogan proceeds to summarize Josiah's reforms, as portrayed by the biblical authors:

> Our sources depict Josiah as deeply moved by the message of the "book of law," when it was read to him, that violators of Israel's covenant with God would be severely punished. After due consultation and encouragement from the prophetess Huldah, he convoked a kingdomwide assembly to renew the covenant between Judah and God based on the "law." This commitment in hand, Josiah ordered a thoroughgoing purge of all non-Israelite forms of worship — the residue of centuries-long accommodation and influence. Everything associated with these rituals was removed and burned, and the priests who attended them banned. And, like Hezekiah in his day, Josiah outlawed worship at the local shrines and high places, redirecting all ritual to the newly cleansed Temple.[4]

According to Margaret Barker, "One generation before Zedekiah there had been the great upheaval in the reign of King Josiah, something now regarded as the turning point in the history of Jerusalem and its

3 John W. Welch and Robert D. Hunt, "Culturegram: Jerusalem 600 BC," in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2004), 22.

4 Mordechai Cogan, "Into Exile: From the Assyrian Conquest of Israel to the Fall of Babylon," in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, ed. Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 345.

religion."[5] Because the book of Deuteronomy is believed to be the "book of law" associated with this reform, the movement is often called the Deuteronomic Reform, and those who agreed with it are called Deuteronomists. Again, Barker explains, "We now recognize that King Josiah enabled a particular group to dominate the religious scene in Jerusalem about 620 BCE: the Deuteronomists. Josiah's purge was driven by their ideals, and their scribes influenced much of the form of the Old Testament we have today, especially the history in 1 and 2 Kings."[6] All of this is likely within the lifetime of Lehi, and the efforts at reform, and the social tensions they created no doubt would have continued into the reign of Zedekiah in 597 BC.

The many scholarly attempts at reconstructing the full nature and extent of these reforms often differ in details. Barker laments, "We can never know for certain what it was that Josiah purged or why he did it. No original versions of the actual texts or records survive from that period, but even the stories as they have come down to us in various sources show that this was a time of major upheaval that was not forgotten."[7] It is from these sources that a context for the differing perspectives of members of Lehi's family can be created. As other Latter-day Saints have noticed, the specific context woven by Barker, though regarded by some scholars as idiosyncratic, proves particularly illuminating for the Book of Mormon.

It is important to realize that Lehi may not have been in complete agreement with Josiah's reforms. Lehi's heritage goes back to the northern Israelite Kingdom, to which these reforms showed a certain degree of hostility. Gardner writes, "The antagonism of the Deuteronomic history to the northern kingdom and the Book of Mormon's affiliation with that kingdom should suggest at least the possibility that Lehi might resist some of Josiah's Deuteronomic reforms."[8] This is not to say that Lehi was *completely* opposed to the reforms. In fact, Lehi and Nephi do appear to be positively influenced in some ways by the Deuteronomic

5 Margaret Barker, "Joseph Smith and Preexilic Israelite Religion," in *The Worlds of Joseph Smith: A Bicentennial Conference at the Library of Congress*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: BYU Press, 2006), 70.

6 Barker, "Joseph Smith and Preexilic Israelite Religion," 71.

7 Margaret Barker, "What Did King Josiah Reform?" in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, 538.

8 Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2007–2008), 1:36.

ideology.[9] Thus, the way Josiah's reforms were seen in Lehi's eyes might be compared to how the Protestant Reformation is viewed by Latter-day Saints today — the work of inspired and well-intended individuals who are, nonetheless, misguided in some (often many) respects.

Significantly, Barker notes, "Remnants of the older faith survived in many places, preserved by the descendants of those who fled from Josiah's purge."[10] Although Lehi leaves after Josiah's day, his persecutors who "sought his life, that they might take it away" (1 Nephi 1:20) were likely supporters of the reform (see below). Hence, Gardner applies this to Lehi.

> Lehi and his family fit into Barker's category of people who left Jerusalem who did not agree with the reforms. The Book of Mormon represents Israelite religion in the pre-exilic period and particularly elements of a time when there were differing ideas and probably heated differences in the direction that religion was to take in addition to the political turmoil imposed by conquering armies, Lehi also experienced a major shift in Judah's public religion, directed by the king. No change comes without resistance, and many crucial themes of the Book of Mormon emphasize some elements of the pre-reform religion lost to the biblical record, although there are indications that Nephite religion was not opposed to all of the Deuteronomistic agenda.[11]

Gardner and other Latter-day Saint commentators have used this context productively to shed light on Lehi and Nephi, but this context has been applied to Laman and Lemuel only in passing. These older sons of Lehi seem to have fully bought into the reformers' ideology, and this is reflected in their reactions to Lehi and Nephi.

## Laman and Lemuel As Deuteronomists

"Whatever else they may have been," reasons Hardy, "Laman and Lemuel appear to have been orthodox, observant Jews. Nephi — who has a vested interest in revealing their moral shortcomings — never accuses them

9 See Kevin Christensen, "Paradigms Regained: A Survey of Margaret Barker's Scholarship and Its Significance for Mormon Studies," *FARMS Occasional Papers* 2 (2001): 9–11;William J. Hamblin, "Vindicating Josiah," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*. 4 (2013): 165–76.

10 Barker, "What Did King Josiah Reform?" 534.

11 Gardner, *Second Witness*, 1:41.

of idolatry, false swearing, Sabbath breaking, drunkenness, adultery, or ritual uncleanness."[12] Hardy's argument is one from silence, but the silence is significant. Indeed, Nephi says Laman and Lemuel were "like unto the Jews who were at Jerusalem, who sought to take away the life of my father" (1 Nephi 2:13). The gate-keepers of Jewish "orthodoxy" just prior to the exile were the Deuteronomists. Kevin Christensen explains, "Laman and Lemuel demonstrate sympathy for the Jerusalem party, the same group of people who caused problems for Jeremiah and Ezekiel."[13] Brant Gardner more explicitly links them to the Deuteronomic reforms.

> The situation in Jerusalem after Josiah's reforms may shed some light on understanding Laman and Lemuel as well as illuminating some of the religious conflict that runs throughout the Book of Mormon. … Lehi's family may be a microcosm of the conflict in Jerusalem between those who espoused Josiah's Deuteronomic reforms and the pre-reform religion. Lehi's theology had affinities with the older religion. What if Laman and Lemuel were believers in the reform?[14]

Though posing the question, Gardner does not explore the possibilities it opens up. Taking a number of case studies from Nephi's record, the actions and attitudes of Laman and Lemuel do in fact become believable as those of a pair of believers in the Deuteronomic reforms.

## Murmuring At the Altar

When Lehi first arrived at his first camp site, "he built an altar of stones, and made an offering unto the Lord" (1 Nephi 2:7). While alternative interpretations of the legal codes were likely available,[15] strict interpretation of the legal codes by Deuteronomists prohibited the

12 Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 39.

13 Kevin Christensen, "The Temple, the Monarchy, and Wisdom: Lehi's World and the Scholarship of Margaret Barker," in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely, eds. (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2004), 497.

14 Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2007–2008), 1:92.

15 The Dead Sea Scrolls, though later than Lehi's time-period, provide an example of an interpretation which is consistent with Lehi's actions. See David Rolph Seely, "Lehi's Altar and Sacrifice in the Wilderness," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 10/1 (2001): 62–69.

sacrifice and offerings by non-Levites outside the temple.[16] It therefore seems significant that it is immediately *after* Lehi sacrifices at the altar that Nephi first mentions Laman and Lemuel, "murmur[ing] against their father" (1 Nephi 2:11–12). Read against the backdrop of the reforms, the timing would suggest the possibility that it was Lehi's perceived violation of Deuteronomic law which evoked, or at least contributed to, the complaints from his oldest sons.

## "Visionary Man"

One of the accusations Laman and Lemuel make against Lehi at this time is that he was a "visionary man," who followed the "foolish imaginations of his heart" (1 Nephi 2:11; cf. 1 Nephi 5:9; 17:20). According to Kevin Christensen, the Deuteronomist ideology rejected visions as a means of knowing the Lord's will, and not only did Lehi receive visions, but some of the content of his visions specifically reflected old beliefs the Deuteronomists were trying to eradicate.[17]

Both John A. Tvedtnes and Matthew Roper have noted that "visionary man" is an appropriate translation of the Hebrew חזה (*ḥôzeh*). Roper adds that the pejorative usage of "visionary man" by Laman and Lemuel was more than mere ridicule or name-calling — it was actually the strong accusation that he was a false prophet.[18] Deuteronomists would have regarded a prophet like Lehi — who claimed to have seen the divine council and received the mysteries (see 1 Nephi 1:8–14) — as a false prophet. Thus Laman and Lemuel calling their father a "visionary man" would be a direct result of their acceptance of the Deuteronomistic interpretation of what a proper prophet should be. They were declaring that their father, by definition of seeing visions, should not be accepted as a true prophet.

Nephi appears to counter, however, by proof-texting from Numbers 12:6,[19] which explicitly declares "If there be a prophet among you, I the Lord will make myself known unto him in a vision, and *will speak unto him in a dream*" (emphasis added). Nephi, it seems, draws on this

16 See ibid., 66–67.

17 See Christensen, "The Temple, the Monarchy, and Wisdom," 452–457.

18 See John A. Tvedtnes, "A Visionary Man," in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon: The FARMS Updates of the 1990s*, ed. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1999), 29–31; Matthew Roper, "Scripture Update: Lehi as a Visionary Man," *Insights* 27/4 (2007): 2–3.

19 I greatly appreciate the insight of an anonymous reviewer who pointed this out to me.

passage just before introducing his brothers' complaints, writing, "the Lord spake unto my father, yea, even in a dream" (1 Nephi 2:1). Hence, as Nephi sets up the narrative, he has already subtly refuted the charge that his father was a false prophet by the time the reader is exposed to it.

## "Jerusalem, That Great City"

According to Nephi, Laman and Lemuel did not "believe that Jerusalem, that great city, could be destroyed according to the words of the prophets" (1 Nephi 2:13). In this, again, Laman and Lemuel were aligned with the Jerusalem elite. David Rolph Seely and Fred E. Woods note that this was the common attitude in Jerusalem at the time and identify six contributing factors.[20] One such factor was the heightened sense of self-righteousness connected with the reforms and manifest in Laman and Lemuel (see 1 Nephi 17:22). "The recent reforms of Josiah (640–609 BC) … had given certain people of Judah an undue sense of self and community righteousness that they believed would surely preserve them from any threatened destruction."[21]

Seely and Woods also explain, "The reforms of Josiah — in conjunction with Judah's perception of the invincibility of their city promised in the Davidic covenant and the miraculous deliverance of the city during the reign of Hezekiah — reinforced the people's belief that the great city of Jerusalem could not be destroyed."[22] Hezekiah, who instituted reforms similar to Josiah's about a century earlier, is Josiah's most immediate ideological forbears. Meanwhile, in the Deuteronomist history, Josiah "is depicted as a second David" and "touted as the ideal Davidic king."[23] Laman and Lemuel, "like unto the Jews who were at Jerusalem," did not believe that their father's prophecy about the destruction of Jerusalem could ever happen.

## Rebellion in the Desert and "Murderous" Intent

Deuteronomic ideals also provide a context within which Laman and Lemuel's rebellion, and even attempt to kill Nephi, in 1 Nephi 7 can

20 See David Rolph Seely and Fred E. Woods, "How Could Jerusalem, 'That Great City,' be Destroyed?" in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, 595–610.

21 Seely and Woods, "How Could Jerusalem 'That Great City,' be Destroyed?" 596.

22 Seely and Woods, "How Could Jerusalem 'That Great City,' be Destroyed?" 605.

23 Cogan, "Into Exile," 342, 345.

make sense. Believing the Deuteronomists were right, and thus the Lord would protect the holy city, "they were desirous to return unto the land of Jerusalem" (1 Nephi 7:7). As Nephi tries to persuade them to rejoin their father at his camp, he reiterates the prophecies of destruction and adds to them his own prophetic pronouncement, "Now behold, I say unto you that if ye will return unto Jerusalem ye shall also perish with them," words which Nephi insists were given to him by "the Spirit of the Lord" (1 Nephi 7:15, see vv. 13–15). Now Nephi, like Lehi, was in their minds a "visionary man," that is, a false prophet. Grant Hardy explains how this would appear to "orthodox Jews" at that time. "Laman and Lemuel would have been aware that the scriptural penalty for false prophets was death (Deut. 18:20; cf. 13:1–11). … The brothers might well have recalled that the Deuteronomic judgment on false prophets required a summary execution, even for 'thy brother, the son of thy mother' (Deut. 13:6)."[24] This could also explain their later attempts to kill both Nephi and Lehi (see 1 Nephi 16:37–38).

## Nephi As Joseph

At various points in his narrative, Nephi uses allusions to the conflict between Joseph and his brothers to set himself up as a type of Joseph, a younger brother chosen to rule over his older siblings. The Deuteronomists opposed traditions grounded in the old "wisdom literature," which portrayed prophets as men of visions and dreams. Joseph is one of two biblical figures (the other is Daniel) most prominently portrayed as "wise men" (the prophets of the wisdom tradition).[25]

That Joseph was a prominent figure in an ideology opposed by the Deuteronomists perhaps adds a layer of subtext to Nephi's use of Joseph, particularly in the narrative of 1 Nephi 7.[26] Here, parallels are most pronounced during Laman and Lemuel's first rebellion, in which his older brothers take him and bind him with the intent to kill him and let his body "be devoured by wild beasts" (1 Nephi 7:16). Joseph's older brothers also bound him with the intent to kill him, and told their father he had been devoured by an "evil beast" (see Genesis 37:20, 33). Thus, in the height of his opposition with his brothers, Nephi portrays himself as a second Joseph, one of the heroes of the old wisdom tradition. Laman's

24 Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 40.

25 See Christensen, "Paradigms Regained," 20–21; Christensen, "The Temple, the Monarchy, and Wisdom," 492–495.

26 See Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 42–43; Gardner, *Second Witness*, 148–149.

and Lemuel's affiliation with the Deuteronomists and their opposition to that tradition heightens the symbolism of Nephi's allusions and imbues them with further meaning: not only Nephi's brothers, but the movement which they represent, the Deuteronomic reforms, are likened unto Joseph's brothers and thus given a negative connotation.

## Laman, Lemuel, and the Law

The clearest evidence of their Deuteronomic sensibilities is their expressed commitment to the law. The Deuteronomists heavily emphasized the law. "The first wave of activity," reports Kevin Christensen, "came with Josiah's decade of reform, the composition of the Deuteronomist edition of the history, and the reemphasis on Moses and the Law in Israelite religion."[27] Christensen explains that the reforms supplanted the older wisdom tradition, to which Nephi and Lehi appear to be affiliated, with a near veneration of the law.[28]

Laman and Lemuel also hold the law up as the final arbiter of "righteousness."

> And we know that the people who were in the land of Jerusalem were a righteous people; for they kept the statutes and 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)

It was the Deuteronomic movement that placed this kind of emphasis on the law. While Nephi is clearly committed to living the law as well, for Nephi the law is not the end itself (see 2 Nephi 11:4; 25:24). "The picture in the Book of Mormon," writes Christensen, "strikes a balance between the Law and the wisdom traditions. The Law in the Book of Mormon never closes the door on revelation but rather promises more. The Law in the Book of Mormon is never seen as an end in itself, but as a type and shadow of Christ."[29]

At issue, then, is not the question of whether the law is important, but rather the role that the law should play. Nephi's "soul [was] rent with

27 Kevin Christensen, "Paradigms Regained: A Survey of Margaret Barker's Scholarship and Its Significance for Mormon Studies," *FARMS Occasional Papers* 2 (2001): 11.

28 Kevin Christensen, "Prophets and Kings in Lehi's Jerusalem and Margaret Barker's Temple Theology," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 4 (2013): 177–193.

29 Christensen, "Paradigms Regained," 19.

anguish" after Laman's and Lemuel's insistence that the law was all that made men righteous (1 Nephi 17:47), and he held out "great hopes" that Laman and Lemuel would eventually repent (1 Nephi 16:5). Nephi may have used the law as "type and shadow of Christ," as Christensen puts it, specifically in effort to appeal to Laman's and Lemuel's Deuteronomist sensibilities.

## Lehi As Moses

All theories are best tested by how well they can account for possible counter-indications. One such potential counter-argument to the thesis I have sketched above is the positive use of Deuteronomy by Nephi and Lehi themselves. I will attempt to deal with one significant example of this, found in how Lehi's farewell address is structured.

Noel B. Reynolds has argued that here Lehi (or, perhaps Nephi in how he records Lehi's speech) has framed himself as a type of Moses,[30] who was the central hero in the minds of the Deuteronomists. Reynolds notes that this is a common technique used by ancient Israelite (Deuteronomist) authors.

> Recent scholarly analyses of the Old Testament show that ancient Israelites expected true prophets to draw such comparisons, at least implicitly. … Old Testament texts consciously portrayed great prophets and heroes in ways that would highlight their similarities with Moses, the prophetic predecessor whose divine calling and powers were not questioned.[31]

Most examples of this pattern come from the Deuteronomist history (Joshua–2 Kings).

As a rhetorical technique, the intent was to convey the message that the later prophet or hero was as significant, in at least some respects, as Moses himself. "By constructing the account of a second figure to evoke the readers' memories of a prominent earlier figure, a writer can suggest strongly to the readers that the later person plays a similar role in God's theater, as did the first."[32] Reynolds has argued that in Lehi's final

30 See Noel B. Reynolds, "Lehi as Moses," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9/2 (2000): 26–35; Noel B. Reynolds, "The Israelite Background of Moses Typology in the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 44/2 (2005): 5–23.

31 Reynolds, "The Israelite Background," 14.

32 Reynolds, "The Israelite Background," 15.

address to his sons and their families (see 2 Nephi 1), he patterned his speech after Moses' ceremonial farewell address in Deuteronomy.

> Lehi's last address to his people appears consciously to invoke at least 14 important themes and situational similarities from the final address of Moses as recorded in Deuteronomy. In so doing, Lehi added the weight of the testimony of Moses to his own. This is especially important because, as is often the case with the living prophet, his people were more accepting of the teachings of the long-dead Moses than of the living Lehi and his successor, Nephi.[33]

How can we make sense of this apparently positive use of Deuteronomy? First, it should be clarified that Lehi was not, as mentioned earlier, completely opposed to the reforms. Second, being against parts of the *ideology* of a particular group who uses Deuteronomy as a foundation is not the same thing as being opposed to that text itself.[34] Lehi and Nephi were not anti-Deuteronomy, and certainly were not anti-Moses.

Moreover, the family dynamics may have also played a role. Laman and Lemuel are heavily targeted in Lehi's farewell address (see 2 Nephi 1:2, 12–27). Here, Lehi, who has previously "exhort[ed] them with all the feeling of a tender parent" (1 Nephi 8:37), is making his final plea to his rebellious sons. As Deuteronomists, they would have especially revered Moses as the lawgiver. Thus, in an effort to be as persuasive as possible, Lehi patterned his address after that of the one figure he knew his older sons would most revere.[35]

It is important to point out, however, that while Lehi used Moses in an effort to persuade his wayward sons, as Reynolds stresses, he nonetheless did not consider his own authority as derivative from Moses but rather appealed to his own special revelations.

---

33 Reynolds, "Lehi as Moses," 35.

34 Latter-day Saints should understand this well, since many self-proclaimed "biblical Christians" have similarly created ideologies we disagree with that are founded, at least loosely, on biblical citations. Our disagreement does not mean, however, that we dismiss the Bible itself.

35 What I am suggesting here is not unlike what tends to happen when Latter-day Saint missionaries bump into zealous evangelicals while tracting. In an effort to be persuasive, the missionaries will often proof-text the Bible to teach (or, more often, argue for) doctrines unique to LDS believers, in preference to using modern LDS scriptures that often teach these doctrines more clearly and fully.

> Lehi used Deuteronomy only as a parallel and not as a foundation for his teaching and blessing. He had experienced the same kinds of visions and revelations that Moses had received. In a vision, God showed Lehi the mixed future of his people and the salvation of all mankind. He had beheld the future birth and ministry of the Messiah, the Son of God. He had seen the triumph of God and his people in the last days, and he had beheld God himself on his throne. The last thing Lehi would have wanted to communicate was that Moses' writings were the sole source of his understanding. … But he knew that his rebellious older sons specifically rejected his visions, calling him a visionary man (1 Nephi 2:11), and he therefore took advantage of Moses as support. Thus Lehi phrased his message in terms that should have repeatedly reminded his hearers of Moses' similar message delivered on a similar occasion.[36]

As mentioned earlier, visions and Messianic teachings such as those taught by Lehi and Nephi were in conflict with Deuteronomist ideals. Yet Lehi knew that Laman and Lemuel held Moses in high regard, and thus sought to use him as an archetype for his own calling. Hence, the above suggestion that Nephi may have used the law to appeal to Laman's and Lemuel's Deuteronomist sensibilities, while trying to point them to something greater, may likewise apply here: Lehi draws on the figure of Moses because he knows it will appeal to Laman and Lemuel, but at the same time he is using the Moses type to suggest that he himself was a true and legitimate prophet.

## Conclusion

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. To be clear, it must be remembered that Nephi and Lehi are *not* anti-law nor anti-Deuteronomy nor even anti-Josiah. Rather, they stand in contrast to parts of the *ideological agenda* of the Deuteronomists. Laman and Lemuel appear to have adopted, perhaps deliberately as rebellious and resentful teenagers often do, the very parts

36 Reynolds, "The Israelite Background," 11–12.

of that ideology that their father rejected. Many of the same conflicts going on in Jerusalem at the time emerge as points of tension between the older brothers and their father and obnoxious little brother. The paradigm juxtaposing Lehi and Nephi as "wise men" of the old tradition and Laman and Lemuel as supporters of the Deuteronomic ideology might thus be used to explain some of the dynamics of Lehi's family. In saying this, I do not wish to justify Laman's and Lemuel's actions — Nephi and Lehi, after all, were true, not false, prophets. Yet this view helps make sense of their actions against Nephi and Lehi.

The examples cited above are merely a sampling of ways this paradigm could enlighten our reading of the Book of Mormon. Much more could be done, for instance, to explore how this perspective might change our reading of Lehi's vision of the tree of life,[37] the place of Laman and Lemuel within that dream, and their struggle to understand the vision. In this article, I have merely provided a few relatively simple "case studies" which I feel serve to build the foundation for seeing Laman and Lemuel as Deuteronomists.

Contextualizing Laman and Lemuel, of course, carries certain consequences. No longer can they be seen as the flat caricatures Nephi makes out of them. The contrast between Lehi and Nephi on one hand, and Laman and Lemuel on the other, no longer stands as the stark and obvious difference between good and evil. Instead, it represents two competing religious ideologies. This isn't too different from our own world today, and we can now more fully appreciate how Laman and Lemuel could have been led to think, "like unto the Jews who were at Jerusalem" (1 Nephi 2:13), that the indignation they directed at their father and brother was justified.

**Neal Rappleye** *is a history student who actively pursues research interests in early Church history and the ancient setting of the Book of Mormon. He blogs about Latter-day Saint topics at http://www.studioetquoquefide.com*

37 While others, most notably Daniel C. Peterson in "Nephi and His Asherah," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9/2 (2000): 16–25, have used the backdrop of Pre-exilic religion and the Josian reforms to discuss the aspects of Lehi's vision, they have not explored how these dynamics might have played out within his family.