

Comments on 1 Nephi 5

Covenant Theology and Everyday Life

When big covenant theology meets practical reality, the result is often messy and filled with friction between people. A risky series of events place the entire family's lives in danger. How is extinction part of the Lord's plan? Why does Lehi's family get selected as part of this plan? Can't someone else do it? What if Lehi is just a little bit too grandiose in his thinking, and everything falls apart?

With the seeming loss of all of her sons, Sariah is faced with the end of her family and death by starvation in the wilderness.

Given the lack of communication between the two groups, any delay in their return could be interpreted as catastrophic failure. Sariah's convictions are tested while her sons are away, and she complains against her husband, Lehi, for sending them off on a seeming fool's errand.

Her complaints against Lehi didn't result in a complete rupture of their relationship, as Lehi reassures her effectively in her uncertainty (v. 6).

When all of the sons return with the plates, she confesses she was wrong to doubt (v. 7-8), and the entire family celebrates their return (v. 9).

The stress of dealing with the immediate reality of practical daily life and keeping that in balance with big theological ideas with eternal consequences is a lot to reconcile. To Sariah, Lehi is her husband and father of her children first, and prophet second. She sees his flaws as well as his strengths, and has to deal with a lot of hardship as they leave all of their land, buildings and comforts behind to go and live in the desert. While this was a moment of weakness for Sariah in a set of extreme circumstances, she apparently never complains against Lehi again, despite the entire family experiencing significant life-threatening difficulties.

The Lord has big eternal plans, and what happens in mortality is part of those plans. Covenants were made with Abraham and subsequently made more specific with Joseph, son of Jacob. Lehi is lineage of both Abraham and Joseph, which he learns in the chapter, and his family has been selected to keep the Lord's covenant with Abraham in part, and Joseph in specific, and that requires Lehi and his family to do some difficult things. The Lord will support them along the way, but

they are there in the middle of it.

This is why Laban and Lehi are both parts of this story. Both are lineage of Joseph, with Laban apparently being the worst part of the family and Lehi being the best part. The problem is Laban has the family records, and that family is about to be slaughtered by the Babylonians or go into exile. So, the plates need to be transferred to Lehi's possession, which is challenging, and involves significant risk. But, the Lord assists in the process, and the outcome is favorable in the end. How it plays out in mortality is difficult and messy for those involved, because the Lord carefully stays in the background as much as possible. But, He is there, and it does work out.

The difficulty for us in mortality is discerning the Lord's hand in things when we are so often beset with our own deep flaws. Why would I believe the Lord cares about me as an individual, or my family any different from any other family? Am I engaging in self-deception if I think I am special? Are these my or someone else's delusions of grandeur? Does someone have something to gain at someone else's expense? Is my or someone else's sanity in question? Is what I think is the Lord's will actually the Lord's will? Sariah had doubts when things got dangerous, and, frankly, I am no different. When things get risky and dangerous, I question the motivations of myself and the people around me.

Lehi the Prophet, Seer and Revelator

Sariah's complaint against Lehi is he is a "visionary man" (cf. v. 2). Laman and Lemuel have the same complaint (cf. 2:11), but their belief is the visions are "the foolish imaginations of his heart". In other words, Laman and Lemuel do not believe their father is genuinely inspired by the Lord with divine dreams and visions, but is crazy, and leaving their land and wealth is stupid.

Laman and Lemuel also complain they will "perish in the wilderness", which is Sariah's complaint. But, at this moment in the text, the risk is not imagined, it is real. All of the sons are gone, leaving Lehi and Sariah and any sisters (cf. 2 Ne. 5:6) alone, where they are at serious risk of starvation.

Sariah's complaint that Lehi is a visionary man doesn't seem to be the same as Laman and Lemuel's. Her complaint seems to be his visions and dreams have led to a precarious position, not that he led astray by "the foolish imaginations of the

heart". It seems more likely the overwhelming stress of the situation causes Sariah to doubt, fearing all of her sons are dead and they themselves will imminently starve to death. The text doesn't say they were running out or had run out of food yet, but definitely suggests it is at least a present concern.

And, where Laman and Lemuel's doubt and rebellions persist and become acute, Sariah's doubts in the chapter are assuaged by Lehi and then permanently ended when the sons return successful. This suggests Sariah's doubts were temporary and a result of duress.

Nephi comments throughout the text about Lehi's visions and dreams (cf. 1:8, 1:16, 5:17, 8:2-36, 10:2-17). Nephi himself has significant visions and dreams, so he is clearly more amenable to accepting them as legitimate. There is nothing in the text to suggest anyone else in the family received dreams and visions.

Nephi seeks to receive dreams similar to his father (cf. 10:17), and does receive them. The clear implication in the text is that Nephi receives these visions so that he will understand his role in what is about to happen. The Lord's long term plan for Lehi's family is explained, with Nephi being the first spiritual leader of the initially more righteous half and Laman as the leader of the more wicked half. And, the more wicked half will chasten the more righteous, to keep them more righteous. Nephi knows he has to put up with Laman and Lemuel's terrible behavior to get them over to the new promised land so the two populations will be established from the two opposing sons.

Some of Lehi's big theological expositions are absent because of the loss of the book of Lehi. Nephi briefly references them earlier (cf. 1:16), and obliquely at the end of this chapter as well (cf. v. 17-19). The problem is we don't have that record. We don't learn what this is about until later, when Lehi is on his deathbed and giving blessings to his youngest sons, Jacob and Joseph (cf. 2 Ne. 2-4). It is very likely Lehi's prophecies at the end of this chapter are the reason he names his final two sons Jacob and Joseph.

1 And it came to pass that after we had come down into the wilderness unto our father, behold, he was filled with joy, and also my mother, Sariah, was exceedingly glad, for she truly had mourned because of us.

2 For she had supposed that we had perished in the wilderness; and she also had complained against my father, telling him that he was a visionary man; saying: Behold thou hast

led us forth from the land of our inheritance, and my sons are no more, and we perish in the wilderness. 3 And after this manner of language had my mother complained against my father.

4 And it had come to pass that my father spake unto her, saying: I know that I am a visionary man; for if I had not seen the things of God in a vision I should not have known the goodness of God, but had tarried at Jerusalem, and had perished with my brethren. 5 But behold, I have obtained a land of promise, in the which things I do rejoice; yea, and I know that the Lord will deliver my sons out of the hands of Laban, and bring them down again unto us in the wilderness. 6 And after this manner of language did my father, Lehi, comfort my mother, Sariah, concerning us, while we journeyed in the wilderness up to the land of Jerusalem, to obtain the record of the Jews.

7 And when we had returned to the tent of my father, behold their joy was full, and my mother was comforted. 8 And she spake, saying: Now I know of a surety that the Lord hath commanded my husband to flee into the wilderness; yea, and I also know of a surety that the Lord hath protected my sons, and delivered them out of the hands of Laban, and given them power whereby they could accomplish the thing which the Lord hath commanded them. And after this manner of language did she speak.

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

v1-9 While the sons were away, their mother Sarai feared they were dead, because their father Lehi had all these unbelievable dreams and ideas in his head and had taken them away from their comfortable, well-established situation to drag them out into the desert to die (v. 2-3). Their father Lehi recognizes the seemingly difficulties they face, but reassures her that the Lord has made big promises to them and will protect their sons so they can return home safely (v. 4-5), and this calms her worries (v. 6). When the sons do return to them safely (v. 1,7) and having obtained the Brass Plates, their mother Sarai does believe everything Lehi had said (v. 7-8). The family then celebrates and gives thanks to the Lord for the extraordinary acts of providence (v. 9).

While this tasking of her sons pushes her convictions to their limits, the successful completion of a seemingly impossible task completely cements her faith, as she now knows that everything Lehi has been saying is in fact from the Lord.

Note Nephi uses emphatic language through these verses to express the happiness and relief at their successful return, "filled with joy...exceedingly glad...their joy was full...rejoice exceedingly".

Sarai never expresses doubted about the Lord, only her husband's claims to be a prophet of the Lord.

There is a clear rhetorical pattern through Sarai's original complaint (v. 2-3), Lehi's response (v. 4-5), and Sarai's confession (v. 8) after their return (v. 1, 7).

The pattern follows the subjects of the Lord's command to flee into the wilderness, old/new land of inheritance, and death/deliverance.

he was a visionary man
 thou hast led us forth from the land of our inheritance
 my sons are no more, and
 we perish in the wilderness
I know that I am a visionary man
 have obtained a land of promise
 Lord will deliver my sons out of the hands of Laban
 bring them down again unto us in the wilderness
I know the Lord hath commanded my husband
 flee into the wilderness
 Lord delivered them out of the hands of Laban
 given power to accomplish Lord's command

See Lynn Johnson's [arrangement](#) for a more detailed analysis of the textual structure.

v2 "a visionary man", not all visions are authentic (cf. Jer. 14:14, Jer. 23:16), and given their present circumstances, Sariah is having doubts about their legitimacy. The title she is using here is clearly derogatory, and perhaps even sarcastic (if she is contrasting Lehi with Abraham (cf. Gen. 15:1) and Isaiah (Isa. 1:1), then this would be an accusation of "Do you think you are like Abraham and Isaiah?". It is difficult to know from the text how bad things got at this point, but it is clear from v. 8 that she doubted the Lord had really spoken with her husband Lehi, and commissioned her sons to do something so risky. Laman and Lemuel had a similar complaint (cf. 2:11), but their statement against Lehi is vituperative, where Sariah's accusation appears to be borne more out of stress than anything else.

v9 At the risk of sounding flippant, we have to remember sacrificial meals were sacred barbecues. Ritual sacrifice was the butchering of animals for food that had been co-opted into a religious purpose with spiritual symbolism. In this historical setting, all meat had to be butchered immediately before the meal, so reinforcing religion and ritual purity through the practice was eminently practical.

If the sons had hunted along the way home, then this sacrificial meal could have happened quickly upon their return. If they had to hunt wild animals for the sacrificial meal, then there could have been days between their return and the celebratory meal.

This is the second time sacrifices and burnt offerings are mentioned (cf. 2:7). This sort of activity was generally restricted to the Temple at Jerusalem at that time (cf. Lev. 17, Deut. 12, Josh. 22:26-29), although there were notable exceptions (cf. Exod. 18:12, 1 Sam. 10:8, 1 Ki. 3:4). Lehi's family was clearly permanently leaving Jerusalem, so they were no longer under that umbrella, but there are priesthood authority issues at play here. Unfortunately, the text is mute on the subject, but there is clear evidence of a priestly lineage at play in subsequent text.

10 And after they had given thanks unto the God of Israel, my father, Lehi, took the records which were engraven upon the plates of brass, and he did search them from the beginning. 11 And he beheld that they did contain the five books of Moses, which gave an account of the creation of the world, and also of Adam and Eve, who were our first parents; 12 And also a record of the Jews from the beginning, even down to the commencement of the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah; 13 And also the prophecies of the holy prophets, from the beginning, even down to the commencement of the reign of Zedekiah; and also many prophecies which have been spoken by the mouth of Jeremiah.

14 And it came to pass that my father, Lehi, also found upon the plates of brass a genealogy of his fathers; wherefore he knew that he was a descendant of Joseph; yea, even that Joseph who was the son of Jacob, who was sold into Egypt, and who was preserved by the hand of the Lord, that he might preserve his father, Jacob, and all his household from perishing with famine. 15 And they were also led out of captivity and out of the land of Egypt, by that same God who had preserved them. 16 And thus my father, Lehi, did discover the genealogy of his fathers. And Laban also was a descendant of Joseph, wherefore he and his fathers had kept the records.

17 And now when my father saw all these things, he was filled with the Spirit, and began to prophesy concerning his seed—18 That these plates of brass should go forth unto all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people who were of his seed. 19 Wherefore, he said that these plates of brass should never perish; neither should they be dimmed any more by time. And he prophesied many things concerning his seed.

v10-19 After celebrating with sacrifice, Lehi takes time to seriously search through the entirety of the brass plates (v. 10). They contain the Torah, the five books of Moses (v. 11). They contain a history of the kings of Judah (v. 12). They contain the writings of the prophets, including some of Jeremiah

(v. 13).

Lehi then finds the genealogy of Joseph ben Jacob, and discovers his own family's covenant connection to him (v. 14-16).

Lehi realizes this larger ancient family connection to Joseph is what is propelling his current family's actions. In order for the Lord to keep the covenant with Joseph alive, he has to bring Lehi and his family to a new promised land and keep them going. All of this is revealed to Lehi by the Spirit and he prophesies about lineage across generations (v. 17). Lehi also predicts the plates will ultimately go to his lineage and all nations (v. 18-19).

Lehi discerns the big theological reason why he and his family have been selected by the Lord, and why they had to obtain the plates. Lehi is lineage of Joseph, and specific covenants were made with Joseph (cf. 2 Ne. 3), so the Lord has to keep the lineage and record of Joseph alive in order to keep the covenant. Laban was not a good candidate for success, so the Lord selects Lehi.

This must have been astonishing for Lehi. Clearly, he had been receiving dreams and revelations, but now all of the pieces of the grand plan fall into place. He and his family are now the lynch pin on the Lord's covenant with Joseph.

If the Lord worked with other families who were also lineage of Joseph, we know nothing about them in specific (cp. 3 Ne. 16:1-3).

v10-13 The collection of writings held sacred by any particular group of believers will vary somewhat, but all Israelite canons always contain the Torah. The historical and prophetic contents is what varies from group to group.

v13 "many prophecies...of Jeremiah", the contents of the Brass Plates with respect to Jeremiah would likely be smaller and quite a bit different from what we have today. The history of the text of the book of Jeremiah is a bit messy compared to the other Hebrew prophets.

v14-16 Nephi goes into extra details to describe Joseph in terms of him being the reason Jacob's entire family was spared from death by starvation, and then was later delivered from captivity by Moses. This is more than just Nephi identifying his patrilineage, it is him explicitly referencing the Lord's

providence in delivering His people as a result of existential threats to the covenant. Now, here, again, is an existential threat to the covenant made specifically with Joseph, and just as the Lord undertook great things to bring about the survival of this lineage in the past, he is doing it again now.

v14-19 This is the connection between Lehi, Laban, the plates and the covenant later discussed at length in 2. Ne. 3. At this point in the narrative, it is an understatement, especially to a Gentile audience. This is the covenant theology driving the entire narrative, and that is not emphasized up front.

v17-18 Nephi's brief mention of Lehi's wide-ranging prophecies here feels like he is burying the lede. We don't find out what Lehi's prophecy is about until he is on his deathbed (cf. 2 Ne. 2-4). Why does Nephi do this? Because Lehi has written it down in his own record (cf. 1:16). From Nephi's point of view, he only needs to make the rhetorical connection to his father's prophecy, so the reader would make the connection. But, unfortunately, we don't have Lehi's record (cf. D&C 3), so we quickly pass over this reference and think little of it.

v18-19 We tend to see this is a prediction that the Bible in general will go to all nations. But, Lehi's prediction is more specific than that. The Bible we have today is the record via Judah through the hands of the sect of the Pharisees, whom the modern-day Rabbi's are the successors of. The Brass Plates themselves will at some point in the future be published and will contain prophetic texts we do not presently have (e.g., Zenos, Zenock, Neum in 19:10, and whoever else is there that remained unreferenced in the Book of Mormon).

20 And it came to pass that thus far I and my father had kept the commandments wherewith the Lord had commanded us. 21 And we had obtained the records which the Lord had commanded us, and searched them and found that they were desirable; yea, even of great worth unto us, insomuch that we could preserve the commandments of the Lord unto our children. 22 Wherefore, it was wisdom in the Lord that we should carry them with us, as we journeyed in the wilderness towards the land of promise.

v20-22 Nephi summarizes and finalizes the events of the preceding chapters. We did what the Lord told us to do (v. 20). We got the Scriptures on the Brass Plates, and recognized their importance for us and the future generations of our families (v. 21), so we had to get them before we left permanently (v. 22).

The entire effort was a harrowing experience for all of them, so recognizing in the end that it was necessary and worthwhile is an important realization.

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