

## Chapter Five

# THE PROPHET NEPHI AND THE COVENANTAL NATURE OF *CUT OFF, CURSED, SKIN OF BLACKNESS, AND LOATHSOME*

Jan J. Martin

Jan J. Martin is an assistant professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University.

## INTRODUCTION

Thirty years after leaving Jerusalem in 600 BC and journeying to the Americas with his family, Nephi, the first author in the Book of Mormon, explained that shortly after their arrival there had been a serious rift between family members. Soon after their father Lehi's death (see 2 Nephi 4:12), Nephi's rebellious older brothers and older brothers-in-law refused to accept Nephi as the family's divinely appointed leader (see 5:2–3, 19–20) and, as a result, were “cut off from the presence of the Lord,” cursed with “a sore cursing,” given a “skin of blackness,” and were deemed “loathsome” to Nephi's people (vv. 20–22). For many modern readers, these descriptions contain some of the most “confusing, troubling, and demanding” concepts in the entire Book of Mormon<sup>1</sup> and stand in stark contrast to Nephi's expressed intentions of speaking and prophesying “plainly” (see 31:3).<sup>2</sup> Even though more than a century of scholarship has been devoted

to explicating Nephi's comments, with interpretations ranging from racial<sup>3</sup> to metaphorical,<sup>4</sup> nothing that has been produced about these verses so far has been completely helpful or entirely satisfying for me.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, with a desire to provide an alternative explanation, I have taken my lead from Mormon, a Nephite prophet who insisted that the Bible and the Book of Mormon were designed to support each other through essential historical perspective (see Mormon 7:9), from scholars who have argued that covenant is a central theme of the Hebrew Bible,<sup>6</sup> and from modern prophets who have emphasized the fundamental position of covenants in the gospel plan.<sup>7</sup> I will argue that all four of the Lamanite descriptors in 2 Nephi 5—*cut off*, *cursed*, *skin of blackness*, and *loathsome*<sup>8</sup>—are best understood from within a covenant perspective, specifically from within the ancient Near Eastern suzerain-vassal covenant relationship that God made with Lehi's family. I will begin by exploring how Nephi deliberately structured 1 and 2 Nephi to emphasize the importance of making and keeping covenants. I will then identify and analyze the specific ancient Near Eastern suzerainty treaty, or the Lehitic covenant, that Nephi presented in the opening chapters of 2 Nephi, and I will show how that treaty guided Nephi's behavior, his perspectives, and his writing. Finally, I will demonstrate that Nephi described Laman, Lemuel, and the sons of Ishmael in terms of the rejected Lehitic covenant and that Nephi's representations of them are covenantal in nature, not racial or metaphorical.

## THE COVENANTAL STRUCTURE OF 1 AND 2 NEPHI

Contrary to what many students of the Book of Mormon assume, 1 and 2 Nephi are not “on-the-ground, in-the-moment” reports of what happened as Nephi and his family left Jerusalem and traveled to the Americas.<sup>9</sup> Instead, they are Nephi's deliberately structured reflections made thirty to forty years after arriving and settling in the promised land (see 2 Nephi 5:29–32). Nephi consciously composed and organized the contents of 1 and 2 Nephi for specific historical, theological, and political purposes.<sup>10</sup> Opening with an Old Testament–like exodus,<sup>11</sup> 1 Nephi shows that Nephi's approach to his family's history was heavily influenced by his reading of the Pentateuch and the prophet Isaiah.<sup>12</sup> Intending to write two separate

could return to the covenant (2 Nephi 5:25; 1 Nephi 2:24). In other words, both groups would be able to help each other recommit to the Lehitic treaty.

## CONCLUSION

Nephi's descriptions of his rebellious older brothers as *cut off*, *cursed*, bearing a *skin of blackness*, and *loathsome* to the Nephites have created much confusion and consternation for students of the Book of Mormon for more than a century. Copious amounts of ink have been employed to argue for racial or metaphorical explanations, none of which have been entirely convincing or satisfying for me. Inspired by the historical perspective that the Book of Mormon and the Bible create when they are used as complementary tools, by the covenantal approach of the Old Testament, and by the central position of covenants in the plan of salvation, I have sought to provide an alternative explanation and have argued that *cut off*, *cursed*, *skin of blackness*, and *loathsome* are best understood from within the ancient Near Eastern suzerainty covenant that Lehi's family participated in. Following a discussion of the deliberate covenant-centered structure of 1 and 2 Nephi, I demonstrated that Nephi was familiar with the ancient Near Eastern suzerainty covenants and that he carefully presented a Lehitic suzerainty covenant in the opening chapters of 2 Nephi. I argued that the elements of the treaty assisted Nephi in recovering from his brothers' rejection of his leadership and that they also dictated the way he described Laman, Lemuel, and the sons of Ishmael after they spurned the Lehitic covenant. From Nephi's perspective, *cut off* signified that the covenant was broken, *cursed* denoted that the promised consequences for breaking the covenant became operative in his brothers' lives, *skin of blackness* was a self-inflicted mark (most likely a tattoo) brought about by Laman and Lemuel's divinely acknowledged desires to be distinctly autonomous, and *loathsome* indicated that the Lamanites would remain outside the covenant until they repented. On this view, Nephi's descriptions are seen to be covenantal in nature, not racial or metaphorical.