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The Composition of Lehi's Family

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Abstract: A characteristic of Hugh Nibley's study of the Book of Mormon, which he has urged others to emulate, is close study of the scriptural text to reveal information which myopia had previously led readers to ignore. In that spirit, this chapter reports my microanthropological examination of what the text reveals regarding the composition and demography of Lehi's party from the beginning of their sojourn in the Arabian wilderness to their arrival in the promised land.

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A characteristic of Hugh Nibley's study of the *Book of Mormon*, which he has urged others to emulate, is close study of the scriptural text to reveal information which myopia had previously led readers to ignore. In that spirit, this chapter reports my microanthropological examination of what the text reveals regarding the composition and demography of Lehi's party from the beginning of their sojourn in the Arabian wilderness to their arrival in the promised land.

The family members most often referred to were the father Lehi and three sons—Nephi, Laman and Lemuel. In most discussions of the events reported in 1 Nephi, Latter-day Saints have generally acted as though these four men were the only significant actors. Others specifically mentioned as being in the traveling party—but apparently of little consequence to the history—were the mother Sariah; sons Sam, Jacob and Joseph; Zoram; Ishmael and his unnamed family members (at least a wife, two sons and five daughters); and Nephi's belatedly mentioned "sisters" (1 Nephi 7:6; 16:7; 2 Nephi 5:6). We shall see, however, that others surely were along.

A first order of priority must be to establish the ages of the *dramatis personae*. The oldest four sons of Lehi were, from eldest to youngest, Laman, Lemuel, Sam and Nephi (see heading to 1 Nephi). The four were with their parents when they departed Jerusalem. Jacob and Joseph were later born in the Arabian wilderness.

The four oldest sons were of marriageable age at the time of departure, for each "took...to wife" a daughter of Ishmael soon after the latter arrived at Lehi's camp (1 Nephi 16:7). Furthermore, Ishmael's two sons evidently married daughters of Lehi. Nephi's cryptic mention of his sisters going with him when the colonists split into two factions in the land of promise (2 Nephi 5:6) implied to Sidney B. Sperry that they had left their husbands, sons of Ishmael.¹ I agree. Professor Sperry supported this idea by citing a statement

made by Erastus Snow in an address printed in the *Journal of Discourses*.² Apostle Snow said, “The Prophet Joseph Smith informed us that the record of Lehi was contained on the 116 pages that were first translated and subsequently stolen...[and] that Ishmael[’s] sons married into Lehi’s family, and Lehi’s sons married Ishmael’s daughters.”

The composition of the party begins to look complex. Rather than to pursue it discursively, I shall sort out the tangled strands of social relationships and ages by initially considering all the personnel more or less in order determined by the amount of information given about them.

1. Nephi

Nephi describes himself as being “exceeding young, nevertheless...large in stature” (1 Nephi 2:16). In 1 Nephi 4:31 he says again that he was “a man large in stature,” in the context of seizing a much older Zoram to keep him from fleeing. Both his use of the expression “a man” and his ability to act like one in handling Zoram allow us to suppose that he was already taller than most men of his society and probably as heavy as the average person despite his chronological youth. Again, where he donned Laban’s gear (1 Nephi 4:19) and successfully impersonated him, we get a picture of a fully grown male. In manner too, he was socially and linguistically sophisticated enough that he could act in Jerusalem with confidence. Taking into account his own characterization (“exceeding young”), a reasonable guess is that he was coming up on his seventeenth birthday when his account starts.

2. Lehi

The indicators of Lehi’s age are paradoxical. By the time the story begins he already has had what we might term a “successful career” managing the “land of his inheritance” (1 Nephi 2:4; 3:16,

22-25). It has been suggested that he was a merchant,³ and indeed he may have been engaged as such at times, trading on his capital. Others think he was a metalsmith.⁴ However, the linkage Nephi makes between his father's wealth and the "land of his inheritance" suggests that his primary economic activity probably was husbandry, chiefly in the sense of being a landlord. As for metalworking, it would be highly unlikely that a man who had inherited land and was considered very wealthy (1 Nephi 3:25) would have been a metal-worker, for the men in that role tended to be of lower social status and were usually landless.⁵

With a son aged twenty-two or twenty-three at the time he departed from Jerusalem in 597 B.C. (see Post script below), he would have married Sariah around 621 B.C. As we shall see, the sequence of her at least eight births requires that she be young—perhaps still sixteen—at her marriage. Lehi probably was a little older, though coming from a family of substance, Lehi would not have had to delay his marriage for economic reasons. I would guess that he was eighteen. If so, then he was born around 639 B.C., although he could have been a few years older. Thus, at the beginning of the *Book of Mormon* record, Lehi was approximately forty-two or perhaps a bit older.⁶ (Latter-day Saint illustrators who depict him only as an aged patriarch should, rather, show him in the early chapters of 1 Nephi at mature middle age.)

He would still sire two sons, plausibly born around his ages forty-five and forty-seven (1 Nephi 18:7; see the discussion below about Sariah's births). On board ship, he, at age fifty-four, and Sariah are both characterized by Nephi as "stricken in years," having "grey hairs," and about to enter a "watery grave." Still Nephi indicates that this was because of grief brought upon them by their children more than because of age *per se* (1 Nephi 18:17-18).

The construction of their ship likely took more than a single year, and the voyage (of up to 20,000 miles) could hardly have consumed less than two years (see Chapter 3).

Lehi survived the voyage, of course. First Nephi 18:23-19:2

reports the group's initial pioneering in the new land, which need not have consumed more than a single year (the activities are less comprehensive and time-extensive than those reported by Nephi when his party settled in the land of Nephi—2 Nephi 5:11, 13). Second Nephi opens with Lehi teaching his family. His historical resume in 2 Nephi 1:1-5 sounds like only a short time had passed since the landing, for he speaks entirely about what had transpired *en route*. His valedictory continues through chapter 3. In 2 Nephi 4:12, the record abruptly states that after Lehi had spoken those things to his household...“he waxed old” and died. My impression is that Lehi lived no more than a couple of years in America and perhaps less than one. His age at death could have been as low as fifty-seven. Considering the arduous circumstances he faced in the last dozen years of his life and especially the intimation in 1 Nephi 18:17-18 that he was viewed as being somewhat sickly, this seemingly premature death is not really surprising.

3. Laman

We may ponder why this eldest son was not married previously. Being a number of years older than Nephi, he would normally have had a wife by the time they left Jerusalem. Lehi was a man of wealth, so the family's socioeconomic position should not have hindered his obtaining a wife but likely enhanced the options. One wonders why, if Ishmael and his family became willing to marry into Lehi's family under the difficult circumstances they did, no marriage had been contracted between members of the two families *before* their departure. But perhaps Laman had been married, the wife having died (the death rate was relatively high, after all, in the ancient world). If so, the deceased spouse could have been a daughter of Ishmael (sororatic marriage, in which a man took as second wife the sister of his first, was a known practice in Israel). Or, possible disorder(s) in Laman's personality, of which there is considerable evidence in Nephi's descriptions of his older brother's behavior, had made it

impossible for the family to persuade any father to give him a daughter for his wife.

Nothing is said directly about Laman's physical characteristics, but the fact that the two eldest brothers could "smite [Nephi and Sam]...with a rod" and that later they "did lay their hands upon [Nephi]" and "bind [him] with cords" (1 Nephi 3:28; 7:16) could suggest that the older pair were no less strong than Nephi. As the eldest son, and a proud and self-centered one at that, Laman comes through in the record as being somewhat haughty and probably pushy among his lessers but, as in dealing with Laban, lacking confidence, being frustrated and unstable in the face of determined opposition (compare 1 Nephi 2:9; 17:55).

Inasmuch as Nephi appears to have been near seventeen, his eldest brother very likely was not younger than twenty-two. I should think twenty-three more likely. It might be suggested that he was considerably older; but that would only make more difficult accounting for the already long period of fertility indicated for his mother, so that seems unlikely.

4. Lemuel

Lemuel seems to have been thoroughly dominated by Laman while possessing many of the same personality characteristics (see their pairing in Lehi's lament, 1 Nephi 2:9-14). Little is said about him as an individual, and never is there an indication that he stood up to or disagreed with Laman (compare 1 Nephi 3:28, "for he hearkened unto the words of Laman"). His age must have been about twenty-one.

5. Sariah

In the sixth century B.C. (as throughout most of human history), the timing of births was considerably different than what prevails today. Philip Houghton has conveniently summarized scientific findings on fertility and survival as a result of many studies of both

skeletons and living humans in pre-modern societies.⁷ For one thing, diet was usually less nutritional and a good deal less consistent than we enjoy. Both minor and major illnesses were common. As one result of such conditions, women typically did not become fertile until around age nineteen, even though they might marry younger than that. The same biological problems decreased the likelihood that a wife would become pregnant. Miscarriages and stillbirths were not uncommon, and even after a successful birth, infants had much smaller chances of survival in their first few years. Obviously most women nursed their babies, and lack of alternative foods meant that each child would (must) be nursed for two years or more, which further limited fertility. Houghton suggests that women in “tribal societies” (which would surely cover at least the eight years in the wilderness for Lehi’s women) “bore children at perhaps four-year intervals.” And of those, probably every mother in her lifetime had lost one or more to early death.⁸

In the case of Sariah, numerous questions arise about her birth history. This is so because two sets of facts press credibility toward two limits when they are compared: (1) on the one hand, the oldest four sons were all of marriageable age at the time of the family’s departure from Jerusalem. Given Nephi’s apparent age the eldest, Laman, could not plausibly be less than twenty-two or twenty-three as the story begins; yet, (2) Jacob and Joseph were born “in the wilderness,” and the probable timing would make Joseph approximately twenty-four to twenty-eight years younger than Laman. For one woman to have had such a long birth career is sufficiently unlikely that we should examine whether Sariah was the sole mother of all Lehi’s mentioned offspring.

Hypothetically, some of the four brothers might have been born to an earlier, deceased wife. But the text leaves little question that Sariah was the mother of all four. The heading to 1 Nephi begins, “An account of Lehi and his wife Sariah and his four sons, being called, (beginning at the eldest) Laman, Lemuel, Sam, and Nephi.” (We may think it odd that Nephi did not write this statement as “...and *their*

four sons,” but in an Israelite cultural context, the reference is not strange.) The mention of “his wife” as well as the continuity in the listing of parents and sons strongly imply that Sariah was the only mother. The words of 1 Nephi 5:2, 8, pretty much put the issue to rest, as Sariah expresses fear that Lehi’s visionary notions have caused the deaths of “my sons” who had gone up to Jerusalem; and when they return safely, she rejoices that the Lord has protected “my sons.”

We cannot be immediately certain that Sariah was the mother of Jacob and Joseph. Nephi says that “my father had begat two sons in the wilderness” (1 Nephi 18:7) but does not mention the mother. Ten verses later, Nephi, during his brothers’ rebellion on board ship, refers to “*my* parents being stricken in years” and down on their sickbeds; 1 Nephi 18:19 then mentions that young Jacob and Joseph were “grieved because of the afflictions of *their* mother.” This phrasing removes almost all doubt that Sariah was the mother of the last two of Lehi’s sons and also assures us that she lived until they were on the boat (she likely died before Nephi left his brothers, for 2 Nephi 5:6 makes no mention of her going with him). Any uncertainty remaining seems to me eliminated at Jacob 2:23-34 where Jacob makes clear that Lehi was opposed in principle to plural marriage, except under very exceptional circumstances, thus the possibility of his having a second wife seems nil.

So we can be confident that Sariah bore six sons. Then, as mentioned above, she also had at least two daughters, based upon Nephi’s reference in 2 Nephi 5:6 to “my sisters,” although there is no other mention of them. While Sperry held out the possibility of as many as four daughters, there were at least two, to account for Nephi’s plural reference. Thus we can be quite certain that Sariah was the mother of at least eight children who survived to adulthood. In addition, it would be likely that she had unmentioned, unsuccessful pregnancies. While this may not be an unprecedented record of fertility and survival in the ancient world, it is highly unusual. (In the *Old Testament*, a notable fertility record drawing particular mention is that of Leah, wife of Jacob, who bore six sons and one daughter in

less than twenty years—Genesis 30:19-20; 31:41.)

It is not the number of these births as much as their spacing that poses the problem under discussion. We are faced here with a sufficiently improbable situation that we should consider whether Sariah's record is reasonable in terms of nature and culture or whether divine intervention must be appealed to. The dire picture of childbirth and survival in simpler societies that Houghton has painted should alert us to the fact that, unlike in modern times, anciently it was not birth prevention that occupied couples' minds but anxiety *for* the bearing and rearing of children. Statistically, conception, pregnancy, birth and the nurturing of children were all fraught with uncertainty and danger, and a large surviving posterity was exceptional.

Still, statistics do not tell us about individuals. In the first place, the Israelites might not have been "typical" of the peoples Houghton was talking about. We do not have enough specific demographic information on them in ancient times to know for sure how they might compare with Houghton's "tribal societies." And then I suppose that the Lord could have picked out of Israel a particular family (Lehi's) to take to the promised land who had biological and spiritual qualities substantially different than "average." So in Sariah's case Houghton's "typical" age of nineteen for the beginning of fertility might not be correct.

The text implies that Sariah lived her first quarter century of married life in circumstances of wealth (see 1 Nephi 3:24-25) and that she was also likely to have been born into a social situation considerably better than average. She thus could have enjoyed a more favorable dietary and health regime than in "tribal societies." Certainly she held up well physically in the wilderness, all things considered (see 1 Nephi 17:2), although eventually the hardships and stress caught up with her, seemingly before she was chronologically "old" (1 Nephi 18:17). Finally, the relatively advantaged circumstances under which Lehi's family lived in the land of Jerusalem likely reduced the mortality dangers to the children once they were born.

Divine intervention could have extended her period of fertility, but nothing in Nephi's record supports that idea. Nephi credits the Lord with strengthening "our women" in the difficult wilderness years through unusual metabolism, but not in regard to fertility (compare 1 Nephi 17:1-3). Still, in Lehi's record, the translation of which was lost by Martin Harris, perhaps there was an indication that Lehi and Sariah considered something miraculous about her final births. Her name, Sariah, hints of a possible typological linkage to Abraham's wife, Sarai/Sarah, who bore Isaac at age ninety. A number of studies have recently shown that Nephi construed his family's life-saving "Exodus" to a "promised land" as symbolically parallel to the original exodus of Israel from Egypt. Other studies have shown that the meaning of names of certain *Book of Mormon* characters seem to tie to events in their lives or to their characteristics.⁹ That Lehi and Sariah named their last two sons after their ancestral patriarchs Jacob and Joseph may tell us that they had patriarchal parallels in mind and may have considered Sariah's late pregnancies somehow comparable to Sarai's exceptional bearing of Isaac.

Let us suppose for now that Sariah's first birth occurred when she was seventeen. This seems not likely but possible. Is it plausible for her to have had eight births¹⁰ in an interval of under thirty years? The answer is yes. A tabulation will be presented later that demonstrates that possibility. But first, relevant facts about other family members need to be laid out.

6. *Jacob and Joseph*

Earlier discussion established with high probability that Sariah, not another wife, was the mother of Jacob and Joseph, and I assume that here. The only substantive clue about when these two sons were born comes from 1 Nephi 18:19. On board ship, when Laman and those who sided with him rebelled against Nephi's leadership; the statement is made that Jacob and Joseph, "being young, having need of much nourishment, were grieved because of the afflictions of their mother."

What ages for the boys may we infer from this way of speaking?

What is said about “nourishment” might be thought to refer to being nursed by their mother, but that makes no sense when the expression is applied equally to both, as it is. But the boys were likely far from infancy, so the “nourishment” may refer primarily to fixing appropriate food (no doubt a difficult task at best on the ship). Their aunts or sisters might have taken up the slack for their mother/mother-in-law, but life probably was hard for all of them. (Particularly if there were pregnant women on board the tossing ship, which is likely, there could have been a considerable sharing of child care quite apart from the case of Sariah.) But “nourishment” refers to more than food. While on forty-three occasions in the *Book of Mormon* “nourish” or a variant term primarily denotes a physical process, two other uses are metaphorical. Probably two senses were intertwined in Nephi’s usage—a combination of providing food and emotional nurturance.

The boys may have been “delicate” as a result of wilderness malnutrition, or they may have been seasick-prone. They may have been particularly dependent psychologically on their mother and distressed by her evident weakness. We do not know of any of those matters. But regardless of what the boys felt about their mother as an individual, a child’s life on a smallish, probably crowded, ship with little room to move about and a host of other youngsters always present would have been stressful and demanding of a mother’s direct attention. Given the many possibilities, we cannot determine the ages of Jacob and Joseph from the statement on nourishment.

From another angle, however, we note that the younger brothers were born “in the wilderness” (1 Nephi 18:7; compare 17:1), which presumably means prior to their arrival at Bountiful. That tells us a bit, but the biggest piece of information in this particular puzzle has to be Sariah’s age. Her two births make most sense coming early in the trek, when she was in her best health. I can imagine that Jacob’s birth came in the first year after the departure from Jerusalem and Joseph’s two years thereafter. In that case, supposing

two years in Bountiful, they would have been respectively nine and seven on boarding ship. The “nourishment” statement need not contradict those ages.

That the late-born sons married and had offspring after their arrival in the promised land is established by a later reference to Jacobites and Josephites as tribes affiliated with the Nephites (e.g., Jacob 1:13). Whom the men might have wed is not indicated, but the close relations of Nephi with Jacob and Joseph—the older brother no doubt became a foster father to the two boys after the death of Lehi (2 Nephi 5:26, Jacob 1:18) suggest that they married daughters of Nephi, or perhaps of Sam. (They could not have married Lamanite, Lemuelite or Ishmaelite cousins because the two boys would have separated from them before reaching marriageable age, as a result of moving to the land of Nephi.)

7. Ishmael and his wife

Ishmael was the first of the trekking party to die, according to the record. Presumably he was older than Lehi. That is supported by the fact that his eldest daughter was apparently too old to marry any of Lehi’s sons (she ended up marrying Zoram, the former servant, 1 Nephi 16:7; this was definitely a second-class marriage for her, though better than none).

Ishmael also had four younger daughters, none of whom was married earlier. No hint is given that the father had mentionable wealth, only a “house” (1 Nephi 7:4). Nibley suggested that Ishmael was “connected with the desert.”¹¹ But a desert man settled into a “house” was usually of somewhat marginal social status in the Near East. In the course of normal events, the prospects for a man of modest means and well along in life to arrange marriages for so many daughters would have been limited. So the appearance of four known young suitors at the door, even if they had not previously made any courtship moves, must have stirred interest in the family even before “the Lord did soften the heart of Ishmael, and also his household”

(1 Nephi 7:5). Had the family been prosperous, likely they would not have been so willing to head off into the desert. As it was, they could see advantages.

Still, we must recognize Ishmael as a man of considerable courage and faith to agree to go off into the wilderness when his own chance for arriving at and enjoying the “land of promise” in the flesh was questionable. Surely it was blessing his posterity that concerned him the most. Once he had made the commitment, he held to it. Only a few days from home (the distance was not great; compare 1 Nephi 2:4, 6), his resolve was tested by the first rebellion of his two sons and two of his daughters (1 Nephi 7:6), but Ishmael and his wife supported Nephi and were willing to press ahead.

Nibley observed that Lehi and Ishmael were probably related, “since it has ever been the custom among the desert people for a man to marry the daughter of his paternal uncle.”¹² That Lehi and Ishmael were somehow kin indeed seems likely, but what that relationship was is not clear. Had they been brothers, as would have been the case for the cited custom to prevail, something might well have been said about that fact. Furthermore, had the brother-brother (“parallel cousin”) relationship been as obvious and patterned as Nibley supposed, we would be hard put to explain why marriages had not previously been contracted, under normal instead of these urgent conditions. In any case, socioeconomic distinctions between the families probably played a part. Furthermore, the supposition that Lehi and Ishmael were closely related goes contrary to the LDS tradition that the former counted descent from Manasseh but the latter from Ephraim (see below, Chapter 2, page 29).

Age differences could also have been a hindrance to contracting marriages under pre-flight conditions, for it is evident that the eldest daughter was too old to marry any of Lehi’s sons, and perhaps it was still customary for the eldest to be married before the younger ones could be betrothed (compare Genesis 29:26). With Zoram now on the scene, however, the matchup may have made more sense.

If, as I suspect, Ishmael’s daughters were not quite good

enough a catch to interest Lehi's menfolk while they were at home, under extreme conditions the fact that the numbers of Ishmael's daughters and the eligible men in Lehi's party worked out exactly right perhaps made the alliance suddenly both feasible and desirable. We have no warrant, however, for supposing that "love" played much if any part in the arrangements; the relationships were practical, at least in the beginning.

When we consider the interrelations between Ishmael's and Lehi's families, the age distribution of the former's offspring probably was about like this:

Table 1.1 Ishmael's family

Child	Age on Leaving Jerusalem
Daughter 1 (married Zoram)	31
Son 1	29
Son 2	26
Daughter 2 (married Laman)	24
Daughter 3 (married Lemuel)	21
Daughter 4 (married Sam)	19
Daughter 5 (married Nephi)	16

(The order and ages of Daughter 1 and Son 1 might be reversed.)

In the absence of any evidence that Ishmael had inherited social and economic advantages, we may suppose that his own marriage had been at a later age than for Lehi, say about age twenty-one, when his wife was about nineteen. Ishmael might then have been fifty-three or fifty-four when his family departed from the Jerusalem area; his wife could have been between fifty-one and fifty-three. In the absence of definite statements about how long it took the party to move down the Red Sea margin to Shazer and then to Nahom, we cannot be sure of Ishmael's age at the time of his death in Nahom (1 Nephi 16:33-36), but it could have been some five years into the journey. If he died under sixty years of age, this would explain some of the anger of his

daughters about what they considered his early demise caused by following Lehi's difficult wilderness agenda. (Incidentally, did the "daughters" who "did mourn exceedingly" include the wives of Nephi, Sam and Zoram, or only those married to Laman and Lemuel? And since there is no mention of his wife's mourning, was she already dead?)

8. The sons of Ishmael

These two were probably older than Lehi's sons. Yet their willingness to be led by Laman and Lemuel in rebellion indicates that they were still on the younger side of adulthood, for married men of, say, more than thirty would be unlikely to follow readily much younger single men of twenty-three and twenty-one as Laman and Lemuel were. Both Ishmael's sons had "families" (1 Nephi 7:6) who accompanied them. The term "families" implies a wife and at least one child each, but there likely were more children, considering the fathers' ages. (Had one or both of the wives been childless, the expression "and their wives/his wife" would likely have been used instead of "...and their families.") As noted above, it may be that at some point the daughters of Lehi became wives of the sons of Ishmael (see also below).

In later *Book of Mormon* history, the descendants of both men were incorporated into a single tribe (Jacob 1:13) for reasons not apparent now. Since Lamoni, local king over "the land of Ishmael" in Lamanite country in the second century B.C. was a descendant of Ishmael (Alma 17:21), his father, who was king over all the Lamanite lands, presumably also counted his lineage to Ishmael. Thus the Ishmaelite tribe came to play a prominent part among "the Lamanites."

9. Sam

Sam was the shy and retiring one of the four brothers, it appears. Though older than Nephi, he followed him consistently (1

Nephi 2:17). He may not have been very assertive; at least one would have thought that when Laman and Lemuel “did smite us [two] even with a rod” (1 Nephi 3:28-29) that he could have combined efforts with Nephi (who was “large in stature”) to prevent the beating. Furthermore, Sam was as frightened as Laman and Lemuel when Nephi, dressed in Laban’s clothes and accompanied by Zoram, approached them at night (1 Nephi 4:28).

Perhaps his retiring if not passive nature is why his father in his final blessing (2 Nephi 4:11), while saluting Sam’s good heart and behavior, could see that his descendants would not survive as a distinct entity but would be incorporated into Nephi’s tribe.

10. Zoram

Zoram had been Laban’s servant. At the time when he promised to accompany the party and be granted nominal equal status with the brothers, he must have weighed in his instantaneous calculation of the costs and benefits the fact that as a servant of Laban in Jerusalem, he would always be a third-class citizen and bound to an unadmirable master. Of course, had he not agreed to go with them, they would have killed him—a rather strong determinant in his decision!

A man as trusted as he was, with access to Laban’s treasury, would have been of some maturity, for he would have had to prove faithful to Laban over a period of years before being given such trust by his master. That he was in his thirties would be reasonable and such an age agrees with his marrying the daughter whom Ishmael’s family may have considered by then their “old maid.” Later he had his own tribal descendants (1 Nephi 18:6; Jacob 1:13), so his wife apparently had fertile years remaining after their marriage.

We learn nothing about his nature, physique or bearing, although he was probably a thorough-going city fellow. Since Laban seems to have played some military role at Jerusalem (1 Nephi 3:31), Zoram likely was also part of the Jewish military apparatus, which

may in part account for the military role his descendants later played (Alma 48:5).

He aligned himself with the Nephi faction in subsequent disputes (2 Nephi 1:30; 5:6), and a generation or more later his descendants formed one of the small tribes within the broad Nephite category (Jacob 1:13). Still, a tradition among part of his descendants centuries later (Alma 54:23) suggests that he had been “pressed and brought out of Jerusalem” against his will by Nephi. Perhaps in weak moments, he confessed privately to his children that, like the Mormon pioneers from Nauvoo, he “went willingly, because he had to.”

Nothing is said about Zoram’s ancestry, but it seems statistically likely, given his bureaucratic/military role in Jerusalem, that he was a Judahite, while both Lehi and Ishmael counted descent from Joseph.

11. Others

As we have seen, there were minor characters in the drama who were considered by Nephi insignificant enough not to mention by name. Let us consider each in turn, presenting what we know and can infer about their ages and social positions.

“My sisters”

The two (or more) daughters of Lehi and Sariah I presume, on the basis of Erastus Snow’s statement, to have become wives of Ishmael’s sons. They were minors at the beginning of the account, otherwise there would be no way to place them in Sariah’s birth history. I suppose that one was around twelve and the other around nine. When they arrived in Bountiful they would have been twenty and seventeen.

It is logical that in the intimate circumstances of the camp, youths approaching sexual maturity would be in a socially awkward position. Likely, the adult role of wife would be arranged for the two daughters as soon as feasible, say around age sixteen for each in turn,

but whom would they marry? The sons of Ishmael alone seem of an age to be possible husbands. Lehi's first daughter may then have become the second wife of Ishmael's first son at about the time they were in Nahom. The second daughter could have become the second wife to Ishmael's second son no later than the time the party reached Bountiful.

This scenario takes the Erastus Snow statement at face value. I realize that to suppose that the daughters became second wives appears to contradict Jacob 2:34 and 3:5, where it is said that Lehi was commanded that there should be no plural wives. But perhaps Lehi received that commandment only in the promised land after, and partially because of, bitter experience with the second wifeness of his two daughters, which had led to their separation from Ishmael's sons. Or, these cases may have been covered under the "escape clause" of Jacob 2:30 ("For if I will...raise up seed unto me, I will command my people" to make polygamous unions), the daughters having no other prospect of marriage within their party.

Still another possibility is that the arduous wilderness experience had caused the (unmentioned) death of the original wives of the sons of Ishmael, whereupon Lehi's daughters were taken as replacement spouses. A final possibility is that the Snow statement was in error in the recollection of the detail about the daughters and that they never married at all due to lack of partners of a suitable age. Obviously, we cannot settle these details on the basis of so few bits of information given us by Nephi in his record. We may wonder about such matters but must restrict our guesses to fit what hints the text gives us.

Wives of Ishmael's sons

Our recognition of the existence of these wives depends completely on the phrasing of 1 Nephi 7:6: "the two sons of Ishmael and their families." No clue is provided about the age or origin of the women. Given patterns of marriage in preexilic Israel, it would be likely that they were kin to their husbands through their fathers, but

that was only an Israelite preference, not an absolute rule. As to their ages, we can only suppose that they were slightly younger than their respective husbands, that is, about twenty-eight and twenty-five at the one time when their existence is implied (1 Nephi 7:6).

Original children of Ishmael's sons

As noted earlier, since both sons had “families,” we must suppose that children were involved. Given the probable ages of the parents, two or three each would be plausible, for a plausible total of five Ishmaelite grandchildren as the story opens.

Children born during the trip through the wilderness

Nephi says in 1 Nephi 17:1, “our women did bear children in the wilderness.” No numbers are included, nor are any exclusions mentioned. Two of these births, Jacob and Joseph, have already been discussed. If we presume that all the younger married women bore children during the eight years, the median number would likely be two, given the rigors of the circumstances—some may have had but one, others three. During the two or more years in Bountiful while they were building the boat, there could have been an additional three born within the group. A distribution like this would be reasonable:

Table 1.2 Children born in the wilderness

Sariah (Jacob and Joseph)	2
Laman's wife	2
Lemuel's wife	2
Sam's wife	2
Nephi's wife	2
Zoram's wife	2
Wife of Son 1 of Ishmael	2
Wife of Son 2 of Ishmael	2
Total of those born in the wilderness	16
Plus those born in Bountiful	3

Were there servants?

No mention is made of male or female servants, yet it is possible that there were some. At first glance, 1 Nephi 2:4 would seem to rule that out, since reference is made only to Lehi's taking "his family." Yet Near Eastern usage would not rule out including servants under that heading without specifically distinguishing them. Lehi's "great wealth" would seem to have called for at least female servants in the household. Nephi's hesitancy about even adding Zoram to their party would not apply in the case of family retainers, who would have known no other life than service to Lehi and Sariah and had no alternative in society in the land of Jerusalem even if they dreamed of defecting. I do not consider it likely that there were such people along, but the door should not be shut on the possibility, for they might account for some genetic variety in the colony as well as providing additional hands for the preparation of the ship when they reached Bountiful.

Finally, I note that Lynn M. Hilton has proposed in an unpublished paper that Laman and Lemuel took dark-skinned South Arabian women as second wives during the sojourn in Bountiful, thus accounting for the skin color attributed to the Lamanites in the promised land in America. This is an interesting idea, however, I am not persuaded by his arguments. That the party had social interaction with local inhabitants in Bountiful on the south Arabian coast does seem likely, in fact inevitable. Among other things, Nephi claims "neither did I build the ships after the manner of men" (1 Nephi 18:2), strongly implying that he had knowledge of other ships which almost certainly would have existed on that coast and had been examined by him. However, Jacob 3:5, which credits the Lamanites with a tradition of monogamy, weighs against the Hilton suggestion.

Now that we have recapped the possible personnel, let us see how Sariah's birth history plausibly went. It does seem possible, barely, to accommodate all her children in an atypical but feasible birth sequence.

Table 1.3 Sariah's birth history

Child	Age on Leaving Jerusalem	Sariah's Age at the Birth
Laman	23*	17
Lemuel	21	(early) 20
Sam	19	22
Nephi	(late) 16	25
Daughter 1	12	29
Daughter 2	9	32
(Departure from Jerusalem)		(41)
Jacob		43*
Joseph		45*
(Arrival in Bountiful)		(49)

** By supposing Laman was twenty-two instead of twenty-three and that Joseph was seven at the time of the shipboard need for "nourishment"—and these are the reasonable extremes—Sariah's age at Joseph's birth could have been as low as forty-two.*

One implication of the composition of the group

Assuming the correctness of these calculations, there would have been some seven vigorous adult males, perhaps supplemented by three of the adult females on any given workday, available for the tasks of gathering materials, constructing the ship, and outfitting and testing it. Assume further that other necessary tasks such as obtaining food and camp maintenance consumed a third of the working days of those eleven souls. If the ship took about two years to build and get ready to sail, then a maximum of around 5,000 person-days of (inexperienced) labor were available. Half that much labor might today construct a house of moderate size, but of limited quality, in perhaps a year. Since, however, Nephi's crew had no lumberyard nor hardware store to draw on, about as much time would be consumed in preparing materials as in actual construction of the vessel. Obviously

the only ship they could construct within these constraints would be quite small. Perhaps some servants were available as a supplement to the labor force, or perhaps some local inhabitants might have been used (which raises the question of how they might have been paid).

Recasting the demographic information, we see that the group who boarded the vessel would have been distributed something like this (excluding any possible servants):

Table 1.4 Group that boarded the vessel.

Age Group	Male	Female	Total
Aged adults	1	2?*	3?
Vigorous adults	8**	7	15
Children	12	13	25
Totals	21	22?	43?

* *We have no idea how long Ishmael's wife lived.*

** *One of the children of Ishmael's first son may have been as old as eighteen by now so is arbitrary counted here.*

These observations may strike some readers as trivial, but I disagree. We have two choices in regard to context or setting as we read the scriptures (or any ancient document): (1) We can impose our own historical and cultural preconceptions on the text (there is no such thing as simply reading a text "literally," in a cultural vacuum); or (2) we we can read it in the best light available to us about the actual, realistic setting. If we do the first, we run the risk of misconstruing the words and subverting the intent of possessing written scripture at all. Truth-lovers take the latter course every time, in my opinion.



Post Script

My calculations of the age of some individuals in the paper are linked to the date of Lehi's departure from Jerusalem, which I supposed at the time I wrote to have been about 597 B.C. Since then, as noted elsewhere in this volume, I have become persuaded that a later date, perhaps 587 B.C., is likely, based upon the arguments in Spackman (1993). I have not here revised this paper to reflect any changes this modified assumption might entail.



Notes To Chapter 1

- ¹ Sidney B. Sperry, "Did Father Lehi Have Daughters Who Married the Sons of Ishmael?" *Improvement Era* 55 (1952), page 642.
 - ² *Journal of Discourses* 23:184.
 - ³ Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites*, vol. 5, *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, John W. Welch, editor, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1988, pages 34-35. The arguments presented favoring the merchant role are insufficiently persuasive precisely because they do not follow the text closely nor exhaustively enough.
 - ⁴ Samuel E. Shepley, "Old World Metal Workers," paper given at Annual Symposium, Society for Early Historic Archaeology, Provo, Utah, 22 October 1983; John A. Tvedtnes, "Was Lehi a Caravaneer?" FARMS Preliminary Report, 1984.
 - ⁵ As I observe in Chapter 3 "Transoceanic Crossings," had Lehi been a skilled metal-worker, Nephi would hardly have worked up ore into tools by himself when he prepared to build the ship; he could more economically have relied on Lehi's skills (1 Nephi 9:11). However, Nephi might well have observed
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metalworking repeatedly back on his fathers estate, where itinerant smiths probably stopped periodically to construct or repair tools, and thus have been familiar in general with the required steps and paraphernalia.

- ⁶ John W. Welch, "Longevity of Book of Mormon People and the 'Age of Man,'" *Journal of Collegium Aesculapium*, 1985, pages 35-45, and "They Came from Jerusalem," *Ensign* 6, 1976, pages 28-29, both available as FARMS Reprints, argues for the birth of Lehi around 655 B.C. His assumption that Nephi was Lehi's sixth child (two sisters being older than he) is highly unlikely, for that would stretch out Sariah's fertility history to an unbelievable and unnecessary length. As I show below, even by making Nephi the fourth child, the problem of Sariah's births is barely manageable in natural terms. Moreover, Welch supposes that Lehi must have been of a certain adult age in order to have been affected by King Josiah's reforms and that this fact requires an age for him older than Sariah. But Lehi only had to be aware of those reforms subsequent to their imposition, not to have been an active observer of their application, in order for them to have influenced his own views about the law, the scriptures, and ritual. Contrary arguments about Lehi's age are evident to me, for example, both Lehi and Sariah show the effects of age simultaneously (1 Nephi 18:17), which suggests that they were nearly the same age.
- ⁷ Philip Houghton, *The First New Zealanders*, Auckland: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980, pages 96-100.
- ⁸ The original pioneer cemetery in downtown Salt Lake City excavated by Brigham Young University's Office of Public Archaeology in 1986 revealed a substantial number of infant burials for whom there was no historical record of either birth or death. The evidence strongly indicated malnutrition as a major cause of the deaths.
- ⁹ Cf. George S. Tate, "The Typology of the Exodus Pattern in the Book of Mormon," in Neal E. Lambert, editor, *Literature of Belief*, Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1981, pages 245-62. Still unpublished studies are by S. Kent Brown, Alan Goff and Terrence L. Szink.
- ¹⁰ As already mentioned, Lehi and Sariah may have had more than two daughters, but lacking any hint of the actual number, I have assumed from this point on the minimum textually satisfactory number—two.
- ¹¹ Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, pages 260-61.
- ¹² Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, page 40.

