

# Lehi's Altar and Sacrifice in the Wilderness

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The Book of Mormon records that Lehi, in obedience to the Lord's command, left Jerusalem with his family and that "when he had traveled three days in the wilderness, he pitched his tent in a valley by the side of a river of water. And it came to pass that he built an altar of stones, and made an offering unto the Lord" (1 Nephi 2:6–7). This simple act of worship raises an important issue for the reader familiar with biblical law.

The Book of Mormon repeatedly assures us that the Nephites continued to live the law of Moses until the coming of Christ (2 Nephi 5:10; Jarom 1:5; Alma 30:2–3; 4 Nephi 1:12). That being the case, many readers are not surprised by Lehi's wilderness sacrifice nor by other occasions when his people "offer[ed] sacrifice and burnt offerings unto the Lord" (1 Nephi 5:9; 7:22) and built a temple, which presumably had an altar (2 Nephi 5:16; Mosiah 2:3).<sup>1</sup> Yet Deuteronomy 12 appears to strictly forbid the building of altars and the making of sacrifice outside the place the Lord had chosen for that purpose. The place so designated is usually understood to be the temple in Jerusalem.

So the question arises, How could these people who observed the Mosaic law justify building altars and offering sacrifices away from the Jerusalem temple? While there are several possible answers, the passage in the Book of Mormon that mentions Lehi's three days' journey into the wilderness (1 Nephi 2:6–7) may provide an explanation that is at once surprising and simple.

Latter-day Saint commentators have not typically dealt with the issues of Nephite sacrifices, altars, and temples outside of Jerusalem and have not commented on the particular problems presented by Deuteronomy 12.<sup>2</sup> Sperry, in his *Book of Mormon Compendium*, simply states, "Lehi built an altar of stones and offered sacrifice to the Lord" without further comment.<sup>3</sup> Nibley describes Lehi's sacrifice as a commonplace occurrence among Semitic peoples of all ages in the desert.<sup>4</sup> Welch apparently assumes that the injunction from Deuteronomy was not of concern to Lehi, arguing that "Father Lehi was also following patterns set by the patriarchs of old."<sup>5</sup> McConkie and Millet note that Lehi offered sacrifice by virtue of the Melchizedek Priesthood, which may be a way of saying that the injunction of the lower law in Deuteronomy was not applicable to Lehi.<sup>6</sup> In their discussion of the building of the Nephite temple, they refer to the Jewish traditions that derive from Deuteronomy 12 but declare that, based on other scriptural evidence, temples could be built anywhere: "It is commonly held by the Jews that there can be but one temple--the temple in Jerusalem. Scriptural writ testifies otherwise."<sup>7</sup> I suggest that more lies beneath the surface.

Deuteronomy 12:

First let us look at the relevant passages in Deuteronomy. According to Deuteronomy 12, after Israel entered the promised land the place of sacrifice was to be confined to a single altar at the place where the Lord would choose to put his name. The key passages are as follows:

But unto the place which the Lord your God shall choose out of all your tribes to put his name there, even unto his habitation shall ye seek, and thither thou shalt come: And thither ye shall bring your burnt offerings, and your sacrifices, and your tithes, and heave offerings of your hand, and your vows, and your freewill offerings, and the firstlings of your herds and of your flocks. (Deuteronomy 12:5–6)

But when ye go over Jordan, and dwell in the land which the Lord your God giveth you to inherit, . . . then there shall be a place which the Lord your God shall choose to cause his name to dwell there. (Deuteronomy 12:10–11)

Take heed to thyself that thou offer not thy burnt offerings in every place that thou seest; but in the place which the Lord shall choose in one of thy tribes, there thou shalt offer thy burnt offerings, and there thou shalt do all that I command thee. (Deuteronomy 12:13–14)

Scholars call this series of injunctions the "centralization of the cult" or the "centralization of worship," referring to how the sacrifices and offerings that were the most prominent rituals of the Mosaic law were to be carried out in one location.<sup>8</sup> In its own way the centralization of worship was a revolutionary law that, when implemented, would change the practice of Israelite religion in a very dramatic way. Because the laws in Deuteronomy 12 affected various institutions in the law of Moses—the offering of tithes and firstlings (Deuteronomy 14:22–26), the celebration of the holidays (Deuteronomy 16:1–17), the cities of refuge (Deuteronomy 19:1–9), and the enfranchisement of the Levites (Deuteronomy 18:6–8)—centralization would also affect the worship of every person in Israel. For example, because sacrifice was an integral part of all of the festivals, these festivals would no longer be celebrated in the various villages, but only at the central altar at the temple after it had been established.

It must also be remembered that, according to Leviticus 17, even the slaughter of clean animals was considered a type of sacrifice that had to be performed at an altar, even if the animal was to be killed only for human consumption.<sup>9</sup> Hence, while Deuteronomy 12 banned the sacrifice of animals at all places other than "the place chosen by the Lord," it also gave instructions for "secular slaughter," whereby an animal could be killed for human consumption even where no altar existed (Deuteronomy 12:14–16). This kind of slaughter was to be performed at the gates of the city, and the blood was to be "poured to the earth," presumably as a symbol recognizing the sanctity of life as first described in Genesis 9:4: "the flesh with the life thereof, which is the blood thereof, shall ye not eat."

A short review of the history of the centralization of worship in Israel will help us to understand the situation facing Lehi. The patriarchs did not exhibit a sense that there had to be only a single place of sacrifice. Hence they built altars and offered sacrifices in many locations in the land of Canaan, including Shechem, Bethel, Hebron, Moriah, and Beer-sheba (Genesis 12:6–8; 13:18; 26:25; Abraham 2:17–20). During the Israelites' exodus from Egypt and sojourn in the wilderness, the portable altar of the tabernacle served for sacrifice.

Later, from the time of the conquest of Canaan to the erection of the temple, numerous altars and even temples were in operation throughout biblical Israel. For example, Samuel sacrificed at Ramah (1 Samuel 9:12–24) and Saul both at Gilgal (1 Samuel 10:8) and at Aijalon (1 Samuel 14:35). According to noted scholar Menachem Haran, "The solitary altars were numerous and

scattered throughout the country; there was probably no settlement without its altar, and altars could even be found outside cities, in the countryside."<sup>10</sup> Besides the temple in Jerusalem, Haran has counted 12 temples that functioned at various times in Israel, including those at Shiloh, Bethel, Dan, Gilgal, Mizpah, and even one in Arad that operated during the time of the temple at Jerusalem.<sup>11</sup>

Deuteronomy 12 states that after the children of Israel entered the promised land, "then there shall be a place which the Lord your God shall choose to cause his name to dwell there" (v. 11). At that designated location all sacrifices and offerings were to be made. While the temple in Jerusalem is not specified at the time of Deuteronomy 12, in biblical tradition that temple became the authorized place. When King Solomon dedicated the temple, he declared it to be the place where the Lord would put his name (1 Kings 8:29). Yet even after the temple was built, sacrifices and offerings continued throughout Israel, most notably at the high places (1 Kings 12:26–33; 2 Kings 16:4), which were uniformly condemned by the prophets (Isaiah 57:7; Hosea 10:8; Amos 7:9). Matters changed during the reigns of two later kings of Judah. Hezekiah (715–687 BC) "removed the high places" and eliminated idolatry throughout Judah so that the religion in Judah was reformed (2 Kings 18:4). Later, Josiah (640–609 BC) finally centralized worship in Jerusalem according to the injunction in Deuteronomy 12 (2 Kings 23:7–9, 15).

### **Legitimacy of Lehi's Altar and Sacrifice**

In light of scriptural evidence there emerge several possible explanations of why Lehi built an altar in the wilderness and offered sacrifice in apparent disregard of the laws set forth in Deuteronomy 12. We will examine three possible explanations here.

1. *Deuteronomy 12 did not intend to eliminate all sacrifice away from the main sanctuary.* The first possibility is that the injunction in Deuteronomy did not originally intend to eliminate all sacrifice outside of the Jerusalem temple. The fact that, after the Israelite possession of the land, altars and sacrifice and even other temples continued at various places has led many scholars to believe that the laws in Deuteronomy 12 were either understood differently before the time of the reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah or were written but enforced later—perhaps during the reigns of Hezekiah, Manasseh, and Josiah.<sup>12</sup>

Those who believe that the laws concerning the centralization of worship were early argue that the original intention of those laws was distributive. That is, the phrase *the place which the Lord your God shall choose* originally was not interpreted as applying exclusively to Jerusalem (in fact, Jerusalem is not mentioned anywhere in Deuteronomy). Rather, the expression was originally understood to apply to a succession of sanctuaries over time (such as Shechem and Shiloh) and only eventually to Jerusalem.<sup>13</sup> Others have argued that the passage was not meant to refer to just one place but to any place that the Lord approved. In this view, there could be any number of divinely approved places of sacrifice.<sup>14</sup>

Even bracketing the issue of the original intention of Deuteronomy 12, it seems certain that by the time of Lehi "the place where the Lord would choose" was understood in ancient Israel to mean the temple in Jerusalem, as understood by Solomon's dedicatory prayer in 1 Kings 8. In the course of Josiah's reforms (King Josiah was a contemporary of Lehi), a book was discovered in the temple that many scholars believe was some form of the book of Deuteronomy. Admittedly, Josiah's reforms are described in language similar to that in Deuteronomy, and the nature of the

reforms closely follows the laws found only in Deuteronomy, especially in terms of the centralization of worship.<sup>15</sup> Motivated by the instructions in the book, Josiah eliminated idolatry throughout the country, cleansed and purified apostate temple practices, broke down the high places, and destroyed the altars throughout the land, including the altar at Bethel (2 Kings 23).

Those reforms are significant for Book of Mormon studies since Lehi grew up in Jerusalem during the reign of Josiah and must have been influenced by the religious reforms that affected the lives of everyone living there and that did not go unnoticed. For example, Lehi's contemporary, Jeremiah, lamented the death of Josiah and praised him for his righteous reign (Jeremiah 22:15–16). Because the plates of brass contained the five books of Moses (1 Nephi 5:11), Lehi and his descendants must have been familiar with the book of Deuteronomy. The language and theology of the Book of Mormon are heavily dependent on Deuteronomy, perhaps more than any other biblical book. The very basis of the oft-repeated covenant in the Book of Mormon that "inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments, ye shall prosper" (1 Nephi 2:20) reflects the theology of Deuteronomy: "Keep therefore the words of this covenant, and do them, that ye may prosper in all that ye do" (Deuteronomy 29:9).<sup>16</sup>

The reforms of Josiah dictated the centralization of worship, which included the commandment that altars and sacrifices should be limited to one place. The only place in scripture that this injunction is found is in Deuteronomy 12. It is possible, of course, that the passage in Deuteronomy did not originally intend to limit sacrifice to only one place. Even so, any explanation of Lehi's altar and sacrifices must deal with the biblical evidence that, during Lehi's time, it was widely understood and enforced that Jerusalem was the only place where sacrifice could be offered.

*2. Melchizedek Priesthood holders were not bound by the centralization of worship as prescribed by Deuteronomy 12.* It seems certain that Lehi, not being of the lineage of Levi,<sup>17</sup> officiated through the Melchizedek Priesthood.<sup>18</sup> Because Lehi and his descendants held this priesthood, they may not have been constrained by all of the injunctions of the law of Moses. There is much that we do not understand about Nephite worship in light of the fact that Lehi and his people were living the law of Moses but apparently possessed the authority of the Melchizedek Priesthood. The Book of Mormon simply does not provide enough data.

Since Lehi was not a Levite, he probably did not have personal access to the temple in Jerusalem. While living there, he may have simply offered his required sacrifices through the approved channels of the Aaronic Priesthood, or perhaps he received divine approval and authority to build altars and offer sacrifice according to other instructions of the Lord or according to his own discretion. We do not know. However, the fact that the patriarchs of old, officiating with Melchizedek Priesthood authority, built altars and offered sacrifice in various locations, and the fact that the restored Church of Jesus Christ builds temples throughout the world, suggest that the centralized worship prescribed in Deuteronomy was either misunderstood or was part of the lower law—a temporary law—that was fulfilled with the atonement of Jesus Christ.

*3. Deuteronomy 12 may have been interpreted anciently as applying only to the land of Israel.* While it is clear that Josiah interpreted the injunction of centralized worship to refer only to Jerusalem, it is possible that anciently there was another viable interpretation of those laws.

The Dead Sea Scrolls provide possible evidence for this view. Twice in the Temple Scroll the expression *three days' journey from the temple* occurs (column 43:12 about the law of the tithe, and column 52:14 concerning sacrifice). The most important passage for our study appears in column 52:

You shall not slaughter a clean ox or sheep or goat in all your towns, near to my temple (within) a distance of a three days' journey; nay, but inside my temple you shall slaughter it, making it a burnt offering or a peace offering, and you shall eat and rejoice before me at the place on which I shall choo{se} to put my name." (11QT 52:13–16; emphasis added)<sup>19</sup>

The standard interpretation by Yigael Yadin and others of the phrase *three days' journey* in this passage is that the Temple Scroll prohibits all nonsacrificial slaughter within the boundaries of three days' distance from Jerusalem. Within this geographical boundary the only permissible slaughter is sacrificial; in other words, the Temple Scroll bans all slaughter for nonsacrificial purposes, the so-called secular slaughter for human consumption.<sup>20</sup> This of course would be a very restrictive injunction. Recently a scholar, Aharon Shemesh, has suggested a new interpretation of the phrase in question.<sup>21</sup> He has demonstrated from rabbinical sources that the actual distance of a three-day journey from the Jerusalem temple would, for all practical purposes, mark a radius encompassing the whole land of Israel, since any point therein can be reached from the temple within that time frame.<sup>22</sup>

Shemesh suggests that the passage in column 52 of the Temple Scroll should be read as an interpretation of Deuteronomy 12:1–5, which is discussed in the Temple Scroll in the preceding passage in column 51. Those verses in Deuteronomy describe the manner of sacrifice in the land after the conquest and the destruction of the pagan altars. Shemesh concludes that the Temple Scroll interprets the whole of Deuteronomy 12 in light of its opening verse: "On this basis, we can then suggest that the author of the Temple Scroll embraced the opinion that the law of centralization of worship applied only in the land of Israel in line with Deuteronomy 12:1's opening declaration: "These are the laws and rules that you must carefully observe *in the land*.""<sup>23</sup> Shemesh cites several other examples from rabbinic literature to show that some of the ancient rabbis did not condemn the temples, altars, or sacrifices in the Jewish temple of Onias in Egypt because they were "outside of the land of Israel."<sup>24</sup>

The same method of interpreting Deuteronomy 12 may lie behind the Nephite justification for building a temple in the New World even in light of their continued obedience to the law of Moses. It is possible that they understood the injunction of Deuteronomy 12 concerning altars, sacrifices, and temples to apply only to the land of Israel as suggested by Deuteronomy 12:1.

Thus, in the Temple Scroll we find an ancient interpretation of the centralization of worship in Deuteronomy that prohibits sacrifice within a three days' journey of Jerusalem. Whether this passage is interpreted to mean that there should be no sacrificial slaughter in Israel except at the temple or that secular slaughter was allowed in Israel, it is clear that an ancient interpretation limited the application of Deuteronomy 12 to a geographical area established by the distance of a three days' journey from Jerusalem—an area that roughly coincided with the boundaries of Israel.

## A clue in the Record?

Nephi recorded of his father Lehi "that when he had traveled three days in the wilderness . . . that he built an altar of stones, and made an offering unto the Lord, and gave thanks unto the Lord our God" (1 Nephi 2:6–7). This statement may simply be due to the historical fact that Lehi and his family traveled for three days before they stopped for a significant rest. But the note on the three days' journey may also be Nephi's way of saying that Lehi and his family were acting in accordance with an understanding of the law of Moses found in Deuteronomy 12.

That understanding is consistent with what we find preserved in the Temple Scroll. According to that document, the building of an altar and the offering of sacrifice were allowed only outside the radius of a three days' journey from the temple in Jerusalem. To put the matter differently, sacrifices beyond the three-day limit were acceptable under the law of Moses. In this view Lehi was conforming to the Mosaic requirement expressed in Deuteronomy 12 when he built an altar in the wilderness and offered sacrifice.

## Notes

1. Unfortunately there is very little information about the Nephite temples in the Book of Mormon. The most complete study of the Nephite temples to date is John W. Welch, "The Temple in the Book of Mormon: The Temples at the Cities of Nephi, Zarahemla, and Bountiful," in *Temples of the Ancient World: Ritual and Symbolism*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1994).
2. For a brief discussion of some of the issues relating to the sacrifice of Lehi and the Nephites beyond the injunctions in Deuteronomy 12, see *JBMS* 8/1 (1999): 71.
3. Sidney B. Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968), 99.
4. Hugh W. Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 245–46.
5. Welch, "The Temple in the Book of Mormon," 320.
6. "As a prophet, Lehi held the Melchizedek Priesthood and by that authority offered sacrifice (*Teachings*, p. 181). . . . The Book of Mormon writers made no attempt to elaborate upon the nature or types of their offerings. The Aaronic Priesthood was the province of the tribe of Levi, and thus was not taken by the Nephites to America. It would appear, therefore, that the sacrifices performed by the Lehiite colony were carried out under the direction of the higher priesthood, which comprehends all the duties and authorities of the lesser" (Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987], 1:31).
7. McConkie and Millet further explain: "A covenant-centered religion required a covenant sanctuary. The fact that the Nephites constructed a temple suggested that all remnants of Israel, wherever they had been scattered, if they possessed the priesthood would have done likewise" (*ibid.*, 1:223).
8. For a recent review of biblical scholarship on Deuteronomy 12, see Bernard M. Levinson, "The Innovation of Cultic Centralization in Deuteronomy 12," in *Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics of Legal Innovation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 23–52. An excellent discussion of the issue of the restriction of sacrifice to a single sanctuary can be found in Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 459–64.

9. The interpretation of Leviticus in terms of the so-called secular slaughter is much debated. See Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 366 n. 43; and Baruch A. Levine, *Leviticus: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 112–13.
10. Menachem Haran, *Temples and Temple Service in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), 459–64. This commentary is highly recommended as a model presentation of biblical scholarship to an educated lay audience.
11. *Ibid.*, 26–42.
12. This is the prevailing view among modern scholars. In the classic documentary hypothesis, the literary strand D—chiefly the book of Deuteronomy—is dated to the middle of the seventh century BC. While most scholars who hold this view agree that there is older material in Deuteronomy, they believe that the book in its present form was edited in the seventh century and its laws were first applied in their entirety by King Josiah. For a balanced and readable presentation of this view, see Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, xix–xxvi; and Moshe Weinfeld, "Deuteronomy, Book of," *Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 2:168–83.
13. See, for example, Alexander Rofé, "The Strata of Law about the Centralization of Worship in Deuteronomy and the History of the Deuteronomistic Movement," in *Congress Volume: Uppsala 1971* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 221–26; Baruch Halpern, "The Centralization Formula in Deuteronomy," *Vetus Testamentum* 31 (1981): 20–38; and Levinson, "Innovation of Cultic Centralization," 24–25.
14. A. C. Welch, "The Problem of Deuteronomy," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 48 (1929): 291–306.
15. See Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 65–84.
16. See Ellis Rasmussen, "Deuteronomy," *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:378–79.
17. Lehi was a descendant of Manasseh (see Alma 10:3).
18. The priesthood that Alma<sup>2</sup> held is described as "the high priesthood of the holy order of God" (Alma 4:20; compare 13:1–12, which describes the priesthood of the Nephites as the Melchizedek Priesthood). Responding to the question of whether the Melchizedek Priesthood was taken away when Moses died, the Prophet Joseph Smith taught: "All Priesthood is Melchizedek, but there are different portions or degrees of it. That portion which brought Moses to speak with God face to face was taken away; but that which brought the ministry of angels remained. All the prophets had the Melchizedek Priesthood and were ordained by God himself" (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976], 180). He also taught: "What was the power of Melchizedek? 'Twas not the Priesthood of Aaron which administers in outward ordinances, and the offering of sacrifices. Those holding the fulness of the Melchizedek Priesthood are kings and priests of the Most High God, holding the keys of power and blessings. In fact, that Priesthood is a perfect law of theocracy, and stands as God to give laws to the people, administering endless lives to the sons and daughters of Adam" (*ibid.*, 322).
19. Translations of the Temple Scroll from Yigael Yadin, *The Temple Scroll* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1983).
20. Yadin, *Temple Scroll* 1.315–20, 2.233–39; Lawrence H. Schiffman, "The Deuteronomistic Paraphrase of the Temple Scroll," *Revue de Qumran* 15 (1992): 558–61; and "Sacral and Non-Sacral Slaughter," in *Time to Prepare the Way in the Wilderness*, ed. Devorah Dimant and

Lawrence H. Schiffman (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 69–84.

21. Aharon Shemesh, "'Three-Days' Journey from the Temple': The Use of this Expression in the Temple Scroll," *Dead Sea Discoveries* 6/2 (1999): 126–38; and *idem*, "A New Reading of Temple Scroll 52:13–16. Does this Scroll Permit Sacrifices Outside the Land of Israel?"

*Proceedings of the International Congress, Fifty Years of the Discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. Lawrence H. Schiffman, Emanuel Tov, and James C. Vanderkam (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2000), 400–410.

22. Shemesh, "'Three-Days' Journey,'" 126–27; emphasis added.

23. *Ibid.*, 130; emphasis added.

24. *Ibid.*, 130–32. This may help to explain the fact that the Jews built temples in Egypt in Elephantine (destroyed in 410 BC) and Leontopolis (shut down in AD 73) where sacrifice was offered. See Haran, *Temples*, 46–47. Shemesh cites Mishnah *Menahot* 13:10 and Babylonian Talmud *Menahot* 109a.

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