

Nephi on Women & Motherhood

By George Potter

Nephi had an incredible intellect and was a “Renaissance man” who was thousands of years ahead of his time. His accolades include: being a great visionary, a prophet, a brave leader who led his family through the wilderness (Mosiah 10:13), a talented wordsmith, the builder and captain of a large sailing ship, the architect of a city and a temple, a king, and the father of the Nephite nation. Yet one of his greatest attributes is that in an era when seemingly little value was placed on women, Nephi taught of the true nobility and importance of them. Indeed, in the very first sentence in the Book of Mormon, he pays equal tribute to his father and his mother: “I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents....”

The prophet’s engravings in 1st and 2nd Nephi are a very ancient record. Yet we see that his treatment of women, even by medieval standards, was revolutionary. Nephi and his disciple, his younger brother Jacob, clearly respected women’s sentiments and achievements, supported their rights, and showed high reverence for the divine calling of motherhood.

To understand just how progressive Nephi was, one needs only to compare his writing to those of other ancient texts, which seldom name women, let alone discuss their affairs. For example, consider the Old Testament. How many women were named in that four-thousand-year chronicle? Of the few who were mentioned, what do you really know about these women?

Only during the last two centuries have women and their issues gained significant import in literature. In many parts of the world today, women are still considered little more than the property of their husbands. In antiquity, women were rarely given credit for their achievements and were seldom respected for the incredible challenges they endured as mothers living under primitive conditions. Period texts like the Old Testament, or even the more recent Qur’an, describe unauthorized polygamy, the right of men to sleep with slave women, and the tradition of acquiring an unlimited collection of concubines.

Perhaps the greatest offense committed against women in antiquity was that they were ignored. Author Michael Crichton transformed the manuscript of Ahmad Ibn Fadlan’s report to the Caliph of Baghdad into a novel format. In 922 A.D., Ibn Fadlan had been sent as an ambassador to the King of the Bulgars. Crichton comments, “Ibn Fadlan never states that his party is greater than a few individuals, when in fact it probably numbered a hundred people or more... Ibn Fadlan does not count literally-slaves, servants, and lesser members of the caravan.”¹ Of course, the ‘lesser’ members of the caravan were the women. No wonder we have the saying, “History was written by men and for men.” The result is a terrible tragedy. We have lost forever the histories of half the world’s population.

¹ Michael Crichton, *Eaters of the Dead: the Manuscript of Ibn Fadlan Relating His Experiences with the Northmen in A.D. 922* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1976), 12.

Nephi broke with tradition by writing in detail about affairs of his mother, wife, sisters, sisters-in-law, and even the mother of Christ. The prophet must have had great respect for women, for he counseled those who followed him to write only on the small plates the things of God (1 Nephi 9:2-4) and those things which should “profit” the people (2 Nephi 5:30-32). Thus, Nephi himself must have valued highly the affairs of women—a concept that seems to have been foreign to other ancient cultures and manuscripts. Following Nephi’s “commandment,” Jacob wrote only of the ‘most precious things’ (Jacob 1:2), and yet he too wrote about the problems faced by the Nephite women.

Nephi showed great empathy and respect for the suffering of the women during his family’s journey and pays specific tribute for the hardships sustained by his own mother (1 Nephi 5:1-3, 18:17,19). It would also appear that Nephi had a deep respect for the faithfulness of his wife, noting that she cried and prayed for his welfare when his brothers bound him (1 Nephi 18:19). Nephi also included on the plates the efforts of one of his sisters-in-law and his mother-in-law to soften the hearts of Laman and Lemuel so that they would cease trying to kill him (1 Nephi 7:19).

Although at one point the daughters of Ishmael murmured against Lehi and Nephi, we should note that Nephi explains that they did so only after their father died and it appeared that they would all die from hunger. Throughout the ordeal of crossing the Arabian desert, Nephi appears to have had a deep empathy for the women, for he inscribed on the plates that they had “suffered much affliction, hunger, thirst, and fatigue” (1 Nephi 16:35).

Nephi’s concern for the women in his party appears to have been seeded in a deep respect for them. In Chapter 17, Nephi holds up the women in the party as exemplars and standards for the entire group and seems to credit the women’s efforts for bringing the party back into compliance with the Lord’s commandments:

And we did travel and wade through much afflictions in the wilderness; and our women did bear children in the wilderness. And so great were the blessings of the Lord upon us, that while we did live upon raw meat in the wilderness, our women did give plenty of suck for their children, and were strong, yea, even like unto the men; and they began to bear their journeyings without murmurings. And thus we see that the commandments of God must be fulfilled. And if it so be that the children of men keep the commandments of God he doth nourish them, and strengthen them... (1 Nephi 17:1-3).

We can see from his earliest writings that rather than ignoring women, as was the custom of the time, Nephi included women in his narrative of the precious things of God.

Jacob loved Nephi (Jacob 1:10) and followed in his footsteps. Undoubtedly, his words make the Book of Mormon the earliest book in history to specifically condemn the unauthorized practice of multiple wives.

Wherefore, I the Lord God will not suffer that this people shall do like unto them of old. Wherefore, my brother, hear me, and hearken to the word of the Lord: For

there shall not any man among you have save it be one wife; and concubines he shall have none; For I the Lord God, delight in the chastity of women. (Jacob 2:26-28)

Equally remarkable is Jacob's strong rebuke of those who abuse their wives. Emotion and physical abuse are both alluded to by Jacob. His language is progressive even for our own day.

For behold, I, the Lord, have seen the sorrow, and heard the mourning of the daughters of my people in the land of Jerusalem, yea, and in all the lands of my people, because of the wickedness and abominations of their husbands.

And I will not suffer, saith the Lord of Hosts, that the cries of the fair daughters of this people, which I have led out of the land of Jerusalem, shall come up unto me against the men of my people, saith the Lord of Hosts.

For they shall not lead away captive the daughters of my people because of their tenderness, save I shall visit them with a sore curse, even unto destruction; for they shall not commit whoredoms, like unto them of old, saith the Lord of Hosts.

And now behold, my brethren, ye know that these commandments were given to our father, Lehi; wherefore, ye have known them before; and ye have come unto great condemnation for ye have done these things which ye ought not to have done.

Behold, ye have done greater iniquities than the Lamanites, our brethren. Ye have broken the hearts of your tender wives, and lost the confidence of your children, because of your bad examples before them; and the sobbings of their hearts ascend up to God against you. And because of the strictness of the word of God, which cometh down against you, many hearts died, pierced with deep wounds. (Jacob 2:31-36)

On Motherhood

Above all, Nephi, perhaps more than any other ancient author, honored motherhood, and his words paid great respect to mothers.

Nephi told Jacob to use only the gold plates for writing the "spiritual things" and to avoid trivia (Jacob 1:1-2,4). In this light, Nephi must have believed it was important that we understand the suffering that his own mother endured in her effort to follow the commandments of God. He tells us how his mother "truly had mourned" when she thought her sons had perished in the wilderness, and how she was "exceedingly glad" when they finally returned (1 Nephi 5:1). Nephi appears to have been humbled by the sacrifice the women made as they bore children in the wilderness, and he takes the time and effort to record these wilderness births on the golden plates (1 Nephi 17:1).

Nephi praised the nobility of all the mothers in their small caravan and acknowledged their strength during the most difficult part of the trail. The example of the mothers seems to have inspired the men in the party and directly led to an increase in the faith experienced by the family, which in turn was the key reason the family was able to survive their arduous journey (1 Nephi 17:1-3). Nephi lets us know that the women in his party had been pampered women, who left their precious things—probably their

maidservants and a large luxurious house—only to endure eight years in one of the most hellish wildernesses on earth. Why? Nephi tells us that these dedicated women did it to fulfill the commandments of God (1 Nephi 17:3). With Nephi's help we can understand that his mother, wife, and the other mothers in the party were great pioneers of faith.

Another profound tribute Nephi made to mothers is that he taught the correct image of our first mother. Satan has caused the world to label Eve with a despicable image. Some Christian and Muslim scholars credit Eve as the root of all evil and relegate her to a dark and distorted legacy. Undoubtedly the psychological sting of this Satanic deception of Eve has been felt by all Christian women.

Nephi, our great prophet, stood tall for Eve. He recorded on the plates Lehi's teachings that Eve was brave, tenacious, and intelligent enough to understand, and then fulfill, her extremely important role in the Lord's plan. So vital was her assignment that its completion was essential for the eternal progression of all her children—each one of us (2 Nephi 2:22-26). The Book of Mormon suggests that Eve understood well the consequences of her actions prior to the fall, i.e., enduring the pains of child birth and physical death so that man could experience God's great gift of free agency (2 Nephi 2:22-26). By the fall, she was helping Adam in opening the door to eternal progression, the knowledge of sweetness and joy, and eventually the blessings for all of us to appreciate and be cleansed by the atonement of Jesus Christ. Indeed, the Book of Mormon provides an accurate image of our noble and wise first mother: a decisive hero, an intelligent martyr who subjected herself to physical death, and a wonderfully loving mother who understood the gospel in great depth (2 Nephi 2:15-18).

And after Adam and Eve had partaken of the forbidden fruit they were driven out of the garden of Eden, to till the earth.

And they had brought forth children; yea, even the family of all the earth.

And now, behold, if Adam [& Eve] had not transgressed he would not have fallen, but he would have remained in the garden of Eden. And all things which were created must have remained in the same state in which they were after they were created; and they must have remained forever, and had no end.

And they would have had no children; wherefore they would have remained in a state of innocence, having no joy, for they knew no misery; doing no good, for they knew no sin.

But behold, all things have been done in the wisdom of him who knoweth all things.

Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy.

And the Messiah cometh in the fullness of time, that he may redeem the children of men from the fall. And because that they are redeemed from the fall they have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves... (2 Nephi 2:19,20,22-26).

Perhaps, the most important tribute to Motherhood found in the Book of Mormon are Nephi's words describing Mary, the mother of our Savior. Carefully consider his praise of Mary and contemplate the powerful endowment it provides for every young woman who dreams of becoming a mother. In my opinion, the images of Mary in the Book of Mormon have little to do with her physical appearance, but describe her core character

and the purity of her soul. God's eyes do not see as those of men. What better model could any young woman have of the eternal importance and grand splendor of motherhood than Mary?

And it came to pass that I saw the heavens open; and an angel came down and stood before me; and he said unto me; Nephi, what beholdest thou?

And I said unto him: A virgin, most beautiful and fair above all other virgins.

And he said unto me: Knowest thou the condescension of God?

And I said unto him: I know that he loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things.

And he said unto me: Behold, the virgin whom thou seest is the mother of the Son of God, after the manner of the flesh. (1 Nephi 11:14-18)

As Mother's Day approaches, I'd like to acknowledge three great mothers who have blessed my life: Mary Potter, my own mother, whose kind spirit constantly reflected the love of Christ; Ila Jenson, my wonderful mother-in-law, who provides me a mother's love now that my own mother is deceased; and my wife Susan Potter, who is the mother of our 10 children and whose incredible support and love have empowered me with the time and inspiration I need to continue developing the body of work known as the Nephi Project. To conclude my Mother's Day tribute, I would like to share with you a story by Gordon Russell, a member of the L.D.S. Church from the United Kingdom.

Once upon a time there was a child ready to be born. So one day she asked God "They tell me you are sending me to earth tomorrow. But how am I going to live there being so small and helpless?"

God replied, "Among the many angels, I chose one for you. She will be waiting for you and care for you."

"But tell me, here in Heaven, I don't do anything else but sing and smile, that's enough for me to be happy."

"And how am I going to be able to understand when people talk to me, if I don't know the language that men talk?"

"Your angel will tell you the most beautiful and sweet words you will ever hear, and with much patience and care your angel will teach you how to speak."

"I've heard that on earth there are bad men. Who will protect me?"

"Your angel will defend you even if it means risking her own life."

"I will always be sad because I will not see you anymore."

"Your angel will always talk to you about me and teach you the way for you to come back to me, even though I will always be next to you."

At that moment there was much peace in Heaven, but voices from earth could already be heard, and the child in a hurry asked softly, "Oh God if I am to leave now, please tell me the name of my angel."

God silenced all fear when he said, "You will simply call her Mother."