

Who were Nephites scattered and smitten by?

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To recap and finish this particular discussion about if the Americas were populated when Lehi and family arrived, Lehi received revelation that their promised land would be "kept from all other nations" (2 Nephi 1:9). This promise had a caveat: their land would be secure as long Lehi and his family remained righteous. Lehi warned that the time would come when they would "dwindle in unbelief" (v. 10) after which the Lord would allow them to be "scattered and smitten" (v. 11).

While some Mormons have supposed that this refers to the coming of the Spaniards (which may possibly account for a future and dual fulfillment of Lehi's prophecy), Lehi immediately launched into an exhortation telling his children that as "one generation passeth to another there shall be bloodshed" (v. 12). Apparently, Lehi suspected the coming of "other nations" in the near future.

As ethnohistory specialist Brant Gardner explains:

"If we read these verses in the context of known history, the 'as yet' defines the conditions into which the Lehiters landed. There was a population in the land, but no foreign conqueror 'as yet.' I suggest that this promise comes because of the implicit reality that other nations would indeed come, and would attempt to overrun Lehi's descendants. Lehi receives a promise that they will be protected from those other nations upon condition of righteousness. This is a promise that is of no value unless others do come and threaten the Nephites," (Second Witness, 2:26).

The appearance of the "other nations" is directly linked to not only the wickedness of Lehi's descendants, but also to a scattering and smiting of those who become wicked. Shortly after Lehi died, Laman and Lemuel were so unrighteous that they sought to kill Nephi who fled with several others. It was at this point that the Nephites began classifying their people as "Nephites" and all others as "Lamanites." According to Lehi's prophecy, when his children became unrighteous, the Lord would allow "other nations" to smite them (2 Nephi 1:11). This wouldn't be possible unless there were already others present, or others arrived immediately after Laman and Lemuel fell back into their unrighteous habits.

Several centuries later, we find Alma exhorting his people to righteousness and recounting the story of Nephi's wayward brothers as an example of the consequences of wickedness (Alma 9:13-14). The Nephites were becoming wicked and were at risk of the same fate. Alma's discourse suggests that the prophecies of Lehi -- the promises and curses (which would include the invasion of others) -- had already been (or continuing to be) fulfilled.

It seems that a possible scenario might be as follows: When the Lehiters arrived, they would have found sparse communities of others, perhaps too small to be called "nations," in their new (limited) land. The Lehiters would have continued to peacefully coexist, perhaps even intermingling with these others, pursuant to their righteousness.

The wickedness of the Lamanites, however, might have brought aggressive others ("other nations") into the Lehite colony who could have merged with the Lamanites and joined in their quest to destroy the Nephites, who may also have joined with peaceful others. When the Nephites separated from the Lamanites the promises and warnings of Lehi would have been realized, and like many prophecies in the Bible, may have seen multiple fulfillments.

Some people have claimed that the Nephites, adhering to Israelite beliefs, would not have married other non-Israelites. While the Nephites would undoubtedly have preferred to marry within the tribe, once they split with the Lamanites there would have been a small pool of eligible singles. In ancient Israel, we find that marrying outside of the tribe was discouraged but was, nevertheless, permitted.

We might wonder how Nephi, as a member of a small incursion into a larger populace become king over a people that included a majority of "others"? Gardner suggests that Nephi may have utilized his metalworking skills (with small personal objects) to trade with others. Because it would have given him trade power, the process was likely guarded. This would have "increased the economic presence of the hamlet and provided enough economic and social benefits that there were some in the village who were willing to follow him 'up' to what became the city of Nephi." As the principal developer of the trade goods, he could easily have become leader of his hamlet and "as economic prosperity encouraged other hamlets to join, he was elevated to king. That general process appears to be the way Mesoamerican cities were formed (around basically a few entrepreneurs)."

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