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Lehi’s Rhetorical Wordplay on Ishmael  
in 2 Nephi 1:28–29 and Its Implications**

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**“IF YE WILL HEARKEN”:  
LEHI’S RHETORICAL WORDPLAY ON ISHMAEL  
IN 2 NEPHI 1:28–29 AND ITS IMPLICATIONS**

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**Matthew L Bowen**

*ABSTRACT: Nephi’s preservation of the conditional “first blessing” that Lehi bestowed upon his elder sons (Laman, Lemuel, and Sam) and the sons of Ishmael, contains a dramatic wordplay on the name Ishmael in 2 Nephi 1:28–29. The name Ishmael — “May El hear [him],” “May El hearken,” or “El Has Harkened” — derives from the Semitic (and later Hebrew) verb šāma‘ (to “hear,” “hearken,” or “obey”). Lehi’s rhetorical wordplay juxtaposes the name Ishmael with a clustering of the verbs “obey” and “hearken,” both usually represented in Hebrew by the verb šāma‘. Lehi’s blessing is predicated on his sons’ and the sons of Ishmael’s “hearkening” to Nephi (“if ye will hearken”). Conversely, failure to “hearken” (“but if ye will not hearken”) would precipitate withdrawal of the “first blessing.” Accordingly, when Nephi was forced to flee from Laman, Lemuel, and the sons of Ishmael, Lehi’s “first blessing” was activated for Nephi and all those who “hearkened” to his spiritual leadership, including members of Ishmael’s family (2 Nephi 5:6), while it was withdrawn from Laman, Lemuel, the sons of Ishmael, and those who sympathized with them, “inasmuch as they [would] not hearken” unto Nephi (2 Nephi 5:20). Centuries later, when Ammon and his brothers convert many Lamanites to the truth, Mormon revisits Lehi’s conditional blessing and the issue of “hearkening” in terms of Ishmael and the receptivity of the Ishmaelites. Many Ishmaelite-Lamanites “hear” or “hearken” to Ammon et al., activating Lehi’s “first blessing,” while many others — including the ex-Nephite Amalekites/Amlicites — do not, thus activating (or reactivating) Lehi’s curse.*

**T**he prophet Lehi’s importance as patriarch over the clan(s) that became the broader Lamanite and Nephite societies requires little

comment. Although Ishmael's role as patriarch and ancestor over the clan was scarcely less important in many respects,<sup>1</sup> it is often forgotten or underemphasized.

Nephi records that "Ishmael died and was buried at the place which was called Nahom" and that his family — and in particular his daughters — "did mourn exceedingly."<sup>2</sup> From this point onward, Ishmael himself no longer remains an active part of Nephi's narrative.<sup>3</sup> However, by virtue of his name and by virtue of his ancestral role, he retains a formidable background narrative presence in Nephi's small-plates record as well as in the post-King Benjamin period of Lehite history preserved in Mormon's abridged record. Nephi, who married one of Ishmael's daughters (perhaps the very one who interceded on his behalf with Laman, Lemuel, and her brothers),<sup>4</sup> never gives the personal name of any member of Ishmael's family. He always refers to them as "the sons of Ishmael"<sup>5</sup> or "daughter[s] of Ishmael."<sup>6</sup> Nephi does not even give the name of the daughter of Ishmael who became his wife. For Nephi's purposes on the small plates, the filial relationship between Ishmael and his children was a sufficiently significant descriptor for each individual.

The clearest intersection of the name *Ishmael*, which in Hebrew denotes "May El [God] hearken" (*yīšmā'ēl*, or consonantly *yšm'ēl*, with the root from which the name is built: the verb *šāma'*, "hear," "hearken," "obey") occurs in Lehi's admonition to Laman, Lemuel, Sam, and the sons of Ishmael in 2 Nephi 1:28–29 in which Lehi exhorts them to "hearken" unto Nephi's voice, promising them his (Lehi's) first blessing if they do "hearken" to Nephi, and warning them that the first blessing will be Nephi's if they fail to "hearken." In this paper, I propose that the intersection of the name *Ishmael* and a verb rendered "hearken" suggests a deliberate wordplay on — or a play on the meaning of — the name *Ishmael*.

I will further suggest that Lehi intended this wordplay, spoken in Hebrew and reported by Nephi on his small plates,<sup>7</sup> to garner the attention of Ishmael's sons and daughters. Lehi had foreseen the almost-inevitable refusal of Laman and Lemuel to "hearken" to his own and Nephi's spiritual direction (see, e.g., 1 Nephi 8), but at least one of the sons of Ishmael and one of the daughters (not to mention Ishmael's wife) had previously supported Nephi — even sticking their necks out for him, so to speak (see 1 Nephi 7:19). I will attempt to show how Lehi's wordplay on "Ishmael" in 2 Nephi 1:28–29 works as part of a rhetorical attempt to win support for Nephi among Ishmael's family.

Moreover, all this appears to have implications for Mormon's telling of the Lamanite conversion narratives in his abridged Book of Alma and the conversion of the Lamanite royal family who lived in the land of Ishmael. Mormon represents Ammon in a literary way as "Nephi." In so doing, Mormon invokes the terms "hear"/"hearken" — represented in Hebrew by the verb *šāma'* — that recalls Lehi's admonition in 2 Nephi 1:28–29. In this admonition, Lehi predicated his promised "first blessing" on "hearkening" to Nephi. The Ishmaelite-Lamanites in the Land of Ishmael "hearkened" to Ammon's spiritual guidance and leadership in the same way that Lehi had hoped Laman and Lemuel would "hearken" to Nephi's spiritual guidance and leadership. Conversely, the ex-Nephite Amalekites/Amlicites who rejected the preaching of Ammon's brother Aaron and the Lamanites who rejected the preaching of Ammon's other brothers (and those with them) worsened their spiritual disinheritance.

### "If Ye Will Not Hearken": A Methodological Note

Biblical Hebrew gives us a pretty good idea of what the phrases "if ye will hearken (unto)" and "if ye will not hearken" (2 Nephi 1:28–29) would have looked like in the language of Lehi, Nephi, Ishmael, and their families. Forms of these phrases are attested in Genesis 34:17 ("But if ye will not hearken unto us [*'im lō' tišmē'ū 'ēlēnū*]"); Leviticus 26:14 ("But if ye will not hearken unto me [*'im lō' tišmē'ū lī*]"); Deuteronomy 11:13 ("if ye shall hearken diligently unto [*'im šāmōa' tišmē'ū 'ēl*] my commandments");<sup>8</sup> Jeremiah 17:24 ("if ye diligently hearken unto me," [*'im šāmōa' tišmē'ūn 'ēlay*]); Jeremiah 17:27 ("But if ye will not hearken unto me [*'im lō' tišmē'ū 'ēlay*]"); Jeremiah 26:4 ("If ye will not hearken to me [*'im lō' tišmē'ū 'ēlay*]"); and Ezekiel 20:39 ("if ye will not hearken unto me [*'im 'ēnēkem šōmē'im*]"). Without exception, the idiom used in these legal and prophetic texts employs the verb *šāma'*, whence the name *Ishmael* derives.

Throughout this article, I work on the assumption that Hebrew was the everyday language Lehi, Ishmael, and their families used, irrespective of how Nephi chose to represent that language on his small plates (cf. 1 Nephi 1:2). In other words, the Hebraistic wordplay in 2 Nephi 1:28–29 (and elsewhere) works on the level of what Nephi reports his father Lehi to have *spoken*. Lehi almost certainly would have used conditional expressions identical or close to *'im tišmē'ū 'ēlay* and *'im lō' tišmē'ū 'ēlay*, both of which have strong lexical and aural resonances with the name *Ishmael*.

### The Name *Ishmael*

Ishmael is a Semitic<sup>9</sup> and Hebrew name meaning “May El [God] Harken” or “El [God] has heard.”<sup>10</sup> In addition to being the name of the son of Abraham and Hagar and the eponymous name of his tribal descendants, “Ishmael” is further attested in the Bible as the name of a prince of Davidic descent who assassinated Gedaliah, the Babylonian-appointed governor of Judah after the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of its inhabitants to Babylon (see 2 Kings 25:25). “Ishmael” is attested abundantly in Hebrew seal inscriptions.<sup>11</sup> The books of Ezra and Chronicles mention other Israelites/Judahites named “Ishmael.”<sup>12</sup> Beyond Nephi’s mentions of his father-in-law Ishmael and the use of the name *Ishmael* as both a toponym and the ethnonym of the family patriarch’s descendants, Ishmael is attested at least once as a later Nephite personal name belonging to one of Amulek’s ancestors (see Alma 10:2).<sup>13</sup>

Semites who bestowed this name upon their children would have done so in the hope that their deity would “hear” the child so named. Perhaps, too, the name was given in gratitude that God had already “heard” prayers for and on behalf of the child so named, especially in the granting of the child (cf. the name *Saul*, “requested”). The biblical cycle that first introduces the name *Ishmael* places repeated emphasis on its derivation from and connection with the verb *šāma*‘ (to “hear” or “hearken”) via wordplay.

#### “The Lord Hath Heard Thy Affliction”: Biblical Wordplay on the Name *Ishmael*

The first biblical wordplay on the name *Ishmael* occurs at the beginning of the pericope that describes his mother’s relationship with Abraham and Ishmael’s subsequent birth.<sup>14</sup> Ishmael’s advent into the narrative history is anticipated already when Sarah gives her handmaid Hagar to Abraham as a wife of lesser status for the purpose of childbearing:

Now Sarai Abram’s wife bare him no children: and she had an handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said unto Abram, Behold now, the LORD hath restrained me from bearing: I pray thee, go in unto my maid; it may be that I may obtain children by her. **And Abram hearkened** [*wayyišma*‘] to the voice of Sarai. (Genesis 16:1–2; emphasis in all scriptural citations is added)

As Moshe Garsiel has noted, the verb form *wayyišma'* anticipates and alludes to the name *Ishmael*.<sup>15</sup> At the moment of Hagar's introduction to the narrative and Sarai's despairing of having a child herself, the text signals the advent of Ishmael in the phrase "And Abraham hearkened." The narrator's use of the Hebrew verb *šāma'* presages the giving of the name *Ishmael*. This verb will serve as a *Leitwort* (a "lead-word" or leading term)<sup>16</sup> throughout the Abraham-Ishmael-Isaac cycle.

Subsequently, Hagar conceives and there is an almost immediate falling-out between her and Sarah on account of the former "despising" the latter (see Genesis 16:4–5). Thus "when Sarai dealt hardly with her, she fled from her face" (Genesis 16:6) into the wilderness. The angel of the Lord finds her there and instructs her: "Return to thy mistress, and submit thyself under her hands" (Genesis 16:7–9). The angel of the Lord, with divinely invested authority, promises to "multiply [her] seed exceedingly, that it shall not be numbered for multitude" (16:10) and then instructs her regarding the birth of her son, which constitutes a narrative etiology for the name *Ishmael*:

And the angel of the LORD said unto her, Behold, thou art with child, and shalt bear a son, and shalt call his name *Ishmael* [*yišmā'ēl*]; because **the LORD hath heard** [*šāma' yhw̄h*] thy affliction. And he will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him; and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren. (Genesis 16:11–12)

What was an implicit etiological wordplay in verse 2 now becomes explicit. The angel offers a basis for her son's naming: he will be Ishmael ("May El hear" or "El has heard") because the Lord (Yahweh) has "heard" his mother in her affliction.<sup>17</sup>

Ishmael's name, like his brother Isaac's subsequently, is divinely appointed — one might say, in Latter-day Saint terminology, "foreordained." The words "[thou] shalt call his name" are both predictive and prescriptive. We see other examples of this phenomenon in the Old Testament and elsewhere in scripture. In addition to Ishmael and Isaac, we have the names of Hosea's<sup>18</sup> and Isaiah's children,<sup>19</sup> John the Baptist,<sup>20</sup> Jesus,<sup>21</sup> and Joseph Smith,<sup>22</sup> among others.<sup>23</sup>

Later in the narrative, when the Lord promises Abraham his son Isaac and prescribes the latter's naming, we find that promise and prescription interlocked with wordplay on the name *Ishmael*:

Then Abraham fell upon his face, **and laughed** [*wayyišhāq*], and said in his heart, Shall a child be born unto him that is an

hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear? And Abraham said unto God, O that **Ishmael** [*yīšmā'ēl*] might live before thee! And God said, Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; **and thou shalt call his name Isaac** [*yīšhāq*]: and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him. And **as for Ishmael** [*yīšmā'ēl*], **I have heard thee** [*šēmā'tikā*]: Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation. (Genesis 17:17–20)

The form of *šāḥaq* here, *wayyīšhāq*, anticipates the imminent fulfillment of the Lord's promise to Abraham concerning his having a son through Sarah (see Genesis 17:16).<sup>24</sup> Abraham's "laughing" or "rejoicing" is followed by his interjection of Ishmael's name, to which the Lord responds by commanding or foretelling Isaac's birth and his naming as a form of *šāḥaq*. It is at this point that the Lord speaks Ishmael's name and plays on in terms of the verb *šāma'*.

This is not the only occasion that we find this kind of interlocking, interwoven wordplay on the names of these two important sons. The occasion of Isaac's birth is marked by etiological wordplay on the name *Isaac* as well as an echo of the name *Ishmael*, his elder son: "And Abraham was an hundred years old, when his son **Isaac** [*yīšhāq*] was born unto him. And Sarah said, **God** hath made me **to laugh** [*šēhōq*], so that all **that hear** [*haššōmēa'*] **will laugh** [*yīšhāq*] with me" (Genesis 21:5–6). Garsiel observes that "this pairing of terms from the two roots of *š-m-* and *š-h-q* ... creates an implied confrontation between the two sons, Ishmael and Isaac."<sup>25</sup>

That confrontation becomes a reality in the verses that follow, a confrontation described in terms of the verb *šāḥaq*, whence the name *Isaac* is described:

And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, which she had born unto Abraham [i.e., Ishmael], **mocking** [*mēšahēq*]. Wherefore she said unto Abraham, Cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with **Isaac** [*yīšhāq*]. And the thing was very grievous in Abraham's sight because of his son. And God said unto Abraham, Let it not be grievous in thy sight because of the lad, and because of thy bondwoman; in all that Sarah hath said unto thee, **hearken** [*šēma'*] **unto her voice**; for in Isaac shall thy seed be called. (Genesis 21:9–12)



Regarding this passage, Robert Alter has noted that “mocking laughter would surely suffice to trigger outrage.”<sup>26</sup> He further states, “Given the fact ... that she is concerned lest Ishmael encroach on her son’s inheritance, and given the inscription of her sons name in this crucial verb, we may also be invited to construe it as ‘Isaac-ing-it’ — that is, Sarah sees Ishmael presuming to play the role of Isaac, child of laughter, the legitimate heir.”<sup>27</sup>

Ironically, the verb *šāmaʿ* becomes the focal point of divine approval for Hagar’s expulsion from the household. However, that same verb continues to demonstrate God’s concern and providence for Hagar and Ishmael. In the text that follows, the narrator places double emphasis on the fact that God has “heard” Ishmael: “And **God heard** [*wayyišmaʿ ʿēlōhîm*] **the voice of the lad**; and the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said unto her, What aileth thee, Hagar? fear not; **for God hath heard** [*kî-šāmaʿ ʿēlōhîm*] **the voice of the lad** where he is” (Genesis 21:17). Robert Alter observes that in the wordplay here on Ishmael, “the ghost of its etymology — ‘God will hear’ — hovers at the center of the story.”<sup>28</sup>

### “Ishmaelites” and Brothers Harkening

Moshe Garsiel points to some additional instances of wordplay<sup>29</sup> on the name *Ishmael* that may have relevance to what we find in the Book of Mormon. Genesis 28:8–9 records that Jacob “obeyed” or “hearkened” to his parents in going to members of their extended family in Padan-aram to seek a wife. Esau, who had previously married Canaanites, takes additional wives from descendants of Ishmael, also extended family: “And ... Jacob **obeyed** [*wayyišmaʿ*] his father and his mother, and was gone to Padan-aram; And Esau seeing that the daughters of Canaan pleased not Isaac his father; Then went Esau unto **Ishmael** [*yišmāʿēl*], and took unto the wives which he had Mahalath **the daughter of Ishmael** [*yišmāʿēl*] Abraham’s son, the sister of Nebajoth, to be his wife” (Genesis 28:7–9).

The wordplay on Ishmael in terms of *šāmaʿ* emphasizes the narrator’s view that Jacob conducted himself worthy of the birthright and birthright blessing that Rebekah had helped him orchestrate to receive, while Esau conversely failed to honor and obey his parents by marrying Canaanite women. His later intermarrying with Ishmael’s descendants constituted an attempt at making amends for this disobedience.

The narrator’s use of the phrase “the daughter of Ishmael” (*bat yišmāʿēl*) also deserves special notice. The only other scriptural

formulations of this phrase are found the Book of Mormon (see 1 Nephi 7:6, 19; 16:7, 35). Lehi's sons and Zoram marry the "daughters of Ishmael" and "the eldest daughter of Ishmael" respectively (see below).

Later on in the Joseph Cycle (Genesis 37–50), when Joseph's brothers conspire against him, they decide to sell him to the Ishmaelites, who were relatives. Garsiel notes<sup>30</sup> the literary treatment of the name *Ishmael* in terms of *šāma'*: "Come, and let us sell him to the **Ishmeelites** [Ishmaelites], and let not our hand be upon him; for he is our brother and our flesh. And his brethren **were content** [*wayyišmē'û*, i.e., "his brothers hearkened" or "his brothers listened"]" (Genesis 37:27). Joseph, the favored brother who will eventually receive the birthright, is sold into Egypt by his disfavored brothers through the medium of his Midianite and "Ishmaelite" kin (see Genesis 37:28–36; 39:1).

The narrator's interconnection of Ishmael, Esau, and the other sons of Jacob (except for Joseph), pertains to the ongoing theme or pattern of older sons not receiving the birthright blessing.<sup>31</sup> This is the very issue that Lehi raises in 2 Nephi 1:27–29 as recorded by Nephi. It should not surprise us that Nephi, upon whom Lehi's "first blessing" eventually rests, was careful to explain exactly why he received that blessing and not his older brothers. The name *Ishmael* emerges as a key piece of that explanation.

### Willing to "Hearken": Ishmael and His Family

Several earlier scenes in Nephi's record lay the groundwork for Lehi's declaration in 2 Nephi 1:27–29. The first Book of Mormon attestation of the name *Ishmael* occurs in 1 Nephi 7:2, when Lehi receives a revelation from the Lord that his sons are to return to Jerusalem and persuade Ishmael's family to join them in their journey. Laman and Lemuel's characteristic murmuring and complaining regarding their father's requests are noticeably absent on this occasion:

And it came to pass that the Lord commanded him that I, Nephi, and my brethren, should again return into [unto]<sup>32</sup> the land of Jerusalem, and bring down **Ishmael** and his family into the wilderness. And it came to pass that I, Nephi, did again, with my brethren, go forth into the wilderness to go up to Jerusalem. And it came to pass that we went up unto the house of **Ishmael**, and we did gain favor in the sight of **Ishmael**, insomuch that **we did speak unto him the words of the Lord**. And it came to pass that the Lord did soften the heart of **Ishmael**, and also his [whole] household,<sup>33</sup> insomuch

that they took their journey with us down into the wilderness to the tent of our father. (1 Nephi 7:2–5)

Nephi himself implicitly *hearkens* to the Lord's commandment when he "go[es] forth into the wilderness" with his brothers to "bring down Ishmael and his family into the wilderness." One can well envision that this constituted one of the most difficult sales pitches of all time: to get Ishmael and his entire household to leave their homes and lives in Jerusalem on a journey whose conclusion, in an unknown land, was far from certain. Nephi does not tell us exactly what they said in making their pitch, only that "we did speak unto him the words of the Lord." Presumably that sales pitch included prophecies about the imminent destruction of Jerusalem and Babylonian captivity. In any case, Ishmael and his family implicitly *hearken* to the Lord's commandment when they "[take] their journey into the wilderness" to join Lehi's family.

Moreover, Nephi emphasizes the "we" pronoun here. In other words, Nephi would not have been the only one who spoke on this occasion. Laman and Lemuel's voices — and perhaps Sam's voice too — constituted an essential part of the brothers' attempt to persuade Ishmael and his household. Miraculously, the sales pitch works! The Lord softened the hearts of Ishmael and his entire family. Nevertheless, trouble quickly ensues:

And it came to pass that as we journeyed in the wilderness, behold Laman and Lemuel, and two of the daughters of **Ishmael**, and the two sons of **Ishmael** and their families, did rebel against us; yea, against me, Nephi, and Sam, and their father, **Ishmael**, and his wife, and his three other daughters. And it came to pass in the which rebellion, they were desirous to return unto the land of Jerusalem. And now I, Nephi, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts, therefore I spake unto them, saying, yea, even unto Laman and unto Lemuel: Behold ye are mine elder brethren, and how is it that ye are so hard in your hearts, and so blind in your minds, that ye have need that I, your younger brother, should speak unto you, yea, and set an example for you? How is it that **ye have not hearkened** [cf. Hebrews *lō' šma'tem*]<sup>34</sup> unto the word of the Lord? (1 Nephi 7:6–9)

Nephi's second question<sup>35</sup> to Laman and Lemuel ("how is it that ye have **not hearkened** unto the word of the Lord?") is particularly interesting in the immediate context of the rebellion of "Laman and

Lemuel, and two of the daughters of Ishmael, and the two sons of Ishmael and their families” against “Nephi, and Sam, and their father, Ishmael, and his wife, and his other three daughters.” Laman and Lemuel’s refusal to “hearken unto the word of the Lord” — the very “words of the Lord” that they had spoken to Ishmael and his family (1 Nephi 7:4) and to which Ishmael and his family had hearkened with “soften[ed] ... heart” (7:5) — had already created a rift in the family, a lasting one as evident in 2 Nephi 5.

The key point here is that Nephi has carefully ascribed the division of Lehi’s and Ishmael’s families to the failure of Laman and Lemuel to “hearken.” This, in turn, leads members of Ishmael’s own family similarly to fail to “hearken unto the word of the Lord” (cf. 1 Nephi 7:9). In fact, Laman and Lemuel caused members of Ishmael’s family to “not hearken” unto the very “words of the Lord” the brothers — including Laman and Lemuel themselves — had spoken unto Ishmael and his household (1 Nephi 7:4).

Importantly, it is members of Ishmael’s family — including one of the daughters of Ishmael and one of the previously rebellious sons of Ishmael — that save Nephi’s life:

And it came to pass that they were angry with me again, and sought to lay hands upon me; but behold, one of the daughters of **Ishmael**, yea, and also her mother, and one of the sons of **Ishmael**, did plead with my brethren, insomuch that they did soften their hearts; and they did cease striving to take away my life. (1 Nephi 7:19)

We can probably surmise that the daughter of Ishmael who intercedes and pleads on Nephi’s behalf is the same daughter of Ishmael that he mentions marrying in 1 Nephi 16:7. Nephi records that she did this on at least one other occasion as well (see 1 Nephi 18:17, 19). In any case, it is scarcely possible that Nephi would have married anyone from Ishmael’s family who sympathized with his brothers and their murderous hostility toward him or had failed to speak up on his behalf.

It is important too that Ishmael and his wife (and the mother of Nephi’s then-future wife), according to Nephi’s own words, had supported Nephi (see again 1 Nephi 7:6, 19). Nephi’s posterity thus were also Ishmael’s posterity. His own children would have been, in a very real sense, “sons of Ishmael” and “daughters of Ishmael.”

Thus, the “brethren” to whom Nephi addresses his words in 1 Nephi 15 and again in 1 Nephi 16:2–4 certainly include Laman and Lemuel but also would have included the sons of Ishmael. Nephi, writing

this account about forty years after the fact,<sup>36</sup> mentions the marriages of Lehi's family and Zoram with Ishmael's daughters. Nephi's following statement, then, was directed to, and meant to be apprehended by the sons of Ishmael as well: "And now my brethren, if ye were righteous and **were willing to hearken to the truth**, and give heed unto it, that ye might walk uprightly before God, then ye would not murmur because of the truth, and say: Thou speakest hard things against us" (1 Nephi 16:3).

Laman and Lemuel were only occasionally "willing to hearken" to the truth. The sons of Ishmael, who were initially willing to hearken to Lehi's sons and accompany their father Ishmael and other kin into the wilderness to join Lehi's party, were becoming increasingly hardened by Laman and Lemuel's antics. In 1 Nephi 16–18, Nephi details their increasing hardness of heart on the journey from Nahom to Bountiful, in the land of Bountiful, and during the voyage from Bountiful to the Promised Land. As we shall see, the verb *šāma'* surfaces at a key moment within this material.

### "Because We Would Hearken"

Much of the murmuring in the chapters that describe the Lehite and Ishmaelite clan through the wilderness revolves not only around Laman and Lemuel but also Ishmael's family.

The word *hearken* — Hebrew *šāma'* — is a key term in the brothers' accusation against Lehi and Nephi and in Nephi's subsequent response:

And we know that the people who were in the land of Jerusalem were a righteous people; for they keep [~~kept~~]<sup>37</sup> the statutes and [the]<sup>38</sup> judgments of the Lord, and all his commandments, according to the law of Moses; wherefore, we know that they are a righteous people; and our father hath judged them, and hath led us away **because we would hearken unto his word** [~~words~~]<sup>39</sup> yea, and our brother is like unto him. And after this manner of language did my brethren murmur and complain against us. And it came to pass that I, Nephi, spake unto them, saying: Do ye *believe*<sup>40</sup> that our fathers, who were the children of Israel, would have been led away out of the hands of the Egyptians **if they had not hearkened** unto the words of the Lord? (1 Nephi 17:22–23)

The statement attributed to the brothers, that they had been led on the wilderness journey "because we would hearken" — i.e., "because we were willing to hearken" — was so ironic as to be laughable in the

context of everything that had transpired to this point on that journey. That irony was by no means lost on Nephi, who included the statement for the benefit of his readers.

Nephi's rejoinder to this statement notably addresses their asserted willingness to "hearken." Nephi, in effect, likens them to the children of Israel when he asks: "Do ye believe that our fathers ... would have been led away out of the hands of the Egyptians **if they had not hearkened ...?**" (1 Nephi 17:23). The Israelites as a nation ultimately made it to their Promised Land, just as Laman, Lemuel, and the sons of Ishmael would to theirs, at least in temporal terms. But they murmured and complained against Nephi just as the Israelites did against Moses and would suffer a similar spiritual fate to the Israelites who died in the wilderness: they would not "enter into [the Lord's] rest" (Psalm 95:11).

This scene, perhaps more than any other, anticipates the weight of Lehi's conditional "first blessing" predicated on "hearkening" (2 Nephi 1:28–29). Nephi, like his father Lehi, knew that Laman, Lemuel, and the sons of Ishmael were *capable* of "hearkening." The real issue was *willingness* (see 1 Nephi 8). In fact, toward the end of his exchange, Nephi makes the point that they did "hear" the Lord's voice from time to time:

Ye are swift to do iniquity but slow to remember the Lord your God. Ye have seen an angel, and he spake unto you; yea, **ye have heard his voice from time to time; and he hath spoken unto you in a still small voice, but ye were past feeling, that ye could not feel his words;** wherefore, he has spoken unto you like unto the voice of thunder, which did cause the earth to shake as if it were to divide asunder. (1 Nephi 17:45)

Their having physically "heard" the Lord's voice made their continued obduracy utterly inexcusable. Nephi here, however, distinguishes another level of hearing. When the Lord spoke in a "still small voice," his words had to be "felt." Laman, Lemuel, and the sons of Ishmael had become so obdurate they could not "hear" the Lord's voice in terms of "feeling" the words of the Holy Ghost. This already effectively "cut [them] off from the presence of the Lord" as had been foretold to Nephi (1 Nephi 2:21) and as Lehi would again forewarn (2 Nephi 1:20; 4:4).

### **"Hearken unto Me, O Jacob": Nephi's Rhetorical Use of Isaiah 48–49**

When Nephi states regarding the general human tendency toward hard-heartedness that "they set [the Holy One of Israel] at naught, **and hearken**

**not to the voice of his counsels**” (1 Nephi 19:7), it is difficult not to hear at least a partial allusion to his brothers and the sons of Ishmael. Nephi goes on in the subsequent verses to describe (yet again) the fulfillment of the Lord’s promise that he would be “a teacher and a ruler” over them (1 Nephi 2:22)<sup>41</sup> when he states: “I, Nephi, did teach my brethren these things” (1 Nephi 19:22). He taught them from the scriptures, making particular use of the words of Isaiah: “that I might more fully persuade them to **believe** in the Lord their Redeemer I did read unto them that which was written by the prophet Isaiah” (1 Nephi 19:23).

In invoking Isaiah at length for the first time (at least insofar as he informs us), Nephi introduces Isaiah’s prophecies with the emphatic proclamation formula<sup>42</sup> “hear”/“hearken”:

Wherefore I spake unto them [i.e., my brethren], saying: **Hear ye** the words of the prophet, ye who are a remnant of the house of Israel, a branch who have been broken off; **hear ye** the words of the prophet, which were written unto all the house of Israel, and liken them unto yourselves, that ye may have hope as well as your brethren from whom ye have been broken off; for after this manner has the prophet written. **Hearken and hear** [MT: *šim’û*, “hear”] this, O house of Jacob, who are called by the name of Israel, and are come forth out of the waters of Judah ... who swear by the name of the Lord, and make mention of the God of Israel, yet they swear not in truth nor in righteousness. (1 Nephi 19:24–20:1)

Israel and Judah, each in turn, had been conquered and exiled by foreign superpowers because they would not “hear” the messages of repentance the Lord had sent them through prophets. Likewise, Nephi’s introduction and citation of Isaiah here emphasize what Laman, Lemuel, and the sons of Ishmael have consistently failed to do: to “hear.”

Even to “hear” or “see” events transpire within the physical realm does not necessarily mean that one will “hear” or “see” the meaning, especially the spiritual meaning, in those events. We recall that Laman and Lemuel had experienced great things — miracles, even! In the course of the Lord’s saving them from the impending destruction of Jerusalem and preserving their lives en route to a new land of promise they saw an angel and “heard” the voice of the Lord speak to them (see 1 Nephi 3:29–31; 7:10; 16:39; 17:45). Thus, it is interesting to consider the potential application (or “likening”) of what follows in Nephi’s quotation of Isaiah 48 to the family’s circumstances, including those of Laman and Lemuel and Ishmael’s family:

Thou hast seen **and heard** [šāmatā] all this; [or, **You have heard**; now see all this (NRSV)] and will ye not declare them? And that **I have showed** [or *hišma`tikā*, “caused thee to hear”] thee new things from this time, even hidden things, and thou didst not know them. They are created now, and not from the beginning, even before the day when **thou heardest them** [lō`šēmatām] not they were declared unto thee, lest thou shouldst say — Behold I knew them. Yea, and **thou heardest not** [lō`šāmatā]; yea, thou knewest not; yea, **from that time thine ear was not opened**; for I knew that thou wouldst deal very treacherously, and wast called a transgressor from the womb (1 Nephi 20:6–8).

Nephi’s citation of this particular Isaiah text becomes particularly apropos in the context of the events that led up to Nephi’s statement in 1 Nephi 17:45: “Ye have seen an angel, and he spake unto you; yea, **ye have heard** his voice from time to time; and he hath spoken unto you in a still small voice, but ye were past feeling, that **ye could not feel his words**; wherefore, he has spoken unto you like unto the voice of thunder ...” Thus, Nephi uses Isaiah to summon his brothers, including the sons of Ishmael to “hearken”:

**Hearken unto me** [šēma`ēlay], O Jacob, and Israel my called, for I am he; I am the first, and I am also the last. Mine hand hath also laid the foundation of the earth, and my right hand hath spanned the heavens. I call unto them and they stand up together. All ye, assemble yourselves, **and hear** [ūšmū]; who among them hath declared these things unto them? The Lord hath loved him; yea, and he will fulfil his word which he hath declared by them; and he will do his pleasure on Babylon, and his arm shall come upon the Chaldeans. (1 Nephi 20:12–14)

**O that thou hadst hearkened** [attended, *hiqšabtā*] **to my commandments** — then had thy peace been as a river, and thy righteousness as the waves of the sea. (1 Nephi 20:18)

Whether he has taken it from the brass plates version of Isaiah or has interjected it himself, Nephi introduces his recitation of Isaiah 49 in similar fashion to his introduction of Isaiah 48, using the prophetic proclamation formula “hearken”:

And again: **Hearken, O ye house of Israel**, all ye that are broken off and are driven out because of the wickedness of the pastors of my people; yea, all ye that are broken off, that



are scattered abroad, who are of my people, O house of Israel. **Listen** [šim'û], **O isles, unto me** [ʿēlay], **and hearken** [or, attend] ye people from far; the Lord hath called me from the womb; from the bowels of my mother hath he made mention of my name. (1 Nephi 21:1)

Nephi's reading in the voice of Isaiah helps him to find and establish his own prophetic voice. He thus speaks to his brothers and brothers-in-law (and their families) with authority of the Lord's "servant" (1 Nephi 21:3 citing Isaiah 49:3), as well as that of their "teacher and [their] ruler" as noted above. Although the broader themes of the scattering and gathering of Israel furnish the superstructure of Nephi's message in 1 Nephi 20–21, his more immediate message to his brothers and their descendants remains a simple one: hear/hearken/listen [šāma'] and hearken/attend *hiqšib*. The phonetic components of the name *Ishmael* would have been particularly heard in the twofold use of the formula šēma' ʿēlay / šim'û ... ʿēlay ("hearken unto me" or "listen [ye] unto me") and also in Nephi's adaptation of the prophecy of Deuteronomy 18:15–19 (1 Nephi 22:20). All of this sets the stage for Lehi's Deuteronomy-based final admonitions to his children and the children of Ishmael, on obedience to which his final blessings will be predicated.

### **“Even Unto His Commanding That Ye Must Obey” (2 Nephi 1:27)**

Just ahead of his pronouncing his conditional blessing upon his older sons and the sons of Ishmael, Lehi cites an instance of their “obeying” Nephi, when he spoke under the constraint of the spirit: “And it must needs be that the power of God must be with him, even unto his commanding you that ye must obey. But behold, it was not he, but it was the Spirit of the Lord which was in him, which opened his mouth to utterance that he could not shut it” (2 Nephi 1:27).

The word rendered “obey” here ultimately represents the spoken Hebrew word *šāma'*, to “hear” which includes the idea “to obey.” It is worth noting that our English word “obey” ultimately derives from a Latin word which means to “hear”: *obey* < Old English *obeyer* < Old French *obeir* < Latin *oboedire* < *ob* (directional) + *audire* (to “hear”).<sup>43</sup> Thus “obedience” means to be in a state of “hearing” or “hearkening.”

Lehi uses this example of almost-forced obedience — “hearing” or “hearkening” — to Nephi and the blessings that it brought the family<sup>44</sup> to preface the bestowal of his conditional “first blessing,” which Lehi bestows on Laman, Lemuel, Sam, and the sons of Ishmael. Lehi will

predicate this blessing, on “hearkening” to — i.e., “obeying” — Nephi’s spiritual leadership, which, of course, becomes an issue of political leadership.<sup>45</sup>

**“If Ye Will Hearken”/“But If Ye Will Not Hearken”:  
Lehi’s Conditional “First Blessing” (2 Nephi 1:28–29)**

Today, as anciently, an Israelite’s most important responsibility is to “hear,” as the so-called Shema prefaced and included what Jesus called “the first great commandment”: “Hear [šēmaʿ], O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD: And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might” (Deuteronomy 6:4–5). As Jesus himself formulated it, “If ye love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15). Deuteronomy 4:19–20 suggests that teaching one’s children in this regard — parental parenesis<sup>46</sup> — constituted one of the most important of duties.

2 Nephi 1:1–4:12 is mainly parenetic in character. Lehi speaks to his sons and “unto all his household, according to the feelings of his heart and the Spirit of the Lord which was in him” (2 Nephi 4:12). At the conclusion of the first part of his final blessings and admonitions (2 Nephi 1), Lehi speaks to all his sons who are older than Nephi (Laman, Lemuel, and Sam) and to the sons of Ishmael. Here he bestows a conditional “first blessing,” predicated on their willingness to “hear” or “hearken unto” Nephi — that is, follow his spiritual guidance and leadership:

And now my son, Laman, and also Lemuel and Sam, and also my sons who are **the sons of Ishmael** [*yišmāʿēl* or *yšmʿl*] behold, **if ye will hearken** [cf. Hebrew *ʿim tišmāʿ ū* or *tišmēʿ ū*] **unto the voice of Nephi** ye shall not perish. And **if ye will hearken unto him** I leave unto you blessing, yea, even my first blessing. But **if ye will not hearken unto him** I take away my first blessing, yea, even my blessing, and **it shall rest upon him**. (2 Nephi 1:28–29)

Lehi’s admonition and blessing, as it appears in Nephi’s text, closely juxtaposes the name *Ishmael* with a threefold repetition of the verb *šāmaʿ*.<sup>47</sup> If we include “obey” from 2 Nephi 1:27, the repetition is fourfold. The polyptotic<sup>48</sup> repetition of *šāmaʿ* around the name *Ishmael* would have had the immediate rhetorical effect of garnering the attention of Ishmael’s sons (and probably any of his daughters who were present on the occasion). The imminence and urgency of their decision to

“hearken” is accentuated by the repetition of the root *šāmaʿ* in its verbal and onomastic forms.

Moreover, at this point we are reminded of Abraham’s exclamation regarding his son Ishmael: “O that Ishmael might live **before thee!** [*lēpānēkā*]” (Genesis 17:18). Before Abraham fully understood the Lord’s promise to him, his prayer was that Ishmael might be his spiritual heir and “live before” Yahweh — i.e., live in his “presence” (*pānīm*). Living in the Lord’s presence now and in eternity was the very spiritual birthright that Laman, Lemuel, and the sons of Ishmael were on the verge of forfeiting.<sup>49</sup>

Regarding Lehi’s first blessing, Noel B. Reynolds, writes:

This is a curious blessing. From Laman and Lemuel’s perspective, it must have been very frustrating. In order to obtain the first blessing, they had to obey Nephi; on the other hand, if they did not obey Nephi, the father’s blessing would go to Nephi. Either way, Nephi wins, although under the first option Laman might preserve the blessing for his posterity by submitting himself during his lifetime to Nephi.<sup>50</sup>

Lehi’s clear implication is that Nephi was his spiritual successor, even if political leadership roles remained for the elder brothers. Beyond the possession of legitimate political authority, which Laman, Lemuel, and the sons of Ishmael could have retained, Lehi’s conditional “first blessing” seems to be, more or less, an adumbration of his restatement of the Lord’s conditional promise:

O my sons, that these things might not come upon you, but that ye might be a choice and a favored people of the Lord. But behold, his will be done; for his ways are righteousness forever. And he hath said that: Inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments ye shall prosper in the land; but inasmuch as ye will not keep my commandments ye shall be cut off from my presence. (2 Nephi 1:19–20; cf. 2 Nephi 4:3–4)

Much has already been written on the clear parallels that Nephi draws between the exodus and Israel’s journey through the wilderness toward the Promised Land and the journey of the Lehites and Ishmaelites through the Arabian wilderness toward their Promised Land.<sup>51</sup> Nephi unquestionably wishes his audience to see Laman and Lemuel’s “hardened hearts” and relentless “murmuring” against Lehi and Nephi in terms of Israel’s conduct towards Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.

Accordingly, Lehi's conditional "first blessing" carries firm echoes of the language of Psalm 95:7–11:

... To day **if ye will hear his voice** [*'im bēqōl tišmā'û*], **Harden not your heart** [*'al taqšû lēbabēkem*], as in the provocation, and as in the day of temptation in the wilderness: When your fathers tempted me, proved me, and saw my work. Forty years long was I grieved with this generation, and said, It is a people that do err in their heart, and they have not known my ways: Unto whom I swear in my wrath that they should not enter into **my rest**. (Psalm 95:7–11)

This psalm alludes back to the story of Israel in the wilderness. Psalm 95:7–11 recalls not only the account of Israel's lack of faith to go up to the land in Numbers 13–14 and Deuteronomy 1:22–40 but also — in view of D&C 84:23–24<sup>52</sup> — Israel's refusal to endure Yahweh's presence (see Exodus 19:3–20:19; compare and contrast Deuteronomy 5:23–33; 18:15–19).

Yahweh's covenant with and blessing upon Israel was predicated on "hearing": "Now therefore, **if ye will obey my voice indeed** [*'im šāmôa' tišmē'û bēqōlî*; or, **if you really will hear my voice**], and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine" (Exodus 19:5). However, Israel refuses to "hear" (or see) Yahweh: "And they said unto Moses, **Speak thou with us, and we will hear** [*nišmā'â*]: but let not God speak with us, lest we die" (Exodus 20:19; cf. Deuteronomy 18:15–19). Israel's subsequent story (Joshua–2 Kings) is one of failure to "hear" or "obey" and thus one of failure to receive the conditionally predicated blessings (cf. D&C 82:10; 130:20–21). The story of Laman, Lemuel, and the sons of Ishmael represents a similar story.

### "Wherefore, They Did Hearken unto My Words"

Nephi details the final fracturing and division of the Lehite/Ishmaelite clan in 2 Nephi 5. Importantly, Nephi distinguishes those who followed him from those who did not follow him, first with the term "believe," perhaps as an ironic play on the name *Laman*,<sup>53</sup> and then secondly with the term "hearken," perhaps as a play on the name *Ishmael*:

Wherefore, it came to pass that I, Nephi, did take my family, and also Zoram and his family, and Sam, mine elder brother and his family, and Jacob and Joseph, my younger brethren, and also my sisters, and all those who would go with me. And all those who would go with me were **those who believed in**

**the warnings and the revelations of God; wherefore, they did hearken unto my words.** (2 Nephi 5:6)

At least some of Ishmael's posterity "hearkened" unto Nephi's words. In so doing, they became joint-heirs with Nephi to Lehi's "first blessing." They would have access to the "presence of the Lord" in terms of having the gift and power of the Holy Ghost but also access to the ritual "presence of the Lord" in the temple that Nephi would have his people build (see 2 Nephi 5:16). They would have access to the writings on the brass plates. In short, they would be able to "enter into [the Lord's] rest" because they were willing to "hear" or "hearken," in the Psalmist's words "today" (Psalm 95:7–11). Thus, "immediately ... the great plan of redemption [could] be brought about" or activated for them (Alma 34:31; cf. 34:16).<sup>54</sup>

### **"Inasmuch as They Will Not Hearken"**

It is also clear that Ishmael's sons and some of his daughters and other members of his family did not "hearken unto [Nephi's] words." Nephi states the consequences of this failure to "hearken," again playing on the name *Ishmael*: "Wherefore, the word of the Lord was fulfilled which he spake unto me, saying that: **Inasmuch as they will not hearken** unto thy words they shall be cut off from the presence of the Lord. And behold, they were cut off from his presence" (2 Nephi 5:20).

Nephi's declaration of the fulfillment of the Lord's words to him in 2 Nephi 5:20 has at least a twofold reference. First, it recalls the Lord's earlier promise to Nephi: "And inasmuch as thy brethren shall rebel against thee, **they shall be cut off from the presence of the Lord**" (1 Nephi 2:21). That promise came much earlier in Nephi's life after, as he tells us, "Laman and Lemuel **would not hearken unto my words;** and being grieved because of the hardness of their hearts I cried unto the Lord for them" (1 Nephi 2:18). Laman and Lemuel's unbelief and unwillingness to "hearken" had now taken many members of Ishmael's family away with them.

Secondly, however, the phrase "inasmuch as they will not hearken" more immediately recalls Lehi's words in 2 Nephi 1:28–29 and the conditional "first blessing" and marks the fulfillment of the negative promise: "But **if ye will not hearken** unto him I take away my first blessing, yea, even my blessing, and it shall **rest** upon him" (2 Nephi 1:29). The "first blessing" now "rested" upon Nephi, and they would not "enter into [the Lord's] rest" (Psalm 95:11) but would be "cut off from his presence"

until such a “day” as they would be willing to “hear” or “hearken” (Psalm 95:7).

### “Wilt Thou Hearken”?

Apart from Nephi’s writings, the strongest concentration of narrative mentions of the name Ishmael and “Ishmaelites” is in Mormon’s abridged Lamanite conversion narrative. There is a significant narratological focus on “hearing” and “hearkening” to Nephite spiritual guidance.

From the outset of this narrative, Mormon emphasizes the connection between Lamoni and the Lamanite royal family and the Ishmaelites: “And thus Ammon was carried before the king who was over the land of Ishmael; and his name was Lamoni; and he was a descendant of Ishmael” (Alma 17:21). Ishmael and the Ishmaelites are not mentioned in such a prominent way in Mormon’s narrative heretofore.

The narrative places dramatic emphasis on Lamoni’s reaction as he “hears” of Ammon’s exploits (Alma 18:4, 10, 16, 18, and 22). More to the point, however, Mormon’s account of Lamoni’s “hearkening” to Ammon’s words demands consideration in light of the refusal of Laman and Lemuel and sons of Ishmael, in times past, to “hear” and “hearken.” Lamoni’s “hearing” and “hearkening” activates the spiritual blessings promised to Lehi’s older sons and the sons of Ishmael in 2 Nephi 1:28–29.

Ammon, Nephi’s descendant through the Nephite royal line,<sup>55</sup> in a real sense represents his ancestor Nephi at this moment in Nephite-Lamanite history — a moment which re-creates earlier moments when Laman and Lemuel and the sons of Ishmael had the choice to “hearken” unto Nephi or to “not hearken” (e.g., 2 Nephi 1:28–29). The willingness of Lamoni, the Ishmaelite king in the land of Ishmael, to “hearken” opens the way for him to be taught the gospel and concerning the rebellions of his ancestors, especially the sons of Ishmael:

Now Ammon being *wise*, yet harmless, he said unto Lamoni: **Wilt thou hearken unto** [cf. Hebrew *tišmaʿ ʿēlāy*]<sup>56</sup> **my words**, if I tell thee by what power I do these things? And this is the thing that I desire of thee. And the king answered him, and said: Yea, **I will believe all thy words**. (Alma 18:22–23)

And he also **rehearsed unto them concerning the rebellions of Laman and Lemuel, and the sons of Ishmael**, yea, all their rebellions did he relate unto them; and he expounded unto them all the records and scriptures from the time that Lehi left Jerusalem down to the present time. But this is not all;

for he expounded unto them the plan of redemption, which was prepared from the foundation of the world; and he also made known unto them concerning the coming of Christ, and all the works of the Lord did he make known unto them. And it came to pass that after he had said all these things, and expounded them to the king, that the king *believed* all his words. (Alma 18:38–40)

Lamoni's willingness to "hearken" and "believe" opens the way for many other Ishmaelite-Lamanites in the Land of Ishmael to "hearken" and "believe."<sup>57</sup> Mormon then states that "the queen [had] **heard** of the fame of Ammon, therefore she sent and desired that he should come in unto her" (Alma 19:2). The ensuing scene replicates much of what had just happened between Ammon and king Lamoni. The queen and many others in the royal court also participate in an ecstatic vision.<sup>58</sup> When misunderstanding and contention arise concerning the meaning of these events, Abish, the queen's (providentially) already-converted maidservant, acts to ensure that these events do not culminate in disaster.<sup>59</sup> After Lamoni and his wife are "raised" from their visions, Mormon records the willingness of many of Lamoni's "Ishmaelish" people to "hear" or "hearken":

And he, immediately, seeing the contention among his people, went forth and began to rebuke them, and to teach them **the words which he had heard** from the mouth of Ammon; and **as many as heard his words believed**, and were converted unto the Lord. But **there were many among them who would not hear his words**; therefore they went their way. (Alma 19:31–32)

Brant Gardner suggests that the text here refers to an "Ishmaelite elite"<sup>60</sup> of a "rival lineage, representatives of whom were present, [who] made these events part of their political resistance."<sup>61</sup> If these observations are correct, Lamoni's teaching "the words which he had heard from the mouth of Ammon" and the "many among them who would not hear his words" take on additional significance in light of Lehi's declaration to Laman, Lemuel, Sam, and the sons of Ishmael regarding the importance of "hearing." Thus we see Mormon further re-creating the moment of decision from centuries earlier: to "hearken" to or "hear" Nephi (now to "hear" Ammon) and to receive Lehi's "first blessing," or to not "hearken" to or "hear" and to remain in darkness, cut off from the Lord's presence.

### “They Would Not Harken”

Mormon further contrasts the initial receptivity of the Ishmaelite-Lamanites vis-à-vis the Lamanites in Middoni and some other places (although many Lamanites at Middoni later converted; see Alma 23:10). Ammon’s brothers did not fare as well in Middoni as he did in the land of Ishmael:

And, as it happened, it was their lot to have fallen into the hands of a more hardened and a more stiffnecked people; therefore **they would not hearken unto their words**, and they had cast them out, and had smitten them, and had driven them from house to house, and from place to place, even until they had arrived in the land of Middoni; and there they were taken and cast into prison, and bound with strong cords, and kept in prison for many days, and were delivered by Lamoni and Ammon. (Alma 20:30)

Many of the Lamanites in Middoni became more receptive to the gospel as time went on, especially after the conversion of Lamoni’s father, the king of all the Lamanites. They too became spiritual heirs to the blessings that Laman and Lemuel and the sons of Ishmael had denied their posterity.

Aaron, Ammon’s brother, experienced similar hardness of heart among the Amalekites/Amlicites in “the city of Jerusalem” in “the land which was called by the Lamanites, Jerusalem, calling it after the land of their fathers’ nativity” (Alma 21:1, 4). The Amalekites/Amlicites, of course, had rejected the traditional Nephite faith and religion in favor of the order of the Nehors.<sup>62</sup> By politically aligning themselves with the Lamanites, just as the sons of Ishmael had aligned themselves with Laman and Lemuel many years earlier and by rejecting the faith, they had disinherited themselves from the spiritual blessings attached to Lehi’s “first blessing”:

And it came to pass as he began to expound these things unto them they were angry with him, and began to mock him; and **they would not hear the words which he spake**. Therefore, **when he saw that they would not hear his words**, he departed out of their synagogue, and came over to a village which was called Ani-Anti, and there he found Muloki preaching the word unto them; and also Ammah and his brethren. And they contended with many about the word. And it came to pass that **they saw that the people would harden their**



**hearts**, therefore they departed and came over into the land of Middoni. And they did preach the word unto many, and **few believed on the words** which they taught. (Alma 21:10–12)

One on level, Mormon's twofold statement regarding the Amalekites/Amlicites that "they would not hear" Aaron's words further emphasizes the hardness of those to whom he preached.<sup>63</sup> By the words "they would not hear," we are to understand "they did not want to hear." There is an allusion to Lehi's report of his dream and Laman and Lemuel's refusal to come and partake of the tree of life: "And it came to pass that I saw them, but they would not come unto me and partake of the fruit" (1 Nephi 8:18). As Jennifer C. Lane has noted, Lehi was stating "they did not want to come."<sup>64</sup>

On another level, we should view Mormon's remarks here against the backdrop of Lehi's conditional blessing in 2 Nephi 1:28–29, especially in consideration of the conversions that have already taken place among the Ishmaelite-Lamanites previously. To the degree that Lamanites of Middoni and Ani-Anti, to whom Aaron, Ammah, and Muloki preached, "would not hear," they remained subjected to the negative promises of Lehi's blessing (2 Nephi 1:29). Mormon's statement "few believed" highlights the persistent "unbelief"<sup>65</sup> that Ammon and the sons of Mosiah as well as those who accompanied them encountered in their missionary work. Fortunately this is not the end of the story.

### Ishmaelite "Hearkening"

The story was clearly different among the Lamanites in the land of Ishmael, who — Mormon emphasizes — were descendants of Ishmael:

But he [Lamoni] **caused that there should be synagogues built in the land of Ishmael**; and he caused that his people, or the people who were under his reign, should assemble themselves together. And he did rejoice over them, and he did teach them many things. And he did also declare unto them that they were a people who were under him, and that they were a free people, that they were free from the oppressions of the king, his father; for that **his father had granted unto him that he might reign over the people who were in the land of Ishmael**, and in all the land round about. (Alma 21:20–21)

In other words, these Ishmaelite-Lamanites were the first to "hear" and the easiest to be entreated with the message of the gospel. Mormon mentions "the people of the Lamanites who were in the land of Ishmael"

(Alma 23:9) at the top entry in his catalogue of Lamanite conversions (see Alma 23:8–15). They were blessed accordingly (see 2 Nephi 1:28).

When the unconverted Lamanites became an existential threat to the converted Lamanites, “a council” was held in “the land of Ishmael” (Alma 24:5). When many of the previously hardened Lamanites joined the converted Lamanites, “many of them came over to dwell in the land of Ishmael and the land of Nephi, and did join themselves to the people of God” (Alma 25:13). The name *Ishmael* in these chapters (Alma 17–25) becomes a fitting symbol of the people’s willingness to “hearken” to the Lord and his messengers, and the Lord in turn “heard” or “hearkened” to them.

### Conclusion and Pragmatics

Nephi’s writings contain two final statements that invoke the theme of “hearkening” and “obedience” (cf. Hebrew *šāma*).<sup>66</sup> Nephi concludes his first “book” thus:

Wherefore, my brethren, I would that ye should consider that the things which have been written upon the plates of brass are true; and they testify that **a man must be obedient** to the commandments of God. Wherefore, ye need not suppose that I and my father are the only ones that have testified, and also taught them. Wherefore, **if ye shall be obedient to the commandments, and endure to the end, ye shall be saved at the last day.** And thus it is. Amen. (1 Nephi 22:30–31)

This conclusion sets the topical framework for Lehi’s final paranesis to his sons in 2 Nephi 1–4 and its aftermath in 2 Nephi 5, including Lehi’s conditional blessing upon Laman, Lemuel, and the sons of Ishmael in 2 Nephi 1:28–29, “if ye will hearken . . . ” / “but if ye will not hearken . . . ”

In conjunction with an inclusio that brackets all of his writings and plays on his own name,<sup>67</sup> Nephi also closes the body of his writings that he made “to be obedient to the commandments of the Lord”<sup>68</sup> with statements that emphasize the importance of “obeying” or “hearkening”:

And now, my beloved brethren, and also Jew, and all ye ends of the earth, **hearken unto these words and believe in Christ;** and if ye believe not in these words believe in Christ. And if ye shall believe in Christ ye will believe in these words, for they are the words of Christ, and he hath given them unto me; and they teach all men that they should do **good** [cf. Egyptian *nfr* = good]. (2 Nephi 33:10)<sup>69</sup>

The last thing that Nephi ever says (in writing) emphasizes a willingness to “hear” that has ever characterized his mortal life and that will forever define him: “For what I seal on earth, shall be brought against you at the judgment bar; for thus hath the Lord commanded me, and **I must obey**. Amen” (2 Nephi 33:15).

Nephi knew, as did his father Lehi, the necessity of “hearkening” in order to activate the blessings of the doctrine of Christ and the plan of salvation — “To day, if ye will hear his voice” (Psalm 95:7; cf. Deuteronomy 18:15-19; 1 Nephi 22:20). To delay “hearkening” was to remain “cut off from the presence of the Lord” and to fail to “enter into [the Lord’s] rest” (Psalm 95:11), perhaps eternally.

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### Notes

1. Erastus Snow, an early Latter-day Saint leader, made the following statement regarding Ishmael: “Whoever has read the Book of Mormon carefully will have learned that the remnants of the house of Joseph dwelt upon the American continent; and that Lehi learned by searching the records of his fathers that were written upon the plates of brass, that he was of the lineage of Manasseh. The Prophet Joseph informed us that the record of Lehi was contained on the 116 pages that were first translated and subsequently stolen, and of which an abridgement is given us in the first Book of Nephi, which is the record of Nephi individually, he himself being of the lineage of Manasseh; but that Ishmael was of the lineage of Ephraim, and that his sons married into Lehi’s family, and Lehi’s sons married Ishmael’s daughters, thus fulfilling the words of Jacob upon Ephraim and Manasseh in the 48th chapter of Genesis, which says: ‘And let my name be named

on them, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the land.’ Thus these descendants of Manasseh and Ephraim grew together upon this American continent, with a sprinkling from the house of Judah, from Mulek descended, who left Jerusalem eleven years after Lehi, and founded the colony afterward known as Zarahemla and found by Mosiah — thus making a combination, an intermixture of Ephraim and Manasseh, with the remnants of Judah and for aught we know, the remnants of some other tribes that might have accompanied Mulek. And such have grown up on the American continent.” Erastus Snow, Speech delivered on May 6, 1882, *Journal of Discourses* 23:184–185.

2. 1 Nephi 16:34–35.
3. E.g., Alma 3:7; 17:19–21; 20:14–17; 21:18–21; 22:1, 4; 23:9; 25:13; 43:14.
4. See 1 Nephi 7:19.
5. 1 Nephi 7:6, 19; 16:20, 27, 37; 18:9, 17; 2 Nephi 1:28; 4:10, 13.
6. 1 Nephi 7:6, 19; 16:7, 35.
7. See 1 Nephi 1:2.
8. Cf. Deuteronomy 7:12: “If [*‘eqeb*, or better, because] you hearken [*tišmē ‘ûn*] to these judgments, and keep, and do them . . . ”
9. E.g., West Semitic *Yašmaḥi-el*, Akkadian *Išme-ilum* or *Išme-ilī* [*Išme-DINGIR*] and Old South Arabic *ysm<sup>‘</sup>l*. See HALOT 447, citing Theodor Bauer, *Die Ostkanaanäer: Eine philologisch-historische Untersuchung über die Wanderschicht der sogenannten “Amoriter” in Babylonien* (Leipzig, Netherlands: Verlag der Asia Major, 1926), 30; J.J. Stamm, *Die akkadische Namengebung* (Leipzig, Netherlands: Hinrichs, 1939; repr. 1968), 72; Karl Mlaker, *Die Hierodulenlisten von Ma<sup>‘</sup>in* (Leipzig, Netherlands: Harrassowitz, 1943), 37.
10. HALOT, 447.
11. Graham I. Davies, Markus N.A. Bockmuehl, *et al.*, *Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions: Corpus and Concordance* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 1:380, 2:169.
12. See Ezra 10:22; 1 Chronicles 8:38; 9:44; and 2 Chronicles 19:11.

13. Alma 10:2: "I am Amulek; I am the son of Gidanah [**Giddonah**], who was the son of **Ishmael**, who was a descendant of Aminadi; and it was that same Aminadi who interpreted the writing which was upon the wall of the temple, which was written by the finger of God." On reading Gidanah over Giddonah, see Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part Three: Mosiah 17–Alma 20* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2006), 1174.
14. See, e.g., Moshe Garsiel's (*Biblical Names: A Literary Study of Midrashic Derivations and Puns*, trans. Phyllis Hackett [Ramat Gan, Israel: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1991], 186) discussion on the onomastic wordplay on Ishmael in terms of *šāma'* throughout the Ishmael-Isaac birth cycle.
15. Ibid.
16. Martin Buber ("Leitwort Style in Pentateuch Narrative," in *Scripture and Translation* [ed. Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig; trans. Lawrence Rosenwald and Everett Fox; ISBL; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994], 114) coined the term *Leitwort* ("lead-word," or "guiding word") and defines it thus: "By *Leitwort* I understand a word or word root that is meaningfully repeated within a text or a sequence of texts or complex of texts; those who attend to these repetitions will find a meaning of the text revealed or clarified, or at any rate made more emphatic. As noted, what is repeated need not be a single word but can be a word root; indeed the diversity of forms strengthens the overall dynamic effect." See further Martin Buber, *Darko shel Mikra: 'iyunim bi-defuse-signon ba-Tanakh* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1964), 284.
17. Cf. Garsiel, *Biblical Names*, 186.
18. Hosea 1:4: "And the Lord said unto him, Call his name Jezreel; for yet a little while, and I will avenge the blood of Jezreel upon the house of Jehu, and will cause to cease the kingdom of the house of Israel"; Hosea 1:6: "And she conceived again, and bare a daughter. And God said unto him, Call her name Lo-ruhamah: for I will no more have mercy upon the house of Israel; but I will utterly take them away"; Hosea 1:9: "Then said God, Call his name Lo-ammi: for ye are not my people, and I will not be your God."
19. Shear-jashub (Isaiah 7:3; 10:21); Maher-shalal-hash-baz: (Isaiah 8:3–4); Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14). "Behold, I and the children whom

the Lord hath given me are for signs and for wonders in Israel from the Lord of hosts, which dwelleth in mount Zion” (Isaiah 8:18).

20. Luke 1:13: “But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and **thou shalt call his name John.**”
21. “But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a son, and **thou shalt call his name JESUS:** for **he shall save** his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:20–21). Luke also confirms this datum: “And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and **shalt call his name JESUS**” (Luke 1:31). 2 Nephi 25:19: “For according to the words of the prophets, the Messiah cometh in six hundred years from the time that my father left Jerusalem; and according to the words of the prophets, and also the word of the angel of God, **his name shall be Jesus Christ, the Son of God.**”
22. 2 Nephi 3:15: “And his name shall be called after me; and it shall be after the name of his father. And he shall be like unto me; for the thing, which the Lord shall bring forth by his hand, by the power of the Lord shall bring my people unto salvation”; JST Genesis 50:33: “And that seer will I bless, and they that seek to destroy him shall be confounded; for this promise I give unto you; for I will remember you from generation to generation; **and his name shall be called Joseph**, and it shall be after the name of his father; and he shall be like unto you; for the thing which the Lord shall bring forth by his hand shall bring my people unto salvation.”
23. 1 Chronicles 22:9 suggests that Solomon’s name was divinely mandated or “foreordained”: “Behold, a son shall be born to thee, who shall be a man of rest; and I will give him rest from all his enemies round about: for **his name shall be Solomon**, and I will give **peace** [*šālôm*] and quietness unto Israel in his days.”
24. Genesis 17:15–16: “And God said unto Abraham, As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be. And I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her: yea, I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall be of her.”

25. Garsiel, *Biblical Names*, 186.
26. Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2004), 103.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid., 105.
29. Garsiel, *Biblical Names*, 186.
30. Ibid.
31. The pattern of younger sons receiving the birthright or becoming the covenant son begins with Abel and Seth (vis-à-vis Cain and their older siblings; Genesis 4:25; Moses 6:2). The Book of Moses shows that this pattern resurfaces with Shem, whom the text clarifies was the second son of Noah (see Moses 8:12). The pattern again emerges with Isaac (vis-à-vis Ishmael); Jacob (vis-à-vis Esau); Joseph (vis-à-vis Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah); Ephraim (vis-à-vis Manasseh). The Lord chooses David for kingship over his older brothers Eliab, Abinadab, Shammah, *et al.* Nephi's being "chosen" can be viewed as fitting within this pattern.
32. Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part One: Title Page, Witness Statements, 1 Nephi 1–2 Nephi 10* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 140–142.
33. Ibid., 142–143.
34. See also Jeremiah 25:3–4 ("but ye have not hearkened [*wēlō' šěma'tem*"]; 2x); 25:7 ("yet ye have not hearkened unto me [*lō'-šěma'tem 'ēlay*]"); 26:5 ("but ye have not hearkened [*wēlō' šěma'tem*]"); 34:17 ("ye have not hearkened unto me [*'attem lō'-šěma'tem 'ēlay*]").
35. Nephi records that he asked three additional "how is it" questions "How is it that ye have forgotten that ye have seen an angel of the Lord? Yea, and how is it that ye have forgotten what great things the Lord hath done for us, in delivering us out of the hands of Laban, and also that we should obtain the record? Yea, and how is it that ye have forgotten that the Lord is able to do all things according to his will, for the children of men, if it so be that they exercise faith in him? Wherefore, let us **be faithful** to him" (1 Nephi 7:10–12). On the evident wordplay involving the name *Laman* and "faith"/"faithfulness" (Hebrew *'mn* and its cognates) vis-à-vis "unbelief" (cf. Hebrew *lō' 'emun*, Deuteronomy 32:20), see

- Matthew L. Bowen, “Not Partaking of the Fruit: Its Generational Consequences and Its Remedy,” in *The Things Which My Father Saw: Approaches to Lehi’s Dream and Nephi’s Vision: The 40th Annual Brigham Young University Sidney B. Sperry Symposium*, ed. Daniel L. Belnap, Gaye Strathearn, and Stanley A. Johnson (Salt Lake City/Provo, UT: RSC and Deseret Book, 2011), 240–63; idem, “The Faithfulness of Ammon,” *Religious Educator* 15/2 (2014), 64–89.
36. Nephi mentions the Lord’s commandment to make the small plates in 2 Nephi 5:30–33. In the very next sentence, he mentions that “forty years had passed away” (2 Nephi 5:34).
  37. Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants*, 1:360.
  38. Ibid., 360–361.
  39. Ibid., 361–362.
  40. On the wordplay on the name *Laman* evident here, see Bowen, “Not Partaking of the Fruit,” 240–263, see especially 242–243.
  41. Cf. also 1 Nephi 16:37 and 2 Nephi 5:19.
  42. On prophetic speech formulas in the Book of Mormon, see Donald W. Parry, “Thus Saith the Lord”: Prophetic Language in Sam’s Speech, *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1/1 (1992): 181–83, citing David E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 88–100.
  43. <http://www.websters1913.com/words/Obey>.
  44. See, e.g., 2 Nephi 1:24: “Rebel no more against your brother, whose views have been glorious, and who hath kept the commandments from the time that we left Jerusalem; and who hath been an instrument in the hands of God, in bringing us forth into the land of promise; for were it not for him, we must have perished with hunger in the wilderness; nevertheless, ye sought to take away his life; yea, and he hath suffered much sorrow because of you.”
  45. Noel B. Reynolds, “The Political Dimension in Nephi’s Small Plates,” *BYU Studies* 27/4 (1987): 15–37.
  46. Parenesis (*paranesis* or *paraenesis*, from Greek *parainesis*) is a rhetorical term designating speech or discourse containing advice, counsel, or exhortation, particularly of a religious nature.



47. Even in Egyptian, the cognate verb *sdm* [or *śdm*] would have been preserved the wordplay involving Ishmael and “obey”/“hearken”/“hear.”
48. Polyptoton = a wordplay involving the repetition of terms from the same root.
49. On living in “the presence of the Lord” as a spiritual heritage or inheritance, see, e.g., 1 Nephi 2:21; 2 Nephi 1:20; 4:4; 5:20; Alma 9:13–14; 36:30; 37:13; 38:15; 50:20; Ether 2:15; 10:11. See further 2 Nephi 9:6; Alma 42:6–15; Helaman 12:21; 14:6. Leviticus 22:3: “Whosoever he be of all your seed among your generations, that goeth unto the holy things, which the children of Israel hallow unto the Lord, having his uncleanness upon him, that soul **shall be cut off from my presence**: I am the Lord.”
50. Reynolds, “The Political Dimension in Nephi’s Small Plates,” 32.
51. See, e.g. George S. Tate, “The Typology of the Exodus Pattern in the Book of Mormon,” in *Literature of Belief: Sacred Scripture and Religious Experience*, ed. Neal E. Lambert (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 1981), 246–62; Terrence L. Szink, “To a Land of Promise (1 Nephi 16–18),” in *Studies in Scripture, Vol 7:1 Nephi to Alma 29*, ed. Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 60–72; idem, “Nephi and the Exodus,” *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 35–51; Noel B. Reynolds, “Lehi as Moses,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9/2 (2000): 26–35, 81–8; idem, “The Political Dimension in Nephi’s Small Plates,” 15–37; S. Kent Brown, “The Exodus Pattern in the Book of Mormon,” in *From Jerusalem to Zarahemla: Literary and Historical Studies of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 1998), 75–98.
52. D&C 84:23–24: “Now this Moses plainly taught to the children of Israel in the wilderness, and sought diligently to sanctify his people that they might behold the face of God; But they hardened their hearts and could not endure his presence; therefore, the Lord in his wrath, for his anger was kindled against them, swore that they should not enter into his rest while in the wilderness, which rest is the fulness of his glory.”
53. Bowen, “Not Partaking of the Fruit,” 242–243.

54. Amulek's statement in Alma 34:31 constitutes a paraphrase of Psalm 95:7–11.
55. Cf. Mosiah 25:13, which states: "And now all the people of Zarahemla were numbered with the Nephites, and this because the kingdom had been conferred upon none but those who were descendants of Nephi." Mosiah II, Benjamin, and Mosiah I (going back to Nephi, presumably) were all kings from Nephi's lineage. Ammon, Aaron, and their brothers as Mosiah II's sons, of course, belonged to this lineage.
56. Cf. Jeremiah 38:15: "Then Jeremiah said unto Zedekiah, If I declare it unto thee, wilt thou not surely put me to death? and if I give thee counsel, **wilt thou not hearken unto me** [*tišma' 'ēlāy*]?"
57. Bowen, "Not Partaking of the Fruit," 240–263.
58. Ecstatic (< Greek *ek* + *stasis* = standing outside). An ecstatic vision is one in which one is "standing outside" one's own body — i.e., an "out-of-body" vision. Cf. 2 Corinthians 12:2–3; 3 Nephi 28:15; D&C 137:1).
59. Matthew L. Bowen, "Father Is a Man: The Remarkable Mention of the Name *Abish* in Alma 19:16 and Its Narrative Context," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 14 (2015): 77–93.
60. Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Textual Commentary on the Book of Mormon, Volume 4: Alma* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 4:305.
61. *Ibid.*, 4:308.
62. See especially Alma 2:1 (and following); 21:45; 24:48.
63. See especially Mormon's comment in Alma 21:3: "Now the Lamanites of themselves were sufficiently hardened, but the Amalekites and the Amulonites were still harder; therefore they did cause the Lamanites that they should harden their hearts, that they should wax strong in wickedness and their abominations."
64. Jennifer C. Lane, "The Presence of the Lord," in *The Things Which My Father Saw: Approaches to Lehi's Dream and Nephi's Vision*, ed. Daniel L. Belnap, Gaye Strathearn, and Stanley A. Johnson (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 130.
65. On Lamanite "unbelief," see again Bowen, "Not Partaking of the Fruit," 240–263.

66. Nephi would have used a form of Hebrew *šāma'* or its Egyptian cognate equivalent *šdm* (*šdm*).
67. See Matthew L. Bowen, "Nephi's Good Inclusio," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, 17 (2015): 181–195.
68. 2 Nephi 5:31.
69. Bowen, "Nephi's Good Inclusio," 181–195.

