

“Even as Our Father Lehi Saw”: Lehi’s Dream as Nephite Cultural Narrative

Daniel L. Belnap

Though Lehi received his dream in a tent near the Red Sea years before his family ever reached the promised land, the images and symbols impacted later generations of Nephites, providing meaning to the events and experiences of their lives. Like a subtle yet crucial weave in the fabric that is the Book of Mormon, elements of the dream can be found in personal narratives such as Alma’s but perhaps are most evident in the description of Christ’s theophany. From the darkness to his voice to his appearance at the temple, the terminology and symbolism of Lehi’s dream is utilized to recount Christ’s climatic visit. All of these textual passages suggest that to later Nephites the dream was much more than simply an interesting story from a long-deceased ancestor. The dream defined these people, acting as a cultural narrative that provided meaning and context to the entire Nephite experience.¹

Cultural Narratives

All societies and cultures have some narrative by which they define themselves and their place in the greater cosmos; these narratives often incorporate

Daniel L. Belnap is an assistant professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University.

creation imagery.² Of course, their content depends upon the values and understandings of the given culture. Sometimes the narratives may be fictive, containing principles or ethics that reflect the unique nature of the community; sometimes they include actual historical events. Oftentimes these narratives are accompanied with ritual behavior that reinforces the narrative, allows the participant to become a part of the narrative, and creates solidarity among the community.³

For ancient Israel, the cultural narrative was the Exodus narrative, which recounted how God delivered his chosen people from captivity in Egypt by spectacularly parting the Red Sea. Though the event is completely historical, the biblical writers saw in it the same type of process that was performed at the Creation.⁴ Thus creation language and imagery were used in texts recounting the event. For example, in Deuteronomy 32:10, the beginning of Israel’s covenant relationship with God is situated in “the waste howling wilderness.” The Hebrew term translated as “waste howling wilderness” is *tohu*, the same term used to describe the primeval chaos found in Genesis 1:2. Thus Israel was in a state of “chaos” prior to their covenantal relationship with God, and with the establishment of that relationship Israel became a cosmos. This state included a unique definition of the differences between Israel and the world around them.⁵

But the Exodus narrative was more than simply a re-creation. Because Israel had existed before the entrance into Egypt, the Exodus narrative suggested a restoration or return home as much as it did a new creation. The Israelites were not so much going to enter into a new creation as they were going to return to their old lands of inheritance. In other words, the Israelites were not going anywhere new; they were going back home. Israel relied on God not to create a new world but to restore them to the one they had already possessed. This sense of return, one of the primary characteristics of Israel’s distinctive cultural narrative, is the power behind the enduring nature of that narrative.⁶

Lehi’s Dream Narrative

Many have noted the role of the Exodus narrative in certain Book of Mormon events, particularly the original journey from Jerusalem to the promised land.⁷ However, the Exodus narrative does not fully encompass the Nephite experience, for, unlike the Israelites in the Exodus narrative, the

Nephites were never going to return to their original lands of inheritance. Instead, they were to leave their home and attempt to establish another somewhere else in the wilderness, a pattern that was repeated over and over again in Nephite history. Some thirty to fifty years after arriving in the promised land, they had to leave the lands of first inheritance and travel into the unknown, eventually settling a land they called the land of Nephi. Approximately four hundred years later, they again had to leave their lands of inheritance and journey into the wilderness, ultimately settling in the land of Zarahemla, a territory already inhabited by the Mulekites. These periodic migrations (without returns to the original territories) differ fundamentally from the Israelite Exodus narrative, a difference not lost on the Nephites. One of the biggest challenges the Book of Mormon prophets had to deal with was the overall communal sense of being scattered, abandoned, and lost, without any promise of returning home. To recognize this ongoing fear, one need only look at Nephi's message in 1 Nephi 19–21, Jacob's speech in 2 Nephi 6–10, and Zeniff's eventual failure to return and reclaim.⁸

At first glance, Lehi's dream does not necessarily appear to be an alternative cultural narrative. There is no historical background to the dream; unlike the Exodus narrative, Lehi's dream is not concerned with where he was before the dream. Moreover, the dream is just that—a dream and therefore fiction. It does not describe an actual historical event or series of events. Yet, paradoxically, these elements are also the means by which the dream could become a cultural narrative, and a powerful one at that.

The dream itself is made up of two sequences, each containing three general scenes differentiated by their emphasis on a microcosmic or macrocosmic scale. The first sequence depicts a personalized scene with a small-scale landscape. We begin with Lehi and follow him through the dark and dreary waste, where he encounters a divine guide who helps Lehi to enter into a large and spacious field dominated by a tree of light. Upon partaking of the fruit of the tree, Lehi seeks to bring the rest of his immediate family (or at least his wife and sons), to the tree so that they may eat of the fruit as well. Running alongside the path leading to the tree is a river. This is the setting of the first sequence.

The second sequence of the dream begins in 1 Nephi 8:19 with “numberless concourses of people” (v. 21) seeking to get to the tree. Not only have the participants expanded in scale, the large and spacious field has also done so, becoming the world. According to the text, mists of darkness cover the path

and are destructive to those seeking to get to the tree. An iron rod can overcome the power of the darkness and must be used to reach the tree. Though these last elements are not found in the first sequence, they do have their analogues, as the chart below demonstrates. Symbolically, the mists of darkness perform the same function as the dark and dreary waste/wilderness, and the iron rod, as explained in greater detail later, is analogous to the divine guide.

First Sequence	Second Sequence
Dark and dreary waste/wilderness	Mists of darkness
Angelic guide	Iron rod
Large and spacious field	World
Tree of life	Tree of life
Lehi and his family	Numberless concourses of people
River	Endless gulf

In light of the correspondence between the two sequences, Lehi’s dream basically retells the same story. In both sequences, the symbolic elements reflect the cosmological understanding of the ancient Near East in Lehi’s day, particularly the tension between the elements that may represent chaos and those that represent the cosmos. Below is a quick review of the cosmological nature of the symbolism in the three scenes that make up each sequence.

Scene 1: Journey through the darkness. The first element in the first sequence is that of the dark and dreary wilderness, later described as the dark and dreary waste, which may be seen as analogous to the pre-cosmic chaos found in the Creation narrative. Though we do not have the original text of the Book of Mormon, the terms “wilderness” and “waste” and their descriptions (dark and dreary) describe something akin to the chaos described in the Old Testament.⁹ As we have seen already, the terms “waste” and “wilderness” were used in Deuteronomy 32:10 to translate *tohu*, the Hebrew term for “chaos.” Job 12:24 uses the term “wilderness” to designate *tohu*, or *chaos*. This verse also associates darkness with the wilderness: “He taketh away the heart of the chief of the people of the earth, and causeth them to wander in a wilderness [*tohu*], where there is no way.” Similarly, Jeremiah 4:23 associates the *tohu* with darkness: “I beheld the earth, and, lo, it was without form, and void [*tohu*]; and the heavens, and they had no light.”

This dark and dreary wasteland is represented in the second sequence by the mists of darkness. Though the two are not exactly the same, they perform

the same function in the narrative, acting as obstacles to be overcome before reaching the cosmos. The description of the darkness as a mist encapsulates its chaotic nature, for, as mentioned earlier, Genesis 1:2 depicts the primal chaos as the abyss, a dark, fathomless sea: “And the earth was without form, and void [*tobu*]; and darkness was upon the face of the *deep*. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the *waters*” (emphasis added).

The river, too, can be understood in this same continuum as the chaotic ocean. Often the terms “sea” and “river” are used interchangeably in the Old Testament to represent chaos such as that described in Psalm 24:2, which speaks of the Creation in the following manner: “For he hath founded it upon the seas, and established it upon the floods [rivers].” As we shall see, Nephi, in his version of the dream imagery, also connects the mists of darkness to the river. Thus, in both sequences, the individuals have some type of experience with the dark chaos.

While in the darkness, Lehi meets a guide who leads him through the wilderness.¹⁰ Though Lehi’s dream is not the Exodus narrative, there are similarities, no doubt because both stories share elements with the Creation narrative. One such commonality is that of the divine guide, sent to lead participants through the chaos. Again, referring back to Deuteronomy 32:10, we find a description of the Exodus in which God found his people: “He found him [Jacob] in a desert land, and in the waste howling wilderness; he led him about, he instructed him.” Historically, the Israelites were led through the wilderness by a divine guide. Later, Joshua also encountered a divine guide, a pattern experienced in visionary encounters as well.

In the second sequence, the counterpart to the guide is the iron rod. Though they differ in form, these two symbols perform the same function—that of helping individuals to reach the cosmic state. We are first introduced to the iron rod in 1 Nephi 8:19, which explains that the iron rod “extended along the bank of the river,” suggesting to our modern senses that the rod ran along the river like a handrail. Yet some have suggested that the iron rod was not a handrail but a weapon like that found in the Old Testament, where it is associated with kingship and power.¹¹ As we shall see, in the book of Helaman it is used in the latter sense.

Scene 2: Obtaining the tree. Following Lehi’s encounter with the guide, the prophet begins to pray for mercy, whereupon he is brought to a large and spacious field with a tree that is later revealed to be the tree of life. The transition

from the dark and dreary wasteland into a field possessing the tree of life is ultimately a cosmic one. It corresponds to the Creation narrative, in which the physical cosmos emerged from the watery chaos (see Genesis 1:1–8). In Isaiah 32:15, a similar transformation is described: “Until the spirit be poured upon us from on high, and the wilderness be a fruitful field.” The transformation of the waste into a cosmos also lies behind the powerful imagery recorded in Isaiah 51:3: “For the Lord shall comfort Zion: he will comfort all her waste places; and he will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the Lord.” This latter reference in particular demonstrates the manner in which the Creation narrative could be used outside of the actual Creation event. Though we do not have the original text, the term “field” is used elsewhere in the Book of Mormon to designate cultivated land (as opposed to the wilderness). Thus the chaos/cosmos dichotomy includes the uncultivated/cultivated dichotomy.

The image of the tree of life itself is an iconic representation of the cosmos. Like the cosmic mountain, the tree of life is a symbol of the axis mundi, or the connection between heaven, earth, and the underworld.¹² Its presence in the field is suggestive of the Garden of Eden, which has been recognized as the template for a temple, which is, in turn, the architectural expression of the finished cosmic state. Like the tree in the Garden of Eden, Lehi’s tree is the source of the living waters, suggesting that the tree is elevated to some degree.¹³ Yet the tree is more than just a symbol of the physical cosmos. The tree also represents Jesus Christ and therefore acts as a symbol of the individual transformation into deity, the true cosmic state of which all other states are merely types.

Just as the tree is symbolic of the whole cosmos, so the fruit becomes symbolic of the tree in its entirety. According to Lehi, the fruit of the tree “was white, to exceed all the whiteness that [he] had ever seen” (1 Nephi 8:11). Later, in Nephi’s vision, the entire tree is described as white: “The beauty thereof was far beyond, yea, exceeding of all beauty; and the whiteness thereof did exceed the whiteness of the driven snow” (1 Nephi 11:8). In both versions, the brightness is as significant as the color itself, suggesting that the fruit gave off light. Thus the journey is not only from a wilderness state to the garden, but also from darkness into light. Lehi, then, has experienced an abbreviated version of the Creation with himself as a type of Adam. This interpretation is strengthened in the second sequence when one realizes that, unlike other elements of the dream, the tree has no analogue. It is integral to both.

Scene 3: Partaking of the fruit and the transformation. The final cosmic transformation is found in 1 Nephi 8:12: “As I partook of the fruit thereof it filled my soul with exceedingly great joy; wherefore, I began to be desirous that my family should partake of it also.” As Lehi partakes of the fruit of the tree of life, he too is transformed, symbolically becoming one with the divine. The ritual of the meal is used universally as a social function to denote place within a given society for both host and guest.¹⁴ In the Bible, the meal is an important event that binds individuals and groups together.¹⁵ The most important, of course, are those relationships between mortals and God.¹⁶

The act of eating is fundamental to the Garden of Eden pericope, but eating was also the ritual that bound Israel to God in the wilderness. The power of meal imagery to signify the mortal/divine relationship may explain why at least one biblical reference uses it to describe the entire Sinai experience: “He [Jehovah] made him [Israel] ride on the high places of the earth, that he might eat the increase of the fields; and he made him to suck honey out of the rock, and oil out of the flinty rock; butter of kine, and milk of sheep, with fat of lambs, and rams of the breed of Bashan, and goats, with the fat of kidneys of wheat; and thou didst drink the pure blood of the grape” (Deuteronomy 32:13–14).

Earlier, in Exodus 24, the covenant-making experience is, in fact, a literal meal: “And Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord, and all the judgments: and all the people answered with one voice, and said, All the words which the Lord hath said will we do. And Moses wrote all the words of the Lord. . . . And he sent young men of the children of Israel, which offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings. . . . And Moses took the blood, and sprinkled it on the people, and said, Behold the blood of the covenant. . . . Then went Moses, and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel: and they saw the God of Israel . . . and did eat and drink” (Exodus 24:3–5, 8–11).

Both of these references use imagery from the peace offering, the one form of sacrifice in which the offerer literally ate of the flesh and God partook symbolically. Lehi’s dream was received following the offering of such sacrifices.

Yet more than communion is expressed in Lehi’s partaking of the fruit. Just as the guest who partakes of a meal becomes a member of the community,

so also is the one who partakes of the divine meal accepted into the divine world. Thus not only has Lehi become one with the divine, he also symbolically becomes divine, a transformation that Alma emphasizes in his discourse on the tree of life. This assimilation into the true cosmos is revealed in Lehi’s desire for and attempts to help others taste of the fruit; through this action, Lehi becomes a creator himself. This progression does not seem to be explicitly repeated in the second sequence, but that does not necessarily mean it should not be implied. The similarities between each scene and the symbols within each scene can lead us to conclude that those who got to the tree and remained there in the second sequence also sought to help others reach the tree. Thus the dream tells of a creation in an ascending series of transformations: the physical state organized from chaotic matter, civilization from wilderness, and the ultimate transformation—that of the fallen, chaotic man into a fully realized, divine being.

The One and the Many

Though the reception and presentation of the dream fits into a specific, historical context and describes a certain worldview, the atemporal and ahistorical nature of the dream gives it significance beyond the immediate placement. In other words, the events transcend a specific time and place. While Lehi is the one who experiences the Creation, the symbolism is such that he is completely replaceable: anyone can be put into his situation and reenact the scene.¹⁷ In other words, since there is no specific time and space to the dream, the elements of the dream may be used in any space and time.¹⁸ The Exodus narrative, on the other hand, though it may share imagery with other narratives, is very much a historical incident; its power to define Israel is bound by the space and time of the event. Though others may borrow the Exodus narrative, because of its historicity it is primarily the narrative of a specific, chosen people.

Like the Exodus narrative, the dream narrative creates a group identity. However, because of its universal nature, the identity of the group it applies to is not necessarily bound by genetic or cultural affinities. Instead, the group is bound by the spiritual transformation described in the dream. It includes the group of people who have reached the tree, whoever they may be; thus the dream can be used to define disparate groups connected only by their journey through the dark wasteland. Moreover, the transformation and the coinciding new identity it affords are greater than those provided by any historical/

temporal narrative. This is because the individuals in the dream are not merely passive agents but also creative beings who bring about cosmos, no matter what chaos they may experience.¹⁹

The Dream Narrative in Later Book of Mormon Writings

The dream narrative was first used to define the Nephite experience in Nephi's own writings: "Having heard all the words of my father, concerning the things which he saw in a vision, . . . I, Nephi, was desirous also that I might see, and hear, and know of these things" (1 Nephi 10:17). Though Nephi will gain an understanding of his Father's dream and will see the same symbols, this does not mean he will experience it in the same manner. Unlike his father's version, Nephi's vision is very much temporally oriented. Relating the symbolic elements of the dream to the future history of his people and their relationship with Christ, it commences with Christ's birth, shows his theophany in the promised land, and concludes with the people's eventual apostasy and restoration. This is accomplished by providing a two-sequence structure in which instead of seeing one sequence followed by another, as in the case of Lehi, Nephi experiences both at the same time. In other words, while he interacts with the angel concerning the symbols of the first sequence, he sees the second sequence. For instance, the guide is present in the form of the angel, and Christ is connected with the iron rod in the historical parts of the vision.²⁰ In this manner, the dream becomes a historical narrative concerning Nephi's future descendants.

Yet, by the end of his writings, Nephi uses the dream narrative in its universal context (as it was used in his father's dream) rather than his own historical context as he discusses the doctrine of Christ. In 2 Nephi 31, he writes of entering the strait and narrow path, which, if followed, leads one to the Father's proclamation, "Ye shall have eternal life." Along the way, one must "press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope." The journey is a progressive one: "Wherefore, you must press forward, . . . feasting upon the word of Christ" (v. 20). In each of these stages, the dream narrative can be discerned. The path reflects the journey through mortality in which one endures to the end. One encounters the mists of darkness on this path, which would require a perfect brightness to be traversed. Finally, the iron rod, or the word of Christ, will lead to eventual communion with God, who will provide eternal life—the fruit of the tree of life.

The dream narrative continues in the writings of Nephi’s brother Jacob, who describes the actual, physical state of the Nephites as one like a dream in which they, like Lehi, were “wanderers . . . in a wilderness” (Jacob 7:26).

By the book of Mosiah, the dream narrative has become the primary narrative used to describe personal and social Nephite transformation. Alma the Younger, in particular, utilized the dream narrative to describe his personal transformation. In Mosiah 27, upon emerging from his comalike sleep, Alma speaks of being cast off and “wading through much tribulation . . . in the darkest abyss” until being brought to “the marvelous light of God” (vv. 28–9). Though the term “abyss” is not found in the dream narrative itself, its analogue (the river) is. Though Lehi does tell us that the river acts as a separating agent between the righteous and the wicked, Nephi’s account reveals that the river is a gulf representing the depths of hell. The association of depths and water are found in the Hebrew term *tehom* that is most often translated as “deep” and that is the primary term used for the precosmic ocean.²¹ The term “gulf” is an English word that originally meant a large body of water,²² and the term “abyss” is a Greek word denoting the cosmic sea. Thus Alma’s abyss is an analogue for the precosmic chaos represented also as the dark and dreary waste and the mists of darkness. Later, to his son Helaman, he again recounts the event, emphasizing the role of Christ in obtaining the light: “I remembered also to have heard my father prophesy unto the people concerning the coming of one Jesus Christ. . . . Now as my mind caught hold upon this thought, I cried within my heart: O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me, who am in the gall of bitterness. . . . And oh, what joy, and marvelous light I did behold. . . . Yea, and from that time even until now, I have labored without ceasing, . . . that I might bring them to taste of the exceeding joy of which I did taste” (Alma 36:17–18, 20, 24). One can readily notice the elements of the dream in both references, as demonstrated in the chart:

Lehi’s Dream	Alma’s Conversion
Dark and dreary waste/mists of darkness	“wading . . . in the darkest abyss”
Angelic guide/iron rod	“I remembered . . . the coming of one Jesus Christ”
	“as my mind caught hold upon this thought”

Lehi's Dream	Alma's Conversion
Lehi cries for God's mercy	"O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me"
Lehi partakes of the fruit of the tree of life	"taste of the exceeding joy of which I did taste"

The dream narrative also appears in Alma's missionary discourses. Beginning with his discourse to those in Zarahelma, Alma states, "My brethren, that belong to this church, have you sufficiently retained in remembrance the captivity of your fathers? . . . Have ye sufficiently retained in remembrance that he has delivered their souls from hell?" (Alma 5:6). Though the terminology is reminiscent of that expected in the Exodus narrative, Alma continues by answering these rhetorical questions using imagery from the dream narrative: "Behold, he changed their hearts. . . . Behold, they were in the midst of darkness; nevertheless their souls were illuminated by the light of the everlasting word" (v. 7). Later in the chapter, Alma invites them to come unto Christ and partake of the fruit of the tree of life, and he ends his discourse by reiterating the invitation, "Come and be baptized unto repentance, that ye also may be partakers of the fruit of the tree of life" (v. 62).²³ While it is clear that the dream narrative is being utilized, it may be even more important to note the manner in which the Exodus narrative is folded into the dream narrative, which now defines the Nephite experience.

Perhaps most familiar to the Book of Mormon reader is Alma's use of the dream in his message to the Zoramites. In Alma 32, while explaining to the inhabitants of Antionum the transforming power of the word of God, Alma compares the word to a seed that, if planted and nourished, will "take root; and behold it shall be a tree springing up unto everlasting life. . . . By and by, ye shall pluck the fruit thereof, which is most precious, which is sweet above all that is sweet, and which is white above all that is white; . . . and ye shall feast" (vv. 41–42).

Clearly, the language used to describe the fruit and tree reflects the imagery recorded in the dream as well as the ability for any and all to be able to eat of the fruit, an important message considering his audience. But Alma goes further. In his description of the narrative, the transformation is especially vivid—eating the fruit leads to becoming a tree of life: "Plant this word in your hearts. . . . And behold it will become a tree, springing up in you unto

everlasting life” (Alma 33:23). Though this image is not one found in the original narrative, it does fit the overall scheme of the narrative and suggests that the narrative changed from time to time to fit specific needs.

Both Alma and Ammon tie the Nephite experience of lacking a true land of inheritance to dream narrative imagery. Speaking to the Ammonihahites, Alma stated, “The voice of the Lord, by the mouth of angels doth declare it [the gospel] . . . because of our being wanderers in a strange land” (Alma 13:22–23), which is the same pattern established in the narrative with the wandering Lehi and the angelic guidance. While among the Lamanites, Ammon declared that God “is my life and light, my joy and my salvation, and my redemption from everlasting wo. . . . Blessed is the name of my God, . . . who has been mindful of us, wanderers in a strange land” (Alma 26:36), thereby recalling the same type of experience that Alma had iterated.²⁴

The sons of Mosiah use terminology from Lehi’s dream to describe their own transformation and the work they had been performing. In Alma 26, Ammon describes his conversion in the following manner: “Behold, he did not exercise his justice upon us, but in his great mercy hath brought us over that everlasting gulf of death and misery, even to the salvation of our souls” (v. 20). Earlier in Alma 26, Ammon, speaking to his brother Aaron, uses the same type of language to describe the Lamanites before their conversion: “Our brethren, the Lamanites, were in darkness, yea, even in the darkest abyss, but behold, how many of them are brought to behold the marvelous light of God! . . . Yea, they were encircled about with everlasting darkness and destruction; but behold he has brought them into his everlasting light” (Alma 26:3, 15). Ammon suggests that he and his brethren acted as the guides, or the iron rod: “Behold, how many thousands of our brethren has he loosed from the pains of hell; . . . and this because of the power of his word which is in us. . . . And we have been instruments in his hands of doing this great and marvelous work” (vv. 13, 15)

Ammon’s use of Lehi’s dream may explain why Mormon, while editing the account, also used dream imagery to describe Lamoni’s conversion: “The cloud of darkness [was] dispelled, and . . . the light of everlasting life was lit up in his soul” (Alma 19:6).

Mormon also uses Lehi’s dream imagery to describe the missionary labors of Helaman and his two sons, Lehi and Nephi, about seventy years later: “Yea, we see that whosoever will may lay hold upon the word of God, which is

quick and powerful, which shall divide asunder all the cunning and the snares and the wiles of the devil, and lead the man of Christ in a strait and narrow course across that everlasting gulf of misery” (Helaman 3:29).²⁵

Like Alma’s use of the dream narrative when speaking to the Zoramites, this reference also suggests that the narrative was changed at times to fit certain events. Though the iron rod in the original dream narrative may imply the concept of the divine warrior (as found in the older Creation narrative), this reading is not explicit. However, here in Helaman 3, Mormon describes the dream narrative in terms that reflect martial behavior. The word of God is explicitly a weapon, and the mists of darkness are now the tools of an adversary who seeks one’s destruction.

Yet perhaps one of the most explicit uses of Lehi’s dream narrative is in the conversion of the Lamanites as recorded in Helaman 5. There, according to the text, following the imprisonment of Nephi and Lehi, the Lamanites were “overshadowed with a cloud of darkness” (v. 28). In the darkness, a voice provided the way for deliverance. Following his instruction, the Lamanites prayed and were “filled with that joy which is unspeakable and full of glory” (v. 44). On a historical level, having achieved this state of cosmos, the Lamanites ceased aggression against the Nephites, the converted went out and transformed other Lamanites, and eventually the whole society was changed. At this point they ended hostilities and gave back all conquered territories still in their possession. Moreover, from this point on, there was no more Nephite-Lamanite aggression; for the next 260 years, all conflict centered on secret societies versus everyone else. Thus one of the most important historical turning points for both the Nephites and the Lamanites is described using Lehi’s dream narrative.

Christ’s Theophany

In light of the manner in which the dream narrative is found throughout the Book of Mormon, it is not surprising to find the narrative hinted at in the texts describing the events leading up to and including Christ’s theophany to the New World, especially as the promise of his visit defines the Nephite experience as much as the dream. From as early as Lehi to just a few years preceding the event, the future visitation by Christ had been prophesied of by almost every prophet in the Book of Mormon. It was the focal point of Nephite spirituality and provided a cultural identity for the Nephites, acting as an anchor to the general Nephite malaise of feeling cut off, isolated, and

abandoned. As the table demonstrates, the overall atmosphere of the dream and the actual Nephite experience culminate in the theophany of Christ.

Element of Lehi’s Dream Narrative	Events of Christ’s Theophany
Dark and dreary wasteland/mists of darkness	Earth completely redone; mists of darkness
Iron rod/angelic guide	Christ’s arm is stretched out still Christ is the Word of God “They saw a Man . . . and he was clothed in a white robe” Voice of God
Tree of life	Glorious arrival of Christ at temple His declaration as “the light and life of the world”
Partaking of the fruit/experiencing true cosmos	All touch Christ one by one All partake of the sacrament
Become a guide for others	Spend the night finding and delivering message to others

Scene 1: The destruction. This synthesis begins with a wasted landscape. According to 3 Nephi 8, “there arose a great storm, such an one as never had been known in all the land” (v. 5). The storm prefigured an entire list of physical phenomena—earthquakes, tempests, fire, and raging seas, which completely reconfigured the landscape. Immediately following the storm, the text describes a “thick darkness upon all the face of the land,” adding that “the inhabitants thereof who had not fallen could feel the vapor of darkness; and there could be no light, because of the darkness, neither candles, neither torches; neither could their be fire kindled with their fine and exceedingly dry wood, so that there could not be any light at all” (vv. 20–21).

While many have provided scientific, geological explanations of the nature of the darkness, Mormon simply describes the phenomenon in the following manner: “There was not any light seen, neither fire, nor glimmer, neither the sun, nor the moon, nor the stars, for so great were the mists of darkness, which were upon the land” (v. 22).²⁶ This description is similar to that which Nephi himself wrote to describe the same event: “I saw a mist of

darkness on the face of the land of promise” (1 Nephi 12:4), and the presence of these physical mists was related to the spiritual state of the Nephites.

In 3 Nephi 9:2, Christ laments the destruction of the Nephites and relates their destruction to their spiritual state: “Because of their iniquity and abominations . . . they are fallen!” This same relationship between their spiritual state and their experience with the mists of darkness was emphasized at least twice in Nephi’s vision. First, in 1 Nephi 12:2 the description of physical devastation is preceded by a description of the Nephite sinful state in which “the multitudes gathered together to battle.” The wars, rumors of wars, and “great slaughters with the sword” (v. 2) represent on a cultural level the chaos that the mists of darkness and other phenomena represent on physical level.²⁷ Later, when witnessing the destruction of his people following Christ’s arrival, the angel defines the mists for Nephi as “the temptations of the devil, which blindeth the eyes, and hardeneth the hearts of the children of men and leadeth them away into broad roads, that they perish and are lost” (v. 17), suggesting that the result of the Nephites’ getting lost in the mists of darkness is their final destruction.²⁸

Christ continues to associate the actual mists with the spiritual state of the Nephites. According to 3 Nephi 9:7, 12, the cities were destroyed “to hide their wickedness and abominations from before my face, that the blood of the prophets and the saints shall not come up any more unto me against them. . . . And many great destructions have I caused to come upon this land, and upon this people, because of their wickedness and their abominations.” Even those who were spared in the destruction were in a sinful place: “O all ye that are spared because ye were more righteous than they, will ye not now return unto me, and repent of your sins?” (v. 13). Of course, the physical darkness is not actually sin and temptation, but the literal manifestation of precosmic chaos. Physical darkness is the Nephite symbol for the chaotic nature of sin that restrains us from becoming the creation we are meant to be.²⁹ Yet, because the mists are also associated with chaos, their presence hints at restoration, at a new creation. In other words, those things that are lost can be found and made anew.

Scene 2: “Mine arm of mercy is extended towards you.” According to the text, the central feature experienced by those who were encompassed by the darkness, besides the ongoing destruction, was the manifestation of Christ’s voice. In this, the symbolism inherent in the iron rod and its analogue, the

divine guide, is exemplified by Christ himself. To understand how comforting the voice would have been, we must recognize the soundscape that surrounded the people. According to the text, for the three days in which the darkness was present, the earth continued to be torn apart, creating “groanings” and “tumultuous noises” (3 Nephi 10:9). These, coupled with the wailing of the survivors, would have created an eerie, frightening experience for everyone. Thus the voice of Christ would have acted as a lifeline, something by which the people could retain their sanity. Among the messages the voice delivered was the following invitation: “Yea, verily I say unto you, if ye will come unto me ye shall have eternal life. Behold mine arm of mercy is extended towards you, and whosoever will come, him will I receive” (3 Nephi 9:14).

The image of the extended arm of God is one found throughout the Old Testament; it is most commonly associated with the power of God to deliver Israel from Egypt and is thus a symbol of the Exodus narrative.³⁰ This image does show up in the Book of Mormon, but the martial elements of it are nonexistent. Instead the qualifier “of mercy” is added, changing the image from a violent one to one reflecting the dream narrative.³¹ Alma’s invitation at the end of Alma 5 is a good example of this: “Behold, he sendeth an invitation unto all men, for the arms of mercy are extended towards them, and he saith: Repent, and I will receive you. Yea, he saith: Come unto me and ye shall partake of the fruit of the tree of life” (Alma 5:33–34). Use of the term *extended* here and in Christ’s invitation of 3 Nephi 9 echoes use of the verb *extended* in relation to the iron rod (see 1 Nephi 8:19). In the dream, the purpose of the rod and its analogue, the divine messenger, was to act as a guide to reaching the tree. In the invitations above, it is Christ’s arms that represent the guide leading to the tree. The image of the extended arm can be found in Lehi’s dream as well.

According to 1 Nephi 8:15, after partaking of the fruit, Lehi sees his family and beckons to them, saying “that they should come unto me, and partake of the fruit.” Though technically this reference falls with the third scene of the dream rather than the second, the imagery is still relevant because in this third scene transformation the guided becomes a guide. Thus the angelic guide leads Lehi to the tree, and Lehi in turn becomes a guide, extending his arm to others so that they can come unto the tree. Back in 3 Nephi, the image of God’s extended arms of mercy is reinforced when he actually appears: “And

it came to pass that he stretched forth his hand and spake unto the people . . ." (3 Nephi 11:9). In both cases, Christ is the iron rod that leads to the tree.

There in the darkness, Christ also declares that he is "Jesus Christ the Son of God. I created the heavens and the earth . . ." With this statement, the chaotic environment, characterized by the darkness itself, is put into a context of a coming creation. Thus, like the angelic guide, Christ's voice leads the people to a new creation, thereby giving the whole experience meaning by replacing the fear with the knowledge that Christ, the Creator, was at work. This in turn would have provided an assurance that they would survive this and in fact become something more than what they were before. This declaration, coupled with his earlier invitation, depicts Christ holding out the iron rod—a creative action. Coming unto Christ is a creative endeavor; one enters into his presence and experiences a cosmos.

Following these declarations, Christ then relates his invitation to a group that had accepted it earlier: "And whoso cometh unto me with a broken heart and a contrite spirit, him will I baptize with fire and the Holy Ghost, even as the Lamanites because of their faith in me at the time of their conversion" (v. 20). Of course, this conversion is the Lamanite experience described in Helaman 5, which followed the dream narrative. According to the Helaman text, the Lamanites experienced physical upheaval (a symbolic return to the pre-creation state) in the form of earthquakes leading to an overwhelming cloud of darkness that paralyzed them. In this state, they received divine assistance in the form of the guide Aminadab and experienced the indescribable joy of union with God. So far this is the exact same pattern the survivors follow. Christ's allusion to the Lamanite experience not only gives the survivors further assurances as to how everything will play out, but also suggests that Christ himself is well aware of the narrative and is using it accordingly to provide peace to the frightened, isolated people in the dark. In the process, he demonstrates why Nephi can insist that the iron rod is the Word of God.³²

Scene 3: "Hold up your light." The final scene of the dream narrative is of union with the tree of life and becoming a force of creation ourselves. In 3 Nephi this culminates in the descriptions of Christ prior to his arrival (his actual arrival) and in the ordinance he establishes at the end of the first day. The setting of Christ's theophany at the temple in Bountiful suggests that he is to be understood as the tree of life. As we saw above, there was an association between the images of the dream and the Garden of Eden, which is

where the final organizing events of the creation took place and a completed cosmos was finished. The Garden of Eden has been recognized as a temple prototype, the tree of life playing an integral role in both the spatial meaning of the temple and in the ritualized behavior of those attending.³³ Christ (as a tree of life) appearing at the temple would have corresponded to the tree of life residing in the field (the representation of the Garden of Eden).

The association is highlighted in Christ’s own description of himself as “the light and the life of the world” (3 Nephi 9:18). Christ will make this same declaration again in 3 Nephi 11 as part of his physical introduction to the people: “I am the light and life of the world” (v. 11).³⁴ The association of the light emerging from the darkness and the tree of life was discussed earlier. The tree must be understood as the source of light, yet in Christ’s theophany this understanding is enhanced by recognizing the relationship between the dream and the condescension of God as taught to Nephi.

In 1 Nephi 11, a series of images connecting the tree to Christ begins in verse 8 as the tree of life is described as exceedingly white, followed by a description of Mary as “exceedingly fair and white” (v. 13).³⁵ At this point, Nephi’s divine guide begins to ask him a series of questions that will connect the image of the tree of life to the doctrine of the condescension of God. This series of exchanges between Nephi and the angel suggests that Nephi is to understand that the tree is a symbol of the condescension of God and that the condescension is represented in Christ as the Redeemer; thus the tree represents Christ. This meaning is then reiterated in the historical portion of the vision recorded in chapter 12, as Nephi observes the multitude of Nephites experiencing the mists of darkness and then witnessing the literal condescension of Christ: “And I saw the heavens open, and the Lamb of God descending out of heaven” (1 Nephi 12:6). Later, Alma explicitly ties the clause “light of the world” to Christ. Recounting to his second son his experience in the “darkest abyss” and his subsequent redemption, Alma declares, “Behold, he is the life and the light of the world” (Alma 38:9).

The connection of Christ to the tree of life finds its ultimate meaning in the ordinances that open and close Christ’s first-day ministry. Following his arrival and introduction, Christ invites all present, “Arise and come forth unto me, that ye may thrust your hands into my side, and also that ye may feel the prints of the nails in my hands and in my feet” (3 Nephi 11:14). The tactile experience, which probably lasted for hours, would have left an indelible

impression on those present and would have been seen as the fulfillment of his invitation made earlier in the darkness, “If ye will come unto me ye shall have eternal life.”³⁶ This would have been reinforced by the institution of and partaking of the sacrament established at the end of the day, in which the people literally partook of a meal provided by the tree of life. Just as one eats the fruit of the tree, so in the sacrament one partakes of the flesh and blood of Christ.³⁷

Yet perhaps one of the most important elements of the dream narrative is the transformation following the partaking of the fruit, in which partakers become a source of the fruit themselves. This is demonstrated powerfully in 3 Nephi 17 and 18. According to the text, following Christ’s ministrations to all the sick and then the children, the multitude experiences the joy associated with the fruit of the tree of life: “And no one can conceive of the joy which filled our souls at the time we heard him pray for us unto the father” (3 Nephi 17:17). This is followed by the blessing and encircling of their children with angels: “And he spake unto the multitude, and said unto them: Behold your little ones. . . . And they saw the heavens open, and they saw angels descending out of heaven . . . ; and they came down and encircled those little ones about, and they were encircled about with fire” (vv. 23–24).³⁸ Following this miraculous event, Christ then exhorts the multitude to reflect on their own transformation: “I am the light; I have set an example for you. . . . Therefore, hold up your light that it may shine unto the world. Behold I am the light which ye shall hold up. . . . And ye see that I have commanded that none of you should away, but rather have commanded that ye should come unto me, that ye might feel and see; even so shall ye do unto the world” (3 Nephi 18:16, 24–25).

That this exhortation follows the giving of the sacrament and alludes back to the earlier ordinance only strengthens the final scene of the dream narrative—by partaking of the tree we too can become sources of transformation by extending our arms and holding up the light so that others may attain the tree as well.

The people immediately act on this lesson by doing exactly what Lehi did after partaking of the tree: “And it was noised abroad among the people immediately, before it was yet dark. . . . Yea, and even all the night it was noised abroad concerning Jesus; and insomuch did they send forth unto the people that there were many, yea, an exceedingly great number, did labor exceedingly all that night, that they might be on the morrow in the place where Jesus

should show himself to the multitude” (3 Nephi 19:2–3). In this, the narrative is once again used to describe the Nephite experience: the journey through the darkness, the divine guide (this time represented by the people themselves) and the communion with the tree of life when Christ miraculously provides the sacrament for those who have gathered the next day.³⁹

Conclusion

The three scenes that make up Lehi’s dream, used again and again in the Book of Mormon to describe the Nephite experience, become in 3 Nephi a template to help the lost Israelites to understand and relate to Christ’s theophany. Lehi’s dream, as the Nephite cultural narrative, defined in a symbolic manner their unique experience. Recognizing the use of Lehi’s dream and how it was referred to elsewhere in the Book of Mormon is a valuable exercise. On one level, it gives us a better understanding of the culture and context of the Book of Mormon people. Yet, because the book was edited with our contemporary experience in mind, Lehi’s dream becomes more than a Nephite cultural narrative; it becomes one that can be utilized by anyone. Its message to those who feel lost and alone is as applicable today as it was then. The transformation promised in the narrative is as real today as it was for the Nephites, and it is in this recognition of the power of Lehi’s dream narrative that it reaches full bloom, and, like the tree of life itself, “sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men” (1 Nephi 11:22), even for readers 2,600 years removed.

Notes

This is a reworking of a paper presented at 2008 Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship conference, in Provo, UT, “The Savior’s Three-day Ministry among the Nephites,” and will be published in a forthcoming volume of the same conference.

1. Credit must be given to Bruce W. Jorgensen, who approached the dream as a narrative from a literary perspective rather than a sociological/cultural one. See Bruce W. Jorgensen, “Reading the Book of Mormon as Typological Narrative,” in *the Second Annual Church Educational System Religious Educators’ Symposium on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1978), 64–70; see also Bruce W. Jorgensen, “The Dark Way to the Tree: Typological Unity in the Book of Mormon,” in *Literature of Belief: Sacred Scripture and Religious Experience*, ed. Neal A. Lambert (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1981), 217–31. More recently, Richard Dilworth Rust has used similar literary approaches

to explore themes within the Book of Mormon in *Feasting on the Word: the Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997).

2. Paul G Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerAcademic, 2008), 67: “[Narratives] tell people about the community to which they belong, their place in it, and the moral order of the society. To be a part of a people is to be a part of their story.”

3. For more on narrative as form of social identity, see Stephen Cornell, “That’s the Story of Our Life,” in *We Are a People: Narrative and Multiplicity in Constructing Ethnic Identity*, ed. Paul Spickard and W. Jeffrey Burroughs (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 41–53, 42: “When people take on, create, or assign an ethnic identity, part of what they do—intentionally or not—is to take on, create, or assign a story, a narrative of some sort that captures central understandings about what it means to be a member of the group.” For a study on the US narrative as reflected in its art, see Michael Kammen, *Meadows of Memory: Images of Time and Tradition in American Art and Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), xx, quoting Joshua Taylor: “The emphatic protestation [by artists] of being purely American is the proclamation of a social attitude, not a description of style. That the artist wished to feel himself different from his European colleagues is of sociological importance.” See also *From Generation to Generation: Maintaining Cultural Identity Over Time*, ed. Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2006), which describes ways in which different cultures have sought to maintain their identity through their native narratives while integrating into the greater US narrative.

4. The biblical creation narrative describes a creation process in which God took unorganized matter, which the Greeks called *chaos*, symbolically represented as a watery abyss or sea, and organized it (shaped or formed it) into the physical cosmos. Building upon this imagery, many biblical writers personified these waters, thus making the creation narrative a battle between God the Creator and the chaos monster. Because the basic theme of the Creation narrative describes a transformation from a chaotic state to a cosmic one, it can be used to describe specific historical or cultural events. Concepts such as death, the enemy, and the wilderness can all be on a continuum representing chaos, while the city, your people, and your land can represent a state of cosmos or organization. One’s emergence into a new territory then can be a creation event. In this manner, the dichotomy provided in the narrative becomes a paradigm in which not only history but contemporary events can be understood. For more on the Exodus narrative as a representation of the cosmic battle between God and chaos, see Bernard F. Batto, *Slaying the Dragon: Mythmaking in the Biblical Tradition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 113, 119: “In a series of spectacular battles Yahweh overwhelms and finally defeats Pharaoh-Egypt in the midst of the sea. Through this same battle Israel emerges from out of the midst of the defeated enemy as God’s newly fashioned people, the final ‘work’ of the Creator who brings forth life out of the midst of the unruly sea. . . . In the second act of creation Yahweh went on to found his people Israel as his covenanted people and establish his ‘resting place’—the place from which he rules the cosmos—in their midst. . . . The exodus, no less than the creation in Genesis, is an ‘event’ of cosmic proportions, a story of origins through which the cosmic order is established

and actualized.” The relationship between the creation account and the deliverance of Israel is also explored in Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 87–88: “The overthrow of the Egyptian host in the sea is singled out to symbolize Israel’s deliverance, Yahweh’s victory. Later, an equation is fully drawn between the ‘drying up of the sea’ and the Creator’s defeat of Rahab or Yamm (Isaiah 51:9–11); the historical event is thereby given cosmic or primordial meaning. . . . It is highly likely that the role of the sea in the Exodus story was singled out and stressed precisely because of the ubiquitous motif of the cosmogonic battle between the creator god and the sea.”

5. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 67: “The exodus in the Old Testament is both history and myth. Historically it happened. Mythologically it became the story the Israelites used to interpret history. Whenever they were in trouble, they looked back to the exodus.”

6. See E. Theodore Mullen Jr., *Ethnic Myths and Pentateuchal Foundations: A New Approach to the Formation of the Pentateuch* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1997). The continuity of this narrative across millennia can be seen in mediums as diverse as *Seinfeld* and the Passover. For an excellent example of the narrative still contributing to the way in which contemporary Jewish experience is perceived, see Liora Gubkin, *You Shall Tell Your Children: Holocaust Memory in American Passover Ritual* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007).

7. Bruce J. Boehm, “Wanderers in the Promised Land: A Study of the Exodus Motif in the Book of Mormon and the Bible,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 186–202; Mark J. Johnson, “The Exodus of Lehi Revisited,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3, no. 2 (Fall 1994): 123–26; George S. Tate, “The Typology of the Exodus Pattern in the Book of Mormon,” in *Literature of Belief*, ed. Neal E. Lambert (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1978); Terrence L. Szink, “Nephi and the Exodus,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1991), 38–51; S. Kent Brown, “The Exodus: Seeing It as a Test, a Testimony, and a Type,” *Ensign*, February 1990, 54–57; S. Kent Brown, “The Exodus Pattern in the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 30, no. 3 (1990): 111–26; and “Nephi and the Exodus,” *Ensign*, April 1987, 64–65.

8. The Book of Mormon does record at least one attempt at returning and restoring an older land of inheritance, but the experiment failed spectacularly. In the book of Mosiah, the reader is told of two attempts made by a group of Nephites to reclaim the land of Nephi. The first fails before they even get there. The second accomplishes a temporary establishment, but by the third generation the descendants are forced to return to the land of Zarahemla. Thus it would seem that any Exodus-like tradition cannot be found in the Book of Mormon.

9. The English terms *wilderness* and *waste* were used to describe that which was uncultivated. This is reflected in Joseph Smith’s translation of Genesis 1:2, “without form and void” as “empty and desolate.” See “wilderness” and “waste” in *Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. XX and XIX respectively (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 335 and 959.

10. We are not told who this guide is. Similarly, we do not know who Nephi’s divine mentor was either. With that said, some have suggested that it was the Holy

Ghost, perhaps even Christ himself. See Sidney B. Sperry, *Answers to Book of Mormon Questions* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1964), 29–30.

11. See Hugh Nibley, “Ezekiel 37:15–23 as Evidence for the Book of Mormon,” in *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1988), 311–28; John A. Tvedtnes, “Rod and Sword as the Word of God,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5, no. 2 (1996): 148–55. Both Nibley and Tvedtnes discuss the rod as staff/weapon.

12. The tree of life as a symbol of the unified cosmos has long been recognized. See E. O. James, *The Tree of Life: An Archaeological Study*, vol. 11, *Studies in the History of Religions* (Leiden: Brill, 1966). For a pictorial study on the universal belief of the tree of life, see Roger Cook, *The Tree of Life: Image for the Cosmos* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1974). For more on the menorah as a symbol for the tree of life, see Carol L. Meyers, *The Tabernacle Menorah*, vol. 2, *American Schools of Oriental Research Dissertation Series* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1976), 143–44.

13. According to Nephi, the tree is associated with the “fountain of the living waters.” Contrary to the modern conception of *fountain*, the term has the primary meaning of “a source of water.” See *Oxford English Dictionary*, “fountain.” Both the tree of life and the source of living waters are found in the Garden of Eden, which, according to Ezekiel 28:13–14, is itself understood to be “the holy mountain of God.”

14. E. N. Anderson, *Everyone Eats: Understanding Food and Culture* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2005), 125: “Food as communication finds most its applications in the process of defining one’s individuality and one’s place in society.” See also Susan Pollock, “Feast, Funerals, and Fast Food in Early Mesopotamian States,” in *The Archaeology and Politics of Food and Feasting in Early States and Empires*, ed. Tamara L. Bray (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers), 17–19: “The ways that food and drink are prepared, presented, and consumed contribute to the construction and communication of social relations, ranging from the most intimate and egalitarian to the socially distant and hierarchical.” See also Michael Dietler, “Feasts and Commensal Politics in the Political Economy,” in *Food and the Status Quest*, ed. Polly Wiessner and Wulf Schiefelhövel (Providence, Oxford: Bergahn Books), 87–126, 89: “Feasts are, in fact, ritualized social events in which food and drink constitute the medium of expression in the performance of what Cohen has called ‘politico-symbolic drama.’ As public ritual events, in contrast to daily activity, feasts provide an arena for the highly condensed symbolic representation of social relations.”

15. Joan M. Gero, “The Practice of Stately Manners,” in *Archaeology and Politics of Food and Feasting*, 285–87: “Feasts present a unique occasion to celebrate together and experience a commonality, all the while asserting the distinctions of social identity that are increasingly dividing the commonality. Feasts provide common social experiential references in time and space for an increasingly dispersed, segmented, and hierarchically arranged social body. Feasts create and intensify the microcosm of social and political and economic complexity that agriculturalists, producers, kin, and neighbors must grow accustomed to under conditions of intensifying social complexity and power consolidations. One gets used to what it means to be a citizen.”

16. See Hallvard Hagelia, “Meal on Mount Zion—Does Isa 25:6–8 Describe a Covenant Meal?,” *Svensk exegetisk arskbok* 68 (2003), 73–95; David Elgavish,

“The Encounter of Abram and Melchizedek King of Salem: a covenant establishing ceremony,” in *Studies in the Book of Genesis: Literature, Redaction, and History*, ed. A. Wénin (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters; Sterling, VA: University Press, 2001), 495–508; also Kathryn L. Roberts, “God, Prophet, and King: Eating and Drinking on the Mountain in First Kings 18:41,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 62, no. 4 (2000), 632–44. Henrietta Lovejoy Wiley, “Gather to My Feast: YHWH as Sacrificer in the Biblical Prophets” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2004); Robert C. Stallman, “Divine Hospitality in the Pentateuch: A Metaphorical Perspective on God as Host” (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1999).

17. This has been recognized most thoroughly by Charles L. Swift in his dissertation, “‘I Have Dreamed a Dream’: Typological Images of Teaching and Learning In the Vision of the Tree of Life” (PhD diss., Brigham Young University, 2003), in which the archetypal nature of the dream’s symbols are discussed. For a study that approaches the archetypal nature from Joseph Campbell’s hero paradigm, see Tod R. Harris, “The Journey of the Hero: Archetypes of Earthly Adventure and Spiritual Passage in 1 Nephi,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6, no. 2 (1997): 43–66.

18. See Charles L. Swift, “Lehi’s Vision of the Tree of Life: Understanding the Dream as Visionary Literature,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14, no. 2 (2005), 53–63, for more on the atemporal, ahistorical nature of the dream; see also Mark Thomas, “Lehi’s Dream: An American Apocalypse,” in *Fourth Annual Symposium of the Association for Mormon Letters* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1979).

19. It is possible that this dream provides a missionary opportunity among non-Israelites when the family of Lehi establish themselves in the promised land. The dream’s inclusive nature allows for those not of Lehi’s own cultural or biological upbringing to become a part of the chosen. Whether or not this is the case cannot be established firmly from the Book of Mormon.

20. The vision itself appears to be made up of four sections. The first is a pre-visionary interaction, which includes Nephi’s worthiness interview and the instructions, comprising verses 1–7 of chapter 11. In the second section, Nephi is shown symbolic images of the dream and given an explanation. He then is shown the history of his people and more symbolism is explained, but only after the historical content has been seen. Finally, he is shown the apocalyptic vision including the last days. In this section, no dream symbolism is overtly explained, though dream terminology is still utilized. Following these four stages, we can see that Nephi is repeating the dream in three successive stages of the visionary history and that by the end he is expected to find the connections between history and the symbolism. The dream as template to the sections of the vision is overt in the beginning but becomes more subtle as the vision progresses. Thus Nephi is taught how to apply the elements of the dream to the history. For more on the relationship between Nephi’s vision and Lehi’s dream, see Corbin T. Volluz, “Lehi’s Dream of the Tree of Life: Springboard to Prophecy,” in *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 2 (1993): 14–38.

21. E. J. Waschke, “מורה,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 15:574–81.

22. *Oxford English Dictionary*, “gulf.”

23. Interestingly, this group apparently was made up of converts: “And behold, he [Alma the Elder] preached the word unto your fathers, and a mighty change was also

wrought in their hearts,” which would demonstrate the universality of the dream for all and any who would become “Nephite.”

24. This declaration may also be referring to his experiences among the Lamanites. But whether he is speaking to the overall Nephite experience, like Alma, or his own personal journey among the Lamanites, the meaning is the same. As Ammon suggested earlier in the book, he is not planning on going home. That he and his brothers do so is beside the point. According to his own words, he was not expecting to do so and thus his words in this particular text reflect more closely the larger Nephite theme of creation, not restoration.

25. Interestingly, in this text the preposition *across* creates a different imaginative landscape for the dream’s setting. Instead of lying next to the path, the gulf is placed in front of the travelers and they must go across the gulf to get to the destination. Thus the description of the path as the “strait” fits in this particular instance with the setting and fits the overall creation landscape, with the cosmos in the center and the chaos surrounding.

26. See John Gee, “Another Note on the Three Days of Darkness,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6, no. 2 (1997), 235–44, for the most recent discussion on this topic and for a list of related studies prior to his own.

27. The first six verses of 1 Nephi 12, as a whole, reflect the dream narrative in its historical context. Beginning in verse 1, Nephi sees “multitudes of people, yea, even as it were in number as many as the sands of the sea,” which correspond to the numberless concourses of people that open up the second sequence of the original dream. Nephi then sees the multitude experience both the spiritual mists of darkness, as noted in the continual warfare and the actual mists: “a mist of darkness, the vapor of darkness” (vv. 4–5). This is followed in verse 6 by the condescension of Christ: “And I saw the heavens open, and the Lamb of God descending out of heaven,” which, in the earlier part of the vision, is equated with the tree of life.

28. At least two references by Moroni suggest the dream narrative was at work even after the final destruction. In Mormon 8:16, speaking of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, Moroni writes, “And blessed be he that shall bring this thing to light; for it shall be brought out of darkness unto light, according to the word of God; . . . and it shall shine forth out of the darkness.” In Mormon 9:6, Mormon speaks of the transformation made possible through Christ to a state in which one is “pure, fair, and white,” reminiscent of the terms used to describe the tree of life, Mary, and those who were transformed following Christ’s arrival in the New World.

29. It appears that the physical mists themselves were also among the causes of death and loss: “And they were spared and were not sunk and buried up in earth; and they were not drowned in the depths of the sea; and they were not burned by fire, neither were they fallen upon and crushed to death; and they were not carried away in the whirlwind; neither were they overpowered by the vapor of smoke and darkness” (3 Nephi 10:13).

30. For example, see Exodus 3:20; 6:6; 7:5; Deuteronomy 4:34; 5:15; 7:19; 9:29; 1 Kings 8:42; 2 Kings 17:36; Jeremiah 32:21; Ezekiel 20:34. Other references use the term to refer to God’s destroying power over the nations, including Israel (see Isaiah 5:25; 9:17, 21; Jeremiah 6:12; 51:25; Ezekiel 25:7; 13, 16).

31. Jacob 6:5: “Repent, and come with full purpose of heart. . . . His arm is extended towards you”; Mosiah 16:12: “having never called upon the Lord while the arms of mercy

were extended towards them”; and Alma 19:36: “his arm is extended to all people who will repent and believe on his name.”

32. See Matthew L. Bowen, “What Meaneth the Iron Rod?” *Insights* 25, no. 2 (2005): 2–3, in which he compares the Hebrew term for rod with the Egyptian term for word.

33. For more on the Garden of Eden, see Donald W. Parry, “Garden of Eden: Prototype Sanctuary,” in *Temples of the Ancient World: Ritual and Symbolism*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1994), 126–48.

34. Christ’s two statements, and their placement within the sequence of events described in 3 Nephi, seem to highlight the atemporal nature of the dream narrative. No time frame is provided by Mormon between the lifting of the darkness and the arrival of Christ, though this has not stopped many from trying to establish the chronology. Yet it may be that the omission is deliberate. It is clear that Mormon can provide very specific information on times and dates, but he chooses not to do so here, perhaps highlighting the symbolic nature of the events rather than the literal, sequential elements. Thus the text emphasizes that Christ’s coming is to be associated with the emergence of light into the New World (the chaos giving way to a new cosmos) and is not so concerned with the details of when. In this case, the symbolic represents the reality better than the actual, literal history does.

35. For more on the relationship between the Marian scene and the image of the tree of life, see Daniel C. Peterson, “Nephi and his Asherah: A Note of 1 Nephi 11:8–23,” in *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World: Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson*, ed. Davis Bitton (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1989), 191–243.

36. See *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph*, ed. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Salt Lake City: Grandin, 1991), 120: “No one can truly say he knows God until he has handled something, and this can only be in the Holiest of Holies.”

37. This relationship may have been intimated in 1 Nephi 11, when Nephi learns that the tree of life is “the love of God that sheddeth itself . . .” The similarity between this language and that of the sacramental prayer: “and ye shall do it in remembrance of my blood, which was shed for you . . .” is striking.

38. This scene seems to be an instruction to the meaning of Christ’s earlier words, in which he stated that we need to be like little children. See M. Gawain Wells, “The Savior and the Children in 3 Nephi 17,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14, no. 1 (2005): 62–73.

39. Interestingly, in the account of the second day is the following description of the transformation of the disciples: “They did pray unto him; . . . and behold they were as white as the countenance and also the garments of Jesus; and behold the whiteness thereof did exceed all the whiteness, yea, even there could be nothing on earth so white as the whiteness thereof” (3 Nephi 19:25).