

Lehi Dreamed a Dream: The Report of Lehi's Dream in Its Biblical Context

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“Behold, I have dreamed a dream,” Lehi announced to his family one morning in the valley of Lemuel in northwestern Arabia (1 Nephi 8:2; see also 9:1; 10:16). This dream and its subsequent interpretation (given in vision to Nephi) provide a powerful Christ-centered foundation for the whole Book of Mormon.¹ Of course, Lehi’s dream of his family, a tree, and its fruit was not the first revelatory dream he had received. Nephi indicates that his father, Lehi, had written an account of his own prophetic ministry that included “many things which he saw in visions and in dreams” (1 Nephi 1:16). The Lord had already communicated his will to Lehi through dreams on such important points as the command to leave Jerusalem (see 1 Nephi 2:1–2)² and to have his sons return to Jerusalem to retrieve the scripture record on the brass plates (see 1 Nephi 3:2). However, we do not have reports of these dreams, only references to them.

The account of Lehi’s dream in 1 Nephi 8 has great significance in the Book of Mormon as a whole due to its length and detail, its warning about the spiritual status of Lehi’s family, and its focus on the beauty and power

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of Christ's Atonement. These features, combined with this dream's prominent location early in the Book of Mormon, raise intriguing questions about dreams and revelation. Is it significant that this major revelation came to Lehi in a dream? Were dreams a legitimate and frequent means of revelation in ancient Israel? Is the report of Lehi's dream in 1 Nephi 8 similar to reports of revelatory dreams in the Bible? If so, how can understanding biblical dream reports help us better appreciate the account of Lehi's dream, his family's reactions to it, and the role it plays in the greater whole of the Book of Mormon?

Surprising as it may seem, such questions have not been discussed in previous Latter-day Saint studies on the report of Lehi's dream. Besides providing general commentary on Lehi's dream in 1 Nephi 8,³ authors have studied it from a literary perspective,⁴ emphasized the doctrinal aspects of its symbolism,⁵ and tried to connect the symbolism with Arabian desert traditions⁶ and even ancient Egyptian symbolism.⁷ However, I am unaware of any analysis of Lehi's dream in the context of biblical and other ancient Near Eastern dream reports (the Near East is essentially the same region as the Middle East), although Lehi and his family had lived in the vicinity of Jerusalem and were presumably familiar with revelatory dream reports in their biblical tradition as well as inspired dreams claimed by their Israelite contemporaries.

My thesis is that understanding the scriptural and cultural context of Israelite dream reports and interpretations as preserved in the Bible provides a richer and more insightful understanding of Lehi's dream (and his son Nephi's corollary interpretive vision), both by way of general background as well as specific insights. To demonstrate this, I provide introductory comments on the report of Lehi's dream, a general introduction to dream reports and interpretations in ancient Near Eastern texts, and a review of the biblical accounts of dreams, followed by an analysis of the report of Lehi's dream in its biblical context. (Space constraints do not allow for a specific, focused analysis of Nephi's report of his vision in this paper.)

Preliminary Considerations regarding the Report of Lehi's Dream

The following four general observations on Nephi's report of Lehi's dream highlight important considerations for this study.

1. *The source of our information.* We are entirely dependent on what Nephi included on his small set of plates for the report of Lehi's dream in 1 Nephi 8. Nephi's report of his father's dream is presented as what Lehi shared with his

family after he experienced his dream (see 1 Nephi 8:2; 9:1). Beyond Nephi's mere memory of that occasion, he presumably retrieved information when writing his account from his father's written record, from what he (Nephi) had already transferred from his father's record to his large set of plates, or from both (see 1 Nephi 1:17; 19:1–2).⁸ Recall that Nephi made his large set of plates about ten years after leaving Jerusalem (see 1 Nephi 19:1–2) but did not make his smaller plates, from which we get 1 Nephi, until about thirty years after his family left Jerusalem (see 2 Nephi 5:28–31). Nephi was thus quite dependent upon his father's and his own previous records for details he provided in relating Lehi's dream (see 1 Nephi 8) and his own vision (see 1 Nephi 11–14).

This is illustrated by the fact that Nephi began his report of Lehi's dream by quoting from his father's record, indicated by the first-person phrasing: "I [Lehi] have dreamed. . . . I did go forth. . . . I saw" (1 Nephi 8:2, 11, 21). This is the family-focused portion of the dream account, in which, once getting to the tree and eating of the fruit, Lehi looks for and calls to his wife and sons. However, Nephi later paraphrased in his own words what his father originally reported, using the third person: "Now I, Nephi, do not speak all the words of my father. But, to be short in writing, behold, he saw other multitudes" (vv. 29–30; see also vv. 31–33; these verses summarize the more universal view of many groups of people Lehi had seen in his dream). Thus the account of Lehi's dream is available to us only as a combination of quotation and paraphrase and only as it existed in Nephi's own record.

2. *Dreams and visions.* A second preliminary consideration is that Lehi's claim, "Behold, I have dreamed a dream; or, in other words, I have seen a vision" (v. 2; also v. 36), reflects an overlap in terminology that is also apparent in the Bible, wherein the terms *dream* and *vision* sometimes occur in parallel (see Isaiah 29:7: "as a dream of a night vision;" see also Job 4:13; Daniel 7:1–2). "Dream and vision are essentially related," and "the two phenomena are difficult to disentangle;"⁹ it is thus evident that "the ancients equated dreams with visions."¹⁰ In Israel and the greater ancient Near East, dreams and visions were considered similar, legitimate forms of visual revelation that the recipient experienced internally. Ancient people were less interested in whether the recipient was asleep or awake and more concerned about the reality of what was seen or heard. Thus, functionally, the only real difference between revelatory dreams and visions was that sleeping dreamers were less aware of their

external surroundings (contrast the awake Nephi and his vision in 1 Nephi 11:1).¹¹ This view of dreams and visions as related phenomena on a spectrum of revelatory modes helps explain why Lehi's wife, Sariah, when concerned that her sons might not return from a mission motivated by an inspired dream (1 Nephi 3:2), exasperatedly, and probably derisively, complained that Lehi was "a visionary man," a title he positively affirmed (1 Nephi 5:1-4; see also 2:11).¹²

3. *Cognate objects.* Lehi's expression "I have dreamed a dream" (1 Nephi 3:2; 8:2) may sound awkward in English, but it is an example of the use of a cognate accusative or cognate object that occurs in Hebrew and some other Semitic languages. In this construction, the verb and the object are derived from the same lexical root.¹³ Other examples of this feature in scripture include Genesis 37:5 ("Joseph dreamed a dream"), 1 Samuel 1:11 ("And [Hannah] vowed a vow"), 1 Nephi 14:7 ("I will work a great and a marvelous work"), and 2 Nephi 5:15 ("I did teach my people to build buildings"). The fact that this grammatical construction occurs in the Bible in connection with dream reports provides an interesting link to the report of Lehi's dream.

4. *Lehi's dream and Nephi's vision.* A final preliminary consideration is the scope of Lehi's dream in relation to Nephi's vision. Although some have claimed that Lehi dreamed essentially what Nephi later saw in his vision,¹⁴ it appears that Nephi actually envisioned things that went well beyond what Lehi had seen, even taking into account that Nephi did not include "all the words of [his] father" in reporting Lehi's dream (1 Nephi 8:29; see also 8:36; 9:1; 10:2, 15). For example, Nephi in his vision specifically requested of the Spirit of the Lord "to know the interpretation" of the tree (1 Nephi 11:11). What was shown to Nephi in response to his desire to understand the symbolism of the tree—the mortal ministry and sacrifice of God the Son (1 Nephi 11:11-36)—does not seem to have been shown to Lehi (otherwise why would Nephi have asked?), nor does it fit the style of Lehi's dream. Nephi's report of Lehi's dream presents it as a spiritual allegory, while Nephi's account of his own vision has a chronological, God-in-history orientation to it.¹⁵ Thus, although the content of Lehi's dream and Nephi's vision overlap, there are differences in content and style, further emphasizing the need for a divinely given interpretation of the symbolism in Lehi's dream. With these several considerations in mind, we can now review general evidence for dream reports in the ancient Near East.

Ancient Near Eastern Dream Reports¹⁶

As far as we know, human beings have always dreamed. Influenced by Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), Western society for over a century has typically viewed dreams “as manifestations of the subconscious. What we have not resolved, what we are unwilling to admit, and even what we dare not recognize while awake—all find expression while we are sleeping.”¹⁷ Thus, for people in modern Western society, neurophysiology and our personal psychological state inform our view of dreams, their origins, and their meanings. However, this was not the view of people in the ancient Near East. They believed that many if not all dreams came as communications from external sources—gods sent pleasant dreams as well as warnings and judgments; demons sent nightmares.¹⁸ Dreams in the ancient Near Eastern were thus seen as functioning to “impart knowledge; dispense healing or infirmity; or convey divine sanction or the reverse, divine punishment.”¹⁹

Dreaming as a form of divine communication was so significant that examples of regular, everyday-type dreams, “in all their fantastic variety,” were collected and catalogued into what we now call “dream books.”²⁰ Evidence for this practice exists from ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, Ugarit, and the Hittite empire. As was the case in other forms of divination (attempts to know the future),²¹ ancient Near Eastern scholars produced lists of these dream elements and their expected outcomes with a standard protasis-apodosis structure (if . . . then . . .). These dream precedents along with their previously observed outcomes were viewed as a means to discern the fate of someone who received a similar divine communication in a similar dream. For example, a few lines from the so-called Chester Beatty “Dream Book,” an Egyptian text dating to the reign of Ramses II (1297–1213 BC), read:

If a man see himself in a dream: . . .

Eating the flesh of a donkey. Good. It means his promotion. . . .

Looking through a window. Good. The hearing of his cry by his god. . . .

Seeing a large cat. Good. It means a large harvest will occur for him. . . .

Drinking warm beer. BAD. It means suppurating illness infects him. . . .

Eating a filleted catfish. BAD. His seizure by a crocodile. . . .

Bitten by a snake. BAD. It means the occurrence of a quarrel against him.²²

Although the operative principles behind such interpretations are not always evident to us (why was dreaming about eating donkey flesh a good omen?),²³ these lists of dreams and their outcomes (as well as other divinatory lists of observed phenomena) exhibit an underlying effort to organize the world and its competing forces, and thus to better know the future and to counteract demonic influences.²⁴

Apart from dream catalogues, actual reports of individuals' dreams in the ancient Near East occur in royal inscriptions, literary texts, and letters, as well as in myths and epics. These dream reports were produced using the standard literary conventions of their time and culture to express in writing the content of the dream.²⁵ Although the available textual evidence of dream accounts from the Semitic peoples living in Syria and Canaan is much sparser, these reports and interpretations show evidence of early Mesopotamian influences.²⁶

For some time now, scholars have classified these written ancient Near Eastern dream reports as representing either *message* or *symbolic* dreams.²⁷ According to this typology, a message dream is one in which a divine being visits a person and delivers a spoken message. One well-known example is preserved in the Ugaritic tablets, in the poetic narration of a presumably epic king, Keret.²⁸ Through disease, accidents, and other tragedies, Keret's family was all destroyed. Lamenting the loss of his progeny one night, he fell asleep and the great West Semitic god, El, appeared to him in a dream (notice the parallelism in this text).

As he [Keret] wept he fell asleep;
 as he cried slumber (came).
 Sleep overpowered him and he lay down;
 slumber, and he curled up.
 And in his dream El came down,
 in his vision the Father of Man,
 and he drew near, asking Keret:
 "What ails Keret that he weeps,
 the gracious one, heir of El, that he groans?" . . .
 ["It is s]ons I would beget,
 descendants I would multiply!"

And Bull, his father, El re[plied]:
 “[Desist] from weeping, Keret,
 from crying, gracious one, heir of El.
 Wash yourself and rouge yourself;
 Wash your [han]ds to the elbow,
 [your] finge[rs] up to the shoulder.” . . .

At this point El further instructs Keret to offer sacrifices and then to attack another kingdom, demanding the king’s daughter for his wife. She will bear him a son to rule after him.

Keret awoke, and (it was) a dream,
 the servant of El [awoke] and (it was) a vision.
 He washed himself and rouged himself,
 he washed his hands to the elbow,
 his fingers to the shoulder.²⁹

The epic tells that after waking Keret did all that he had been instructed to do in El’s message to him and everything came to pass just as Keret had dreamed.

A well-known biblical example of a message dream is the one Solomon received at Gibeon, narrated in 1 Kings 3:5–15. Shortly after securing the throne in Jerusalem, Solomon “went to Gibeon to sacrifice there; for that was the great high place” (v. 4; he had not yet built the temple in Jerusalem³⁰). While there, “the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night: and God said, Ask what I shall give thee” (v. 5). Solomon requested wisdom and “an understanding heart” (v. 9). Jehovah promised to grant him this, as well as “riches, and honour” (v. 13). These two classic examples of message dream reports (Keret’s and Solomon’s) portray a divine being conveying a message to the dreamer. There is no symbolic imagery requiring interpretation.

A symbolic dream, on the other hand, is one in which the dreamer sees visual images that convey a message about the future, but the symbolism in the dream requires interpretation after awakening. Reports of symbolic dreams are typically followed by an interpretation announced by someone other than the dreamer. For example, the Mesopotamian epic hero Gilgamesh dreamed that “there were stars in the sky for me. And (something) like a sky-bolt of Anu kept falling upon me! I tried to lift it up, but it was too heavy for me.”

After awakening, he related this and the rest of his dream to his mother. She provided an interpretation of its symbolism.³¹

Genesis 41 contains a biblical example of a symbolic dream report in which the Egyptian Pharaoh dreamed he saw seven thin cows eating seven fat cows and then seven scrawny tassels of grain consuming seven plump tassels (see vv. 1–8). Joseph announced the same interpretation for these parallel dreams: seven years of plenty in Egypt would be followed by seven years of famine (see vv. 14–32).

However, all ancient Near Eastern dream reports do not fit so neatly into these two categories—message and symbolic dreams—and this schema overemphasizes a conceptual distinction between symbolic and nonsymbolic dream revelations that does not seem to have been important to ancient Near Eastern peoples.³² The dream report in Genesis 28:11–16 illustrates this situation. Jacob “dreamed, and behold a ladder [or stairway] set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. And, behold, the LORD stood above it, and said. . . .” The rest of the dream account relates Jehovah’s promises to Jacob. Although the emphasis in the report is definitely on the Lord’s appearance and message to Jacob, not on the symbolism of what he saw, this dream report demonstrates the lack of precision in designating dreams as either message or symbolic, since it combines both symbolism and spoken message. Nevertheless, I employ the standard designations—message and symbolic dreams—in this introductory survey.

Like other ancient Near Eastern forms of divination (attempts to learn the future), ancient Near Eastern dream reports regularly display various types of linguistic and literary wordplay, and sometimes even visual or orthographic punning based on the use of particular hieroglyphs or cuneiform signs.³³ Words, and even the forms in which they were written, were considered by the ancients to be “vehicles of power.” Thus, punning and other types of wordplay in dream reports and their interpretations were thought to “limit that power by restricting the parameters of a dream’s interpretation. The dream [could not] now mean anything, but only one thing.”³⁴ Professional diviners and dream interpreters thus skillfully exhibited their power in controlling the interpretation of dreams that were written as text, thus avoiding potential future calamity.

Although such activity may seem odd, one scholar has rightly observed that, “while the process of dreaming certainly appears to be universal, the

process of interpreting dreams is not, . . . the exegetical approach to dreams appears to be thoroughly grounded in, and determined by, the specific cultural and ontological frameworks of the interpreter."³⁵ Thus, ancient Near Eastern peoples sought legitimate, accurate, limiting interpretations of their symbol-laden dreams in order to determine the will of the gods and to avert danger.³⁶ To forget one's dream could be perilous, because without a correctly remembered dream one could not obtain the appropriate dream interpretation. Without an authentic interpretation, one could not prepare for or attempt to alter one's fate, if need be.³⁷ This is illustrated by the anxiety of the imprisoned Egyptian officials who said to Joseph, "We have dreamed a dream, and there is no interpreter of it" (Genesis 40:8).³⁸

Biblical Dream Reports

Biblical dream reports and interpretations exhibit both similarities and differences with their counterparts in other ancient Near Eastern texts.³⁹

The Hebrew noun *halom* is translated *dream* and is cognate with the same word in other northwest Semitic languages.⁴⁰ It designates every type of dream, from divine ones to nightmares. The Old Testament indicates that revelatory dreams were received by such well-known individuals as Jacob (see Genesis 28:12; 31:10–11), Joseph (see Genesis 37:5–10), Solomon (see 1 Kings 3:5–15), Job (see Job 7:14), and Daniel (see Daniel 7:1).⁴¹ Accounts of dreams received by non-Israelites include the dreams of two Egyptian officials (see Genesis 40:5–8), an Egyptian Pharaoh (see Genesis 41), a Midianite soldier (see Judges 7:13–15), and Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar (see Daniel 2; 4). These dreams functioned to relay divine approval and important knowledge of the future.⁴²

As with other ancient Near Eastern dream literature, the Bible preserves reports of what are commonly labeled message dreams (such as Solomon's in 1 Kings 3) and symbolic dreams (such as Pharaoh's in Genesis 41). And as noted above, some dream reports (such as Jacob's in Genesis 28) do not fit so neatly into this general schema.

Interestingly, the majority of symbolic dreams in the Bible as it has come down to us were given to non-Israelites.⁴³ Other than young Joseph's dreams recounted in Genesis 37, which indicated that his family would eventually bow down to him, and Daniel's dream of four beasts and "the Ancient of days" (Daniel 7:22),⁴⁴ the other symbolic dreams reported in the Bible were received by imprisoned Egyptian officials (see Genesis 40), an

Egyptian Pharaoh (see Genesis 41), a Midianite soldier (see Judges 7), and King Nebuchadnezzar (see Daniel 2; 4). In the case of the dreams given to the Egyptians and the Babylonian king, Joseph and Daniel respectively were the interpreters. These symbolic dreams (except Judges 7:13–14, in which the Midianite’s dream was immediately understood by his companion) served to demonstrate, among other things, that God-inspired Israelites had the necessary spiritual connections to interpret dreams accurately when others could not, and thus to emphasize the reality and superiority of Jehovah (see Genesis 40:8; Daniel 2:28).⁴⁵

Biblical evidence indicates that Israelites, like other ancient Near Eastern peoples, believed that many if not all dreams came as communications from an external source. The Bible “only recounts dreams of religious value: messages sent by God.”⁴⁶ There are no catalogs of dreams and dream omens preserved in the Bible (nor among Israelite inscriptions). Although dreams among other ancient Near Easterners originated with various deities and demons, the Bible, not surprisingly, indicates dreams originated with Jehovah, the true God, whether the dreams were sent to Israelites or non-Israelites. Job even attributed his nightmares to Jehovah (see Job 7:14).

However, in parallel with some ancient Near Eastern texts, certain biblical evidence suggests Israelites also had what they considered to be “ordinary dreams.”⁴⁷ Passages that refer to these include Job 20:8 (“He shall fly away as a dream, and shall not be found”) and Isaiah 29:7–8 (“the multitude of all the nations that fight against Ariel . . . shall be as a dream of a night vision, . . . even be as when an hungry man dreameth, and, behold, he eateth; but he awaketh, and his soul is empty”).⁴⁸ At the very least, such passages illustrate that some dreams seemed fleeting and of no real substance to some Israelites (compare Jacob 7:26).⁴⁹

The biblical narrative does make clear that Jehovah utilized dreams, whether they involved spoken instructions or more enigmatic symbolism, as one legitimate means of communicating with ancient Israelites. This was in addition to other accepted modes of revelation such as visions, divine appearances, prophecy, the Urim and Thummim, and casting lots.⁵⁰ For example, Jehovah instructed Aaron and Miriam that “if there be a prophet among you, I the LORD will make myself known unto him in a vision, and will speak unto him in a dream” (Numbers 12:6). Additionally, Elihu reminded Job that “God speaketh . . . in a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falleth

upon men. . . . Then he openeth the ears of [speaks to] men, and sealethe their instruction" (Job 33:14–16). And on the night before his death, when a desperate Saul "enquired of the LORD, the LORD answered him not, neither by dreams, nor by Urim, nor by prophets" (1 Samuel 28:6)—all these modes of revelation are presented as legitimate but unavailable to Saul.

As with other modes of legitimate revelation, however, some Israelites falsely claimed to have received revelatory dreams. For example, the prophet Jeremiah, a contemporary of Lehi, warned the people of Jerusalem about false prophets who spoke in the name of Jehovah, but who "commit[ted] adultery, and walk[ed] in lies" (Jeremiah 23:14). Of them the Lord said, "I have not sent these prophets. . . . I have heard what the prophets said, that prophesy lies in my name, saying, I have dreamed, I have dreamed. . . . Behold, I am against them that prophesy false dreams, saith the LORD, . . . and cause my people to err by their lies" (Jeremiah 23:21, 25, 32; see also 29:8–9). Moreover, Deuteronomy explicitly indicates that if "a prophet, or a dreamer of dreams" encouraged the Israelites to pursue other deities in addition to Jehovah, the Israelites should not only ignore him but also "put [him] to death" (Deuteronomy 13:1, 5).⁵¹ In these passages, Jehovah was not speaking against authentic revelation by means of dreams, just against the false claims of false prophets.⁵² Joel's prophecy supports this view, emphasizing that the Lord would continue to employ dreams as a legitimate form of divine communication in the future: "I [Jehovah] will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions" (Joel 2:28). In light of the content of Jeremiah 23 and Deuteronomy 13, one wonders how aware Lehi's family was of these false prophets in Jerusalem and how this may have influenced the family's views of Lehi and his claims of revelatory dreams.

Turning now to some literary considerations, analysis reveals four consistent elements in the biblical reports of symbolic dreams: (1) an introduction, including the announcement that a dream has been received; (2) a description of the dream's contents; (3) an interpretation of the dream by someone else, found at variable distances from the dream report and not properly part of it; and (4) the realization of the events symbolized in the dream.⁵³ These features are clearly evident, for example, in the dream reports of Pharaoh's officials and of Pharaoh himself and in Joseph's interpretation of their dreams (see Genesis 40–41).

Another feature of symbolic dream reports in the Bible is the use of language that invites readers or listeners into the “living picture” that is being related by the dreamer.⁵⁴ One way this is accomplished is by the repeated use of the Hebrew particle *hinneh*, “behold,” employed by a speaker or narrator to emphasize and draw attention to what occurs in the dream report.⁵⁵ For example, *hinneh* occurs six times in the seven verses containing the Pharaoh’s dreams about cows and grain (see Genesis 41:1–7). This emphatic injunction thus encourages readers to look along with the person receiving the dream as it is narrated in the Bible.

As in other ancient Near Eastern dream texts, punning and other wordplay is evident in the biblical reports, although much of this is lost in translation.⁵⁶ A classic example occurs in Genesis 40. Angered with his chief cup-bearer (“butler” in the KJV⁵⁷) and baker, the Pharaoh imprisoned them in the same facility in which Joseph was being held. The two officials each dreamed a dream; Joseph interpreted both of them, saying to each, “Within three days shall Pharaoh lift up thine head” (Genesis 40:13, 19). So, on “the third day . . . [Pharaoh] made a feast . . . and he lifted up the head of the chief butler [cup-bearer] and of the chief baker among his servants. And he restored the chief butler unto his butlership again; and he gave the cup into Pharaoh’s hand: but he hanged the chief baker: as Joseph had interpreted to them” (Genesis 40:20–22). Thus, with biblical punning, one official’s head “was lifted up” through exoneration and one by hanging.⁵⁸

Another example of wordplay in biblical dream reports is the use of word clusters, concentrations of key words for emphasis.⁵⁹ The report of the Pharaoh’s parallel dreams of cows and grain provides an example of such word clusters. The Hebrew word *sheba’*, “seven,” occurs seven times in the narration of Pharaoh’s dreams (see Genesis 41:1–7) and six more times in Pharaoh’s telling of his dream to Joseph (see vv. 18–24). This word then occurs ten more times in the report of Joseph’s interpretation of Pharaoh’s dreams (see vv. 25–31). This concentration of the word “seven” serves to emphasize the interpretation that a complete cycle of seven years of agricultural plenty would be followed by a full cycle of famine.⁶⁰

The last consideration in this section emphasizes the rhetorical value of dream reports. One scholar has correctly observed that biblical and other ancient Near Eastern dream reports “can [also] serve non-literary functions by contributing to the authority, ideology, and persuasiveness of the text.”⁶¹

This is evident, for example, in the book of Daniel. Daniel 2 narrates Daniel's interpretation of King Nebuchadnezzar's dream, in which Nebuchadnezzar saw a great human image, segments of which were composed of different metals, that was ultimately smashed by a "stone . . . cut out of the mountain without hands" (Daniel 2:45). Significantly, the report of Daniel's interpretation of this dream begins with him verbalizing the claim that "wisdom and might are [God's]. . . . He removeth kings, and setteth up kings: he giveth wisdom unto the wise. . . . He revealeth the deep and secret things. . . . The light dwelleth with him" (Daniel 2:20–22). This overriding theme of God's superior knowledge and power, articulated in Daniel's interpretation of the Babylonian king's dream, provides a significant ideological, or theological, perspective that is emphasized throughout the rest of the book.

This review of biblical symbolic dream reports and their interpretations provides a context in which to now examine the report of Lehi's dream.

Lehi's Dream Report in Its Biblical Context

In light of the above overview, the account of Lehi's dream in 1 Nephi 8 definitely shares features and characteristics with dream reports in its greater ancient Near Eastern and, more specifically, biblical context. I will now highlight seven of these shared features before concluding.

1. *Symbolic dream reports and their introductions.* As reported by Nephi, Lehi's dream was a symbolic one. Interestingly, the claim to have "dreamed a dream" occurs in the Bible only in relation to symbolic dreams, such as those of Joseph (see Genesis 37:5–9) and the Pharaoh (see Genesis 41:15).⁶² Nephi's report of Lehi's introduction—"Behold, I have dreamed a dream" (1 Nephi 8:2)—thus matches the phrasing that introduces biblical symbolic dream reports.

2. *Disturbing nature of symbolic dreams.* Just as the Pharaoh's "spirit was troubled" when he awoke from his symbolic dreams about cows and tassels of grain (Genesis 41:8), so Nebuchadnezzar's "spirit was troubled" and he was "afraid" when he awoke from his enigmatic dreams about a human figure made of various metals and about a great tree (Daniel 2:1–3; 4:5).

A different form of this feature is included in the report of Lehi's dream. Nephi quotes Lehi as saying that his dream caused him to fear for his sons Laman and Lemuel because in his dream they would not join the family at the tree (1 Nephi 8:4, 35–36). Lehi was thus troubled about certain sons, not

about general conditions. Lehi's response demonstrates the degree to which he accepted his dream as a real manifestation of current and future truths. This aspect is similar to the "troubling" that was the outcome of several biblical dream accounts.

3. *Narrative structure.* Consistent with the four-point narrative structure outlined in the previous section, Nephi's account first opens with Lehi's announcement that he had "dreamed a dream" (1 Nephi 8:2). This phrase serves to introduce his symbolic dream and is followed by a description of the dream's contents, which appears to be partly quoted from Lehi and partly paraphrased by Nephi (see vv. 5–35).

The third point in the biblical narration of dream reports involves someone other than the dreamer announcing the interpretation of the dream after gaining it through revelation. As recounted in 1 Nephi 8, Lehi narrated his dream but provided neither interpretation nor explanation. Later, Nephi learned the interpretation of his father's dream in a God-given vision, which also included further specific knowledge (as indicated above). Interestingly, however, Nephi does *not* recount that he informed *his father*—the one who had dreamed the dream—of his vision and the interpretation he (Nephi) was given. Rather, Nephi relates that he answered his brothers' questions about their father's dream based on what he (Nephi) had learned in his vision (see 1 Nephi 15:1–7, 21–30). However, the first thing Nephi reports after the conclusion of his vision is that "after I, Nephi, had been carried away in the spirit, and seen all these things, I returned to the tent of my father" (1 Nephi 15:1). It is plausible that this is when he informed Lehi of his vision and shared his interpretation, presuming he would have done so before discussing his vision with his brothers.

This variation from the biblical pattern of another person interpreting the dream for the dreamer may be due to Nephi's choice to emphasize his sharing of interpretive knowledge with his less spiritually enlightened brothers. Significantly, however, the pattern in the Book of Mormon of someone receiving a symbolic dream and someone else announcing its meaning is consistent with the biblical pattern.

The fourth point in the narrative structure involves the realization of the events portrayed in the dream. The report of Lehi's dream includes this feature, especially in regard to his expressed fears about his sons Laman and Lemuel (see 1 Nephi 8:4, 36) because they would not partake of the fruit (see

1 Nephi 8:17–18, 35). As related in Nephi’s own narrative and in the account of the generations that came after him, these fears were fully realized.

4. *Invitation for others to see.* Another common feature in biblical symbolic dream reports (mentioned above) is the use of the Hebrew emphatic particle, *hinneh*, “behold,” to encourage readers and listeners to see along with the dreamer what they had experienced. However, *behold* occurs only a few times in 1 Nephi 8, as Lehi relates that he had dreamed a dream (four times in vv. 2–4). Nephi does not recount that Lehi spoke this word in sharing his dream with his family.⁶³

Nevertheless, an alternative expression does serve to invite readers to see what Lehi saw. This is the repeated verbal form *beheld*, which in English looks similar to *behold*, but which is not a translation of the Hebrew particle *hinneh*, “behold.” The English word *beheld* in 1 Nephi 8 is probably a translation of the common Hebrew verb *ra’ah*, “to see.” This is often the case in the King James Version (e.g., Genesis 12:14; 48:8). The verb *beheld* occurs eleven times in Nephi’s first person quotation of his father’s earlier account of his dream (see 1 Nephi 8:2–28). Although this pattern differs in detail from biblical dream accounts, it is functionally similar. By emphasizing that “I [Lehi] beheld,” or in other words, that “I [Lehi] saw [a field, a river, a tree, fruit, etc.],” the report of Lehi’s dream not only narrates what he saw, but also invites us to enter his image-rich experience by seeing along with him.

5. *Wordplay.* As indicated above, most ancient Near Eastern reports of symbolic dreams, including those in the Bible, occur in a narrative context and demonstrate some sort of wordplay. Such wordplay provides keys to interpreting essential features of the dream and serves to connect the dream and its interpretation to the narrative⁶⁴ but is often lost in translation. This makes it challenging to ascertain the degree to which Nephi’s report of Lehi’s dream fits this category, since we only have the text as translated by Joseph Smith. However, one feature that is quite evident in 1 Nephi 8 is key-word clusters (reviewed above).

In the thirty-two verses that recount Lehi’s dream (see 1 Nephi 8:4–35), the word *tree* occurs nine times (it also occurs nine times in chapter 11 in Nephi’s report of his vision). The word *fruit* occurs in the report of Lehi’s dream eighteen times (but, interestingly, only three times in Nephi’s vision report, once in chapter 11 and twice in chapter 15). These word clusters emphasize the significance of the tree and its fruit in Lehi’s dream. No other

symbols in Lehi's dream are mentioned this often. Given the focus of the dream, it may seem obvious that the words *tree* and *fruit* are so frequently used. However, there is no inherent reason for these terms to occur more than a few times. It is the repetition of the words, over and over again, that heightens our awareness of the significance of these symbols. Accordingly, Lehi's dream affirms that nothing is more important than associating with the tree and internalizing its fruit.

Furthermore, as one scholar has observed regarding biblical word clusters, "the frequency with which we hear these words is more than literary embellishment; it is the thread that ties the dream to its interpretation."⁶⁵ Thus the similarly frequent occurrence of *tree* in both Lehi's dream and the early part of Nephi's vision report demonstrates and emphasizes the integrated interpretive role of Nephi's experience in relation to Lehi's dream.

Another example of wordplay in connection with Lehi's dream report involves the noun *seed*. The Hebrew word *zera'* ("seed") designates both seeds that are planted in the ground (e.g., Genesis 1:11; Isaiah 5:10) as well as human seed or offspring (e.g., Genesis 15:3; Exodus 32:13). The word *seed* occurs eight times in 1 Nephi 2–7 with this latter meaning, progeny. Nephi only reports the use of the word *seed* once in connection with Lehi's dream (1 Nephi 8:3), when, based on his dream, Lehi assumes that Nephi, Sam, "and many of their seed" would be saved. However, Lehi expressed grave concern about Laman and Lemuel, who were also his "seed."

Using the botanical usage, Nephi reports in 1 Nephi 8:1 that just before Lehi's dream his family "gathered together all manner of seeds of every kind, both of grain . . . and also of the seeds of fruit." Although *seed* with this botanical meaning does not occur again in 1 Nephi 8, the multiple occurrences of the terms *tree* and *fruit* in the account of Lehi's dream imply the notion of seeds. Lehi's dream account is thus connected to its narrative context in 1 Nephi by its concern for seed, human and otherwise.

Additionally, tying the report of Lehi's dream to its interpretation, the word *seed*, designating descendants, occurs thirty-three times in the account of Nephi's vision, primarily in 1 Nephi 12–13 (in reference to the future seed of Nephi and his brothers). So, while Lehi and his family took "seeds" with them on their journey to their new home (see 1 Nephi 8:1; 16:11; 18:6, 24), the Book of Mormon is primarily concerned with reporting the activity of Lehi and Sariah's "seed" in relation to Jesus's gospel.⁶⁶

Thus the recurrence of key words highlighting major symbols in the reports of Lehi's dream and Nephi's vision link these two accounts and serve to emphasize primary themes narrated throughout the Book of Mormon: division and rebellion among Lehi and Sariah's seed and the absolute need to internalize the power of Christ's Atonement, symbolized by eating fruit from a particular tree.

6. *Rhetorical value.* As observed above, "dream account[s] can serve non-literary functions by contributing to the authority, ideology, and persuasiveness of the text."⁶⁷ This can definitely be seen in the Book of Mormon. For example, the fact that Nephi and Sam joined their parents at the tree in the report of Lehi's dream, while Laman and Lemuel did not, foreshadows not only division in the family, but the superior role Nephi would play as a religious and political leader and historian among those of his family who, like himself, faithfully followed Lehi's prophetic direction. This development has parallels with Joseph's experiences, in which his own dreams when young (see Genesis 37) were fulfilled through his subsequent political rise to power in Egypt and his superior position within his own family (see Genesis 39–50).⁶⁸ In reality, Nephi's transition from spiritual heir-apparent to religious and political leader of his people had already been realized by the time Nephi produced the account of Lehi's dream on his small set of plates. Thus Lehi's dream, as reported by Nephi, serves to foreshadow and substantiate social and political developments among Lehi and Sariah's posterity.⁶⁹

Additionally, as already observed, the Christ-centered nature of the Book of Mormon flows in large measure from this foundational combined dream and vision in its early chapters. The interrelated accounts of Lehi's dream and Nephi's vision authoritatively set the ideological or theological tone for all that follows, rhetorically strengthening the persuasiveness of later uses of tree and fruit symbolism (particularly in the teachings of Jacob and Alma) and of later prophetic invitations to come to Christ and live.

On a broader scale, by including the account of his father's dream, Nephi may have sought to ascribe increased persuasiveness and scriptural authority to his own record through its parallel with the biblical account, which begins with a tree of life in Eden and the eating of fruit, albeit from a different tree (see Genesis 2:9; 3:22, 24). In the report of his own vision, Nephi refers to the tree seen by Lehi in his dream as a "tree of life" (1 Nephi 11:25; 15:22, 28).⁷⁰ And later in the Book of Mormon the phrase "tree of life" is employed to

hearken back to the tree in Lehi's dream by Lehi himself (see 2 Nephi 2:15) and also by Alma, who seems to refer to both Eden's tree of life and the tree in Lehi's dream (e.g., Alma 5:34, 62; 12:21, 23, 26).⁷¹

7. *Interpretation of symbolic dreams.* The tree with its fruit is the conceptual center point in the account of Lehi's dream; everything happens in relation to it. However, in harmony with biblical reports of symbolic dreams, the symbolism of the tree and its fruit is *not* explained to Lehi in his dream. In fact, during his own vision Nephi indicated to the Spirit of the Lord that he wanted to understand the interpretation of the meaning of the tree (1 Nephi 11:9–11),⁷² and his brothers later specifically asked Nephi, "What meaneth this thing which our father saw in a dream? What meaneth the tree which he saw?" (1 Nephi 15:21).

It may be hard to imagine that Lehi and Nephi did not initially understand what the tree and fruit and other symbols in Lehi's dream represented. Presumably they discussed some possibilities. But the symbolic dream was a revelation from God, and as such it required a divine interpretation to accurately understand the message God intended to communicate. It was not wise to merely guess at what visual revelation was intended to convey. Similarly, the dreams reported in Genesis 41 (given to the Pharaoh) and Daniel 2 (given to Nebuchadnezzar) had come from Israel's God, and their interpretations were dependent upon specific revelation from him.

Such biblical combinations of dreams plus interpretations function as prophecy.⁷³ As Joseph said to the Pharaoh, "God hath shewed Pharaoh what he is about to do" (Genesis 41:25). So, likewise, the combination of Lehi's dream plus Nephi's interpretive vision in the Book of Mormon can be viewed as a great prophecy. But before Lehi and his family could fully appreciate this, Lehi's dream needed an inspired, authoritative interpretation.

Complicating the issue of their understanding Lehi's dream is the fact that many of the images in the dream report have multiple symbolic meanings. Trees, for example, are used in the Old Testament to symbolize abundant life (see Psalm 1:3), contented peace (see Micah 4:4), majesty and strength (see Ezekiel 31:3–5; Daniel 4:10–11), protection (see Ezekiel 31:6), longevity (see Isaiah 65:22), a righteous person who endures faithfully (see Jeremiah 17:7–8), and sins like pride and arrogance (see Isaiah 2:13; Zechariah 11:2). Additionally, wisdom and righteousness are described as "a tree of life" to those who possess them (see Proverbs 3:18; 11:30). And Lehi himself was

familiar with the use of an olive tree to symbolically represent the house of Israel (see 1 Nephi 10:12, 14).

First Nephi, therefore, portrays Nephi authoritatively relating through his vision experience the one true interpretation of the tree and the other symbols in his father's dream. Nephi's report of his vision permanently establishes the interpretation of Lehi's dream and its symbols, such that those reading his account to this day do not venture alternative views on the symbolism.

Conclusion

Nephi's report of Lehi's dream shares many similarities with biblical and other ancient Near Eastern reports of symbolic dreams. Understanding these similarities heightens our awareness of important aspects of Lehi's dream and its integration into and function within the text of 1 Nephi. These parallels range from such basic similarities as the fact that both Lehi's dream and symbolic biblical dreams are introduced with the expression "dreamed a dream," to more complex relationships evident in the narrative structuring of dream reports, the use of word clusters and other wordplay, and the rhetorical function they serve in their greater context.⁷⁴ Nephi's report of Lehi's dream is certainly compatible with its biblical Israelite context.

As mentioned, the Bible affirms that Jehovah sometimes chose vivid and richly symbolic dreams to reveal knowledge about his plans and to demonstrate his power to ancient people. The symbolic dreams given to Joseph, the Egyptian Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, and Daniel convey via their enigmatic symbolism large-scale future developments, both national and family focused. The dream given to Lehi is no different. Its symbolic but compact representation of the future announces knowledge and truths that play out in the Book of Mormon and beyond. The report of Lehi's dream also serves to further reinforce the legitimate prophetic role of Lehi, to whom the Lord had made himself known through dreams (see Numbers 12:6).

Nephi's account of Lehi's grand dream of a tree and its fruit contains a power to instruct that goes beyond mere words, as it conveys a universal picture of personal salvation in a fallen world, connected more specifically to history through the interpretive vision given to Nephi. The fact that no other message or symbolic dream reports are included in the Book of Mormon after Lehi's dream and Nephi's visionary interpretation of it gives Lehi's dream a powerful position and influential status.⁷⁵ Our reading of the whole Book of

Mormon is significantly impacted by the authoritative presentation of doctrinal truths revealed through Lehi's dream and Nephi's interpretive vision. And all of this grows out of Lehi's matter-of-fact statement one morning, "Behold, I have dreamed a dream" (1 Nephi 8:2).

Notes

I thank my student assistants Angela Belle Wagner and Courtney Dotson for helping with research on this paper. I also thank my colleague Daniel L. Belnap and my wife, Jane Allis-Pike, for providing feedback on earlier drafts of this paper. Note that I have usually rendered Hebrew words according to the "general purpose" transliteration scheme found in The SBL Handbook of Style (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 28.

1. Jeffrey R. Holland's statement about 1 Nephi 8 in *Christ and the New Covenant* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 162, is often cited as support for this view: "At the very outset of the Book of Mormon, in its first fully developed allegory, Christ is portrayed as the source of eternal life and joy, the living evidence of divine love, and the means whereby God will fulfill his covenant with the house of Israel and indeed the entire family of man, returning them to all their eternal promises."

2. Compare the similar dream revelations in Ether 9:3 ("the Lord warned Omer in a dream that he should depart out of the land") and Matthew 2:13 ("the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt;" see also Matthew 2:19–20).

3. See, for example, George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl, *Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1955), 1:60–65; and Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987), 1:54–61. Kent P. Jackson, "The Tree of Life and the Ministry of Christ (1 Nephi 8–11, 15)," in vol. 7 of *Studies in Scripture* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 34–43, focuses primarily on 1 Nephi 11, saying little about chapter 8.

4. Charles 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): 52–63. See also the format of this chapter as understood by Donald W. Parry, *The Book of Mormon Text Reformatted according to Parallelistic Patterns* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1992), 12–15. James T. Duke, *The Literary Masterpiece Called the Book of Mormon* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2004), 70–72, adds nothing new to the discussion.

5. See, for example, Susan Easton Black, "Behold, I Have Dreamed a Dream," in *The Book of Mormon: First Nephi, the Doctrinal Foundation*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1988): 113–24, and Dennis L. Largey, "Lehi's Dream," in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 516–18.

6. See, for example, Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites*, vol. 5, *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 43–46; and more recently S. Kent Brown, "Lehi¹, journey of, to the promised

land,” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 515, with further bibliography.

7. See C. Wilfred Griggs, “The Book of Mormon as an Ancient Book,” *BYU Studies* 22, no. 3 (1982): 259–78, especially 274–78.

8. See S. Kent Brown’s discussion of this in “Lehi, book of,” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, 511.

9. Ann Jeffers, *Magic and Divination in Ancient Palestine and Syria* (New York: Brill, 1996), 128 and 125.

10. Scott B. Noegel, *Nocturnal Ciphers: The Allusive Language of Dreams in the Ancient Near East* (New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 2007), 264–65. He further claims that we should at least think of dreams and visions “existing side by side on a continuum of mantic [divinatory] experiences.” See similarly Frances Flannery-Dailey, *Dreamers, Scribes, and Priests: Jewish Dreams in the Hellenistic and Roman Eras* (Boston: Brill, 2004), 2, who observes that “the ancients placed dreams and visions along a thickly inhabited spectrum of hypnagogic phenomena.” See also M. Ottosson, “*halom*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. by G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 4:427.

11. Bruce R. McConkie, “Dreams,” in *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 208, states that “all inspired dreams are visions, but all visions are not dreams; . . . it is only when the vision occurs during sleep that it is termed a dream.” See also Gerald N. Lund’s discussion of dreams and visions and other more or less direct forms of revelation in *Hearing the Voice of the Lord* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2010), 30–42. Lund views, as I do, various types of revelation on a spectrum or continuum.

12. See Matthew Roper, “Scripture Update: Lehi as a Visionary Man,” in *Insights* 27, no. 4 (2007): 2–3, who discusses the probable negative sense in which Sariah, and earlier her older sons, had used this phrase in reference to Lehi. Roper bases his assessment on passages in the book of Jeremiah, a contemporary of Lehi.

13. A number of Latter-day Saint authors have commented on this Hebraic feature in the Book of Mormon. See, for example, M. Deloy Pack, “Hebraisms,” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, 322–23; and John Tvedtnes, “The Hebrew Background of the Book of Mormon,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991), 80–81.

14. See McConkie and Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary*, 56, who, writing in reference to Lehi’s dream, state that they “will draw upon Nephi’s account of the same vision (given in its entirety in 1 Nephi 11–14).”

15. See, for example, the observations in Steven L. Olsen, “Prophecy and History: Structuring the Abridgment of the Nephite Records,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15, no. 1 (2006): 24–25, on the content and stylistic nature of Lehi’s dream, which he describes as “an allegorical representation of salvation,” and Nephi’s vision, which he describes as “a literal representation of the plan of salvation . . . [representing] God’s redemptive work as it unfolds in real-world spatial, temporal, and human contexts.” Contrast Duke, *Literary Masterpiece*, 70, who claims, incorrectly in my view, that “the Dream of Lehi, and Nephi’s interpretation of that dream, is another wonderful example of an allegory (1 Nephi 8–15).” On the content of the dream and vision, see also John W. Welch, “Connections between the Visions of Lehi and Nephi,” in John W. Welch and

Melvin J. Thorne, eds., *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 49–53. Welch, while pointing out the many connecting similarities between Lehi’s dream and Nephi’s vision, observes that, “the two visions are very different in character. Lehi’s dream is intimate, symbolic, and salvific; Nephi’s vision is collective, historic, and eschatological” (49). Welch also states that, “Nephi’s vision is not a mere rerun of the Lehi’s. The second clearly develops each element of the first, from different perspectives and for different purposes” (52).

16. The foundation of modern research on dreams in the ancient Near East is the study by A. Leo Oppenheim, *The Interpretation of Dreams in the Ancient Near East: With a Translation of the Assyrian Dream Book* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1956). Oppenheim actually based his categorization of dreams on the Hellenistic author Artemidorus of Daldis (second century AD). Many major and minor publications on dreams have followed Oppenheim’s general assessment. Due to the scope and nature of this study, I cite only a few of the more recent books on the topic, assuming interested readers will consult the bibliographies therein for further citations and for a broader perspective.

17. Shaul Bar, *A Letter That Has Not Been Read: Dreams in the Hebrew Bible* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 2001), 1. I thank Fred Woods for bringing this book to my attention; unfortunately, it has received rather mixed reviews. See also S. A. L. Butler, *Mesopotamian Conceptions of Dreams and Dream Rituals* (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1998), 13–14; and Flannery-Dailey, *Dreamers, Scribes, and Priests*, 1.

18. See, for example, Oppenheim, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 237; and Butler, *Mesopotamian Conceptions of Dreams and Dream Rituals*, 14–15, 23, 73. Butler and Oppenheim write as if they accept that ancient Near Eastern peoples thought all dreams came from external sources. However, Ottosson, “*halom*,” in *Theological Dictionary*, 4:424, claims that “certain dreams were considered to derive not from divine revelation but from the psychological state of the dreamer.” Commenting on the religious orientation of dreams in ancient texts, Kelly Bulkeley, *Dreaming in the World’s Religions: A Comparative History* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 3–4, makes the interesting observation that “dreaming has always been regarded as a religious phenomenon. Throughout history, in cultures worldwide, people have seen their dreams first and foremost as religiously meaningful experiences. . . . As a matter of historical fact, . . . dreams have played a powerful, complex, and dynamic role in the world’s religious and spiritual traditions.”

19. Flannery-Dailey, *Dreamers, Scribes, and Priests*, 35.

20. Jean-Marie Husser, *Dreams and Dream Narratives in the Biblical World*, trans. Jill M. Munro (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 18. See also Butler, *Mesopotamian Conceptions of Dreams*, 19, 97–101. Dream omens are much better attested from Mesopotamia than from Egypt. The remains of only one poorly preserved text represent a so-called dream book from Ugarit. See, for example, Dennis Pardee, “Ugaritic Dream Omens (1.93),” in *Context of Scripture*, ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger (Boston: Brill, 2003), 1:293–94.

21. Divination was the ritual practice of “divining” or attempting to learn the future by observing natural phenomena thought to contain clues as to what the gods had decreed. Mesopotamian diviners, for example, observed and catalogued such things as

anomalies on the livers and other internal organs of sacrificial animals, irregular heavenly and meteorological manifestations, dreams, and the births of disfigured humans and animals. Such divinatory practices were forbidden according to the Israelite Mosaic law (see Deuteronomy 18:10; Isaiah 47:13).

22. Robert K. Ritner, "Dream Oracles (1.33)," in *Context of Scripture*, 1:53–54. Husser, *Dreams and Dream Narratives*, 59, accurately observes that while "dream interpretation is, however, well attested [in Egypt], . . . it is not an integral part of a divinatory system [as in Mesopotamia]; . . . rather it seems to be related to magic."

23. Husser, *Dreams and Dream Narratives*, 33, 68.

24. Noegel, *Nocturnal Ciphers*, 43.

25. For example, Oppenheim, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 186–87, 206, observed that most ancient Near Eastern dream reports or narratives, not surprisingly, consist of two major aspects: (1) the setting of the dream, which information typically brackets or frames the dream report, and (2) the content of the dream. Also, the dreamer's response to the dream is often included. Oppenheim is cited by Bar, *A Letter That Has Not Been Read*, 218–19, who concludes at the end of his book that Oppenheim's observation was correct. Of course, genre and other factors impacted the use of stereotypical features in such reports.

26. Husser, *Dreams and Dream Narratives*, 73–74, provides a brief survey of the relevant texts from Ugarit and the first millennium Aramaic kingdoms. See also Noegel, *Nocturnal Ciphers*, 107–112.

27. See, for example, the discussion of these designations by Husser, *Dreams and Dream Narratives*, 23–24, 99–100; and Noegel, *Nocturnal Ciphers*, 6–8.

28. The remains of ancient Ugarit are located near the Mediterranean coast of Syria. King Keret's name is also written Kirta.

29. N. Wyatt, *Religious Texts from Ugarit: The Words of Ilmilku and His Colleagues* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 183–86, 198. The text is KTU 1.14.

30. Gibeon is about six miles northwest of Jerusalem. Second Chronicles 1:3–6 indicates that the Mosaic tabernacle was then in Gibeon, even though David had brought the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem.

31. Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia* (New York: Oxford, 1989), 57–58. This text is found on tablet one of the Gilgamesh epic.

32. For this reason Scott Noegel, *Nocturnal Ciphers*, 274–76, designates any dreams that required interpretation as "enigmatic," and he calls for a new and conceptually different terminology. See Oppenheim's preliminary use of the term *enigmatic* in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 206.

33. See Noegel, *Nocturnal Ciphers*, 11–32, 89–91.

34. Noegel, *Nocturnal Ciphers*, 40; see also 45, 105–6. Additionally, Noegel observes that "similes and metaphors served 'magicians' long before they served poets" (90).

35. Noegel, *Nocturnal Ciphers*, 253.

36. Husser, *Dreams and Dream Narratives*, 29.

37. See, for example, Noegel, *Nocturnal Ciphers*, 46–50. His similar comments on Egyptian enigmatic dreams are found on pages 92–93.

38. Due to space limitations and a lack of relevancy for studying 1 Nephi 8, I have included no comments on the ancient practice of incubation. Incubation involved sleeping

at a temple or other sacred space, often in conjunction with other ritual activity, with the express intent of receiving a revelatory dream (all are reported to have been message dreams). For a summary of this practice throughout the ancient Near East, see Husser, *Dreams and Dream Narratives*, 46–50, 69–71, 172–76. I have also not included specific comments on the interesting evidence regarding dreams and interpretations in the Mari texts. On this material, see Jack Sasson, “Mari Dreams,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 103 no. 1 (1983): 283–93; and Noegel, *Nocturnal Ciphers*, 83–86.

39. Ann K. Guinan, “Divination,” in *Context of Scripture*, 1:422, asserts, citing Oppenheim and others for support, that “strong parallels do connect Mesopotamian and biblical accounts of dream interpretation.” It is worth noting that there are no extant Israelite inscriptions that recount dream reports, interpretations, or omens.

40. See, for example, the summary comments in Ottosson, “*halom*,” in *Theological Dictionary*, 4:427; Husser, *Dreams and Dream Narratives*, 88; and Flannery-Dailey, *Dreamers, Scribes, and Priests*, 46.

41. In the New Testament, reports of dreams occur in relation to Joseph, husband of Mary (Matthew 1:20; 2:13, 19–22), the wise men (Matthew 2:12), and probably Paul (“a vision appeared to Paul in the night;” Acts 16:9).

42. Flannery-Dailey, *Dreamers, Scribes, and Priests*, 53, notes that in the Bible “the [dream] function of healing is seriously attenuated,” in contrast to dreams in the general ancient Near East.

43. Oppenheim, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 207, 209, claimed that all biblical symbolic dreams were given to non-Israelites, but based on Genesis 37 and Daniel 7 (see below), I disagree.

44. For discussions of these symbolic, or enigmatic, dreams in the Bible, see Husser, *Dreams and Dream Narratives*, 106–22; and Noegel, *Nocturnal Ciphers*, 116–180. Husser, *Dreams and Dream Narratives*, 121–22, dismisses Daniel 7 as a symbolic dream, preferring to see it as a vision “presented as a dream.” However, Noegel, *Nocturnal Ciphers*, 163–76, treats Daniel 7 as a symbolic enigmatic dream report, as do I.

45. Lehi and his family would have had no knowledge of Daniel’s experiences, since these occurred after they had left Jerusalem, but I assume that Lehi and his family would have had some knowledge of Joseph and his dream experiences nearly a millennium earlier, at least after (if not before) the family obtained the brass plates. See 1 Nephi 5:10–11, 14. Of course, no extant copy of Genesis dates to Lehi’s time, nor does Nephi mention in 1 Nephi anything about Joseph’s dreams and interpretations, so we cannot be completely certain what was available to them. However, Nephi does mention the “five books of Moses” (1 Nephi 5:11).

46. Husser, *Dreams and Dream Narratives*, 101.

47. See, for example, Husser, *Dreams and Dream Narratives*, 102. In “Dreams, Visions,” in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, ed. by Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 217, it is claimed that “all dreams in antiquity were not necessarily considered divine, but with few exceptions . . . ordinary dreams and nightmares play little or no part in the plot of most biblical narratives”.

48. See also Ecclesiastes 5:3, 7.

49. Contrast the views in note 47 with Noegel, *Nocturnal Ciphers*, 120, who claims without qualification that “we should not be surprised to find that the Israelites also shared the Mesopotamian conception of dreams as divine messages.”

50. For a brief discussion of the legitimate revelatory mode of casting lots, see Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, Dana M. Pike, and David Rolph Seely, *Jehovah and the World of the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2009), 157.

51. There are minor differences in the versification of the King James Bible and the traditional Hebrew Bible in this and several other passages cited in this paper. In all such cases, I have given only the English citation.

52. See, for example, Noegel, *Nocturnal Ciphers*, 186–87; and Flannery-Dailey, *Dreamers, Scribes, and Priests*, 50–51, who agree with this analysis, against Husser, *Dreams and Dream Narratives*, 139–42, who sees conveyed in Jeremiah 23 and related passages a preference by prophets such as Jeremiah for visions instead of dreams. Flannery-Dailey even suggests that Jeremiah 31:26 may refer to a dream Jeremiah experienced.

The challenge of false dreamers and prophets clearly continued into the Israelites’ post-exilic period. Almost a century after Jeremiah, Zechariah proclaimed, “for the idols have spoken vanity, and the diviners have seen a lie, and have told false dreams; they comfort in vain: therefore they went their way as a flock, they were troubled, because there was no shepherd” (Zechariah 10:2). Such biblical passages reinforce the notion that receiving revelatory dreams was a part of legitimate prophetic activity, so much so that even false prophets feigned the experience.

53. Husser, *Dreams and Dream Narratives*, 106–7; and Flannery-Dailey, *Dreamers, Scribes, and Priests*, 39–41. This arrangement is not so different from the stereotypical features in the reports of ancient Near Eastern symbolic dreams, as discussed by Oppenheim, and cited in note 25, above.

54. Husser, *Dreams and Dream Narratives*, 107.

55. Of course, *hinneh* occurs many times in the Hebrew Bible outside dream reports. Such attestations are usually in narrated speech, similar to the narration of someone announcing a dream. Thus, while *hinneh* frequently occurs in biblical dream reports, it is not unique to them.

56. See the analysis of Noegel, *Nocturnal Ciphers*, 113–82.

57. The KJV rendered the Hebrew noun *mashqeh* in Genesis 40 and 41 as “butler,” but the word is usually, and more accurately, rendered as “cupbearer” in modern English translations.

58. It is not clear from the Hebrew verb *t-l-h* whether hanging by the neck or impaling—hanging on a wooden stake—is intended here (some commentators also suggest beheading). See Noegel, *Nocturnal Ciphers*, 129–32, for a discussion of the dream reports in Genesis 40, including further examples of wordplay therein.

59. As with the occurrence of the emphatic particle *hinneh*, punning and word clusters are not unique to biblical dream reports, but are certainly well attested within them.

60. See, for example, Noegel, *Nocturnal Ciphers*, 132–34, for a discussion of this passage. Noegel observes that the report of Joseph’s interpretation includes wordplay between *sheba’*, “seven,” and *saba’*, “abundance, plenty,” in Genesis 41:29: “there come seven [*sheba’*] years of great plenty [*saba’*] throughout all the land.” In addition to sounding similar, the consonants of these two words look the same when written.

61. Noegel, *Nocturnal Ciphers*, 257.

62. Husser, *Dreams and Dream Narratives*, 89, makes this easily verified observation. There are only eight occurrences of the phrase in the Bible (see Genesis 37, 40–41; Judges 7; Daniel 2). The dreams Joseph received when he was still in Canaan (see Genesis 37:1–10) were symbolic but not really enigmatic, since his brothers and father clearly understand the implication of their symbolism. In this case, no specific interpretation is provided, although the truthfulness of these dreams is verified in the subsequent narration.

63. The word *behold* does occur in 1 Nephi 8:14, in the phrase, “I looked to behold,” but this is a variant of the verb *beheld*, and not a possible occurrence of the Hebrew particle, *hinneh*, “behold.” Nephi, in introducing his paraphrase (8:30), does employ this latter term, “but, to be short in writing, behold, he saw.”

64. See Noegel, *Nocturnal Ciphers*, throughout.

65. Noegel, *Nocturnal Ciphers*, 170.

66. Susan Easton Black, “Behold, I Have Dreamed a Dream,” 113–14, makes a partial form of this observation. Further highlighting the occurrence of the concept and word *seed* in the dream and vision is the fact that *seed* does not occur in the intervening chapters, 1 Nephi 9–10, which contain Nephi’s comments about his metal plates and his report of some of his father’s prophecies about the Messiah.

67. Noegel, *Nocturnal Ciphers*, 257.

68. See Husser, *Dreams and Dream Narratives*, 114, for comments on Joseph’s situation.

69. Another possible rhetorical feature in 1 Nephi that I do not discuss in the body of this paper is the possibility that Nephi, especially after his own vision (11–14), considered himself an analogue to his ancestor Joseph, an interpreter of other people’s dreams. If so, one wonders if this impacted the extent of Lehi’s dream that Nephi reported in his account in proportion to his own vision.

70. Not only does the corollary between the Edenic tree of life and the tree Lehi saw in his dream increase the authority of Nephi’s text, the fact that the Lord prohibited Adam and Eve from further access to the tree of life (see Genesis 3:22–24; Moses 4:28–31), allows Lehi’s dream and Nephi’s visions to illustrate the way back to the tree of life, the fruit of which will allow its worthy partakers to live with Christ and his Father. Additionally, the fact that Adam and Eve had to exit the garden after eating fruit from a tree has at least a loose correlation to Lehi and his family leaving their home and his dreaming about a tree of life.

71. See for example Alma 5:34, in which Alma quotes the Lord as saying, “Come unto me and ye shall partake of the fruit of the tree of life; yea, ye shall eat and drink of the bread and the waters of life freely.” This sounds a lot like what Nephi learned in vision: “[the rod led to] the fountain of living waters, or to the tree of life; which waters are a representation of the love of God; and . . . the tree of life was a representation of the love of God” (1 Nephi 11:25). Likewise, Alma’s counsel in Alma 5:62, “Come and be baptized unto repentance, that ye also may be partakers of the fruit of the tree of life,” sounds more in harmony with the symbols in Lehi’s dream than the tree in Eden.

72. Elsewhere the symbols in Lehi’s dream were just explained to Nephi in his vision (e.g., 1 Nephi 12:16–18).

73. See the comments of Husser, *Dreams and Dream Narratives*, 110, on this topic. Frances Flannery, “Dream and Vision Reports,” in *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism*, ed. John J. Collins and Daniel C. Harlow (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 550, relates that this view of considering dreams and their authoritative interpretations as prophecy continued through the Jewish Second Temple period, but that Rabbinic authors viewed them in much lower regard.

74. Recognizing these features also reinforces our understanding of the impact that Israelite cultural practices, as evidenced in the biblical dream reports, had on Lehi and his family. We would not expect them to have developed their own unique literary styles and cultural practices within weeks of leaving Jerusalem, and it appears that they were still heavily influenced decades later when the account of Lehi’s dream was written by Nephi on his “small” set of plates.

75. The only other occurrences of the word *dream* in the Book of Mormon as we have it are found in reference to Lehi’s dream (1 Nephi 10:2; 15:21); in Nephi’s quotation of Isaiah (2 Nephi 27:3); in Jacob’s description of his people’s lives passing as “a dream” (Jacob 7:26); in the separate and presumably chronologically earlier dream of the Jaredite Omer (Ether 9:3); and in Korihor’s claim to the Nephite high priest Giddonah that the Nephite leaders “have brought them [the Nephites] to believe, by their traditions and their dreams and their whims and their visions and their pretended mysteries,” that they would offend God if they lived differently (Alma 30:28). It is not clear from this statement whether Korihor makes specific reference to the founding dream and vision experiences of Lehi and Nephi, to an ongoing tradition of prophetic dreams and visions that is not represented in our Book of Mormon, or to both. I think the last option is the most likely.