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# Lehi's Dream and Nephi's Vision as Apocalyptic Literature

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Like the parables of Jesus, the visions of Ezekiel, or the revelation of John, the symbolism of Lehi's dream begs elucidation. A tree and a river, a building and a rod, mists of darkness and wandering multitudes—each element leaves inquisitive readers with a desire that echoes Nephi's— "to know the interpretation thereof" (1 Nephi 11:11). Even the dulled spiritual senses of Laman and Lemuel were roused in wonder until the usually apathetic brothers asked Nephi a question that paralleled his own, "What meaneth this thing which our father saw in a dream?" (1 Nephi 15:21). The dream's imagery elicited fascination, and understandably so, for "the closed door will always impel the curious to peek behind it."[1]

Of course, how wide that door will swing open—and how much is recognized within—largely depends on the readiness of the one looking inside. In Nephi's case, an eager learner found a generous teacher, and a series of Spirit-given, angel-directed visions unfolded, which now fill over ten pages of text (see 1 Nephi 11–14). Laman and Lemuel, on the other hand, received from Nephi a scant sixteen verses (see 1 Nephi 15:21–36), which consisted mostly of

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exhortation rather than explanation, and that only after considerable effort on Nephi's part to prepare his brothers to be taught.[2]

Mere length, however, is only one difference between the two successive interpretations of Lehi's dream. Far more significant is the interpretive methodology employed. In either case, the lens through which the dream's elements are interpreted casts the dream in a different light and links it to a distinct literary genre.[3] Nephi gives his brothers a straightforward image-to-object explanation, casting Lehi's dream as parable.[4] In contrast, the angel shows Nephi the interpretation in terms of salvation history, casting Lehi's dream as apocalypse.[5]

Ironically, our understanding of Lehi's dream tends to reflect the straightforward explanation given to Laman and Lemuel more than the apocalyptic interpretation that Nephi received. The allegorical approach is fitting and beneficial; however, when we limit ourselves to an "image-to-*object*" method of interpretation, we miss the richness of the "image-to-*event*" approach the angel employed. We find personal application, but we miss the panoramic, historical interpretation that Nephi was blessed to obtain. Surely we hope to mirror Nephi's spiritual aptitude more than that of his brothers. This requires us to ask what we can learn from the angel's message and method that we cannot gain from the answers offered to Laman and Lemuel, and how the details in the second narrative inform our understanding of the first.[6] In the following pages I argue that the evidence for and the benefits of an apocalyptic reading of these narratives are compelling. By recognizing Lehi's dream and Nephi's vision as paired pieces of apocalyptic literature—complete with the historical narrative, eschatology, and dualism typical of that genre—readers may be better able to place themselves, both temporally and spiritually, within its prophetic framework.[7]

## Lehi's Dream as History

While parables may find fulfillment in history,[8] it is in apocalyptic literature that history plays a starring role. Its message is typically couched in historical terms from the start, and its purpose is to guide its readers through—and prepare them for—an unfolding panorama of future events. Thus, while parable is primarily *story* (with personal application possible in any age), apocalypse is more often *history* (with specific fulfillment in the final age). Lehi's dream fits within both genres and is therefore similarly suited for both ageless

personal application (what Nephi hoped for his brothers) and specific historical fulfillment (what Nephi learned for himself). The differences appear in the manner of interpreting the dream's elements. In Laman and Lemuel's case, it was as though they had a painting of the dream to which Nephi attached labels identifying its constituent parts—each image representing an ageless spiritual reality. In Nephi's experience, as history proceeded to unfold, it was as if he was seeing each of the dream's elements take shape before his eyes—each image representing a time-bound historical event.

Unlike Lehi's dream, then, Nephi's vision contains, in the words of one scholar, "a literal dimension. Nephi sees relevant future events as they would transpire in real space and time and as they would involve real people," each of which is meant to explain an element of his father's dream.[9] He first witnessed the condescension of God as shown by the birth of his Only Begotten Son, and in doing so he saw, as it were, the tree of life bud, blossom, and bear fruit (see 1 Nephi 11:13–22). Next he beheld the ministries of Christ, John the Baptist, and the Twelve Apostles and, in essence, saw the iron rod form beside the tree and stretch out into the field beyond (see 1 Nephi 11:24–31). He then was shown the Crucifixion of Christ and the persecution of the early Church, and thus the great and spacious building began taking shape in the distance (see 1 Nephi 11:32–36). Shifting his gaze from the Old World to the New, Nephi saw "wars, and rumors of wars, and great slaughters with the sword among [his] people" (1 Nephi 12:2). Though interrupted by the ministry of Christ among his descendants, violence eventually erupted again, and consequently mists of darkness began to veil the rod and shroud the tree, filthy water began bubbling up like a river from hell, and the building he had seen earlier loomed ever larger and more sinister (see 1 Nephi 12:2–23). Time continued its onward march, and Nephi observed the deepening apostasy and the corruption of Christianity until, peering through the suffocating mists, he perceived in that great and spacious building the unmistakable trappings of a great and abominable church (see 1 Nephi 13:1–9). By then, each of the dream's elements had appeared and the field had been populated with people whose actions were divided no longer into the four distinct groups Lehi had described, but rather into the two possible directions their actions were taking them, either toward the tree or away from it, inspired by either the church of the Lamb of God or by the church of the devil. The battle between these two opposing forces continued and intensified (see 1

Nephi 13–14), and after a hint of their eventual end, the curtain closed on the apocalyptic vision of Nephi.

| Image | Object (allegorical approach) | Event (historical approach) |
|---|---|---|
| Tree of life | Love of God (see 1 Nephi 11:22) | Birth of Christ (see 1 Nephi 11:13–22) |
| Rod of iron | Word of God (see 1 Nephi 11:25; 15:24) | Ministry of Christ and his Apostles (see 1 Nephi 11:24–31) |
| Great and spacious building | Pride of the world (see 1 Nephi 11:36); vain imaginations (see 1 Nephi 12:18) | Crucifixion, persecution (see 1 Nephi 11:32–36); apostasy (see 1 Nephi 13:1–9) |
| Mists of darkness | Temptations of the devil (see 1 Nephi 12:17) | Wars and wickedness among Nephites and Lamanites (see 1 Nephi 12:2–23); continued apostasy (see 1 Nephi 13:27–28) |
| River of water | Depths of hell (see 1 Nephi 12:16) | Destruction of the wicked (see 1 Nephi 12:15; 14:3–4) |

## Apocalyptic Literature

The use of a narrative history like that of Nephi's vision is one of the distinguishing features of the apocalyptic genre. The word *apocalypse* comes from the Greek noun *apokalypsis*, meaning "revelation" or "disclosure," and what is usually being revealed is the hand of God in the events of history, especially during times when history does not appear to be going God's way. During such periods, the focus of scripture becomes increasingly eschatological, in hopes that today's trials will be eclipsed by hope for tomorrow. This explains the preoccupation of apocalyptic writers with the end times—for instance, Daniel during the Babylonian exile or John during the Roman persecution—as each looked forward longingly to the day when "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes" (Revelation 7:17; 21:4).

Both the writings of Daniel and the book of Revelation typify the apocalyptic genre, which is generally defined as "a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly

being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world."[10] Scholars have further clarified that in apocalyptic literature these "transcendent realities" are revealed by means of "visions and otherworldly journeys, supplemented by discourse or dialogue and occasionally by a heavenly book. The constant element is the presence of an angel who interprets the vision or serves as guide on the otherworldly journey. This figure indicates that the revelation is not intelligible without supernatural aid. . . . [Therefore,] the disposition of the seer before the revelation and his reaction to it typically emphasize human helplessness in the face of the supernatural."[11]

The classic illustration of the genre is the book which gives it its name, the Apocalypse of John, also known as the book of Revelation. In the book's first verse are found almost all of the characteristic elements of the genre. It is a revelation in the form of prophetic narrative, is "sent and signified . . . by [God's] angel unto his servant John," and describes "things which must shortly come to pass" (Revelation 1:1).

Judged by the scholarly definition and the example of Revelation, 1 Nephi 11–14 qualifies for the title "The Apocalypse of Nephi."[12] His vision takes the form of narrative (unfolding several thousand years of history), is mediated by otherworldly beings (at first the Spirit of the Lord and subsequently an angel), and is unintelligible without divine assistance (the revelation only occurs after Nephi has recognized his dependence on heaven's help [see 1 Nephi 10:17–11:6]). Perhaps even more significantly, Lehi's dream fits the description of apocalyptic literature as well. It too is in narrative form (the story of various groups' movements toward or away from the tree of life), Lehi is guided by an otherworldly being (the man dressed in a white robe), and he is only able to see the object of his journey when he begins "to pray unto the Lord that he would have mercy on [him]" (1 Nephi 8:8). Thus Lehi's dream may likewise be termed "The Apocalypse of Lehi."

| Apocalyptic Literature | Revelation of John | Lehi's Dream | Nephi's Vision |
|---|---|---|---|
| Narrative framework | Narrative of the earth's seven thousand years | Narrative of various person's journeys to the tree of life | Narrative of history from Jesus' day to latter days |

| Apocalyptic Literature | Revelation of John | Lehi's Dream | Nephi's Vision |
|---|---|---|---|
| Revelation | "The Revelation of Jesus Christ" (Revelation 1:1) | "I have dreamed a dream; or, in other words, I have seen a vision" (1 Nephi 8:2) | Series of visions (see 1 Nephi 11–14) |
| Otherworldly being | "Sent and signified it by his angel" (Revelation 1:1) | "A man . . . dressed in a white robe" (1 Nephi 8:5) | The Spirit of the Lord; later an angel (see 1 Nephi 11:11, 14) |
| Human recipient | "Unto his servant John" (Revelation 1:1) | Lehi | Nephi |
| Transcendent reality | "Things which must shortly come to pass" (Revelation 1:1) | The individual—coming unto Christ | The history of the world—coming unto Christ |

## Spatial versus Temporal Dimensions

As shown, the apocalyptic nature of Lehi's dream is not derived merely from its explanatory association with Nephi's vision; it is apocalyptic in its own right. In other words, it is not simply the springboard for Nephi's apocalyptic vision but rather the first half of an apocalyptic whole. And when coupled, the two accounts do together what neither version can accomplish singlehandedly: they provide both the spatial and temporal dimensions at which apocalyptic literature aims. Lehi's dream is *spatial*, dealing with a supernatural world and our journey through spiritual darkness to God's brilliant tree of life. Nephi's vision is *temporal*, foretelling the onward march of history and the role of God within it. Stated differently, Lehi's dream is *vertical*, describing our spiritual journey heavenward, toward the love of God, while Nephi's vision is *horizontal*, chronicling humanity's historical journey forward, toward the end of time.[13]

That Lehi's dream and Nephi's vision would together point both forward and upward is particularly significant. The book of Revelation—the most famous Christian apocalypse—likewise does both, though the heavenly journey found in chapter 4 is heavily overshadowed by the temporal narration of the opening of the seven seals. Yet among Jewish apocalypses, only the apocryphal *Apocalypse of Abraham* combines the two,[14] making the tandem

apocalypses of Lehi and Nephi a particularly rare and valuable gem. As one expert explains, "When consideration is given to the perennial tension between temporal and spatial definitions of salvation (e.g., mythic versus epic views of reality in antiquity and historical versus existential views today), the juxtaposition of temporal and spatial axes within ancient apocalypses seems conceptually fitting."[15]

In other words, when the ancients asked if meaning was to be found in myths (spatial/vertical) or in epics (historical/horizontal), or when people today wonder if salvation is spiritual or temporal—that is, whether it is found beyond this world (spatial/vertical) or within it (historical/horizontal)—apocalyptic literature answers yes! No wonder Nephi would later call his father's dream "a representation of things both temporal and spiritual" (1 Nephi 15:32). Together, the visions of Lehi and Nephi offer what some have considered mutually exclusive eschatologies—one "with the goal of the individual in existential terms" and the other with "the goal of history in cosmological terms."[16] They show that God is at work both in history and in the human heart. That he functions within time as well as outside of it. That not only can we be saved, but the world in which we live can be saved as well. In short, the apocalyptic contribution of this prophetic father and son shows not only what we must do to arrive at the tree of life but also what God is doing to take history in the same divine direction. They dramatize not only one's path to salvation but also the plan of salvation itself.

| Apocalyptic Literature | |
|---|---|
| Lehi's Dream | Nephi's Vision |
| Heavenly journey | Chronological narrative |
| Mystical | Historical |
| Spiritual | Temporal |
| Spatial | Sequential |
| Vertical (upward) | Horizontal (forward) |
| Mythic | Epic |
| Existential | Cosmological |

## Prophetic versus Apocalyptic Eschatology

In addition to combining the spatial and temporal aspects of apocalyptic literature, Lehi's dream and Nephi's vision also reflect the genre's continuum

between "prophetic eschatology" and "apocalyptic eschatology."[17] In both cases, eschatology "refers to a time in the future when the course of history will be changed to such an extent that one can speak of an entirely new state of reality."[18] The difference lies in how one arrives at that future state. Prophetic eschatology emphasizes personal and communal repentance and righteousness, which brings about deliverance and prosperity in this life. According to this view, present problems are largely due to one's own wickedness and therefore increased holiness will result in future blessings. Book of Mormon prophets reflect this outlook each time they repeat the promise "Inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments ye shall prosper in the land" (2 Nephi 1:20; see also 1 Nephi 2:20; 2 Nephi 1:9; 4:4; Jarom 1:9; Omni 1:6; Mosiah 1:7; 2:22, 31; Alma 9:13; 36:1, 30; 37:13; 38:1; 48:15, 25; 50:20).

Apocalyptic eschatology, meanwhile, draws a picture of present conditions that is far more difficult to correct. Human reform alone will be insufficient to effect the needed change, and thus God will have to intervene in the course of history to preserve his people and bring about their redemption. In this view, evil is largely an outer enemy, one that God alone can overcome, doing so with cataclysmic events meant to alter the world order. Thus the scriptures—Bible, Book of Mormon, and Doctrine and Covenants alike—speak of a new heaven and a new earth (see Isaiah 65:17; 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1; Ether 13:9; D&C 29:23–24).

The eschatologies presented in Lehi's dream and Nephi's vision are, respectively, prophetic and apocalyptic.[19] In his dream, Lehi focused on the personal actions that would bring individuals to the tree; "whose fruit was desirable to make one happy" (1 Nephi 8:10): his own prayers, which brought him out of the "dark and dreary wilderness" (v. 4); his family members' heeding him when he beckoned them to come unto him (vv. 14–15); the multitudes' desire to "obtain the path" (v. 21); and the willingness of still others to "[hold] fast to the rod of iron" as it led through the mists of darkness (v. 30).[20] In each case, these individuals held the keys to their own deliverance—prayer was rewarded with prosperity, listening with learning, seeking with obtaining, and endurance with triumph. Apocalyptic literature always has "a hortatory aspect,"[21] and each of these descriptions was in fact an admonition. Moreover, by addressing his dream specifically to Laman and Lemuel,[22] exhorting them to hearken at the end of the story, preaching and prophesying unto them "of many things," and bidding them obey (vv. 37–38), Lehi placed an immediate

solution squarely into the hands of his murmuring sons. Yes, in their journey from Jerusalem they too were wandering through what seemed "a dark and dreary wilderness," all because a white-robed man—in this case their father—had bade them follow. But if they would only "pray unto the Lord" and ask for "his tender mercies," the darkness would disappear, the field of opportunity would appear, and they too would gain access to a source of "exceedingly great joy" (vv. 4–12). No wonder Nephi's later words to his brothers were likewise more invitation than explanation. Keeping to the prophetic eschatology of his father, he "exhort[ed] them with all the energies of [his] soul, and with all the faculty which [he] possessed" to give heed, to remember, and to obey (1 Nephi 15:25).

Nephi certainly could have given them much more than that, having just descended from his own series of panoramic visions. But the message he received had been couched in different terms—characterized by apocalyptic, rather than prophetic, eschatology. The dream that Laman and Lemuel had heard was "intimate, symbolic, and salvific. Nephi's vision [was] collective, historic, and eschatological."[23] Compared to what Nephi saw, the problem of wandering multitudes was only a minor problem, one largely resolvable "in house." The real drama was a cosmological struggle between good and evil, one that the righteous could win only if "the power of the Lamb of God . . . descended upon the saints of the church of the Lamb, and upon the covenant people of the Lord" (1 Nephi 14:14). God himself would have to intervene for his people to gain an eventual victory and, throughout Nephi's vision, he does.[24] In the discovery of America, the independence of the United States, and the Restoration of the gospel, the Lord is a principal player, at work backstage until "the time cometh that he shall manifest himself unto all nations" (1 Nephi 13:42). Unlike Lehi's dream, which focuses on individual choice rather than divine intervention, Nephi's vision portrays a God at work in the world, "manifest[ing] himself . . . in word, and also in power, in very deed" (1 Nephi 14:1). For Lehi the plea was "Come and partake"; for Nephi it was "Thy kingdom come."

## Dualism

Whether spatial or temporal in its narrative or prophetic or apocalyptic in its eschatology, apocalyptic literature typically conveys its message in strongly dualistic terms. In the spatial/temporal dichotomy, whether moving

upward through space or forward through time, one is leaving a baser, more worldly reality for a higher, more heavenly one. The latter (prophetic/apocalyptic) portrays the struggle as being between righteousness and wickedness in this life or between the forces of good and evil at the end of times. Thus the apocalyptic work itself reflects the context in which it was written: the turmoil unleashed by two opposing forces, and the choice between them that must be made.

It is in clarifying this choice—and forcing it upon us—that dualism in apocalyptic literature makes its greatest contribution.[25] Middle ground is effectively eliminated, leaving readers no longer able to "halt . . . between two opinions" (1 Kings 18:21). Thus, in works like the book of Revelation, it is not only the "lukewarm" Laodiceans that are challenged to choose between hot and cold (see Revelation 3:15–16); each reader is presented with the same clear choice, with both options depicted in graphic, dualistic terms. The decision the book of Revelation forces upon its readers is summarized eloquently by one author:

> Will it be war or peace? Repentance or continued wickedness? Hatred or love? Vengeance or forgiveness? Zion or Babylon? Apostasy or Restoration? Destruction or salvation? The plowshare or the sword? Ultimately the decision is that to which John devotes the entire book of Revelation. Will it be the grasping dragon or the sacrificing Lamb? The devouring beast or the growing man child offering his gentle iron rod? The bride clothed in the sun or the whore appareled in her trappings? The harvest joy of the whitened fields or the despair of the grapes of wrath?[26]

This tendency to juxtapose opposing elements is also present in Lehi's dream, and to an even greater extent, in Nephi's vision. In Lehi's case, the "dark and dreary wilderness" gives way to the white and desirable fruit (1 Nephi 8:4–12). The great and spacious building is placed in opposition to the tree of life. And beside the river of filthy water is an iron rod that "extend[s] along [its] bank" (1 Nephi 8:19), the two possibilities running literally and symbolically in parallel. Wherever one might be along the path, both the turbulence of the dirty water and the stability of the iron rod are choices within easy reach.

Similarly, Nephi's vision foretells a drama of good versus evil presented in stark dualistic opposition: the "multitudes of the earth . . . gathered together

to fight against the apostles of the Lamb" (1 Nephi 11:34); "the power of God" upon one group of Gentiles and "the wrath of God" upon those who "gathered together against them" (1 Nephi 13:18); the loss of "plain and precious things" from the "book of the Lamb of God" and the coming forth of "other books . . . by the power of the Lamb" to restore those truths that were lost (1 Nephi 13:26–40). Throughout his vision, Nephi sees the righteous and the wicked divided, in one way or another, by "a great and a terrible gulf" (1 Nephi 12:18; see also 1 Nephi 15:28–30), too wide to be bridged by indecision. All would have to choose one side of that gulf or the other, for, as foretold in the vision, the continuous work of God would be "everlasting, either on the one hand or on the other," with "peace and life eternal" fixed opposite captivity and destruction (1 Nephi 14:7).

The dualism in Nephi's vision becomes most pronounced as the narrative shifts from specific images and events to the opposing powers behind those elements. In a dramatic declaration, Nephi's angelic guide presents a cosmology in which all things are subsumed into two competing camps. "There are save two churches only," he affirms; "the one is the church of the Lamb of God, and the other is the church of the devil." A classic example of dualism, there is no middle ground, "wherefore, whoso belongeth not to the church of the Lamb of God belongeth to that great church, which is the mother of abominations; and she is the whore of all the earth" (1 Nephi 14:10). Black or white. Good or evil. No places of neutrality in which to hide. The church of the devil would exist "among all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people," and so would the church of the Lamb; though its numbers would be smaller, it too would be "upon all the face of the earth" (1 Nephi 14:11–12). Lest we limit this "church" to a single ecclesiastical entity, Nephi later refers to it in terms that clearly show its symbolic, archetypal nature.[27] Therefore, rather than symbolizing a specific religious organization per se, the great and abominable church consists of anyone "that fighteth against Zion, both Jew and Gentile, both bond and free, both male and female, . . . for they are they who are the whore of all the earth." As with the earlier verse, this one also ends in a definite duality in which two—and only two—options exist: "For they who are not for me are against me, saith our God" (2 Nephi 10:16).

Throughout Nephi's vision, the church of the devil is decidedly against the church of the Lamb. It is the moving force behind the mists of darkness, the river of filth, and the great and spacious building, which, like the church

it represents, was similarly "filled with people, both old and young, both male and female" (1 Nephi 8:27). In opposition to the forces of righteousness, it "slayeth the saints of God," it "pervert[s] the right ways of the Lord," and it "fight[s] against the Lamb of God" wherever it may be (1 Nephi 13:5, 27; 14:13). As Nephi learned, "the devil . . . [is] the founder of it," and the desires of those who belong to its ranks center on worldliness and materialism ("gold, and silver, and silks, and scarlets, and fine-twined linen, and all manner of precious clothing"), the lusts of the flesh ("harlots"), and pride ("the praise of the world") (1 Nephi 13:6–9). In this respect, its tactics mirror the adversary's three original temptations of Christ (see Matthew 4:1–11) as well as the downfalls of the three kings of united Israel.[28] Indeed, the church of the devil is as old as the church of the Lamb it opposes.

## Parallels to the Book of Revelation

With its historical narrative, its apocalyptic eschatology, and its dualistic juxtaposition of good and evil, the Apocalypse of Nephi is strikingly similar to the Apocalypse of John, the archetype of the apocalyptic genre. The threefold desires of the great and abominable church parallel the images of Babylon that populate the book of Revelation, where John likewise paints pictures of an enemy that influences through pride and power (the beasts in Revelation 13), worldliness and materialism (the merchant city in Revelation 18), and the lusts of the flesh (the great whore in Revelation 17). Both apocalypses personify the kingdom of the devil as "the mother of harlots" (1 Nephi 14:17; Revelation 17:5), who sits "upon many waters" (1 Nephi 14:11; Revelation 17:1) and fights against the people of God (see 1 Nephi 14:13; Revelation 13:7). She brings mists of darkness out of the chaos of war (see 1 Nephi 12:2–5; Revelation 9:1–11) and causes her victims to stumble, either by "pervert[ing] the right ways of the Lord" (1 Nephi 13:27) or, stated more symbolically, by making them "drunk with the wine of her fornication" (Revelation 17:2). Nevertheless, the kingdom of the devil falls—whether as Babylon (see Revelation 18:2) or the great and spacious building (see 1 Nephi 11:36)—and Satan is cast into the bottomless pit (see Revelation 20:1–3), which he and his followers had dug for others (see 1 Nephi 14:3). At that time, only the faithful Saints remain, dressed in white robes of righteousness (see 1 Nephi 12:10–11; Revelation 7:13–15; 19:8), having overcome the world. It is then their blessing to enjoy the living water and the tree of life (see 1 Nephi 11:25; Revelation 22:1–2).

The shift from wickedness to righteousness in each account centers on the battle over revealed truth. In John's account, he sees a beast bearing the name of blasphemy, worshipped by the wicked and at war with the Saints. Elsewhere called "the false prophet" (see Revelation 16:13; 19:20; 20:10), this beast—as a counterfeit Christ—has "two horns *like a lamb*" but speaks "as a dragon," bent on "deceiv[ing] them that dwell on the earth" by means of "miracles," "great wonders," and signs "from heaven" (Revelation 13:11–14; emphasis added). Of note is the fact that each element in this description of the beast bears a religious connotation, giving context to the battle between good and evil that John describes.[29] Therefore, it is only fitting that John would counter his depiction of "another beast" (Revelation 13:11) with the promise of "another angel," one who would have "the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth" (Revelation 14:6).

Similarly, much of Nephi's vision of the great and abominable church centers on its efforts to deceive by "tak[ing] away from the gospel of the Lamb many parts which are plain and most precious; and also many covenants of the Lord" (1 Nephi 13:26). Nephi saw the book that contained the gospel of the Lamb, but devoid of the plain and precious parts that had been removed by the great and abominable church, "an exceedingly great many [would] stumble, yea, insomuch that Satan [would have] great power over them" (1 Nephi 13:28–30). Nevertheless, just as the angel did in John's revelation, God would restore those truths that had been lost, bringing forth "other books . . . by the power of the Lamb" to "make known the plain and precious things which [had] been taken away" (1 Nephi 13:39–40).

Though striking, these parallels between the Apocalypses of Nephi and John should not come as a surprise, for the one was a prelude to the other. In concluding his vision, Nephi foresaw his New Testament counterpart, "one of the twelve apostles of the Lamb" who would "see and write the remainder of these things" (1 Nephi 14:20–21). And though Nephi was forbidden to write the rest of what would be contained in Revelation, it was nevertheless part of what he saw in vision (see 1 Nephi 14:24–25). John and Nephi bore tandem testimonies of what God would do in the last days.

## Application in Apocalypse

Speaking of the vision of the tree of life to students at Brigham Young University, President Boyd K. Packer affirmed, "You may think that Lehi's

dream or vision has no special meaning for you, but it does. You are in it; *all of us are in it*."[30] Depending on our approach to the dream, we may see ourselves "in it" symbolically, as in Lehi's version, or historically, as in Nephi's account, but in either case, for us "this story is reality," as an earlier General Authority declared.[31] In truth, we simultaneously appear in both genres, since our spiritual journey to the tree of life takes place within the temporal framework of Nephi's eschatological vision. Our individual quest to partake of the fruit is therefore inseparable from the Lord's plans to establish his kingdom. In both cases, we are players on the stage of salvation history, enticed by two opposing forces in the drama's decisive final scenes.

By contrast, readers typically place themselves within Lehi's dream alone, without positioning that dream in Nephi's prophetic chronology. Unfortunately, by separating the two accounts, we miss the eschatology and duality inherent in the apocalyptic narrative. If, on the other hand, we maintain a sense of both chronology and duality in our reading of Lehi's dream (projecting Nephi's interpretive framework onto the elements his father saw), the account becomes something like a cosmic chess match between God and the adversary, each player attempting to win us to his side. The contest begins as God beckons us to an incomparable tree bearing love and life. In opposition, Satan sends forth a river of filth bent on sweeping us up in its current. Sensing our danger, the Lord counters by marking a path that leads safely to the tree of life (and out of the river's reach), only to find the adversary conjuring a spacious structure filled with mocking masses—a mirage of materialism to lure us from the path of safety. In response, the Lord erects an iron rod designed to anchor us to the path, a guardrail meant to rouse us from our wanderings. Yet Satan, undeterred, either conceals that rod in mists of obscurity or removes whole sections ("plain and precious parts") under cover of darkness, hoping to blur the boundary between journeying safely and wandering lost. Within this apocalyptic framework, both the individual and society itself are marching forward, pulled between the poles of righteousness and wickedness—the tree of life and the great and spacious building, the church of the Lamb and the church of the devil.

In the end, choosing Christ and coming unto him becomes the message of both narratives and constitutes what President Packer called "the central message of the Book of Mormon."[32] In Lehi's dream, Christ is "the source of eternal life, [and] the living evidence of divine love." In Nephi's vision, he is

"the means whereby God will fulfill his covenant with the house of Israel and indeed the entire family of man."[33] In either version—or better said, through a combination of the two—we see the purposes assigned these narratives by Nephi: that all might "come to the knowledge of their Redeemer and the very points of his doctrine, that they may know how to come unto him and be saved" (1 Nephi 15:14).

## Notes

1. S. Michael Wilcox, *Who Shall Be Able to Stand? Finding Personal Meaning in the Book of Revelation* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 7.

2. To further illustrate the difference in depth between the two explanations, consider the fact that while Nephi needed only one verse apiece to clarify the tree and rod symbols for his brothers (see 1 Nephi 15:22, 24), the angel led Nephi through a trio of visions and forced him to wrestle with a question he could not at first answer. Only then did the angel confirm the explanation that Nephi was finally able to deduce (see 1 Nephi 11:8–25). Along the way, Nephi saw the mother of Jesus and the birth of Christ and came to understand the condescension of God, all by way of answers to his question about the tree.

3. Similarly, Steven L. Olsen wrote, "While Lehi's and Nephi's experiences both center on the plan of salvation, they represent, for the most part, different literary genres. Lehi's dream is largely allegorical, while Nephi's vision is largely a historical narrative." "The Centrality of Nephi's Vision," *Religious Educator* 11, no. 2 (2010): 52.

4. The parabolic approach seems most common in treatments of Lehi's dream. In essence, we see it as the story of a spiritual journey (much like the parables of the prodigal son or the good Samaritan). Or we see it as a quest for what is most desirable (like the parable of the pearl of great price) or as a choice between good and evil (like the parable of the wheat and tares). For an insightful parallel between Lehi's dream and the parable of the sower, centering on the four different groups of people presented in each narrative, see Jeffrey R. Holland, *Christ and the New Covenant* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 161–62.

5. Viewing Lehi's dream as apocalyptic literature fits well within the framework of "visionary literature" proposed for the dream by Charles Swift in his article, "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.

6. For pedagogical insights relating to the angel's methodology, see David A. Bednar, "Seek Learning by Faith," *Religious Educator* 7, no. 3 (2006): 4.

7. Richard Dilworth Rust has written, "The impact of *what* the Book of Mormon says often is created through *how* it is said." *Feasting on the Word: The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997), 2. Eric D. Huntsman cites this statement in his own discussion of genre theory, affirming, "A major literary concern when we read a passage of scripture is to identify what

kind of writing the passage is and how this genre affects how we read it." "Teaching through Exegesis: Helping Students Ask Questions of the Text," *Religious Educator* 6, no. 1 (2005): 114.

8. This is especially true when the parable or allegory in question is viewed through the expanded lens of the Restoration, with its emphasis on the establishment of the kingdom of God in the last days. For example, section 86 of the Doctrine and Covenants clearly places Christ's parable of the wheat and tares in the context of the Apostasy, the latter-day gathering, and the Final Judgment. Joseph Smith saw similar historical fulfillment in the parables of the kingdom found in Matthew 13, which trace the destiny of the kingdom of God from the Savior's time "even unto the end of the world." See *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 2:264–72. For a discussion of Joseph Smith's historical view of the parables of the kingdom, especially the parable of the sower, see Jared M. Halverson, "Of Soils and Souls: The Parable of the Sower," *Religious Educator* 9, no. 3 (2008): 32–36. The allegory of the olive tree in Jacob 5 is likewise steeped in history, chronicling—in advance—the Lord's ongoing efforts to redeem his people. In each of these cases, timeless truths double as concrete historical developments. They are as much about prophecy as they are about principles.

9. Olsen, "Nephi's Vision," 53. See also Corbin T. Volluz, "Lehi's Dream of the Tree of Life: Springboard to Prophecy," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 2 (Fall 1993): 14–38.

10. John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 5; see also Paul D. Hanson, "Apocalypses and Apocalypticism," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:279.

11. Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination*, 5–6.

12. Eric D. Huntsman refers to the "Apocalypse of Nephi" in "Teaching through Exegesis," 120. Stephen E. Robinson also categorizes Nephi's vision as apocalyptic literature in "Nephi's 'Great and Abominable Church,'" *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7, no. 1 (1998): 34–36.

13. "Nephi's historic-prophetic perspective extended beyond a cyclical view to a linear and teleological view of history as he elaborated broader themes in the divine plan." Roy A. Prete, "God in History? Nephi's Answer," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14, no. 2 (2005): 37.

14. See Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination*, 6.

15. Hanson, "Apocalypses and Apocalypticism," 279.

16. Hans Schwarz, "Eschatology," in Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price, eds., *A New Handbook of Christian Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 158.

17. See Hanson, "Apocalypses and Apocalypticism," 281.

18. David L. Petersen, "Eschatology," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 2:575.

19. Another way to consider these two distinct perspectives is by associating the prophetic view and the apocalyptic view with what scholars have differentiated, respectively, as the Old Testament hope for blessings in this life and the New Testament expectation for the coming of the kingdom of God.

20. For an excellent summary of the various means by which one may reach the tree of life, see Matthew O. Richardson, "Vision, Voice, Path, and Rod: Coming to Partake

of the Fulness," in *The Fulness of the Gospel: Foundational Teachings from the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 26–38.

21. Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination*, 6.

22. When relating the dream, Lehi refers to Laman and Lemuel with the second-person "you" (see 1 Nephi 8:4). He refers to Nephi and Sam using the third-person "they" (see 1 Nephi 8:3).

23. John W. Welch, "Connections between the Visions of Lehi and Nephi," *Insights*, July 1993, 2.

24. Roy A. Prete has written, "As a truly great prophet with an unusually clear view of future developments, Nephi provides a vast sweep of God's role in human affairs for the accomplishment of divine purposes." "God in History," 37.

25. In words well suited to the history portrayed in apocalyptic literature, Frederic Farrar wrote that "the object of Prophecy in all ages has been moral warning infinitely more than even the vaguest chronological indication, since to the voice of Prophecy as to the eye of God all Time is but one eternal Present." Frederic W. Farrar, *The Life of Christ* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1999), 542.

26. Wilcox, *Who Shall Be Able to Stand?*, 215.

27. For a discussion of the great and abominable church in both historical and typological terms, see Robinson, "Nephi's Great and Abominable Church," 32–39.

28. In Christ's temptations in the wilderness, changing stones into bread was a temptation of the lusts of the flesh, casting himself down from the temple was a temptation of pride, and being offered the kingdoms of the earth was a temptation of worldliness and materialism. In ancient Israel, King Saul fell to a sin of pride, King David fell to the lusts of the flesh, and King Solomon fell to worldliness and materialism. Satan may alter his tactics, but he still uses the same three types of temptation. The desires of the great and abominable church are still the same.

29. See Wilcox, *Who Shall Be Able to Stand?*, 188–90.

30. Boyd K. Packer, "Lehi's Dream and You," in *Brigham Young University 2006–2007 Speeches* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University), 258; emphasis added.

31. William Grant Bangerter, "Coming through the Mists," *Ensign*, May 1984, 28.

32. Boyd K. Packer, "The Things of My Soul," *Ensign*, May 1986, 61.

33. Holland, *Christ and the New Covenant*, 162.