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Lehi's Dream and Nephi's Vision as Used by Church Leaders

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One time I (Woodger) was babysitting my four-year-old nephew and went into the other room as he was taking a bath. After a few minutes, he ran into the front room stark naked, holding a little plastic sword and yelling, "Look, Aunt Mary Jane. I am a stripling warrior!" Though my four-year-old nephew was unfamiliar with the meaning of *stripling*, he was well acquainted with the Book of Mormon story of the stripling warriors. In many ways we are all like my nephew; we have a basic but incomplete knowledge of certain scriptural symbols. For the Church, this may be especially true of the symbols found in 1 Nephi 8–14.

Former Primary general president Cheryl C. Lant agreed with this premise when she spoke to Brigham Young University students in January 2010. Referring to the symbols found in 1 Nephi 8, she said, "Now these images that I have suggested to you today may seem very common. You have heard about them since you were in Primary. But they are basic. They are essential for us not only to know but to understand."[1] Sister Lant took it as a given that BYU students knew and understood the symbols presented in this scripture block.

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For the current generation of Latter-day Saints, Lehi's dream is commonplace. The usage of Lehi's dream and Nephi's subsequent vision as recorded in 1 Nephi 8–14 has become one of the most oft-quoted scriptural blocks in general conference addresses. Yet this does not mean that the dream has been used the same way from era to era. This study will identify who has referenced the dream-vision; in what context it is used; and the interpretations, analysis, and application that are shared among these addresses. This paper is divided into three sections, each corresponding to a period of Church history. The first period covers Joseph Smith's day until the turn of the twentieth century, when the images were used to describe the political, religious, and social separation between the Church and the world as well as the importance of following the Brethren. The second period covers 1900 to 1985, when the dream was used to counter the rise of secular, academic humanism and when it expanded to include the growing importance of missionary work and the importance of holding to gospel standards. In the final period, from 1985 to the present, greater emphasis was given to individual challenges resulting from the relativism of modern society and the significance of family relationships in our spiritual progress.

Joseph Smith's Day to 1900

Use of Lehi's dream begins with an inauspicious start. The Prophet Joseph Smith made some very definitive statements in reference to the Book of Mormon. He once declared, "Take away the Book of Mormon and the revelations, and where is our religion? We have none" (Joseph Smith—History 2:52). He also stated that the volume is "the most correct of any book on earth . . . and a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book" (introduction of the Book of Mormon). Though the Book of Mormon certainly was powerful in the early Church as a catalyst for conversion, Joseph Smith never quoted 1 Nephi 8 in any of his recorded sermons, teachings, writings, or journals, and "when Joseph Smith outlined the Church's doctrine and undertook to expound in detail his personal 'religious principles' in an 1835 'Letter to the Elders of the Church,' he quoted at great length from Luke, Acts, Revelation, Matthew, Isaiah, and Hebrews to teach the fundamentals" rather than turning to Book of Mormon prophets like Lehi and Nephi.[2] The reason for this is unclear, though historian Alex Smith, who has done extensive work on the *Joseph Smith Papers*, suggests that Joseph

considered his translation of the text of the Book of Mormon a finished task. It was a missionary text, and he had finished his responsibility.[3]

At first glance, it would appear that those who led the Church after the Prophet's martyrdom continued to refer mostly to the Old and New Testaments when applying scripture. Terryl L. Givens reminds us that as Brigham Young brought the Saints west, "pioneers referred to themselves as a modern-day Israel, being led across the plains by a modern Moses. . . . And that identification has been thorough and continuous to the present day. True enough, Utah would eventually found her Lehi and her Bountiful . . . [but] it was the Camp of Israel, not the Clans of Lehi, that moved across the plains. Old Testament names and places occur some fifteen to twenty times on Utah maps. Book of Mormon sources are confined to three prophets, one city, and a honeybee."[4] Yet allusions to the dream in the *Journal of Discourses* suggest that the dream was known and had become, or at least was becoming, a part of the Church's scriptural awareness. As early as 1853, Brigham Young alluded to the dream, in particular to the "finger of scorn" pointed by those in the large and spacious building. In fact, five times from 1853 to 1870 President Young references this term, using it to describe the derision the world had concerning the Church, the missionaries, and even the clothing made by the members. In all of these examples, President Young appears to use the image as a means to build Church solidarity, though in one particular address he encouraged listeners to make sure they did not wander into "forbidden paths," that they stay true to the narrow path that led to eternal life. Though the term *iron rod* is not mentioned in this reference, President Young did say that the Holy Ghost would guide them so they did not lose their way.[5]

The imagery of people becoming lost without the iron rod is a common one in the *Journal of Discourses*. In 1879, Elder Erastus Snow focused on the fact that those who retained hold of the iron rod successfully negotiated the mists and clouds of darkness, while those that did not became lost.[6] President Joseph F. Smith warned that those who turned from the truth and wandered into "forbidden paths" could not claim the blessings of the gospel, and President George Q. Cannon wondered how long it would take for Church members to stray into the "forbidden paths" if it were not for the "knowledge of God and the ordinances."[7] In 1859, Elder George A. Smith declared that those who did not follow the Holy Spirit were "blinded by the mists of darkness."[8]

In 1863, President John Taylor made passing reference to the importance of grasping the iron rod. Like President Young, he taught that continually holding on represented having God's Spirit with us always.[9] Elder Orson Hyde in 1873 mentioned the peace that one may gain by holding on to the iron rod.[10] Significantly, both he and President Taylor compared holding the iron rod to engaging in regular prayer. President Daniel H. Wells stated that holding the rod kept one from swerving to the right or to the left, with the rod being the promise of exaltation. Elder Orson Pratt associated the surety of the iron rod with the Holy Spirit of Promise.[11] Perhaps the most detailed text alluding to the dream was a discourse by Orson Pratt in 1872, in which he used the dream to describe that at times, like Lehi, we are left on our own to experience the challenges of our own journeys in the darkness. Though he suggests that in those times the Spirit may not be directly with us, he did say that Lehi was not left alone but had the iron rod to lead him to the tree of life.[12]

In all of these references, we see similar usages, through three main scenes. Though the tree of life is mentioned in all of them, of particular interest for the early Apostles was the importance of the iron rod. In most cases, the iron rod was understood to be the word of God, which included an understanding of the Spirit as a guide. Concern was expressed about losing one's way and becoming lost, and a distinction was made between the Saints on the path and the world that mocked them and pointed the finger of scorn. This last element is of interest because at the time these talks were given the Church's relationship with the outside world could be described as one of antagonism, or at least opposition.

Near the end of the century, the dream was used by the Brethren to describe specific scenarios challenging the Saints. For instance, in April 1888, Elder Franklin D. Richards taught: "This vision that was here seen, though it applied to the people who received it, and to the new land to which they were going, still the circumstances attendant upon them were in some respects so analogous to the circumstances of the present day, that it seems to me that from this lesson we may derive profit and be strengthened in our work and induced to hold firmly to this rod of iron, . . . which is the word of God."[13] In his discourse, Elder Richards equated the situation of Latter-day Saint fathers and husbands who were imprisoned because of persecution to that of walking in the mists of darkness. Closing his talk, he declared, "There will come to those who are true and faithful, these manifestations, from time to

time, that will show them from one step to the next the way to the Tree of Life."[14] A year later, Elder John W. Taylor referenced Lehi's vision as he spoke about the Saints' morals and ethics—which he felt were lacking, due in part to the youth of the Church being too caught up into the things of the world. He warned that immorality led one into paths of darkness.[15] The next year, Elder Anthon H. Lund paraphrased the entire dream and used the law of tithing and obedience as a metaphor for holding to the rod of iron.[16]

1901 to 1985

General Authorities' use of the dream in the twentieth century continued to relate the importance of grasping the iron rod, or heeding the words of the prophets.[17] For example, the iron rod was used to represent revealed, scriptural authority, as opposed to secular, academic humanism. This application began as early as 1897, when President George Q. Cannon of the First Presidency admonished Saints to grasp the rod of iron by accepting revelation concerning the divine nature of man rather than getting caught up by the theory of evolution.[18]

In 1909, Elder Rulon S. Wells warned about so-called "new religion," alluding to a publication written by Harvard university president and professor emeritus Charles Eliot earlier that summer. Eliot had expressed the need for a "new religion," one not based on authority or eschatological promises. In his talk, Elder Wells reminded the Saints that following the iron rod would get them to the tree of life, where they could partake of the fruit and feel the love of God. He also warned the Saints that they should fear God and not just rely on His love. Elder Wells explained that a fear of the penalties associated with disobedience should serve as a driving force for obedience; in other words, Church members could use fear to drive them to the fruit of the tree.[19]

That same year, Elder Stephen L. Chipman repeated almost verbatim the admonition Elder Wells had given: "If we will do so, clinging to the word of God, remembering the penalties that come from transgressing and going against it, we will eventually arrive at the tree and partake of that love of God."[20] Eight years later, Elder Chipman, concerned with an apparent growing skepticism and "reason" among the youth, again referred to Lehi's dream, promising that if Latter-day Saints study the scriptures, they "will cling to the iron rod, and will not be led astray by the wisdom and by the cunning craftiness of men."[21]

In October 1916, Elder James E. Talmage contrasted the "theories and conceptions of men" with the "the rod of certainty, the rod of revealed truth" of the restored gospel.[22] Likewise, Anthony W. Ivins, referencing again the concept of evolution versus the divine nature of man, talked about holding on to the iron rod, the scriptures, and revealed revelation, promising that "it will bear us safely through, until we find our way back into the presence of our Creator."[23] A year later, Elder Anthon H. Lund mentioned the iron rod with a warning: "There is a great danger before our young people in modern ideas that are being taught them, and we want to be on our guard that they take the word of God, the iron rod, and cling to it." Elder Lund warned Latter-day Saints about letting youth fall into the trap of thinking that the world is a "self-running machine" and that God is not needed.[24]

As the century progressed, the dream continued to be used to confirm the importance of following the Brethren, though it also began to be used in two new applications, the first of which was missionary work. In 1918, Elder Charles A. Callis, then mission president of the Southern States Mission, spoke of inviting, like Lehi of old, those who did not possess the gospel: "I invite you, my fellow-beings, who are not in the Church 'to come and be baptized unto repentance, that ye also may be partakers of the fruit of the tree of life.'"[25] Similarly, in 1924, Elder James E. Talmage compared missionaries to Lehi, who beckoned to his own family after he partook of the fruit.[26]

In April 1929, Elder Talmage used the dream to distinguish between revelation and secular knowledge, tailoring the dream to those who were engaged in academics. In his address he portrayed the iron rod as being important for those who were exploring academic research. He encouraged scholars be true to their testimony so they would not be led away by the "lack of physical evidences [of the gospel] in the eyes of the academic/scientific community." In his analogy Elder Talmage used a particularly interesting approach to holding to the iron rod. Whereas most references speak of grasping the rod, he spoke of tying one's guide rope to the rod: "To those of you who want to explore I say, in all earnestness, tie fast your guide rope to the rod of iron, which is defined as the Word of God. Hold to it firmly, and you may venture out into the region of the unexplored in search of truth if you will; but do not loosen your hold on the rope; and remember that there is very little safety in holding to a rope that is loose at both ends."[27]

We see a new focus in 1943, when Elder Harold B. Lee compared individuals near the tree of life to Saints who had stored food during World War II. He compared those who were accusing Church members of being hoarders to those "who sat in the house of Lehi's dreams, and pointed fingers of scorn." [28] During the same year, Elder Marion G. Romney used the dream as an example of the necessity of studying the word of God in order to develop unity among the members, an important principle stressed during the war.[29] In both cases, the dream was used to help solidify the specific welfare plan espoused by the Church leadership.

In April conference in 1957, Elder Marion D. Hanks associated his experience traversing a cave with the dream to emphasize to the youth that they need not abandon the gospel truth merely because the answers were not as satisfactory as they would wish. He warned the youth against using secular or worldly views to govern their thinking by comparing the mists of darkness to a factory fire in which many died because smoke and fear kept them from finding an exit door. Similarly, said Elder Hanks, those who got caught up in academic institutions and abandon their testimony could also become lost and unable to find an emergency exit door which leads to the Savior.[30]

In 1961, Elder Harold B. Lee addressed the concern among the Brethren about the science and philosophies of man attempting to discredit the gospel of Jesus Christ. Elder Lee identified four groups of people represented in the dream: "Those who partook of the fruit . . . and remained steadfast; those who did partake and then were blinded by mists of darkness which arose from the river and lost their way; those who went so far as to taste the fruit and then fell away because they were ridiculed by those living in spacious dwellings, representing the riches of the world; and finally those who refused to partake of the delicious fruit of the tree." Elder Lee also spoke of the necessity of good works. He stated that the "good fruits of the Church" come from the "good works of its members."[31]

Later that decade, in 1966, Elder Delbert L. Stapley's conference address focused on an interpretation of Lehi's dream. Elder Stapley's thorough discussion of Nephi's reaction to his father's dream gave various modern interpretations of each symbol.[32]

In 1971, President Harold B. Lee compared the mists of darkness to "the numerous institutions of secular and theological learning" and the great and spacious building to "the mockery and ridicule of the world." President Lee

declared, "If there is any one thing most needed in this time of tumult and frustration, when men and women and youth and young adults are desperately seeking for answers to the problems which afflict mankind, it is an 'iron rod.'"[33] He quoted an article from the *Wall Street Journal* that stated, "Religion represents the accumulation of man's insight over thousands of years into such questions [of life] . . . [which are] at the root of man's restlessness."[34] He then stated, "Wouldn't it be a great thing if all who are well schooled in secular learning could hold fast to the 'iron rod,' or the word of God, which could lead them, through faith, to an understanding, rather than to have them stray away into strange paths of man-made theories and be plunged into the murky waters of disbelief and apostasy?" He also said that man is hungry for a knowledge of who they are, where they come from, and what their purpose is. His address encouraged Latter-day Saints not to let go of the rod or get lost in the mists of darkness that were being created by the theories of man.[35]

In April 1975, Elder Ezra Taft Benson, then President of the Quorum of the Twelve, spoke of the iron rod as being the Book of Mormon, warning, "Every Latter-day Saint should make the study of this book a lifetime pursuit. Otherwise he is placing his soul in jeopardy and neglecting that which could give spiritual and intellectual unity to his whole life. There is a difference between a convert who is built on the rock of Christ through the Book of Mormon and stays hold of that iron rod, and one who is not."[36]

The theme of missionary work emerged again when Elder Carlos E. Asay associated the missionary's zeal with Lehi's desire to have his family come to the tree[37] and when Elder Robert L. Backman, a former mission president, urged would-be missionaries to retain a hold on the iron rod.[38] One particularly interesting application associated with missionary work is found in Elder David B. Haight's April 1979 talk, in which he spoke about the responsibility of members to make sure new converts retained a hold on the iron rod of the restored gospel.[39]

In 1984, Elder William Grant Bangerter said, "All you who have read 1 Nephi, chapter 8, will recall the scene. If you have not read it, I wish you would do so and get the feeling and the vision of this picture."[40] In his address, Elder Bangerter referred to a painting that depicted the dream that a young man in prison had produced. After narrating the dream, Elder Bangerter stated, "I know of no more graphic description of the condition of those who call themselves Latter-day Saints in relation to the influences of the world

than this great vision. This story is reality. It is a great prophecy. It is a vivid warning." He stated that those people who wandered into forbidden paths of destruction could represent modern day Latter-day Saints who were easily influenced by the thoughts of the world. [41]

In many of these talks one can discern concerns of Church leadership about the ever-increasing threat of secular, humanistic approaches to mankind's problems. Recognizing that these philosophies could lead members astray, the Brethren found a divine model in Lehi's dream that could be applied to this challenge. Yet at the same time the dream was used to emphasize the unique power of the gospel of Christ as an instrument of change and the dream could thus be applied to missionary work.

1985 to the Present

The year 1985 marked a renewed emphasis on the dream, no doubt a result of the teachings of President Benson. John W. Welch declared, "A person would need to be both deaf and blind not to have noticed that President Benson has made [the Book of Mormon] a main theme of paramount importance."[42] With a renewed emphasis on the Book of Mormon in general, the Brethren began to speak of new personal applications of the dream. For instance, Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin often used the dream in his talks concerning enduring to the end.[43] Yet even as the dream began to be associated with various new principles, some approaches emerged as important themes. One of these was the use of the dream to speak about permissive social morals and ethics. To some degree, this may have been a natural offshoot of earlier concerns about secular humanism, but here it is differentiated by social concerns rather than academic ones, and it reflects an increasing concern about new media formats and their influence on the Saints.

This new theme is explicit in President Benson's April 1986 address entitled "The Power of the Word," in which he used the dream to describe the growing threat of immorality: "When we read of the spreading curse of drugs, or read of the pernicious flood of pornography and immorality, do any of us doubt that these are the forbidden paths and rivers of filthiness Lehi described?" Further he adds, "Not only will the word of God lead us to the fruit which is desirable above all others, but in the word of God and through it we can find the power to resist temptation, the power to thwart the work of Satan and his emissaries."[44]

A major concern was the social pressure exerted against the Saints. Elder Neal A. Maxwell addressed concerns about both humanistic and moral laxness in his April 1987 address, speaking of the great and spacious building as a "spacious but third-class hotel."[45] Then, in May 1996, he warned of the influence of those in the great and spacious building, which can lead others into forbidden paths:

> [A] few eager individuals . . . lecture the rest of us about Church doctrines in which they no longer believe. They criticize the use of Church resources to which they no longer contribute. They condescendingly seek to counsel the Brethren whom they no longer sustain. Confrontive, except of themselves of course, they leave the Church, but they cannot leave the Church alone. Like the throng on the ramparts of the "great and spacious building," they are intensely and busily preoccupied, pointing fingers of scorn at the steadfast iron-rodders (1 Ne. 8:26–28, 33). Considering their ceaseless preoccupation, one wonders, "Is there no diversionary activity available to them, especially in such a large building—like a bowling alley?" Perhaps in their mockings and beneath the stir are repressed doubts of their doubts.[46]

Years later, Elder Maxwell used this imagery again when he asked Latter-day Saints to place themselves figuratively in the dream. He encouraged Latter-day Saints to "bear the pointing fingers which, ironically, belong to those finally who, being bored, find the 'great and spacious building' to be a stale and cramped third-class hotel."[47] Elder W. Craig Zwick made a similar observation when he exhorted youth to remember that those who made it to the tree did so by not heeding the mocking of those in the large and spacious building, and Elder Robert S. Wood challenged the Saints, and youth in particular, to avoid the cynicism and mockery that is so common in society and thereby bypass entrance into the large and spacious building.[48]

In 1985, Elder Boyd K. Packer suggested that the Saints "would do well to read very thoughtfully the parable of the tree of life in the eighth chapter of 1 Nephi, and to ponder very soberly verse twenty-eight," which describes those who fell away from the tree and were ashamed "because of those that were scoffing at them." Elder Packer mentioned this scripture as a warning to individuals who were easily persuaded by the world. Later in the talk he referred to those who fell away into forbidden paths and were lost. He asked Saints to

be cautious of letting the world influence their faith.[49] Seven years later, Elder Packer was even more explicit in his talk "Our Moral Environment," where he identified the increasing moral pollution as the mists of darkness.[50]

Reacting to the ever-increasing influence of the media and its promotion of a way of life that is alien to the gospel, Elder M. Russell Ballard stressed the importance of parents teaching their children to hold to the iron rod against the encroaching pervasiveness of television.[51] In April 2002, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland said, "We are bombarded with the message that on the *world's* scale of things we have been weighed in the balance and found wanting. Some days it is as if we have been locked in a cubicle of a great and spacious building where the only thing on the TV is a never-ending soap opera entitled *Vain Imaginations*."[52]

Elder William R. Bradford spoke of the "clutter" of modern life and suggested that great benefit would come from a renewed emphasis on holding to the rod through scripture study,[53] a solution that Elder Merrill J. Bateman offered as well.[54] Elder Yoshihiko Kikuchi reiterated the promise when he said, "We can partake of 'the love of God,' 'the tree of life,' and drink from 'the fountain of living waters' daily by communing with our Holy Father, immersing ourselves in the scriptures, and meditation."[55]

Another common yet specific application of the mists of darkness was to pornography, a medium that spread virally with new media forms. In 2002, President Thomas S. Monson, in reference to the mists of darkness, declared, "In the interpretation of Lehi's dream, we find a rather apt description of the destructiveness of pornography."[56]

The increasing nature of materialism also fits within this category. Elder L. Tom Perry in particular used the dream more than once to teach the importance of gospel integrity rather than the desire for material possessions. In his address "If Ye are Prepared Ye Shall Not Fear," we read:

> The current cries we hear coming from the great and spacious building tempt us to compete for ownership in the things of this world. We think we need a larger home, with a three-car garage, a recreational vehicle parked next to it. We long for designer clothes, extra TV sets, all with VCRs, the latest model computers, and the newest car. Often these items are purchased with borrowed money, without giving any thought to providing for our future needs. The result of all

> this instant gratification is overloaded bankruptcy courts and families that are far too preoccupied with their financial burdens.[57]

In another context, he stated:

> Many of you are trying too hard to be unique in your dress and grooming to attract what the Lord would consider the wrong kind of attention. In the Book of Mormon story of the tree of life, it was the people whose "manner of dress was exceedingly fine" who mocked those who partook of the fruit of the tree. It is sobering to realize that the fashion-conscious mockers in the great and spacious building were responsible for embarrassing many, and those who were ashamed "fell away into forbidden paths and were lost" (1 Nephi 8:27–28).[58]

This interpretation was reiterated in April 2009 by Elder Dallin H. Oaks, who warned the "me" generation to avoid the desire to enter the great and spacious building of worldly acclaim and possessions.[59]

As the Church's stance on various social issues such as gay rights became more publicized and ridiculed in the press, Latter-day Saints were instructed to not focus their energy on verbally attacking those who mocked their faith. Instead, General Authorities urged Latter-day Saints to avoid the temptations of Satan as symbolized in the dream-vision.

Elder Robert D. Hales specifically used the dream to describe the manner by which Saints could overcome the world: "Nephi gives a clear and compelling account of the process, which includes desiring, believing, having faith, pondering, and then following the Spirit."[60] In 2006, Elder Hales asked Church members to picture themselves in the dream. He asked, "Are we holding onto the iron rod, or are we going another way? I testify that how we choose to *feel* and *think* and *act* every day is the way we get on the path, and stay on it, until we reach our eternal destination."[61]

The power of the dream as a metaphor for the increasing moral and social concerns were summed up by Elder Holland in 2008 when he spoke of the trials Saints were then dealing with:

> In the course of life all of us spend time in "dark and dreary" places, wildernesses, circumstances of sorrow or fear or discouragement. Our present day is filled with global distress over financial crises,

> energy problems, terrorist attacks, and natural calamities. These translate into individual and family concerns not only about homes in which to live and food available to eat but also about the ultimate safety and well-being of our children and the latter-day prophecies about our planet. More serious than these—and sometimes related to them—are matters of ethical, moral, and spiritual decay seen in populations large and small, at home and abroad.[62]

Another theme from this period is that of family relationships and obligations. As early as 1985, Elder Perry emphasized that Latter-day Saints should strive to save their families just as Lehi had encouraged his family to partake of the tree.[63]

Elder Richard G. Scott emphasized the fact that when "Lehi partook of the fruit of the tree of life and was filled with joy, his first thought was to share it with each member of his family, including the disobedient," illustrating the importance of loving "without limitations" instead of judging or giving up on loved ones that need help.[64] Though Elder Scott did not focus solely on Laman and Lemuel, others did; this was an innovation not found at any other time in this dispensation. For example, Elder Glenn L. Pace said that even after Lehi saw in his vision that Laman and Lemuel would not partake of the fruit of the tree, "he never gave up but labored with them and loved them even with his dying breath."[65] Elder William Grant Bangerter said that Laman and Lemuel "turned their back on the tree of life. They joined the world and lost the promise."[66]

Elder Maxwell similarly analyzed Laman and Lemuel's actions: "Laman and Lemuel also displayed little lasting spiritual curiosity. Once true, they asked straightforward questions about the meaning of a vision of the tree, the river, and the rod of iron. Yet their questions were really more like trying to connect doctrinal dots rather than connecting themselves with God and His purposes for them. . . . As to their spiritual significance, Laman and Lemuel were sad ciphers."[67] Addressing the need to liken all scriptures to ourselves, Elder Maxwell used Laman and Lemuel as examples of individuals who did not see their full potential because they could not see Godlike qualities, nor did they express the desire to do so. Later, relating the dream to the relativism of the day, Elder Maxwell taught that the desire to know truth is essential to salvation, noting that Laman and Lemuel never partook of the fruit of the tree of life because they did not seek to understand God.[68]

Speaking of the challenges of parenting, President Boyd K. Packer acknowledged, "It is a great challenge to raise a family in the darkening mists of our moral environment,"[69] while in April 1999 Elder Ballard used the dream to stress the importance of setting the right example in parenting to counteract the prevailing mists of immorality: "As parents, teachers, and leaders, it is our solemn duty to set a powerful, personal example of righteous strength, courage, sacrifice, unselfish service, and self-control. These are the traits that will help our youth hold on to the iron rod of the gospel and remain on the straight and narrow path."[70]

Elder Rex D. Pinegar also built upon the analogy between Lehi and Latter-day Saint fathers, emphasizing "the importance of a father, as patriarch to his family and as its chief priesthood officer, setting a righteous example by making the gospel lifeline operative and effective in his own life and then extending it to his family."[71] In the same vein, in October 2001, Elder Russell M. Nelson spoke of the importance of parents, and fathers specifically, holding on to the iron rod and teaching their children to do the same.[72]

The dream was increasingly used in speeches directed specifically to youth. During the priesthood session in October 1987, Elder Vaughn J. Featherstone referred to the time period as "the most trying time in history." He taught that "the rod of iron leading to the tree of life for you, our young men, may well be the implementation of the complete and full work of the Aaronic Priesthood."[73] Sharon G. Larsen of the Young Women general presidency suggested that the light symbolized in the Young Women torch logo was to help Young Women through their own mists of darkness.[74] In 2009, Ann M. Dibb, also of the Young Women general presidency, built her entire talk to the youth around the powerful imagery of Lehi's dream, concluding with the promise that true joy comes from being obedient and keeping both hands on the rod of iron.[75]

Sister Larsen and Sister Dibb are not the only sisters to use the dream in their talks. In general conference in October 1995, Aileen H. Clyde of the Relief Society general presidency used the iron rod as a general term but then went on to speak of a South African sister who she saw as an example of one who had clung to the rod.[76] Describing the manner in which the Relief Society had led this African Saint to bless her community, particularly through the family organization, Sister Clyde revealed how one could be like Lehi by holding on to the rod. Recently, Mary N. Cook of the Young

Women general presidency also spoke of teaching children through example by grasping the iron rod through challenging life experiences Barbara Thompson of the Relief Society general presidency told of experiences where she observed her niece and her husband teaching their young children about the importance of grasping to the iron rod, suggesting that it is never too early to start teaching children about staying on the path through the simple symbols used in the vision.[77]

As one can see, Lehi's dream continues to play a fundamental role in the teachings of Church leaders, just as it did in earlier generations. Yet, reflecting changes in society and culture, the dream has been adapted to address specific challenges for the Saints. Since President Benson's reemphasis on the Book of Mormon in 1985, the dream has become even more common in the speeches and talks of our leaders, particularly as a means of understanding the fundamental and foundational role of families as well as the challenges of modern life.

Conclusion: You Are in the Dream

Since 2008, when President Monson became President of the Church, the dream has continued to be one of the most often discussed scriptural texts. In the October 2010 conference alone there were at least six allusions to the dream, reflecting the contexts used above.[78] President Monson himself has used the dream twice in one general conference setting, asking the members to recall Lehi's vision of the tree of life[79] and suggesting that the dream continues to grow in importance for Latter-day Saints.

President Boyd K. Packer has described this importance through his own experience. Admitting that earlier in his life the dream "did not mean all that much to me,"[80] he gave Brigham Young University students the current and future view of the dream-vision. His address gives us the answer to why the dream-vision has come of age. President Packer informed Church members that they might find themselves in the dream figuratively, due to the greater influence of the media and the political involvement in individual lives. He observed:

> Largely because of television, instead of looking over into that spacious building, we are, in effect, living inside of it. That is your fate in this generation. You are living in that great and spacious building. . . .

> The mist of darkness will cover you at times so much that you will not be able to see your way even a short distance ahead. You will not be able to see clearly. . . .
>
> Atheists and agnostics make nonbelief their religion and today organize in unprecedented ways to attack faith and belief. They are now organized, and they pursue political power. . . .
>
> You live in an interesting generation where trials will be constant in your life.[81]

President Packer suggested that the dream could be more than simply an allegory or story but a template or guide that one could pattern one's life by. Expressing the need for us to be more than simply passive readers, President Packer challenged Saints to find themselves in the dream: "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 . . . . As we think . . . of the dream or vision that Lehi had we see that there are prophecies in there that can be specifically applied to your life. Read it again. . . . All of the things that you need to know are there. Read it. And make it a part of your life."[82]

When Elder Kevin W. Pearson was called as a General Authority, he exemplified this challenge when he proclaimed the importance of the dream in his life: "I see the entire world through that dream. . . . That is the prism through which I've seen life."[83] Like Elder Pearson, we too can use the dream as a prism through which much of the plan of salvation can be understood.

Yet for all the specific modern challenges, it is comforting to realize that the applicability of the dream is, in essence, no different for us than it was for the early Brethren in this dispensation. Though the mists of darkness are different in type, they are not different in effect. Whether one is led away by apostates, secular humanism, or permissive moral values, one ends up lost in forbidden territory. And regardless of whether one views the iron rod as the scriptures, the prophet, the Holy Ghost, or one's testimony, it is the rod that will safely lead one back. And with that we can rest assured that whatever new challenges may arise, as President Packer taught, we can continue to "find ourselves" in Lehi's dream.

Notes

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2. Terryl L. Givens, *The Book of Mormon: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 108.

3. Alex Smith, phone conversation with Mary Jane Woodger, July 13, 2011.

4. Terryl L. Givens, *The Book of Mormon: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 109.

5. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–86), 1:236, 323; 3:362; 12:163, 170; 13:93–94).

6. Erastus Snow, in *Journal of Discourses*, 20:374.

7. Joseph F. Smith, in *Journal of Discourses*, 24:76–77; George Q. Cannon, in *Journal of Discourses*, 18:84.

8. George A. Smith, in *Journal of Discourses*, 10:67.

9. John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 10:261.

10. Orson Hyde, in *Journal of Discourses*, 16:14.

11. Daniel H. Wells, in *Journal of Discourses*, 16:128; Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 8:106.

12. Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 15: 234.

13. Franklin D. Richards, "Holding Fast to the Iron Rod," in *Collected Discourses, 1886–1898* (Sandy, UT: B.H.S., 1987), 1:104.

14. Richards, "Holding Fast," in *Collected Discourses*, 1:107.

15. John W. Taylor, "Morality and Chastity," in Conference Report, October 7, 1898.

16. Anthon H. Lund, in Conference Report, October 1899, 14.

17. Hyrum M. Smith, in Conference Report, October 1905, 23; Charles W. Penrose, in Conference Report, 1906, 85; J. N. Lambert, in Conference Report, April 1921, 54; Nephi Jensen, in Conference Report, April 1922, 43–44; Anthony W. Ivins, in Conference Report, April 1922, 43–44; George Albert Smith, in Conference Report, April 1937, 35–36; Rulon S. Wells, in Conference Report, April 1935, 25, 28.

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20. Stephen L. Chipman, in Conference Report, April 1909, 114.

21. Stephen L. Chipman, in Conference Report, April 1917, 132.

22. James E. Talmage, in Conference Report, October 1916, 75.

23. Anthony W. Ivins, in Conference Report, October 1917, 68.

24. Anthon H. Lund, in Conference Report, April 1918, 9.

25. Charles A. Callis, in Conference Report, April 1918, 107.

26. James E. Talmage, in Conference Report, October 1924, 141.

27. James E. Talmage, in Conference Report, October 1929, 48.

28. Harold B. Lee, in Conference Report, April 1943, 127.

29. Marion G. Romney, in Conference Report, October 1943, 39–41.

30. Marion D. Hanks, in Conference Report, April 1957, 129; Marion D. Hanks, in Conference Report, April 1959, 76–77.

31. Harold B. Lee, in Conference Report, April 1964, 23.

32. Delbert L. Stapley, in Conference Report, April 1966, 23–27.

33. Harold B. Lee, "The Iron Rod," *Ensign*, June 1971, 7.

34. Lee, "Iron Rod," 6.

35. Lee, "Iron Rod," 8.

36. Ezra Taft Benson, "The Book of Mormon Is the Word of God," *Ensign*, May 1975, 65.

37. Carlos E. Asay, "The Spirit of Missionary Work," *Ensign*, November 1976, 41–42.

38. Robert L. Backman, "To the Young Men of the Church," *Ensign*, November 1980, 42.

39. David B. Haight, "'Feed My Sheep,'" *Ensign*, May 1979, 62.

40. Wm. Grant Bangerter, "Coming through the Mists," *Ensign*, May 1984, 28.

41. Bangerter, "Coming through the Mists," 28.

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46. Neal A. Maxwell, "'Becometh As a Child,'" *Ensign*, May 1996, 68.

47. Neal A. Maxwell, "How Choice a Seer!" *Ensign*, November 2003, 102.

48. W. Craig Zwick, "We Will Not Yield, We Cannot Yield," *Ensign*, May 2008, 98; Robert S. Wood, "Instruments of the Lord's Peace," *Ensign*, May 2006, 94–95.

49. Boyd K. Packer, "'From Such Turn Away,'" *Ensign*, May 1985, 35.

50. Boyd K. Packer, "Our Moral Environment," *Ensign*, May 1992, 66.

51. M. Russell Ballard, "The Effects of Television," *Ensign*, May 1989, 80.

52. Jeffrey R. Holland, "The Other Prodigal," *Ensign*, May 2002, 63.

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67. Neal A. Maxwell, "Lessons from Laman and Lemuel," *Ensign*, November 1999, 8.
68. Maxwell, "Lessons from Laman and Lemuel," 9.
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73. Vaughn J. Featherstone, "A Champion of Youth," *Ensign*, November 1987, 29–30.
74. Sharon G. Larsen, "Your Light in the Wilderness," *Ensign*, May 1999, 90.
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82. Packer, "Lehi's Dream and You," 6.
83. Julie Dockstader Heaps, "Lehi's Dream Provides a Guiding View of Life," *Church News*, June 14, 2008.