

Lehi's Dream as a Template for Understanding Each Act of Nephi's Vision

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Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, in his work *Christ and the New Covenant*, suggests an important way to study the scriptures when he writes, “The Spirit made explicit that the Tree of Life and its precious fruit are symbols of Christ’s redemption.”¹ Because neither the Spirit nor Nephi ever vocalizes this connection between the tree and Christ (Nephi gives two direct interpretations of the tree and its fruit: to the angel he identifies it as “the love of God” [1 Nephi 11:22], and to his brethren he identifies it as “a representation of the tree of life” [1 Nephi 15:22]), Elder Holland teaches us through his reading how to uncover doctrine and messages within the scriptures that are not explicitly stated. He explains how the Spirit first links the tree to Christ when he tells Nephi he will show him the tree and then the Son of God descending out of heaven. After this occurs and Nephi asks to know the interpretation of the tree, the Spirit immediately shows him Christ’s nativity—the virgin Mary with an infant in her arms. Then the angel, who replaces the Spirit of the Lord and becomes Nephi’s guide for the duration of the vision, concludes this image by declaring, “Behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son

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of the Eternal Father!" (1 Nephi 11:21). To ensure Nephi understands the connection, the angel follows the image and the declaration with a question for Nephi: "Knowest thou the meaning of the tree which thy father saw?" (v. 21).² Elder Holland reaches his conclusion by looking closely at how the Spirit frames the images, the sequence in which Nephi's guides show him the images, and the dialogue or interactions between Nephi and his guides.

Elder Holland's interpretation illustrates the additional layers of meaning we will find within the dream when we give credence to what is seen as well as spoken and when we link images to statements. The dream has been called "one of the richest, most flexible, and far-reaching pieces of symbolic prophecy contained in the standard works,"³ and "a literary masterpiece and a doctrinal gem."⁴ Yet, when we as readers hold to the one interpretation directly stated by Nephi or his guides and never seek out the multiplicity of meanings contained within Nephi's vision, we miss much of the vision's majesty. To begin the excavation of these meanings, I employ a methodology of literary analysis similar to Elder Holland's in which I analyze Nephi's authorial choices, the interactions between Nephi and his guides, the established narrative logic, and the repetition, overlapping, and conjoining of words and images in 1 Nephi 11 through 14.

Such an analysis reveals that the connections between Lehi's dream and Nephi's vision do not cease after 1 Nephi 12, as most readers believe, but instead continue until the end of Nephi's vision in chapter 14. As neither 1 Nephi 13 nor 14 contains any explicitly vocalized interpretations of the symbols in Lehi's dream, readers most often see these chapters as unrelated bonus material in which Nephi is shown the future inhabitants of the American continent and the period before the Second Coming.⁵ However, close analysis reveals that these chapters contain further interpretations of different aspects of Lehi's dream played out in specific temporal and historical moments. Nephi's vision may be better understood as a four-act play: act 1, Christ's earthly ministry (1 Nephi 11); act 2, the Nephites and Lamanites in the land of promise (1 Nephi 12); act 3, the Gentiles and house of Israel in America (1 Nephi 13); and act 4, the period immediately preceding Christ's Second Coming (1 Nephi 14). Nephi's vision repeats the imagery of Lehi's original dream, but in different contexts, each subsequent chapter building on the meaning of the imagery in the previous chapters. Although the angel appears to provide Nephi with fewer interpretations of the symbols as the dream proceeds, the layering of images from

1 Nephi 11 through 14 allows Nephi, and readers along with him, to see how the imagery of Lehi's dream is still at work and how each act contains distinct prophetic interpretations.

At the end of his vision, Nephi informs the reader, "I have written but a small part of the things which I saw" (1 Nephi 14:28). While this refers in part to the portion of the vision the angel forbids him to record, such a statement also signals Nephi's crucial role in reconstructing his vision for future readers. Nephi has the difficult task of taking a multisensory experience and relating it through words only. He must choose when to let the images speak for themselves and when to offer commentary—when to record the words of his guide and when to offer his own interpretation. Multiple moments within the text indicate that Nephi at times sees images that he does not describe or hears interpretations that he does not recount.⁶ Ultimately, we can base our analysis only on what Nephi wrote, but we drastically undervalue Nephi's authorial role when we do not recognize his hand in the intricate retelling of his vision. He is constantly helping the reader to understand and see connections between the acts of his vision and his father's dream and revealing new layers of meaning for each of the symbols.⁷

Act 1: Christ's Earthly Ministry (1 Nephi 11)

General Authorities, scholars, and various readers have previously recognized many of the connections between Nephi's vision of Christ's birth, baptism, ministry, and crucifixion and the elements of Lehi's dream. I will touch on them briefly and offer a few new insights in order to make explicit the implicit narrative patterns and phrases that Nephi and his guides use to link Nephi's vision to Lehi's dream. When Nephi is first "caught away in the Spirit of the Lord," he asks to "behold the things which [his] father saw" (1 Nephi 11:1, 3). In response to this request, the Spirit links the tree to Christ, telling Nephi he will show him first the tree and then the Son of God descending out of heaven. After showing Nephi the tree, however, he does not immediately show him the Son of God. Instead he pauses and asks Nephi, "What desirest thou?" (v. 10). Nephi's response, "to know the interpretation thereof" (v. 11), appears to alter the intended vision because rather than seeing the Son of God descending out of heaven he sees first the virgin Mary and then later "the Son of the Eternal Father" in her arms (v. 21). Such change in the dream's direction should cause us as readers to reflect on how seeing Mary and Christ

as a newborn baby helps Nephi, and by extension ourselves, to understand the interpretation of the tree as the love of God (made manifest through the gift of his Son) better than simply seeing the Son descending out of heaven.⁸ One answer could be that each image illustrates the magnitude of God's condescension: God the Father's condescension in having a mortal child, and God the Son's condescension in coming down as a helpless infant.⁹

The change in the vision's direction, coupled with the angel testing Nephi to make sure he comprehends what he sees, underscores the fact that his understanding of the condescension of God is critical to knowing the interpretation of the tree. Recognizing this first explicit connection between an element in Lehi's dream and in Nephi's vision is essential on the structural level because it establishes the basic pattern the angel will use to provide Nephi with interpretations of his father's dream: the angel shows Nephi a symbol followed by a vision sequence that is an interpretation of that symbol. With this first symbol, the angel explicitly tells Nephi to make the connection; hereafter, the angel relies on the narrative pattern to signal to Nephi, as well as to the modern reader, that he is providing an interpretation.

The next vision sequence illustrates this pattern at work and establishes Nephi's common interpretive strategy of stating clearly the general interpretation of a symbol and leaving the reader to recognize the specific interpretation through the vision sequence. The sequence begins with Nephi informing the reader that he beheld "the rod of iron," which is the "word of God"; "the fountain of living waters," which is "a representation of the love of God"; and "the tree of life," which is also "a representation of the love of God" (v. 25). Immediately after, he sees Christ's baptism and ministry. Following the established logic of the vision, Nephi receives the specific interpretation of each of these symbols within this vision of Christ's life. Christ becomes a living iron rod, showing and teaching through his baptism and ministry how to return to God's presence. Nephi expands upon this connection near the end of his ministry when he explains to his people that to commence on the "path which leads to eternal life," they must follow Christ's example and be baptized (see 2 Nephi 31:18; see v. 17). Significantly in this context, "the word of God" is one of the titles for Jesus Christ—Christ is God's word made flesh (see John 1:1, 14). As Christ himself explained, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14:6). In this statement, as in the vision, Christ simultaneously performs multiple functions.

Along with being the rod of iron, he continues to represent the fountain of living water and the tree of life as he heals the sick and afflicted, providing another example of what occurs as people come unto Christ and partake of the fruit. Likewise, Christ's crucifixion is another manifestation of the condescension of God and his great love.

The final image sequence of act 1, in which the great and spacious building moves to the forefront, is particularly important from a narrative viewpoint because it illustrates multiple strategies that the angel and Nephi use to build connections between symbols and historical moments. While in previous sequences the symbol is shown and then the interpretation is shown, here the two are intertwined as Nephi beholds the large and spacious building filled with multitudes gathered together "to fight against the twelve apostles of the Lamb" (v. 35). In this sequence, the angel emphasizes that both general and (multiple) specific interpretations exist for each symbol by vocalizing the general meaning—"the world and the wisdom thereof"—and a specific meaning—"the house of Israel hath gathered together to fight against the twelve apostles of the Lamb" (v. 35). Remaining true to the narrative pattern he has established, Nephi then offers further commentary on the general interpretation—"the great and spacious building was the pride of the world" (v. 36)—but leaves the reader to gain his or her own understanding of the specific interpretation.

Another rhetorical tool in this sequence is the linking of phrases to symbols; such linking allows the phrase to stand in later for the symbol. Three times within two short verses, Nephi uses the phrase "gathered together" to describe the inhabitants of the great and spacious building. Repetition creates a solid connection in the mind of the reader that allows Nephi to evoke the image of the "large and spacious building" with simply the phrase "gathered together" (vv. 34–35).¹⁰ As Nephi and the angel explicitly link phrases and concise general interpretations with elements from Lehi's dream, they mention the elements less frequently and adopt a shorthand of sorts. For instance, the angel unequivocally links the tree and Christ in act 1; consequently, throughout the rest of the vision Christ's appearance calls up the image of the tree as well.

One last narrative strategy that merits attention in act 1 is Nephi's and the angel's repetition of similar words and actions to recall an earlier moment in the dream or vision. For instance, once the angel establishes Christ as the

meaning of the tree, he shows Nephi an image of the Son of God as the children of men “fall down at his feet and worship him” (v. 24). The repetition of words and actions signals this as a historical echo to the individuals in Lehi’s dream who “fell down and partook of the fruit of the tree” (1 Nephi 8:30).

Lehi’s Dream (1 Nephi 8)

Before proceeding with the connection between Lehi’s dream and Nephi’s vision, a brief review of the kaleidoscope¹¹ of elements shown to Lehi is critical. Although the major elements are clear in most readers’ minds—a rod of iron leading to the tree of life set in opposition to a great and spacious building and a mist of darkness arising to lead people from the path if they do not hold firmly to the rod—other elements are more prone to become hazy or to merge together in both our personal interpretations and artists’ renditions. The river and fountain of water are two such elements. Most depictions of Lehi’s dream include only one body of water; however, the text clearly states there are two: a river of filthy water that represents the depths of hell and a fountain of living waters that represents the love of God (see 1 Nephi 11:25; 12:16). The confusion likely stems from Nephi and the angel using *river* and *fountain* as interchangeable terms throughout the dream to describe both the pure and impure bodies of water.¹²

Another element that is often hazy in our minds and left out of artistic renditions is the large and spacious field. After spending hours in the “dark and dreary waste” (1 Nephi 8:7), Lehi prays and then beholds “a large and spacious field” (v. 9). Significantly, Lehi does not say he is in the field, rather that he beholds the field and then beholds the tree. Lehi’s sense of relief is evident as he now has something to look to and move toward—the field and the fruit of the tree. Later in his dream, Lehi explains that the strait and narrow path and rod of iron lead first to the tree and then on to the head of the fountain and a large and spacious field: “And I also beheld a strait and narrow path, which came along by the rod of iron, even to the tree by which I stood; *and it also led* by the head of the fountain, unto a large and spacious field, as if it had been a world” (v. 20; emphasis added). Visual representations of the dream often have the tree as the end point of the rod and either leave out the large and spacious field or conflate it with the space where concourses of people are trying to obtain the path. While this may not seem like an important

oversight in the context of Lehi's dream, such conflation obscures our ability to see the connections between Lehi's dream and Nephi's vision.

Many textual details make it clear that the large and spacious field is not where the concourses of people currently are but what they are pressing toward. First, Lehi is not in the field but rather moves toward the field; second, the mists of darkness that cover the concourses of people recall Lehi's experience of being in darkness for many hours in the dark and dreary waste, not the relief and joy he feels at seeing the field and the tree; and third, Lehi tells his family the rod of iron *leads* to the large and spacious field. If we imagine, as readers often do, that the concourses of people are located in the large and spacious field at one end of the rod and the tree of life is located at the opposite end of the rod, then Lehi's description of the rod of iron as *leading* to the large and spacious world would be inappropriate for the word of God, as the rod would not lead individuals to a place God does not want them to go. A look at the 1828 edition of Webster's dictionary makes it clear that at the time Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon, the term *lead* meant to guide or conduct to a purposeful place. The dictionary cited examples such as the following: "The Israelites were *led* by a pillar of a cloud by day, and by a pillar of fire by night," and "He *leadeth* me beside the still waters Ps. 23."¹³

Lehi seeing the word of God leading to a field, or as he redefines it "a world" (v. 20), is unsurprising because running throughout ancient and modern scripture—most notably in part of the Abrahamic covenant—is God's promise to his chosen people that they will receive a land for their inheritance if they are faithful.¹⁴ Both Lehi and Nephi, before seeing their respective visions, receive a promise from the Lord that they "shall be led to a land of promise" (1 Nephi 2:20; see 1 Nephi 5:5). In Lehi's dream, he sees a large and spacious field—a symbol of the promised land his family is currently journeying toward. As Daniel L. Belnap argues convincingly, this dream becomes a new cultural narrative for the family of Lehi as they leave Jerusalem behind and seek a new land of inheritance.¹⁵ Significantly, this world in the dream can only be reached by holding firm to the word of God, and Lehi is told that all those who come to this promised land "should be *led* out of other countries by the hand of the Lord" (2 Nephi 1:5). Nephi sees the historical fulfillments of this prophecy in acts 1 and 3 of his vision. Recognizing that the rod of iron leads to a new world as well as the tree of life helps us apprehend how intimately connected to Lehi's dream are acts 2, 3, and 4 of Nephi's vision—in

essence, they show what happens to individuals as they obtain and live in this new world.

Lehi's reference to the large and spacious field as "a world" (1 Nephi 8:20) deserves further discussion. In the context of what Nephi will soon see in his vision, both words are significant. First, it is *a* world, not *the* world, indicating the existence of multiple worlds. Second, Lehi's choice of the word *world* to describe what he sees connects the promised land to the "New World," as it will be called at the time of Columbus's discovery of the Americas.¹⁶ With these elements of the dream in the forefront rather than the backdrop of our dream landscape, the sequence in Nephi's vision from Christ's ministry to the inhabitants of the promised land becomes the next logical step rather than a disconnect.

Act 2: The Nephites and Lamanites in the Land of Promise (1 Nephi 12)

Act 1 closes in the Old World, and act 2 opens in the New World, where Nephi see his descendants, their cities and wars, their visitation from Christ, and their eventual destruction. The symbol of the great and spacious building provides the unifying transition from one scene to the next. Without mentioning the building explicitly, Nephi relies on the connection he has established a few verses earlier between the building and the phrase "gathered together" to signal that the great and spacious building takes on a new historical interpretation in the New World: Nephites and Lamanites "gathered together to battle, one against another" (1 Nephi 12:2). That the Nephite and Lamanite civilizations have become another incarnation of the great and spacious building is reinforced by the elements associated with "the pride of the world" (1 Nephi 11:36)—wars, contentions, and cities—that dominate this vision sequence (see 1 Nephi 12:1–3).

Soon another element from Lehi's dream enters the scene: "a mist of darkness" (v. 4). The mist of darkness, like the other symbols, has more than one interpretation; in this case, it has a physical manifestation as well as a metaphorical meaning. Later in this chapter, we learn that "the mists of darkness" represent "the temptations of the devil, which blindeth the eyes, and hardeneth the hearts of the children of men" (v. 17). Here the specific temptation facing the Nephites and Lamanites is war, which most likely springs from the temptations of power, greed, pride, and hatred. Because the people succumb

to these temptations and associate with the large and spacious building, an actual mist of darkness covers the earth and many are lost during the time prior to Christ's appearance in the New World. Although this physical mist of darkness is not actually the temptations of the devil, it does relate to the Nephites' spiritual reality and is a result of their succumbing to Satan's temptations. The mist performs a similar function in real life to what it does in Lehi's dream: it covers and confuses those individuals who are not standing firm in their commitment to Christ and symbolically holding to the iron rod. The presence of the rod of iron, although not mentioned specifically, is felt when its function is fulfilled and those who are not lost in the mist of darkness qualify to see the Lord.

Nephi next beholds a prophetic interpretation of individuals partaking of the fruit and accessing the Atonement as he witnesses his people being in the presence of the Lamb of God and having their garments made white "in his blood" (v. 10). The angel repeats this interpretation of their garments being made white in the blood of the Lamb for both the twelve disciples and the people collectively (see vv. 10–11). Such imagery reinforces the fruit of the tree as being Christ and his Atonement, and it reiterates the connection between whiteness and the fruit. The books of 3 Nephi and 4 Nephi recount the fulfillment of this prophecy in the coming of the Savior to the New World and the three generations who pass away in righteousness "because of the love of God which did dwell in the hearts of the people" (4 Nephi 1:15).

In a kaleidoscope of overlapping images, Nephi next beholds his people battling against the Lamanites until their eventual destruction; this event is overlaid with the symbolic images of the filthy river, the mist of darkness, and the large and spacious building. As Nephi sees these image sequences simultaneously, the angel voices the ahistorical and atemporal interpretation of each element. "The fountain of filthy water [is] . . . the depths of hell," "the mists of darkness are the temptations of the devil," and "the large and spacious building" is the "vain imaginations and the pride of the children of men" (1 Nephi 12:16–18). Nephi displays his ability to connect the symbols to the visionary history when he attributes the destruction of his people to their "pride" and the "temptations of the devil" (v. 19). Having each of the three elements—the filthy river, the mist of darkness, and the large and spacious building—together emphasizes that the destruction of the Nephites will be the result of their choosing to follow Satan and the ways of the world rather

than God. The Lamanites remain after the Nephites are gone, but Nephi makes it clear that their fate is not pleasant. By calling the people a “dark, and loathsome, and a filthy people” (v. 23), Nephi connects them to symbols of hell—the filthy water and the dark mist. God may not have literally destroyed the Lamanites, but by dwindling in unbelief they have become a part of hell.

Act 3: The Gentiles and House of Israel in America (1 Nephi 13–14:6)

In act 3 the scene shifts again to show “the nations and kingdoms of the Gentiles” (1 Nephi 13:3). A new symbol, “this great and abominable church” (v. 6), displays striking similarities to the great and spacious building—so much so that this church should be seen as a historical analogue of the building.¹⁷ In both function and characteristics, the great and abominable church mirrors the great and spacious building. In the two previous historical explanations of the great and abominable church, multitudes gathered together to first war against the Apostles of the Lamb and then against the Nephites—God’s once chosen people (see 1 Nephi 11:34; 1 Nephi 12:13–15). In act 3 of his vision, Nephi learns that the church “slayeth the saints of God, yea, and tortureth them and bindeth them down, and yoketh them with a yoke of iron, and bringeth them down into captivity” (1 Nephi 13:5). This description connects the church to both the historical function of the great and spacious building, as individuals in the building literally slay the saints of God, and the ahistorical, metaphorical function, as people become captive and yoked once they allow the pride and vanity of the world to consume them. The angel further cements this connection between the two elements when he explains that the church, “for the praise of the world, . . . destroy[s] the saints of God” (v. 9). Thus pride and worldly praise motivate individuals within both the building and the church. The two groups are also the same in character: the materiality of the great and abominable church—described as a love of “gold, and silver, and silks, and scarlets, and fine-twined linen” (v. 7)—is simply a historical representation of the “exceedingly fine” dress and “mocking” attitude that characterized the inhabitants of the great and spacious building (1 Nephi 8:27).

After seeing the latest manifestation of the great and spacious building, the vision shifts to show Nephi God’s plan for helping individuals escape Satan’s influence, as represented in the great and abominable church, and

again Lehi's dream becomes the template for understanding this historical moment. In essence, act 3 is the societal equivalent to Lehi's individual experience. The actors in this vision begin at a place similar to Lehi's dark and dreary wasteland, as Nephi repeats multiple times they are in "captivity" in the Old World (see 1 Nephi 13:13, 16). The waters that separate the Gentiles from the New World are a historical interpretation of the waters that separate the great and spacious building from the tree and the field in Lehi's dream. As the angel has explained to Nephi, the gulf that separates the great and spacious field and tree of life from the great and spacious building is "the word of the justice of the Eternal God, and the Messiah who is the Lamb of God" (1 Nephi 12:18). The two remain separated because of the justice of God.

This ahistorical interpretation fits precisely with the historical interpretation in 1 Nephi 13, in which the Old World inhabitants are kept separated from the New World inhabitants until Lehi's posterity through their wickedness lose their right to the land and bring upon themselves "the wrath of God" (1 Nephi 13:14).¹⁸ Lehi's dream teaches that only the iron rod, meaning the word of God, leads people to the tree and the field; the Spirit of God performs this function in act 3 as he leads individuals out of captivity and to the New World (vv. 12–16). Worth noting is the manifestation of the word of God in each of its major forms over the course of this vision.¹⁹ In act 1 Jesus Christ embodies the word of God, here in act 3 the Holy Ghost becomes the iron rod that leads individuals to the New World, and later in act 3 the scriptures hold the word of God that leads God's children to Christ and eternal life. Consequently, Nephi's vision also helps the reader understand the different ways God makes known his word and leads his children to eternal life.

When one looks at this prophetic revelation through the lens of Lehi's dream, it also becomes apparent that the individuals who possess this New World have partaken of the fruit of the tree in the course of their journey. The description of the New World inhabitants as "white, and exceedingly fair and beautiful" is one indication of this (v. 15). By this point in Nephi's vision, the angel and Nephi have established through repetition that the color white is synonymous with partaking of the fruit: the fruit is white, the tree is white, and individuals who partake of the fruit are made white through the blood of the Lamb. The fact that the Saints have "the power of the Lord" implies that they have partaken of the fruit because they can merit his power only as they "humble themselves before the Lord" (v. 16). The act of humbling themselves

before Christ recalls the image of those who kneel before the tree in Lehi's dream. In both instance, individuals recognize their dependence on the Lord: he alone has delivered them out of captivity, whether temporally or spiritually.

Although Christ does not physically appear in this sequence, his presence is felt through "the power of the Lord" (a term layered with connections to Christ and the fruit), that is with the Gentiles as they battle against "their mother Gentiles" (vv. 16–17). By using the term "gathered together" to mark the mother Gentiles as another iteration of the great and spacious building, Nephi indicates to the reader that this battle is a historical analogue to the symbolic opposition between the inhabitants of the great and spacious building and the individuals at the tree.

"Knowest thou the meaning of the book?" the angel asks (v. 21). With this question, the angel connects the book that the Gentiles carry with them to the New World with the two most significant elements of Lehi's dream and Nephi's vision—the tree of life and the condescension of God. Only three times does the angel engage Nephi in dialogue and test his understanding by asking him, "Knowest thou . . ." (1 Nephi 11:16, 21; 13:21). Such limited questioning underscores the importance of these three elements and ties them together. One might be tempted because of the overt connection among the three to see if the book—which we recognize to be the Bible—fulfills the same function as the condescension of God and is therefore another manifestation of the tree of life. This is an intriguing idea; however, close analysis of the book reveals its function to be analogous to that of Jesus Christ in his baptism and ministry and of the Holy Ghost in leading individuals to the New World, as the book brings people to accept Christ as their Savior. Consequently, it is another manifestation of the iron rod. However, the book clearly has some other significance than being another manifestation of the word of God.

The book's importance is underscored first by the company it keeps with the tree and the condescension of God—it is an instrument of salvation—and second by the strikingly different presentation it occasions from Nephi. Nephi's staging of the book's vision sequence is unlike any other because he quotes the angel's explanation of the book for twenty-two verses rather than sharing what he saw—a marked shift from the rest of the vision in which descriptions of what he saw dominate. Comments from the angel, such as "thou hast beheld" and "thou seest" (1 Nephi 13:24–26, 28–30), indicate irrefutably that Nephi sees what the angel describes and possibly more since at

other times in the vision Nephi sees multiple sequences simultaneously, yet Nephi chooses to record the words rather than the images. This shift in narrative strategy reveals the high value Nephi places on the angel's precise interpretation and his desire to pass it on undiluted to his readers.

In a similar rhetorical move, the angel turns to a higher authority, the Lamb of God, to explain the future role of the books: the angel introduces another book midway through the vision sequence (which we recognize as the Book of Mormon), so the singular *book* becomes the plural *books*. The angel quotes the Lamb of God, bearing record that the Book of Mormon will contain the gospel, his word, and will be the instrument through which individuals will be brought to him (vv. 24–36). Nephi later expands on this idea in 2 Nephi 25–28 when he illustrates how the Jews, Lamanites, and Gentiles reject Christ. The solution to their problem is an acceptance of Christ through the Book of Mormon and its teachings. Notably, Christ's words are only heard in Nephi's vision, testifying of the book and the great and marvelous work Christ will perform among the children of men at the last day. The significance of the Book of Mormon in the time preceding Christ's Second Coming cannot be overstated.

Within Nephi's vision sequence of the book lies another expansive historical interpretation of Lehi's dream. Though the symbols from Lehi's dream are not mentioned overtly, the connections become clear through specific interpretations that have become analogous to the symbols. For instance, the great and abominable church continues to fulfill the function of the great and spacious building as it seeks to destroy the word of God by taking away the "plain and most precious" parts from the Bible (1 Nephi 13:26). The result of such tampering with the Bible is a mist of darkness that settles over it. Without explicitly using the phrase "mist of darkness," the angel evokes its presence through the phrases he uses to describe what happens to individuals when truth is missing from the Bible: they are in an "awful state of blindness" (v. 32), and "an exceedingly great many do stumble, yea, insomuch that Satan hath great power over them" (v. 29). Such consequences are the result of wandering in darkness and recall the image in Lehi's dream of the multitudes wandering in this mist. In both instances, an individual may still hold firm to the rod, or the truths contained within the book, and come unto Christ. However, the mists—or lack of truth that "blind[s] the eyes" (v. 27)—make the process much more difficult.

Each interpretation of the mist of darkness expands our understanding of what constitutes the temptations of the devil. From the Lamanites and Nephites, we see how wars and contentions tempt us away from the word of God. In this sequence, the mist of darkness both creates temptations and was created by Satan's temptations. Elder Bruce R. McConkie explains this phenomenon: "The devil wages war against the scriptures. He hates them, perverts their plain meanings, and destroys them when he can. He entices those who heed his temptings to delete and discard, to change and corrupt, to alter and amend, thus taking away the key which will aid in making men, 'wise unto salvation.'"²⁰ In this vision sequence, the angel makes known Satan's plan to cover the word of God with a mist of darkness.

Standing in opposition to this mist and the great and spacious building in this sequence are the rod of iron and the tree of life. In each expanded interpretation of Lehi's vision, the word of God is available to lead individuals to Christ. With the following statement, the angel establishes how the Book of Mormon and Bible will fulfill the function of the rod: "These last records . . . shall make known to all kindreds, tongues, and people, that the Lamb of God is the Son of the Eternal Father, and the Savior of the world; and that all men must come unto him, or they cannot be saved" (v. 40).²¹ In his final recorded sermon given near the end of his life, Nephi reinforces the necessity of partaking of the word of God to reach the tree and confirms that readers should have recognized the dream symbols in his historical vision by using language from the dream: "If ye shall press forward, feasting upon the word of Christ, and endure to the end, behold, thus saith the Father: Ye shall have eternal life" (2 Nephi 31:20).²² The word *feasting* appropriately describes how the word of God must become a part of us, changing us and qualifying us for the blessings of eternal life. As is often the case, the elements in Nephi's vision function on both the spiritual and temporal level. Spiritually, the Book of Mormon and the Bible, which contain "the words of the Lamb" (1 Nephi 13:41), will lead individuals to Christ. Temporally, the Book of Mormon and the Bible will prepare the world for the literal appearance of Christ at the Second Coming.

The high point of Nephi's vision occurs when the tree of life (a representation of the Lamb of God) and the great and spacious field (a representation of the promised land) are brought together as the culminating promise. Those who partake of the fruit, referred to here as those who "hearken unto

the Lamb of God," shall have the Lamb of God "manifest himself unto them in word, and also in power . . . [and] shall be numbered among the seed of thy father; yea, they shall be numbered among the house of Israel; and they shall be a blessed people upon the promised land forever" (1 Nephi 14:1–2). Individuals who press forward and hold fast to the rod will come into the presence of the Savior and receive the promised land; however, the connection to the earlier image in Lehi's dream of individuals partaking of the fruit and falling away reminds the reader that steadfastness is required even after the destination is reached.

At the end of act 3, after the illustration of this beautiful promise, a new element from Lehi's dream comes briefly to the forefront. Thus far, the angel has shown Nephi prophetic, expansive interpretations of the tree and its fruit, the iron rod, the large and spacious field, the great and spacious building, and the mist of darkness. Now the angel focuses his attention on the terrible gulf, filthy water, and the many individuals wandering off the path. Similar to how the angel incorporates the other elements of Lehi's dream into act 3, he does not explicitly mention the filthy river and corresponding gulf but instead relies on preestablished layers and connections to evoke their presence. First, the imagery of a great pit and a gulf align closely. Second, the angel explains that the pit, like the river and gulf, is a representation of hell (v. 3). Third, the pit, like the river and gulf, is in the interesting position of being the devil's creation but also upholding the justice of God (see 1 Nephi 12:18; 14:4)—thus the common function of the two establishes their connection. Recognizing how the symbols build upon one another increases our comprehension of each symbol. In this particular instance, the angel's explanation of how the pit will be "dugged" and "filled" by "the devil and his children" answers the question of who will create the gulf of hell that Nephi tells his brothers is "prepared for the wicked" (1 Nephi 14:3; 15:29).

Act 4: Time before Christ's Second Coming (1 Nephi 14:7–30)

Act 4 of Nephi's vision, which begins in 1 Nephi 14:7, offers the last prophetic interpretation of Lehi's vision and fittingly commences with the angel quoting the Lamb of God's announcement that "a great and a marvelous work" is about to come forth that will lead individuals to "peace and life eternal" or to "the captivity of the devil" (v. 7). Several aspects of the Lord's statement evoke Lehi's dream. First, the basic divide between peace and life

eternal and the captivity of the devil is simply another way of illustrating the divide between the tree of life and the great and spacious building that has governed each vision sequence. Second, in terms of word choice, Christ uses key terms—blindness, captivity, and destruction—that Nephi and the angel have connected to each element associated with Satan in Lehi’s dream—the mist of darkness, the great and spacious building, and the gulf of water. By this point in the vision, each symbol has become dense with meaning; consequently, Christ’s statement possesses greater richness and power than it would have if placed at the beginning of the vision because here it draws on everything that precedes it.

Following the established narrative pattern, the angel then proceeds to show Nephi the explanation of the Savior’s prophecy. Nephi beholds what we now understand to be the analogue for the great and spacious building, the great and abominable church, which has “dominion over all the earth” (v. 11). The number of the righteous are small in comparison—just as Lehi’s dream has indicated they would be: “Great was the multitude that did enter into that strange building” (1 Nephi 8:33). Soon the great and abominable church fulfills its narrative function when it “gather[s] together multitudes . . . to fight against the Lamb of God” (1 Nephi 14:13), just as the great and spacious building has “gathered together” (1 Nephi 11:35) multitudes to fight against the Twelve Apostles of the Lamb, the Nephites, the Saints of God, and the Gentiles in America.²³

Similar to what he does in act 3, the Lord manifests his presence through the power of the Lamb of God that descends upon the covenant people of the Lord. Nephi underscores the connection between obtaining the power of God and partaking of the fruit by using phrases that signify an individual has partaken of the fruit: “saints,” “covenant people,” and “righteousness” (v. 14). In this final iteration of the battle between the great and spacious building and the tree of life—here referred to as the church of the Lamb of God and the church of the devil—the great gulf has become unsurpassable. The either-or language that dominates this sequence indicates a polarization so strict that individuals no longer switch sides or sit on the fence but rather belong to God or the devil (see vv. 7, 10).²⁴ The ending of Nephi’s recorded vision parallels the ending of Lehi’s dream—both finish in midstride with individuals pressing towards God and partaking of the fruit of the tree or “feeling their way towards that great and spacious building” (1 Nephi 8:31; see v. 30).

Conclusion

A literary analysis of Lehi's dream and Nephi's vision makes clear the sincerity with which Nephi penned the words, "I bear record that I saw the things which my father saw, and the angel of the Lord did make them known unto me" (1 Nephi 14:29). By paying close attention to the established narrative logic, the repetition, overlapping, conjoining of words and images, and Nephi's role in the retelling process, we recognize that although Nephi did not experience the elements in the same manner as his father did (Nephi's vision was collective and historic, while his father's was intimate and symbolic), he did see the same symbols and comprehend how his father's dream acted as a template for understanding the future of his posterity, the Gentile inhabitants of the New World, and all people before Christ's Second Coming. He then sought to make these connections known to his reader in his reconstruction of his vision.

After Nephi's vision concludes, his brethren ask him to explain the things their "father saw in a dream" (1 Nephi 15:21). In light of the immense interpretation Nephi has just received, the recorded insight he provides to his brethren is staggering in its brevity. He offers them only the meaning of the symbols in their most general terms, keeping to himself all the specific and layered insights he now possesses. What is Nephi's reason for this? Likely he recognizes they will benefit most from hearing the basics: an "awful gulf," which is hell, has been prepared for those individuals who "die in their wickedness" (vv. 28, 33); the fruit of the tree of life "is most precious and most desirable above all other fruits; yea, and it is the greatest of all the gifts of God" (v. 36); and they must "hearken unto the word of God" in order to withstand "the temptations and the fiery darts of the adversary" (v. 24). The information that Nephi sets forth simply and clearly is what we must know and understand to finish successfully our mortal sojourn and return to God, yet more knowledge exists if we are willing to seek it.

When comparing the examples of Nephi and his brethren, it is significant to note how much information beyond the basics the Lord desires to make known to his children. As Nephi chastises his brethren, "Do ye not remember the things which the Lord hath said?—If ye will not harden your hearts, and ask me in faith, believing that ye shall receive, with diligence in keeping my commandments, surely these things shall be made known unto you" (v. 11). Nephi's experience of receiving his vision illustrates the reality of

God's promise: he saw not only the interpretation of the dream his father had seen but also a vision of the whole history of the world, similar to that seen by John the Beloved and the brother of Jared. Our personal experience of reading Lehi's dream and Nephi's vision may parallel either Nephi's or his brethren's: we may accept the essential doctrine that Nephi and his guides explicitly state and move on, or we may choose to look closer and use narrative tools to excavate the layers of meaning and connections set out by Nephi and his guides.

Notes

1. Jeffrey R. Holland, *Christ and the New Covenant* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 160.

2. Holland, *Christ and the New Covenant*, 160.

3. Corbin T. Volluz, "Lehi's Dream of the Tree of Life: Springboard to Prophecy," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 2 (1993): 38.

4. Robert L. Millet, "Another Testament of Jesus Christ," 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), 163.

5. Although the standard reading is to see no connection between 1 Nephi 8 and 1 Nephi 13 and 14, Corbin T. Volluz has provided an insightful interpretation of 1 Nephi 12, 13, and 14 as an extended prophetic vision of the three separate multitudes that attempt to make their way to the tree of life. See Volluz, "Lehi's Dream of the Tree of Life," 20–29. While I find Volluz's reading convincing, our readings overlap on very few points.

6. For instance, in 1 Nephi 13:23–30 Nephi cites the angel's explanation of what he is seeing rather than describing it himself, and in 1 Nephi 14:5 the angel mentions showing Nephi things that Nephi has not described.

7. As seen in his quotations of and expansions on Isaiah's words, Nephi delighted in the multiplicity of meanings that could be contained in a single image or prophecy (see for example 2 Nephi 26–27). He rejoiced to show his people and his future readers that Isaiah's prophecies could speak simultaneously of Isaiah's time, the meridian of time, and the Second Coming. Therefore, we should not be surprised to find Nephi recounting his vision in a manner that helps his reader see how the elements in Lehi's dream take on different meanings at various points in his vision.

8. "The tree of life . . . is the love of God. The love of God for His children is most profoundly expressed in His gift of Jesus as our Redeemer." Neal A. Maxwell, "Lessons from Laman and Lemuel," *Ensign*, November 1999, 8.

9. For further explanation of the condescension of God in 1 Nephi 11, see Bruce R. McConkie, "Behold the Condescension of God," *New Era*, December 1984, 35–39.

10. Volluz too noted that whenever Nephi uses the phrase "multitudes gathered together," it seems to refer to the great and spacious building. "Lehi's Dream of the Tree of Life," 19.

11. Charles L. Swift, "Lehi's Vision of the Tree of Life: Understanding the Dream as Visionary Literature," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14, no. 2 (2005): 58–61, explains how Lehi's dream follows the kaleidoscopic structure of visionary literature as explained by Leland Ryken in *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 170.

12. The fountain is negative in 1 Nephi 8:32 and 12:16; the fountain is positive in 1 Nephi 8:20 and 11:25; the river is ambiguous in 1 Nephi 8:13, 17, 19, 26 because it has not yet been identified as filthy; the river is negative in 1 Nephi 12:16 and 15:26–27.

13. *Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary* (1828), "lead."

14. Abraham 2:6 and Genesis 12:7 and 17:8 contain the Lord's promise to Abraham that he and his seed are given the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession. Much of the Old Testament recounts his posterity's ability to obtain and keep or lose this promised land according to their righteousness. In the early history of the Church, the saints moved from place to place in search of the land of Zion promised to them by the Lord. In the Doctrine and Covenants we are promised that if we are faithful in keeping the new and everlasting covenant, we "shall inherit thrones, kingdoms, principalities, and powers, dominions" (D&C 132:19).

15. For more information, see Daniel L. Belnap, "'There Arose a Mist of Darkness': The Narrative of Lehi's Dream in Christ's Theophany" (paper presented at the Scholars Focus Conference on Third Nephi, Laura F. Willes Center for Book of Mormon Studies, Provo, UT, September 2008), 4–5.

16. The term "New World" is believed to have been coined in 1492 by a Spanish scholar named Peter Martyr d'Anghiera in a letter discussing Columbus's first voyage to the Americas. Edmundo O'Gorman, *The Invention of America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1961), 84–85.

17. John W. Welch suggests that "the great and spacious building was the same as the great and abominable church" but offers very little to back up the assertion. "Connections between the Visions of Lehi and Nephi," in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon: The FARMS Updates of the 1990s*, ed. Melvin J. Thorne and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999). Such a reading confirms my argument that readers intrinsically want to link the great and abominable church to the great and spacious building, although they cannot or do not precisely explain why. The object of my article is to make explicit those implicit connections that Nephi and the angel provide to help readers make the intuitive connections.

18. Similarly, the Nephites were earlier protected and kept separate from the Lamanites until their wickedness no longer merited the "justice of the Eternal God" to keep them separate (1 Nephi 12:18; see v. 19).

19. Terry B. Ball defines the word of God as "that which is given of God to lead one to eternal life. It includes Jesus Christ and his plan of redemption, scriptures, and truths revealed by the Holy Ghost." *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), "word of God," 792.

20. Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965–73), 1:624–25.

21. The Book of Mormon and the Bible are not the only last records. First Nephi 13:39 makes it clear that there are multiple "other books" that will assist in this work.

Robert J. Matthews has identified the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible, the Pearl of Great Price, and the Doctrine and Covenants as three of these other books. Robert J. Matthews, "A Study of the Text of Joseph Smith's Inspired Version of the Bible," *BYU Studies* 9, no. 1 (1968): 3.

22. For more information on this idea, see Belnap, "Narrative of Lehi's Dream in Christ's Theophany," 13–14.

23. For an excellent discussion on the great and abominable church and how it is used historically in chapter 13 and typologically in chapter 14, see Stephen E. Robinson, "Warring against the Saints of God," *Ensign*, January 1988, 34–40. Robinson also notes that the church of the devil should be seen as the equivalent to the great and spacious building because they share many characteristics.

24. This strict divide could be attributed to the apocalyptic nature of this vision. Since, as Robinson reminds us, "Apocalyptic literature is dualistic. . . . There are no gray areas in apocalyptic writing." Robinson, "Warring against the Saints," 34.