

The Doctrine of Christ in 2 Nephi 31–32 as an Approach to the Vision of the Tree of Life

Jared T. Parker

The vision of the tree of life in 1 Nephi 8 and 11–14 and the doctrine of Christ in 2 Nephi 31–32 are two familiar subjects in the Book of Mormon. What may not be well recognized is that Nephi apparently drew upon elements of the vision of the tree of life to teach the doctrine of Christ.¹ Recognition of this connection sets the stage for us to appreciate how the vision of the tree of life portrays the fundamental doctrine of Christ—the way to return to God’s presence and partake of eternal life as described in 2 Nephi 31–32.

Structure and Setting

Nephi’s exposition of the doctrine of Christ can be divided into two parts, both of which provide insight into the vision of the tree of life. The first part is found in 2 Nephi 31 and is a complete, self-contained unit. Nephi indicates that he feels compelled to address the doctrine of Christ before concluding his portion of the record. “The things which I have written sufficeth me, save it be a few words which I must speak concerning the doctrine of Christ” (2 Nephi

Jared T. Parker received a PhD in chemical engineering from Brigham Young University and is a medical device specialist in Flagstaff, Arizona.

31:2). By the end of the chapter, it is clear that Nephi believes he has said all that is needed: “And now, behold, this is the doctrine of Christ, and the only and true doctrine of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, which is one God, without end. Amen” (v. 21).

The second part of the doctrine of Christ is found in 2 Nephi 32. Here Nephi continues to write about the doctrine of Christ because he anticipates his readers will not fully understand 2 Nephi 31. Nephi did not originally intend to say more, but he perceives by the Spirit it is necessary to do so. Still, he is only allowed to say so much: “Behold, this is the doctrine of Christ, and there will be no more doctrine given until after he shall manifest himself unto you in the flesh. . . . And now I, Nephi, cannot say more; the Spirit stoppeth mine utterance” (vv. 6–7). Though Nephi was restrained from saying more, the content of chapter 32 provides important clues for a more complete understanding of the doctrine of Christ.

It is also important to recognize the setting of 2 Nephi 31–32. Nephi writes about the doctrine of Christ at the end of a long, prophetic life. His incredible vision of Lehi’s dream occurred over thirty years before,² when Nephi was very young and had limited life experience. In contrast, Nephi concludes his sacred record with the doctrine of Christ after he had married and had children, built a ship to cross the ocean, led a colony away from his murderous brothers, constructed a temple, experienced war and bloodshed, and served as a prophet and king for many years. Thus 2 Nephi 31–32 was written by an extremely experienced and inspired Nephi, a prophet who had spent his entire life studying, pondering, and teaching the things of God. Near the end of his life, Nephi provides his readers greater insight and understanding by drawing upon the visions he and his father had so many years before.

The Doctrine of Christ and the Vision of the Tree of Life

It has been observed by others that Nephi’s prophecies in 2 Nephi 25–30 correlate to topics from his vision of the tree of life in 1 Nephi 11–14.³ However, it may not be generally recognized that Nephi seems to continue this approach in 2 Nephi 31–32. He introduces the doctrine of Christ by directing his readers back to a specific part of his earlier vision. “I would that ye should remember that I have spoken unto you concerning that prophet which the Lord showed unto me, that should baptize the Lamb of God” (2 Nephi 31:4). In his vision of

the tree of life, Nephi saw John baptize Christ (see 1 Nephi 11:27), and Nephi turns to this event to begin his great doctrinal exposition.

Having oriented his readers back to his vision of the tree of life, Nephi refers to several things that are clearly from his father's dream or his own vision: Christ's baptism (compare 1 Nephi 11:27 with 2 Nephi 31:4–8),⁴ the strait⁵ and narrow path (compare 1 Nephi 8:20–23 with 2 Nephi 31:9, 18–19), the rod of iron or word of God/Christ (compare 1 Nephi 8:19–20, 24, 30; 11:25; 15:23–25 with 2 Nephi 31:19–20; 32:3), pressing forward on the path (compare 1 Nephi 8:21, 24, 30 with 2 Nephi 31:20), and the fruit of the tree of life, or eternal life (compare 1 Nephi 8:10; 15:21–22, 36 with 2 Nephi 31:18, 20). Certainly Nephi does not accidentally mention these dream or vision elements. Rather, he intentionally draws upon them to teach the doctrine of Christ. In other words, the vision of the tree of life is the setting for the doctrine of Christ.

What is fascinating is that Nephi includes many other things not mentioned explicitly in either his or his father's visions but that relate within the framework of the vision's original imagery. Consider the following: Christ set the example in that he was baptized by water, received the Holy Ghost, and endured to the end (see 2 Nephi 31:6–9, 12–13, 16–17); there is a gate to the strait and narrow path which is repentance and baptism by water (see vv. 9, 17–18); the Holy Ghost will baptize with fire those who enter the gate and show them all things they should do on the path to eternal life (see vv. 13–14; 32:5); those who fail to endure to the end on the path cannot be saved (see 2 Nephi 31:14–16); faith, hope, and love are how one presses forward on the path (see vv. 19–20); holding fast to the iron rod means feasting on the words of Christ, which will tell all things one should do on the strait and narrow path (see vv. 20; 32:3); while on the path, one must pray always in the name of Christ (see v. 9); those who press forward and endure to the end will receive eternal life (see 2 Nephi 31:20); and there is only one name and one way for man to be saved (see v. 21).

By including new concepts along with previous ones from the vision of the tree of life, Nephi is providing another approach to his father's dream and to his own vision. This is not to say that Nephi is revising or correcting his earlier record of the visions but rather that he is synthesizing various concepts and creating another perspective using key elements of the vision of the tree of life. While Lehi's dream centers on his family and Nephi's vision

contemplates future events, the doctrine of Christ appears to be another approach one focused on the individual requirements to obtain eternal life.

Second Nephi 31: The Doctrine of Christ

Christ set the example. One principle we may explore is Nephi's thought-provoking suggestion that Christ's example may be seen within the symbolism of the vision of the tree of life. Lehi saw various groups interact with the tree (see 1 Nephi 8:21–25, 30) and Nephi saw Christ's birth and ministry as the interpretation of the tree (see 1 Nephi 11:10–31), but now Nephi gives another perspective. Not only is Christ the manifestation of the love of God, or the tree of life, but he is also the perfect example for all because he traversed the path himself. "And he said unto the children of men: Follow thou me. . . . Follow me, and do the things which ye have seen me do" (2 Nephi 31:10, 12). In essence, the Savior says to all, "Follow me to the tree of life." Christ set the example because he got on the path and pressed forward to the tree himself.

Nephi also explains that Christ did not set the example just because an example was needed. Even though he was holy, Christ needed to enter by the gate of baptism "to fulfill all righteousness" (v. 6). In demonstrating obedience to the Father's commandment to be baptized, Christ himself was holding fast to the iron rod of his Father's word. Nephi describes Christ's baptismal covenant as that he "witnesseth unto the Father that he would be obedient unto him in keeping his commandments" (v. 7). Christ also needed to receive the Holy Ghost, press forward on the strait and narrow path, resist every mist of darkness of Satan's temptations, and endure to the end to partake of eternal life.

Gate of repentance and baptism by water. An innovation found in the doctrine of Christ is Nephi's inclusion of a gate to the strait and narrow path. There was no hint of a gate to the path in Lehi's dream or in Nephi's vision. Nephi's brother Jacob first mentions a gate to the strait and narrow way (see 2 Nephi 9:41), but it is Nephi who expands this idea and identifies the gate as repentance and baptism by water.

Why did Nephi identify repentance and baptism as the gate to the path? Lehi's dream gave the impression that anyone could commence in the path without meeting a specific requirement (see 1 Nephi 8:21–22). However, it seems Nephi adds the imagery of a gate to the path because of Christ's example and the Father's commandment. Christ's baptism "showeth unto the children of men the straitness of the path, and the narrowness of the gate, by

which they should enter, he having set the example before them. . . . And the Father said: Repent ye, repent ye, and be baptized in the name of my Beloved Son” (2 Nephi 31:9, 11). Nephi understood that he was shown Christ’s example so he could tell others the universal requirement to get on the path. “Wherefore, do the things which I have told you I have seen that your Lord and your Redeemer should do; for, for this cause have they been shown unto me, that ye might know the gate by which ye should enter. For the gate by which ye should enter is repentance and baptism by water. . . . And then are ye in this strait and narrow path which leads to eternal life” (vv. 17–18). Nephi knew that the only way to get on the path is to be baptized as Christ would be, and so he added a gate to the strait and narrow path.

Receiving the Holy Ghost and baptism by fire. Another principle not found in either Lehi’s or Nephi’s vision is the reception of the Holy Ghost when one is on the strait and narrow path. Nephi spoke of the Holy Ghost in his earlier vision (see 1 Nephi 11:27; 12:7, 18; 13:37), but not as related to the path to the tree. Also, neither Lehi nor Nephi mentioned the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost. Now, as with baptism by water, Christ’s example of receiving the Holy Ghost becomes a critical part of reaching the tree of life. The Savior says, “He that is baptized in my name, to him will the Father give the Holy Ghost, like unto me; wherefore, follow me, and do the things which ye have seen me do” (2 Nephi 31:12). A person who receives the Holy Ghost is baptized with fire and with the Holy Ghost, speaks “with the tongue of angels” (v. 13), and receives a remission of sins (see v. 17). Moreover, the Holy Ghost is one source of the iron rod, the word of God, because he “witnesses of the Father and the Son” (v. 18). All these things come to those who get on the path to eternal life and receive the Holy Ghost.

Failing to endure to the end. In Lehi’s dream, many commenced on the path but later “wandered off” or “fell away into forbidden paths and were lost” (1 Nephi 8:23, 28). Now in the doctrine of Christ, we learn the gravity of what it means to be lost. Nephi receives a revelation from the Son explaining the seriousness of entering the covenant and then turning away: “After ye have repented of your sins, and witnessed unto the Father that ye are willing to keep my commandments, by the baptism of water, and have received the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost . . . and after this should deny me, it would have been better for you that ye had not known me” (2 Nephi 31:14). Nephi testifies that this means such persons cannot be saved: “And now, my

beloved brethren, I know by this that unless a man shall endure to the end, in following the example of the Son of the living God, he cannot be saved” (v. 16). Enduring to the end is the only way anyone will be able to partake of the tree of life in eternity.

Press forward with faith, hope, and love. Nephi gives new insight into the way a person actually presses forward on the path to the tree. “Wherefore, ye must press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope, and a love of God and of all men” (v. 20). What was previously a general description of pressing forward on the path has now become specific. The triad describing a true Christian—faith, hope, and love—summarizes what is required to successfully press forward on the path. And as Christ set the example, each is to exercise faith as he did, hope as he did, and love as he did. All of this makes the person more like him, which is one goal of pressing forward to the tree of life.

Feast on the word of Christ. In Lehi’s dream, those who reached the tree were “clinging” or “continually holding fast” (1 Nephi 8:24, 30) to the rod of iron. Now Nephi describes this differently. He says that one must be “feasting upon the word of Christ” (2 Nephi 31:20) on the path to eternal life. It is as if Nephi wants those on the path to internalize the word of God and make it a part of them. He seems to portray this by changing the imagery from “clinging” or “continually holding fast” to “feasting” on the word.

Ye shall have eternal life. The fruit of the tree of life symbolizes eternal life as it is “most precious and most desirable above all other fruits” and represents “the greatest of all the gifts of God” (1 Nephi 15:36; compare D&C 14:7). Taking his readers all the way to partaking of the tree of life, Nephi includes a revealed promise to those who press forward on the path and endure to the end. “Thus saith the Father: Ye shall have eternal life” (2 Nephi 31:20). This promise appears to be that of being sealed up to eternal life. In other words, Nephi feels he has given enough instruction for his readers to know how to make their calling and election sure. It is actually quite simple: get on the path and press forward until you obtain the promise of eternal life. Elder Bruce R. McConkie explained similarly: “The way it operates is this: you get on the path that’s named the ‘straight and narrow.’ You do it by entering the gate of repentance and baptism. The straight and narrow path leads from the gate of repentance and baptism, a very great distance, to a reward that’s called eternal life. . . . If you’re on the path when death comes—because this is the time and

the day appointed, this is the probationary estate—you'll never fall off from it, and, for all practical purposes, your calling and election is made sure."⁶

No other name, no other way. Nephi punctuates the doctrine of Christ with the final statement that there is no other name nor way man can reach the tree of life. Even though there was no mention of the importance of the name of Christ in the earlier visions, Nephi includes it in the doctrine of Christ with the Father's commandment, "Be baptized in the name of my Beloved Son" (v. 11). All must be baptized in the name of Christ, and those who are baptized witness that they are "willing to take upon [them] the name of Christ" (v. 13). And so it becomes clear that only those who have taken upon themselves the name of Christ will be allowed to partake of the tree of life because there is "none other . . . name given under heaven whereby man can be saved in the kingdom of God" (v. 21).

In Lehi's dream, there was no specific path to get to the great and spacious building; apparently it was open to all, however they came. In stark contrast, 2 Nephi 31 emphasizes that there is only one way to reach the tree of life, the one way that all must follow, without exception. Nephi knows he has taught the only way to return to God, which is the fundamental doctrine of Christ. "And now, behold, my beloved brethren, this is the way; and there is none other way. . . . And now, behold, this is the doctrine of Christ, and the only and true doctrine of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, which is one God, without end. Amen" (v. 21).

Second Nephi 32: Nephi's Commentary

Like chapter 31, chapter 32 is about the doctrine of Christ, but here Nephi anticipates his readers' questions that may arise from his description of the doctrine, specifically what to do while on the path. It is important to study these two chapters together, or we might miss the greater insights Nephi wants us to gain about the doctrine of Christ.

With prophetic sensitivity to the Spirit, Nephi realizes that his readers may not fully comprehend what they should do after baptism to obtain eternal life. He feels he has explained it sufficiently because he asks them why they ponder this. "And now, behold, my beloved brethren, I suppose that ye ponder somewhat in your hearts concerning that which ye should do after ye have entered in by the way. But, behold, why do ye ponder these things in your hearts?" (2 Nephi 32:1).

To help explain what one should do while on the path to eternal life, Nephi returns to the concept of speaking with the tongue of angels. “Do ye not remember that I said unto you that after ye had received the Holy Ghost ye could speak with the tongue of angels? And now, how could ye speak with the tongue of angels save it were by the Holy Ghost?” (v. 2). Nephi mentioned this idea only briefly in 2 Nephi 31, but now he explains the connection more directly: “Angels speak by the power of the Holy Ghost; wherefore, they speak the words of Christ” (v. 3). Therefore, words spoken by the power of the Holy Ghost, such as those spoken by angels, are the words of Christ. Nephi further elucidates this point by quoting what he previously said and identifying why it is so important to feast on the words of Christ. “Wherefore, I said unto you, feast upon the words of Christ; for behold, the words of Christ will tell you all things what ye should do.”

Clearly, the words of Christ will tell those who have been baptized all things they should do to partake of the tree of life. Nevertheless, Nephi follows this point with an interesting statement: “Wherefore, now after I have spoken these words, if ye cannot understand them it will be because ye ask not, neither do ye knock; wherefore, ye are not brought into the light, but must perish in the dark” (v. 4). Nephi still seems concerned that his readers may not fully comprehend his words. It also appears that he wants his readers to pray to obtain a greater understanding of what he has said.

Verse 5 continues Nephi’s efforts to help his readers understand: “For behold, again I say unto you that if ye will . . . receive the Holy Ghost, it will show unto you all things what ye should do.” Even though he has already mentioned this before, Nephi emphasizes the role of the Holy Ghost again. Not only is the Holy Ghost the source of the words of Christ that will “tell . . . all things” one should do on the path, he will also “show . . . all things” that should be done. Truly receiving the Holy Ghost is absolutely critical for each person on the path to be able to reach the tree of life.

More than once now, Nephi has referred to “things” to be done after baptism, but he has not identified anything in particular. Why is this? Is it that Nephi does not have anything specific in mind or are there additional things required of every person on the path to eternal life that he chooses not to mention? Unfortunately, Nephi does not answer this question but instead continues rather cryptically: “Behold, this is the doctrine of Christ, and there will be no more doctrine given until after he shall manifest himself unto you

in the flesh. And when he shall manifest himself unto you in the flesh, the things which he shall say unto you shall ye observe to do” (v. 6). While it is ambiguous what Nephi means here by Christ manifesting himself “unto you in the flesh,” it is clear that when this happens, Christ himself will provide additional doctrine and tell what things should be done.

Whatever it is that Nephi will not write about explicitly, he makes it plain that he has taken the topic as far as he can. “And now I, Nephi, cannot say more; the Spirit stoppeth mine utterance, and I am left to mourn because of the unbelief, and the wickedness, and the ignorance, and the stiffneckedness of men; for they will not search knowledge, nor understand great knowledge, when it is given unto them in plainness, even as plain as word can be” (v. 7). We can almost feel Nephi’s grief at this point. He wants his readers to understand more, but the Spirit stops him. What could be so important that Nephi would mourn? It seems he mourns because men will not value sacred knowledge enough to search until they find it themselves. Men will not seek to understand greater knowledge even when they are told plainly such knowledge exists and is available.

In a sad conclusion to Nephi’s mourning, we can sense his feelings as he perceives that his readers still will not comprehend what they should do to reach the tree of life, even though he briefly alluded to additional revelation that may result from the doctrine of Christ: “And now, my beloved brethren, I perceive that ye ponder still in your hearts; and it grieveth me that I must speak concerning this thing. For if ye would hearken unto the Spirit which teacheth a man to pray, ye would know that ye must pray; for the evil spirit teacheth not a man to pray, but teacheth him that he must not pray” (v. 8). He already told his readers that if they do not understand what they should do after baptism, it is because they do not ask or knock. He also said that his readers must receive the Holy Ghost, which if they did, would teach them to pray.

It must have seemed obvious to Nephi that prayer would bring the revelation of what he wanted his readers to understand. “But behold, I say unto you that ye must pray always, and not faint; that ye must not perform any thing unto the Lord save in the first place ye shall pray unto the Father in the name of Christ, that he will consecrate thy performance unto thee, that thy performance may be for the welfare of thy soul” (v. 9). With this statement Nephi ends his explanation of the doctrine of Christ, leaving his readers with an implicit invitation to seek additional knowledge that he has gained for himself

but was not allowed to share, such as the greater doctrine that awaits one at the end of the strait and narrow path.

Nephi's commentary in chapter 32 is ultimately an exhortation to endure to the end while on the strait and narrow path, which is accomplished by being worthy of and heeding to the whispering of the Holy Ghost, symbolically represented in the voice of angels. Though mention of the words of angels in chapter 32 may refer back to the explicit words of Christ in 2 Nephi 31 (promising that those who had been baptized by fire and by the Holy Ghost could speak with the tongue of angels), it may also hearken back to the role of angels in both Nephi's visionary experience and his father's dream.

The Words of Angels⁷

In 1 Nephi 8 and 11–14, an important, though subtle, gospel principle is revealed—the role of angelic ministry in the plan of salvation. In both Lehi's dream and Nephi's subsequent vision, angelic ministration plays a fundamental role in the revelatory experience. For Lehi, an angel guides him through the “dark and dreary waste” (1 Nephi 8:7), functioning in the same manner as the iron rod. For Nephi, an angel guides him through his vision, teaching him about Christ, who will also appear and function like angels in delivering the word of God. In light of the role of angelic ministration in Lehi's dream and Nephi's vision, perhaps it is not surprising to find angelic function described in connection with the doctrine of Christ. Certainly, angelic ministration has played and continues to play a fundamental role in bringing about the salvation of mankind. As such, it may be useful to review how angels function as deliverers of the words of Christ, both explicitly and implicitly.

Words of angels in the scriptures. Explicit angelic ministration can be found throughout the scriptures. Consider how often the words of angels are recorded in the Book of Mormon: Lehi was taught by angels (see 1 Nephi 1:8–15); Nephi recorded the words of angels (see 1 Nephi 3:29–31; 11–14; 19:8, 10; 2 Nephi 25:19); Jacob learned many things, including Christ's name, from an angel (see 2 Nephi 6:9, 11; 10:3); King Benjamin taught the words of an angel to his people (see Mosiah 3:2–27); Alma and the sons of Mosiah were rebuked by an angel (see Mosiah 27:11–17); Alma was instructed by and delivered the message of angels (see Alma 8:14–18; 9:25, 29); Amulek was called and prepared for his ministry by an angel (see Alma 10:7–10); an angel taught Alma the state of the soul between death and resurrection (see Alma 40:11); and an

angel taught Samuel the Lamanite what to preach to the wicked Nephites (see Helaman 13:7; 14:9, 26–28). Certainly the Book of Mormon contains the ministration and teachings of angels. We could also add many examples from the other standard works,⁸ but the point is clear: ministering angels speak the words of Christ to tell mortals what they need to do on the strait and narrow path. Thus angels are a key source of the iron rod, the word of God in the vision of the tree of life, and all can feast on their words in the scriptures.

Words of angels not found in the scriptures. Interestingly, not all angelic ministration is explicitly retold in the scriptures. Again just looking in the Book of Mormon, consider how many experienced the ministering of angels, but we do not have a record of what was communicated: Nephi (see 1 Nephi 14:25–28; 2 Nephi 4:24); Jacob (see Jacob 7:5); many among the Nephites (see Alma 13:22–26); many converted Lamanites (see Alma 19:34; 24:14); various men and women (see Alma 32:23); Nephi, Lehi, and about three hundred Lamanites (see Helaman 5:38–39, 48–49); wise men (see Helaman 16:14); Nephi (see 3 Nephi 7:18); the Nephites and their children (see 3 Nephi 17:24; 19:14–15); and Mormon and Moroni visited by the three translated Nephites (see 3 Nephi 28:25–26, 30; Mormon 8:11).

Apparently some things angels say are to be shared with all who will listen while other things are not for the world to know. In either case, it seems that feasting on the words of Christ spoken by angels can prepare one eventually to feast on the words of Christ directly from him. This is consistent with what Nephi said in 2 Nephi 32:3 and 6, that his readers should feast on the words of Christ, recognized and understood through the ministration of the Holy Ghost, but that no more doctrine would be given until Christ manifests himself “unto you in the flesh.” One possible fulfillment of this promise may have been Christ’s ministry among the Nephites after his resurrection.⁹ Christ ministered to the Nephites as the ultimate angel, the messenger of the Father, and all of them obtained eternal life (see 3 Nephi 27:30–31). The Nephite golden years occurred because all of them feasted on the words of Christ until they were at the tree of life partaking of its fruit. Nevertheless, we currently have less than “a hundredth part” (3 Nephi 26:6) of what Christ taught the Nephites. Possibly similar to Nephi being stopped from saying more, Mormon was forbidden from including all that Christ taught the Nephites (see 3 Nephi 26:11).¹⁰

Though the injunction against saying more suggests some knowledge that cannot be discussed in a more public forum, it also encourages the reader to contemplate that which has been given more closely. As Lehi did not interpret his dream for his family (see 1 Nephi 15:2–3), Nephi left his readers to seek more light and knowledge about the doctrine of Christ on their own (compare Alma 12:9). In essence, it seems Nephi wanted his readers to do what he had done throughout his life—feast on the words of Christ, including those spoken by angels, to learn more—which takes us back to the invitation he provides in chapter 32.

Yet the role of angelic ministrations in both Lehi’s and Nephi’s revelatory experiences and in Nephi’s description of the doctrine of Christ may have another symbolic meaning, one that points to another approach that can be taken to understand the relationship between Lehi’s dream and the doctrine of Christ—that of the temple.

The Doctrine of Christ, the Dream, and the Temple

The primary relationship between the vision of the tree of life, the doctrine of Christ, and the ancient temple is that they all portray the way man may return to God’s presence and partake of eternal life. As temple allusions may be noted in Lehi’s dream¹¹ and Nephi’s vision,¹² such allusions in 2 Nephi 31–32 would be consistent with seeing the doctrine of Christ as an approach to the vision of the tree of life. Even so, this perspective is not explicit in the text and must be approached with care. Identifying parallels should not be considered conclusive, but solely as observations for consideration.

The tree of life is closely associated with the ancient temple. When Adam and Eve were cast out of God’s presence and the Garden of Eden, cherubim and a flaming sword blocked them from “the way of the tree of life” (Genesis 3:24). “Perhaps it would not be too much to assume that the way spoken of could have been a strait and narrow path. Thus it seems possible that when Lehi saw the tree of life in his dream, he was in reality seeing a representation of that same tree which existed in the midst of the Garden of Eden.”¹³ Ever since the Fall, man has sought to return to the tree of life, and the revealed pattern of the ancient temple modeled the Garden of Eden and how man could return to God’s presence.¹⁴ In other words, the way to the tree of life may be seen as the path through the ancient temple. This suggests a connection

between the ancient temple and the way to the tree of life as portrayed in the Garden of Eden, Lehi’s dream, Nephi’s vision, and the doctrine of Christ.

Nephi taught the doctrine of Christ in such a manner that it is possible to see parallels to the ancient temple.¹⁵ In fact, it is only with all the elements Nephi emphasized in 2 Nephi 31–32 that the two models correlate to each other. Consider how the doctrine of Christ corresponds to the symbolism of the ancient temple.¹⁶

Ancient Temple	Strait and Narrow Path
<i>Outer Court</i>	
Altar of sacrifice	Obedience and sacrifice/Faith and repentance
Laver of water/Brazen sea	Gate of repentance and baptism by water
<i>Holy Place</i>	
Shewbread	Feasting on word of Christ
Candlestick(s)	Holy Ghost shows the way
Altar of incense	Prayer in Christ’s name
<i>Holy of Holies</i>	
Cherubim	Angels
Ark of covenant/Mercy seat	Presence of God/Eternal life
High priest	Christ the example

The Outer Court. In the outer court of the ancient temple, the altar of sacrifice and laver of water/brazen sea were used regularly for animal sacrifices and ritual washings. These symbolized obedience and sacrifice, as well as faith, repentance, and baptism by water.¹⁷ Likewise, Nephi emphasized obedience, repentance, and baptism by water in the doctrine of Christ (see 2 Nephi 31:10–13). Perhaps the gate of repentance and baptism is akin to the requirement that the ancient priests be cleansed by sacrifice and washed with water before entering the Holy Place (see Exodus 30:18–21).

The Holy Place. It is interesting that when Nephi sought to help his readers understand what to do after baptism in 2 Nephi 32, he emphasized three things that may be compared to the three items in the Holy Place: the word of Christ, the Holy Ghost, and prayer. First, Nephi’s description of “feasting

upon the word of Christ” (2 Nephi 31:20) might be likened to the shewbread the priests ate each week (see Exodus 25:30; Leviticus 24:5–9). Second, the oil in the candlestick(s), which was to “burn always” (Exodus 27:20), literally showed the way inside the otherwise dark Holy Place. This may be compared to Nephi’s statement that the Holy Ghost “will show unto you all things what ye should do” (2 Nephi 32:5). Third, incense was associated with prayer anciently (see Psalm 141:2) and was to be offered on the altar in the Holy Place twice daily (see Exodus 30:7–8). Perhaps this is related to the fact that Nephi “did pray oft” in a Temple setting (1 Nephi 18:3) and corresponds to his exhortation to “pray always, and not faint . . . in the name of Christ” (2 Nephi 32:9).

Cherubim and angels. In the ancient temple, the cherubim on the mercy seat (see Exodus 25:18–22) and overshadowing the ark of the covenant (see 1 Kings 6:23–28) guarded the throne or dwelling place of God.¹⁸ In addition, cherubim were found on the veils (see Exodus 26:32) and curtains or walls (see 1 Kings 6:29) of the temple, all representing the guardians of the way to the tree of life. To enter the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies, one had to be ritually clean and pass by the cherubim.

Angels may be compared to the cherubim because they “call men unto repentance . . . to prepare the way among the children of men, by declaring the word of Christ unto the chosen vessels of the Lord” (Moroni 7:31). As Nephi said, they teach those on the strait and narrow path “all things [they] should do” (2 Nephi 32:3) to reach the tree of life. “And by so doing, the Lord God prepareth the way that the residue of men may have faith in Christ, that the Holy Ghost may have place in their hearts” (Moroni 7:32). Thus cherubim guard the way and angels prepare the way for mankind to obtain the strait and narrow path and press forward to eternal life.

The Holy of Holies. The culminating symbol in the ancient temple was entering the Holy of Holies to be in God’s presence and partake of eternal life.¹⁹ This may be compared to the doctrine of Christ where those who get on the path and press forward eventually hear the Father say, “Ye shall have eternal life” (2 Nephi 31:20), and are thus prepared to enter his presence.²⁰ In the doctrine of Christ, Nephi taught how to prepare for God’s presence and was an example of this himself in that he saw the Lord (see 2 Nephi 11:2).

High priest, Christ the example. As a final potential parallel between the doctrine of Christ and the ancient temple, Nephi portrayed Christ as setting the example by entering through the gate and pressing forward on the path

to obtain eternal life. Like the high priest in ancient Israel, Christ, the great high priest, offered himself as a sacrifice and entered into God's presence (see Hebrews 9), symbolically passing through the ancient temple himself. When Christ said to Nephi, "Follow me, and do the things which ye have seen me do" (2 Nephi 31:12), we could imagine him saying, "Follow me through the temple to the presence of my Father." Both in the ancient temple ritual and the doctrine of Christ, Jesus is the model for all who want to return to God's presence and partake of the tree of eternal life.

Having identified some possible allusions to the ancient temple in the doctrine of Christ, we must ask, did Nephi have these things in mind when he wrote 2 Nephi 31–32? Was he trying to point his readers to the ancient temple to help them better understand the doctrine of Christ? We do not and cannot know the answers to these questions. The comparisons between the ancient temple and 2 Nephi 31–32 are consistent with seeing the doctrine of Christ as an approach to the vision of the tree of life, but without more information from Nephi himself, allusions to the ancient temple in the doctrine of Christ must be only considered possible, not certain or sure. Yet in terms of application, recognizing that the temple could be depicted in the doctrine of Christ may help us understand even better the role of the temple in our own journey along the strait and narrow path.

Conclusion

Nephi used the vision of the tree of life as the model for teaching the doctrine of Christ. In doing this, he included many new elements along with imagery from the original vision, creating another approach that describes what one must do to reach the tree of life. Even so, Nephi mourned because he could not say more and his readers would not seek to know more about the doctrine of Christ. Yet he also invited us to find out more, just as he did, and in that invitation he becomes our angel and our guide like his father before him. Through the Holy Ghost such ministration can become our iron rod to lead us to the tree. That the temple can be symbolically represented in the dream is not really surprising because the temple, like angelic ministration and the Holy Ghost, functions to lead us back to God and the gift of eternal life. This complex symbolism is one of the primary reasons Lehi's dream is such a powerful discourse on the doctrine of Christ.

Notes

1. Others have noted that Nephi referred to elements of the vision of the tree of life later in his record (see Daniel B. McKinlay, "Strait and Narrow," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 3:1419), but a survey of Latter-day Saint literature suggests that an in-depth study of 2 Nephi 31–32 and the vision of the tree of life is lacking.

2. Lehi's family left Jerusalem in 600 BC and camped in a valley they called Lemuel (see 1 Nephi 2:4–6, 14). Here Lehi and Nephi received their visions of the tree of life (see 1 Nephi 16:6), which appears to have been early on in the eight year journey from Jerusalem to Bountiful (see 1 Nephi 16:13–17, 33; 17:1–5). Nephi wrote about the doctrine of Christ sometime after 559 BC (see 2 Nephi 5:34) and probably closer to 544 BC when he gave Jacob charge concerning the small plates (see Jacob 1:1). This means more than thirty years, and at most fifty-five years, had passed between Nephi's vision and his writing of the doctrine of Christ in 2 Nephi 31–32.

3. See a comparison in Frederick W. Axelgard, "1 and 2 Nephi: An Inspiring Whole," *BYU Studies* 26, no. 4 (1986): 58. Also, Nephi's prophecies "referred to events revealed not only to Isaiah but to Nephi himself in his vision of the tree of life: the birth, crucifixion, and resurrection of the Messiah (2 Ne. 25); the ministry of Christ to the Nephites and the condition of the Gentiles in the last days (2 Ne. 26); the coming forth of the Book of Mormon (2 Ne. 27); the workings of the devil and his abominable church in the last days (2 Ne. 28); the Gentiles' rejection of the Book of Mormon (2 Ne. 29); and the conversion of Gentiles, Jews, and Lehi's seed (2 Ne. 30:1–8) before the millennial day. . . . Thus Nephi's prophecies in 2 Nephi 25–30 correlate to both passages in Isaiah and to Nephi's vision of the tree of life." John Sears Tanner, "Nephi," in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 585.

4. Though not explicit in the text, it appears Lehi also learned this and other information recorded in 1 Nephi 10 from his vision of the tree of life (see vv. 7–10, 17). The content is similar to what Nephi saw in vision when he said, "I saw the things which my father saw" (1 Nephi 14:29).

5. Even though the two words "strait" and "straight" are pronounced the same, they have quite different meanings. "Strait" means narrow, while "straight" means not crooked. "In the 1829 printer's manuscript of the Book of Mormon, the word 'straight' was never used. When Joseph Smith said the word 'strai[gh]t,' Oliver Cowdery apparently always preferred to spell it 's-t-r-a-i-t,' which was, in the early nineteenth century, an acceptable spelling for either meaning. Indeed, spellings varied from one early edition of the Book of Mormon to the next; thus, one must consider the word in context to determine its meaning." John W. Welch, "Strait, straight," in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, 746. Regarding the path leading to the tree of life, all earlier editions of the Book of Mormon read "straight and narrow," while the current (1981) edition reads "strait and narrow." Careful analysis had led some to favor the earlier reading (Noel B. Reynolds and Royal Skousen, "Was the Path Nephi Saw 'Strait and Narrow' or 'Straight and Narrow?'," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 10, no. 2 [2001], 30–33; John W. Welch, "Straight (Not Strait) and Narrow," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 16, no. 1 [2007], 18–25) or the current reading. See Paul Y. Hoskisson, "Straightening Things Out: The

Use of *Strait* and *Straight* in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12, no. 2 (2003): 58–71.

6. Bruce R. McConkie, “The Probationary Test of Mortality,” address given at the University of Utah Institute, January 10, 1982, 8–9.

7. I take the term “angel” in Nephi’s writings to mean a heavenly messenger. This is based on its use in the Book of Mormon, which is consistent with the King James translation of the Bible. The Hebrew *mal’ak* and the Greek *aggelos*, both meaning “messenger,” can refer to earthly or heavenly beings, but Jerome’s Latin translation of the Bible (almost a thousand years after Nephi) used different words to distinguish between human and heavenly messengers. See Carol A. Newsom, “Angels (Old Testament),” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:248–49. The King James translators maintained this distinction by rendering *mal’ak* and *aggelos* as “angel” when they believed a heavenly being was intended. Likewise, the use of “angel” in the Book of Mormon appears to refer to heavenly messengers (see Book of Mormon Index, “Angel” and “Angels, ministering of”). Nephi’s statement that those who receive the Holy Ghost can speak “with the tongue of angels” (2 Nephi 31:13, 14; 32:2) indicates that mortals can speak the words of Christ as angels do, but not that they are angels themselves (see likewise D&C 42:6). Angels in Nephi’s day would have included unembodied spirits, disembodied spirits, or translated beings, but not resurrected beings since none were yet resurrected, and only those who belong to this earth minister to it (see D&C 130:5; see also Oscar W. McConkie, “Angels,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1:40–41).

8. Note that some form of the word “angel” is found 543 times in the standard works, according to a search of the English text of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *The Scriptures: CD-ROM Resource Edition 1.0* (Salt Lake City: Intellectual Reserve, Inc., 2002).

9. This is based on the similarity between 2 Nephi 32:6 and Nephi’s earlier statement in 2 Nephi 26:1: “And after Christ shall have risen from the dead he shall show himself unto you, my children, and my beloved brethren; and the words which he shall speak unto you shall be the law which ye shall do.”

10. The brother of Jared had a similar experience and restriction (see Ether 3:21). The things he saw were made known to the Nephites after Christ’s ministry among them, but we do not have them today (see Ether 4:1–7).

11. See Corbin T. Volluz, “Lehi’s Dream of the Tree of Life: Springboard to Prophecy,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 2 (1993): 34–8.

12. For his vision, Nephi was “caught away in the Spirit of the Lord, yea, into an exceedingly high mountain” (1 Nephi 11:1). As mountains were associated anciently with sacred space and Temples (see Isaiah 2:2–3; 56:7), Nephi was in a temple setting when he saw his vision of the tree of life.

13. Volluz, “Lehi’s Dream of the Tree of Life: Springboard to Prophecy,” 35.

14. An excellent visual portrayal of this may be found in Donald W. Parry, “Garden of Eden: Prototype Sanctuary,” in *Temples of the Ancient World*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1994), 134–5.

15. It should be noted that Nephi built a temple and kept the law of Moses, which centered around temple worship (see John W. Welch, “The Temple in the Book of Mormon: The Temples at the Cities of Nephi, Zarahemla, and Bountiful,” in *Temples of*

the Ancient World, 297–387). “And we did observe to keep the judgments, and the statutes, and the commandments of the Lord in all things, according to the law of Moses. . . . And I, Nephi, did build a temple; and I did construct it after the manner of the temple of Solomon” (2 Nephi 5:10, 16). Certainly Nephi would have regularly participated in the performances and ordinances of the law of Moses at the temple he built. Moreover, the Nephites had the Melchizedek Priesthood (see Joseph Fielding McConkie, “Priesthood among the Nephites,” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, 656–58) and, unlike ancient Israel, were not restricted from entering into the rest of the Lord (see Jacob 1:7). This suggests the righteous among the Nephites had access to the blessings of the temple that were available before Christ’s resurrection by virtue of the Holy Order of God among them (see 2 Nephi 6:2; Alma 13:1–16). Thus it seems Nephi was thoroughly informed on the critical role of the temple and its symbolism, including the higher ordinances that were originally offered to ancient Israel to bring them into God’s presence (see D&C 84:19–25).

16. The symbolism of the ancient temple is adapted from Church Educational System, *Old Testament Student Manual: Genesis–2 Samuel*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 155–56. I appreciate Robert J. Norman of the Church Educational System for introducing me to the idea that the strait and narrow path may be seen in the ancient temple.

17. There is no scriptural indication that the laver of water/brazen sea was used for baptisms anciently. Perhaps the brazen sea of Solomon’s Temple was used for baptisms for the living and reference to this has been removed from the record we have. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 103–4. Whatever the case, the laver of water/brazen sea symbolized baptism, which was part of the law of Moses (see D&C 84:26–27).

18. See Numbers 7:89; 1 Samuel 4:4; 2 Samuel 6:2; Psalm 80:1; 99:1; Isaiah 37:16.

19. Since some fell away after partaking of the fruit of the tree of life, it seems that Lehi’s dream portrayed a symbolic entering into God’s presence, as in entering the Holy of Holies in the ancient temple, not actually entering God’s presence and partaking of eternal life.

20. Notice how the Prophet Joseph Smith’s description of this process is similar to Nephi’s: “After a person has faith in Christ, repents of his sins, and is baptized for the remission of sins and receives the Holy Ghost, . . . then let him continue to humble himself before God, hungering and thirsting after righteousness, and living by every word of God, and the Lord will soon say unto him, Son, thou shalt be exalted. When the Lord has thoroughly proved him . . . then the man will find his calling and election made sure. Then it will be his privilege to receive the other Comforter. . . . When any man obtains this last Comforter, he will have the personage of Jesus Christ to attend him, . . . and even He will manifest the Father unto him.” *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1938), 150–51.