

“The Presence of the Lord”

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Lehi's dream in 1 Nephi 8 has been interpreted in many rich and helpful ways. Most commonly we see it through the lens of Nephi's vision in 1 Nephi 11 or Nephi's explanation to his brothers in 1 Nephi 15, but this paper explores the insights we can gain by seeing the dream of the tree of life through the conceptual framework expressed by Lehi's comments. A careful study of Lehi's response to his dream can help us see what it means not only to him but also to all of us more universally.

At the end of his narrative, Lehi gives us an interpretive tool to read the significance of our relationship to the tree. After he recounts his vision, Lehi expresses fear that Laman and Lemuel “should be cast off from the presence of the Lord” (1 Nephi 8:36). Lehi's interpretation of his dream is framed by two central concepts or terms: being “cast off” and “the presence of the Lord.” This interpretation suggests a bifurcation of existence into two conceptual categories—being in the presence of the Lord and being separated from the Lord.

We have a number of resources to understand what Lehi meant both in terms of being “cast off” and of being in “the presence of the Lord.” While we

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do not have the original language of the Book of Mormon to directly compare with the Hebrew of the Old Testament, both “cast off” and “the presence of the Lord” are important terms in the Bible, describing distance from and proximity to God, often directly related to temple imagery.

After exploring this Old Testament background, noting the foundational temple imagery of these terms, I will show how paying attention to the uses of “cast off” and “the presence of the Lord” in the Book of Mormon can deepen our appreciation of the doctrinal insights found in Lehi’s dream. These terms show up in critical passages throughout the Book of Mormon that explain the criteria for either being in the presence of God or being cast off. By studying the term “presence of the Lord” in the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon, we can see that it has a broader, more multifaceted scope than any particular specialized meaning such as entering the celestial kingdom or receiving the Second Comforter in mortality.

The choice to come unto Christ and partake of the fruit can be understood both in terms of daily choices and experiences as well as ultimate choices and one’s final destiny. When Lehi describes his own experience of partaking of the fruit, he comments: “I beheld that it was most sweet, above all that I ever before tasted. Yea, and I beheld that the fruit thereof was white, to exceed all the whiteness that I had ever seen. And as I partook of the fruit thereof it filled my soul with exceedingly great joy” (1 Nephi 8:11–12). The act of partaking of the sweetness, purity, and joy of coming unto Christ and experiencing his presence does not require waiting until the end of our life or receiving the Second Comforter. It is significant that Helaman writes to Captain Moroni, “And now, my beloved brother, Moroni, may the Lord our God, who has redeemed us and made us free, *keep you continually in his presence*” (Alma 58:41; emphasis added). What it means to be in the presence of the Lord in mortality, as well as in the eternal world, is richly developed in Lehi’s dream as well as in the related Old Testament and Book of Mormon references.

Lehi’s interpretation of responses to the offer of the fruit combines two overarching themes of the Book of Mormon. First, it captures the invitation to come unto Christ, to enter into his presence and partake of the kind of life that he enjoys. At the same time, this image is coupled with an awareness that not all who are separated will choose to come. This is the awareness that one can choose to be cast off forever—clearly the fear of Lehi for his sons.

While the events in Lehi’s dream were more encompassing, his concluding commentary focuses on the state of his sons. Lehi “exceedingly feared for Laman and Lemuel; yea, he feared lest they should be *cast off from the presence of the Lord*” (1 Nephi 8:36; emphasis added). Before looking closely at the uses of the terms “cast off” and “the presence of the Lord,” it may be helpful to look narrowly at the things Lehi saw that he described in these terms.

There are two places in the dream where Laman and Lemuel appear. The first is partway through the dream, where Lehi himself is at the tree and looks around for his family. Other family members come and partake of the fruit, but even though Laman and Lemuel are specifically invited, “they would not come unto me and partake of the fruit” (1 Nephi 8:18). Then, at the very end of Lehi’s description of his dream, he observes that some who had partaken of the fruit fell away because they heeded the scorn of those in the great and spacious building. The very last line of description that we have from Nephi, however, focuses not on those who chose to leave the tree, but on those who chose not to come: “And Laman and Lemuel partook not of the fruit, said my father” (v. 35). Recognizing individuals’ use of agency in responding to the offer to partake of the fruit of the tree is critical to making sense of the foundational theological issues represented by “the presence of the Lord” and being “cast off” by the Lord. These issues include questions of justice, mercy, and agency.

“Presence of the Lord”: Insights from the Old Testament

The term “presence” in English versions of the Old Testament is usually a translation of the Hebrew word *pānîm*. It literally means “face,” as in one’s visage, but its usage has a broader sense.¹ For example, “*pānîm* was used in reference to entering or leaving the presence of a king or a superior”² or, by extension, the presence of the Lord. The term appears about four hundred times in the Old Testament, and in over a quarter of those instances it refers to the Lord Jehovah.³ “In some cases, the term ‘face’ or ‘presence’ stands in for naming the individual that is being referred to as the subject of the action.”⁴

A key dimension of the term “presence” is the expression of relationships,⁵ both among humans and between God and humans. These aspects include “real personal presence, relationship, and meeting (or refusal to meet).”⁶ Simian-Yofre notes that “insofar as *pānîm* bespeaks presence, its purpose is to underline the positive aspect of the interpersonal relationship. The negative aspect of the relationship is expressed by separation from *pānîm*.”⁷

One example of how one's relationship with the presence of the Lord can change is illustrated in Genesis 3:8, where, after eating of the forbidden fruit, "Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence [*pānīm*] of the Lord God amongst the trees of the garden." Their disobedience had changed their relationship to the presence of the Lord. They no longer desired to be in his presence. Not only can people remove themselves from God's presence, but we also see a change in relationship expressed in the Old Testament phrase of the Lord "hiding his face," which "is not simply a punishment: it signifies a radical disruption of the relationship with God."⁸ The issues of both humans approaching God's presence and the availability or withdrawal of that presence run through the Old Testament in the language related to the temple.

Central to the understanding of the tabernacle or temple in the Old Testament is that this is the place in which the Lord's presence is made available. There are a number of *pānīm*-related expressions in the Old Testament that are almost always associated with the language of worship at the temple. These include being seen before the face of Jehovah, being before Jehovah, and seeking his face.

The commandment for all Israelite men to visit the sanctuary three times a year during the feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles (see Exodus 23:14–17) can literally be read as "to appear (be seen) before the [face of] Yahweh."⁹ This expression functions as "a technical term for a cultic encounter with the deity,"¹⁰ meaning that the term "appear before the presence" refers to the setting of temple worship.¹¹

The other *pānīm* expression that consistently points to a temple setting is *lipne YHWH*, meaning "before or to Yahweh [Jehovah]." This technical expression of worship appears 225 times in the Old Testament.¹² The term describes not only the worship and sacrifices of the priests in the temple, "but also private religious acts are performed *lipne yhw*."¹³ This phrase emphasizes that actions of sacrifice and worship, as well as private acts of devotion, "are performed in some sense in the presence of Yahweh [Jehovah]."¹⁴

In addition, the term "seek his face" (*biqqēš pānīm*) can also include a formal act of worship or sacrifice, although this sense is not always required.¹⁵ The spirit of seeking his face in connection with the technical language of temple worship can be seen in Psalm 42:2: "My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: when shall I come and appear before God?" We see here the desire to be in God's presence.¹⁶

“Cast Off”: Insights from the Old Testament

Because of the various verbs that could be translated “cast off” and the breadth of Old Testament examples of this concept, for the sake of simplicity this study will only briefly consider passages that discuss the fear of being “cast off forever.” In each case, the root verb is *zanach*. The term is generally understood to mean “to reject, exclude, or abandon.”¹⁷ Cognates to other Semitic languages suggest a possible meaning of “to hate” or “to be angry,” but this is debated.¹⁸ Of the nineteen times the verb *zanach* appears in the Old Testament, fourteen of those instances have God as the subject of the verb.¹⁹ Ten of those instances are found in the Book of Psalms, where poetic structures can help enhance our understanding of the term.

Part of the meaning of the term *zanach* can be seen in the parallels with which it is coupled. On many occasions, we see that being cast off is not being given access to God’s presence in the context of the temple. Separation from worship can be seen in the parallel use of the questions “Why castest thou off my soul?” and “Why hidest thou thy face [*pānīm*] from me?” (Psalm 88:14).²⁰ This parallel can be seen in Psalm 74:1, where the Psalmist asks, “O God, why hast thou cast us off for ever? why doth thine anger smoke against the sheep of thy pasture?” Ringgrin observes, “There is a parallel reference to the wrath of God. The psalm deals with destruction of the temple by enemies, which is taken to prove that Yahweh is angry with his people and therefore ignores his temple.”²¹

The fear of abandonment can be seen in Psalm 44:23, in which the plea “Cast us not off for ever” suggests that here “*zānach* means that God has totally turned his back on his people.”²² In Psalm 77:7–9, the Psalmist asks, “Will the Lord cast off for ever? and will he be favourable no more? Is his mercy clean gone for ever? doth his promise fail for evermore? Hath God forgotten to be gracious? hath he in anger shut up his tender mercies?” Here we see the parallels to being “cast off” appear to be the opposite of the mercy and compassion we normally associate with the Lord. Here “*zānach* is associated with ‘never be favorable (*rātsāh*),’ ‘his *chesedh* [mercy] has ceased,’ ‘forget to be gracious (*shākhach channōth*),’ and ‘shut up compassion (*qāphats rach^amīm*).’”²³

While the thought of being separated and cast off in this manner is truly fearsome, we are given a reason why it occurs. An explanation for the Lord’s action in casting off his people is found in 1 Chronicles 28:9, where David

gives Solomon his charge concerning the building of the temple. Here the Lord's relationship to humans is set in terms of response to human agency. "And thou, Solomon my son, know thou the God of thy father, and serve him with a perfect heart and with a willing mind: for the Lord searcheth all hearts, and understandeth all the imaginations of the thoughts: *if thou seek him, he will be found of thee; but if thou forsake him, he will cast thee off for ever*" (1 Chronicles 28:9; emphasis added). It is significant that by making the presence of the Lord available with the building of the temple, the terms of access are also presented. The principle taught here has a striking resonance with the message conveyed by Lehi's dream of the tree of life. Those who seek him find his presence, and those who forsake him are separated from his presence.

"Presence of the Lord" in the Book of Mormon

A clear picture that emerges from the Book of Mormon discussion of the presence of the Lord highlights the role of human agency and desire in our relationship to his presence. A consistent theme is that we will not *want* to be in his presence if we are unclean. These comments emphasize the Day of Judgment or the thought of the Day of Judgment as a time when our recognition of our state before God will cause us to recoil from him. Jacob testifies that if we are unclean on the Day of Judgment, we will "shrink with awful fear" because we "remember [our] awful guilt in perfectness, and be constrained to exclaim: Holy, holy are thy judgments, O Lord God Almighty—but I know my guilt; I transgressed thy law, and my transgressions are mine" (2 Nephi 9:46). Alma warns that if we are in that "awful state" of being unclean on the Day of Judgment, we will want "the rocks and the mountains to fall upon us to hide us from his presence" (Alma 12:14). In telling of his conversion, Alma describes how "the very thought of coming into the presence of my God did rack my soul with inexpressible horror" (Alma 36:14). He later warns how justice will be administered on the Day of Judgment and how the unclean will be consigned "forever to be cut off from his presence" (Alma 42:14). The idea that only clean things will be allowed into God's presence seems to be something we will all acknowledge as being right and just.

The overarching message of both the gospel and the Book of Mormon is that God himself does not desire our separation from his presence. The image of Lehi beckoning to his family to come and partake of the fruit emphasizes the central message of the Book of Mormon—that God's arms of mercy are

extended to his children (see 2 Nephi 28:32; Jacob 4:47; Jacob 6:4; Mosiah 16:12). Alma expresses the Lord’s desire for all his children: “Behold, he sendeth an invitation unto all men, for the arms of mercy are extended towards them, and he saith: Repent, and I will receive you. Yea, he saith: Come unto me and ye shall partake of the fruit of the tree of life” (Alma 5:33). The fruit of the tree is waiting for us if we will trust in the Atonement of Christ and come and partake, rather than choose to perish in our separated and fallen state. The way to be clean and fit for the Lord’s presence is prepared for all. Alma invites those not yet in the Church, “Come and be baptized unto repentance, that ye also may be partakers of the fruit of the tree of life” (Alma 5:62). In his very last writing, Mormon reminds us that Christ “hath brought to pass the redemption of the world, whereby he that is found guiltless before him at the judgment day hath it given unto him to dwell in the presence of God in his kingdom” (Mormon 7:7).

The availability of the tree of life suggests that being in God’s presence throughout eternity is offered to us, but the options not to come and partake of the fruit or not to stay at the tree are also real. Our choice to receive or not will ultimately determine our fate. Our separation will be an expression of our own desire, not God’s desire. The vision of the tree clarifies the reality that agency is the final factor in our eternal status. Mormon’s summary reemphasizes this tension between a godly desire for all to enjoy the presence of the Lord and the consequences of agency and human choice. Note how his language echoes that of Lehi: “And I would that all men might be saved. But we read that in the great and last day there are some who shall be cast out, yea, who shall be *cast off from the presence of the Lord*” (Helaman 12:25; emphasis added).

While many of the passages in which the term “presence of the Lord” appears in the Book of Mormon emphasize judgment and the afterlife, some passages seem to focus on our condition in this life. These passages are helpful to note since they show that we need not read being at the tree solely as arriving in the celestial kingdom. When we can see being at the tree and partaking of the fruit as experiencing the presence of the Lord in this life, we get greater insight into how the blessings of the Atonement give us access to the divine presence in mortality.

One critical insight that is frequently repeated in the Book of Mormon is the relationship between being in a state of disobedience and being cut off from the presence of the Lord. Because the English of the Book of Mormon

does not give us access to the original terms, it is hard to draw many conclusive findings about why in these places the expression is consistently “cut off” rather than “cast off.”²⁴ The Book of Mormon usage might suggest that the different term (“cut off”) represents a temporary condition that can change, because one’s rebellion or disobedience may ebb and flow and thus change one’s access to the presence of the Lord in mortality.

One of the earliest teachings of Lehi, found in 1 Nephi 2:21, explains the relationship of obedience and access to God’s presence: “And inasmuch as thy brethren shall rebel against thee, they shall be cut off from the presence of the Lord.” Later in the Book of Mormon we see a fulfillment of this warning, as Alma reminds the people of Ammoniah: “Now I would that ye should remember, that inasmuch as the Lamanites have not kept the commandments of God, they have been cut off from the presence of the Lord. Now we see that the word of the Lord has been verified in this thing, and the Lamanites have been cut off from his presence, from the beginning of their transgressions in the land” (Alma 9:14). Over and over again, our choices are portrayed as affecting our access to the presence of God in this life.

While the negative version of this lesson can seem to be a dominant theme in the Book of Mormon, we do find a beautiful portrayal of the possibility of enjoying God’s presence in this life as well. In this epistle from the prophet Helaman to Captain Moroni, the desirability of living in such a way as to always enjoy the presence of the Lord in mortality is captured with a simple prayer for another’s well-being: “May the Lord our God . . . keep you continually in his presence” (Alma 58:41).

Again, it is this sense of being in his presence now—of being at the tree and partaking of the fruit now—that we need to read in the message of Lehi’s dream, in addition to the ultimate sense of being in his presence forever. But how is it that we are in the presence of the Lord during this life? It may be easier to read the vision of the tree of life in terms of our eternal state, because there we can see ourselves literally in the presence of the Father and the Son in celestial glory forevermore.

Psalm 51 can help us appreciate a central way in which we can enjoy his presence continually in this life. The Psalmist prays, “Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me” (Psalm 51:11). Sometimes we forget the privilege that is ours with the gift of the Holy Ghost. By coming unto Christ with faith, repenting, and partaking of the cleansing power

of baptism, we are made fit to be temples of God, to have the presence of the Lord literally within us in the gift of the Holy Ghost (see 1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19). So while seeking to be in the presence of the Lord can be a quest focusing us on preparing for the next life, it can also focus us on living worthy to be “continually in his presence” in this life as well.

When we understand both the contemporary as well as the future dimensions of reading ourselves into Lehi’s vision, we realize that in any time frame we must be clean to be at the tree, to enjoy the presence of the Lord. We also realize that we can have no access to his presence on our own because “all are fallen and are lost” (Alma 34:9). Lehi reminds Jacob, “No flesh . . . can dwell in the presence of God, save it be through the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah” (2 Nephi 2:8). Whether we read being at the tree and partaking of the fruit as enjoying the gift of the Holy Ghost, partaking of the sacrament, entering into holy temples, or being worthy to dwell in celestial realms of glory, access to his presence is made possible only in and through Christ’s Atonement.

“Cast Off” in the Book of Mormon

As in the Old Testament, the term “cast off” is also widely used in the Book of Mormon, and a full study would be beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is critical to notice the central place the term holds in framing the message of the Book of Mormon. In the title page of the Book of Mormon, Moroni emphasizes its message of mercy rather than condemnation. He explains that one of the purposes of the Book of Mormon is “to show unto the remnant of the House of Israel what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers; and that they may know the covenants of the Lord, *that they are not cast off forever*” (emphasis added). Just as we focused our examination of “cast off” in the Old Testament on the expression “cast off forever,” the introductory sentence of the Book of Mormon suggests the question of our eternal relationship to the presence of the Lord as a major theme of the book.

We started this study with Lehi’s expression of concern for Laman and Lemuel, that “he feared lest they should be cast off from the presence of the Lord” (1 Nephi 8:36). We see that concern deepened with Nephi’s fear for Laman and Lemuel: “Behold, my soul is rent with anguish because of you,

and my heart is pained; *I fear lest ye shall be cast off forever*" (1 Nephi 17:47; emphasis added).

Although a loved one's fear or concern for us may not always be sufficient to change our course of action, it is very important to notice that this is not an idle fear but one that can potentially wake us up to the reality of our situation. The Book of Mormon provides vivid examples of those who experience the fear of being cast off forever. In those who face this reality it brings a realization of the need for mercy and repentance, leading to profound change.

The two clearest examples are also perhaps the most striking instances of deep repentance in the Book of Mormon. They are the examples of the sons of King Mosiah and the father of King Lamoni. We read that the sons of King Mosiah were able to experience mercy, precisely because they began to understand justice. "They were desirous that salvation should be declared to every creature, for they could not bear that any human soul should perish; yea, even the very thoughts that any soul should endure endless torment did cause them to quake and tremble" (Mosiah 28:3). The consequences of sin were very real for them. They knew from personal experience what it was like to be cast off from the presence of God. "And thus did the Spirit of the Lord work upon them, for they were the very vilest of sinners. And the Lord saw fit in his infinite mercy to spare them; nevertheless they suffered much anguish of soul because of their iniquities, suffering much and *fearing that they should be cast off forever*" (Mosiah 28:4; emphasis added). They had experienced being cast off in mortality and did not want to remain in that state forever.

We see the power of the fear of eternal separation from God, or being "cast off forever," also working on the father of King Lamoni to bring him down to repentance. We learn that Ammon had taught him that "if ye will repent ye shall be saved, and if ye will not repent, ye shall be cast off at the last day" (Alma 22:6). As Aaron continued to work with the father of King Lamoni, he taught him the good news of God's mercy, coupled with a message of justice—the reality of where we would be without Christ—"laying the fall of man before him, and their carnal state and also the plan of redemption, which was prepared from the foundation of the world, through Christ, for all whosoever would believe on his name. And since man had fallen he could not merit anything of himself; but the sufferings and death of Christ atone for their sins, through faith and repentance, and so forth" (vv. 13–14).

Aaron’s message was a second witness of the reality of justice, of being eternally cast off from God, combined with the mercy of Christ’s redemption, which gives us hope of again being restored to God’s presence. Only this direct message of choices and consequences could bring about such a mighty change. “And it came to pass that after Aaron had expounded these things unto him, the king said: What shall I do that I may have this eternal life of which thou hast spoken? Yea, what shall I do that I may be born of God, having this wicked spirit rooted out of my breast, and receive his Spirit, that I may be filled with joy, *that I may not be cast off at the last day?* Behold, said he, I will give up all that I possess, yea, I will forsake my kingdom, that I may receive this great joy” (v. 15; emphasis added).

It is striking that the father of King Lamoni understood that through the power of Christ’s redemption he could have access to the presence of God not only in the eternities but also right now. Note that the hope of not being “cast off at the last day” is paired with the immediate hope of receiving his Spirit and being filled with joy. Think of the experience of those partaking of the fruit of the tree; Lehi says, “As I partook of the fruit thereof it filled my soul with exceedingly great joy” (1 Nephi 8:12).

As Latter-day Saints, testifying of a loving, merciful Father and a compassionate, self-sacrificing Son of God, we rarely use phrases such as “fear of God” or “wrath of God.” As we have seen in Psalms, the terms associated with God’s justice in casting people off forever can seem contrary to our understanding of God. “Will the Lord cast off for ever? and will he be favourable no more? Is his mercy clean gone for ever? doth his promise fail for evermore? Hath God forgotten to be gracious? hath he in anger shut up his tender mercies?” (Psalm 77:7–9).

Our fear should be about the right thing—not about God’s relation to us, but about ours to him. The Book of Mormon provides a means of understanding the message of mercy and justice taught in the Bible. Again, the title page states that the Book of Mormon is designed “to show unto the remnant of the House of Israel what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers; and that they may know the covenants of the Lord, *that they are not cast off forever*” (emphasis added). Our fear should not be about God’s disposition, but about ours.

A striking example that “casting off forever” is the result of our actions and not the Lord’s can be seen in an additional line of Isaiah 50, also found

in 2 Nephi 7:1: “Yea, for thus saith the Lord: *Have I put thee away, or have I cast thee off forever?* For thus saith the Lord: Where is the bill of your mother’s divorcement? To whom have I put thee away, or to which of my creditors have I sold you? Yea, to whom have I sold you? Behold, for your iniquities have ye sold yourselves, and for your transgressions is your mother put away” (emphasis added). It is very significant that the first line does not appear in the biblical manuscripts as they have been preserved. In the King James Version, chapter 50 of Isaiah begins, “Thus saith the Lord: Where is the bill of your mother’s divorcement?” The additional Book of Mormon phrase emphasizes the central doctrinal question of whose agency is at work when we find ourselves in a state of separation, of “being cast off.” Has *he* cast us off forever?

With this additional sentence the principle taught is still the same—it is human agency, not divine will that has brought about the rupture in our relationship with the Lord—but the additional phrase perfectly captures the central Book of Mormon message we find encapsulated in Lehi’s vision. Laman and Lemuel were separated from the presence of the Lord because “*they would not come unto me and partake of the fruit*” (1 Nephi 8:18; emphasis added).

We must be careful in how we read the modal verb “would” in this sentence. It does not talk about their destiny not to come. In modern-day English we use “would” or “will” to express future tense, but *will* also means “what we *want*”; its root is the German verb *willen*. Laman and Lemuel did not come because they did not *want* to come. Their state of being “cast off from the presence of the Lord” was not because the Lord cast them off, but because they rejected him.

This doctrinal emphasis is perhaps one of the most consistent and important threads of the Book of Mormon. It is our desires that determine our destiny. We are offered the path to the tree of life—faith, repentance, and covenants with the Lord. But it is our choice to accept or refuse that covenant path that determines our status—whether we are “cast off” or we enter into the “presence of the Lord.”

This principle, that choosing faith in Christ and repenting is the only means of getting access to his presence, is clearly taught by Nephi, who explained “that as many of the Gentiles as *will* repent are the covenant people of the Lord; and as many of the Jews as *will not* repent shall be cast off; for the Lord covenanteth with none save it be with them that repent and believe in his Son, who is the Holy One of Israel” (2 Nephi 30:2; emphasis added). The Lord wants “the remnant of the House of Israel” to know “that they are *not*

cast off forever” on his part. But the choice to accept his gift of mercy remains on our part. Just as in Lehi’s dream, where only following the path will lead to the tree, at the end, only faith and repentance will determine our access to the presence of the Lord.

Conclusion

The soberness of this reality appears often in the writings of Book of Mormon prophets. They repeatedly warn that if we do not choose to come unto Christ and become clean through him, then not only *shall* we be cast off, but we *must* be cast off. Nephi testifies, “If ye have sought to do wickedly in the days of your probation, then ye are found unclean before the judgment-seat of God; and no unclean thing can dwell with God; wherefore, ye *must be cast off forever*” (1 Nephi 10:21; emphasis added). Nephi explains to his brothers that “if they should die in their wickedness they *must be cast off* also, as to the things which are spiritual, which are pertaining to righteousness; wherefore, they must be brought to stand before God, to be judged of their works; and if their works have been filthiness they *must needs be filthy*; and if they be filthy it *must needs be* that they cannot dwell in the kingdom of God; if so, the kingdom of God *must be filthy also*” (1 Nephi 15:33; emphasis added).

Alma the Younger learned for himself that his eternal access to God’s presence was in his own hands when the angel warned him, “Go thy way, and seek to destroy the church no more, that their prayers may be answered, and this even *if thou wilt* of thyself be cast off” (Mosiah 27:16; emphasis added). When Alma awoke from his conversion experience, he testified that escape from eternal banishment was possible only through being born again: “Marvel not that all mankind, yea, men and women, all nations, kindreds, tongues and people, must be born again; yea, born of God, changed from their carnal and fallen state, to a state of righteousness, being redeemed of God, becoming his sons and daughters; and thus they become new creatures; and unless they do this, they can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God. I say unto you, unless this be the case, they *must be cast off*; and this I know, because I was like to be cast off” (vv. 25–26; emphasis added).

These passages send a clear and consistent message about choices and consequences. But the sharp dichotomy of the Book of Mormon worldview can sometimes sound harsh in the context of the restored gospel and might end up sounding like a message of heaven or hell. What sense are we to make of this

stark Book of Mormon division of the “presence of the Lord” and being “cast off,” given the Restoration nuances of postmortal life found in sections 76 and 88 of the Doctrine and Covenants? We learn from these scriptures that, in a sense, all who inherit a degree of glory *will* enjoy a degree of the presence of God, whether it be the presence of the Son in the terrestrial kingdom or the presence of the Holy Ghost in the telestial kingdom (see D&C 76:77, 86). In this sense, being fully cast off forever would only apply to those in outer darkness.

But choosing to receive less is also choosing to separate oneself from the fullness of God’s presence. That outcome is *not* God’s goal or plan for any of his children, but allowing us to choose for ourselves is. Mormon wrote, “I would that all men might be saved. But we read that in the great and last day there are some who shall be cast out, yea, who shall be cast off from the presence of the Lord” (Helaman 12:25). Like the temple, Lehi’s dream lays out for us a model or template of spiritual reality. Just as Lehi beckoned to his family to come and partake of the fruit, God wishes our salvation and makes it available to us through the gift of his Son. We need to learn about that offer and then choose to come unto Christ and partake of his salvation (see 2 Nephi 26:24, 27; Omni 1:26). “The way is prepared from the fall of man, and salvation is free” (2 Nephi 2:4). But just like those on the path toward the tree, to partake of that gift we must choose to follow the way through our obedience to the principles and ordinances of the gospel—faith, repentance, and making and keeping covenants—allowing ourselves to be made clean and become fit to enter into the presence of the Lord and partake of the kind of life that he enjoys.

The offer is real, and so is our choice. After seeing his family’s spiritual state played out in the vision of the tree of life, Lehi feared for Laman and Lemuel “lest they should be cast off from the presence of the Lord” (1 Nephi 8:36). It was a real fear because it was a real possibility. At that point there was no fixed outcome. It was still their choice. Like our loving Father in Heaven, Father Lehi could “call, persuade, direct aright, and bless with wisdom, love, and light, in nameless ways be good and kind,” but he could not choose for his sons. Lehi’s dream testifies that God “will never force the human mind.”²⁵

Notes

1. See E. F. Harrison, “Presence of God,” in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 3:956;

and Joel F. Drinkard, “Face,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:743.

2. Drinkard, “Face,” 2:743.

3. Simian-Yofre, “Pānîm,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helber Ringgren, and Heinz-Joseph Fabry, trans. David E. Green (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 11:591.

4. “In Exod 33:16 the Lord said that his face (NIV my Presence) would go with Moses. This means that God himself would accompany Moses. The expression is used in the same way in Isa 63:9 and Lam 4:16. In Deut 4:37 Moses said that God led the people from Egypt through his face (NIV his Presence) and his great power. His face is equated with his power as the means through which God did his mighty deeds.” Harry F. van Rooy, “Panim,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 3:638–39.

5. Simian-Yofre, “Pānîm,” 11:607.

6. “All the fundamental relationships between God and human beings can be described by *pānîm* and its associated expressions.” Simian-Yofre, “Pānîm,” 11:607.

7. Simian-Yofre, “Pānîm,” 11:607.

8. Simian-Yofre, “Pānîm,” 11:603.

9. Drinkard, “Face,” 2:743.

10. Simian-Yofre, “Pānîm,” 11:604.

11. This can be both with and without bringing a sacrifice. “The expression . . . is used to state that someone is appearing before the Lord. This usually meant in a cultic sense, to appear in the sanctuary during a festival (Exod 34:20, 24; Deut 16:16; 31:11) or when bringing a sacrifice (Isa 1:12). Hannah also used this expression for her son’s appearance in the temple (1 Sam 1:22).” Van Rooy, “Pānîm,” 3:639.

12. Drinkard, “Face,” 2:743. On *lipne* and *panim*, see Simian-Yofre, “Pānîm,” 11:608–9. On its role in covenants, see Simian-Yofre, “Pānîm,” 11:610.

13. Simian-Yofre, “Pānîm,” 11:610.

14. Simian-Yofre, “Pānîm,” 11:606, see also 609–10.

15. Simian-Yofre, “Pānîm,” 11:598.

16. Psalm 42 “voices an intense yearning, not found in other texts, to behold the face of Yahweh. The cultic aspect is present in the allusion to the temple (v. 5[4]), the assurance of appearing before the altar of God (43:4), and liturgical praise (*ydh*).” Simian-Yofre, “Pānîm,” 11:605.

17. See Helmer Ringgren, “Zanach,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 4:105; and Eugene H. Merrill, “Zanach,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 1:1126–27.

18. Rueven Yaron argues that in most cases it is best to understand *zanach* in light of the Akkadian cognate, *zenû*, “to be angry,” rather than “to abandon.” “The Meaning of Zanach,” *Vetus Testamentum* 13, no. 2 (April 1963): 237–39. This is not universally agreed upon. Some argue that it is better understood as “reject” or “spurn” and that Assyrian “*zinû*, to be angry” is not connected. Francis Brown, Samuel R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, “Zanach,” in *A Hebrew English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), 276. Ringgren considers Yaron’s suggestion of following the Akkadian reading of ‘hate’ as a possible meaning “not certain, but likely.” “Zanach,” 4:105. Merrill notes that

cognates have been suggested in Arabic and Akkadian, but does not suggest any meaning of anger in the Biblical Hebrew period. Merrill, "Zanach," 1:1126–27.

19. Merrill, "Zanach," 1:1126.

20. Ringgren, "Zanach," 4:105.

21. Ringgren, "Zanach," 4:105.

22. Ringgren, "Zanach," 4:106.

23. Ringgren, "Zanach," 4:106.

24. The phrase "cut off from the presence of the Lord" appears in Leviticus 22:2–3, describing the holiness required by the priests and Levites to officiate in the temple and be near the sacred offerings: "Speak unto Aaron and to his sons, that they separate themselves from the holy things of the children of Israel, and that they profane not my holy name in those things which they hallow unto me: I am the Lord. Say unto them, Whosoever he be of all your seed among your generations, that goeth unto the holy things, which the children of Israel hallow unto the Lord, having his uncleanness upon him, that soul shall be cut off from my presence: I am the Lord." The verb here for "cut off" is *karat*, which, in addition to "cut off," can also mean "cut down," as in trees. It is also the verb for cutting used in "cutting or making a covenant." Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 503.

John E. Hartley argues that "defilement of the holy carries the severe cut-off penalty (cf. 7:20–21). Never again could such an offender serve at the altar." "Leviticus," in *Word Biblical Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 4:355. Jacob Milgrom believes that being "cut off" in this context for priests implies "the end of his line . . . or death by divine agency." *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 3a, *Leviticus 17–22: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 1850.

25. "Know This, That Every Soul Is Free," *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 240.