

# The Rod of Iron in Lehi's Dream

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The rod of iron is one of the most widely known images from the Book of Mormon. It is frequently mentioned during general conference, referenced in books, and used in articles to help Latter-day Saints remember the importance of the word of God. Yet there is more to this symbol than most members realize.

We recall that the prophet Lehi, under the direction of God, led his family into the wilderness from Jerusalem. However, this journey was not a happy family camping trip, but a migration away from a spiritual wasteland, to the lament of two of his sons, Laman and Lemuel. Then, God commanded Lehi to have his children return to Jerusalem, first for a copy of the scriptures and later for Ishmael's family to join them in their exodus. After these successful journeys, Lehi was perhaps wondering how he could lead these people to the promised land when he did not know where it was and when the people rebelled at every turn. Then Lehi received a vision in the night (see 1 Nephi 8).

In Lehi's dream, an angelic visitor led him through a wilderness "for the space of many hours in darkness" (1 Nephi 8:8).<sup>1</sup> Lehi prayed for mercy, and immediately light flooded the vista, and he saw various items. Here, the important elements included a tree with desirable fruit (which Nephi identified as the tree of life), a path leading to the tree, a river, and a "rod of iron" between the path and the river (v. 19; see also vv. 10, 13). Lehi also noted that there was "on the other side of the river . . . a great and spacious building" (v. 26).

In the dream, people found the path in a spacious field and walked on it toward the tree. However, when the path paralleled the river bank, there arose eddying mists of darkness that caused many to lose their way. This was where the rod of iron came into use: “And it came to pass that I beheld others pressing forward, and they came forth and caught hold of the end of the rod of iron; and they did press forward through the mist of darkness, clinging to the rod of iron, even until they did come forth and partake of the fruit of the tree” (v. 24).

Thus, the rod of iron led toward the tree. Nephi wrote in detail about two groups of rod holders Lehi described. One was the “cling-ons” mentioned in the verse just quoted. The other Lehi identified as “other multitudes pressing forward; and they came and caught hold of the end of the rod of iron; and they did press their way forward, continually holding fast to the rod of iron, until they came forth and fell down and partook of the fruit of the tree” (v. 30). Note that the latter group held fast to the rod.

The rod helped both groups make it to the tree. The difference was that the “cling-ons” did not stay at the tree (see v. 28). They fell away under the scoffing looks of the inhabitants of the great and spacious building. Without laboring the point unduly, it may be that the “cling-ons” had difficulties staying loyal to the course. They progressed to the tree of life, they successfully passed through the temptations of the devil, but they could not endure *at* the end. A possible reason was that the gospel was not *the* purpose of their lives, but merely a passing concern or even a hobby. Their clinging to the rod suggests they had made but a part of the gospel their goal.<sup>2</sup> Those who held fast to the rod seem to have used it as the guide that brought them to the fulness of the gospel blessings; and thereby they were able to stay true to the end.

Nephi’s brief account of his father’s explanation of the vision does not include everything. He omitted items his father saw, ignored the discussion afterward, and skipped over the prophecies that Lehi made at that time (see vv. 29–30, 36–38). Doubtless these presented no problem to him, and we will receive more understanding from the book of Lehi at some future date. What interested Nephi, as the author of his own book of scripture, was his own response to Lehi’s dream. Nephi, a son of a prophet and a prophet in his own right, inquired of the Lord to understand Lehi’s vision. He then received his own vision. It is mainly on Nephi’s account that the common interpretation of Lehi’s dream is based (see 1 Nephi 10–15).

Nephi saw in his vision the birth of Christ, his ministry and crucifixion, and events leading up to the end of the world. After this

instruction, he encountered his apostate brothers arguing about the meaning of Lehi's dream and instructed them in the imagery of the iron rod: "And I said unto them that [the rod of iron] was the word of God; and whoso would hearken unto the word of God, and would hold fast unto it, they would never perish; neither could the temptations and the fiery darts of the adversary overpower them unto blindness, to lead them away to destruction" (1 Nephi 15:24).

Most of the iron rod associations used in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have arisen from this single verse. The formula is straightforward: iron rod = word of God = scriptures. There are additional nuances associated with the iron rod imagery, however, which add depth to this formula. Nephi's declaration to his brothers was not the only possible representation of the iron rod, but it was the one best suited to his audience. The intent here is to unpack the symbolic imagery of the rod and offer another more inclusive interpretation.

### **Physical Rod**

First, consider the rod. The description of the rod of iron indicates that it was a rod of finite length. It was approached on one end, grasped by its end, and released before or upon arrival at the tree of life. Its purpose was to conduct people to the tree of life.<sup>3</sup> It was not the goal of the journey but an aid.<sup>4</sup> It was also a physical barrier to the destruction that the river represented.<sup>5</sup> Because it occurred in a dream setting,<sup>6</sup> there is no need to suppose that the rod was held up or sustained by other supports. In other words, it is not necessary to see it as a railing, something seldom seen in ancient architecture. Also neither its height above the ground nor its diameter is important.

Though railings were rare in Lehi's world, rods or staffs were not. Rods were common and necessary accouterments to a nomadic life. Rods were used to steer the flock by day and to count them at day's end.<sup>7</sup> The additional attribute of iron made the rod formidable (see Numbers 35:16). The shepherd's rod "was a weapon, normally a piece of wood with a knob at one end. With it, he could defend the flock from predators"<sup>8</sup> or, in the case of Laman and Lemuel, even beat up siblings (see 1 Nephi 3:28).

Rods also served as supports or walking sticks. Although Lehi's rod appears to have been horizontal and, therefore, had the semblance of a railing, the nuance of the rod's connotations should not be overlooked. Rods were extended to those in need so that they could grasp the end and be assisted out of danger. Hugh Nibley mentioned an iron rod leading up to the temple at Jerusalem.<sup>9</sup> Lehi's rod was placed between

the river bank and the path and thus acted as a guard rail. In this way, its physical presence aided those on the path. Rather than a handrail, it may have been a universal aid that each traveler could grasp and use.

### **Rod as Scriptures or Book**

As mentioned previously, the rod of iron as a metaphor for the scriptures is common in Latter-day Saint writings. Of the 625 references to “rod” and “iron” in *Gospelink 2001*, nearly all refer to the iron rod as equivalent to the scriptures. This usage is canonized in modern scripture via the eighth article of faith: “We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly; we also believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God.” Here “word of God” equals the Bible and Book of Mormon (see also D&C 19:26). Remember that Nephi equated “word of God” with “rod of iron.”

### **Rod as Measuring Stick**

There are, however, a few times when the iron rod is referred to as a measuring stick. This use refers to the rod as the scriptures,<sup>10</sup> as they become a measuring stick along the route to the tree of life. Incidentally, the word *canon* is ultimately derived from the reed measuring rod of ancient Israel.<sup>11</sup> This usage is also reminiscent of the angel measuring the New Jerusalem with a golden rod (see Revelation 21:15–17)<sup>12</sup> and John measuring the temple and the Saints with another rod (see Revelation 11:1–2).<sup>13</sup>

### **Rod as Scepter**

Rods were also important symbols of authority or rule. Legend has it that Adam’s rod was cut from the tree of life,<sup>14</sup> making it appropriate that the rod of iron directs Lehi’s descendants back to the rod’s ultimate origin, the tree of life. Hugh Nibley noted: “The rods of Adam, Enoch, Elijah, Moses, Aaron, David, Judah, etc., were actually thought of as one and the same scepter, loaned by God to his earthly representative from time to time as a badge of authority and an instrument of miracles, proving to the world that its holder was God’s messenger. But such a thing is also the law, and the Rabbis spoke of the law as God’s staff, to lead and discipline his people.” Further, Nibley explained, “For the ancients it was quite possible for a piece of wood to be at one and the same time a scepter, a rod of identification (which was only a private scepter), and a book (with a message written on or attached to the sender’s staff).”<sup>15</sup>

Of course, in Lehi's vision, the rod was made of iron rather than wood, but the meaning is similar, as other scriptures clarify. The only Old Testament reference to a "rod of iron" comes from Psalm 2:9. To the Son of God, the Lord declared, "Thou shalt break [the heathen] with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel." (Further references come from the book of Revelation: 2:27; 12:5; 19:15.) Here we learn that Christ shall rule with a "rod of iron." President Joseph F. Smith clarified this passage: "Which rod is the Gospel and the Priesthood."<sup>16</sup> The Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible changes the verse to read "word of God" rather than "rod of iron" (Joseph Smith Translation, Revelation 2:27), furthering their interchangeable use.

### Iron Rod as Christ

Thus there is more than one interpretation of what the rod of iron could be. Each explains part of the symbolism, but does not quite reach the mark. What does make the symbolism complete is if Jesus Christ is the rod of iron. Consider the following verses from Nephi's account: "And after [the angel] had said these words, he said unto me: Look! And I looked, and I beheld the Son of God going forth among the children of men; and I saw many fall down at his feet and worship him. And it came to pass that I beheld that the rod of iron, which my father had seen, was the word of God, which led to the fountain of living waters, or to the tree of life; which waters are a representation of the love of God; and I also beheld that the tree of life was a representation of the love of God" (1 Nephi 11:24–25).

Nephi saw Christ in vision, then made the connection between what he was seeing and his father's symbolism. Nephi saw the word of God in action. This connection was explained in a recent article by Matthew Bowen. He wrote: "We note that the Egyptian word *mdw* means not only 'a staff [or] rod' but also 'to speak' a 'word.' The derived word *md.t*, or *mt.t*, probably pronounced \*match in Lehi's day, was common in the Egyptian dialect of that time and would have sounded very much like a common Hebrew word for rod or staff, *matteh*."<sup>17</sup> Nephi realized, while watching Jesus Christ's ministry and puzzling over the symbolism of the iron rod, that Lehi's symbolism in the dream required a Hebrew-Egyptian pun!

Jesus Christ has many titles in the scriptures. "There are many ways in which the Lord is described as Ruler. He is the Potentate, Prince, *Sceptre*, *Rod* and *Staff*, Captain, Commander, Deliverer, Governor,

Guide, King, Lawgiver, and Master.”<sup>18</sup> In addition, Christ is, as John told us, the consummate Word of God (see John 1:1).

The phrase *word of God* is used in the King James Bible forty-nine times. In the Old Testament it refers to prophecy (see 1 Samuel 9:27; 1 Kings 12:22; 1 Chronicles 17:3). In the New Testament, it refers to scriptures in general (see Mark 7:13 and Luke 4:4), but mainly to the gospel of Jesus Christ (thirty-plus references). John and Paul both used this phrase to refer specifically to Jesus Christ (see Romans 10:17; Hebrews 4:12; 11:3; 1 Peter 1:23; 2 Peter 3:5; Revelation 1:2; 19:13).

Jesus Christ as the iron rod embodies the various interpretations of this symbol. He is the source of scripture. He is the ultimate measuring stick. He is the ruler, user, and giver of scepters, power, authority, and priesthood. Christ is the ultimate Iron Rod.

Returning to Lehi’s dream, imagine Christ in place of the rod of iron: “And it came to pass that I beheld others pressing forward, and they came forth and caught hold of [Christ]; and they did press forward through the mist of darkness, clinging to the [Savior], even until they did come forth and partake of the fruit of the tree” (1 Nephi 8:24).

The problem with the “cling-ons” was that they fell away after crossing the finish line because they left Christ spiritually behind. They knew of Christ but did not know Christ.

## The Path

A note of caution is necessary. The iron rod, in this aspect of Christ’s mission, was a helper, not the end of the journey. In fact, focusing on the iron rod does a disservice to Lehi’s dream. The focus of the dream was on partaking of the fruit of the tree of life as individuals and as a family. The rod of iron was, in fact, only a secondary aid in arriving there. The real guide in the dream was the much-overlooked path.

The relationship between the “strait and narrow path” and the “rod of iron” needs to be noted. The path ended at the tree of life. Its beginning lay somewhere in the “large and spacious field” (1 Nephi 8:20). Lehi noticed the path after he saw the tree, the river, the head of the river, and the rod of iron. This observation indicates that the path was not obtrusive. It was thin and narrow. Nephi did not ask about the path’s symbolism, nor did the angel overtly discuss it with him. His brothers also did not inquire about the path. Paths were common and their symbolism clear.

For desert dwellers, paths are paramount. Especially in the era before paved roads, street signs, and GPS devices, marked paths were

necessary even to the point of assuring one's life. If a traveler missed a turn on the correct path, he might follow a "forbidden" path for days before noticing his mistake. Mistakes like these could be fatal in a land where water is scarce.

Paths are often marked with stone cairns. These piles of rocks can be seen across valleys, making reassuring vistas for weary eyes. Well-traveled paths become ruts and cut through the topsoil to a depth of several meters. They even become visible from space. Such caravan routes are easy to follow once you get into a rut.

The most difficult paths to follow are the less-traveled ones. These paths appear as a slight bruising on the land. A few stalks of bent grass herald the direction. In rocky earth, just a faint impression of an occasional footprint or shifted earth may be seen. Indeed, a faint path must be felt more than seen. Deviance from a less-traveled path is easy, especially if it is largely unmarked or intertwined with a broad path for a distance.

Nephi explained a little about the path at the end of his writings. He noted that baptism is the gate by which all enter into the path, even Christ: "For the gate by which ye should enter is repentance and baptism by water; and then cometh a remission of your sins by fire and by the Holy Ghost. And then are ye in this strait and narrow path which leads to eternal life; yea, ye have entered in by the gate; ye have done according to the commandments of the Father and the Son; and ye have received the Holy Ghost, which witnesses of the Father and the Son, unto the fulfilling of the promise which he hath made, that if ye entered in by the way ye should receive" (2 Nephi 31:17–18).

This passage suggests that the first test began in the field where Lehi saw "numberless concourses of people, many of whom were pressing forward, that they might obtain the path which led unto the tree by which [he] stood" (1 Nephi 8:21). Presumably, the people *not* pressing forward had not entered into the gate. They had not humbled themselves as little children. They did not have the Holy Ghost identifying the correct path through the field amidst the many other paths available.

The people who entered in at the gate identified the correct path through the field. They "commence[d] in the path" (1 Nephi 8:22) and made progress to the tree of life. They left the world behind, walking uprightly towards the tree, but they were not yet at the destination. There were additional hazards along the journey. Mists of darkness blinded the travelers. In the dream, these mists came from the river, perhaps creating a dense fog. At the onset of the mists, many lost their

way. Their eyes were not on the path, so they lost it as the fog rolled in. They were blinded by the fog and seemed to have hardened their hearts against asking for directions.

Those who were watching the path, hunched a little to observe it well, saw an iron rod along the path. They grasped it and used it to help them through the darkness. It is tempting to identify those who were grasping the rod as symbolizing people whose calling and election are made sure—people who have such a tight relationship with Christ that he walks hand in hand with them to the tree of life. But that is probably wrong. More likely, they are the active members of the Church who follow the path and ask Christ for help each time the mists of darkness come upon them. They are faithful members who, like the Israelites of old, follow the iron rod up to the temple and eat the fruit of eternity. Many do not realize how close they are to Christ (see 3 Nephi 9:20) as they follow the path and hold his hand. Luckily, he does and aids them against temptations, depositing them at the foot of the tree of life.

For those of us still on the path, and even for those further up the rod: “I would ask if all is done? Behold, I say unto you, Nay; for ye have not come thus far save it were by the word of Christ with unshaken faith in him, relying wholly upon the merits of him who is mighty to save. 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. Wherefore, 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 31:19–20). **RE**

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## Notes

1. See Boyd K. Packer, “The Edge of the Light,” address delivered at Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, March 4, 1990.

2. Matthias F. Cowley, in Conference Report, October 1903, in Boyd K. Packer, *Memorable Stories and Parables of Boyd K. Packer* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 34–37.

3. C. Wilfred Griggs, “The Book of Mormon as an Ancient Book,” *BYU Studies* 22, no. 3 (1982): 259–78; Hugh Nibley, *Approaching Zion*, ed. Don E. Norton (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1989), 577–78; John W. Welch, “The Narrative of Zosimus and the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 22, no. 3 (1982): 311–32.

4. Nibley, *Approaching Zion*, 577–78.

5. S. Michael Wilcox, “Letters from Loving Father to His Children,” *Church News*, January 2, 1993.



6. Charles 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): 54.
7. John A. Tvedtnes, "Rod and Sword as the Word of God," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5, no. 2 (1996): 149.
8. Tvedtnes, "Rod and Sword as the Word of God," 149.
9. Hugh Nibley, "Lecture 16: Mountain of the Lord's House," in *Ancient Documents and the Pearl of Great Price*, ed. Robert Smith and Robert Smythe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo UT: FARMS, 1986), 4.
10. Joseph Fielding McConkie, *Answers: Straightforward Answers to Tough Gospel Questions* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1998), 221–22.
11. "Canon," *Encyclopedia of Mormonism: The History, Scripture, Doctrine, and Procedure of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 254.
12. Richard D. Draper, *Opening the Seven Seals: The Visions of John the Revelator* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991), 227–39.
13. Donald W. Parry and Jay A. Parry, *Understanding the Book of Revelation* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1998), 132–47.
14. Jeanette W. Miller, "The Tree of Life, a Personification of Christ," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 1 (1993): 103.
15. Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo UT: FARMS, 1988), 318.
16. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Church History and Modern Revelation* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1946–49), 140.
17. Mathew L. Bowen, "What Meaneth the Rod of Iron?" *Insights: The Newsletter of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) at Brigham Young University* 25, no. 2 (2005): 2–3.
18. Joseph Fielding McConkie and Donald W. Parry, *A Guide to Scriptural Symbols* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1990), s.v. "Ruler"; emphasis added.