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The Tree of Life, a Personification of Christ

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Throughout history in many cultures, man has looked to the tree of life as a symbol of eternal life. The form of the tree of life varies according to a culture’s perception of the universe. Many early Christians saw the tree of life as a personification of Jesus Christ. It may be that the tree of life vision in the Book of Mormon was presented to introduce the Savior and his ministry. We may learn much about the Lord’s calling and personality by combining a study of various cultural ideas of the tree of life with the testimonies of the prophets contained in the scriptures.
Abstract: Throughout history in many cultures, man has looked to the tree of life as a symbol of eternal life. It has been typified in varying forms according to the culture’s perception of the universe. Many early Christians saw the tree of life as a personification of Jesus Christ. It may be that the tree of life vision in the Book of Mormon was presented to introduce the Savior and his ministry. We may learn much about the Lord’s calling and personality by combining a study of various cultural ideas of the tree of life with the testimonies of the prophets contained in the scriptures.

Although Lehi’s dream of the tree of life is among the best-known passages of the Book of Mormon, it may also be one of the least understood. Why is this dream so important that it was given such a prominent place at the beginning of the book, almost as if it were an introduction? Why are there so many chapters of explanation that follow? I would like to explore the possibility that the dream was given to teach about Christ. Nephi explains that the words that he wrote were for the express purpose of persuading his people to believe in Jesus Christ (2 Nephi 33:4), for, he says: “My soul delighteth in proving unto my people the truth of the coming of Christ, . . . and all things which have been given of God from the beginning of the world, unto man, are the typifying of him” (2 Nephi 11:4). As the angel gave Nephi the explanation of the tree of life, he stated that the fulness of the gospel would come to the Gentiles and from the Gentiles to the remnant of Nephi’s seed that they might receive nourishment from the “true vine,” to be grafted into the “true olive-tree” (1 Nephi 15:13, 15–16).

I propose that the tree of life is a personification of Jesus Christ. This paper will compare some of the basic elements of Lehi’s dream and its subsequent interpretation with other
passages of scripture and with the symbolism of the tree of life in other cultures, weaving the threads into a design depicting the nature of the Savior’s calling and personality. I will equate the tree of life with the temple, for in many regards it functions like a temple, particularly where no temple is present. Further, I compare the features of the tree of life with several elements of John M. Lundquist’s temple typology. Those points of the temple typology that I wish to consider are (1) the temple is associated with the tree of life; (2) the earthly temple and the tree may also be seen as a copy or counterpart of the heavenly model; (3) the temple and the tree of life are associated with the primordial hillock and the waters of life; (4) they are the link between the worlds and are the places where one meets with and receives the instructions of God; (5) they are central to the economic structure of the society and assure abundance and prosperity; (6) the temple and tree of life are associated with the sacral meal; (7) the temple plays a legitimizing political role; and, finally, (8) both are places of sacrifice.

Determining the Tree of Life to Be the Symbol of Jesus Christ

It is not an original concept to relate the tree of life to Jesus, as early Christians also saw the connection. In the late third century, Methodius, like other patristic authors, likened the Savior to the tree of life.

The tree of life is the firstborn of all wisdom,... the tree which is planted near the running waters which brings forth its fruit in due season.... He who does not believe in Christ and does not perceive that he is the first principle, the tree of life and is unable to show to God his tabernacle adorned with the loveliest fruit, how will he be able to rejoice?

Clement of Alexandria added his testimony by saying that “the Word blossomed and bore fruit, being ‘made flesh’ and

gave it to those ‘who had tasted of His graciousness.’ ”3 The greatest symbolic value of the tree is that it symbolizes Christ, who is the Word (John 1:1–17). It is he who is

The Word, the tree planted by the water’s edge which the Father has begotten without intermediary, laden with fruit, flourishing, tall, fair-branched. Christ is the tree of life.4

In latter-day scripture, we read in Alma 32:28–42 that as Alma taught about faith, he compared “the word unto a seed.” He continued that if the individual has the desire and will plant the “true seed” in his heart, “it shall be a tree [a tree of life] springing up unto everlasting life” (Alma 32:41). This tree, if nourished, will bring forth fruit “which is most precious, which is sweet above all that is sweet, and which is white above all that is white, yea, and pure above all that is pure; and ye [the righteous] shall feast upon this fruit even until ye are filled” (Alma 32:42).

Whether deciduous or evergreen, a vine or a pole, the cosmic tree is a perfect symbol of Jesus. When it is deciduous, the branches of the tree spread throughout the universe, creating a protective umbrella over all the earth. The trunk, the Axis Mundi, extends from the heavens through the center of the universe downward, connecting with the earth, then continuing down into the underworld and the waters of chaos. There the roots spread out in the realm of the dead, creating the foundation upon which the earth was laid. The shedding of its blossoms, fruit, and leaves in the appropriate season, to come forth anew the following season, typifies resurrection and life everlasting. Although the tree loses its leaves and for all intents and purposes appears to be dead, the root remains alive and renews life the following season. The fruit, sap, or oil was desirable for its curative value. The fruit was the food of the gods and of the righteous—that which gave eternal life.5

The Savior is personified by the tree. His influence, or the “light of Christ,” fills the immensity of space. He is “in all things; [it is he] which giveth life to all things” and “quickeneth

3 Clement of Alexandria, Stromata, in Reno, The Sacred Tree, 106.
4 Asterius, Commentary on the Psalms 1:4–5, in Reno, The Sacred Tree, 105.
5 Reno, The Sacred Tree, 7, 28, 60, 62.
all things” (D&C 88:13, 17). He, like the branches of the tree of life which encompass the entire earth, protects and gives life to every living thing.

A further reminder is that Christ was crucified and lay three days in a sepulchre. It appeared to all that he was dead, but at the end of the three days he rose “from the dead, with healing in his wings” (2 Nephi 25:13). The imagery suggests that even without its leaves, the tree is endless. Mosiah 16:8–9 tells us that “there is a resurrection, therefore the grave hath no victory. . . . [He is] a life which is endless, that there can be no more death.” The very color of the evergreen signifies life—the evergreen never loses its color or needles, thereby signifying its eternal nature.

Jesus himself declared that he was the true vine, and the Father the husbandman (John 15:1). The symbolism appears to be the same in this instance as if it were a deciduous tree. The tree represents the Axis Mundi:

The transformation of the tree into a pillar or pole brings about a shift of symbolic meaning. The foliage is that part of the tree which responds to change. Stripping the tree of this foliage reveals its changeless centre; the vertical axis around which the visible world of the tree revolves. For the cosmic tree reflects not only the endless regeneration of the cosmos but also its undying centre.6

The Tree of Life Equated with the Temple Typology

1. The tree of life is associated with the temple. Traditionally, the tree of life in nearly every culture was either in the temple or took the place of the temple when the temple was absent. In the Near East the temples “were conceived as fertile, green, well-watered paradises.”7 The tree was in the middle of this paradise and was a very important part of the cultic ritual. It was there that libations were poured out, revivifying the tree as though it were the dying god being brought back to life. When the temple was absent, the tree was seen as the dwelling place of the deity or in some cases became actual representations of the

deity. "The actual changing-over of the 'sacred place' as an image"8 has been translated in many ancient texts. The tree grew beside a stone or altar, the two standing alone, with no sanctuary necessary, thus creating what Eliade calls the microcosm, reproducing the natural landscape.

And when water came to complete this landscape, it signified latencies, seeds, and purification. The 'microcosmic landscape' gradually became reduced in time to but one of its constituents, to the most important: the tree or sacred pillar. The tree came to express the cosmos fully in itself, by embodying, in apparently static form, its 'force,' its life and its quality of periodic regeneration.9

In Judaism, we find that the menorah—pure and whole, perfect and unbroken—became the representation of the tree of life.10 In comparing the description of the menorah with that of the paschal lamb in Exodus 12:5–43, we find that the lamb is to be whole and undivided, with no broken bones and without blemish, sacrificed in the temple. In John 1:29, John declared that Jesus was the Lamb of God.

Both ancient and modern prophets attest to Christ's appearance in the temple. Ancient prophets saw and conversed with the Lord face to face in a temple setting (Genesis 32:30; Exodus 6:1–4). When Moses finished the work on the tabernacle, "then a cloud covered the tent of the congregation, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle" (Exodus 40:34). The children of Israel were brought before the Tabernacle to stand before Jehovah (Leviticus 9:4–5).

The Savior taught in the temple on numerous occasions during his mortal ministry. Following his resurrection, a "great multitude gathered together, of the people of Nephi, round about the temple" (3 Nephi 11:1). While they were conversing about the signs of his death, he appeared to them and announced that he was "the God of Israel, and the God of the whole earth" (3 Nephi 11:14). They were invited to feel the prints of the nails in his hands and his feet (3 Nephi 11:14).

9 Ibid.
10 Cook, The Tree of Life, 20.
Modern prophets have also seen Christ in the temple. The Prophet Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery reported that while in the Kirtland Temple on April 3, 1836:

> The veil was taken from our minds, and the eyes of our understanding were opened. We saw the Lord standing upon the breastwork of the pulpit, before us; and under his feet was a paved work of pure gold, in color like amber. His eyes were as a flame of fire; the hair of his head was white like the pure snow; his countenance shone above the brightness of the sun; and his voice was as the sound of the rushing of great waters, even the voice of Jehovah, saying: I am the first and the last; I am he who liveth, I am he who was slain; I am your advocate with the Father. (D&C 110:1-4)

2. The earthly temple or tree of life may be seen as a copy or counterpart of a heavenly model. In 1 Nephi 11:1–25, we find that Nephi desired to see the vision that his father Lehi had previously received of the tree of life. Nephi said that “as I sat pondering in mine heart I was caught away in the Spirit of the Lord, yea, into an exceedingly high mountain” (1 Nephi 11:1). The following verses include an interview with the Spirit, who asks certain questions to ascertain Nephi’s intent and worthiness to receive the interpretation of the vision. Upon finding him worthy, Nephi was told that a sign would be given him (1 Nephi 11:7). After he saw the tree which bore the fruit, he would then behold a man descending out of heaven, of whom he was to bear witness that he was the Son of God. He was then shown the tree that his father had seen as well as a virgin who was carried away in the Spirit and reappeared bearing a child whom the Spirit identified as “the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son of the Eternal Father!” The Spirit then asked, “Knowest thou the meaning of the tree which thy father saw?” (1 Nephi 11:21). Nephi responded “it is the love of God” (1 Nephi 11:22).

The vision was given to introduce the Lamb of God, whom we call Jesus Christ (John 1:29). Though the reference is not explicit, it may be concluded that it is the Savior who personifies the love of God (cf. 1 John 4:7–16). For this reason we may conclude that the tree represents Christ.

3. The tree is associated with the primordial hillock where the temple is established and grows out of the primordial waters of the abyss, and thus there is an intimate mythological and
cultic connection between the tree, the temple, and the waters of life. In a paper written by Donald W. Parry, we find that:

Before the creation, while the earth was "without form, and void," water covered the entire earth (Gen. 1:1–9). It existed before the "clods, rock, formations, and continents." According to Judah ben Pazl, water was the original element. But the original waters were in a state of chaos, so Yahweh (whom we know as Jesus Christ) came down from heaven and organized the waters into a state of orderliness. How did he do it? Rabbi Isaac said, "The Holy One, blessed be he, cast a stone into the ocean, from which the world then was founded." The waters were controlled much like a man corks a bottle. "Wherewith does one cover a cask? With a lid of earthen-ware." This cork of the bottle or covering for the cask, became the "primordial hillock," the first land to emerge from chaos. In Genesis 1, God commanded the land (primordial hillock) to appear and then planted on it the garden (see verses 9–12, 29–30).11

The tree of life was planted in the middle of the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:9). The garden and the tree were planted before man was placed in it (Genesis 2:8). Similarly, Christ, who is the "Firstborn," came forth before every creature. He was the first of the Father's spirit children (D&C 93:21).

In the Commentary on the Psalms, Eusebius of Caesarea stated that:

He who, through his whole life and at all times, night and day, observes the divine law, may be likened to a tree whose roots are situated near the waters from which streams he is completely watered by spiritual things. For indeed, blessed is he who, having drunk and been watered by divine discipline, yields his fruit at the proper time, because the Son of God is the tree of life.12

Nephi was told that the rod of iron which his 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 [also] a representation of the love of God; and I [Nephi] also beheld that the tree of life was a representation of the love of God" (1 Nephi 11:25).

Jesus declared himself to be the waters of life to a Samaritan woman as they sat at Jacob's well. He asked her for a cup of water from the well and explained to her that those who drank of that water would thirst again. "But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life" (John 4:14). Thus, Christ is both the tree and the waters of life.

4. The tree of life and the temple are the links between the worlds and are the places where one meets and communicates with God. The trunk is the Axis Mundi, which is the link between the worlds—"the way" or "the path"—the means for one to ascend to heaven. In John 14:6, Jesus declares himself as "the way, the truth and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me." In 2 Nephi 31:17–21, Nephi tells his people that the gate by which one enters the "strait and narrow path which leads to eternal life" is faith, repentance, baptism, and the remission of sins. It is through reliance upon Christ that one must continue in the path, pressing "forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope and a love of God and of all men... This is the way; and there is none other way nor name given under heaven whereby man can be saved in the kingdom of God" (2 Nephi 31:20–21). Christ is the way, the path, the Axis Mundi, which leads to eternal life.

In the Doctrine and Covenants we read that Jesus "descended below all things, in that he comprehended all things, that he might be in all and through all things" (D&C 88:6). After his death upon the cross, Christ descended into the realm of the dead to prepare the way for their deliverance. "Through his atonement, and by obedience to the principles of the gospel, mankind might be saved" (D&C 138:4; cf. 138:5–15). It is Jesus who descended and who also ascended (Ephesians 4:10), creating a link between the worlds.

Man finds the way to the Father through the Lord Jesus Christ, who is also the means of communication with the Father. Jesus said: "And whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name,

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13 Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religion, 380–81.
which is right, believing that ye shall receive, behold it shall be given unto you” (3 Nephi 18:20). “And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him” (Colossians 3:17).

5. The tree of life and the temple are central to the economic structure of the society and assure abundance and prosperity. Traditionally, the tree of life was the supportive pillar that held the heavens in place; animals and men made their homes beneath its protective covering. The tree was the source of all plant life and insured fertility. It was through the medium of the tree that food was distributed. The following passage illustrates how the tree assures structure to the society:

That the central axis is the single most important feature of all dwellings, even under the open sky, is tragically illustrated at the most archaic level of culture, by a story concerning one of the clans of the Arunta, an Aboriginal tribe of Central Australia. A sacred pole always stood at the centre of their world; for after creating the world in mythical times, their creator god Numbakula fashioned such a pole out of a gum tree, and then climbed up it to the sky-world, never to be seen again. The clan carried an imitation of this pole with them on their wanderings, travelling always in the direction it seemed to point. The ethnologists Spencer and Gillen record that once this pole got broken, and that, after wandering for some time quite aimlessly, the entire clan lay down to die. Life for them no longer seemed worth living, for the axis of their world was broken and communication with the sacred lost.

Christ is the protector and structurer of society. He said, “How often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate” (Matthew 23:37–38).

Furthermore, Christ is the root and the rock which goes down into the netherworld spreading throughout, giving a “sure foundation” (Isaiah 28:16) to the world—it is he who supports the earth. In 1 Peter 2:4 we are told that he is a “living stone.”

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14 Reno, The Sacred Tree, 58, 60, 74, 85.
15 Cook, The Tree of Life, 16.
Quoting Isaiah, Peter tells us that the Lord says, “Behold, I lay in Sion a chief corner stone, elect, precious: and he that believeth on him [Christ] shall not be confounded” (1 Peter 2:6). He is the foundation of the world and upon him rests all things.

In Isaiah 11:10, he is called the “root of Jesse.” He must surely be the same root that extends down into the waters of chaos and controls them. Having been controlled, the waters flow forth from the roots of the tree as the waters of life. When the root is absent, chaos reigns. Helaman told his sons,

Remember, remember that it is upon the rock of our Redeemer, who is Christ, the Son of God, that ye must build your foundation; that when the devil shall send forth his mighty winds, yea, his shafts in the whirlwind, yea, when all his hail and his mighty storm shall beat upon you, it shall have no power over you to drag you down to the gulf of misery and endless wo, because of the rock upon which ye are built, which is a sure foundation, a foundation whereon if men build they cannot fall. (Helaman 5:12)

Thus the prosperity of the people is jeopardized when they forget their God and fail to make him the foundation stone in their lives.

Lehi told his children in the final days of his life: “And he [Christ] hath said that: Inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments ye shall prosper in the land; but inasmuch as ye will not keep my commandments ye shall be cut off from my presence” (2 Nephi 1:20).

6. The tree and the temple are associated with the sacral meal. Traditionally, the fruit, sap, or oil of the tree was desirable for its curative value. The fruit—that which gave eternal life—was the food of the gods and the righteous. Lehi described the fruit of the tree as “desirable to make one happy,” as sweet, and as “white to exceed all the whiteness that I had ever seen” (1 Nephi 8:10–11).

Christ overcame death and thus became the “firstfruits” of the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:20–23). Just as the fruit, leaves, and sap of the tree of life have a curative value, so also has Christ healing powers.

In The Symposium of the Ten Virgins, Methodius states:
But these things seduce the unwary who fail to realize that the tree of life which once grew in Paradise has now been made to bloom again for everyone in the Church, and it bears the fair and comely fruit of faith. . . . For the tree of life is the firstborn of all. . . . He who does not believe in Christ and does not perceive that he is the first principle, the tree of life, and is unable to show to God his tabernacle adorned with the loveliest of fruit, how will he be able to rejoice?\(^{16}\)

In one sermon Christ declared himself to be the Bread of Life. "I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world" (John 6:51).

As Alma taught his sermon on faith, his concluding admonition was to look forward with an eye of faith to the fruit of the tree of life.

But if ye will nourish the word, yea, nourish the tree as it beginneth to grow, by your faith with great diligence, and with patience, looking forward to the fruit thereof, it shall take root; and behold it shall be a tree springing up unto everlasting life. And because of your diligence and your faith and your patience with the word in nourishing it, that it may take root in you, behold, by and by ye shall pluck the fruit thereof, which is most precious, which is sweet above all that is sweet, and which is white above all that is pure; and ye shall feast upon this fruit even until ye are filled, that ye hunger not, neither shall ye thirst. (Alma 32:40–42)

7. The tree and temple play a legitimizing political role. The idea that the king was a gardener in ancient times, the substitute for the "real king," is well attested in the mythic epics of the ancient Near East. "The garden supervised by the royal gardener is the garden of paradise as symbolized by the temple

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The king is not only the guardian and waterer of the garden but is also the possessor of the tree of life. In his hand, the twig of the Tree of Life becomes a sceptre, thus uniting the kingly role and the priestly role into one. According to Ezekiel, “Thy mother is like a vine ... planted by the waters: she was fruitful and full of branches. ... She had strong rods for the sceptres of them that bare rule” (Ezekiel 19:10–11).

The sceptre which Adam carried was cut from the tree of life. This rod was passed on through the patriarchs, from Seth to Noah, from Noah to Shem, and then to Abraham.¹⁸ According to the Book of the Bee,

At that time there were wars everywhere, and an angel took the rod, and laid it in the Cave of Treasures in the mount of Moab, until Midian was built. There was in Midian a man, upright and righteous before God, whose name was Yathro. When he was feeding his flock on the mountain, he found the cave and took the rod by divine agency; and with it he fed his sheep until his old age. When he gave his daughter to Moses, he said to him, “Go in, my son, take the rod, and go forth to thy flock.” When Moses had set his foot upon the threshold of the door, an angel moved the rod, and it came out of its own free will towards Moses. And Moses took the rod, and it was with him until God spake with him on mount Sinai.¹⁹

This rod was the rod which Moses carried into Egypt, with which he challenged the authority of the Pharaoh, divided the waters of the Red Sea, struck the rock that produced the abundant water, healed the bitter waters, held the brazen serpent that healed those who looked upon it, and ultimately led the Children of Israel to the Promised Land. It was this staff which budded and grew. In the end it found its resting place in the Holy of Holies.

We find that Christ is King of Kings: “Keep this commandment without spot, unrebukeable, until the appearing of

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¹⁹ Book of the Bee, cited in Widengren, The King and The Tree of Life, 38 n. 2.
our Lord Jesus Christ: Which in his times he shall shew, who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords; Who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light” (1 Timothy 6:14–16).

8. The tree and the temple are places of sacrifice. The king in ancient Near Eastern religions, acting in his priestly role, “performs certain acts of libations with the view of revivifying this tree, which is also the visible symbol of the dying god, who is called back to life.”20 Christ is the dying god. In Amulek’s testimony of Jesus, he bears witness that the Savior is “the great and last sacrifice, . . . infinite and eternal” (Alma 34:10). Further, he proclaimed: “And behold, this is the whole meaning of the law [of Moses], every whit pointing to that great and last sacrifice; and that great and last sacrifice will be the Son of God, yea, infinite and eternal” (Alma 34:14).

Isaiah’s testimony is that

Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: . . . he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter. (Isaiah 53:4–7)

Conclusion

During General Conference in April 1992, David B. Haight counseled members of the Church to look beyond the symbol. He quoted John A. Widtsoe when he said:

We live in a world of symbols. No man or woman can come out of the temple endowed as he should be, unless he has seen beyond the symbol, the mighty realities for which the symbols stand....The endowment which was given by revelation can best be understood by revelation; and to those who seek

20 Ibid., 19; cf. 11–19.
most vigorously, with pure hearts, will the revelation be greatest.21

He advised that before going to the temple, one should clear his conscience and then one “will come to know our Lord there.”22

When we clear ourselves of the mists of darkness that precede the tree of life, we may see beyond the symbol more clearly. With or without branches, the tree bears fruit and is adorned beautifully. It extends through the center of the universe, connecting heaven, earth, and the underworld. It is associated with eternal life and has great curative value to all who partake; its fruit is most desirable and delicious above all. The tree grows near the edge of the water and its roots extend down into the chaotic waters to control them. The waters that emerge from it possess life-giving virtues.

Thus we see that each of these features may be applied to Christ. His love and influence is over all, he is found in the temple, he is the “Way” which leads to eternal life. He is the foundation of the world, the firstfruits of the resurrection. He offers healing power to the souls of all who will believe in him. He is the king of kings and the last and final sacrifice.

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22 Ibid., 17.