



7-31-1993

Lehi's Dream of the Tree of Life: Springboard to Prophecy

Corbin T. Volluz
Skagit County, Washington

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

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

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol2/iss2/3>

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.



NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title Lehi's Dream of the Tree of Life: Springboard to Prophecy

Author(s) Corbin T. Volluz

Reference *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/2 (1993): 14-38.

ISSN 1065-9366 (print), 2168-3158 (online)

Abstract Lehi's dream of the tree of life is well known in Latter-day Saint circles. Its relationship to the vision of Nephi (1 Nephi 11-14), however, may not be so well known. This paper examines the proposition that Nephi's vision was an expansive, prophetic interpretation of Lehi's dream of the tree of life; gives an alternate interpretation of Lehi's dream as a guide to the afterlife; and links Lehi's dream, the Garden of Eden, and the temple.

Lehi's Dream of the Tree of Life: Springboard to Prophecy

Corbin T. Volluz

Abstract: Lehi's dream of the tree of life is well known in Latter-day Saint circles. Its relationship to the vision of Nephi (1 Nephi 11–14), however, may not be so well known. This paper examines the proposition that Nephi's vision was an expansive, prophetic interpretation of Lehi's dream of the tree of life. An alternate interpretation of Lehi's dream as a guide to the afterlife is also discussed. Finally, links between Lehi's dream, the Garden of Eden, and the temple will be considered.

1. Introduction

As recorded in 1 Nephi 8, Lehi is given a divine dream, the centerpiece of which is the tree of life. Upon the tree's branches grows white fruit, which is delicious to the taste. From the base of the tree of life flows a fountain of pure water. Leading up to the tree of life is a strait and narrow path.¹ Alongside and running parallel to the strait and narrow path is a rod of iron, placed there for the purpose of guiding hapless pilgrims who are from time to time overcome by mists of darkness while making their journey to the tree of life. The point at which the path and the rod begin is described as a large and spacious field. On this field are great multitudes of people, many of whom are going forth to take hold of the rod of iron and begin their way along the path toward the tree of life. Running near the tree of life is a river of filthy water (not to be confused with the fountain of pure water flowing from the base of the tree). Beyond the filthy water is a great and spacious building, filled to the brim with people wearing fancy clothes and making snide

¹ Though never expressly stated in the text, the path appears to be the only means of access to the tree of life, and hence to the fruit it bears.

comments and mocking gestures at those who are partaking of the fruit of the tree of life.

This much is familiar to most Latter-day Saints. As familiar as is the scenario of the tree of life dream, scarcely less familiar is the basic interpretation of that dream:

1. The tree of life represents "the love of God" (1 Nephi 11:22, 25) as does also "the fountain of living waters" (1 Nephi 11:25).

2. The rod of iron represents "the word of God" (1 Nephi 11:25; 15:24).

3. The great and spacious building represents "the pride of the world" (1 Nephi 11:36; 12:18).

4. The river of filthy water represents "the depths of hell" (1 Nephi 12:16; 15:29).

5. The mists of darkness represent "the temptations of the devil" (1 Nephi 12:17).

When all these symbols and their interpretations are put together, the message that is commonly derived is similar to that found in 1 Nephi 15:24:

And I said unto [Laman and Lemuel] 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 [i.e., the mists of darkness and the great and spacious building] overpower them unto blindness, to lead them away to destruction [i.e., the river of filthy water].

The common interpretation is that those who faithfully follow the rod of iron (by reading the scriptures, or "the word of God") will ultimately partake of the fruit of the tree of life (i.e., the love of God). It may be rash, however, to conclude that this is the sole interpretation of the tree of life dream. While certainly of great importance in our personal quest to return to the presence of our Heavenly Father, this particular interpretation may be only one of several levels of meaning derived by Nephi from the symbols of Lehi's dream.²

² It may be observed that it is this interpretation that Nephi divulged to his two murmuring brothers, Laman and Lemuel, when they came to him inquiring as to what the dream of their father meant (1 Nephi 15:21-24). It would be reasonable to conclude that the level of understanding im-

In 1 Nephi 11–14 is recorded Nephi's great panoramic vision of the future, beginning with the birth of the Savior in mortality and culminating with the final destruction of the wicked at his second coming. This vision has generally been seen as unrelated to the interpretation of Lehi's dream of the tree of life, the vision being considered a bonus given to Nephi in addition to the dream's interpretation. It is the thesis of this paper, however, that such is not the case, but rather that the entire panoramic vision of the future received by Nephi was itself a divine and expansive interpretation of Lehi's dream of the tree of life. Part 2 of this paper will examine this thesis.

Part 3 will consider evidence that another alternate interpretation of the tree of life dream included a description of the afterlife and the ultimate destinies of the wicked and the righteous. Finally, Part 4 will consider insights that can be gleaned from the tree of life dream as it relates to the nature of the Garden of Eden and the temple.

2. Lehi's Dream of the Tree of Life as the Springboard for Nephi's Vision of the Future

The primary interpretation revealed to Nephi of Lehi's dream of the tree of life was a panoramic view of the future from the advent of the Savior in mortality up until the Second Coming.

The Birth of Jesus Christ, His Baptism, Ministry, and Crucifixion

The Birth of Jesus Christ. As an interpretation of the tree of life symbol, Nephi was given a vision of the birth of Jesus Christ. Nephi was shown the tree of life in vision by "the Spirit of the Lord" (1 Nephi 11:1, 8). Nephi then requested to know "the interpretation thereof" (1 Nephi 11:11). In direct response to his request, Nephi was shown a "beautiful and fair" virgin in "the city of Nazareth" (1 Nephi 11:13–15). At this juncture, the "Spirit of the Lord," who had taken Nephi up to the mountain

parted by Nephi to Laman and Lemuel would be the milk and not the meat of the interpretation of the tree of life dream, for surely the faithless and unbelieving Laman and Lemuel were not spiritually prepared to receive the deeper things of God.

top and had introduced him to the vision, disappears, and an angel takes his place as Nephi's escort (1 Nephi 11:12–14). In continuing the demonstration of the interpretation of the tree of life, the angel now shows Nephi the "condescension of God."

The word *condescend* means "to waive dignity or superiority voluntarily and assume equality with an inferior." This is precisely what Nephi's guide proceeds to show him. Nephi sees the virgin being "carried away in the Spirit" and subsequently giving birth to a child who is identified by the angel as "the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son of the Eternal Father!" (1 Nephi 11:18–21). Thus is depicted the "condescension of God"—that God the Son, the Creator of all things under the direction of his Father, would of his own volition descend from the celestial courts of glory to take upon himself a mortal tabernacle of flesh and blood and become equal with members of the human race. Such is the interpretation of the tree of life given by the angel to Nephi.³

The interpretation having been given, the angel next quizzes Nephi as to whether he understands the meaning of the

³ There can be little question that this is, in fact, the interpretation of the tree of life, inasmuch as this part of the vision is given in direct response to Nephi's request to know the interpretation of the tree (1 Nephi 15:11). For further support of this proposition, see Jeanette W. Miller, "The Tree of Life, a Personification of Christ," *Journal of Mormon Studies* 2/1 (1993): 93.

It may be that at this time, Nephi was also instructed that this momentous event of the Lord's advent in mortality would take place six hundred years from the time he saw it in vision. Though not recorded in this section of the Book of Mormon, Nephi later makes reference to this additional piece of prophetic insight, and refers to it as having come through "the words of the angel" (1 Nephi 19:8).

It also seems likely that the reason for the change in escorts from the Spirit of the Lord to the angel is that the Spirit of the Lord was in reality Christ in the premortal state. Having carried Nephi to the mountain top and introduced him to the beginning of the vision, the Spirit of the Lord disappeared just prior to Nephi's beholding the birth of the Savior. This may have been done to impress upon Nephi the identity of the Spirit of the Lord as that same child that Nephi witnessed being born in the vision. For Nephi to have simultaneously seen both the premortal Messiah by his side and the Son of God being born in the vision could have led to needless confusion over the issue.

tree of life (1 Nephi 11:21).⁴ Nephi replies, "Yea, it is the love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men" (1 Nephi 11:22).⁵

The Baptism of Jesus Christ. Next, Nephi beholds the rod of iron which his father had seen, "which led to the fountain of living waters, or to the tree of life" (1 Nephi 11:25). The living waters flow from the base of the tree of life. A basic interpretation of the living waters would be that they are the divine drink that goes along with the divine food (i.e., the fruit of the tree of life) to be given to those who reach the end of the strait and narrow path. Here, though, the angel gives to Nephi another, prophetic, interpretation. The symbol of the living waters is used to represent the waters of the Jordan River in which Christ was baptized by John the Baptist. Indeed, this is exactly what is shown Nephi in vision immediately after he beholds the living waters (1 Nephi 11:26–27).⁶

The Ministry and Atonement of Jesus Christ. In conjunction with the symbol of the living waters discussed above, Nephi also saw the rod of iron which his father had seen, which "led to . . . the tree of life," and which Nephi was given to know represented "the word of God" (1 Nephi 11:25).

In his vision, Nephi then received a prophetic interpretation of the symbol of the rod of iron, which included an account of Christ's mortal ministry (1 Nephi 11:28), his choosing of the twelve apostles (1 Nephi 11:29), and his healing of the sick

⁴ As in other sacred teaching experiences, the Lord, or his messenger, first imparts knowledge, then asks questions to determine how well the student has learned.

⁵ How does "the love of God" relate to Christ's birth? Love on the part of the Son of God for mankind was the motivating factor in his condescending to take upon himself flesh and blood, for it was only by and through this means that he could provide a ransom whereby mankind might be redeemed from the effects of the Fall. "We love him, because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

Also, the love of God the Father was manifest in sending his Son to be born into this world: "For God so loved the world, that he sent his only begotten Son, that whosoever should believe in him should not perish, but should have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

⁶ The waters of baptism may be typified as "living" inasmuch as the ordinance of baptism must be received in order to obtain eternal life (John 3:5). In the early Christian writing *Didache* 7, it says: "But concerning baptism, thus shall ye baptize. Having first recited all these things, baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in living (running) water."

(1 Nephi 11:31), culminating with the Savior's being "lifted up upon the cross and slain for the sins of the world" (1 Nephi 11:33).

As stated above, Nephi was informed that the rod of iron was "the word of God" (1 Nephi 11:25). It is significant in this context that one of the name-titles for Jesus Christ is "the Word of God" (John 1:1, 14). This fits with the interpretation given Nephi of "the rod of iron," or "word of God," as representing the ministry and death of Christ, for Christ was the Word of God incarnate. Christ, as the Word of God, came to earth not to do his own will, but the will of his father (John 6:38), up to and including enduring the agony of the atonement and crucifixion (Matthew 26:39).

The Apostasy from the Church Christ Established. After beholding the "Son of the everlasting God" being "slain for the sins of the world," Nephi was shown in vision "the multitudes of the earth . . . gathered together to fight against the apostles of the Lamb" (1 Nephi 11:34). Nephi further beheld that this "multitude . . . was gathered together . . . in a large and spacious building" (1 Nephi 11:35). Because they were gathered together in a "large and spacious building," it may be that this multitude was an interpretation of the great and spacious building symbol of Lehi's dream.⁷

The angel of the Lord then gives Nephi two interpretations of the great and spacious building, one specific and one general. The specific interpretation of the great and spacious building is "the house of Israel [who] hath gathered together to fight against the twelve apostles of the Lamb" (1 Nephi 11:35). The general interpretation of the great and spacious building, on the other hand, is given when Nephi identifies it as "the pride of the world" (1 Nephi 11:36).⁸

In the first session of the April 1989 General Conference, President Ezra Taft Benson stated:

⁷ It will be seen that whenever the phrase *multitudes gathered together* is used in Nephi's vision, it seems to have reference to an interpretation of the great and spacious building symbol of Lehi's dream.

⁸ The great and spacious building as a representation of the house of Israel gathered together to fight against the twelve apostles of the Lamb is only the first of several interpretations within the vision of Nephi of the great and spacious building symbol from Lehi's dream. Nevertheless, its general interpretation as "the pride of the world" applies with equal force to all the subsequent specific interpretations of that symbol as well as the one under consideration.

It was through *pride* that Christ was crucified. The Pharisees were wroth because Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, which was a threat to their position, and so they plotted his death. (See John 11:53.)⁹

We can well imagine that the same pride that motivated the wicked members of the house of Israel to crucify the Lamb would also motivate them to fight against his twelve apostles.

Next, Nephi sees the great and spacious building fall, "and the fall thereof was exceedingly great" (1 Nephi 11:36). This would likely be a figurative manner of expressing the destruction and scattering of the house of Israel, which began in A.D. 70 when Jerusalem was demolished by the Romans.

Nephi then receives a prophetic warning from the angel:

Thus shall be the destruction of all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people [not just the house of Israel], that shall fight against the twelve apostles of the Lamb. (1 Nephi 11:36)

As we shall see, this warning is in dead earnest.

The Three Multitudes: The Prophecy of Nephi's Descendants

As 1 Nephi 12 begins, the vision shifts its focus from events on the Eastern Hemisphere to events on the Western Hemisphere. The whole of chapter 12 deals exclusively with the fate of Nephi's descendants.

In Lehi's dream, there are three separate multitudes or groups of people that attempt to make their way along the strait and narrow path to the tree of life, each multitude achieving a different degree of success. These three multitudes of Lehi's dream symbolize the prophetic destiny of Nephi's seed as interpreted in 1 Nephi 12.

The First Multitude. The first multitude is described in the dream of Lehi as follows:

And I [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 I stood. And it came to pass that they did come forth, and commence in the path which led to the tree. And it

⁹ Ezra Taft Benson, "Beware of Pride," *Ensign* 19 (May 1989): 5.

came to pass that there arose a *mist of darkness*; yea, even an exceedingly great mist of darkness, insomuch that they who had commenced in the path did lose their way, that they wandered off and were lost. (1 Nephi 8:21–23)

As related above, Lehi saw “numberless concourses of people,” many of whom were pressing forward. As an interpretation thereof, Nephi sees in vision “multitudes of people” upon the “land of promise,” and these multitudes are his seed and the seed of his brethren (1 Nephi 12:1).

Next, Nephi is shown great battles and wars among his seed and the seed of his brethren, which last for the space of many generations (1 Nephi 12:2–3). Then Nephi sees a “mist of darkness” on the face of the land of promise. This “mist of darkness” beheld by Nephi is an interpretation and elaboration of the “mist of darkness” that Lehi saw cause the destruction of the first multitude in his dream, causing them to “lose their way, that they wandered off and were lost” (1 Nephi 8:23).

As a prophetic interpretation of this symbolic destruction of Lehi’s first multitude, Nephi beheld in vision the destruction of his people that attended the vapor of darkness:

I saw lightnings, and I heard thunderings, and earthquakes, and all manner of tumultuous noises; and I saw the earth and the rocks, that they rent; and I saw mountains tumbling into pieces; and I saw the plains of the earth, that they were broken up; and I saw many cities that they were sunk; and I saw many that they were burned with fire; and I saw many that did tumble to the earth because of the quaking thereof. (1 Nephi 12:4)

The Second Multitude. The second multitude is described in the dream of Lehi as follows:

And it came to pass that I [Lehi] 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. (1 Nephi 8:24)

This second multitude may represent the righteous part of the people of Nephi who were not slain by the great destructions

attending the mists of darkness at the crucifixion of Christ. (Note that Lehi saw them "press forward *through* the mists of darkness.") They were not killed as was the first multitude, their more wicked brethren, but were spared, and Lehi saw them "come forth and partake of the fruit of the tree."

This "partak[ing] of the fruit of the tree" is a representation of the second multitude's obtaining the "love of God" (1 Nephi 11:22, 25) and their incorporation of that love into their society, by means of which they were enabled to live for approximately two hundred years in the glorious and blessed state described at length in the book of 4 Nephi:

And it came to pass that there was no contention in the land, because of the *love of God* which did dwell in the hearts of the people. (4 Nephi 1:15)

This interpretation of the second multitude was given to Nephi in his vision when he saw

the vapor of darkness, that it passed from off the face of the earth; and behold, I saw *multitudes* who had not fallen because of the great and terrible judgments of the Lord. (1 Nephi 12:5)¹⁰

Unfortunately, however, in Lehi's dream the second multitude was not to remain forever at the tree of life. As Lehi records:

And after they [the second multitude] had partaken of the fruit of the tree they did cast their eyes about as if they were ashamed. And I also cast my eyes round about; and beheld, on the other side of the river of water, a great and spacious building; and it stood as it were in the air, high above the earth. And it was filled with people, both old and young, both male and female; and their manner of dress was exceedingly fine; and they were in the attitude of mocking and pointing their fingers towards those who had come at and were

¹⁰ Further amplification and details regarding the second multitude are added in Nephi's vision when he beheld "the Lamb of God descending out of heaven" (1 Nephi 11:5), Christ's choosing twelve others from among the seed of Nephi for his disciples (1 Nephi 11:7-10), and the passing away of three generations and many of the fourth generation in righteousness (1 Nephi 12:11-12).

partaking of the fruit. And after they had tasted of the fruit, they were ashamed, because of those that were scoffing at them; and they fell away into forbidden paths, and were lost. (1 Nephi 8:25–28)

In Nephi's vision, he is shown the prophetic meaning behind the symbolic imagery of Lehi's dream: "And it came to pass that I saw *the multitudes of the earth gathered together*" (1 Nephi 12:13). Whereas the first gathering together of multitudes was a representation of the house of Israel assembling in order to fight against the twelve apostles of the Lamb, this second gathering of multitudes represents the seed of Nephi and his brethren who gather together for their final great battle, which would result in the virtual annihilation of the Nephite society (1 Nephi 12:14–15). Once again the phrase *multitudes gathering together* is being used to interpret the symbol of the great and spacious building of Lehi's dream.

The angel next exhibits to Nephi three symbols from Lehi's dream which, when combined, represent the destruction of the people of Nephi:

1. The "fountain [river] of filthy water," the interpretation of which the angel gives as "the depths of hell" (1 Nephi 12:16). This is the destination of the descendants of Nephi, who died in their wicked and rebellious state.

2. The "mists of darkness," the interpretation of which the angel gives as "the temptations of the devil, which blindeth the eyes, and hardeneth the hearts of the children of men, and leadeth them away into broad roads, that they perish and are lost" (1 Nephi 12:17). These temptations are the *outer* force that eventually led to the destruction of the Nephites.

3. The "great and spacious building," the interpretation of which the angel gives as "the vain imaginations and the pride of the children of men" (1 Nephi 12:18). This pride is the *inner* force that caused the Nephites' overthrow.

In vision, Nephi then beholds the interpretation of the above three symbols as applied to the destruction of his people:

I beheld and saw that the seed of my brethren did contend against my seed, according to the word of the angel; and because of the *pride* of my seed [the great and spacious building], and the *temptations of the devil* [the mists of darkness], I beheld that the seed of

my brethren did overpower the people of my seed. (1 Nephi 12:19)¹¹

But what of the remnant of the people who survived that cataclysmic battle? The dream of Lehi gives us a symbolic answer to that question and the vision of Nephi offers a corresponding interpretation.

In Lehi's dream, "They [the second multitude] fell away into forbidden paths and were lost" (1 Nephi 8:28). In the vision that Nephi beheld, the angel said unto him:

Behold, these [survivors of the last great battle of the Nephites] shall dwindle in unbelief. And it came to pass that I beheld, after they had dwindled in unbelief they became a dark, and loathsome, and a filthy people, full of idleness and all manner of abominations. (1 Nephi 12:22-23)

Thus is symbolized and interpreted the complete apostasy which was to occur among the descendants of Nephi and his brothers. Spiritually speaking, "they did fall away into forbidden paths and were lost" (1 Nephi 8:28).

The Gap in the Record of Lehi's Dream. Before we proceed to a discussion of the third multitude of Lehi's dream and

¹¹ Though not expressly stated in this passage, it is implied that Nephi's people, having been destroyed in their wickedness, were therefore cast down into the "depths of hell," as symbolized by the river of filthy water.

The three symbolic elements from Lehi's vision along with their interpretations are given by the angel in inverse order from the application of those symbols to the destruction of Nephi's people, thus forming a chiasm.

A. "The depths of hell" (1 Nephi 12:16)

B. "The temptations of the devil" (1 Nephi 12:17)

C. "Pride and vain imaginations" (1 Nephi 12:18)

C'. "The pride of my seed" (1 Nephi 12:19)

B'. "The temptations of the devil" (1 Nephi 12:19)

A'. The depths of hell (implied; 1 Nephi 12:19)

Inasmuch as it was a practice of the ancient Hebrews to place the most important element at the center of the chiasmic structure, it appears that the vision of Nephi considers "pride" to have been the main contributing factor to the fall of the Nephites. Other scriptures would support this view. Mormon stated, "Behold, the *pride* of this nation, or the people of the Nephites, hath proven their destruction" (Moroni 8:27). In a revelation through Joseph Smith, the Lord said, "Beware of *pride*, lest ye become as the Nephites of old" (D&C 38:29).

its corresponding interpretation in Nephi's vision, we must first recognize that the entire account of the dream of Lehi was not recorded by Nephi upon the plates. At some point between the second and third multitudes, Nephi intentionally omitted some of the details of Lehi's dream when he made his record. As he puts it, "And now I, Nephi, do not speak all the words of my father" (1 Nephi 8:29).

This gap in the record of Lehi's dream becomes important when we realize that, although this part is missing from the dream itself, the prophetic interpretation thereof is *not* missing from Nephi's vision. In other words, although Nephi didn't include this section of Lehi's dream on the gold plates, he did include the interpretation of the missing section of Lehi's dream when he recorded his vision.

After the gap in Lehi's dream, the narrative of that dream picks up in 1 Nephi 8:30 with the third multitude (or group of multitudes). Once we can identify the interpretation of this third multitude from Lehi's dream in Nephi's vision, and the point in the record of Nephi's vision at which it is located, we can be relatively sure that the intervening material between the interpretations of the second multitude and the third multitude will be an interpretation of the missing portion of Lehi's dream.

In Lehi's dream, the third multitude is described as making their way along the path to the tree of life with many of them remaining there for good (1 Nephi 8:30). This is likely a representation of the last days when the seed of Nephi shall once again embrace the gospel, which shall come to them by means of the Gentiles and will never again depart from it into a state of apostasy. Not surprisingly, this is exactly the prophetic interpretation put upon this scene by Nephi in his vision, beginning with 1 Nephi 14.

Apparently, then, the events described in Nephi's vision as occurring between the time of the second multitude and the third multitude (constituting the whole of 1 Nephi 13) were symbolized by some means in Lehi's dream. But due to Nephi's desire to "be short in writing" (1 Nephi 8:30), the exact manner in which they were symbolized in Lehi's dream was not recorded by Nephi on the plates of gold.¹²

¹² It would be an interesting exercise to attempt a reconstruction of the unrecorded section of Lehi's dream based upon the interpretation thereof found in 1 Nephi 13. Space considerations, however, do not permit such an attempt in this article. For now, we will skip the whole of 1 Nephi 13

The Third Multitude. In Lehi's dream, the third multitude is described as follows:

[Lehi] saw 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. (1 Nephi 8:30)

Lehi saw a great polarization occurring among the inhabitants of the earth, for not only did he see multitudes pressing toward the tree of life, but

He saw also multitudes feeling their way towards that great and spacious building. . . . And great was the multitude that did enter into that strange building. (1 Nephi 8:31, 33)

Lehi then saw in his dream that the fate of the third multitude that had pressed forward and obtained the tree of life was happier than that of the former two multitudes:

And after [the wicked] did enter into that building they did point the finger of scorn at me and those that were partaking of the fruit also; *but we heeded them not.* (1 Nephi 8:33)

The lack of heed given by those at the tree of life to the scorn of the wicked leads us to the conclusion that they did not fall away from the tree as did their predecessors, but remained there permanently. Thus concludes the dream of Lehi.¹³

In Nephi's vision, the interpretation of the third multitude from Lehi's dream is recorded in 1 Nephi 14:7:

For the time cometh, saith the Lamb of God, that I will work a great and a marvelous work among the

without further comment and turn our attention to the beginning of 1 Nephi 14 for the interpretation of the third multitude from Lehi's dream.

¹³ Though this abrupt conclusion may leave the reader hanging somewhat, we learn later that this is all according to the plan. In fact, it appears that this may not really have been the end of Lehi's dream at all, but rather merely all that Nephi was permitted by the Lord to record on the gold plates. More of this later.

children of men; a work which shall be everlasting, either on the one hand or on the other—either unto the convincing them unto peace and life eternal, or unto the deliverance of them to the hardness of their hearts and the blindness of their minds unto their being brought down into captivity, and also unto destruction, both temporally and spiritually, according to the captivity of the devil, of which I have spoken.

From this verse, we learn that the prophetic interpretation of the third multitude of Lehi's dream consists of those persons in the last days who are convinced "unto peace and life eternal." They make it to the "tree of life," partake of the fruit, and fall not away.¹⁴

As we have seen, the rest of the people in Lehi's dream who do not come to the tree of life gather themselves to the great and spacious building. This is interpreted by Nephi as their being brought down into "captivity" and "destruction both temporally and spiritually" (1 Nephi 14:7). As Lehi's dream appears to depict a polarization between the wicked and the righteous in the days of the third multitude, we see similarly depicted in Nephi's vision a great polarization among the peoples of the earth—"a work which shall be everlasting—either on the one hand or the other" (1 Nephi 14:7).¹⁵ In subsequent verses, Nephi further describes the polarity that will occur in the last days:

And he [the angel] said unto me: Behold there are save two churches only; the one is the church of the Lamb of God, and the other is the church of the devil; wherefore, whoso belongeth not to the church of the Lamb of God belongeth to that great church, which is

¹⁴ Nephi is told by the angel that, if the Gentiles in the last days shall "hearken unto the Lamb of God," and "harden not their hearts against the Lamb of God, they shall be numbered among the house of Israel" (1 Nephi 14:1–2). Thus the Gentiles may also be included in the select number of the third multitude so long as they comply with the same requirement as is imposed upon the literal descendants of the house of Israel, that being repentance (1 Nephi 14:6).

¹⁵ We also learn from 1 Nephi 14:7, quoted above, that the cause of this extreme polarization in the last days is the "marvelous work" which the Lord will perform, i.e., the restoration of the gospel and the gathering of his people out of the world (2 Nephi 29:1–2).

the mother of abominations; and she is the whore of all the earth. (1 Nephi 14:10)¹⁶

Nephi is then shown that the numbers of the church of the devil will far exceed the numbers of the church of the Lamb of God (1 Nephi 14:11–12), even as the same situation had been typified in Lehi's dream (1 Nephi 8:33).

Next, Nephi beholds "that the great mother of abominations did gather together multitudes upon the face of all the earth, among all the nations of the Gentiles, to fight against the Lamb of God" (1 Nephi 14:13).¹⁷ As the vision of Nephi concludes, he describes the "power of the Lamb of God" descending upon the church of the Lamb (1 Nephi 14:14) and the "wrath of God" being "poured out upon that great and abominable church, inso-much that there were wars and rumors of wars among all the nations and kindreds of the earth" (1 Nephi 14:15).

Just as the dream of Lehi left the reader hanging, so does the vision of Nephi. This similarity in abrupt endings of Nephi's vision and Lehi's dream tends to confirm the hypothesis that the vision of Nephi is an interpretation of Lehi's dream, up to and including the cliff-hanger ending. But at the conclusion of Nephi's vision, we learn the reason behind the premature finale.

Nephi was forbidden by God to record the conclusion of the vision. He saw more than he was allowed to write down. Nephi was shown that the apostle John would have the "ordination" to write the rest of the things that Nephi was shown but forbidden to include in his record (1 Nephi 14:18–28). This accounts not only for the abrupt ending to Nephi's vision, but also the similarly abrupt ending to the dream of Lehi. It is likely that, even as the record of Nephi's vision was curtailed due to

¹⁶ Nephi's brother Jacob, who had also apparently been given a view of this same vision (see 2 Nephi 6:9–15; 9:5, 41; 10:3), described the polarization that would occur as follows: "Wherefore, he that fighteth against Zion, both Jew and Gentile, both bond and free, both male and female, shall perish; for they are they who are the whore of all the earth; *for they who are not for me are against me*, saith our God" (2 Nephi 10:16).

¹⁷ The phraseology of "gather(ing) together multitudes" should be familiar by now. It is clear that the great and spacious building of Lehi's dream is serving in yet another symbolic role, this time as the latter-day church of the devil, or great mother of abominations. Following in the pattern of the first representation of the great and spacious building (1 Nephi 11:35), it now "gathers together multitudes" to fight against the Lamb of God.

the anticipated account of John, so was the record of Lehi's dream cut short for the same reason.¹⁸

It appears from the foregoing that Nephi received an interpretation of Lehi's dream of the tree of life, which interpretation was given him in the form of a vision. That interpretation included a panoramic prophecy from the advent of the Savior in mortality up to the earth's final moments just prior to his second coming in glory.

It is nothing short of amazing that the varied and complex list of events described in Nephi's vision were derived from the few, simple symbols used in Lehi's dream of the tree of life. But this is not the end of it, for Lehi's dream does not symbolize things related to this world alone. In the next section, we will discuss how the tree of life scenario lends itself to an interpretation of the events to occur to the wicked and the righteous in the afterlife.

3. Lehi's Dream of the Tree of Life as a Guide to the Afterlife

In the last section, we saw how the prophetic vision Nephi was given as recorded in 1 Nephi 11–14 served as a divine interpretation of the symbolic elements of his father's dream of the tree of life. Shortly after Nephi received his great vision, we find Laman and Lemuel inquiring of him as to the meaning of the river of water "which our father saw" (1 Nephi 15:26). Nephi proceeds to embark on a new interpretation of the symbols of the tree of life dream, and in so doing teaches his older brothers concerning the state of the souls of mankind in the afterlife. Nephi says of the river:

¹⁸ Later, however, Nephi lets slip the fact that the fate of the great and spacious building (latter-day church of the devil) is the same as the great and spacious building in the meridian of time (the house of Israel), i.e., it "shall tumble to the dust and great shall be the fall of it" (1 Nephi 22:14, 23). Such a fate would fit nicely with the symbolism of the great and spacious building that Lehi saw in his dream, inasmuch as it was built, "as it were, in the air high above the earth" (1 Nephi 8:26). The precarious position of the great and spacious building symbolized its instability from the first, together with the peril of all those who entered therein. The fate of the latter-day church of the devil thus fulfills the prophecy given earlier by the angel to Nephi: "Thus shall be the destruction of all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people, that shall fight against the twelve apostles of the Lamb" (1 Nephi 11:36).

And I said unto them that the water which my father saw was filthiness; and so much was his mind swallowed up in other things that he beheld not the filthiness of the water. And I said unto them that it was an awful gulf, which separated the wicked from the tree of life, and also from the saints of God. . . . And I said unto them that our father also saw that the justice of God did also divide the wicked from the righteous; and the brightness thereof was like unto the brightness of a flaming fire, which ascendeth up unto God forever and ever, and hath no end. (1 Nephi 15:27, 29-30)

This scene of a yawning gulf separating the wicked from the righteous is likely a representation of the spirit world prior to the atonement and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Up until that time, there was no intercourse between the two hemispheres of the spirit world and no preaching of the gospel to the wicked and ignorant by the righteous (D&C 138; Luke 16:19-31). Therefore, in terms of the period of time in which Nephi spoke (between 600 and 592 B.C.), his description of the spirit world was correct.

It is a simple matter to see how this situation in the spirit world was interpreted from Lehi's dream of the tree of life. The righteous part of the people are on one side of the river and the wicked on the other. Presumably, the righteous are on the side of the tree of life, and the wicked are on the side of the great and spacious building. Indeed, we saw just such a tableau in Lehi's dream. Enlarging and amplifying upon the symbols of Lehi's dream, however, the river here seems not to be a mere stream of water running level with the ground, but is instead like the Colorado River, cutting through the chasms and gorges of the Grand Canyon, so as to create a great gulf of division between the righteous and the wicked, over which neither group may pass.

Next, Nephi describes to his brothers the scene that will take place on the judgment day:

The day should come that they must be judged of their works, yea, even the works which were done by the temporal body in their days of probation. Wherefore, 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; where-

fore, they must be brought to stand before God, to be judged of their works. (1 Nephi 15:32–33)

Though not mentioned in this text, several other scriptural passages referring to the judgment day speak of a “bar.” Both Jacob and Moroni speak of the “pleasing bar of God,” before which all mankind shall be judged (Jacob 6:13; Moroni 10:34). Though the word *bar* as used in this context obviously has legalistic implications, it is interesting that the foremost definition of the word *bar* is “a straight piece (as of wood or metal) that is longer than it is wide, and has any of various uses (as for . . . support).”¹⁹ This definition of a *bar* as a long-shaped piece of metal fits the description of the iron rod leading to the tree of life.²⁰ It is therefore possible that this judgment scene described by Nephi was typified in Lehi’s dream by the transportation of the wicked multitude by some means across the gulf to stand before the rod of iron (judgment bar) along with the righteous in order to be judged of their works.

The bar, or the rod of iron, is the place where the people are judged. It will be remembered that the fundamental interpretation of the rod of iron is “the word of God” (1 Nephi 11:25). As we have pointed out above, one of the most common scriptural uses of the phrase *the word of God* is as a name for Jesus Christ. Therefore, the bringing of all people before the rod of iron (*judgment bar* or *word of God*) to be judged of their works may symbolize the scriptural verity that Christ will be the judge of all mankind (John 5:22), and that all will be brought to stand before him in that great judgment day to be judged of their works, whether they be good or whether they be evil (Revelation 20:12–13).

Nephi then describes for his brothers the fate of the wicked and the righteous subsequent to the final judgment, all in terms of symbolism derived from his father’s dream:

¹⁹ Merriam-Webster, *Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam, 1967), 69.

²⁰ Moreover, the legalistic connotation of the word *bar* came from “a partition or railing running across a courtroom, intended to separate the general public from the space occupied by the judges, counsel, jury, and others concerned in the trial of a cause.” The word *bar* is also used to describe “the place where prisoners stand at their trial” in Henry C. Black, *Black’s Law Dictionary* (St. Paul, MN: West, 1968), 187–88.

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. But behold, I say unto you, the kingdom of God is not *filthy*, and there cannot any unclean thing enter into the kingdom of God; wherefore there must needs be a place of *filthiness* prepared for that which is *filthy*.

And there is a place prepared, yea, even that awful hell of which I have spoken, and the devil is the preparator of it; wherefore the final state of the souls of men is to dwell in the kingdom of God, or to be cast out because of that justice of which I have spoken.

Wherefore, the wicked are rejected from the righteous, and also from that tree of life, whose fruit is most precious and most desirable above all other fruits; yea, and it is the greatest of all the gifts of God. (1 Nephi 15:33–36)

From Nephi's interpretation, we may conclude that, in terms of Lehi's dream, once the wicked are brought across the gulf to be judged of their works before the judgment bar of God, they are not simply put back where they once were on the opposite side of the gulf, but are cast into the gulf itself and the river which winds its way through it, while the righteous remain at the tree of life, to partake of its fruit forever.²¹

²¹ The symbolism of the river of "filthy" water is cleverly tied in with its representation of the "depths of hell" and those who are cast into it. Once the wicked are judged and found "filthy," they cannot enter into the kingdom of God (1 Nephi 15:34), but must needs go to a place of like filthiness. Nephi informs us that just such a place of filthiness has been prepared for them, and that it is the depths of hell, fittingly represented by the river of "filthy" water.

It is possible that Nephi means more by the concept of "filthy" water than merely the fact that it is muddy or dirty. After all, it is not too repugnant to be doused in muddy water. Many people pay good money to do just that in large rafts along the rapids of the Colorado River! Rather, the word translated "filthy" has the additional connotation of "contemptibly offensive, vile or objectionable." This additional offensiveness of the river could be due to the presence of human or animal waste. It is possible that the river of filthy water may amount to no more than an open sewage ditch. To be cast into that kind of river would be repugnant indeed!

As will be recalled, Nephi further interpreted the river of filthy water as:

A representation of that awful hell, which the angel said unto me was prepared for the wicked, . . . and the brightness thereof was like unto the brightness of a flaming fire, which ascendeth up unto God forever and ever, and hath no end. (1 Nephi 15:29–30)

It is feasible to interpret this passage as describing the river of water as burning in some manner, as “a flaming fire.” The use of a “burning” body of water to represent hell is not without precedent in the scriptures, being the equivalent of the familiar “lake of fire and brimstone.”²²

First Nephi 15:30 states that “the justice of God did also divide the wicked from the righteous.” It is the justice of God that keeps the wicked from returning to his presence along with the righteous. Adam sinned and was cast out of God’s presence in the beginning. We have all sinned personally and thereby come short of the glory of God. In the terms used in Lehi’s dream, we have all become filthy through the commission of sin and are therefore bound for the river of filthy, burning water as our eternal resting place. There is only one other alternative that God has provided, and that is the tree of life, which now comes to represent the presence of God himself. And the only way by which we may reach the tree of life is the strait and narrow path, along which stretches the rod of iron. There is no other way provided by which access may be gained to the tree of life.

We recall that, early on in Nephi’s vision (1 Nephi 11:26–33), the interpretation of the “rod of iron” was given as the ministry and atonement of Jesus Christ. Now we can more fully appreciate the symbolism involved in that interpretation. Even as the rod of iron is the only manner by which the multitudes can approach and obtain the fruit of the tree of life, so is the atonement of Jesus Christ the only way by which we can overcome

²² Nephi’s brother Jacob spoke of the lake of fire and brimstone using similar terminology as Nephi used in describing the river of filthy water: “And according to the power of justice, for justice cannot be denied, ye must go away into that lake of fire and brimstone, whose flames are unquenchable, and whose smoke ascendeth up forever and ever, which lake of fire and brimstone is endless torment” (Jacob 6:10).

the effects of the fall, be forgiven of our sins, and return to the presence of God (see Mosiah 3:17).²³

First Nephi 15:36 states that the fruit of the tree of life "is the greatest of all the gifts of God." Similarly, Doctrine and Covenants 14:7 declares, "And, if you keep my commandments, and endure to the end, you shall have eternal life, which gift is the greatest of all the gifts of God." Thus we see that the act of partaking of the fruit of the tree of life is likely symbolic of partaking of eternal life, both gifts being described as the greatest of the gifts of God.²⁴

4. Lehi's Dream of the Tree of Life as a Diagram of the Garden of Eden

When describing to his brothers the separation of the wicked from the tree of life, Nephi uses a curious phrase: "And I said unto them that our father also saw that the justice of God did also divide the wicked from the righteous" (1 Nephi 15:30).

One is left to wonder how an abstract concept such as "justice" can operate to divide these two groups of people. It is possible the answer to this question is found in Alma 42, in which the justice of God is contrasted with the mercy of Christ and we are shown how, through the atonement of the Savior, both justice and mercy are satisfied and neither is robbed. Alma defines the workings of the justice of God to be the casting of Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden subsequent to their partaking of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, due to the fact that they had transgressed his ordinances and were no longer fit to dwell in his presence (Alma 42:14). Alma goes on to say,

Now, we see that the man had become as God, knowing good and evil; and lest he should put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat and live forever, the Lord God placed cherubim and a

²³ As we have seen, the strait and narrow path, and the rod of iron by which it runs, represent the atonement of Jesus Christ. In this context, it may be remembered that the Savior himself declared, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man cometh unto the Father but by me" (John 14:6).

²⁴ In a similar vein, the Lord revealed to John the Revelator: "To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God" (Revelation 2:7).

flaming sword, that he should not partake of the fruit.
(Alma 42:3)

Thus we see that it was not the mere attribute of justice alone which accomplished the dividing of the wicked from the tree of life, but rather it was the justice of God as made manifest in his placing "cherubim and a flaming sword" to guard the tree of life (Genesis 3:24; Alma 12:21; 42:2; Moses 4:31).

Abraham informs us that the tree of life was "in the midst of the garden" (Abraham 5:9; see also Revelation 2:7). Yet, when God cast Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden, he placed the cherubim with the flaming sword not in the midst of the garden, as one might expect, but "eastward in Eden" (Moses 4:31; Alma 12:21; 42:2; Genesis 3:24). The question arises as to why God would put the guardians of the tree of life in the east part of the garden when the tree of life was in the midst of the garden. This would seem an ineffective manner of guarding the tree of life, inasmuch as an intruder could enter from the north, south, or west, and partake of its fruit without encountering the guardians.

It is possible that the reason the Lord put cherubim eastward in Eden to guard the tree of life which was located in the midst of Eden is because there was only one entrance to the garden, and that entrance was located in the east.

Of all the Eden accounts available to Latter-day Saints, the one contained in the Bible alone gives us a fascinating insight. Whereas the other accounts simply state that the cherubim were put at the east part of Eden to "guard the tree of life," the Bible states that the cherubim were put there to guard "the way of the tree of life" (Genesis 3:24). A "way" to the tree of life would naturally lead from the entrance in the east part of the garden of Eden to the tree itself, situated "in the midst of the garden" (Abraham 5:9). 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, and which continues to exist for the future enjoyment of the faithful in the paradise of God (Revelation 2:7). The history of the earth from Adam to the winding-up scene is one great drama in which Adam and Eve (all of us, respectively), after having been cast out of the Garden of Eden, lose their access to the tree of life and eternal life. They must now find their way back and gain

readmittance to the garden so that they may once more partake of the fruit of the tree of life and lay hold on immortality and exaltation. The play ends where it begins—the Garden of Eden and the tree of life.

It has been suggested by numerous Latter-day Saint scholars that the Garden of Eden was the first temple,²⁵ inasmuch as it was there that God first revealed himself to man. In addition to this similarity, the Garden of Eden may have possessed a number of other features similar to later temples, thus serving as the great archetype of the House of the Lord.

First, as noted above, there is apparently some sort of barrier that surrounds the Garden of Eden such that no one may gain entrance except at a particular spot. Although there may be some other explanation, the first idea that comes to mind is the existence of walls. A walled garden does not seem out of the question.²⁶

Second, the only entrance to the garden seems to face east. Having the entrance to the temple face east has long been recognized as the established pattern for building temples.

Third, the entrance to the garden is guarded by angels to make sure that no unclean thing passes to the tree of life. Similarly, at the entrances to latter-day temples are located guardians, put there for the purpose of making sure that only the righteous are allowed admittance.

Fourth, the tree of life, representing the presence of God or eternal life, is located in the middle of the Garden of Eden.

²⁵ Donald W. Parry, "The Garden of Eden: Sacred Space, Sanctuary, Temple of God," *Explorations: A Journal for Adventurous Thought* 5 (Summer 1987): 83–107; Joseph Fielding McConkie, "The Mystery of Eden," in Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet, eds., *The Man Adam* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1990), 30; Stephen E. Robinson, "The Book of Adam in Judaism and Early Christianity," in *ibid.*, 145; Roger R. Keller, "Adam: As Understood by Four Men Who Shaped Western Christianity," in *ibid.*

²⁶ According to Jewish legend, the serpent, while tempting Eve to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, "suspended himself from the wall surrounding Paradise." The same legend refers to "the gate of Paradise" which Eve opened, thus allowing the serpent admittance. Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Bible* (New York City: Simon and Schuster, 1956), 49.

The idea of the gate is particularly interesting in light of the fact that Nephi later adds to the tree of life scenario the detail of a gate through which one must pass in order to commence in the way that leads to the tree of life (2 Nephi 31:17–18).

According to temple-building procedure, it is customary to place the celestial room, the symbol of the presence of God and the attainment of eternal life, in the center of the structure, even as anciently the holy place and the holiest of holies were located in the center of the temple complex.²⁷

Finally, just as one must traverse the way that leads from the entrance to the Garden of Eden in order to arrive at the tree of life, so must the temple patron proceed along the "way" of the temple ordinances, oaths, and covenants in order to arrive at the celestial room.

The fact that the Lord placed angels (cherubim) to guard the way of the tree of life may give additional insight into Brigham Young's oft-quoted definition of the endowment:

Your endowment is, to receive all those ordinances in the house of the Lord, which are necessary for you, after you have departed this life, to enable you to walk back to the presence of the Father, *passing the angels who stand as sentinels*, being enabled to give them the key words, the signs and tokens, pertaining to the holy Priesthood, and gain your eternal exaltation in spite of earth and hell.²⁸

It is conceivable that the angels the Lord placed as guardians to the tree of life after the expulsion of Adam and Eve are the very same angels that Brigham Young tells us we must pass in order to gain our eternal exaltation.

Conclusion

This paper has investigated the dream of the tree of life received by Lehi and recorded in 1 Nephi 8, together with the various and sundry interpretations of that dream as contained in other passages of the Book of Mormon. From the simple scenario of the tree of life, with its elements numbering under a dozen, spring interpretations involving the history of the world from the advent of the Savior to the last days, the destiny of the wicked and the righteous in the hereafter, and the strategy of

²⁷ Some of the more recently constructed temples, however, such as the San Diego and Las Vegas temples, have the celestial room located at the end of the building.

²⁸ John Widtsoe, *Discourses of Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1941), 416.

what we must do as individuals during this mortal phase of our existence to assure us of attaining eternal life. Further, the tree of life scenario is laden with temple associations. Lehi's dream of the tree of life thus takes its place as one of the richest, most flexible, and far-reaching pieces of symbolic prophecy contained in the standard works. It stands as a testament not only to the prophetic nature of the Book of Mormon, but also to the prophetic nature of the man who brought it forth in these last days.

The fact that the Lord placed angels (cherubim) to guard the way of the tree of life may give additional insight into Brigham Young's oft-quoted definition of the endowment:

Your endowment is, to receive all those ordinances in the house of the Lord, which are necessary for you, after you have departed this life, to enable you to walk back to the presence of the Father, passing the angels who stand as sentinels, being enabled to give them the key words, the signs and tokens, pertaining to the holy Priesthood, and gain your eternal exaltation in spite of earth and hell.²⁸

It is conceivable that the angels the Lord placed as guardians to the tree of life after the expulsion of Adam and Eve are the very same angels that Brigham Young tells us we must pass in order to gain our eternal exaltation.

Conclusion

This paper has investigated the dream of the tree of life received by Lehi and recorded in 1 Nephi 8, together with the various and sundry interpretations of that dream as contained in other passages of the Book of Mormon. From the simple scenario of the tree of life, with its elements numbering under a dozen, spring interpretations involving the history of the world from the advent of the Savior to the last days, the destiny of the wicked and the righteous in the hereafter, and the strategy of

²⁷ Some of the more recently constructed temples, however, such as the San Diego and Las Vegas temples, have the celestial room located at the end of the building.

²⁸ John Widsoe, *Discourses of Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1941), 416.