Nephi and His Asherah

Daniel C. Peterson

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Asherah was the chief goddess of the Canaanites. She was El’s wife and the mother and wet nurse of the other gods. At least some Israelites worshipped her over a period from the conquest of Canaan in the second millennium before Christ to the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC (the time of Lehi’s departure with his family). Asherah was associated with trees—sacred trees. The rabbinic authors of the Jewish Mishna (second–third century AD) explain the asherah as a tree that was worshipped. In 1 Nephi 11, Nephi considers the meaning of the tree of life as he sees it in vision. In answer, he receives a vision of “a virgin, . . . the mother of the Son of God, after the manner of the flesh.” The answer to his question about the meaning of the tree lies in the virgin mother with her child. The virgin is the tree in some sense and Nephi accepted this as an answer to his question. As an Israelite living at the end of the seventh century and during the early sixth century before Christ, he recognized an answer to his question about a marvelous tree in the otherwise unexplained image of a virginal mother and her divine child—not that what he saw and how he interpreted those things were perfectly obvious. What he “read” from the symbolic vision was culturally colored. Nephi’s vision reflects a meaning of the “sacred tree” that is unique to the ancient Near East. Asherah is also associated with biblical wisdom literature. Wisdom, a female, appears as the wife of God and represents life.
Nephi’s vision of the tree of life, among the best-known passages in the Book of Mormon, expands upon the vision received earlier by his father, Lehi.

And it came to pass that the Spirit said unto me: Look! And I looked and beheld a tree; and it was like unto the tree which my father had seen; and the beauty thereof was far beyond, yea, exceeding of all beauty; and the whiteness thereof did exceed the whiteness of the driven snow.

And it came to pass after I had seen the tree, I said unto the Spirit: I behold thou hast shown unto me the tree which is precious above all. And he said unto me: What desirest thou? And I said unto him: To know the interpretation thereof. . . . (1 Nephi 11:8–11)

Since Nephi wanted to know the meaning of the tree that his father had seen and that he himself now saw, we would expect “the Spirit” to answer Nephi’s question. But the response to Nephi’s question is surprising:

And it came to pass that he said unto me: Look! And I looked as if to look upon him, and I saw him not; for he had gone from before my presence. And it came to pass that I looked and beheld the great city of Jerusalem, and also other cities. And I beheld the city of Nazareth; and in the city of Nazareth I beheld a virgin, and she was exceedingly fair and white. And it came to pass that I saw the heavens open; and an angel came down and stood before

and he said unto me: Nephi, what beholdest thou?

And I said unto him: A virgin, most beautiful and fair above all other virgins.

And he said unto me: Knowest thou the condescension of God?

And I said unto him: I know that he loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things.

And he said unto me: Behold, the virgin whom thou seest is the mother of the Son of God, after the manner of the flesh.

And it came to pass that I beheld that she was carried away in the Spirit; and after she had been carried away in the Spirit for the space of a time the angel spake unto me, saying: Look!

And I looked and beheld the virgin again, bearing a child in her arms.

And the angel said unto me: Behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son of the Eternal Father! (1 Nephi 11:12–21)

Then “the Spirit” asks Nephi the question that Nephi himself had posed only a few verses before:

Knowest thou the meaning of the tree which thy father saw? (1 Nephi 11:21)

Strikingly, though the vision of Mary seems irrelevant to Nephi’s original question about the significance of the tree—for the tree is nowhere mentioned in the angelic guide’s response—Nephi himself now replies that, yes, he knows the answer to his question.

And I answered him, saying: Yea, it is the love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men; wherefore it is the most desirable above all things.

And he spake unto me, saying: Yea, and the most joyous to the soul. (1 Nephi 11:22–23)

How has Nephi come to this understanding? Clearly, the answer to his question about the meaning of the tree lies in the virgin mother with her child. It seems, in fact, that the virgin is the tree in some sense. Even the language used to describe her echoes that used for the tree. Just as she was “exceedingly fair and white,” “most beautiful and fair above all other virgins,” so was the tree’s beauty “far beyond, yea, exceeding of all beauty; and the whiteness thereof did exceed the whiteness of the driven snow.” Significantly, though, it was only when she appeared with a baby and was identified as “the mother of the Son of God” that Nephi grasped the tree’s meaning.

Why would Nephi see a connection between a tree and the virginal mother of a divine child? I believe that Nephi’s vision reflects a meaning of the “sacred tree” that is unique to the ancient Near East, and that, indeed, can only be fully appreciated when the ancient Canaanite and Israelite associations of that tree are borne in mind.

Asherah, Consort of El

The cultural and religious distance between Canaanites and Israelites was considerably smaller than Bible scholars once thought. (Michael D. Coogan says it clearly: “Israelite religion [was] a subset of Canaanite religion.”)¹ In their attempts to better understand the beliefs of the ancient Israelites, modern scholars have been greatly helped by extra-biblical documents and artifacts that have been recovered from the soil of the Near East. For many years, there had been little beyond the Bible itself for them to study. The situation changed dramatically beginning in 1929 with the discovery of the Ugaritic texts at Ras Shamra, in Syria. They revolutionized our understanding of Canaanite religion in general, and of early Hebrew religion in particular.

The god El was the patriarch of the Canaanite pantheon. One of his titles was  שב  צַֽלְמָנ. Frank Moore Cross Jr. noted: “We must understand it . . . as meaning originally ‘El, lord of Eternity,’ or perhaps more properly, ‘El, the Ancient One.’ The myths recorded on the tablets at Ugarit portray ‘El as a greybeard, father of the gods and father of man.”² However, observed Professor Cross, “no later than the fourteenth century B.C. in north Syria, the cult of ‘El was declining, making room for the virile young god Ba’al-Haddu,”³ the Baal of the Old Testament. El was probably also the original god of Israel.

Assyrians represented the sacred tree of divine fertility in several iconic forms.
In the earliest Israelite conception, father El had a divine son named Jehovah or Yahweh. Gradually, however, the Israelite conception of Yahweh absorbed the functions of El and, by the 10th century B.C., King Solomon’s day, had come to be identified with him.

Asherah was the chief goddess of the Canaanites. She was El’s wife and the mother and wet nurse of the other gods. Thus, the gods of Ugarit could be called “the family of [or ‘the sons of’] El,” or the “sons of Asherah.” Moreover, Asherah was connected with the birth of Canaanite rulers and could be metaphorically considered to be their mother as well.

She was strongly linked with the Canaanite coastal city of Sidon, at least in the period following Lehi and Nephi’s departure from the Old World, and probably before. This is interesting because Lehi, whose family origins appear to lie in the north of Palestine and who may have had a trading background, “seems to have had particularly close ties with Sidon (for the name appears repeatedly in the Book of Mormon, both in its Hebrew and Egyptian forms), which at that time was one of the two harbors through which the Israelites carried on an extremely active trade with Egypt and the West.”

Moreover, Asherah seems to have been known and venerated among the Hebrews as well. At least some Israelites worshipped her over a period extending from the conquest of Canaan in the second millennium before Christ to the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.—the time of Lehi’s departure with his family from the Old World. Ancient Israelite women, for instance, were sometimes buried in “Asherah wigs,” and she may also be reflected in Israelite temple architecture. Additionally, thousands of mass-produced goddess figurines have been found at Israelite sites. Summarizing the evidence, William Dever writes of the figurines that “most show the female form nude, with exaggerated breasts; occasionally she is depicted pregnant or nursing a child.” But there is one significant difference between the figurines from Israelite sites and those recovered from pagan Canaanite locations: The lower body of the Israelite figurines lacks the explicit detail characteristic of the Canaanite objects; indeed, the area below the waist of the Israelite figurines is typically a simple plain column. Whereas the pagan Canaanite objects depict a highly sexualized goddess of both childbearing and erotic love, in the Israelite figurines the aspect of the dea nutrix, the nourishing or nurturing goddess, comes to the fore. As Professor Dever writes, “The more blatantly sexual motifs give way to the nursing mother.”

Asherah seems to have been popular among all segments of Israelite society over many years. She was worshipped in Israel in the time of the Judges, but she was important in later Hebrew cities as well. Although 1 Kings 3:3 says that he “loved the Lord,” King Solomon brought Asherah into Jerusalem sometime after 1000 B.C. And a large-scale center of Asherah worship may have functioned at Ta’anach, under at least the indirect patronage of the court of Solomon.

After the separation of the states of Israel and Judah, King Ahab and his Phoenician-born queen, Jezebel, daughter of “Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians,” installed Asherah in Samaria, where “around 800 B.C.E. the official cult of Yahweh included the worship of his consort Asherah.” She seems to have been worshipped there until the fall of Israel to the Assyrians in 721 B.C.

But the veneration of Asherah was hardly restricted to the often-denigrated northern kingdom. In the south, in Judah, Solomon’s son, Rehoboam, introduced her into the temple at Jerusalem—meaning, presumably, that he erected some sort of sacred symbol (sometimes referred to in the lowercase as “an asherah” or “the asherah”) that represented her. Kings Asa and Jehoshaphat removed Asherah from the temple, but Joash restored her. The great reforming king Hezekiah removed her again, along with the so-called Nehushtan, which 2 Kings 18:4 describes as “the brazen serpent that Moses had made.” Subsequently, although he failed to restore the Nehushtan, King Manasseh reinstalled Asherah in the Jerusalem temple, where she remained until the reforms of King Josiah, who reigned from roughly 639 to 609 B.C. So visible was Asherah still in this period just prior to the Babylonian captivity that Lehi’s contemporary, the prophet Jeremiah, felt obliged to denounce her worship. In other words, an image or symbol of Asherah stood in Solomon’s temple at Jerusalem for nearly two-thirds of its existence, certainly extending into the lifetime of Lehi and perhaps even into the lifetime of his son Nephi.

Her title Elat (“goddess”) persists to this day in the name of a major Israeli coastal resort and in the
Israel's name for the Gulf of Aqaba. Lehi and his party very likely passed through or by Elat on their journey southward from Jerusalem.

By the time of Israel's Babylonian exile and subsequent restoration under Ezra, however, opposition to Asherah was universal in Judaism. Indeed, the developing Israelite conception of Yahweh seems, to a certain extent, to have absorbed her functions and epithets much as it had earlier absorbed those of Yahweh's father, El. Thus, Asherah was basically eliminated from the history of Israel and subsequent Judaism. In the text of the Bible as we now read it, filtered and reshaped as it appears to have been by the reforming Deuteronomist priests around 600 B.C., hints of the goddess remain, but little survives that gives us a detailed understanding of her character or nature.

So what are we to make of Asherah? Does the opposition to her veneration expressed and enforced by the Deuteronomists and the reforming Israelite kings indicate that she was a foreign pollution of legitimate Hebrew religion coming from abroad? It does not look that way. Recall that Hezekiah removed both the asherah and the Nehushtan from the temple at Jerusalem. The Nehushtan was not a pagan intrusion, but was “the brasen serpent that Moses had made,” which had been carefully preserved by the Israelites for nearly a millennium until Hezekiah, offended by the idolatrous worship of “the children of Israel who did burn incense to it” (2 Kings 18:4), removed it and destroyed it. In other words, the Nehushtan had an illustrious pedigree entirely within the religious world of Israel, and there is no reason to believe that the asherah was any different in this respect.

What is striking in the long story of Israel's Asherah is the identity of those who did not oppose her. No prophet appears to have denounced Asherah before the eighth century B.C. The great Yahwist prophets Amos and Hosea, vociferous in their denunciations of Baal, seem not to have denounced Asherah. The Elijah–Elisha school of Yahwist reformers do not appear to have opposed her. Although 400 prophets of Asherah ate with Jezebel along with the 450 prophets of Baal, Elijah's famous contest with the priests of Baal, while dramatically fatal to them, left the votaries of Asherah unmentioned and, evidently, untouched. “What happened to Asherah and her prophets?” asks David Noel Freedman. “Nothing.”

In subsequent years the ruthless campaign against Baal inspired by Elijah and Elisha and led by Israel's Jehu left the asherah of Samaria standing. Baal was wholly eliminated, while the veneration of the goddess actually outlived the northern kingdom.

Belief in Asherah seems, in fact, to have been a conservative position in ancient Israel; criticism of it was innovative. Saul Olyan, noting that “before the reforming kings in Judah, the asherah seems to have been entirely legitimate,” argues that ancient Hebrew opposition to Asherah emanated entirely from the so-called Deuteronomistic reform party, or from those heavily influenced by them. Other factions in earliest Israel, Olyan says, probably thought that worshipping her was not wrong and may well have worshipped her themselves. (The book of Deuteronomy is considered by most scholars to have been associated with the reforms of the Judahite king Josiah in the seventh century B.C., and a number of students of the history of Judah believe that it was actually written during that period.) Writing about the common goddess figurines to which we have already referred, Professor Dever remarks, “As for the notion that these figurines, whatever they signified, were uncommon in orthodox circles, the late Dame Kathleen Kenyon found a seventh-century B.C. ‘cult-cache’ with more than three hundred fifty of them in a cave in Jerusalem, not a hundred yards from the Temple Mount.” (It should be kept in mind that this date for these figurines makes them at least near contemporaries of Lehi.)

What was Asherah's role in early Israelite religious belief? Given what we have already said about the history of Canaanite and Israelite religion, “Asherah may have been the consort of El, but not [of] Yahweh, at some early point in Israelite religion.”

Over the generations, however, the Israelites’ concept of Yahweh absorbed the attributes of Yahweh's father, El, and the people's imagination seems also to have granted to Yahweh the wife and consort of his father. “It is well-known,” remarks André Lemaire, that in Israelite religion Yahweh replaced the great god El as Israel's God. If Yahweh replaced El, it would seem logical to suppose that under Canaanite influence asherah [i.e., material tokens representing the goddess] replaced Athirat [the goddess Asherah], and that, at least in the popular religion of ancient Israel if not in the purer form of that religion reflected in the Bible, asherah functioned as the consort or wife of Yahweh.
The view that Asherah was considered the divine wife of Yahweh seems to be gaining ground among students of ancient Israelite religion. That some in Judah saw his consort as Asherah is hardly any longer debatable,” declares Thomas Thompson. “Asherah was a goddess paired with El, and this pairing was bequeathed to Israelite religion by virtue of the Yahweh-El identification,” according to Smith, while Olyan says that Asherah seems to have been regarded as Yahweh’s consort in both state and public religion, in both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. 

Important support for this contention has come from two recent and very controversial archaeological finds in Palestine. The first is Khirbet al-Qom, a site about eight miles west of Hebron and six and a half miles east-southeast of Lachish in the territory of ancient Judah. The palaeo-Hebrew inscriptions at Khirbet al-Qom can be dated to between 700 and 800 B.C. Scholars agree that they show us at least a portion of the popular religion of their time. The second is Kuntillet ‘Ajrūd, perhaps the southernmost outpost of the kingdom of Judah. This place served as either a fortress or a stopover point for caravans (or both). It is situated on the border between the southern Negev and the Sinai peninsula, not far from the road that linked Gaza and Elat. The archaeological ruins at this location reflect influences from the northern kingdom of Israel and date to the late ninth or early eighth century B.C., which would place them in the reign of Jehoahaz, king of Israel, the son and successor to the militant anti-Baalist Jehu.

An inscription discovered at Kuntillet ‘Ajrūd was written in red ink on the shoulder of a large clay vessel. It seems to refer to “Yahweh of Samaria and his Asherah.” On the other side of the vessel is a drawing of a tree of life. The tomb inscription at Khirbet al-Qom also appears to mention “Yahweh and his asherah” (where some sort of cultic object is intended) or, less likely, “Yahweh and his Asherah” (where the reference may be directly to a goddess-consort). With these finds explicitly in mind, archeologist William Dever has contended that “recent archeological discoveries provide both texts and pictorial representations that for the first time clearly identify ‘Asherah’ as the consort of Yahweh, at least in some circles in ancient Israel.” Raphael Patai declares that they indicate that “the worship of Asherah as the consort of Yahweh (‘his Asherah!’) was an integral element of religious life in ancient Israel prior to the reforms introduced by King Josiah [Josiah] in 621 B.C.E.” David Noel Freedman conurs, saying, “Our investigation suggests that the worship of a goddess, consort of Yahweh, was deeply rooted in both Israel and Judah in preexilic times.”

As among the Canaanites, furthermore, Asherah was also associated with earthly human fertility and human childbirth. A Hebrew incantation text found in Arslan Tash in upper Syria, dating from the seventh century B.C. (i.e., to the period just prior to Nephi’s vision), appears to invoke the help of the goddess Asherah for a woman in delivery.

Let us now focus more precisely on the nature of the veneration that was paid to the divine consort among the Israelites. What was the “asherah” that stood in the temple at Jerusalem and in Samaria? Asherah was associated with trees. A 10th-century cultic stand from Ta’anach, near Megiddo, features two representations of Asherah, first in human form and then as a sacred tree. She is the tree. Perhaps we should think again, here, of the Israelite goddess figurines: It will be recalled that their upper bodies are unmistakably anthropomorphic and female, but their lower bodies, in contrast to those of their pagan Canaanite counterparts, are simple columns. William Dever suggests that these columnar lower bodies represent tree trunks. And why not? Asherah “is a tree goddess, and as such is associated with the oak, the tamarisk, the date palm, the sycamore, and many other species. This association led to her identification with sacred trees or the tree of life.” The rabbinic authors of the Jewish Mishna (second–third century A.D.) explain the asherah as a tree that was worshipped.

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The lowercase “asherah” was most commonly a carved wooden image, perhaps some kind of pole. Unfortunately, since it was wooden, direct archaeological evidence for it has not survived. But we know from the biblical evidence that the object could be planted (Deuteronomy 16:21) so that it stood up (2 Kings 13:6), but that it could also be pulled down (Micah 5:13), cut (Exodus 34:13), and burned (Deuteronomy 12:3). Very probably it was of wood and symbolized a tree. It may itself have been a stylized tree. It was not uncommon in the ancient Near East for a god or goddess to be essentially equated with his or her symbol, and Asherah seems to have been no exception: Asherah was both goddess and cult symbol. She was the “tree.”

The menorah, the seven-branched candelabrum that stood for centuries in the temple of Jerusalem, supplies an interesting parallel to all of this: Leon Yarden maintains that the menorah represents a stylized almond tree. He points to the notably radiant whiteness of the almond tree at certain points in its life cycle. Yarden also argues that the archaic Greek name of the almond (amygdale, reflected in its contemporary botanical designation as Amygdalis communis), almost certainly not a native Greek word, is most likely derived from the Hebrew em gedolah, meaning “Great Mother.”

“The Late Bronze Age iconography of the asherah would suggest,” writes Mark Smith, “that it represented maternal and nurturing dimensions of the deity.” Raphael Patai has called attention to the parallels between Jewish devotion to various female deities and quasi-deities over the centuries, commencing with Asherah, and popular Catholic veneration of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Interestingly, it appears that Asherah, “the mother goddess par excellence,” may also, paradoxically, have been considered a virgin. The Punic western goddess Tannit, whom Saul Olyan has identified with Israelite-Canaanite Asherah, the consort of El, the mother and wet nurse to the gods, was depicted as a virgin and symbolized by a tree.

It should be apparent by now why Nephi, an Israelite living at the end of the seventh century and during the early sixth century before Christ, would have recognized an answer to his question about a marvelous tree in the otherwise unexplained image of a virginal mother and her divine child. Not that what he saw and how he interpreted those things were perfectly obvious. What he “read” from the symbolic vision was culturally colored. The Coptic version of the record called the Apocalypse of Paul shows how cultural interpretation shapes meaning. This document, which probably originated in Egypt in the mid-third century of the Christian era, relates a vision of the great apostle that, in this detail at least, strikingly resembles the vision of Nephi: “And he [the angel] showed me the Tree of Life,” Paul is reported to have said, “and by it was a revolving red-hot sword. And a Virgin appeared by the tree, and three angels who hymned her, and the angel told me that she was Mary, the Mother of Christ.” But Nephi’s vision goes even further, identifying Mary with the tree. This additional element seems to derive from precisely the preexilic Palestinian culture into which, the Book of Mormon tells us, Nephi had been born.

Of course, Mary, the virgin girl of Nazareth seen by Nephi, was not literally Asherah. She was, as Nephi’s guide carefully stressed, simply “the mother of the Son of God, after the manner of the flesh.” But she was the perfect mortal typification of the mother of the Son of God.

**Asherah and the Biblical Wisdom Writings**

Asherah is connected with the Bible in an entirely different manner as well. We will examine a Bible passage that seems to deal with her while also yielding several interesting parallels to the visions of Lehi and Nephi.
Biblical scholars recognize a genre of writing, found both in the standard, canonical scriptures (e.g., Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Solomon) and outside the canon, that they term “wisdom literature.” Among the characteristics of this type of writing, not surprisingly, is frequent use of the term wisdom. But also common to such literature, and very striking in texts from a Hebrew cultural background, is the absence of typical Israelite or Jewish themes. We read nothing there about the promises to the patriarchs, the story of Moses and the Exodus, the covenant at Sinai, or the divine promise of kingship to David. There is, instead, a strong emphasis on the teachings of parents, and especially on instruction by fathers. Careful readers will note that all of these characteristics are present in the accounts of the visions of Lehi and Nephi as they are treated in the Book of Mormon.

The Bible identifies two chief earthly sources of wisdom. It is said to come from “the East,” which is almost certainly to be understood as the Syro-Arabian desert, and from Egypt. (The book of Job, for example, is set in “the East” and lacks much if any trace of peculiarly Israelite or Hebrew lore.) This is reminiscent of the twin extra-Israelite influences—Egypt and the desert—that the Book of Mormon and Latter-day Saint scholarship have identified for the family of Lehi and Nephi. It may be significant that a section of the book of Proverbs (3:1–9) claims to represent “the words of Lemuel”—using a name that not only occurs among the sons of Lehi but also is at home in the Arabian desert.

Certain other motifs common to wisdom literature are also typical of the Book of Mormon as a whole. For example, both the canonical and extra-canonical wisdom books are much concerned with the proper or improper use of speech. The book of Proverbs warns against the dangerous enticements of “the strange woman, even . . . the stranger which flattereth with her words,” and advises us to “meddle not with him that flattereth with his lips.” Flattering and “cunning words,” generally used for evil purposes and with an implication of deceit, are also a recurring concern of the Nephite record. Another consistent theme in both the Book of Mormon and Near Eastern wisdom literature is the notion that wisdom or justice or righteousness brings prosperity, while folly or wickedness leads to suffering and destruction. The vocabulary of Proverbs 1–6, which stresses learning, understanding, righteousness, discernment, and knowledge, is obviously related to important messages of the Book of Mormon in general, and of the visions of Lehi and Nephi in particular. Similarly, Proverbs 3:1–12 focuses on our need to “hear” inspired wisdom, as well as on the promise of “life” and our duty to trust in the Lord rather than being wise in our own eyes. Each of these admonitions can also be documented abundantly throughout the text of the Book of Mormon— notably Nephi’s repeated invitation to us to put our trust in the Lord rather than in “the arm of flesh.” In Nephi’s vision of the tree of life, the “great and spacious building” symbolizes the wisdom and pride of the world, which shall fall.

But among the interesting correspondences between ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature and the Book of Mormon, one is of special interest for the present article. Wisdom itself is represented in Proverbs 1–9 as a female person. Indeed, here and elsewhere in ancient Hebrew and Jewish literature, Wisdom appears as the wife of God, which can hardly fail to remind us of ancient Asherah. She may even have played a role in the creation: “The Lord by wisdom hath founded the earth,” says Proverbs 3:19. “Like the symbol of the asherah, Wisdom is a female figure, providing life and nurturing.” In fact, as Steve A. Wiggins observes of Asherah herself, “She is Wisdom, the first creature of God.” The classical text on this subject is found in Proverbs 8:22–34.

The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old. I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was. When there were no depths, I was brought forth; when there were no fountains abounding with water.
Before the mountains were settled, before the hills was I brought forth:

While as yet he had not made the earth, nor the fields, nor the highest part of the dust of the world.

When he prepared the heavens, I was there: when he set a compass upon the face of the depth:

When he established the clouds above: when he strengthened the fountains of the deep:

When he gave to the sea his decree, that the waters should not pass his commandment: when he appointed the foundations of the earth:

Then I was by him, as one brought up with him: and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him;

Rejoicing in the habitable part of his earth; and my delights were with the sons of men.

Now therefore hearken unto me, O ye children: for blessed are they that keep my ways.

Hear instruction, and be wise, and refuse it not.

Blessed is the man that heareth me.

The use of the Hebrew word ashre in this connection—from the same root (‘shr) that underlies the word asherah—is probably significant. “Happy is the man that findeth wisdom” (Proverbs 3:13). (A similar wordplay may be going on behind the word happy in 1 Nephi 8:10, 12, and perhaps even behind joy and joyous in 1 Nephi 8:12 and 11:23.) Another noteworthy fact is that “the ‘tree of life,’ which recalls the asherah, appears in Israelite tradition as a metaphorical expression for wisdom.” Indeed, Mark Smith sees Proverbs 3:13–18 as “a conspicuous chiasm” in which the essentially equivalent “inside terms” are ḥokmāh (wisdom) and ṣeḥ-hayjim (a tree of life). The apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus, which is also known as Wisdom of Ben Sira, uses various trees to symbolize Wisdom (24:12–19). “Wisdom is rooted in the fear of the Lord,” says Ecclesiasticus 1:20 (New English Bible), “and long life grows on her branches.” “She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her: and happy is every one that retaineth her” (Proverbs 3:18).

Several parallels between the language of Proverbs 1–9 and the language of the visions in 1 Nephi will be apparent to careful readers. Note, for example, in Proverbs 3:18, quoted above, the image of “taking hold,” which recalls the iron rod of Lehi and Nephi’s visions. The New English Bible translation of Proverbs 3:18 speaks of “grasp[ing] her” and “hold[ing] her fast”—in very much the same way that Lehi and Nephi’s visions speak of “catching hold of” and “holding fast to” the rod of iron. Proverbs 4:13 advises us to “take fast hold of instruction; let her not go: keep her; for she is thy life.” Apocryphal Baruch 4:1 declares that “all who hold fast to [Wisdom] shall live, but those who forsake her shall die.” Both the advice of Proverbs and the images of Lehi’s dream, furthermore, are expressly directed to youths, to sons specifically or to children. (“O, remember, my son,” says Alma 37:35, echoing this theme, “and learn wisdom in thy youth; yea, learn in thy youth to keep the commandments of God.”) Both Proverbs and 1 Nephi constantly use the imagery of “ways,” “paths,” and “walking” and warn against “going astray,” “wandering off,” and “wandering in strange roads.” Proverbs 3:17 declares that “her [Wisdom’s] ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace.” In subsequent Nephite tradition, King Benjamin speaks of “the Spirit of the Lord” that “guide[s] . . . in wisdom’s paths” (Mosiah 2:36), and Mormon laments “how slow” people are “to walk in wisdom’s paths” (Helaman 12:5).

Proverbs represents Wisdom’s words as “plain,” an attribute that is lauded repeatedly throughout 1 Nephi, notably in the narrative of Nephi’s vision, and throughout 2 Nephi. The phrase plain and precious, recurrent in Nephi’s account of his experience with the angelic guide, could serve as an excellent description of biblical “Wisdom.” Even more apt is the phrase plain and pure, and most precious in 1 Nephi 14:23. In Proverbs 8:19 Wisdom declares, “My fruit is better than gold, yea, than fine gold.” “She is more precious than rubies,” says Proverbs 3:15, “and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her.” “Wisdom,” declares Ecclesiasticus 4:11, “raises her sons to greatness.” Similarly, Lehi and Nephi’s tree was “precious above all” (1 Nephi 11:9)—“a tree, whose fruit was desirable to make one happy” (1 Nephi 8:10), “desirable above all other fruit” (1 Nephi 8:12, 15; compare 11:22). Accordingly, no price is too high to pay, if it will bring us to attain wisdom. “I say unto you,” Alma the Younger remarked to the poor among the Zoramites in the context of a discussion centering on a seed
and on the tree of life that could be nourished out of it, “it is well that ye are cast out of your synagogues, that ye may be humble, and that ye may learn wisdom” (Alma 32:12). Confident in the quality of what she has to offer, Wisdom, according to Proverbs, invites others to partake:

Wisdom crieth without; she uttereth her voice in the streets:
She crieth in the chief place of concourse, in the opening of the gates: in the city she uttereth her words.  
Doth not wisdom cry? and understanding put forth her voice?  
She standeth in the top of high places, by the way in the places of the paths.  
She crieth at the gates, at the entry of the city, at the coming in at the doors.  
She hath sent forth her maidens: she crieth upon the highest places of the city.

Yet, for all her exalted status, Wisdom must face “scorners,” which must surely remind the reader of 1 Nephi of those in “the large and spacious building” who point the finger of scorn at the saints coming forward to partake of the tree of life. This building seems to represent a human alternative to the true wisdom, the divine wisdom of God: Nephi records that it symbolizes “the world and the wisdom thereof” (1 Nephi 11:35).

Wisdom represents life, while the lack of wisdom leads to death. (Perhaps the juxtaposition of a living and nourishing tree in 1 Nephi with the inanimate structure from which the worldly lean out to express their disdain is intended to make this point.) “For the upright shall dwell in the land, and the perfect shall remain in it. But the wicked shall be cut off from the earth, and the transgressors shall be rooted out of it.”

Wisdom says in Proverbs 8:35–36, “and shall obtain favor of the Lord. But he that sinneth against me wrongeth his own soul: all they that hate me love death.” The sinner, in fact, falls into the clutches of the “whorish woman,” the rival to Lady Wisdom: “For her house inclineth unto death, and her paths unto the dead. None that go unto her return again, neither take they hold of the paths of life.” Ammon in the Book of Mormon closely echoes the warning of Proverbs: “O how marvelous are the works of the Lord, and how long doth he suffer with his people; yea, and how blind and impenetrable are the understandings of the children of men; for they will not seek wisdom, neither do they desire that she should rule over them!” (Mosiah 8:20). Ecclesiasticus 4:19 says of Wisdom and of the individual who “strays from her” that “she will desert him and abandon him to his fate.” In Lehi’s vision, those who rejected the fruit of the tree “fell away into forbidden paths and were lost” (1 Nephi 8:28) or “were drowned in the depths of the fountain” (1 Nephi 8:32). “Many were lost from his view, wandering in strange roads” (1 Nephi 8:32). It was for fear of this possible outcome that, after partaking of the fruit of the tree, Lehi was “desirous that [his] family should partake of it also” (1 Nephi 8:12). In a parallel vein, Ecclesiasticus 4:15–16 tells us that Wisdom’s “dutiful servant . . . will possess her and bequeath her to his descendants.”

In 1 Nephi 8:13–14, Lehi’s tree is associated with a river and spring of water. “The symbols of fountain and tree of life are frequent” in wisdom literature too. Nephi himself, in 1 Nephi 11:25, actually equates the “tree of life” with “the fountain of living waters; “which waters,” he relates, “are a representation of the love of God.” “And I also beheld,” he continues, “that the tree of life was a representation of the love of God.”

The inclusion in 1 Nephi of two authentically preexilic religious symbols (Asherah and Wisdom) that could scarcely have been derived by the New York farmboy Joseph Smith from the Bible strongly suggests that the Book of Mormon is, indeed, an ancient historical record in the Semitic tradition.


42. See Day, “Is the Bible Right After All?” 36; and Patai, Early History of God, 52.


44. See Taylor, “The Two Earliest Known Representations of Yahweh,” 358–60, 565 n. 19. Taylor, Yahweh and the Sun, 29; Dever, “Asherah, Consort of Yahweh?” 27; and De Moor, “Ashtaroth,” 1,120, 1,121–22; Day, “Asherah,” 397, explains the name Asherah after two ancient names of the sun. He concludes that the name Asherah was not used by the ancient Hebrews.

45. See, for example, 1 Kings 4:29; Job 1:3; compare Murphy, Tree of Life, 23–25, 175, 195.

46. See Murphy, Tree of Life, 33.

47. See 1 Nephi 1:2; and Nielsen, Lehi in the Desert; the World of the Jaredites; There and Back Again, 1988), 34–42.

48. See Murphy, Tree of Life, 22.


50. See also Psalms 5:9–10; 7:18; 8:6.


52. See Murphy, Tree of Life, 15, for this theme in the ancient Near East.

53. Compare Proverbs 26:12. 6:4; 8:4; 31:38; 26:1; 31:36.

54. See 1 Nephi 2:3, 5; and Nielsen, Life of the Prophet, the World of the Jaredites, There Were Jerelades (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and RMM, 1988), 34–42.

55. Compare Murphy, Tree of Life, 22.


57. See also Psalms 5:9–10; 7:18; 8:6.


59. See Murphy, Tree of Life, 15, for this theme in the ancient Near East.

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61. See 1 Nephi 2:3, 5; and Nielsen, Life of the Prophet, the World of the Jaredites, There Were Jerelades (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and RMM, 1988), 34–42.

62. See Murphy, Tree of Life, 22.


64. See also Psalms 5:9–10; 7:18; 8:6.


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67. Compare Proverbs 26:12. 6:4; 8:4; 31:38; 26:1; 31:36.

68. See 1 Nephi 2:3, 5; and Nielsen, Life of the Prophet, the World of the Jaredites, There Were Jerelades (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and RMM, 1988), 34–42.

69. Compare Murphy, Tree of Life, 22.

70. See Proverbs 26:12 (compare 6:4; 7:5, 21–23); 20:19 (compare 12:6, 26; 28:9).

71. See also Psalms 5:9–10; 7:18; 8:6.


73. See Murphy, Tree of Life, 15, for this theme in the ancient Near East.

74. Compare Proverbs 26:12. 6:4; 8:4; 31:38; 26:1; 31:36.

75. See 1 Nephi 2:3, 5; and Nielsen, Life of the Prophet, the World of the Jaredites, There Were Jerelades (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and RMM, 1988), 34–42.

76. Compare Murphy, Tree of Life, 22.

77. See Proverbs 26:12 (compare 6:4; 7:5, 21–23); 20:19 (compare 12:6, 26; 28:9).

78. See also Psalms 5:9–10; 7:18; 8:6.


80. See Murphy, Tree of Life, 15, for this theme in the ancient Near East.

81. Compare Proverbs 26:12. 6:4; 8:4; 31:38; 26:1; 31:36.