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Abstract 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 & HIS ASHERAH

DANIEL C. PETERSON

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



me; 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)



Assyrians represented the sacred tree of divine fertility in several iconic forms.

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 *ʿēl ʿōlām*. 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 ʿEl 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 ʿEl was declining, making room for the virile young god Baʿl-Haddu,”³ the Baal of the Old Testament. El was probably also the original god of Israel.

In the earliest Israelite conception, father El had a divine son named Jehovah or Yahweh.⁴ 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.⁵

Asherah was the chief goddess of the Canaanites.⁶ 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."⁷ Moreover, Asherah was connected with the birth of Canaanite rulers and could be metaphorically considered to be their mother as well.⁸

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.⁹ 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."¹⁰

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.¹¹ 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."¹²

Asherah seems to have been popular among all segments of Israelite society over many years.¹³ She was worshipped in Israel in the time of the Judges.¹⁴ She was especially venerated in the countryside,¹⁵ but she was important in later Hebrew cities as well.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

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."¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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 brassen 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.²⁰ 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.²¹ Her title *Elat* ("goddess") persists to this day in the name of a major Israeli coastal resort and in the

Israeli 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.²² 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.²³

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."²⁴ 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.²⁵

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,"²⁶ 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.²⁷ (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."²⁸ (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."²⁹ 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.³⁰

The view that Asherah was considered the divine wife of Yahweh seems to be gaining ground among students of ancient Israelite religion.³¹ “That some in Judah saw his consort as Asherah is hardly any longer debatable,” declares Thomas Thompson.³² “Asherah was a goddess paired with El, and this pairing was bequeathed to Israelite religion by virtue of the Yahweh-El identification,”³³ 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.³⁴

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.³⁵ Scholars agree that they show us at least a portion of the popular religion of their time.³⁶ 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.³⁷

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.³⁸ 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, archae-

ologist 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.”³⁹ 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.”⁴⁰ David Noel Freedman concurs, saying, “Our investigation suggests that the worship of a goddess, consort of Yahweh,

was deeply rooted in both Israel and Judah in preexilic times.”⁴¹

As among the Canaanites, furthermore, Asherah was also associated with earthly human fertility and human childbirth.⁴² 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.⁴³

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.⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶ 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.”⁴⁷ The rabbinic authors of the Jewish Mishna (second–third century A.D.) explain the *asherah* as a tree that was worshipped.⁴⁸

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 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.⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰ 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.”⁵¹

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.”⁵²

“The Late Bronze Age iconography of the asherah would suggest,” writes Mark Smith, “that it represented maternal and nurturing dimensions of the deity.”⁵³ 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.⁵⁴ Interestingly, it appears that Asherah, “the mother goddess par excellence,” may also, paradoxically, have been considered a virgin.⁵⁵ The Punic western goddess Tannit, whom Saul Olyan has identified with Israelite-Canaanite Asherah, the con-

sort of El, the mother and wet nurse to the gods, was depicted as a virgin and symbolized by a tree.⁵⁶

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.”⁵⁷ 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*.”⁵⁸ 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.



From Assyria, the ninth century B.C.

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.⁵⁹ 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.⁶⁰ (The book of Job, for example, is set in “the East” and lacks much if any trace of peculiarly Israelite or Hebrew lore.)⁶¹ 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.⁶² It may be significant that a section of the book of Proverbs (31:1–9) 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.⁶³ 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.”⁶⁴ “Flattering” and “cunning words,” generally used for evil purposes and with an implication of deceit, are also

a recurring concern of the Nephite record.⁶⁵ 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.⁶⁶ 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.⁶⁷ 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.”⁶⁸ 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.⁶⁹

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.⁷⁰ 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.⁷¹ 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.”⁷² In fact, as Steve A. Wiggins observes of Asherah herself, “She is Wisdom, the first creature of God.”⁷³ 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.



A plaque from Sumer of the third millenium B.C.

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 [*ashre*] are they that keep my ways.

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

Blessed [*ashre*] is the man that heareth me.

The use of the Hebrew word *ashre* in this connection—from the same root (*ʿshr*) that underlies the word *asherah*—is probably significant.⁷⁴ “Happy [*ashre*] 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.)⁷⁵ 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 *ʿeṣ-hayim* (a tree of life).⁷⁶ 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 [*meʿushshar*]⁷⁷ 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 exam-

ple, in Proverbs 3:18, quoted above, the image of “taking hold,” which recalls the iron rod of Lehi and Nephi’s visions.⁷⁸ 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.⁷⁹ (“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.”⁸⁰ 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.⁸¹ The phrase *plain and precious*, recurrent in Nephi’s account of his experience with the angelic guide,⁸² 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.”⁸³ “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.⁸⁴

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.⁸⁵

She hath sent forth her maidens: she crieth upon the highest places of the city.⁸⁶

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.⁸⁷ 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.⁸⁸ (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.”⁸⁹ “For whoso findeth me findeth life,” 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.”⁹⁰ 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.⁹¹ 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. 

ENDNOTES

Desert Epiphany: Sariah and the Women in 1 Nephi
Camille Fronk

1. Phyllis A. Bird, "Women," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6: 952.

2. Two months after the 1978 revelation on priesthood was given, Elder Bruce R. McConkie quoted 2 Nephi 26:33 and gave the following commentary: "These words have now taken on a new meaning. We have caught a new vision of their true significance. . . . Since the Lord gave this revelation on the priesthood, our understanding of many passages has expanded. *Many of us never imagined or supposed that they had the extensive and broad meaning that they do have*" ("All Are Alike unto God," in *Charge to Religious Educators*, 2nd ed. [Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1982], 152).

3. Francine Bennon, "Women and the Book of Mormon," in *Women of Wisdom and Knowledge* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 177.

4. John L. Sorenson, "The Composition of Lehi's Family," in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 2:190.

5. Jeffrey R. Chadwick, "Sariah in the Elephantine Papyri," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/2 (1993): 196–98; see also a series of articles on the subject in "Seeking Agreement on the Meaning of Book of Mormon Names," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9/1 (2000): 28–39.

6. George Reynolds and Janne Sjodahl, *Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1955), 1:14; Chadwick, "Sariah," 198; Paul Y. Hoskisson, "Lehi and Sariah," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9/1 (2000): 30–31.

7. See Sorenson, "Composition of Lehi's Family," 182.

8. See Alfred J. Hoerth, *Archaeology and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1998), 366.

9. See Roberta L. Harris, *The World of the Bible* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 96.

10. See Mayer I. Gruber, "Private Life in Ancient Israel," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson (New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 1995), 1:633; Martin Noth, *The Old Testament World*, trans. Victor I. Gruhn (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1966), 158–63.

11. Bird, "Women," 954.

12. See Lynn M. Hilton and Hope A. Hilton, "In Search of Lehi's Trail; Part 2: The Journey," *Ensign*, October 1976, 38.

13. See Charles M. Doughty, *Travels in Arabia Deserta* (New York: Random House, 1936), 268.

14. Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 36. John A. Tvedtnes suggested that Lehi was skilled in agriculture and metallurgy. See Tvedtnes, "Was Lehi a Caravaner?" (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1984).

15. See Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 36–37.

16. See Camille S. Williams and Donna Lee Bowen, "Ordinary People in the Book of Mormon," *Ensign*, January 1992, 36–39.

17. Bird, "Women," 952.

18. See K. Roubos, "Biblical Institutions," in *The World of the Bible*, ed. A. S. Van Der

Woude (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1986), 1:353.

19. Doughty, *Travels*, 278, 280; See

Wendell Phillips, *Unknown Oman* (New York: David McKay Co., 1966), 141.

20. Doughty, *Travels*, 570.

21. See Hugh W. Nibley, *Teachings of the Book of Mormon: Semester 1* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1993), 58–105.

22. Doughty, *Travels*, 398.

23. See Phillips, *Unknown Oman*, 218;

Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 40.

24. See Erastus Snow, in *Journal of Discourses*, 23:184.

25. See Sorenson, "Composition of Lehi's Family," 186.

26. See Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 70.

27. Doughty, *Travels*, 190–91.

28. *Ibid.*, 190, 259.

29. *Ibid.*, 190.

30. See *Ibid.*, 381; Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 53.

31. Doughty, *Travels*, 278–79.

32. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 53; see

William G. Palgrave, *Narrative of a Year's Journey through Central and Eastern Arabia* (London: Macmillan, 1865), 1:12–13.

33. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 53–58; Hilton and Hilton, *Lehi's Trail*, 39; S. Kent Brown, "A Case for Lehi's Bondage in Arabia," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6/2 (1997): 205–6; S. Kent Brown, *From Jerusalem to Zarahemla: Literary and Historical Studies of the Book of Mormon* (BYU Religious Studies Center, 1998), 58.

34. Brown, "Lehi's Bondage," 205–17; Brown, *From Jerusalem to Zarahemla*, 55–67.

35. See Sorenson, "Composition of Lehi's Family," 181, for a discussion of health concerns in childbirth that accompanied the yearning for children in ancient societies.

36. Doughty, *Travels*, 281.

37. See Gruber, *Ancient Israel*, 644;

Doughty, *Travels*, 189–90, 266.

38. Doughty, *Travels*, 257, 262.

39. Roubos, "Biblical Institutions," 350.

40. Doughty, *Travels*, 262.

41. Reynolds and Sjodahl, *Commentary*, 165.

42. Bryant S. Hinckley, *Not by Bread Alone* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1955), 54.

Nephi and His Asherah Daniel Peterson

1. Michael D. Coogan, "Canaanite Origins and Lineage: Reflections on the Religion of Ancient Israel," in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*, ed. Patrick D. Miller Jr., Paul D. Hanson, and S. Dean McBride (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 115. Compare William G. Dever, *Recent Archaeological Discoveries and Biblical Research* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990), 121, 128, 166.

2. Frank Moore Cross Jr., "Yahweh and the God of the Patriarchs," *Harvard Theological Review* 55 (1962): 240.

3. *Ibid.*, 234, 241–42.

4. See Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 7; and Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel's Second God* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

5. See Smith, *The Early History of God*, xxiii, xxvii, 8–11, 15, 21, 22, 23, 163; Raphael Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 3rd ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 133; Cross, "Yahweh and the God of the

Patriarchs," 253–57; Otto Eissfeldt, "El and Yahweh," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 1 (1956): 25–37.

6. See John Day, "Asherah in the Hebrew Bible and Northwest Semitic Literature," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105/3 (1986): 385–87, 398; Steve A. Wiggins, "The Myth of Asherah: Lion Lady and Serpent Goddess," *Ugarit-Forschungen: Internationales Jahrbuch für die Altertumskunde Syrien-Palästinas* 23 (1991): 384; and Steve A. Wiggins, *A Reassessment of "Asherah": A Study according to the Textual Sources of the First Two Millennia B.C.E.* (Kevelaer, Germany: Butzon und Bercker, 1993), 192.

7. See J. C. de Moor, "ashērah," in G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1974), 1:439. On Asherah as divine wet nurse, see Wiggins, *Reassessment of "Asherah"*, 26–27, 71, 76, 89, 190; on her maternal aspect, see pp. 37, 71, 89.

8. Wiggins, *Reassessment of "Asherah"*, 27, 71, 108–10, 131, 190.

9. See John Wilson Betlyon, "The Cult of 'Asherah'/'Ēlat at Sidon," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 44/1 (1985): 53–56; compare de Moor, "ashērah," 1:440; and Day, "Asherah in the Hebrew Bible," 387–88.

10. Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3d ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 47.

11. See Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 34; Manfred Dietrich and Oswald Loretz, "Yahwe und seine Aschera": *Anthropomorphes Kultbild in Mesopotamien, Ugarit und Israel: Das biblische Bilderverbot* (Münster: UGAR-IT-Verlag, 1992), 120; Wiggins, *Reassessment of "Asherah"*, 149.

12. See Dever, *Recent Archaeological Discoveries*, 157–59.

13. See Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 39; and Thomas L. Thompson, "The Intellectual Matrix of Early Biblical Narrative: Inclusive Monotheism in Persian Period Palestine," in *The Triumph of Elohim: From Yahwisms to Judaisms*, ed. Diana Vikander Edelman (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996), 119 n. 13.

14. See Smith, *Early History of God*, 6, 145.

15. See Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 47, 52.

16. See J. Glen Taylor, *Yahweh and the Sun: Biblical and Archaeological Evidence for Sun Worship in Ancient Israel* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 58–59; and Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Yahweh—The Patriarch: Ancient Images of God and Feminist Theology*, trans. Frederick J. Gaiser (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 66.

17. J. Glen Taylor, "The Two Earliest Known Representations of Yahweh," in *Ascribe to the Lord: Biblical and Other Studies in Memory of Peter C. Craigie*, ed. Lyle Eslinger and Glen Taylor, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series* 67 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988), 566.

18. David Noel Freedman, "Yahweh of Samaria and His Asherah," *Biblical Archaeologist* 50/4 (December 1987): 248; see Herbert Niehr, "The Rise of YHWH in Judahite and Israelite Religion," in Edelman, *Triumph of Elohim*, ed. Edelman, 57, 59.

19. See Edelman, "Introduction," in *Triumph of Elohim*, 19; and Lowell K. Handy, "The Appearance of Pantheon in Judah," in *Triumph of Elohim*, ed. Edelman, 27–43.

20. Switching the roles of mother and father, Jeremiah 2:27 mocks the veneration

of Asherah. See Saul M. Olyan, "The Cultic Confessions of Jer 2,27a," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 99 (1987): 254–59.

21. See Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 39, 41–42, 45–52; Wiggins, *Reassessment of "Asherah"*, 125; Smith, *Early History of God*, 80, 94; Saul M. Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh in Israel* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 19, 70–72; and many other sources.

22. Smith, *Early History of God*, 98, 161–63; compare Gerstenberger, *Yahweh—The Patriarch*, 92, 136.

23. Wiggins, *Reassessment of "Asherah"*, 130.

24. Freedman, "Yahweh of Samaria and His Asherah," 248. See 1 Kings 18:1–46.

25. See 2 Kings 10:18–28; 13:6; see also Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 4; Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 43–46; and Smith, *Early History of God*, 80.

26. Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 73.

27. See *ibid.*, 3–4, 9, 13–14, 22, 33, 43, 73–74; Smith, *Early History of God*, 150; Olyan, "The Cultic Confessions of Jer 2,27a," 257; and Baruch Halpern, "Brisker Pipes Than Poetry: The Development of Israelite Monotheism," in *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel*, ed. Jacob Neusner, Baruch A. Levine, and Ernest S. Frerichs (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 83.

28. Dever, *Recent Archaeological Discoveries*, 159.

29. Smith, *Early History of God*, 89.

30. André Lemaire, "Who or What Was Yahweh's Asherah?" *Biblical Archaeology Review* 10/6 (1984): 46.

31. See Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, xiv, 74; and William Dever, "Is the Bible Right After All?" interview by Hershel Shanks, *Biblical Archaeology Review* 22/5 (Sept./Oct. 1996): 37.

32. Thompson, "The Intellectual Matrix of Early Biblical Narrative," 119 n. 10.

33. Smith, *Early History of God*, 19; compare 89, 92–93; and Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, xiv.

34. Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 29, 33–34, 38, 74.

35. See Lemaire, "Who or What Was Yahweh's Asherah?" 42, 44; André Lemaire, "Les inscriptions de Khirbet el-Qūm et l'asherah de YHWH," *Revue biblique* 84 (1977): 602–03 (cf. pp. 596, 597); Ziony Zevit, "The Khirbet el-Qūm Inscription Mentioning a Goddess," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 255 (1984): 39; Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 23; and Day, "Asherah in the Hebrew Bible," 394.

36. See Lemaire, "Les inscriptions de Khirbet el-Qūm et l'asherah de YHWH," 608; Lemaire, "Who or What Was Yahweh's Asherah?" 44, 51; and Freedman, "Yahweh of Samaria and His Asherah," 246–49.

37. Freedman, "Yahweh of Samaria and His Asherah," 248.

38. See Ze'ev Meshel, "Did Yahweh Have a Consort?" *Biblical Archaeology Review* 5/2 (1979): 31; William G. Dever, "Asherah, Consort of Yahweh? New Evidence from Kuntille 'Ajrud," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 255 (1984): 26–27; Dever, *Recent Archaeological Discoveries*, 140–49, which discusses the find at Kuntille 'Ajrud.

39. Dever, "Asherah, Consort of Yahweh?" 21; compare p. 30. See also Olyan, "Cultic Confessions of Jer 2,27a," 257, 259; Dever, "Is the Bible Right After All?" 37; Brian B.

Schmidt, "The Aniconic Tradition: On Reading Images and Viewing Texts," in *Triumph of Elohim*, ed. Edelman, 75–105; and Gerstenberger, *Yahweh—The Patriarch*, 33–34.

40. Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 52–53; compare Gerstenberger, *Yahweh—The Patriarch*, 33–34.

41. Freedman, "Yahweh of Samaria and His Asherah," 249; compare Day, "Asherah in the Hebrew Bible," 392; and Niehr, "Rise of YHWH in Judahite and Israelite Religion," 54–55, 59. See Proverbs 8:22–34. This image that is emerging from very recent scholarship—an enthroned God who sits with his consort in the midst of a divine council composed of his children, who are linked with the sun and moon and stars—sheds fascinating light on Lehi's vision as it is recorded in 1 Nephi 1:9–11. That account describes "One descending out of the midst of heaven," whose "luster was above that of the sun at noon-day" and who was followed by twelve others whose "brightness did exceed that of the stars in the firmament" and who then, together, "came down and went forth upon the face of the earth." Clearly, this refers to the Savior, Jesus Christ, and his twelve apostles. (Taylor, throughout his book *Yahweh and the Sun*, argues for an ancient link between Yahweh or Jehovah [whom Latter-day Saints identify as the pre-mortal Jesus Christ] and the sun.) Read in light of recent biblical scholarship, however, the account of Lehi's vision also appears to imply notions of the premortal existence and the literally divine lineage of humanity that are often presumed to have arisen only in the later doctrinal development of Mormonism.

42. See Dever, "Is the Bible Right After All?" 36; and Patai, *Early History of God*, 52.

43. Cited in Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 39.

44. See *ibid.*, 49; and Day, "Asherah in the Hebrew Bible," 397.

45. See Taylor, "The Two Earliest Known Representations of Yahweh," 558–60, 565 n. 19; Taylor, *Yahweh and the Sun*, 29; Dever, "Asherah, Consort of Yahweh?" 27; and de Moor, "asherah," 1:441–43. Wiggins, *Reassessment of "Asherah"*, 13, thinks ancient Hebrews would have seen Asherah in the Garden of Eden's tree of life.

46. William G. Dever, lecture at Brigham Young University, 14 February 1997.

47. Steve A. Wiggins, "The Myth of Asherah: Lion Lady and Serpent Goddess," *Ugarit-Forschungen: Internationales Jahrbuch für die Altunterschiede Syrien-Palästinas* 23 (1991): 383, with references.

48. See Day, "Asherah in the Hebrew Bible," 397–98; 401–4, with references.

49. See Wiggins, *Reassessment of "Asherah"*, 92.

50. See *ibid.*, 94–95, 101, 109, 129 (with rabbinic references); Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 38–39, 42, 45, 48; Smith, *The Early History of God*, 81–85; and Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 1–3.

51. See Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 26, 28, 31–32; W. L. Reed, "Asherah," in George Arthur Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962–), 1:250–52; de Moor, "asherah," 1:441; Day, "Asherah in the Hebrew Bible," 408; and Dietrich and Loretz, "*Yahwe und seine Aschera*," 82–85, 99.

52. Leon Yarden, *The Tree of Light: A Study of the Menorah, the Seven-Branched Lampstand* (Uppsala, Sweden: Skriv Service AB, 1972), 44–47, 103–6.

53. Smith, *The Early History of God*, 84; compare Wiggins, *Reassessment of "Asherah"*, 37, 71, 89; and Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*, trans. Ralph Mannheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 48–50, 52, 241–43.

54. Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 20, 116, 139–40, 151–52, 199, 265, 280.

55. Quoting Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 57 n. 82; compare Olyan, "Cultic Confessions of Jer 2,27a," 259.

56. Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 56–61, 65–67.

57. See Ernest A. Wallis Budge, *Egyptian Tales and Romances: Pagan, Christian and Muslim* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1935), 280.

58. 1 Nephi 11:18; emphasis added.

59. See Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996), 1–4, 103.

60. See, for example, 1 Kings 4:29–34; Job 1:3; compare Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 23–25, 175, 195.

61. See Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 33.

62. See 1 Nephi 1:2; and Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 34–42.

63. See Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 22.

64. Proverbs 2:16 (compare 6:24; 7:5, 21–23); 20:19 (compare 12:6; 26:28; 29:5). See also Psalms 5:9; 12:2; 78:36.

65. See, for example, 2 Nephi 28:22; Jacob 7:2, 4; Mosiah 7:21; 9:10; 10:18; 11:7; 26:6; 27:8; Alma 20:13; 30:47; 46:5, 7, 10; 50:35; 52:19; 61:4; Helaman 1:7; 2:4–5; 13:28; 3 Nephi 1:29; 7:12; Ether 8:2. Daniel 11:21 nicely summarizes a frequent effect of flattery in the Book of Mormon.

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

67. Compare Proverbs 26:12.

68. 2 Nephi 4:34; 28:31.

69. See 1 Nephi 11:35–36.

70. See Proverbs 1:20–21; 4:5–9, 13; 7:4; 8:1–3, 22–36; 9:1–3. The Hebrew term translated as "wisdom," *hokmah*, is, of course, a feminine noun. Murphy, in *Tree of Life*, 133–49 and throughout, offers a useful discussion of "Lady Wisdom."

71. Patai supplies references that I do not have space here to discuss (see his *Hebrew Goddess*, 97–98). Proverbs 7:14 advises its audience to take Wisdom as a sister or kinswoman.

72. Smith, *Early History of God*, 95.

73. Wiggins, "Myth of Asherah," 383.

74. See Smith, *Early History of God*, 95.

75. If so, the language of the plates must be Hebrew, or something like it. Compare Genesis 30:13.

76. See Smith, *Early History of God*, 95; compare Proverbs 11:30; 15:4.

77. Again, from the root *shr*.

78. Compare Proverbs 4:13 and 1 Nephi 8:24, 30; 15:24.

79. Compare Proverbs 1:4, 8, 10, 15; 3:1, 11, 21; 4:1, 3, 10, 20; 5:1, 7–8, 20; 6:1, 3, 20; 7:1, 7; 1 Nephi 8:12–18.

80. See Proverbs 1:15, 19, 20; 2:1, 8, 9, 12, 13, 15, 18–20; 3:6, 12, 17, 23; 4:11, 12, 14, 18–19, 26–27; 5:5, 6, 8, 21, 23; 6:12, 23; 7:8, 12, 25, 27; 8:2, 13, 20, 32; 9:6. Compare the "paths" (1 Nephi 8:20–23, 28) and "ways" (1 Nephi 8:23, 30–31) and "roads" (1 Nephi 8:32) of Lehi's vision. Compare also Psalm 1:1–6, quoted earlier.

81. See Proverbs 8:6–9; compare 1 Nephi 13:26–29, 32, 34–40; 14:23; 2 Nephi 4:32;

9:47; 25:4; 26:33; 33:5–6.

82. See 1 Nephi 13:26, 28, 29, 32, 34, 35, 40.

83. Compare Proverbs 3:14; 8:11, 19; also 2:4; Job 28:12–28; Wisdom of Solomon 7:8; 8:5.

84. Proverbs 1:20–21.

85. Proverbs 8:1–3.

86. Proverbs 9:3.

87. As in Proverbs 1:22; 3:34; compare 9:6–8, 12; 1 Nephi 8:26–27, 33; 11:35.

88. On wisdom equated with life, see Proverbs 3:2, 18, 22; 4:4, 10, 13, 22; 6:23–35; 8:35–36; 9:6–11. On unwise wisdom as the way to death, see Proverbs 2:18; 5:5; 7:22–23, 26–27; 9:18.

89. Proverbs 2:21–22.

90. Proverbs 2:18–19.

91. Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 29 (with references). See Widengren, *The King and the Tree of Life*. Proverbs 5:15–18 also mentions waters and rivers.

Lehi as Moses
Noel B. Reynolds

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1. For an account of these political aspects of Nephi's small plates, see Noel B. Reynolds, "The Political Dimension in Nephi's Small Plates," *BYU Studies* 27 (fall 1987), 15–37. Not only does Nephi flee into the wilderness after slaying an official of an oppressive regime, but he then leads his people through that wilderness, across the water, and to the promised land. "Like Moses, he constantly has to overcome the murmuring and faithlessness of his people. Like Moses, he secures divine assistance to feed his people in the wilderness. And like Moses, he is caught up into a mountain to receive the word of God" (*ibid.*, 33). Further, on two occasions Nephi explicitly invokes the historical model of Moses laboring with the murmuring Israelites as a device to persuade his brothers to come along and help him in the tasks the Lord has given to him—obtaining the brass plates (1 Nephi 4:1–3) and building the ship (1 Nephi 17:7ff.). See Noel B. Reynolds, "Nephtite Kingship Reconsidered," (*in Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World*, ed. Davis Bitton [Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998], 172–77), for a list of 21 points of comparison between Nephi and Moses. George S. Tate has demonstrated a pervasive dependence on Exodus typology generally by many Book of Mormon writers. See his "The Typology of the Exodus Pattern in the Book of Mormon," in *Literature of Belief: Sacred Scripture and Religious Experience*, ed. Neal E. Lambert (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1981), 245–62. Other writers who have documented extensive connections between the exodus of Israel and its leaders and the Lehite exodus recorded in the Book of Mormon include Terry L. Szink, "Nephi and the Exodus," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: FARMS and Deseret Book, 1991), 38–51. In the same volume, see also Alan Goff, "Mourning, Consolation, and Repentance at Nahom," 92–99. Stephen D. Ricks and others have made related observations about Benjamin. See, Ricks's

"King, Coronation, and Covenant in Mosiah 1–6," in *King Benjamin's Speech*, ed. John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 233–75.

2. This must be qualified to the extent that in 1 Nephi 4 and 17 Nephi does refer to the similarity between Lehi's family's experience and that of the Israelites in the wilderness, with implicit reference to the leadership issue. See note 1 above.

3. See Reynolds, "Kingship," 177.

4. The older brothers are to receive the first blessing only if they accept the leadership of the younger brother. And who is to judge? See a more detailed analysis in Reynolds, "Political Dimension," 32.

5. Moses calls "heaven and earth to witness against" Israel this day that they have been instructed in what they should do (Deuteronomy 4:26). John W. Welch and Daryl R. Hague have analyzed eight Book of Mormon farewell sermons, including Lehi's, using the pattern identified in ancient literature by William S. Kurz in "Luke 22:14–38 and Greco-Roman and Biblical Farewell Addresses," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104, no. 2 (1985), 251, 262. See their "Benjamin's Sermon as a Traditional Ancient Farewell Address," in *King Benjamin's Speech*, ed. Welch and Ricks, 103–5. One of Welch's students addresses the larger question of Deuteronomy's impact on the Book of Mormon as a whole. See Julie Stevenson, "Deuteronomy and the Book of Mormon," 25 November 1980, unpublished MS on file in the BYU law library. In the final draft of this paper I was generously assisted by Drew Briney, who gave me access to his comprehensive analysis of Deuteronomical terminology that shows up in the Book of Mormon. His lists demonstrate that later Book of Mormon prophets also used Deuteronomy frequently.

6. See Stevenson, "Deuteronomy and the Book of Mormon," 1.

7. John L. Sorenson argues in his article "The 'Brass Plates' and Biblical Scholarship" (*Dialogue* 10 [autumn 1977]: 31–39) that the plates of brass would fit best the Elohist (E) northern kingdom version of the Old Testament as that has been hypothesized by Bible scholars. John W. Welch suggests that the plates of brass might have been produced for King Josiah himself, after the discovery of Deuteronomy (see his study "Authorship of the Book of Isaiah," in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Pary and John W. Welch [Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998], 430–32).

8. I owe this clarification to James E. Faulconer.

9. I hope it is clear to readers that I am not claiming an isomorphism between Deuteronomy and 2 Nephi. The two texts have far more differences than similarities. Nor do I claim that Deuteronomy is the only possible biblical source for the Deuteronomical themes I identify in 2 Nephi. All I am claiming is that Lehi's invocation of so many of the themes we find concentrated and repeated in Deuteronomy, combined with the extensive similarity of his life situation to that of Moses at the time of his final speeches to his people, would have provided a powerful connection and rhetorical leverage for Lehi's immediate audience.

10. For an analysis of the awkward logic of Nephi's appointment, see Reynolds, "Nephtite Kingship," 163.

11. See Deuteronomy 4:1, 5, 8, 14, 40, 45; 5:1, 31; 6:1, 17, 20; 7:11; 8:11; 11:32; 12:1;