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Title Lehi's Vision of the Tree of Life: Understanding the Dream as Visionary Literature

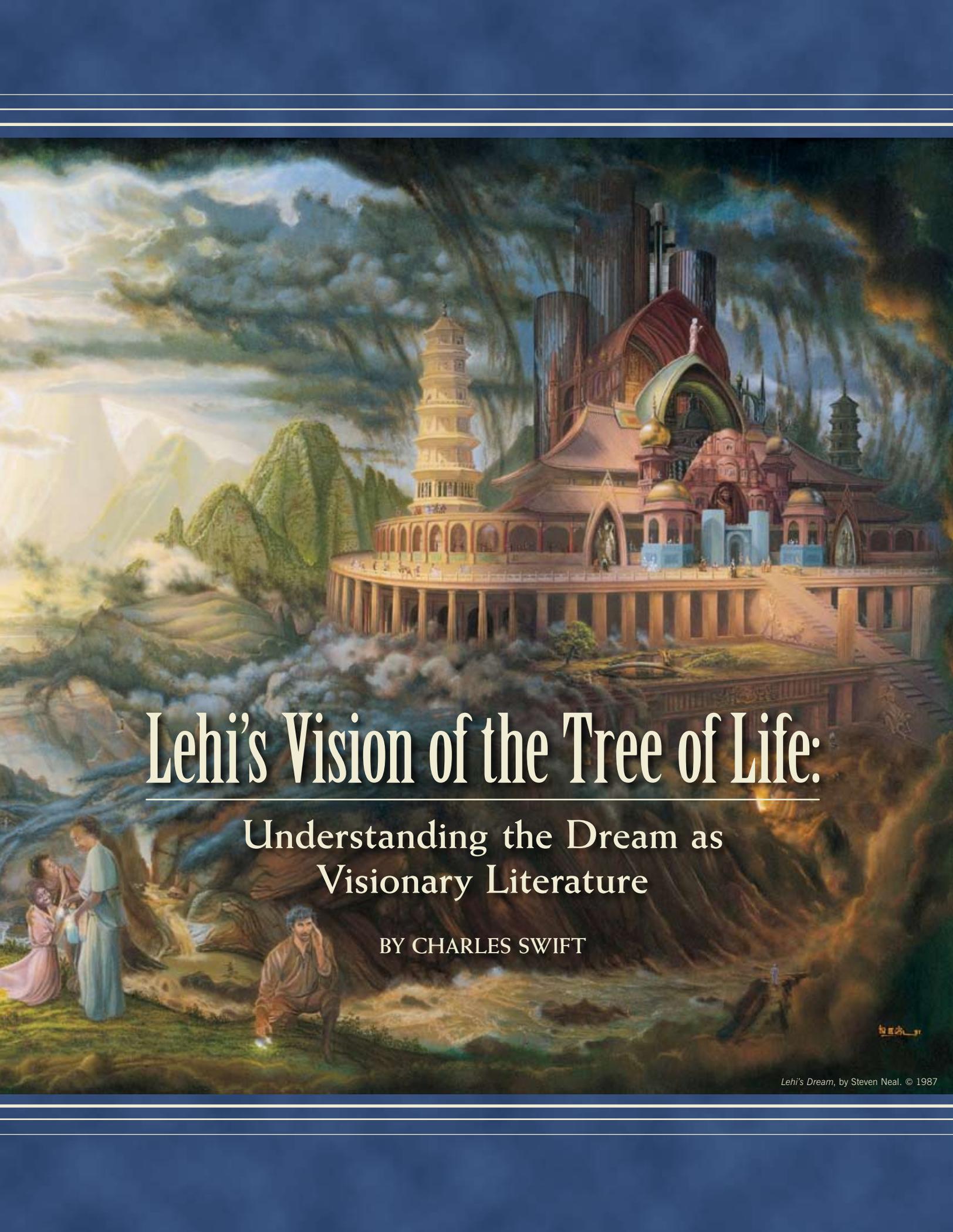
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Abstract One of the more striking and significant passages in the Book of Mormon is Lehi's vision of the tree of life. It is often studied in terms of its content alone, with clarifying details illuminated by Nephi's similar vision. However, exploring this vision against the backdrop of ancient visionary literature can lead to greater appreciation of its literary richness while affording insights into its interpretation. Many narrative components of Lehi's vision match the characteristic elements of visionary literature identified by biblical scholar Leland Ryken, including otherness, reversal of ordinary reality, transcendental realms, kaleidoscopic structure, and symbolism. The relationship between symbolic aspects of Lehi's vision and specific historical events more clearly recognized in Nephi's account (e.g., Christ's mortal ministry, the apostasy, Nephite history) is discussed. In addition, identifying the man in the white robe in Lehi's vision as John the Revelator provides a natural narrative and structural link to Nephi's vision that emphasizes the relatedness of the two accounts. Most elements of the vision point to Jesus Christ. Lehi's vision comports well with the genre of ancient visionary literature, a form that biblical scholarship has shown to be worthy of serious scholarly attention.





Lehi's Vision of the Tree of Life:

Understanding the Dream as
Visionary Literature

BY CHARLES SWIFT

“Behold,” Lehi tells his family while in the wilderness, “I have dreamed a dream; or, in other words, I have seen a vision” (1 Nephi 8:2). With these promising, personal words the prophet introduces one of the most beautiful and significant passages of the Book of Mormon—a passage that has been called “a literary masterpiece and a doctrinal gem.”¹ It has even been considered a type for the entire book, particularly its depiction of the tree of life: “The Book of Mormon is itself a tree of life—a work of beauty and purity, with its words to be feasted upon.”²

Even with such enthusiastic endorsements, we often read Lehi’s account of his dream in terms of its content alone, studying what it has to say about his family in particular and, when read in the light of Nephi’s later interpretive vision, about the world in general. As part of such a study we usually rely on Nephi’s elucidating account to help us understand the specific meanings of particular symbols in Lehi’s vision. But if we step back and take a wider view, exploring Lehi’s account in light of what may be called *visionary literature*, we can better appreciate its literary quality and glean insights that may have eluded us before.

Examples of literary forms such as narrative, poetry, and epistles appear throughout the Book of Mormon. But visionary literature is a different form with its own set of characteristics. Leland Ryken, a noted scholar in the field of the Bible as literature, has defined visionary literature as “pictur[ing] settings, characters, and events that differ from ordinary reality. This is not to say that the things described in visionary literature did not happen in past history or will not happen in future history. But it does mean that the things as pictured by the writer at the time of writing exist in the imagination, not in empirical reality.”³ Ryken continues in his book to identify characteristics of visionary literature, and in the process he shows this literary form to be worthy of serious scholarly attention in the analysis of ancient texts. Other scholars in his field tend to treat visionary parts of the Bible as distinctive, identifiable pieces rather than view them

collectively as a broad literary form with particular elements.⁴ My purpose in looking at Ryken’s work is not to suggest that there was a predetermined format for accounts of visions to which Lehi’s dream had to conform, but rather to help us better gauge its literary richness and see important aspects of his dream that we might otherwise miss.

Otherness

The first element of visionary literature Ryken discusses is “the element of otherness.” Visionary literature, he explains, “transforms the known world or the present state of things into a situation that at the time of writing is as yet only imagined. In one way or another, visionary literature takes us to a strange world where ordinary rules of reality no longer prevail.”⁵ For instance, Lehi’s vision depicts a world that is other than our own, a world in which simply eating fruit fills one’s “soul with exceedingly great joy”—not with the momentary pleasure of having hunger abated, but with a powerful emotion that is intimately connected to “the love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men” and is “the most desirable above all things” and “the most joyous to the soul” (1 Nephi 8:12; 11:22, 23). It is a world in which a rod of iron exists not in the center of a city or as a railing in some large building, but in the middle of a wilderness. Grasping it guides one along a narrow path to the tree that bears the miraculous fruit. Mists are described not as mists of water or fog but as mists of darkness and are



“the temptations of the devil” (1 Nephi 12:17).⁶ Also improbably situated in a wilderness, a “great and spacious building” apparently stands “in the air, high above the earth” (1 Nephi 8:26).⁷

In Lehi’s dream most components are imaginative, which is not to say fantastic, or completely separated from reality.⁸ Of course, there are men in white robes, as well as trees, fruit, wildernesses, paths, and even rods of iron. But these elements as parts of Lehi’s vision are not intended to correspond to specific objects in the time and space we call reality. They are symbols. And, as is often the case with symbols, they have their counterparts in reality. This vision, however, is concerned with the meaning conveyed by the symbols. For example, the mist of darkness in Lehi’s dream may very well resemble the “heavy mists and fog [that] at times blanket the coasts of Arabia during the monsoon season,”⁹ and knowing this adds to our appreciation of the dream’s

Lehi’s Vision, by Hai-yi Yang

imagery—yet the mist that is in the dream conveys the temptations of the devil rather than any climatic phenomenon. By contrast, when Lehi sees his family in his vision, he is seeing something whose meaning is directly and irrevocably dependent upon the reality of the individuals actually existing in his family. The image of Laman that Lehi sees in his dream gets its meaning from the Laman who is his son. If there were no mists along the coasts of Arabia, then the symbolic mist of Lehi’s vision would still retain its meaning; if, however, Lehi had no family in reality, then the image of Laman that he saw would completely change in significance and meaning, and we would lose the power of Lehi’s fatherly concern and love for his son.



Low-lying mists reminiscent of Lehi's dream blanket the mountain landscape in Yemen. Photo courtesy of Kim Clark.

Transformation and Reversal

“The motifs of transformation and reversal are prominent in visionary literature, and they lead to this principle of interpretation: *in visionary literature, be ready for the reversal of ordinary reality.*”¹⁰ Ryken’s second element does not mean that reality itself is reversed, that up is down and white is black. Instead, what seems to be the event that will naturally take place actually does not. For example, a



powerful army is unexpectedly defeated, or a beautiful, appealing scene ends up being a terrible place full of horrors.

An excellent example of reversal occurs when Lehi finds himself in “a dark and dreary wilderness,” a guide in a white robe appears, and Lehi follows him to “a dark and dreary waste” (see 1 Nephi 8:4–7). We expect Lehi’s guide to bring him to a place of light and safety, but instead the prophet is taken to yet another dark and dreary place. What kind of deliverance figure, clothed in the powerful symbol of a white robe, would take a prophet from one dark place to another? An additional reversal happens when Lehi, apparently without leaving the dark and dreary waste, beholds the tree and the beautiful fruit that brings great joy. We would not normally think that such a scene of hope and salvation could be viewed from within such a foreboding locale.

Later in the dream, it makes sense that some people appear, yet they never make it to the tree, and they end up wandering off and getting lost. It is quite a reversal, however, to learn that there are others who partake of the fruit but still lose their way: “And after they had tasted of the fruit they were ashamed, because of those that were scoffing at them; and they fell away into forbidden paths and were lost” (1 Nephi 8:28). Up to this point in the vision, all those who have partaken of the fruit—namely, Lehi, Sariah, Sam, and Nephi—have not fallen away, yet these other people do.



Above: People holding fast to the iron rod as they approach the mist of darkness. Illustration by Jerry Thompson, © IRI. Left: *Lehi in the Wilderness*, by Marwan Nahle, © IRI. Courtesy of the Museum of Church History and Art.

Another reversal of people being lost takes place when the mist of darkness arises: “It came to pass that there arose a mist of darkness; yea, even an exceedingly great mist of darkness, insomuch that they who had commenced in the path did lose their way, that they wandered off and were lost” (1 Nephi 8:23). We assume that people who are making their way along the path are carefully holding on to the iron rod (otherwise, there would be no purpose for it). Note that the path is visible; people do not need the rod to guide them. The rod becomes necessary when the mist arises because people can no longer see the path. Yet despite our expectation that people will make it safely through the mist by holding on to the rod, somehow they become lost.

When we examine it closer, we see that the entire dream, in fact, is one extended reversal because what begins with a solitary man in a dark and dreary waste—a bleak, empty setting with absolutely nothing to picture other than the man—ends up as a dream full of images: a large building crowded with people in “exceedingly fine” clothing, a path, a rod of iron, a mist of darkness, bodies of water, forbidden paths, a tree with its sweet white fruit, and “numberless concourses” of people.

Transcendental Realms

While visionary literature often deals with “the other”—with people and events not of this world—it frequently portrays this otherness as transcendent. This literature puts forth a place that is not simply different but above and beyond the here and now of the person seeing the vision. Ryken explains:

The element of transcendence is pervasive in visionary literature, and it, too, can be formulated as a principle: *when reading visionary literature, be prepared to use your imagination to picture a world that transcends earthly reality.* Visionary literature assaults a purely mundane mindset; in fact, this is one of its main purposes.

The strangeness in visionary literature extends to both scenes and actors. The scene is cosmic, not localized.¹¹

In fact, the world of the vision of the tree of life is cosmic. This is not just a tree with delicious fruit; it is the tree of life whose fruit can bring “exceedingly great joy” to a person’s soul. The path in Lehi’s dream represents the way to eternal life, the rod



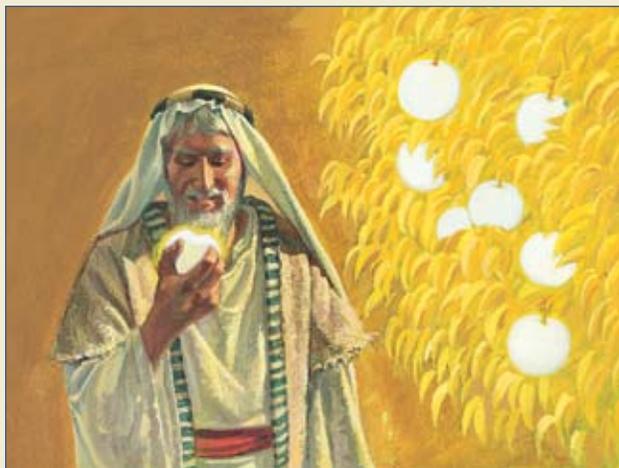
Top: *The Vision of Ezekiel*, by Paul Falconer Poole. Tate Gallery, London/Art Resource, NY. Bottom: *Nebuchadnezzar's Dream*, by Robert Barrett. © 1986 Robert Barrett—do not copy

stands for the word of God, and one body of water symbolizes the depths of hell. The great and spacious building is not merely an edifice, but “the world and the wisdom thereof” (1 Nephi 11:35) and the “vain imaginations and the pride of the children

of men” (1 Nephi 12:18). In light of Nephi’s vision, which came to him after he asked to see what his father, Lehi, had seen, Lehi’s dream of the tree of life can be seen as much more than the journey of one man who is concerned for his two rebellious sons. The vision is of cosmic significance, entailing the rise and fall of a great civilization and extending from Lehi’s camp to the entire world and its ultimate future. Above all, the vision reveals the Son of God—his birth, life, and death.

The Imagination

The “visionary strangeness” of this type of literature leads to “a related rule for reading it: *visionary literature is a form of fantasy literature in which readers must be willing to exercise their imaginations in picturing unfamiliar scenes and agents.*”¹² While the imagery of the tree of life vision is much less fantastic than that of the book of Revelation, it nonetheless invokes the reader’s imagination. For example, readers know that the tree may look somewhat like trees with which they are familiar, but the image of Lehi’s tree is not limited by their experience. What shape does the tree of life take? Specific trees are mentioned in the Book of Mormon, such as fir trees and cedars (see 2 Nephi 24:8) and olive trees (see Jacob 5), but the tree of life is not identified as a specific type of tree found in the real world. And what about the tree’s purely white fruit? What is its texture, and how does it taste? Once again, we are not given any details or names of fruit with



Lehi partakes of the white fruit, which “filled [his] soul with exceedingly great joy” (1 Nephi 8:12). Illustration by Jerry Thompson, © IRI.

which we are familiar, but we are left to exercise our imagination. Most of us know what a mist of water looks and feels like, but what is a mist of darkness? And how does a building stand with no foundation under it?¹³ If the building is not touching the ground, how do people enter it? The vision asks us to imagine things and events and places that may have some relationship to what we experience but remain fundamentally unfamiliar.

Kaleidoscopic Structure

One of the most striking aspects of the tree of life vision is how it is not confined by any smooth continuity of images. Such visions typically do not begin at the beginning and then seamlessly flow through the middle to the end, but they are disconnected at times, with distinct components. As Ryken notes:

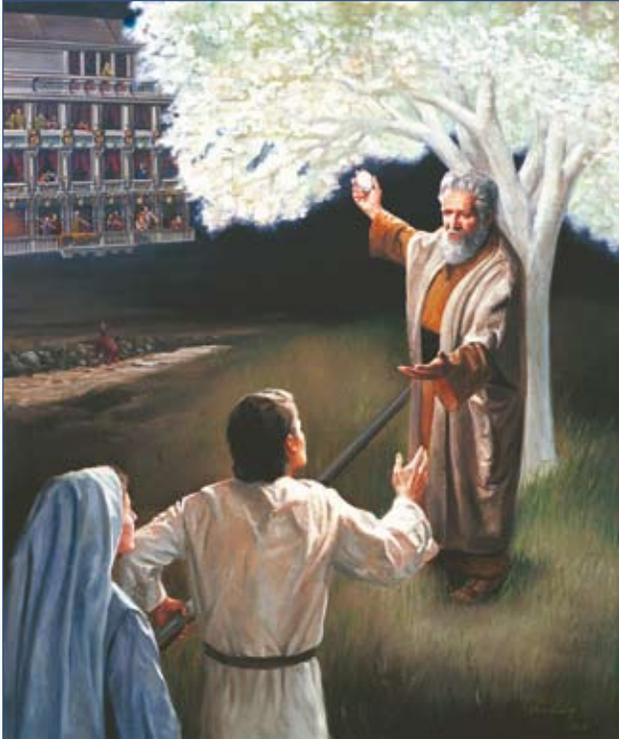
The element of the unexpected extends even to the structure of visionary literature. I will call it a kaleidoscopic structure. It consists of brief units, always shifting and never in focus for very long. Its effects are similar to those of some modern films. . . . Visionary elements, moreover, may be mingled with realistic scenes and events.

This disjointed method of proceeding places tremendous demands on the reader and is the thing that makes such literature initially resistant to a literary approach. The antidote to this frustration is a basic principle of interpretation: *instead of looking for the smooth flow of narrative, be prepared for a disjointed series of diverse, self-contained units.*

Dream, and not narrative, is the model that visionary literature in the Bible follows. Of what do dreams consist? Momentary pictures, fleeting impressions, characters and scenes that play their brief part and then drop out of sight, abrupt jumps from one action to another. This is exactly what we find in visionary literature.¹⁴

“The ancients recognized both dreams and visions but frequently used the terms interchangeably.”¹⁵ It is not surprising, then, that Lehi calls this vision a *dream*, and it is the qualities of dream, rather than those of narrative, that dominate the account.

Lehi’s dream can be divided into three fundamental experiences: that of Lehi (see 1 Nephi



Lehi beckons others to taste the precious fruit of the tree of life. *Lehi's Dream*, © David Lindsley—do not copy.

8:5–13), his family (see vv. 14–18), and the world (see vv. 19–33). However, the dream can be further studied in terms of individual components that dominate the structure of the vision (see accompanying chart).¹⁶

Elements of the vision often seem to suddenly appear, without any hint of prior awareness of them and with no foreshadowing in the text. For example, Lehi is standing next to the tree of life but does not see the river until he is looking for his family, even though the river is next to the tree by which he is standing: “As I cast my eyes round about, that perhaps I might discover my family also, I beheld a river of water; and it ran along, and it was near the tree of which I was partaking the fruit” (1 Nephi 8:13). Also, after Lehi, Sariah, Sam, and Nephi partake of the fruit, and Laman and Lemuel do not, Lehi sees the rod of iron: “It came to pass that I saw [Laman and Lemuel], but they would not come unto me and partake of the fruit. And I beheld a rod of iron, and it extended along the bank of the river, and led to the tree by which I stood” (1 Nephi 8:18–19). The rod, which is such a crucial element

of the vision from that point on, does not even exist for Lehi and his family when they are making their way to the tree. (One might argue that perhaps the rod exists but Lehi simply does not see it. However, this is a dream—a vision—not reality. If the viewer of the vision does not see something in the vision, then it does not exist as a part of the vision.)

Though Lehi earlier saw the river, he apparently did not see the rod of iron that runs alongside it nor the “strait and narrow path, which came along by the rod of iron, even to the tree by which [he] stood” (1 Nephi 8:20). In the real world it would be difficult to stand beside a tree and miss a river that is next to it as well as the rod and path that lead up to it. But considering the kaleidoscopic nature of a dreamlike vision, it makes sense that elements of the experience would appear at different times regardless of how close they are to one another in this visionary world.

The groups of people in the vision are also like separate scenes from a movie. They never overlap—we do not see some of one group making it to the tree while others in the same group fall away. Everyone in the first group wanders off before arriving at the tree. Everyone in the second group completes his or her journey to the tree, partakes of the fruit, and then falls away after being negatively influenced by people in the building. Even the final cluster of people is composed of separate, distinct groups that never mingle with one another. One group holds to the rod and partakes of the fruit, one group feels its way to the building, one group drowns in the fountain, and one group wanders in strange roads. It is as though each group is in a separate scene, independent of one another yet part of the same dream.

The chart not only illustrates how the vision can be divided into components, but also indicates their structure. Though the vision itself has a cinematic feel to it at times, moving from one component to another, each component possesses standard narrative elements:

Individual units normally consist of the usual narrative elements of scene, agent, action, and outcome. The corresponding questions to ask of individual passages are:

1. *Where* does the action occur?
2. *Who* are the actors?
3. *What* do they do?
4. What is the *result*?¹⁷

COMPONENTS OF LEHI'S VISION OF THE TREE OF LIFE

1 NEPHI 8

No.	Verse	Setting	People	Action/Outcome
1	4–6	a dark and dreary wilderness	Lehi, man in white robe	Lehi sees the wilderness, and a man in a white robe tells the prophet to follow him.
2	7–8	a dark and dreary waste	Lehi, man in white robe	Lehi follows the man and finds himself in a dark and dreary waste. He travels for many hours in darkness and eventually prays to the Lord for mercy.
3	9–12	a large and spacious field, near a tree	Lehi	After he prays, Lehi sees a large and spacious field. He goes to a tree and eats its fruit. The fruit fills his soul with great joy, and he wants to share it with his family.
4	13–16	near a tree, at the head of a river	Lehi, Sariah, Sam, Nephi	As he looks for his family, Lehi sees a river near the tree. He then sees Sariah, Sam, and Nephi and invites them to partake of the fruit. They go to him and eat the fruit.
5	17–18	at the head of a river	Lehi, Laman, Lemuel	Lehi wants Laman and Lemuel to partake of the fruit, but they neither go to him nor eat the fruit.
6	19–23	a rod of iron, a riverbank, a path	Lehi, numberless concourses of people	Lehi sees a rod of iron and a strait and narrow path. The rod leads to the tree and by the head of the fountain to a large and spacious field that is like a world. He sees large numbers of people trying to make their way to the path. They commence along the path, but a mist of darkness arises and they wander off the path and become lost.
7	24–28	a path, a tree, a great and spacious building, forbidden paths	Lehi, other people	Lehi sees others hold to the rod, make their way through the mist of darkness, and eventually partake of the fruit. Afterward, they look about and are ashamed. He sees the great and spacious building on the other side of the river, apparently high above the earth, full of prideful people who mock those who have partaken of the fruit. The people who have partaken of the fruit fall away into forbidden paths and are lost.
8	29	Nephi's place of writing	Nephi, Lehi	Nephi records that he is not writing everything his father recounted.
9	30	a path, a tree	Lehi, group of people	Nephi records that Lehi saw people hold to the rod and make it to the tree, where they partook of the fruit.
10	31	a great and spacious building	Lehi, group of people	Nephi records that Lehi saw people pressing ¹ their way to the building.
11	32	the depths of a fountain, strange roads	Lehi, group of people	Nephi records that Lehi saw people who drowned in the fountain and others who were lost from his view as they traveled strange roads.
12	33	a great and spacious building	Lehi, group of people	Nephi records that many people entered into the building and mocked those who had partaken of the fruit.

The components listed in the chart are not incoherent slices of the vision; they possess distinct story elements. For example, it may not make narrative sense to us why the rod of iron is not apparent throughout the vision, but it works perfectly in the scenes in which it does occur. And the distinct groups that Lehi sees, within their own isolated scenes of finite action structured around key story elements, make sense to us even though we live in a world of infinite combinations of people who do an infinite number of things.

Symbolism

Another important component of visionary literature is symbolism. While such literature borrows its story qualities from narrative, Ryken notes that “it makes even more use of the resources of poetry” by adopting “the technique of symbolism. In fact, it is symbolic through and through, a point that cannot be overstated.”¹⁸ Just as symbolism is the “basic literary mode used in Revelation,”¹⁹ so is it in the literary account of Lehi’s vision of the tree of life. That vision has been called “one of the richest, most flexible, and far-reaching pieces of symbolic prophecy contained in the standard works.”²⁰ As we would expect, Lehi does not refer to what he sees as symbols and does not explain their meanings. However, from Nephi’s account of his own vision of the tree of life, we know that Lehi’s vision features many symbols, such as the tree representing the love of God, the path symbolizing the way to eternal life, the rod corresponding to the word of God, and the mist depicting the temptations of the devil.

It should be remembered, though, that visionary literature is “heavily symbolic but rarely pictorial.”²¹ The symbols are meant to convey images of meaning, not necessarily pictures. For example, when we read the story of Nephi breaking his bow, it is not difficult to create a mental picture that appears realistic. However, when we attempt to picture Lehi’s vision of the tree of life, we quickly become confused about where things are supposed to be and what they should look like. How many bodies of water are there? Which body of water runs alongside what other element of the vision? How does the building hover in the air? Is the path straight, or does it meander as we would imagine the river doing? What makes a path “forbidden,” and how is it marked or portrayed so that people know it is

forbidden? Or does Lehi simply know intuitively of the forbidden nature of these paths? Though Lehi’s vision is full of imagery that we can see in our minds, we can conclude that the purpose of the vision is not chiefly pictorial. We can imagine what we need to imagine, but if we try to be too precise we lose the sweeping grandeur of the vision and are caught up in details that cannot be worked out.

How symbolism corresponds to reality is also important to consider. Many may suppose that if a passage is visionary, it contains meaning but does not correspond to actual people, places, objects, or events, now or in the future.²² This is understand-



Lehi's Vision of the Tree of Life, Aberlardo Lovendino. Courtesy of the Museum of Church History and Art.

able since it makes sense, for example, to accept the meaning of the tree of life as the love of God while rejecting the notion that there is an actual tree of life somewhere whose fruit literally fills the partaker with joy. But the fact that visionary literature is symbolic does not change its possible relationship with reality. Individual symbols may not correspond directly to artifacts in time and space, but

the meaning assigned to them may. The events may even be historical, and then the question becomes how the writer describes history.²³ As Ryken suggests, the “corresponding question we need to ask of visionary literature in the Bible is a further principle of interpretation: *of what historical event or theological reality or event in salvation history does this passage seem to be a symbolic version?*”²⁴

In Lehi’s dream, the fruit of the tree symbolizes the love of God and the Atonement, both of which actually exist. The path represents a way of life that leads to eternal life—a way of life that actually exists. While the images in Lehi’s dream certainly represent these important meanings, it is mainly through studying Nephi’s vision of the tree of life that we can best understand how specific historical events are symbolized in his father’s dream.



In his study of the vision of the tree of life, Corbin T. Volluz explains how Nephi’s account of his own vision may confirm that Lehi’s vision corresponds to actual events.²⁵ Of course, his approach to Lehi’s dream is not the only possible interpretation of how the dream and Nephi’s vision may relate to each other, but it is a careful study that warrants serious attention. The elements of Lehi’s vision, which include the tree of life, fruit, river of water, rod of iron, different groups of people, and the great and spacious building, can be seen in Nephi’s vision of the Lord’s mortal ministry and the apostasy that follows (see 1 Nephi 11). In succeeding chapters (see 1 Nephi 12–14), the vision’s elements are somewhat separated from one another and linked to different future events. The first group of people in Lehi’s dream (those who make some progress but then lose their way after the mists of darkness arise) may correspond to the Nephites who are destroyed for their wickedness before the Savior visits their civilization (see 1 Nephi 12:1–4). The second group (those who hold to the rod, partake of the fruit, but fall away because of the mocking of the people in the great and spacious building) may represent the Nephites who survive the mist of darkness and destruction at the Savior’s crucifixion and partake of the spiritual fruit when the risen Savior ministers to them but whose descendants eventually fall away because of pride (see 1 Nephi 12:5–23). While there does not seem to be any element in Lehi’s vision that corresponds to the next segment of Nephi’s vision—the establishing of the abominable church, removing important parts of the scriptures, the founding of the United States, and the coming forth of latter-day scripture (see 1 Nephi 13)—Volluz believes the lack of corresponding scenes could be because a portion of Lehi’s vision was not recorded: “I, Nephi, do not speak all the words of my father” (1 Nephi 8:29). And the third group of people in Lehi’s dream, who are divided between the righteous who partake of the fruit and remain faithful and the wicked who feel their way toward the building, drown in the depths of the fountain, or become lost on forbidden paths, may relate to Nephi’s vision of the division in the last days between the two churches: the church

John on Patmos Seeing Holy City. © 2006 ProvidenceCollection.com; all rights reserved; image #1389. Courtesy Quebecor Printing of Kingsport, TN—do not copy.

of the Lamb of God and the church of the devil (see 1 Nephi 14).

Volluz's reading of Lehi's vision of the tree of life, in light of the corresponding chapters of Nephi's vision, clearly supports the argument that the vision possesses a key attribute of visionary literature: a symbolic representation of important historical events, theological realities, or events in salvation history. We can interpret Lehi's vision as being concerned with his immediate family, his descendants, the house of Israel, and, in fact, the entire world and the last days.

One more future historical event is part of the vision of the tree of life but is not included in either account: the end of the world. In his vision, Nephi sees John the Revelator and is told that John "shall see and write the remainder of these things; yea, and also many things which have been. And he shall also write concerning the end of the world" (1 Nephi 14:21–22). In other words, Nephi is stopped from giving a complete account of his vision because it includes the end of the world, and the Savior has chosen John to write about that in the book of Revelation.²⁶

The presence of John the Revelator in Nephi's vision adds another element of historical reality to the vision. The way in which Nephi describes his vision of John is significant to the beginning of Lehi's vision: "I looked and beheld a man, and he was dressed in a white robe" (1 Nephi 14:19). Nephi's prophetic vision, which forms an interpretation of his father's dream, drawing out its apocalyptic nature, now comes full circle, ending where his father's dream began (see 1 Nephi 8:5). Though there have been other interpretations of whom the man in the white robe represents in Lehi's dream, from a messenger to a Christ-figure to Moses, I believe that John the Revelator is one important possibility.

Pursuing this idea, we find John greeting Lehi at the beginning of his vision and serving as his guide, taking him to the point when Lehi can turn directly to the Lord and see a vision that can be understood to concern not just his family, or even his descendants, but also the entire world and its ultimate destiny. Thus, when reading 1 Nephi 14:25—"The Lord God hath ordained the apostle of the Lamb of God [John] that he should write [of the apocalypse]"—we are not surprised that the Lord would appoint the man he ordained for that



Lehi's Dream, by David Hyrum Smith. Courtesy of Community of Christ Archives, Independence, Missouri.

purpose to begin and end the vision of the tree of life in the Book of Mormon. Lehi and Nephi may have experienced more in their visions than they recorded. For example, perhaps they both saw the man in the white robe at the beginning and end of their respective visions. However, if we consider what we do know from the record the Book of Mormon offers, it becomes significant that the man who appears at the beginning of Lehi's account could also be the one appearing at the end of Nephi's, thus emphasizing the relatedness of the two accounts.

The Book of Mormon is a work of sacred literature. In particular, the vision of the tree of life is a striking example of visionary literature, with most of its elements pointing to the very heart of the vision, Jesus Christ. It is significant that this important vision is related early in the book, for, as Elder Jeffrey R. Holland has written, "at the very outset of the Book of Mormon, in its first fully developed allegory, Christ is portrayed as the source of eternal life and joy, the living evidence of divine love, and the means whereby God will fulfill his covenant with the house of Israel and indeed the entire family of man, returning them to all their eternal promises."²⁷ 

- data for the history of the two principal capitals in the area, San Lorenzo and La Venta, as well as on some limited survey around both capitals. I draw from the following sources: Michael D. Coe and Richard A. Diehl, *In the Land of the Olmec* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980); Ann Cyphers, "Reconstructing Olmec Life at San Lorenzo," in *Olmec Art of Ancient Mexico*, ed. Elizabeth P. Benson and Beatriz de la Fuente (Washington DC: National Gallery of Art, 1996), 61–71; Cyphers, ed., *Población, Subsistencia y Medio Ambiente en San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1997); Rebecca González Lauck, "La Venta: An Olmec Capital," in *Olmec Art of Ancient Mexico*, 73–81; Stacey C. Symonds and Roberto Lunagómez, "Settlement System and Population Development at San Lorenzo," in *Olmec to Aztec: Settlement Patterns in the Ancient Gulf Lowlands*, ed. Barbara L. Stark and Philip J. Arnold III (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997), 144–73; Symonds, Cyphers, and Lunagómez, *Asentamiento Prehispánico en San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2002); and Christopher von Nagy, "The Geoarchaeology of Settlement in the Grijalva Delta," in *Olmec to Aztec*, 253–77.
41. See John E. Clark, Richard D. Hansen, and Tomás Pérez Suárez, "La Zona Maya en el Preclásico," in *Historia Antigua de México, Volumen 1: El México Antiguo, sus áreas culturales, los orígenes y el horizonte Preclásico*, ed. Linda Manzanilla and Leonardo López Luján (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2000), 437–510.
 42. For basic information see the entries on El Mirador, Kaminaljuyú, and Chiapa de Corzo in Susan Toby Evans and David L. Webster, eds., *Archaeology of Ancient Mexico and Central America: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland Publishing, 2001).
 43. For the demise of the Olmec civilization, see the following: Clark, Hansen, and Pérez, "La Zona Maya," 437–510; John E. Clark and Richard D. Hansen, "The Architecture of Early Kingship: Comparative Perspectives on the Origins of the Maya Royal Court," in *Royal Courts of the Ancient Maya: Vol. 2, Data and Case Studies*, ed. Takeshi Inomata and Stephen D. Houston (Boulder: Westview Press, 2001), 1–45; Richard A. Diehl, *The Olmecs: America's First Civilization* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2005); and González, "La Venta: An Olmec Capital," 73–81.
 44. See Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion*.
 45. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Four Cornerstones of Faith," *Ensign*, February 2004, 6.
- Lehi's Vision of the Tree of Life: Understanding the Dream as Visionary Literature**
Charles Swift
1. Robert L. Millet, "Another Testament of Jesus Christ," in *The Book of Mormon: First Nephi, the Doctrinal Foundation*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1988), 163.
 2. Richard Dilworth Rust, *Feasting on the Word: The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1997), 4.
 3. Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 165.
 4. See, for example, Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); Bernard McGinn, "Revelation," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1990), 523–41; John B. Gabel, Charles B. Wheeler, and Anthony D. York, *The Bible as Literature: An Introduction*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982); and Northrop Frye, *Words with Power: Being a Second Study of the "Bible and Literature"* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990).
 5. Ryken, *Bible as Literature*, 166.
 6. Admittedly, one might argue that "mist of darkness" really means "dark mist," the way the "rod of iron" might be called the "iron rod." This may or may not be the case. There are several other instances in this account in which adjectives are used before nouns to modify them (e.g., "dark and dreary wilderness," "white robe," "dark and dreary waste," "large and spacious field," "strait and narrow path"), indicating, at least, that it's reasonable to read "mist of darkness" to be something other than just a dark mist since the words "dark mist" could have been used to convey that latter meaning.
 7. On the possible connection of the building of Lehi's dream to ancient South Arabian architecture, see S. Kent Brown, "The Queen of Sheba, Skyscraper Architecture, and Lehi's Dream," *JBMS* 11 (2002): 102–3.
 8. On the connections to desert geography and other features of life in Lehi's dream, see S. Kent Brown, "New Light from Arabia on Lehi's Trail," in *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002), 64–69, 102–4.
 9. S. Kent Brown, "Lehi, Journey of, to the promised land," in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey et al. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 515.
 10. Ryken, *Bible as Literature*, 167; emphasis in original.
 11. Ryken, *Bible as Literature*, 167; emphasis in original.
 12. Ryken, *Bible as Literature*, 169; emphasis in original.
 13. Examples of ancient Arabian houses "built after the Babylonian design of Lehi's day" were 10 and 12 stories high, with their windows starting 20 to 50 feet above the ground for purposes of defense. "At night these lighted windows would certainly give the effect of being suspended above the earth." Early castles of Arabia looked like they stood in the air, high above the earth (see Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988], 257; also see Brown, "Lehi, Journey of, to the promised land," 515). The fact that such ancient houses existed, however, does not change the argument that the vision of the tree of life demands that the reader deal with unfamiliar images. The Book of Mormon is an ancient book written for modern times—its readers are the people of today, not those contemporaneous with Lehi or anyone else in the book. While there may be images in the vision that correspond with what some people in the book may have actually seen in life, these same images are unfamiliar to readers of the Book of Mormon.
 14. Ryken, *Bible as Literature*, 170; emphasis in original.
 15. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), s.v. "Dreams, Visions."
 16. Of course, we might choose to divide up the vision into components in several different ways. For this chart, however, I have basically chosen to designate a new component when the location of the action changes. Lehi's location does not change once he has partaken of the fruit of the tree, but the location of the events he is observing and talking about does.
 17. Ryken, *Bible as Literature*, 170–71; emphasis in original.
 18. Ryken, *Bible as Literature*, 171.
 19. Leland Ryken, *Literature of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974), 339.
 20. Corbin T. Volluz, "Lehi's Dream of the Tree of Life: Springboard to Prophecy," *JBMS* 2/2 (1993): 38.
 21. Ryken, *Bible as Literature*, 173.
 22. It is interesting that while people are concerned about the historicity of symbols, rarely do they concern themselves with the symbolism of history. Just as symbols can correspond to actual events, actual events can be understood to be symbolic. I do not refer only to ritual and ceremony, such as the sacrament or baptism, which are by definition symbolic actions. I refer to events in everyday life that normally would not be considered anything out of the ordinary but that can actually be seen as pointing to meaning beyond themselves. For example, Elder Boyd K. Packer spoke

of an experience he had years ago in Cuzco, Peru. When Elder Packer was in a sacrament meeting, a small native boy came inside the building off the streets. A woman there “banished him” from the meeting, but the boy later returned. Elder Packer held out his arms, and the boy ran to him and sat on his lap. Then Elder Packer, “as something symbolic,” set him in Elder A. Theodore Tuttle’s chair. When Elder Packer returned home, he told President Spencer W. Kimball about the event. President Kimball told him that the

experience had “far greater meaning than [Elder Packer had] yet come to know” and that he had held a nation on his lap (see Boyd K. Packer, “Children,” *Ensign*, May 2002, 7, 9).

23. Ryken, *Literature of the Bible*, 339.

24. Ryken, *Bible as Literature*, 172; emphasis in original.

25. See Volluz, “Lehi’s Dream,” 16–29.

26. It is interesting that John warns us not to add or take away from the book of Revelation (see Revelation 22:18–19). If Nephi had been permitted

to write about the end of the world, we would have received his account *after* having received John’s, and it would be as though Nephi had added to what John had written.

Contrary to what some claim (that John was referring to the Bible and that therefore the Book of Mormon illegitimately adds to it), John could only have been referring to the book of Revelation, and Nephi was expressly forbidden from even appearing as if he were adding to it.

27. Jeffrey R. Holland, *Christ and the New Covenant* (Salt Lake

City: Deseret Book, 1997), 162.

Chart, page 60

1. The original manuscript of the Book of Mormon reads *pressing* here, but Oliver Cowdery misread it as *feeling* when preparing the printer’s manuscript. See Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part One: 1 Nephi 1 – 2 Nephi 10* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 187.