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# The Book of Mormon As an Ancient Book

C. Wilfred Griggs

Typical of attempts to deny the authenticity of the Book of Mormon are a work entitled *The Truth about the "Lehi Tree-of-Life" Stone*<sup>1</sup> and an unpublished manuscript recently sent to the author by a professional journal for evaluation. In both instances, the authors list parallels between Lucy Mack Smith's account of a dream which Joseph Smith, Sr., experienced in ca. 1811<sup>2</sup> and the account of the Tree of Life dream in 1 Nephi 8 through 15. The purpose for listing the parallels is to show that Joseph Smith, Jr., got the inspiration from his father (either directly or perhaps indirectly through his mother) for most of the symbols in the dream. One author, Hougey, avers that "arbitrary or unexpected similarities" in the two accounts "rule out the possibility of independent development,"<sup>3</sup> although he does not give criteria for determining when similarities can be considered "arbitrary or unexpected." Within the framework of his own bias, Hougey is apparently unwilling to see any alternative to his hypothesis that Joseph Smith simply borrowed the dream account from the Smith family traditions.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Hal Hougey, *The Truth about the "Lehi Tree-of-Life" Stone* (Concord: Pacific Publishing Co., 1963).

<sup>2</sup>Both authors refer to the first edition of Lucy Mack Smith's biography of Joseph (*Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet, and His Progenitors for Many Generations* [Liverpool: S. W. Richards, 1853], pp. 58–59), although the account of the dream has not been changed in the revised edition (*History of Joseph Smith by His Mother, Lucy Mack Smith* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954], pp. 48–50). I have used the account in the revised edition.

<sup>3</sup>Hougey, "Lehi Tree-of-Life" Stone, p. 24.

<sup>4</sup>There is no evidence that Lucy Mack Smith committed her material to writing before 1845, and because the Book of Mormon was printed by 26 March 1830, some question exists regarding the influence of the Book of Mormon phrasing on Lucy Smith's work. According to Lucy's chronology, the particular dream of her husband which is used by critics in their comparison occurred in 1811, nineteen years before the Book of Mormon was published in English and thirty-four years before Lucy's work was written. The complex nature of possible influences over so lengthy a period of time in narrating a dream experience is beyond reconstruction with certainty. Hougey argues polemically and tendentiously that if one suggests the Book of Mormon account influenced Lucy Smith in her phrasing or wording in recounting the dream of Joseph Smith, Sr., one must then admit "that Joseph Smith's mother was dishonest, and that she willingly and purposely jeopardized the reputation of her son" (Hougey, "Lehi Tree-of-Life" Stone, p. 25). He then states that such could not have been the case "in view of all the things she says about him," returning to his simplistic theory that the only direction of influence was from Lucy Smith to her son.

## DETERMINING THE METHOD

The major weakness of such criticisms is the one-dimensional approach taken to problems which the Book of Mormon presents. The assumption that any parallels between the world of Joseph Smith and the world of the Book of Mormon, real or imagined (e.g., the similarities to the account of the dream of Joseph Smith, Sr., in the case of the former, and the superficial points of contact with Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews* in the case of the latter), are sufficient to discredit the Book of Mormon is naive. The challenge of the Book of Mormon lies elsewhere. It claims to be an ancient book, and it must be examined and criticized in terms of this claim.

If, as Joseph Smith states, it is a translation, any modern language source material which the translator found useful or helpful in his translating efforts cannot be used *ipso facto* as evidence against the authenticity of his work. In addition to identifying any language parallels with modern language sources, the critic must also analyze the historical, cultural, and social elements which are found throughout the narrative of the Book of Mormon and then must show that these elements cannot represent the ancient world home claimed for them before he can disprove the antiquity of the book. Since it is highly unlikely that anyone could invent a work which represents Ancient Near Eastern society accurately, and in such great length as the Book of Mormon (even a transplanted segment of that society would retain many characteristics of its original home which could be checked for accuracy), subjecting the book to the test of integrity in a historical context would be a reasonable task for any scholar to undertake. Criticism of fraudulent texts which use Christ as the subject (e.g., the *Archko Volume* or the *Infancy Gospels*) as well as of numerous other non-Christian forgeries shows how rather easily scholars can discredit such attempts.

The Book of Mormon deserves the same kind of test, especially in view of the continuing avalanche of materials relating to the Ancient Near East that have been recovered during the last century. Because such materials were unknown in the early nineteenth century, they provide an ideal control against which to measure the Book of Mormon, for Joseph Smith obviously could not have had access to them while writing the book. It is precisely this dimension of historical criticism, however, which has been almost totally neglected in attempts to prove the book a fraud. Hugh Nibley, the leading Mormon scholar in the field of antiquity, is one of the few individuals up to the present time who has applied serious tests of historical

compatibility to the Book of Mormon.<sup>5</sup> This paper attempts to continue in this methodology, a methodology accepted generally in disciplines related to ancient studies.

An instructive example of how to handle a text such as the Book of Mormon has recently been provided through the providence of manuscript preservation and recovery. In 1958, Professor Morton Smith of Columbia University was examining manuscripts in a monastery near Jerusalem when he happened on a two-and-one-half page text purporting to be a letter of Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150 to ca. 215) to a certain Theodore.<sup>6</sup> The letter does not correspond to any previously known texts of Clement and there is no known Theodore who associated with the Alexandrian theologian. The paper on which the text was found is a heavy white binder's paper commonly found in books in Venice during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the handwriting on it is dated variably from the late seventeenth century to the early nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> By scholarly consensus, Smith was able to date the manuscripts at 1750, plus or minus fifty years. Although the scribe is acknowledged to be experienced, as noted by good spelling and correct use of accents (the language is Greek), the nature of the writing indicates he was in a hurry. It is therefore impossible to tell whether he is responsible for the high quality of the text or if he is simply copying a work of unusually good literary and grammatical character.

The material in the letter was totally unexpected, especially since it speaks favorably of a *Secret Gospel of Mark*, which was essentially sacramental or ordinance-oriented and which depicted Jesus as a mystagogue for Christians who wished to become perfect by being led as "hearers into the innermost sanctuary of that truth hidden by seven veils."<sup>8</sup> With its modern paper, modern handwriting, and unfamiliar and unexpected contents, one would expect the manuscript to have all the ingredients of a first-class forgery. But Smith chose to judge the document by what he considers "the primary test for authenticity," namely the examination of the text in terms of its

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<sup>5</sup>Nibley's three major works in this area are *Lehi in the Desert and the World of the Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1952); *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1964); and *Since Cumorah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1967). The debt of any writer in this field, including my own, will be obvious to anyone familiar with Nibley's treatment of the subject, even when, as in the present instance, other materials relating to Book of Mormon origins are being considered for the first time in that context.

<sup>6</sup>Morton Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), p. ix.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 1. Smith submitted photographs of the manuscript to a number of specialists who generously supplied opinions on the date of the hand. Although different dates were favored by the scholars, Smith states that all agreed on the possibility of an eighteenth-century date.

<sup>8</sup>Clement to Theodore, fol. 1, recto lines 22-23 and line 17.

claimed historical and literary context. After writing nearly 450 pages comparing the style, language, and contents of the short text to already-known ancient sources, Smith concluded that he had found a copy of an authentic letter of Clement and that “the consequences for the history of the early Christian Church and for New Testament criticism are revolutionary.”<sup>9</sup>

If a two-and-one-half page text can elicit 450 pages of analysis and commentary in an attempt to determine its authenticity, one would not expect less from the scholarly world in the case of the Book of Mormon. Nevertheless, the book has received little serious attention from specialists in ancient studies. In this paper, given the limitations imposed by time and space, I will discuss only two specific instances of recently recovered materials which relate to the original world of the Book of Mormon, particularly to Lehi’s dream. They are worth considering here as a limited approach to the larger question of historical compatibility in the Book of Mormon.

#### THE GOLD PLATES, RIVERS, AND THE TREE OF LIFE

A major religious movement sweeping through the Greek world in the sixth century B.C. became known in later time as Orphism.<sup>10</sup> Although, due to the paucity of extant sources, little is known concerning early Orphism,<sup>11</sup> it is believed that after originating in Thrace the religious beliefs spread rapidly via the Greeks throughout the Mediterranean world.<sup>12</sup> The popularity of the movement can be inferred from a literary fragment attributed to the sixth-century poet Ibykos, which says Ὀνομακλυτὸν Ὀρφήν — “well-known or famous Orpheus.”<sup>13</sup> It can be assumed that the Greeks were familiar with this religious philosophy and that they may have been spreading it throughout the eastern Mediterranean, including Egypt, from the seventh century B.C. We know that the Greeks had good trade

<sup>9</sup>Smith, *Clement of Alexandria*, pp. 4 and ix.

<sup>10</sup>G. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1964), p. 37f; Jane Harrison, *Themis* (1927; reprint ed., New York: Meridian Books, 1962), p. 462; W. K. C. Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1966), p. 11; and Kathleen Freeman, *Companion to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), p. 1.

<sup>11</sup>E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966), p. 147. The author states, “But I must confess that I know very little about early Orphism, and the more I read about it the more my knowledge diminishes. Twenty years ago, I could have said quite a lot about it (we all could at that time). Since then, I have lost a great deal of knowledge.” New discoveries tend to upset old theories.

<sup>12</sup>The Thracian origin is argued in Dodds, *Greeks and the Irrational*, p. 147, and Freeman, *Companion to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers*, pp. 1–2; and on the story relating to Orpheus and Orphic rituals, see Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion*, p. 25ff; F. M. Cornford, *From Religion to Philosophy* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), p. 178n., mentions possible connections with Iranian or Persian influences on Orphism, suggesting a more eastward origin for the theology of the movement.

<sup>13</sup>Hermann Diels and Walther Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (1952; reprint ed., Berlin: Weidmann, 1960), 1:3, citing Ibykos, fr. 17.

relations with non-Greek countries of the Near East throughout that century.<sup>14</sup>

Guthrie implies that it was possible to have come in contact with *Orphica* through writings rather than through direct preaching, because “Orphism always was a literature, first and foremost.” Rather than being a collection of *dogmata* within a narrow tradition, Orphism was a way of life which may not have required worship of a new god or a change in established worship patterns.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Freeman characterizes the later collection of Orphic literature as “a collection of writings of different periods and varying outlook, something like that of the Bible.”<sup>16</sup> Orphism was influenced by other religions, both Greek and non-Greek,<sup>17</sup> and its syncretistic material was later quoted freely in Christian and Neo-Platonic sources.<sup>18</sup>

Beyond the many divergent texts and ideas which become part of the *Orphica*, there appears to have been a special body of material collected into hexametric poems considered authoritative in Orphic circles.<sup>19</sup> The earliest-preserved tradition from the fifth century B.C. concerning this even earlier Orphic poetry states that it was engraved on tablets which were to be found in Thrace.<sup>20</sup> According to the Pseudo-Platonic dialogue, *Axiochos*, these tablets were said to have been made of bronze, and the fate of the soul in the spirit world (Hades) was the subject of the message engraved upon them. The plates were further said to have been brought to Delos by two seers from the land of the Hyperboreans,<sup>21</sup> indicating that it was the religious significance and divine source of the material which justified its being engraved upon metal plates.

Guenther Zuntz observes that although metals were not used as writing materials as often as papyrus, animal skins, wood, or stone, “they were so used, and that by no means rarely.”<sup>22</sup> Among the

<sup>14</sup>R. Sealey, *A History of the Greek City States, 700–338 B.C.* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), p. 52; J. B. Bury and R. Meiggs, *A History of Greece*, 4th ed. (London: Macmillan & Co., 1975), pp. 84–85; and Chester G. Starr, *The Economic and Social Growth of Early Greece, 800–500 B.C.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 49–51. That religion spread with trade during this period is suggested by Guthrie (*Orpheus and Greek Religion*, p. 11): “It is generally agreed that there was considerable activity, whether nascent or renaissant, in the sphere of Orphic and kindred religion, in the sixth century B.C.”

<sup>15</sup>Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion*, pp. 9, 10. I. M. Linforth, *The Arts of Orpheus* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1941), states that before 300 B.C. the description “Orphic” was applied to all sorts of ideas associated with every manner of ritual.

<sup>16</sup>Freeman, *Companion to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers*, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup>See note 15, and Harrison, *Themis*, p. 462f.

<sup>18</sup>Freeman, *Companion to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers*, p. 5.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 4. See examples of the hexameters attributed to Orpheus in Plato *Cratylus* 402b; *Philebus* 66c; and a reference to Orphic hexameters in *Ion* 536b.

<sup>20</sup>Euripides *Alcestis* 965ff. The scholiast on the passage, a contemporary of Plato, stated that the tablets actually existed at that time on Mount Haimos.

<sup>21</sup>Pseudo-Plato *Axiochos* 371a.

<sup>22</sup>Guenther Zuntz, *Persephone* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 278.

many examples which could be cited, one notes an inscribed fifth-century bronze disc from Luso in Arkadia,<sup>23</sup> and a number of bronze plaques inscribed with legal texts or dedications.<sup>24</sup> Of quite a different nature are the *Defixionum Tabellae* (tablets of enchantments or curses), written on tablets of lead and buried in graves and chthonic sanctuaries. The purpose of burying such texts was to bring the curses to the attention of the deities of the next life whom the plates invoke to pronounce penalties upon the writers' enemies. These lead plates date from the fifth century B.C. onward and are found throughout the Greek world, from Sicily to Syria. Zuntz suggests that lead was used because it changes in time from a shiny silver color when fresh to a "dark color and dead heaviness," an appropriate combination for the pernicious purposes of the texts.<sup>25</sup>

In the opposite thematic direction from plates containing curses and penalties is the small gold plate (less than one inch in height) which was found at Amphipolis and which has engraven upon it an inscription of ten lines of magical names and formulae, for example, "Βαρουχ Αδωναι Ουριηλ Γαβριηλ Μιχαηλ, κτλ." (Baruch, Adonai, Uriel, Gabriel, Michael, etc.).<sup>26</sup> One gold plate, unearthed in Gallep on the Lower Rhine, the site of a Roman camp, contains an inscription of magical names and incantations which Sieburg identified as Egyptian, Jewish, Phoenician, and Babylonian.<sup>27</sup> Similar texts have been found inscribed on silver and bronze,<sup>28</sup> as well as prescriptions for writing protective and religious spells on tablets of gold, silver, bronze, and tin.<sup>29</sup> The gold plates with the magical spells, however, date from the Roman period, while the aforementioned lead plates with the curses date from the classical age of Greece. One might look for gold plates from the earlier period with religious texts inscribed upon them to help establish historical compatibility for the Book of Mormon.

The famous Orphic gold plates provide perhaps the best examples of such early religious texts written upon tablets of gold and buried in the ground. There are at least seventeen such plates known

<sup>23</sup>*Inscriptiones Graecae* V, 2. 387; cf. V, 2. 390, 566.

<sup>24</sup>Zuntz, *Persephone*, p. 278, n. 7, referring to O. Kern, *Inscriptiones Graecae*, 1. 1, pls. 8, 10, and 21. Plate 8 is a bronze plaque from Mycenae and plate 10 is one from Thetonium in Thessaly. Cf. V. Arangio-Ruiz and Olivieri, *Inscriptiones Siciliae et M. Graeciae* (1925) for numerous examples, e.g., an archaic bronze plaque from Policastro (p. 47). These date from the sixth and fifth centuries B.C., and numerous examples from later periods could be cited.

<sup>25</sup>Zuntz, *Persephone*, p. 279.

<sup>26</sup>*British Museum Catalogue*, p. 378, no. 3153, cited in Zuntz, *Persephone*, p. 279f. No. 3150 in the *BM* is a similar gold plate, and others have been found.

<sup>27</sup>F. Sieburg, *Bonner Jahrbuecher*, 103 (1898): 123ff.

<sup>28</sup>A. Wiedemann, *Bonner Jahrbuecher*, 79 (1885): 215ff; and Sieburg, *Bonner Jahrbuecher*, p. 123ff.

<sup>29</sup>Sieburg, *Bonner Jahrbuecher*, p. 136ff.

at present, found in ancient burial sites in such widely scattered areas as Italy, Greece, and Crete.<sup>30</sup> The plate first found was discovered probably in the eighteenth century, although it was not published until 1836.<sup>31</sup> The most recently discovered plate came to light in 1972 and was published in 1976.<sup>32</sup> Dating of the plates is difficult, due to lack of similar texts to which they may be compared, but Zuntz and Burkert date them from as early as the fifth century B.C. in one instance and as late as the third century A.D. in another (most are dated to the fourth century B.C. or earlier).<sup>33</sup> Zuntz hypothesized the existence of a larger text which was the ancestor of the gold plate texts and which, when read to an audience of initiates, was accompanied by ritual acts, although he did not accept the earlier opinions of Wieten and Harrison that these acts were celebrations of mysteries relating to a mystic death and resurrection for the living.<sup>34</sup> Despite Zuntz's reluctance to acknowledge the earlier text as a "didactic poem," a recently found Orphic papyrus, dated to the fourth century B.C. and discovered in a tomb near Thessaloniki, contains a commentary on an authoritative Orphic poem, perhaps a form of the one which preceded the fragments on the gold tablets.<sup>35</sup> Because of this ancient commentary, Burkert assumes a date for the original poem to be at least the fifth or sixth century B.C.

All commentators agree that the material on the gold plates is not indigenous to Greece but represents foreign influences from the sixth century or earlier. Zuntz suggests that the apparent cultic influence on the earlier version of the ritual formulary could well have come from Egypt, a hypothesis proposed by others before him.<sup>36</sup> Harrison, however, attributes the enrichment of the poem with ritual elements to Iranian influence.<sup>37</sup> The influence was certainly from the Ancient Near East, even if there is no agreement on where the ideas were found originally.

Commentators agree that the texts on the plates are related to

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<sup>30</sup>In addition to the list of plates and their origins given in Zuntz, *Persephone*, p. 286, two others are known to the author. One is in the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles and the other was discovered in southern Italy (Hipponios) in 1972 and published by Zuntz, "Text der Lamelle von Hipponion," in *Wiener Studien (WST)* 89 (1976). The last mentioned plate will be discussed in some detail.

<sup>31</sup>Zuntz, *Persephone*, p. 355.

<sup>32</sup>Zuntz, *WST* 89 (1976), esp. p. 132 for text.

<sup>33</sup>Zuntz, *Persephone*, pp. 294ff, 355ff. Walter Burkert, while visiting U.C. Berkeley as the Sather Classical Lecturer in 1977, gave some information and opinions concerning the plates, which information will be used in this paper.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 343.

<sup>35</sup>This papyrus was discussed in some detail by Professor Burkert, who stated that it clearly predates the tomb in which it was found. Presocratic concepts from Anaxagoras and Democritus were found in the text, but nothing later than the fifth century can be seen in the work.

<sup>36</sup>Zuntz, *Persephone*, pp. 342f, 370ff; Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion*, pp. 177, 198, 208; and Freeman, *Companion to the Greek Pre-Socratic Philosophers*, pp. 7, 14, et passim.

<sup>37</sup>Harrison, *Themis*, p. 462ff.



one another, even though various plates contain different parts or aspects of the original work. I am not concerned here with the task of reconstructing the parts into the original order of the whole or with determining how each aspect of the original has been altered or preserved on the different plates. For the present, the consideration of various elements of the poem is as important as an examination of the places they occupied in the original work. Following Guthrie, Zuntz, Burkert, and others, the texts will be translated and presented as concisely as possible in order to place the general story before the reader. Where another translator is not named, I present my own rendition.

“This is the tomb [rule] of remembrance if someone is about to die.<sup>38</sup>  
You go to the well-fashioned houses of Hades [realm of departed spirits].”

“You shall find to the left of the House of Hades a spring . . .  
to this spring you must not come near.”<sup>39</sup>

“Go to the right as far as one should go, being right wary in all things.”<sup>40</sup>

“There is to the right a spring,  
near which is standing a white cypress.  
There the souls of the dead who descend refresh themselves.”<sup>41</sup>

“Further on, you shall find another, the Lake of Remembrance, and cold water flowing forth, and there are guardians above it.<sup>42</sup>  
They will ask you in their astute minds,  
‘For what purpose are you searching [wandering] about the dark regions of the destructive netherworld?’ ”<sup>43</sup>

“Who are you? Whence are you?”<sup>44</sup>  
[The answer follows]  
“Here I stand before you, pure from impurity, Queen of those below,<sup>45</sup>  
and Eukles and Eubouleus, and the other immortal gods and daemons,<sup>46</sup>

<sup>38</sup>The first part of the text is taken from the Hipponios tablet found in 1972. It is one of the earliest of the plates, dating perhaps to the fifth century. There is some question whether “tomb” or “rule” should be read, but I here follow the editors of the text.

<sup>39</sup>Petelia Plate (B<sub>1</sub>), lines 1–3. In this plate alone, the tree mentioned below is found by the forbidden spring on the left. Elsewhere the tree is beside the spring on the right, where commentators agree it belongs.

<sup>40</sup>Plate from Thurii (A<sub>4</sub>), line 2, translation of Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion*, p. 173.

<sup>41</sup>Hipponios plate, lines 2–4.

<sup>42</sup>Combined from B<sub>1</sub>, lines 4–5, and Hipponios plate, lines 6–7.

<sup>43</sup>Hipponios plate, lines 8–9.

<sup>44</sup>Plates from Crete (B<sub>3</sub>–B<sub>8</sub>), line 3.

<sup>45</sup>This text comes from the plates from Thurii, designated A<sub>1</sub>–A<sub>3</sub>, and from B<sub>1</sub>. A composite rendering of the four is given below. The more common rendering, “I am come from the pure, pure Queen of those below,” is rejected by Zuntz, *Persephone*, p. 306, following E. Rohde et al., *Psyche* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 2:218. The adjective is unsuitable for the goddess, and, ritually speaking, it is the soul which has become καθαρά ἐκ καθαρῶν (“pure from the pure”). No agreement exists on the goddess’s identity.

<sup>46</sup>Zuntz notes that the words “suggest an assembly of gods which it is hard, even so, to visualize” (*Persephone*, pp. 311–12).

for I also profess that I am one of your blessed race,  
and I have paid the penalty for unrighteous deeds.”  
“Say, ‘I am a son of earth and of starry heaven,  
but my race is of heaven alone. This you yourselves know.’”<sup>47</sup>

“‘But I am parched with thirst and I am about to perish. Give to me  
quickly the cold water which flows forth from the Lake of Memory.’”<sup>48</sup>

“And they will have pity under the king of the underworld,  
[or perhaps: “And they will initiate you to the king of the under-  
world”]

and they themselves will give you to drink from the holy spring,  
and thenceforth among the other heroes you shall have lordship.”<sup>49</sup>

[The gods speak:]

“Hail, you who have suffered the suffering. This you have never  
suffered before.

You are become god from man.

A kid you are fallen into milk.

Hail, hail to you journeying the right hand road

By the holy meadows and groves of Persephone.”<sup>50</sup>

“You are going a long way, which others also [go],  
initiates and Bacchoi, heirs of the holy way.”<sup>51</sup>

The preceding text is a composite of the various texts which have already been acknowledged as being associated in origin and thought.<sup>52</sup> A commentary on the text represents a sampling of the scholarly opinions presently held concerning the material.

The major difficulty for many has been to specify the religious movement with which the plates are to be identified. They have long been known as the “Orphic gold plates,” but Zuntz observes that on no plate is there a clear hint pointing to Orpheus or Dionysius, and “no reason remains for describing the religion to which they witness as ‘orphyic.’”<sup>53</sup> Still, the claim in Pseudo-Plato *Axiochos* that the subject of the ancient bronze plates was the fate of the soul in the spirit world is precisely the subject of the texts considered above.<sup>54</sup> It

<sup>47</sup>Hipponios plate, line 10, and B<sub>1</sub>, lines 6–7.

<sup>48</sup>Hipponios plate, lines 11–12, and B<sub>1</sub>, lines 8–9.

<sup>49</sup>Hipponios plate, lines 13–14, and B<sub>1</sub>, lines 10–12. The alternate translation was suggested by an emended spelling proposed by M. West. It is left in parentheses in favor of the reading on the plate, although spelling difficulties exist in line 13 as it stands.

<sup>50</sup>A<sub>4</sub>, lines 3–7, translated by Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion*, p. 173.

<sup>51</sup>Hipponios plate, lines 15–16.

<sup>52</sup>Analysis of the metrical difficulties in the poetic lines, and also of the presence of some prosaic elements in certain of the plates, has led to attempts at determining what portions of the texts were original and which were added later. There is no real agreement at present on solutions to such problems, and even suspected additions must be earlier than the basic composition given above, that is, prior to the fourth century B.C.

<sup>53</sup>Zuntz, *Persephone*, p. 326. The single exception is the term *Bacchoi* in line 16 of the Hipponios plate, not known when he wrote this book. Burkert considers this at best a slender thread to connect with “Orphism.”

<sup>54</sup>Pseudo-Plato *Axiochos* 371a.

is further claimed that the bronze plates of Pseudo-Plato are the same as the "Thracian tablets which tuneful Orpheus carved out," as mentioned by Euripides in the *Alcestis*.<sup>55</sup> There is considerable harmony in subject matter between the anciently attested bronze plates of Thrace as reported in ancient sources and the gold plates which have been recovered in modern times. Gunthrie summarizes the message of the gold plates as follows:

The purpose of the plates is clear from their contents. The dead man is given those portions of his sacred literature which will instruct him how to behave when he finds himself on the road to the lower world. They tell him the way he is to go and the words he is to say. They also quote the favourable answer which he may expect from the powers of that world when he has duly reminded them of his claims on their benevolence.<sup>56</sup>

Zuntz suggests that the text and some unspecified accompanying rites "in which the journey of the deceased to Persephone was symbolically enacted" were celebrated by the living at the burial of the dead. The rites "were considered indispensable if a soul was to attain to its 'proper and blissful consummation.'" He attempts to identify the ritual drama with Pythagorean rites and argues that "the preservation, through the centuries, of these texts, and the custom of inscribing them on gold leaves to accompany the dead, became understandable . . . as elements, and evidence, of these Pythagorean rites."<sup>57</sup>

The ritual nature of the text is further suggested by the fact that although the engraved Hipponios tablet was found in the grave of a female, line ten says, "I am a *son* of earth and of starry heaven." The same text seems to be necessary for all participants, male and female. A separate study of related sources reveals the necessity of also performing such ritual acts on behalf of the dead.

As the spirit of the deceased enters Hades, or the realm of departed spirits, counsel is given to avoid the path on the left and to keep to the one on the right. Plato may be drawing upon the same religious or literary tradition when he has Socrates say of the path to Hades:

To be sure, the journey is not as Aeschylus has Telephos speak of it. For he states that the path leads straight to Hades, but it seems to me to be neither straight nor single. Otherwise there would not be any need of guides, for surely one would not go astray if there were only one path.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup>Euripides *Alcestis* 967-70.

<sup>56</sup>Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion*, p. 172.

<sup>57</sup>Zuntz, *Persephone*, p. 343.

<sup>58</sup>Plato *Phaedo* 108a.

Plato is more explicit in the *Gorgias*, where in the final pages Socrates gives a mythical account of the judgment which takes place in Hades.<sup>59</sup> Socrates gives his opinion that after death men go to a great meadow where there is a crossroads. Those who are deemed just in the judgment given there may take the path in Hades which leads to the Isles of the Blest, while the unjust must take the path which leads to Tartaros. Hades is not only a place of judgment but also a temporary abode for those in transit to a more permanent residence. Finally, in the *Republic*, Plato appears to make allusion to the same source as that which is behind the gold plates.<sup>60</sup> Socrates is speaking to Glaucon and tells him of a story in which, after the judgment of souls, the unjust had to take the path leading to the left and downward, while the just could take the path leading to the right and upward. In the gold plates, then, the avoidance of the spring on the left is clearly equivalent to the avoidance of a place of suffering, or hell.

Despite the apparent confusion in the various plates about the number of springs of water (the *spring* near the cypress is not always identified with the *Lake* of Memory, nor is the distinction always clear between the spring on the left and the one on the right), scholars generally assume that there are only two springs.<sup>61</sup> Zuntz suggests that the spring near the tree may actually be flowing from the Lake of Memory,<sup>62</sup> but the essential unity of the two springs on the path to the right is still maintained. The spring of *Lethe*, or forgetfulness, is likely the one on the left because the spring and lake on the right are associated with *Mnemosyne*, or remembrance.<sup>63</sup>

*Lethe*, or forgetfulness, appears as a personified goddess first in Hesiod's *Theogony*, but she is found in rather bad company:

But abhorred Strife bare painful Toil and Forgetfulness and Famine and tearful Sorrows, Fightings also, Battles, Murders, Manslaughters, Quarrels, Lying Words, Disputes, Lawlessness and Ruin, all of one nature, and Oath who most troubles men upon earth when anyone willfully swears a false oath.<sup>64</sup>

This mention of *Lethe* occurs in the context of a description of the goddesses who, as the offspring of Night, have the task of punishing sinners with appropriate penalties.<sup>65</sup> By the time of Plato, *Lethe* had

<sup>59</sup>Plato *Gorgias* 523ff, esp. 524a.

<sup>60</sup>Plato *Republic* 614ff, esp. 614c.

<sup>61</sup>Jane Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1903; reprint ed; Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1959), p. 574; cf. below, note 63.

<sup>62</sup>Zuntz, *Persephone*, p. 378.

<sup>63</sup>Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religions*, p. 177f; Zuntz, *Persephone*, p. 378ff; and Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, p. 574f.

<sup>64</sup>Hesiod *Theogony* 226–30.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*, 211–25.

become a river which was destructive to the unjust and which was to be avoided by the just. Plato tells the myth of Er, the Pamphylian, who dies in war and is miraculously restored to life. In this tale, obviously well-known enough to be proverbial by the fifth century, Er gives an account of the nature of the world of departed spirits, and Socrates concludes from the myth that only the souls of the just can escape the punishment of drinking from the spring of *Lethe* and forgetting everything.<sup>66</sup> Elsewhere, Plato speaks of the soul which has not followed in the path of the gods as one which falls to the earth burdened with a load of forgetfulness and wrongdoing.<sup>67</sup> Zuntz states that “death is, in essence, forgetting,” whereas to seek the drink from the spring or lake of memory is to seek life, and “they who retain memory are those who are ripe for a higher form of existence.”<sup>68</sup>

The tree beside the spring has been consistently identified as a “Tree of Life,” although the Greek phrase, “white cypress,” is troublesome to many:

This ‘white cypress’ indeed has never ceased puzzling students; for the cypress is not white. . . . Even if the Greek adjective is taken in its wider and basic sense (‘shining’), its application to this dark tree remains unexplained.<sup>69</sup>

Guthrie also admits his uncertainty concerning the description of the tree:

Concerning the white cypress I do not see that it helps towards an explanation to say that by white cypress the writer meant a white poplar (as Comparette in *Laminetti Orfiche*, Florence, 1910), an admittedly common, as well as extremely beautiful tree, and one, moreover, which had associations with the dead. It is a striking feature of the poem, and I hope that some day our knowledge of infernal history may be widened sufficiently to include it.<sup>70</sup>

A. B. Cook proffers the suggestion that “on the whole it seems most likely that the tree of the tablets was a miraculous cypress.”<sup>71</sup> As such, he continues, the white cypress is in line with such marvelous trees as the silver apple tree of the Celts or the twelve-fruited tree of the Revelation. One should also note that, according to Pseudo-Kallisthenes, when Alexander the Great consulted the two oracular

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<sup>66</sup>Plato *Republic* 621. *Lethe* is forgetting, and the Greek word for truth, *aletheia*, has been seen as “non-forgetting.” The reward for the just is to have knowledge preserved or restored, just as the punishment for the unjust is to forget what they know.

<sup>67</sup>Plato *Phaedrus* 248c.

<sup>68</sup>Zuntz, *Persephone*, pp. 380–81.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., p. 373.

<sup>70</sup>Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion*, p. 182.

<sup>71</sup>A. B. Cook, *Zeus* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1940), 3:420–21.

trees of the Sun and the Moon in Prasiake, the trees were similar to cypresses, although nothing is said concerning their color.<sup>72</sup>

The ritual nature of the plates has been noted above, but just what comprised the ritual actions or how they accompanied the text has not been clearly determined or agreed upon by commentators. Zuntz argues for Pythagorean mysteries, Guthrie for Orphic rites, and Harrison for Cretan adaptations (in an Orphic manner) of Egyptian funerary ceremonies. Guthrie notes that it is impossible even to tell whether the dialogue occurs between the initiate and the gods of Hades or the guide of the spirit of the deceased.<sup>73</sup> There is one matter concerning the plates upon which all do agree: they originated in or were strongly influenced by Near Eastern culture and religion.

#### THE NEAR EASTERN CONNECTION

One of the earliest commentators to make the connection between Orphic beliefs and Egypt was Herodotus. In a famous statement from his book on Egypt, the historian states that Egyptians did not permit woolen articles in their temples nor would they be buried in woolen garments. "In this," he continues, "they agree with the so-called Orphika or Bacchika, which are really Egyptian and Pythagorean. For in these rites also, if a man share in them, it is not lawful for him to be buried in woolen garments."<sup>74</sup>

In the present instance of the so-called Orphic texts, virtually all modern scholars have suggested an Egyptian origin for them because of the reference in some of the gold tablets to ψυχρὸν ὕδωρ ("cold or refreshing water"). This connection is usually based on some funeral monuments bearing the following inscription: δοίη ὁ Ὄσιρις τὸ ψυχρὸν ὕδωρ ("May Osiris grant [to you] cold or refreshing water").<sup>75</sup> These monuments date no earlier than the Roman Empire, however, and their relevance to the gold plates has been disputed.<sup>76</sup> Language similar to that on the plates has also been found on a magical papyrus from Egypt: "Hail to the water white and the tree with the leaves high hanging."<sup>77</sup> Similarity of both the gold plates and the Egyptian sources just quoted with the early Christian term *refrigerium* denoting the "refreshment" of the dead in

<sup>72</sup>Pseudo-Kallisthenes *Historia Alexandri Magni* 17. 27ff.

<sup>73</sup>Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion*, p. 176f.

<sup>74</sup>Herodotus *Hist.* 2. 81.

<sup>75</sup>*Inscriptione Graeciae (Ital et Sic.)* XIV, 1488, 1705, 1782.

<sup>76</sup>Zuntz, *Persephone*, p. 370.

<sup>77</sup>B. C. Dieterich, *Abraxos*, p. 97, cited in Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, p. 576. (Χαίρε δὲ λευκὸν ὕδωρ καὶ δένδρεον ὑψιπέτηλου "Hail to the white water and to the tree with lofty foliage.")

Paradise has also been of great interest to students of early Christian doctrines.<sup>78</sup>

The Greek word ψυχρόν not only means “cold” but also suggests “refreshing,” and it is also related to the term ψυχή, or “soul.” Jane Harrison made the following observation regarding the ψυχρὸν ὕδωρ of the well of Osiris and the water and tree in the magical papyrus: “The well would be both cool and fresh and life-giving; by it the soul would revive (ἀναψύχειν), it would become ‘a living water, springing up into everlasting life.’ ”<sup>79</sup> The tree growing by the fountain or spring of living water is thus a Tree of Life, and “it is only the soul whose purity is vouched for which is to be allowed to drink from it.”<sup>80</sup>

Much earlier than the funeral monuments and the magical papyrus, and therefore much more significant for similarities to the gold plates under discussion, are the Egyptian funerary texts frequently placed in graves from the time of the Old Kingdom through the Roman period. Zuntz summarizes the relevance of the *Book of the Dead* literature for the tablets:

Concerned lest their dead, at their resting-places on the edge of the desert, should lack the vital moisture, the Egyptians sought to provide it for them by including suitable spells and pictures in the *Book of the Dead*. Hence we find in it representations of the dead, on their way through the Netherworld, scooping water from a basin between trees, or catching in a bowl water poured out either by an arm which grows from a tree beside a large basin, or by a goddess inside that tree.<sup>81</sup>

Chapter 58 of the *Book of the Dead* is entitled “the Chapter of Breathing the Air and of Having Power over the Water in the Underworld.” The accompanying illustration on the Ani Papyrus shows Ani and his wife, Thuthu, drinking water with the right hand from a pool which is bordered by palm trees laden with fruit.<sup>82</sup> The text presents a dialogue between the god Osiris and Ani: “Open to me! Who are you, and where are you going? I am one of you.” The next chapter has a similar heading, and the accompanying illustration shows Ani kneeling beside a pool of water next to which is growing a sycamore tree. The goddess Nut is in the tree pouring water into Ani’s hands from a vessel. The text with the illustration begins,

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<sup>78</sup>Zuntz, *Persephone*; cf. Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, p. 575, n. 2; Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion*, p. 192, n. 14; et passim.

<sup>79</sup>Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, p. 576.

<sup>80</sup>Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion*, p. 177.

<sup>81</sup>Zuntz, *Persephone*, p. 371.

<sup>82</sup>E. A. Wallis Budge, trans., *The Egyptian Book of the Dead: The Papyrus of Ani in the British Museum* (1895; reprint ed.; New York: Dover Publications, 1967), pp. 314–15.

“Hail, sycamore tree of the goddess Nut. Grant thou to me of the water and the air which are in thee.” In chapters 107 and 109 a spell is given to enable the initiate to enter the regions of heaven. Two sycamore trees are described as being at the door of the Lord of the East, and the initiate approaches the trees and the door by being guided in a boat (obviously on a river), the barge of the god. South of the trees and the door are the lakes of a thousand geese and the great fields of the god, which Piankoff associates with a type of paradise composed of green pastures and hunting grounds.<sup>83</sup> Also in the *Book of the Dead* are spells in which the initiate is required to give specific secret or ritual names and responses to questions of identity and purpose before he is allowed to enter the realm of the god.<sup>84</sup>

Elsewhere in Egyptian funerary literature, the water of the god Osiris is spoken of as *cold* water, just as in the examples from the Roman period cited previously. “This cold water of yours, O Osiris, this cold water of yours, O King, has gone forth to your son, has gone forth to Horus.”<sup>85</sup> One can also find warnings where the soul of the deceased is told to avoid the lake of the evil-doer.<sup>86</sup> The purpose of the warnings, instructions, and dialogues is implied in one of the Pyramid Texts: “Thou art departed that thou mayest become a spirit, that thou mayest become mighty as a god, an enthroned one like Osiris.”<sup>87</sup>

Despite obvious similarities shared by the writings on the Grecian gold plates and the Egyptian literature, in addition to the proven contacts between the Greek and Egyptian civilizations from the critical seventh century B.C. and later, sufficient differences have been noted to show that some modification accompanied the borrowing of motifs. The only refreshment mentioned in the Grecian gold tablets is a drink of water, but the soul in Egyptian texts is refreshed “not only with water but also with fruit and frankincense.”<sup>88</sup> The Greek plates always refer to a cypress tree, while the Egyptian literature consistently mentions a sycamore, and Zuntz states, “There could not easily be trees more different than these two.”<sup>89</sup> The drinking of a “living water” by the soul parched with thirst is common to both

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<sup>83</sup>A. Piankoff, *The Wandering of the Soul*, Bollingen Series XL (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 6:4-8.

<sup>84</sup>*Book of the Dead*, chap. 125, cited in Piankoff, *Wandering Soul*, pp. 8-10.

<sup>85</sup>R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), Utterances 32, 33, 423, etc.

<sup>86</sup>*Ibid.*, Utterances 214 and 500. Zuntz appears to have missed such sources, for he states that the Egyptians have nothing corresponding to the two springs of some of the plates.

<sup>87</sup>Spell 752b, cited in Piankoff, *Wandering Soul*, p. 3.

<sup>88</sup>Zuntz, *Persephone*, p. 372.

<sup>89</sup>*Ibid.*



sources, but, so far as is known, Egypt had neither springs of Lethe nor Mnemosyne. While chapter 25 of the *Book of the Dead* gives a formula to allow a man to possess memory in the Netherworld,<sup>90</sup> no mention is made of a well or drinking of water in that context. The designation of the two springs as Lethe and Mnemosyne was considered by Harrison to be a Greek development from the neutral fountains mentioned in the Egyptian literature.<sup>91</sup> Because the Egyptians are not known to have used inscribed gold plates before the Roman period, either for the living or the dead, Zuntz suggests that this practice was also a Greek innovation upon an older tradition.<sup>92</sup>

The differences in the two civilizations allow for independent development within a common tradition, or more likely, a tradition borrowed by one from the other. Zuntz summarizes his views on the relationship between the Greek gold plates and the Egyptian sources:

In both countries these texts are equally designed to accompany the dead into their graves in order to tell them what awaits them in the other world and how they are to meet it. In Egypt this had been the custom for hundreds and even thousands of years, while in Greece there is no trace of it, apart from the few Gold Leaves, whose texts witness to a set of very specific persuasions. Hence it can reasonably be agreed that the narrowly confined and recent Greek usage derives from that older civilization to which Greeks owed so much and which they often proclaimed as their teacher of "wisdom."<sup>93</sup>

The burial of the texts with the dead does not preclude the sacred significance of the materials to the living, especially when one considers the ritual purposes commentators attach to them. The recitation of the text, or at least part of it, on special ritual occasions, would be necessary to prepare the living initiate for his journey into the world of departed spirits. The burial of the text with the deceased insures that he will have a familiar and faithful guide for his heavenly journey, one whose warnings and reminders will protect him and assist him in achieving his divine potential.

#### THE BOOK OF MORMON AND THE DREAM OF LEHI

It is apparent the accounts of Lehi's dream in the Book of Mormon have much in common with those on the Greek gold tablets and the related Egyptian literature. The Book of Mormon narrative claims Egyptian connections (1 Nephi 1:2; Mosiah 1:4; Mormon 9:32),

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<sup>90</sup>Budge, *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, p. 87f.

<sup>91</sup>Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Literature*, p. 576.

<sup>92</sup>Zuntz, *Persephone*, p. 376.

<sup>93</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 375-76.

probably quite similar to the mercantilistic connections of the Greeks in Egypt.<sup>94</sup> The Book of Mormon begins at the close of the seventh century B.C. (1 Nephi 1:4; 5:13; 10:4; etc.), a date which coincides precisely with the seventh–sixth century origins of the religious materials on the Greek gold plates. The use, or borrowing, of typically Egyptian motifs and the practice of inscribing religious writings upon gold plates are of considerable significance to the student of the Book of Mormon, and the striking resemblances in all the materials under discussion would be remarkably coincidental if they were not connected to a common source or origin. Since the Greek gold tablets are assigned to an Egyptian origin, which agrees in time and content with the Egyptian associations of the Book of Mormon, the most feasible and plausible explanation for the internal characteristics shared by both is that seventh–sixth century B.C. Egypt provides the common meeting ground for both traditions.

In the first narration of the dream account in 1 Nephi, the one given by Lehi, the following description elements are noteworthy. Lehi's dream begins in a dark and dreary wilderness, through which he can advance safely only with the assistance of a guide (1 Nephi 8:4–7). Following his guide through the “dark and dreary waste” for a long time, Lehi reaches a large field through which flows a river (1 Nephi 8:9–13). Near the river stands a tree, laden with a sweet white fruit which refreshes the wanderer. At this point Lehi himself becomes a guide to some of his own family, who are apparently lost in the dark wilderness with nobody else to guide them (1 Nephi 8:14–16). As details of the dream come into focus, Lehi further describes a path leading to the tree (1 Nephi 8:20–22) and many other paths leading to doom and destruction (1 Nephi 8:23, 28, 32). Some of the multitude of souls wandering in the dark world are assisted in their journey by a “rod of iron” (1 Nephi 8:19, 24, 30), but many are drowned in the hitherto unidentified fountain, or river (1 Nephi 8:32). In addition to those drowned in the river, others enter into a “great and spacious building,” described as being on the opposite side of the river from the tree (1 Nephi 8:26). The building is superterrestrial and filled with people of wealth who scorn those eating from the fruit of the tree (1 Nephi 8:27f., 33). Not all who go to the tree for refreshment enjoy the experience, suggesting that some are not properly prepared to receive the fruit, and others wander off and are lost in a great mist of darkness, indicating they have not

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<sup>94</sup>Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, p. 36ff.

secured an adequate guide to help them achieve the goal of the tree (1 Nephi 8:23–28, 32).

In this brief account, narrated from the perspective of Lehi, the only two elements without corresponding features in the Greek plates or the Egyptian literature are the “rod of iron” and the “great and spacious building.”<sup>95</sup> It was noted earlier that despite similar differences between the Greek plates and Egyptian texts (Lethe and Mnemosyne, the writing upon the plates, and the white cypress tree all differ from their counterparts in Egyptian sources) scholars note that the paths, tree, springs, and dialogue with divine beings argue for an original relationship with independent development in the Greek texts. The differences in the Book of Mormon are likewise not sufficient to disprove the Egyptian connection and are in no way incompatible with the ancient world home claimed by the Book of Mormon.

The second narration of the dream, given by Lehi’s son, Nephi, displays an even greater affinity with the Greek and Egyptian sources than does Lehi’s earlier abbreviated account. In the expanded version, there is much that at first appears extraneous to the symbols of the dream, particularly the prophetic history of Jesus, the Christian tradition, and some aspects of world history as they relate to the family of Lehi. One observes that the dream symbols are very much like the elements of a ritual drama, functioning as vehicles for transmitting the history of man and for conveying redemptive knowledge to the participant. The common Near Eastern elements of the Tree of Life, springs or rivers of water, etc., which are part of the Egyptian redemption ritual for the dead, and which are adopted and adapted on the Greek plates for an Orphic or Pythagorean mystery drama, are also found in the Book of Mormon Tree of Life dream. These elements of the vision or dream assist in the prophetic and visionary portrayal of the Christian message of the redemption of humanity. This often-repeated aspect of the redemption drama in the Book of Mormon must be reserved for another study, since the dream symbols as they relate to the Ancient Near East are the focus of the present paper.

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<sup>95</sup>Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, p. 211ff., cites evidence which would suggest that the great building may have come from the Arab world, which in turn was an imitation of earlier Babylonian architecture. The height, sometimes ten to twelve stories, is even described as making the building appear to stand in the air, high above the earth. He further notes that in Arab tradition, spaciousness is the index of elegance and comfort. There is some possibility that the rod of iron also came from the Jewish world of Lehi, especially in relation to the temple, but that must be dealt with properly within its own cultural context.

In a manner which has been recognized only recently as typically apocalyptic,<sup>96</sup> Nephi is transported to a high mountain where the vision given earlier to his father is opened to his view and understanding (1 Nephi 11:1). Before he is permitted to see the vision of the tree, however, Nephi is asked two questions by his angelic guide, and only satisfactory answers to these questions allow him to proceed (1 Nephi 11:2–6). The dialogue pattern of preparing Nephi for further visionary insights continues throughout the account, including a series of questions from his angelic guide: “What desireth thou?” (1 Nephi 11:10), “What beholdest thou?” (1 Nephi 13:2), “Knowest thou . . . ?” (1 Nephi 11:16, 21), and “Rememberest thou . . . ?” (Nephi 14:8).

As the vision opens, Nephi first sees the tree, which he describes as being white (1 Nephi 11:8).<sup>97</sup> As the vision continues, he sees all that his father had seen, but in many instances gives new details not recounted in the earlier version. The unidentified river of water in the first version of the dream is a “fountain of filthy water” in the second account and is further identified as “the depths of hell” (1 Nephi 12:16). Especially noteworthy is the mention of a second spring in the longer version, “the fountain of living waters,” which flows beside the Tree of Life (1 Nephi 11:25). The other symbols from Lehi’s vision, such as the rod of iron, the great building, and the dark mists, are repeated and explained in Nephi’s account.

The symbols under consideration in the present essay are reminiscent of those studied by Goodenough in his extensive work, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*. Goodenough argues that symbols in the ancient world could be transferred from one religion or culture to another and not lose their usefulness in a new setting.<sup>98</sup> He refers specifically to the Tree and Water of Life when stating that such symbols had a constant religious value, although they “could be used with gods whose mythologies were utterly dissimilar.”<sup>99</sup> It is the constant religious value behind the symbols which permits their use in divergent traditions. The Tree and Water of Life may signify refreshment and life-giving power in one instance and the bestowal of memory (the essence of life) in another. The river of filthy water can be

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<sup>96</sup>The author has given a brief treatment of this theme elsewhere (for example, “Manichaeism, Mormonism, and Apocalypticism,” *Sperry Lecture Series*, Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1973, pp. 18–25), and the volume of recent literature on the subject attests to its new-found importance in the study of ancient religious history and literature.

<sup>97</sup>In the earlier account only the fruit was mentioned as white (1 Nephi 8:11), perhaps because of the emphasis on partaking of the fruit. The tree receives greater emphasis in Nephi’s experience.

<sup>98</sup>E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, 13 vols. (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1954), especially vol. 4.

<sup>99</sup>*Ibid.*, 7:116.

hell, Forgetfulness, or the water of the evil-doer in different mythologies, but the *value* of the symbols remains constant.

### CONCLUSION

Throughout this type of literature, the need is expressed for a personal or a textual guide to aid the traveler and initiate as he journeys along the divine path. The mists of darkness in the dream of the Tree of Life prevent many from seeing their way or from finding such a guide, and they are thus prevented from traveling the *one* path which will lead to the tree. The purpose of burying plates with the sacred and necessary message for the heavenly traveler is to ensure that he has the means and assistance to traverse the dark path successfully despite any threatening and destructive obstacles he may encounter. Just as the Egyptian and Greek texts—against which the Book of Mormon can be tested for historical compatibility—claim to have been written as guides for adherents of their respective traditions, so also the Book of Mormon states that it is a guide for those who wish to be redeemed by Christ and find the path to the Tree of Life (1 Nephi 13:33–37; 14:18–20). There can be no question but that the Book of Mormon has a demonstrable compatibility with the Ancient Near Eastern origin which it claims. Its message and challenge give it significance in a modern setting, and they cannot be ignored nor taken lightly.