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Noel B. Reynolds

Brigham Young University - Provo, nbr@byu.edu

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The Language of the Spirit in the Book of Mormon

Noel B. Reynolds

Abstract: This study provides students of the Book of Mormon with the first comprehensive analysis of the many ways in which the word spirit is used in that volume of scripture. It demonstrates how the titles Holy Ghost, Spirit of God, Spirit of the Lord, Holy Spirit, and the Spirit are used interchangeably to refer to the third member of the God. It also shows that the Holy Ghost was understood to be a separate being. The analysis is thoroughly integrated with scholarly studies of references to the spirit (rûah) in the Hebrew Bible. The functions of the Holy Ghost are also identified and explained.

Students of Restoration scriptures and practices usually begin their studies of the Holy Ghost and its functions from the perspective of the New Testament, the revelations received by Joseph Smith for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or even from other Christian traditions, theologies, and practices. As another fundamental Restoration scripture, the Book of Mormon has not always been easy to reconcile with that approach because of some passages that do not fit

modern language and categories easily. The following study takes a different approach. It begins with a systematic study of the references to the Spirit and to the Holy Ghost in the text of the Book of Mormon and proposes an analysis of this Nephite discourse that is coherent and consistent throughout that text and that benefits from comparisons with Old Testament conceptions.

While some have taken the position that Joseph Smith must have inserted New Testament phraseology and concepts into the text to make it more appealing to Christian readers of his time, I do not agree with that and will not undertake any intertextual

analyses involving the New Testament.¹ The Book of Mormon presents itself as written by Israelites educated in Jerusalem in the late seventh century BCE and by their descendants, who claimed a version of the Old Testament as their scriptural heritage. Accordingly, this essay focuses on the text of the Book of Mormon with some comparisons with the Old Testament with the help of scholars who have produced relevant studies of that text.

The Spirit in the Old Testament and in the Book of Mormon.

The analysis that follows shows a much more explicit and developed Nephite understanding of the Spirit of the Lord and the functions of that spirit in the world than we would expect from reading the Old Testament alone. But the Hebrew Bible also turns out to provide a productive context for illuminating Book of Mormon language of *the spirit*. Wilf Hildebrandt's exhaustive 1995 study of Old Testament usage facilitates my comparison with the Book of Mormon text.²

¹ One current presentation of such a theory can be found in the Claremont dissertation, now published as Nicholas J. Frederick, *The Bible, Mormon Scripture, and the Rhetoric of Allusivity* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2016). A helpful review that addresses those issues can be found in Jeffrey D. Tucker, "Nicholas J. Frederick. The Bible, Mormon Scripture, and the Rhetoric of Allusivity," *BYU Studies*, 56, no. 3 (2017): 198–201.

² Wilf Hildebrandt, *An Old Testament Theology of the Spirit of God* (Peabody, MA:

Hildebrandt's study is especially helpful because he rejects the approach of predecessors who looked at the Old Testament through the lens of the New.

Rather, he argues,

the understanding of *rûah* as “spirit” must be sought in the context of how the relationship between god and humanity is conceived and presented in the ancient Near East. Rather than reading back into the OT literature our NT views and pneumatology, we must come to the material afresh, with an OT perspective if possible.³

While recognizing that most Ancient Near Eastern (hereafter ANE) cultures used *rûah* or some related term to refer to *wind* or *life-breath*, he points out that

Hendrickson Publishers, 1995). Most scholarly treatments of this topic are short surveys designed to pave the way to much more intensive analyses of New Testament material. Hildebrandt was also chosen to write the article “Spirit of Yahweh,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets*, eds. Mark J. Boda and J. Gordon McConville (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 747–57, which provides a useful ten-page summary of key points from the 1995 monograph.

³ Hildebrandt, *An Old Testament Theology of the Spirit of God*, 3. For a clear endorsement of this approach from a recent evangelical perspective, see David Firth, “The historical books,” in *A Biblical Theology of the Holy Spirit*, eds. Trevor J. Burke and Keith Warrington (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 12–13.

only the Hebrew Bible also uses the term to refer to the spirits of God or men.

There is no evidence that the root [rh] has the meaning “spirit” or “Spirit,” in the OT sense, outside of the Hebrew canon. Ancient Near Eastern texts do not use *rûah* to indicate that gods have spirits or that the *rûah* is an extension of a god. Nor does the term refer to aspects of the human spirit. Therefore, although Israel has many similarities with the cultural environment of the ancient Near East, the term *rûah* has a unique development of its lexical range of meanings in the OT. The OT is the only ancient literature that develops this term to portray a people’s experience with their God.⁴

While Hildebrandt goes on appropriately to explore and develop a wide range of issues related to *spirit* in the Hebrew Bible, this paper uses his findings primarily to assess the extent to which Nephite understandings related to the Holy Ghost may reflect pre-exilic biblical culture. In the opening chapter of his book, Hildebrandt presents a long list of examples of different ways in which the concept of the Spirit of God is used in the Old Testament. An exhaustive study of all such examples will not be necessary to demonstrate that the Nephite prophets shared much of the traditional Hebrew cultural understanding, while adding insights

⁴ Hildebrandt, *An Old Testament Theology of the Spirit of God*, 5.

gleaned from their own experiences and revelations.

The Spirit of God

The term *rûah* occurs 389 times in the Old Testament, and Hildebrandt counts 107 of those as direct references to the Spirit of God or Spirit of the Lord. In addition to these references, he recognizes “numerous allusions, emblems, symbols, images, and figurative expressions [that] denote the work and movement of *spirit* or *the Spirit of God* in the Hebrew canon.”⁵ In her 2010 Marquette PhD dissertation, Lynne Hilton Wilson calculated that the Book of Mormon uses *Spirit of the Lord* 4.5 times as often per 100 words as does the New Testament and 3.75 times as often as the Old Testament.⁶

Hildebrandt has helpfully categorized the direct references into four groups.⁷

⁵ *Ibid.*, 2, emphasis added. In a more recent study, Richard E. Averback, “The Holy Spirit in the Hebrew Bible and its Contributions to the New Testament,” in *Who’s Afraid of the Holy Spirit?*, eds. David B. Wallace and M. James Sawyer (Dallas: Biblical Studies Press, 2005), 16–18; produced a slightly different count, with 378 mentions of *rûah*, 94 of which he interpreted as personal references “to the third person of the Trinity.”

⁶ See the article reporting her dissertation findings in Lynne Hilton Wilson, “A New Pneumatology: Comparing Joseph Smith’s Doctrine of the Spirit with His Contemporaries and the Bible,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (2012): 143.

⁷ The categories Hildebrandt formulates in *An Old Testament Theology*, p. 27, are derived

Examples for each of these can be readily supplied from the Book of Mormon as they surface naturally in the Nephite account without any obvious reference to their Old Testament parallels. I list each of those four categories below, together with selected Book of Mormon examples for each.

1. *The creation of the universe and humankind.*

While the large number of Book of Mormon references to the Lord's role in the creation are mostly framed to teach humankind's dependence on him, there are a few passages that reflect the Old Testament understanding that the creation was accomplished through the Spirit of God. In his final sermon to his people, King

from the examples he reviews on pp. 12–27. Transcription preferences vary among Hebraists, but to avoid confusion for readers, I will only use *rûah* in this paper, even when a quotation may have used something different.

Benjamin appears to invoke the ANE notion of creation of life by the breath or spirit of God: “If ye should serve him who hath created you from the beginning and art preserving you from day to day by lending you *breath* that ye may live and move and do according to your own will, ... and yet would ye be unprofitable servants” (Mosiah 2:21).⁸ We get a unique twist on the role of the Spirit of God in the creation of man when the Lord showed himself to the brother of Jared and explained: “All men were created in the beginning after mine own image. Behold, this body which ye now behold is *the body of my spirit*. And man have I created after *the body of my spirit*” (Ether 3:15–16). It may also be noted that the missionaries Ammon and Aaron were able to connect with their Lamanite converts by explaining that their belief in a Great Spirit that created all things is another version of the Nephite teaching that God created all things.⁹

⁸ Throughout this paper, quotations from the Book of Mormon text, including spelling, punctuation, and capitalization, will be taken from the most accurate critical text available—Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). Italics are not from the critical text but may be added for emphasis of words or phrases that are key to the discussions in this paper.

⁹ See Alma 18:24–28; 22:10–11. Without more information, it is not possible to determine how closely this relates to Old Testament or to Nephite cultural understandings.

2. *The establishment of and subsequent provisions for the people of God.*

The initial establishment of the Nephites as the Lord's covenant people under the leadership of Lehi and Nephi provides clear and extensive examples of their reliance on the Spirit of the Lord in that process, but later restorations provide additional examples. It begins with the initial visions in which Lehi was "overcome with the Spirit" and carried away in a vision and "filled with *the Spirit of the Lord*" (1 Nephi 1:7–14). When Lehi needed divine help to obtain the cooperation of his reluctant oldest sons, he was again "filled with the Spirit," before they could be convinced to return to Jerusalem for the plates of brass, which contained the words of the holy prophets that had "been delivered unto them by *the Spirit and power of God*" (1 Nephi 2:14; 3:20). Nephi tells how he "was *led by the Spirit*, not knowing beforehand the things which I should do," step by step in retrieving those plates, and how Lehi "was *filled with the Spirit*" when he received them (1 Nephi 4:6; 5:17). Later, Nephi's aggressive role in taking the lead of the founding generation is deeply resented by his older brothers. The patriarch Lehi defends Nephi and confirms the necessity of their obeying their younger sibling with this explanation:

It must needs be that *the power of God* must be with him, even unto his

commanding you that ye must obey. But behold, it was not him, but it was *the Spirit of the Lord* which was in him which opened his mouth to utterance, that he could not shut it. (2 Nephi 1:27)

In these and other ways, the Spirit of the Lord works first through Lehi and then through his son Nephi to establish a new covenant, like the one given to Abraham before them, which would identify their descendants as a covenant people of the Lord.

Given the history of Israel, Lehi and Nephi undoubtedly saw a clear type in their experience. Just as “God led the nation by the *rûah* through the leadership of Moses” out of Egypt and through forty years of trials in the wilderness, so “Joshua was a man in whom was the *rûah* (Num 27:18)”; and “the presence of the Spirit with Joshua provided him with wisdom and skill to function as a leader and administrator during the conquest period.”¹⁰ In numerous direct ways, Lehi is presented in the Book of Mormon as another Moses in bringing his people out of an apostate Jerusalem across the sea to a new promised land. And just as the Old Testament presents Joshua as another Moses, the Nephite text does the same with Nephi. In both texts, the presence of the Spirit in these men’s lives is credited for

¹⁰ Hildebrandt, *An Old Testament Theology of the Spirit of God*, 109.

their success in establishing the Lord’s covenant people in their promised lands.¹¹

3. *The kingdom of God is established and promoted on earth through ... Spirit-appointed individuals who are enabled and motivated for their tasks by the Spirit of God.*¹²

When Nephi’s brothers refused to provide the labor necessary to build a ship and tried to drown Nephi in the sea, he was filled with the Spirit of God, and “they durst not do this lest they should wither before me, so powerful was *the Spirit of God*. And thus it had wrought upon them” (1 Nephi 17:52). The prophet Abinadi challenged the wicked king Noah and his council, thereby inspiring Alma and

¹¹ For the parallel comparison of Lehi and Nephi with Moses, see Noel B. Reynolds, “Lehi as Moses,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9, no. 2 (2000): 26–35; and “The Israelite Background of Moses Typology in the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 44, no. 2 (2005): 4–23.

¹² In his own briefer treatment of this general topic, Anthony C. Thiselton advances this same category of manifestations of the Spirit of God, seeing it as “the most characteristic gift of the Spirit of God in the Old Testament.” He further clarifies that “the gift of the Spirit is given to individuals only to promote *the welfare of the community* of Israel. ... Although there are gifts for an individual at a particular moment in time, their ultimate function and purpose relate to the good of the community in a permanent way.” Thiselton, *The Holy Spirit — In Biblical Teaching through the Centuries, and Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2012), 9.

others to flee and form the church that would provide the impetus for the reorganization and revitalization of the entire Nephite people. He was protected as he attacked their wicked ways: “the people of king Noah durst not lay their hands on him, for *the Spirit of the Lord* was upon him” (Mosiah 13:5). The great successes of the sons of Helaman in their mission to reclaim the Lamanites was explained by reference to the way in which the Spirit of the Lord did work upon them (Mosiah 28:3).

4. *Through the Spirit, prophets are called, inspired, transported, motivated, and used by the rûah to accomplish their difficult tasks.*

The accounts of the Nephite prophets are replete with examples of how they were inspired, motivated, and protected by the Spirit of the Lord. And just as the Spirit of the Lord transported Elijah from place to place in his service, so a later Nephi was transported to safety and from preaching to preaching:

But behold, the power of God was with him; and they could not take him to cast him into prison, for he was *taken by the Spirit* and conveyed away out of the midst of them. And it came to pass that thus he *did go forth in the Spirit* from multitude to multitude declaring the word of God. (Helaman 10:16–17)

Similarly, Samuel the Lamanite’s preaching and prophesying incited wicked Nephites to try to kill him. “But *the Spirit of the Lord* was with him, insomuch that they could not hit him with their stones neither with their arrows” (Helaman 16:2). Alma teaches the people of Gideon “according to the Spirit of God which is in me” (Alma 7:5), including the things which “the Spirit hath said . . . unto me” (Alma 7:9. Cf. vs. 8 and 13).

The Spirit(s) of Men

Another large and related topic that will not be undertaken in this paper focuses on the Nephite concepts related to the spiritual dimension of men and how these might relate to the culture of ancient Israel. Like the Old Testament writers, the Nephites used three principal terms when referring to matters of the human spirit — *spirit*, *heart*, and *soul*. For the most part, the hundreds of examples of Nephite usage seem to follow the Hebrew Bible patterns with each of these.¹³ But some variations arise, most obviously in the teachings of Jacob and Alma, which deserve closer examination than can be included here.

¹³ For early examples for *heart* and *soul* see 1 Nephi 15; 2:11; 8:12; 11:23. For an extended exploration of the identity of heart and spirit in the Hebrew Bible, see John R. Levison, *Filled with the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007), 29–31 and 65–67.

Names or labels that refer to the Holy Ghost

The Holy Ghost

Holy Ghost is clearly the preferred name for this divinity in the English Book of Mormon, occurring 94 times throughout the text. It occurs in the writings of the first generation of Nephite prophets 31 times, and is reported by Nephi to be the name that the Son used twice in his explanations of the gospel to Nephi during the great vision received at the first camp in the wilderness.¹⁴ It occurs 8 times in the first half of the Book of Alma. But it is used most intensively (32 times) in the chapters containing the teachings of Jesus when he visited the Nephites after his resurrection. That intensity carries over into the final three books written by Mormon and his son Moroni — occurring 23 times.

The Spirit of God and the Spirit of the Lord

While we cannot know with certainty what Nephite or Hebrew words lie behind the 1829 English translation, it should be recognized that English translations of the Hebrew Bible do differentiate these labels according to the

¹⁴ 2 Nephi 31:12, 14. In the same passage, Nephi demonstrates that he has adopted this terminology in his own teaching and summarizing of the gospel or doctrine of Christ. See 2 Nephi 31:8, 13, 17, 21; and 2 Nephi 32:2, 3, 5.

underlying Hebrew or Aramaic terminology. *Spirit of the Lord* is the standard translation for the 27 occurrences of *rûah yhw̄h*; and *spirit of God* is used for the Hebrew *rûah ʿĕlōhîm*, which occurs 15 times, and its Aramaic equivalent, which occurs 5 times. Bible translators and commentators do not usually find a substantive difference in meaning between the two labels and point to cultural differences of time and place to explain this textual variation.¹⁵ As will be seen below, this convention for Bible translation may not apply to the English Book of Mormon.

In some of these Book of Mormon passages, *the Spirit of God* is transparently interchangeable with the even more frequently used phrase *the Spirit of the Lord*. The phrase *the Spirit of God* occurs twenty times, and most notably in

¹⁵ Objection to this standard assumption in Old Testament interpretations has been raised by Daniel I. Block in his article, “Empowered by the Spirit of God: The Holy Spirit in the Histrographic [sic] writings of the Old Testament,” *Southern Baptist Theological Journal* 1 (Spring 1997): 42–61, where he points out that “in many instances it is difficult to tell whether the *rûah* spoken of is *the* Holy Spirit or another spirit at Yahweh’s disposal” (p. 43). See the examples he provides on p. 51. (The author and journal editors probably intended to use *Historiographic* in the title.)

the writings of Nephi, Alma, and Mormon.¹⁶ Shortly after telling how in his great vision he “beheld the *Spirit of God*, that it wrought upon other Gentiles,” Nephi reports that he “beheld the *Spirit of the Lord*, that it was upon the Gentiles” (1 Nephi 13:13, 15). Alma displays the same terminological indifference in using both of these names for the Holy Ghost, as can be readily seen when reading the references in the previous footnote (#16) and the account describing Ammon’s teaching of the Lamanite king. Ammon is described as “being filled with the *Spirit of God*,” and then he sees “the *Spirit of the Lord* poured out according to his prayers upon the Lamanites” (Alma 18:16; 19:14). In his teaching of his sons, Alma tells Shiblon that “it is the *Spirit of God* which is in me which maketh these things known unto me.” And then he tells Corianton what “the *Spirit of the Lord* doth say unto me” (Alma 38:6; 39:12). Finally, it should be recognized that Moroni’s listing of the spiritual gifts that was cited in the previous paragraph to demonstrate the interchangeability of *the Spirit of Christ* and *the Spirit of God* in his writing was introduced by Moroni’s comprehensive statement that all these things are given to men “by *the power of the Holy Ghost*,” suggesting that these

¹⁶ Cf. 1 Nephi 14:12, 13; 17:47, 52; 19:12; Alma 5:46, 47; 7:5; 9:21; 13:4; 18:16; 24:30; 30:42; 38:6; 61:15; Helaman 5:45; 3 Nephi 7:21, 22; Moroni 10:8–9.

other names are alternative ways of referring to the Holy Ghost:

[He] will manifest the truth of it unto you by *the power of the Holy Ghost*.

And by *the power of the Holy Ghost* ye may know the truth of all things.

And whatsoever thing is good is just and true. ... And ye may know that he is by *the power of the Holy Ghost*. Wherefore I would exhort you that ye deny not *the power of God*. ... And again I exhort you, my brethren, that ye deny not the gifts of God, for they are many and they come from the same God. (Moroni 10:4–8)

The name *the Spirit of the Lord* occurs twice as often as *the Spirit of God* in the text and is even more obviously an alternate name for the Holy Ghost. As will become evident in several of the discussions below, the same functions are assigned to both, and in a number of its occurrences, *the Spirit of the Lord* is explicitly linked to *the Holy Ghost*. However, one series of these references appears to be an exception and requires separate treatment. Examples of explicit equivalence include the following:

1. In his own late prophecies, Nephi foretells a future struggle for the souls of men between the devil and *the Spirit of the Lord* in which a future generation of the Nephites will yield to the devil, in contrast to

a generation of the Gentiles who will much later be convinced “that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God ... by the power of *the Holy Ghost*” (2 Nephi 26:12–13).

2. In the opening page of the Book of Mormon, Lehi is “filled with the Spirit of the Lord” as he reads from a book in his vision. Similarly, “the Spirit of the Lord” came upon Benjamin’s listeners, “and they were filled with joy.” In seven similar passages, it is the Holy Ghost that fills recipients.¹⁷
3. After Benjamin’s sermon, the people tell him “the Spirit of the Lord Omnipotent” has wrought a mighty change in their hearts. In Moroni’s addendum to his father’s abridgment, he speaks of both the converted Lamanites and of all Nephites baptized into the church as having been wrought upon and changed or cleansed by the Holy Ghost.¹⁸
4. Seven times, the text speaks of *the Spirit of the Lord* being in a person

¹⁷ Cf. 1 Nephi 1:12 and Mosiah 4:3 with Alma 8:30; 36:24; 3 Nephi 12:6; 19:13; 26:17; 30:12; and Moroni 8:26.

¹⁸ Cf. Mosiah 5:2 with Ether 12:14 and Moroni 6:4.

as an explanation for spiritual events and changes. Four other passages point to *the Holy Ghost* being in someone to explain similar events.¹⁹

5. Ammon reported “seeing *the Spirit of the Lord* poured out ... upon the Lamanites” as they were converted. Similarly, in his visit to the Nephites, Jesus prophesies of a distant future “pouring out of *the Holy Ghost*” upon the Gentiles.²⁰
6. Ammon also had reported how he and his brother missionaries preached the word of God at all the synagogues and assemblies of the Amlicites and the Lamanites as “they were *led by the Spirit of the Lord*.” In his final addendum describing the manner of managing Nephite worship in the church, Moroni describes the conduct of their meetings: “For as the power of *the Holy Ghost* led them whether to preach or exhort or to pray or to supplicate or to sing, even so it was done.”²¹

¹⁹ Cf. 1 Nephi 15:12; 2 Nephi 1:27; 4:12; Words of Mormon 1:7; Mosiah 2:36; Alma 11:22; and Ether 12:2 with Alma 39:6; Ether 12:41; Moroni 3:4, and 7:32.

²⁰ Cf. Alma 19:14 and 3 Nephi 20:27.

²¹ Alma 21:16; Moroni 6:9.

7. The writings of Nephi and the Book of Mosiah speak several times of *the Spirit of the Lord being upon someone* as a way of explaining how they were blessed as a convert or magnified as a servant of God. In six other passages, Nephi, Jesus Christ, and Mormon speak of *the Holy Ghost being upon someone* with similar effects.²²

While the foregoing examples are not intended to provide an exhaustive list of phrasings in the Book of Mormon text where *Holy Ghost* and *Spirit of the Lord* are used interchangeably, they are more than sufficient to demonstrate that the writers of this text across the full Nephite dispensation were not signifying meaningful differences by invoking one or the other term. Some writers may have preferred one or the other phrasing, but others have used both in their writings. The argument of the paper to this point is that the potential for different interpretations for *Spirit of God*, *Spirit of the Lord*, and *Holy Ghost* is not substantial, and that the three titles do appear to always have the same referent in this text.

The Holy Spirit

²² Cf. 1 Nephi 13:15; 2 Nephi 21:2; Mosiah 43; 13:5, and 18:13 with 1 Nephi 11:27; 12:7, 2 Nephi 31:8; 3 Nephi 19:13, 20:27; and Mormon 1:14.

Only two other names are used formally as accepted equivalents to Holy Ghost. At the end of the Nephite dispensation, Moroni provides the only Book of Mormon instance of the New Testament name *Comforter* for the Holy Ghost: “And because of meekness and lowliness of heart cometh the visitation of the *Holy Ghost*, which *Comforter* filleth with hope and perfect love” (Moroni 8:26). *Holy*

Spirit, more frequently used as an alternative name, occurs 16 times. Three of these make the equivalence of the names explicit. Nephi uses both in explaining the effect of the Holy Ghost on the human heart:

“For when a man speaketh by the power of the *Holy Ghost*, the power of the *Holy Ghost* carrieth it unto the hearts of the children of men. But behold, there are many that harden their hearts against the *Holy Spirit*, that it hath no place in them.” (2 Nephi 33:1–2).

Jacob equates rejection of the *Holy Ghost* with quenching the *Holy Spirit*.²³ And Alma substitutes *Holy Spirit* for *Holy Ghost* in a standard listing of the three divinities in a reference to the scene of the final judgment: “the bar of Christ the Son and God the Father and the *Holy Spirit* — which is one Eternal God —” (Alma 11:44). Thirteen other references by Nephi, Jarom, Benjamin, Alma, and Mormon are consistent with these, but do not make it explicit that they are using the name *Holy Spirit* as an alternate to *Holy Ghost*.²⁴ Given the translation history, it is not possible to determine how many Nephite terms lie behind these three English titles in the translation. But it is clear that the Nephites did not use the various titles to indicate a belief in a multiplicity of divinities.

²³ Jacob 6:8.

²⁴ 1 Nephi 2:17; 2 Nephi 2:28; Jarom 1:4; Mosiah 3:19; Alma 5:46 (twice), 5:54, 7:16, 11:44, 13:28, 18:34, 31:36; Helaman 5:45; and Moroni 8:23.

The Spirit

It is probably self-evident for most readers that the abbreviated term *the Spirit* (with or without capitalization) also occurs as a way of referring to the Holy Ghost. By my count, this shorthand label is used 105 times throughout the text — more than any of the other titles. This count does not include the ambiguous occurrences in 1 Nephi 11–14 that will be discussed separately. It does include 28 occurrences in phrases such as “the spirit of revelation” or “the spirit of prophecy” that Skousen chose not to capitalize.²⁵ But it seems usually to be a shorthand reference to the Holy Ghost, for the context and phrasing is almost always similar or identical to the contexts and phrasings of the other terms discussed above.

The Spirit or Light of Christ

At the end of his late appendages to his father’s abridgment, Moroni inserts a sermon that Mormon had given at some previous assembly of the Nephite faithful. On that occasion, Mormon introduced unprecedented terminology when he taught:

²⁵ All editions of the Book of Mormon have had to deal with the fact that the original manuscript did not include capitalization except for proper names. Skousen does explain his rationale for capitalizing references to deity but does not deal explicitly with the choice not to capitalize many occurrences of *the spirit*. These would seem to be occurrences where the text is not obviously referring to a person. See his prefatory discussion in Skousen, *The Book of*

For behold, my brethren, it is given unto you to judge, that ye may know good from evil. And the way to judge is as plain, that ye may know with a perfect knowledge, as the daylight is from the dark night. For behold, *the Spirit of Christ* is given to every man that they may know good from evil.

Wherefore I shew unto you the way to judge. For every thing which inviteth to do good and persuadeth to believe in Christ is sent forth by the power and gift of Christ. Wherefore ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of God. (Moroni 7:15–16)

Both here and in the closing chapter where Moroni himself uses the phrase one more time, it seems that they are both using *the Spirit of Christ* as an alternate name for the Holy Ghost. As Mormon told the people, the Spirit of Christ was “sent forth by the power and gift of Christ,” echoing language used throughout the Book of Mormon in reference to the Holy Ghost.²⁶ In the same passage, Mormon went on to employ yet another synonymous phrase:

And now my brethren, seeing that ye know the light by which ye may

Mormon: The Earliest Text, xli.

²⁶ For example, see 1 Nephi 10:17, 13:35–37; 2 Nephi 28:26; Jacob 6:8 and 3 Nephi 29:6, which refer to “the gift of God,” “the gift of the Holy Ghost,” or “the gift and power of the Holy Ghost.”

judge, which light is *the light of Christ*, see that ye do not judge wrongfully; for with that same judgment which ye judge, ye shall also be judged.

Wherefore I beseech of you, brethren, that ye should search diligently in *the light of Christ* that ye may know good from evil. And if ye will lay hold upon every good thing and condemn it not, ye certainly will be a child of Christ. (Moroni 7:18–19)

But this “light of Christ” is also described as performing functions usually attributed to the Holy Ghost in Nephite discourse.²⁷ Moroni’s only invocation of *the Spirit of Christ* comes in his discussion of the spiritual gifts that are given to them by “the Spirit of God,” which he concludes by saying, “And all these gifts comes by the Spirit of Christ” (Moroni 10:8–17).

Functions of the Holy Ghost

Through the course of the Book of Mormon, several distinguishable functions for the Holy Ghost are identified. From the opening pages, the Holy Ghost plays a central role in bringing revelations and prophecies to the Nephite prophets and in softening their hearts that they might believe. In particular, the

²⁷ Mormon’s lone reference does not provide much leverage for an engagement with the discussions of “the light of Christ” that have evolved in modern LDS discourse and that are summarized in C. Kent Dunford, “Light of Christ,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 834.

Holy Ghost brings the testimony of Christ and witnesses of the Father and the Son. The Holy Ghost also plays a powerful role in the conversion process as it brings the remission of sins and a spiritual rebirth to those who will sincerely repent. In such examples, the Spirit is “poured out” on its recipients.²⁸ And as the new converts take up the path that leads to eternal life, they are told that it is the Holy Ghost that “will shew unto you all things what ye should do” (2 Nephi 32:5) as they “endure to the end.”

Guiding the faithful and enduring to the end

Nephi described the gospel process in dialogical terms. The process begins with an invitation to repent, to abandon one’s current path in life and to take up the covenant path. That invitation may come from a variety of possible agents and may be accompanied by a spiritual witness. The recipient can respond in one of two ways — by humbling him- or herself, repenting, and choosing to be baptized, or by hardening his or her heart and rejecting the invitation. The person who responds positively and sincerely is promised the remission of sins, which the Father then sends “by fire and by the Holy Ghost.” As Nephi explains, that person has thereby entered into “the straight and narrow path” that leads to life eternal but can only realize that goal by “enduring to the end.” Walking that path then

²⁸ Cf. Mosiah 4:20, 18:10–13, 25:24; Alma 8:10, 16:16, 19:14; Helaman 6:36; and 3 Nephi 20:27.

requires continuing the dialogue in daily obedience to the guidance provided by the Holy Ghost — which, as Nephi explains in the previous quotation, “will shew unto you all things what ye should do” (2 Nephi 32:5). The Holy Ghost or the Spirit is promised as a divine presence to illuminate that covenant path and to guide choices that will enable the new convert to stay on that straight and narrow path and reach its promised end successfully.

The remission of sins

Although the weight of traditional Christian teaching links baptism directly to the remission of sins in a mechanical way, the Book of Mormon writers never say that baptism can wash away sins.²⁹ Rather, Nephi, in his original teaching of the doctrine of Christ as taught to him by the Father and the Son, states clearly that the remission of sins comes through the reception of the Holy Ghost and after baptism by water. And at the very end of the Nephite dispensation, Moroni describes the practice and experience of the Nephite church in the same way:

For the gate by which ye should enter is repentance and baptism by water,

²⁹ Significant New Testament scholarship rejects that standard view. See, e.g., James D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), 15–17, where he states flatly that “the very idea of a rite which effected forgiveness was wholly foreign to the prophetic genius of the OT” — before going on to show why he sees that idea as problematic for the New Testament as well.

and then cometh a remission of your sins by fire and by the Holy Ghost.

And then are ye in this straight and narrow path which leads to eternal life.

(2 Nephi 31:17–18)

And after that they had been received unto baptism and were *wrought upon and cleansed by the power of the Holy Ghost*, they were numbered among the people of the church of Christ. (Moroni 6:4)

While it may be true that much Latter-day Saint discourse follows the standard Christian interpretation on this point, the Book of Mormon never wavers in linking the remission of sins uniquely to the Holy Ghost. Baptism of water is consistently characterized as converts witnessing to the Father that they have repented and are willing to take the name of Christ upon themselves and keep his commandments as a preparation and prerequisite for the remission of sins.³⁰ The decision to be baptized belongs to the convert. The decision to accept the repentance of the convert as sincere belongs to the Father. The spiritual experience associated with the remission of sins goes by many descriptive titles, including *the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost* and *spiritual rebirth*.

Born of the Spirit

³⁰ For an extended discussion of this point and the relevant scriptural references, see Noel B. Reynolds, “Understanding Christian Baptism through the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 51, no. 2 (2012): 5–17.

In the original account of his conversion experience, it was reported that Alma₂ stood and spoke:

A I have repented of my sins and have been *redeemed of the Lord*.

B Behold, I am *born of the Spirit*.

C And the Lord said unto me: Marvel not that *all mankind*,

C* yea, men and women — *all nations, kindreds, tongues,*
and people —

B* must be *born again, yea, born of God*,

A* changed from their carnal and fallen state to a state of righteousness,
being *redeemed of God*,

becoming his sons and daughters (ballast line). (Mosiah 27:24–25)

In this remarkable chiasm, Alma captures most of the essential elements that came to be associated with the Nephite and Lamanite experience of spiritual rebirth. The last two-thirds of this short rhetorical unit quotes what Alma heard the Lord saying to him and shows us the general principles from which Alma extracted the succinct two-clause description of his own experience. He quotes the Lord saying each element to him twice in parallel lines — providing simultaneously both emphasis and elaboration on each of the points that echo Alma's opening lines. Other Nephite conversion experiences will also include references to repentance, remission of sins, and the role of the Spirit in their being born of God

or just born again. Alma has also infused this brief account with the gospel covenant context, by informing his readers how he had finally accepted the divine invitation in his “carnal and fallen state,” to repent and enter the true path (covenant), allowing the Lord, now his kinsman redeemer by covenant, to raise him to a state of righteousness as his son by covenant.³¹

One additional message built into this brief account is the Lord’s explanation that Alma’s particular experience is available universally to all men and women — all kindreds, tongues, and people — as the way they can each be individually redeemed to a state of righteousness, becoming thereby a covenant son or daughter of the Lord. While the Old Testament repeatedly shows how God establishes and maintains his covenant with Israel as a people through the power of the Spirit, this Book of Mormon account brings the covenant analysis down to the level of individuals and explains the direct role of the Spirit in their experience as they take on the covenant offered to them by Jesus Christ.

In several parallel events reported throughout the Book of Mormon, people are described as groups having the Spirit poured out upon them or as individuals

³¹ For a detailed discussion of this covenant language in an Old Testament context see Noel B. Reynolds, “Covenant Language in Biblical Religions and the Book of Mormon” (working paper, July 17, 2019), which will be available online at <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/> until it is published in final form.

being born again in a conversion event. In these cases, the Holy Ghost is also described as bringing joy and relief from spiritual suffering as it also brings the remission of sins. Nephi had reported his own original conversion in far less dramatic or theologically developed language, describing how after observing the rebellion of his older brothers against his father's revelations, he had prayed "to know the mysteries of God." The result was that the Lord "did visit me and did soften my heart that I did believe all the words which had been spoken by my father ... the things which the Lord had manifested unto me *by his Holy Spirit*" (1 Nephi 2:16–17). Later, after receiving his own version of the great vision given to Lehi, Nephi was able to explain this process in terms of the gospel taught to him by the Father and the Son: "For the gate by which ye should enter is repentance and baptism by water, and then cometh a remission of your sins by fire and by the Holy Ghost" (2 Nephi 31:17).

The most expansive and theologically developed account of this spiritual rebirth is recorded in the chapters that report King Benjamin's final sermon to his people. After he taught them about the coming of Christ and his atonement and the inevitable consequences of their sins, the people had fallen to the earth,

for the fear of the Lord had come upon them. And they had viewed themselves in their own carnal state, even less than the dust of the earth, and they all cried aloud with one voice, saying: O have mercy and apply the

atonement blood of Christ that we may receive forgiveness of our sins and our hearts may be purified, for we believe in Jesus Christ the Son of God, who created heaven and earth and all things, who shall come down among the children of men. And it came to pass that after they had spoken these words, *the Spirit of the Lord came upon them*, and they were *filled with joy*, having received *a remission of their sins* and having *peace of conscience* because of the exceeding faith which they had in Jesus Christ, which should come, according to the words which king Benjamin had spoken unto them.

(Mosiah 4:1–3)

After Benjamin went on to explain the requirements of faithful obedience to Christ for the rest of their lives, he urged them to always remember this experience by which they “have come to *the knowledge of the glory of God*, ... have *tasted of his love* and received a *remission of [their] sins*,” which in turn had caused “such *exceeding great joy* in your souls.” He then promised them that if they would remember these things daily “standing steadfastly in the faith,”

ye shall *always rejoice* and be *filled with the love of God* and always retain a *remission of your sins*; and ye shall *grow in the knowledge of the glory of him* that created you, or in *the knowledge of that which is just and true*.

(Mosiah 4:11–12)

Benjamin again turned to an exposition of the many changes they would

need to make in their lives if they would serve the Lord faithfully (Mosiah 4:13–30). And again, the people responded, telling him that they believed “all the words which [he] had spoken,” saying,

And also we know of their surety and truth because of *the Spirit of the Lord* Omnipotent, which hath *wrought a mighty change in us or in our hearts*, that we have no more disposition to do evil but to do good continually. And we ourselves also through *the infinite goodness of God* and *the manifestations of his Spirit* have great views of that which is to come. ... And we are *willing to enter into a covenant* with our God to do his will and to be obedient to his commandments in all things that he shall command us all the remainder of our days. (Mosiah 5:2–3, 5)

In his response, Benjamin reiterated the covenantal structure of this experience in which they have been “spiritually begotten” as “children of Christ”:

The *covenant* which ye have made is a *righteous covenant*. And now because of the covenant which ye have made, ye shall be called *the children of Christ*, his sons and his daughters; for behold, this day he hath *spiritually begotten* you, for ye say that your hearts are changed through faith on his name; therefore ye are *born of him* and have become his sons and his daughters. (Mosiah 5:6–7)

Other less developed examples of this spiritual experience are reported

throughout Nephite history.³² In most of these, the role of the Spirit is mentioned prominently for bringing humility and meekness, the remission of sins, peace of conscience, joy, love, and the knowledge of the glory of God. From Mormon's historical perspective, these events of actual encounters with the Holy Ghost in the lives of the people seem to take precedence over those occasions when the gift of the Holy Ghost may have been formally conferred on new converts after baptism. Mormon summarizes all this in his final comments at the end of the Nephite dispensation:

And the firstfruits of repentance is baptism. And baptism cometh by faith unto the fulfilling the commandments; and the fulfilling the commandments bringeth *remission of sins*; and the remission of sins bringeth *meekness and lowliness of heart*. And because of meekness and lowliness of heart cometh *the visitation of the Holy Ghost*, which Comforter filleth with *hope and perfect love*, which love endureth by diligence unto prayer until the end shall come, when all the saints shall dwell with God. (Moroni 8:25–26)

These accounts of spiritual rebirth describing the experiences of individuals who have engaged the gospel of Jesus Christ by repenting and covenanting with him to obey his commandments throughout their lives have little direct parallel in

³² See Enos 1:1–8; Alma 19:6, 12–14, 29–34; 22:13–18; 36:5, 16–26; and Helaman 5:42–49.

the Old Testament. The Nephite accounts speak repeatedly of converts who are “filled with the Spirit,” or “filled with joy.” At their baptism, Alma’s converts “came forth out of the water rejoicing, being filled with the Spirit” (Mosiah 18:14).

The persecutors of Nephi and Lehi in their prison were transformed by a divine intervention. And after repenting and calling upon God, “they were filled with that joy which is unspeakable and full of glory. And behold, *the Holy Spirit of God* did come down from heaven and did enter into their hearts. And they were filled as if with fire” (Helaman 5:44–45). After the Lamanite king described his vision of his Redeemer, he sank down with joy, “being *overpowered by the Spirit*,” which caused the queen, Ammon, and the other Lamanites in their presence to sink down as well, being “*overpowered with joy*” Alma 19:13–14). That joy is explained variously as a response to the remission of sins which has been received, to the knowledge of Christ’s atonement and promises of redemption, or to a knowledge of the eventual resurrection. As a well-known class of events, they clearly informed the Nephite understanding of the Spirit of the Lord and the effect it could have in the lives of the people of the Lord.

The Spirit will be poured out from heaven to restore the covenant people.

The Old Testament prophets repeatedly spoke of a future time when Israel would be restored to its former blessings as the Spirit would initiate a

transformation in his covenant people.³³ These prophecies “portray metaphorically the blessings brought by the Spirit just as the rain brings about the fructification and fertility of the earth.” From the time of Moses, the *rûah* was associated “with the pouring out of oil in the ritual of anointing.”³⁴ Hildebrandt summarizes these prophecies of a time when Israel will be restored to the covenant: The Spirit will transform both the barren land and the human hearts. But “in order to experience the restoration and renewal prophesied, however, the people were called on to respond in repentance, faith, and covenant loyalty.”³⁵

In the Book of Mormon this same language also appears repeatedly, but usually with reference to real-time events in the lives of Nephite writers. Jacob records that the Lord God “poured in his Spirit into my soul,” thereby enabling him to confound the words of Sherem (Jacob 7:8). Benjamin explained the great spiritual experience of his repentant people in terms of the Lord pouring out his Spirit upon them, causing that their hearts should be filled with joy (Mosiah 4:20).

³³ See, e.g., Isaiah 32:15, 44:3, Ezekiel 38:29; Joel 2:28–9.

³⁴ Hildebrandt, *An Old Testament Theology of the Spirit of God*, 92. See Exodus 28:41 and 1 Samuel 10:1.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 91. See Herbert M. Wolf, “The Transcendent Nature of Covenant Curse Reversals,” in *Israel’s Apostasy and Restoration: Essays in Honor of Roland K. Harrison*, ed. Avraham Gileadi (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 319–25, for a useful and contextualized analysis of these prophecies.

Similarly, Alma₁ asked his new converts,

What have you against being baptized in the name of the Lord, as a witness before him that ye have *entered into a covenant with him*, that ye will serve him and keep his commandments, that he may *pour out his Spirit* more abundantly upon you? (Mosiah 18:10)

Then as he performed the first baptism, Alma prayed, “O Lord, *pour out thy Spirit upon they servant*,” and once “*the Spirit of the Lord was upon him*,” he performed the baptism, saying, “Helam, I baptize thee, having authority from the Almighty God, as a testimony that ye have entered into a covenant to serve him until you are dead as to the mortal body; and *may the Spirit of the Lord be poured out upon you*” (Mosiah 18:12–13).

There are many more examples. Faced with spiritually defiant apostates in Ammonihah, Alma₂ sought “God in mighty prayer, that he would *pour out his Spirit* upon the people ... that he might baptize them unto repentance” (Alma 8:10). As Alma and Amulek subsequently undertook to establish the church throughout the Nephites’ land, “the Lord did *pour out his Spirit* on all the face of the land for to prepare the minds of the children of men, or to prepare their hearts to receive the word” (Alma 16:16). Similarly, the missionary Ammon rejoiced to see “*the Spirit of the Lord poured out* according to his prayers upon the Lamanites,” demonstrating to him that “his arm is extended to all people” (Alma

19: 14, 36). Later, when the Nephites were dwindling in unbelief, “the Lord began *to pour out his Spirit* upon the Lamanites because of their easiness and willingness to believe in his word” (Helaman 6:36).

The spirit of prophecy and the spirit of revelation.

While it is evident to readers of the Old Testament that both prophecy and revelation have a spiritual source and character, the Nephite prophets are frequently explicit in attributing divine communications to “the power of the Holy Ghost.”³⁶ In the Hebrew Bible, it is “not until the exilic and postexilic period” that “prophecy is viewed in retrospect as wrought by the spirit.”³⁷ As Alma undertakes

³⁶ 3 Nephi 29:6. Cf. 1 Nephi 10:17–22; 2 Nephi 26:12–13. Old Testament studies have produced quite a range of interpretations of the role of the spirit in revelation and prophecy since Hermann Gunkel first overturned the apple cart and challenged a long history of interpretation grounded in standard Christian theology. See Hermann Gunkel, *The Influence of the Holy Spirit: The Popular View of the Apostolic Age and the Teaching of the Apostle Paul*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville and Phillip A. Quanbeck II (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979). Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, trans. and ed. Moshe Greenberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 97–101, does an excellent job of distinguishing Israelite understandings of the spirit and its action from the Greek understanding of mantics and spiritual frenzy, two understandings which had been conflated in some biblical scholarship.

³⁷ F. W. Horn, “Holy Spirit,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, trans. Dietlinde M. Elliott (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 3:263.

the work of revitalizing the Nephites spiritually, he offers his own experience to support his teachings and to show others how they may acquire the same spiritual knowledge he has been given:

- I. They are *made known unto me by the Holy Spirit of God*. Behold, I have fasted and prayed many days that I might know these things of myself.
 - A And now I do know of myself that they are *true*,
 - B for the Lord God hath made them *manifest unto me by his Holy Spirit*;
 - C and this is *the spirit of revelation* which is in me.
- II. And moreover I say unto you that as it has thus been *revealed unto me* that the words which have been spoken by our fathers are true,
 - C* even so according to *the spirit of prophecy* which is in me,
 - B* which is also by the *manifestation of the Spirit of God*,
 - A* I say unto you that I know of myself that whatsoever I shall say unto you concerning that which is to come is *true*.

(Alma 5:46–8)

In this compound and parallel account, Alma testifies both to the truth of the revelations given to him personally and to the truth of those received and written by “our fathers.” All were manifestations of “the Holy Spirit of God,” and are

therefore true. He refers to the spirit in this function as both “the spirit of revelation” and as “the spirit of prophecy which is in me.” Key terms in this statement point to the structure of a recurring discourse in the Book of Mormon about spiritual knowledge.

The frequently occurring phrases *the spirit of prophecy* and *the spirit of revelation* are arresting because they do not occur in the Old Testament and appear to be original formulations introduced by Nephite prophets of the first generation. Nephi taught that “the words of Isaiah ... are plain unto all they that are filled with *the spirit of prophecy*” before going on to offer his own “*prophecy according to the Spirit which is in me*” (2 Nephi 25:4). Nephi defined the break-off group that followed him as those that “believed in the warnings and the *revelations of God*; wherefore they did hearken unto my words” (2 Nephi 5:6). His brother Jacob reports twice that the Nephites in his day had “many *revelations and the spirit of (much) prophecy*” (Jacob 1:6, 4:6).

This seemingly redundant linkage of *revelation* and *prophecy* shows up repeatedly, and by the third Nephite century may have acquired a common biblical rhetorical form that occurs a dozen times throughout the text. In the seven-sentence transmittal note written in the sixth Nephite generation, Abinadom again links the two, but in a way that indicates the preservation of some distinctiveness of meaning: “And I know of no *revelation* save that which has been written,

neither *prophecy*” (Omni 1:11).

By the time of Alma in the sixth Nephite century, these two terms are regularly conjoined in the common rhetorical figure of *hendiadys*. In the late twentieth century, scholars came to appreciate the frequent appearance of this figure in the Hebrew Bible, leading some to claim that Hebrew literature reflects its use more intensively than does any other ancient literary tradition. In *hendiadys*, two related nouns or verbs are conjoined — usually by *and* — in identical grammatical forms or structures. While modern readers might simply see these as synonyms or appositions, this rhetorical figure invited ancient readers to see these conjunctions conveying a single more complex concept that incorporates the full range of meaning of both terms. In another paper I have shown that the Nephites used this rhetorical technique extensively in their discourse about repentance.³⁸ Here is a list of these conjunctions of the spirit of *revelation* and *prophecy* in the Book of Mormon:

1. “According to the spirit of *revelation* and *prophecy*” (Alma 4:20)
2. “According to the spirit of *revelation* and *prophecy*” (Alma 8:24)

³⁸ See Noel B. Reynolds, “The Language of Repentance in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 29, 2020 (forthcoming), which is available online temporarily as an unedited working paper, Brigham Young University, Provo, 2018, 27–28, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/2325>.

3. “Having *the spirit of prophecy and the spirit of revelation*” (Alma 9:21)
4. “They had *the spirit of prophecy and the spirit of revelation*” (Alma 173).
5. “According to the spirit of *revelation and prophecy*” (Alma 23:6)
6. “According to the spirit of *prophecy and revelation*” (Alma 43:2)
7. “Denying the spirit of *prophecy and of revelation*” (Helaman 4:12)
8. “To disbelieve in *the spirit of prophecy and in the spirit of revelation*” (Helaman 4:23)
9. “That had the spirit of *revelation and also of prophecy*” (3 Nephi 3:19)
10. “Worketh *by revelation or by prophecy*” (3 Nephi 29:6)
11. “There is no *revelations nor prophecies*” (Mormon 9:7)
12. “And also by the spirit of *prophecy and of revelation*” (title page)

Two of these *hendiadyses* are found in speeches of Alma, and the rest occur in narratives provided by Mormon as abridging editor, or his son Moroni in the title page. A similar logic occurs in two other passages by Alma and Mormon respectively in which larger parallel constructions accomplish the same conjunction of language and meanings. The most elaborate is the passage quoted above — Alma 5:46–47. The second is Mormon’s description of Alma’s preaching to the people of Gideon, which puts the revelations of the fathers and of

Alma himself into a parallel construction with the spirit of prophecy.

And Alma went and began to declare the word of God unto the church which was established in the valley of Gideon, according to *the revelation of the truth of the word* which had been spake by his fathers and according to *the spirit of prophecy* which was in him — according to the testimony of Jesus Christ the Son of God, which should come for to redeem his people from their sins — and the holy order by which he was called.³⁹ (Alma 6:8)

The most convincing explanation for the Nephites' rhetorical conjunction of *revelation* and *prophecy* rests in a comparison of the Hebrew vocabulary that could underlie each of these terms. The Hebrew word for *revelation* derives from the verb *to reveal* (*gālâ*), which in this context refers to the self-revelation of the Lord to men. *Prophecy* (*n^ebû'â*), on the other hand, can refer either to the teachings or commandments the Lord gave to prophets for communication to his people or to the predictions of future events featuring principally the future coming and atonement of Jesus Christ, as in Alma 6:8 quoted above, but also describing what

³⁹ In this passage Alma explicitly equates the spirit of prophecy with “the testimony of Jesus Christ the Son of God, which should come for to redeem his people.” As already explained in this paper, one of the primary functions of the Holy Ghost in Nephite scripture is to “witness of the Father and the Son” (2 Nephi 31:18). Most Book of Mormon prophecies focus on the coming Christ. Alma’s specification is echoed by Joseph Smith in Joseph Fielding Smith,

might follow from the community's obedience or failures to obey the revealed instructions. By joining these terms in the rhetorical figure of *hendiadys* or in other typical Hebrew parallel structures, the Nephites are claiming that any use of one term implicitly brings with it the meaning of the other. Jesus Christ has revealed himself to many prophets — giving them a preview of his ministry and atonement — and teaching them his gospel, which they in turn were instructed to teach to the people. These same prophets have also been shown what will happen to the people as they accept or reject the gospel in present and future generations.

This explanation works well in accounts of Nephite prophets of their experience with the divine. Beginning on the first page of the Book of Mormon, Lehi has a vision of God on his throne and is commanded to warn the people to repent, with attendant accounts of the disasters that await the unrepentant. Immediately after Nephi's account of Lehi's great vision, Nephi tells us that his father shared these prophecies with his sons and taught them “concerning the gospel which should be preached among the Jews” (1 Nephi 10:11). Similarly, Nephi has a vision of Christ and receives prophecies to share with his people — as well as the gospel or doctrine of Christ, which shows all people how they can get on the straight and narrow path that leads back to God.⁴⁰ Alma claimed to have

ed., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1938), 160.

⁴⁰ See the full discussion in Noel B. Reynolds, “The Gospel According to Nephi: An

seen a heavenly scene identical or similar to the one described by Lehi. Nephi explains that he includes excerpts from the writings of his brother Jacob and Isaiah in his own account because, like himself, they have both seen the Lord.⁴¹ For the Nephites, prophecy comes through those to whom the Lord has revealed himself in vision, by his voice, or through manifestations of the Holy Ghost.

The mysteries of God

The Nephites also display a developed discourse about the *mysteries of God* that will be “revealed” or “unfolded” to the faithful — a discourse that seems to be more assumed than explicated in the Old Testament. In the opening sentence of his writings, Nephi contextualizes his writing project, explaining that he had been “highly favored of the Lord in all [his] days” because he had received “great knowledge of the goodness and *the mysteries of God*” (1 Nephi 1:1). While the term *mystery* in the Greek New Testament may often refer to religious rituals, in the Book of Mormon it refers consistently to the things of God that can only be known by revelation.

[A]fter I Nephi having heard all the words of my father concerning the things which he saw in a vision and also the things which he spake *by the power of the Holy Ghost*, ... I Nephi was desirous also that I might see and

Essay on 2 Nephi 31,” *Religious Educator* 16, no. 2 (2015): 51–75.

⁴¹ 2 Nephi 11:2–3.

hear and know of these things *by the power of the Holy Ghost*, which is the gift of God unto all those who diligently seek him. ... And the way is prepared for all men from the foundation of the world if it so be that they repent and come unto him. For he that diligently seeketh shall find, and *the mysteries of God* shall be unfolded to them by *the power of the Holy Ghost* (1 Nephi 10:17–19).

Jacob also described “the depths of *the mysteries* of [the Lord]” as “unsearchable” and recognized that “it is impossible that man should find out all his ways. And no man knoweth of his ways save it be revealed unto him” (Jacob 4:8). The Nephite prophets mention at least 30 times these mysteries, secrets, words, or things of God that can be “revealed,” “unfolded,” “made known,” or “made manifest” to men.⁴² These revelations and prophecies come “by the power of the Holy Ghost” to those who demonstrate faith and have repented of their sins, and who diligently seek. As Alma explained, “There is none that knoweth these things save it be the penitent. Yea, he that repenteth and exerciseth faith and bringeth forth good works and prayeth continually without ceasing, unto such it is given to know the mysteries of God. Yea, unto such it shall be given to reveal things which never have been

⁴² Examples of this usage include 1 Nephi 1:1, 2:16, 10:17–19; 2 Nephi 27:10–11, 22, 30:16–18; Jacob 4:8–9, 15–18; Jarom 1:2; Mosiah 1:2–5, 2:9, 8:17, 19–20; Alma 5:46–48, 10:5, 12:9–11, 26:21–22, 37:4, 10–12, 40:3; Mormon 5:8–9.

revealed” (Alma 26:21–22).

Other issues related to the Holy Ghost

The power of the Holy Ghost

We have only one clear example in the Old Testament of a prophet claiming to exercise his responsibility by virtue of this spiritually given power. In Micah 3:8 we read: “But truly I am *full of power by the spirit of the Lord*, and of judgment, and of might, to declare unto Jacob his transgression, and to Israel his sin.”⁴³ In contrast, the Nephite writers explicitly cite *the power of the Holy Ghost* 29 times as the means by which they were cleansed from sin, received divine knowledge, or were able to perform certain functions. Nephi sets the pattern by pointing to this power as the means through which men can see, hear, and know the mysteries and precepts of God, which are “unfolded to diligent seekers by “*the power of the Holy Ghost.*” Further, “angels speak by *the power of the Holy Ghost,*” and Jesus Christ will manifest himself to the Gentiles and to all believers by the same power.⁴⁴ Jacob explains the effectiveness of inspired speaking, saying that “*the power of the Holy Ghost* carrieth it unto the hearts of the children of

⁴³ While this shows a compatibility between our Old Testament and the Book of Mormon usage, the Nephites would not have known about late prophets like Micah from the plates of brass.

⁴⁴ See 1 Nephi 10:17–19; 2 Nephi 26:12–13, 28:26, 32:2–3.

men.” But he recognizes that this power does not overwhelm their agency when he laments that “there are many that harden their hearts against the Holy Spirit, that it hath no place in them.” In so doing, they “deny the good word of Christ and *the power of God and the gift of the Holy Ghost* and quench the Holy Spirit” (Jacob 6:7–8). When Jacob confronted Sherem with his own testimony of the atonement of Christ, Sherem demanded “a sign by this *power of the Holy Ghost,*” and was rendered dumb. This led him to confess publicly “the Christ and *the power of the Holy Ghost,*” while admitting that he had been deceived “by *the power of the devil*” (Jacob 7:12–13; 17–18).

Alma explained the future coming of Christ into mortality by saying that “the virgin ... shall be overshadowed and conceive *by the power of the Holy Ghost*” (Alma 7:10). Nephi had earlier quoted “the Lamb” telling him that the saints of the last days would be able “to bring forth Zion at that day” because they would “have *the gift and the power of the Holy Ghost,*” which could enable them to “endure to the end” (1 Nephi 13:37). Prophesying again of those same future developments, Jesus told the Nephites that these same teachings “which I shall declare unto you hereafter of myself and *by the power of the Holy Ghost ... shall be made known unto the Gentiles*” (3 Nephi 21:2). Mormon closed his summary of Christ’s teachings to the Nephites with warnings to the future Gentiles: “Yea, woe unto him that shall deny the revelations of the Lord and that shall say: The

Lord no longer worketh by revelation or by prophecy or by gifts or by tongues or by healings or *by the power of the Holy Ghost*” (3 Ne. 29:6). In his closing sermons Mormon reported one of his own revelations: “The word of the Lord came to me *by the power of the Holy Ghost*,” at the same time that he recognized the Spirit was no longer striving with the apostate Nephites, who were “seeking to put down all power and authority which cometh from God, and they are denying the Holy Ghost” (Moroni 8:7–8, 28). But he also recognized that for the faithful, “the Holy Ghost may have a place in their hearts according to *the power* thereof,” and that the “meek and lowly in heart” can “confess that Jesus is the Christ” “*by the power of the Holy Ghost*” (Moroni 7:32, 36, 44).

In his own final addendum to his father’s abridgment, Moroni gathered up some key ordinances and practices of the Nephite church, while showing various ways in which they invoked the power of the Holy Ghost. Priests and teachers were ordained “*by the power of the Holy Ghost* which was in them.” New converts who were received unto baptism “were wrought upon and cleansed *by the power of the Holy Ghost*.” And the church conducted its meetings “after the manner of the workings of the Spirit and *by the power of the Holy Ghost*, for as *the power of the Holy Ghost* led them whether to preach or exhort or to pray or to supplicate or to sing, even so it was done” (Moroni 3:4, 6:4, 9). Finally, Moroni promised all readers of this book that if they would “ask God, the Eternal Father, with a sincere

heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ,” he would “manifest the truth of it unto you *by the power of the Holy Ghost.*” Further, he explained, “*by the power of the Holy Ghost* ye may know the truth of all things. . . . And ye may know that he is *by the power of the Holy Ghost*” (Moroni 10: 4–7).

Clearly, *by the power of the Holy Ghost* was a stock phrase that was invoked repeatedly by a wide range of Nephite writers. And it could be used to qualify a long list of specific activities. Men, angels, and the Lord himself are described as speaking by this power. It also produces revelations and the knowledge of the truths and mysteries of God and gives divine precepts to men. It can soften hearts and carry these truths “unto the hearts of the children of men” (Jacob 6:1). It will enable men to bring forth Zion and endure to the end. It made possible the mortal conception of Christ. It can work upon and cleanse newly baptized converts. It can shape the conduct of worship meetings “after the manner of the workings of the Spirit” (Moroni 6:9). It can enable faith and the confession that Jesus is the Christ.

This flexibility of application fits well with the Hebrew word used in the one Old Testament mention of the power of the spirit that is quoted above from Micah 3:8: “But truly I am full of *power by the spirit* of the Lord.” A similar idea may lie behind the angel’s message to Zerubbabel that the temple would be rebuilt “not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit” (Zechariah 4:6, NIV); and Isaiah’s warning

against seeking the help of Egypt: “The Egyptians are mere mortals and not God; their horses are flesh and not spirit” (Isaiah 31:6, NIV).

While over 20 different Hebrew terms have been translated into English as *power* in the Hebrew Bible, *kowach* is translated that way 37 times, in comparison to 11 times for the nearest competitor. The meaning of *kowach* also makes it a promising candidate for the Hebrew term that may lie behind this Nephite phrasing. In its 126 Old Testament occurrences, it refers generally to the capacity to act, and can be applied in very different linguistic situations. “It can be understood both in physical and figurative terms,” and it does not appear to be derived from cognate languages.⁴⁵ Further, “it is a poetic word as it is used most frequently in the poetic and prophetic literature.”⁴⁶ “In a static sense, *koah* [kowach] suggests the capacity to endure, as of a stone (Job 6:7), but more commonly it expresses potency, capacity to produce. ... By extension the word

⁴⁵ R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1980), 436–7, hereafter cited as *TWOT*. See also Willem A. VanGemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997). Hereafter cited as *NIDOTTE*. The more recent *NIDOTTE* does mention ANE cognate forms found in Aramaic and some others (2:621).

⁴⁶ James Strong, “Hebrew and Aramaic Dictionary,” in *The New Strong’s Expanded Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 128.

comes to connote general ability to cope with situations (Deut 8:17–18; I Chr 29:14; Ezr 10:13; etc.).”⁴⁷ But “the word is frequently used in connection with God.” The more salient examples refer to his creating of the earth and to his delivering his people from Egyptian bondage.⁴⁸ And without “the enabling power of Yahweh’s spirit, human might and strength are incapable of accomplishing the work of God in the world.”⁴⁹ It was Isaiah who asked, “where is he who set *his Holy Spirit* among them, who sent *his glorious arm of power* to be at Moses’ right hand, who divided the waters before them” (Isaiah 63:11b). As Hildebrandt concludes his discussion on this point,

God exercised great power through the Spirit by leading the people through the divided sea. This phenomenon was recorded for the sake of each generation to indicate the power of Yahweh. It is the foundational event for the nation. Just as creation is brought into reality by the Spirit for all humanity, so in the exodus event the Spirit brings Israel through the sea and establishes the people of God in Canaan. Through the *rûah*, Israel is born, delivered, established, nurtured, and sustained (cf. Isa 43:5).⁵⁰

⁴⁷ *TWOT*, 437.

⁴⁸ Robin Wakely, s.v. “כֹּחַ (kōah),” *NIDOTTE*, 2:624.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:625.

⁵⁰ Hildebrandt, *An Old Testament Theology*, 71–72. See the longer discussion on pages

Power and authority

Closely related to the passages referring to *the power of the Holy Ghost* are fifteen additional passages referring to *the power and authority* that comes from God or is given by God and is evident in the preaching and conduct of the Nephite prophets. For example, the account of Abinadi's final appearance before King Noah and the council of priests bent on his destruction ends by Abinadi pointing to their inability to

lay their hands on him, for the *Spirit of the Lord* was upon him. And his face shone with exceeding luster even as Moses' did while in the mount of Sinai while speaking with the Lord. And he spake with *power and authority from God*. (Mosiah 13:5–6)

As I will show in another study, the phrase “power and authority” is used throughout the Book of Mormon as a *hendiadys* that connotes the capacity to perform some deed legitimately and can be used with equal effect in a religious or political context, where it can be stated either positively or negatively.⁵¹ But in many of these it is used explicitly or implicitly to refer to the power of God

67–72.

⁵¹ See Noel B. Reynolds, “*Hendiadyses* in the Book of Mormon” (working paper, June 2019).

exercised through his Spirit.⁵²

The gift and power of God

Frequently the Nephite prophets characterized the power of God or of the Holy Ghost as a gift. In the closing lines of the record, Moroni did this twice, stating first that should the day come “that *the power and gifts of God* shall be done away among you, it shall be because of unbelief.” Then, in the very next sentence, he asserts that anyone who does good “shall work by *the power and gifts of God*” (Moroni 10:24–25). In the title page of the record, which may have been the very last thing he wrote, Moroni used this same terminology again. Referring to the record itself, he assured his readers that it will “come forth *by the gift and power of God* unto the interpretation thereof”; and then, at the end of the same long sentence, he repeated that it will “come forth in due time by the way of Gentile, the interpretation thereof *by the gift of God*” (Title page). This phrasing echoes the early account written by Nephi as he described his own reaction to the words of his father's description of his great vision, “which he spake by the power of the Holy Ghost.” “And it came to pass that I Nephi was desirous also that I might see and hear and know of these things *by the power of the Holy Ghost, which is the gift of God* unto all those who diligently seek him” (1 Nephi 10:17).

⁵² Additional examples include Words of Mormon 1:17, Mosiah 13:6, Mosiah 18:17, 26, Mosiah 27:14; Alma 5:3, 17:3; Helaman 5:18, 6:5, 11:18; 3 Nephi 7:17, 12:1; and Moroni 8:28.

In the Book of Mormon as a whole, there are at least 15 passages in which the gift and power of God, of the Holy Ghost, of Christ, or of the Lamb are linked in similar phrasings.⁵³ But they also seem to be saying the same thing. Divine power can be given to men to do good — the Lord’s work. It can also be noted that the repeated linkage of the two nouns *power* and *gift* in many of these statements appears to constitute a common Nephite *hendiadys* that signals divine power working through the men to whom it is given for God’s purposes. For example, Nephi prophesied that his record would “come forth unto the Gentiles by the *gift and power* of the Lamb” and promised that “blessed are they which shall seek to bring forth my Zion at that day, for they shall have *the gift and the power* of the Holy Ghost” (1 Nephi 13:35, 37). The same phrasing does not occur in Old Testament.

Conferring the Gift of the Holy Ghost

In his final listing of the practices of the Nephite church, Moroni makes it clear that they did continue the practice of conferring the gift of the Holy Ghost on new members, just as Christ had authorized his twelve disciples to do when he visited the Nephites and reestablished the church.⁵⁴

⁵³ In addition to those already cited in the text, see 1 Nephi 13:35, 37; 2 Nephi 28:26; Jacob 6:8; Omni 1:20; Mosiah 8:16; 3 Nephi 29:6; Moroni 3:4, 7:16.

⁵⁴ See the account in 3 Nephi 18:36–37.

The words of Christ which he spake unto his disciples, the twelve whom he had chosen, as he laid his hands upon them. And he called them by name, saying: Ye shall call on the Father in my name in mighty prayer. And after that ye have done this, ye shall have power that on him whom ye shall lay your hands ye shall give the Holy Ghost. And in my name shall ye give it, for thus do mine apostles. Now Christ spake these words unto them at the time of his first appearing. And the multitude heard it not, but the disciples heard it. And on as many as they laid their hands fell the Holy Ghost.

(Moroni 2:1–3)

There is no mention of this ordinance in the Nephite church before the coming of Christ, and there are likewise no accounts of events in which the ordinance was performed after that. We do have the single occasion when Alma and his select group of mostly experienced missionaries undertook their mission to the apostate Zoramites. After praying for the people and the missionaries, “he clapped his hands upon all they which were with him. And behold, as he clapped his hands upon them, they were filled with the Holy Spirit” (Alma 31:36). But this does not seem to be the same thing as bestowing the gift of the Holy Ghost on new converts.

The Holy Ghost as a separate divine being

One question that can be asked about the nature of the Holy Ghost is whether he is a separately identifiable divine being, or whether he is the shared mind of the Father and the Son — as Sidney Rigdon taught the Kirtland saints.⁵⁵ While numerous passages could be read either way, there are sixteen passages in the Book of Mormon that would seem to require that he be understood as a separate, divine being. Six passages make a point of the fact that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost witness or bear record of one another in a way that clearly treats them as separate beings each with their own agency. Three of these occur in key passages where Christ is being quoted while presenting his gospel or doctrine.⁵⁶ Two others also quote Jesus during his visits to the Nephites.⁵⁷ The sixth is a late reminder from Moroni based on these earlier statements.⁵⁸ In a similar seventh version, Moroni announces the importance of three witnesses and

⁵⁵ See Larry E. Dahl and Charles D. Tate, Jr., eds., “Lecture 5,” in *The Lectures on Faith: In Historical Perspective* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 1990), 83–89. Despite ongoing efforts to attribute these Kirtland lectures to Joseph Smith, it is now clear that they were written by Rigdon and published at his instigation. See Noel B. Reynolds, “The Case for Sidney Rigdon as Author of the ‘Lectures on Faith,’” *Journal of Mormon History* 31, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 1–41.

⁵⁶ 2 Nephi 31:18; 3 Nephi 11:32, 36.

⁵⁷ 3 Nephi 16:6, 28:11.

⁵⁸ Ether 12:41.

points to fact that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost all bear record of God's word (gospel):

And in the mouth of three witnesses shall these things be established; and the testimony of three and this work [the Book of Mormon] — in the which shall be shewn forth the power of God and also his word, of which the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost beareth record — and all this shall stand as a testimony against the world at the last day (Ether 5:4).

Even more impressively, eight other passages point independently to different contexts in which the person of the Holy Ghost is understood to be a separate divine being. In his extended account of his great vision, Nephi quotes “the voice of the Son” telling him that “He that is baptized in my name, to him will the Father give the Holy Ghost like unto me” (2 Nephi 31:12), pointing to separate and related roles of the three divinities. At the conclusion of the same passage, which is the first and possibly most important exposition of the gospel or doctrine of Christ in the Book of Mormon, Nephi describes it as “the only and true doctrine of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost” (2 Nephi 31:21). In a later discourse, Jesus Christ had given the Nephites precise wording to be used in the ordinance of baptism, which also referred to the three divinities individually by name: “Having authority given me of Jesus Christ, I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost” (3 Nephi 11:25). One of the last

things Jesus told the Nephites enriches our understanding of the roles and relationships of the three divinities: “And the Father giveth the Holy Ghost unto the children of men because of me” (3 Nephi 28:11). In a unique account, Mormon mentions future adulations of the Holy Ghost in God’s heavenly kingdom. Speaking first of Jesus Christ he says:

And he hath brought to pass the redemption of the world, whereby he that is found guiltless before him at the judgment day hath it given unto them to dwell in the presence of God in his kingdom, to sing ceaseless praises with the choirs above unto the Father and unto the Son and unto the Holy Ghost, which is one God, in a state of happiness which hath no end. (Mormon 7:7)

And finally, just as Nephi in 2 Nephi 31:21 assigned some ownership of the doctrine of Christ to the Holy Ghost, Moroni, in his closing writings also does the same thing with divine grace:

And now I would commend you to seek this Jesus of whom the prophets and apostles have written, that the grace of God the Father and also the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost, which beareth record of them, may be and abide in you forever. (Ether 12:41)

In light of these passages, Nephi’s twice stated vision of the Holy Ghost descending upon Jesus at the time of his baptism could also be read as another evidence of the Nephite understanding of the separateness of the three divinities.

The unity of the three divinities

It may seem puzzling that some of the very passages which list out the separate names of these three divinities — while pointing to some of their different functions and roles — also affirm that they are a unity in some unexplained way. In the same sentence cited above in which Nephi assigned ownership of the doctrine of Christ to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, he went on to comment: “which is *one God* without end” (2 Nephi 31:21). Similar statements are repeated in the second key account of the gospel or doctrine of Christ, which Jesus presented to the assembled Nephites when he first appeared to them after his resurrection: “I say unto you that the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost *are one*; and I am in the Father and the Father in me, and *the Father and I are one*” (3 Nephi 11:27). And then only a few lines later, Jesus expands this statement to include the Holy Ghost and affirms to the Nephites that “the Father and I and the Holy Ghost *are one*” (3 Nephi 11:36). Taken with other passages in the Book of Mormon which make similar statements, it is possible to raise questions about potential theological inconsistencies.

While the Nephite prophets never seemed to worry about the theology, there are repeated phraseologies which may point to understandings that rendered these questions non-problematic for them. In this regard it may be helpful to note that numerous passages throughout the Book of Mormon speak of the Spirit or the Holy

Ghost being *in* the faithful. In the recorded prayer of Jesus to the Father during his visitation to the Nephites, Jesus speaks helpfully of his relationship to the Father in the same way. In that prayer Jesus asks the Father to give the Holy Ghost “unto all them that shall believe” in the words of his disciples. He then goes on:

And now Father, I pray unto thee for them, and also for all they which shall believe on their words, that they may *believe in me*, that I may be *in* them as thou Father art *in* me, that *we may be one*. (3 Nephi 19:23)

While it is not explained here what it might mean for Jesus to be *in* his believers or for the Father to be *in* Jesus, that seems key to understanding how they are one and how they expect the faithful to become one with them. It does not seem to suggest a oneness that compromises individual identity.⁵⁹

Nephi and the Spirit of the Lord

There is one obvious exception to the foregoing which has puzzled readers for generations. In an aside Nephi tells his readers that “the course of the Lord is one eternal round,” because in all ages when men will repent and seek God diligently, “the mysteries of God shall be unfolded to them by the power of the

⁵⁹ Royal Skousen has provided an enlightening review of all relevant passages in the text and an explanation of textual changes made in different editions. See Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon: Part 1 - 1 Nephi 1-2 Nephi 10*, 2nd ed. (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2005), 235–38.

Holy Ghost” (1 Nephi 10:19). In that context, Nephi then describes the circumstances of the great vision he received while staying in their first camp in the wilderness. He reports being “caught away in *the Spirit of the Lord* ... into an exceeding high mountain” and being asked by *the Spirit* what he desired (1 Nephi 11:1–2). Reassured by Nephi’s declaration of belief in his father’s words, “*the Spirit* cried with a loud voice, saying: Hosanna to the Lord, the Most High God, for he is God over all the earth, yea, even above all. And blessed art thou Nephi because thou believest in the Son of the Most High” (1 Nephi 11:6).

In due course, Nephi is shown the vision of the tree of life his father had seen, prefaced by “the Spirit [saying] unto [Nephi]: ‘Look’” (1 Nephi 11:8). As Nephi’s description of this conversation progresses, he describes himself and *the Spirit* asking and answering questions to each other. At the end, Nephi offers the following clarifications:

For I spake unto him as a man speaketh, for I beheld that he was *in the form of a man*, yet nevertheless I knew that it was *the Spirit of the Lord*, and he spake unto me as a man speaketh with another. (1 Nephi 11:11)

Readers have long debated the nature of *the Spirit* or *the Spirit of the Lord* in this story.⁶⁰ One thing is clear: Nephi was perfectly comfortable using both names

⁶⁰ A parallel debate has long occupied theologians of the Old Testament, who have struggled to understand incidents involving the appearance of “the angel (*mal’ak*) of the Lord” or

for the same being — going back and forth between the two titles in his report. But what is unique in this passage is the obvious suggestion that this being may actually have been the premortal Jesus Christ. From a literary perspective, the disappearance of this spirit guide from the story at the very moment that Jesus Christ appears in the vision Nephi is watching might support that conclusion. In another remarkable passage, over a thousand years before his own birth, the Lord showed himself to the Brother of Jared and explained:

Behold, this body which ye now behold is the body of my spirit. And man have I created after the body of my spirit. And even as I appear unto thee to be in the spirit will I appear unto my people in the flesh. (Ether 3:16)

Nephi received his great vision over three decades before he penned the version we have in the small plates. As will be shown below, it is clear that he understood that Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost were different beings and that he used *the Spirit of the Lord* interchangeably with *the Spirit*, *the Spirit of God*, and *the Holy Ghost*. It can occur to readers that the story of receiving this vision may have been told in this way to help readers understand that these connections and

“of God.” A number of these passages seem to be saying that the angel was the Lord himself and do not yield easily to other interpretations. See the helpful discussion in Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1967), 2:23–29. Also see Stephen F. Noll, s.v. “*mal’āk*,” *NIDOTTE*, 2:941–43.

distinctions were still being clarified for Nephi through these experiences in real time. All of his encounters with the divine before this vision spoke of the Spirit or the Spirit of the Lord. In relating the prophecies and revelations of his father Lehi in those early chapters, he moves on to use *the Spirit of God* and *the Holy Ghost* — all of which have been introduced before Nephi’s account of his own great vision in chapter 11. Only in the middle of this vision does he become clearly and personally aware of the Son of God as a premortal spiritual being.

Conclusions

In the Book of Mormon the Holy Ghost is regarded both as a divine being that in some important sense is one with the Father and the Son and that can be in human beings when they are under his influence and as the means by which the power of God is manifest in the lives of people. The full set of spiritual labels used by the Nephites (Holy Spirit, Spirit of God, Spirit of the Lord, spirit of prophecy and revelation, the Spirit, etc.) seem always to apply to this same being. The means by which the Holy Ghost’s influence is made manifest is never explained but is always represented as being clearly recognizable — particularly as it opposes the power or spirit of the devil. It witnesses to men of the divinity of the Father and the Son, softens their hearts to receive his gospel, inspires the speech of the prophets, brings the remission of sins to those who will respond to the gospel

invitation through repentance, and shows the faithful all things what they should do to endure to the end and qualify for eternal life.

Noel B. Reynolds (PhD, Harvard University) is an emeritus professor of political science at Brigham Young University, where he taught a broad range of courses in legal and political philosophy, American Heritage, and the Book of Mormon. His research and publications are based in these fields and several others, including authorship studies, Mormon history, Christian history and theology, and the Dead Sea Scrolls.