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Rethinking the Rod of Iron

T. J. Uriona

Near its beginning, the Book of Mormon relates the dream of an Israelite father and visionary prophet named Lehi. About 600 BCE, Lehi and his family “tarried in the wilderness,” having fled Jerusalem for a promised land, guided by the Lord (1 Ne. 8:2). In this dream, Lehi saw a symbolic scene with multiple elements, including a tree with desirable fruit and a river running near the tree. “And,” he said, “I beheld a rod of iron, and it extended along the bank of the river, and led to the tree” (1 Ne. 8:19). Lehi observed how people made their way through darkness to the tree by grabbing the end of the rod and “holding fast” to it (1 Ne. 8:30). Later, in his own apocalyptic vision, Lehi’s son Nephi discerned the meaning of the iron rod: “I beheld that the rod of iron, which my father had seen, was the word of God, which led to the fountain of living waters, or to the tree of life.” Nephi learned that the fountain and the tree typified the love of God (1 Ne. 11:25).

The iron rod is iconic within Latter-day Saint culture. It is the subject of lessons and sermons and songs.¹ Media and art regularly depict it as some type of handrail.² This concept of the iron rod as a type of rail or

1. Mary Jane Woodger and Michelle Vanegas Brodrick, “Lehi’s Dream and Nephi’s Vision as Used by Church Leaders,” in *The Things Which My Father Saw: Approaches to Lehi’s Dream and Nephi’s Vision*, ed. Daniel L. Belnap, Gaye Strathearn, and Stanley A. Johnson (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 374–92; Richard G. Oman, “Lehi’s Vision of the Tree of Life: A Cross-Cultural Perspective in Contemporary Latter-day Saint Art,” *BYU Studies* 32, no. 4 (1992): 5–34.

2. For example, see the image results for an internet search on the terms “iron,” “rod,” and “lehi”: <https://www.google.com/search?q=iron+rod+lehi>.

balustrade may at first appear to be the only possible way to understand and visualize the iron rod.³ A close reading of the Book of Mormon in light of the ancient Near East yields a surprisingly distinct interpretive possibility. To Lehi and those of the ancient Near East, the rod symbolized the right to rule and was held in the hand of gods, kings, and shepherds.⁴ The Israelite narrative contains extensive references to the rod in this context and provides strong support for conceptualizing the rod of iron as something other than a handrail when it is first introduced in Lehi's vision.⁵ In that verse ("And I beheld a rod of iron, and it extended" [1 Ne. 8:19]), the verb "extend" gives the impression that the rod, as the subject in the sentence, is what extends, like a railing or handrail. However when the rod is viewed in an ancient context⁶—as a discrete rod or shepherd's tool—it suggests that there is an implied agent, the Lord, who is extending the rod of iron to shepherd those of Lehi's dream.⁷ When read in this way the "extended" rod matches well with the symbolism of the rod in the ancient Near East and the biblical account of Jesus Christ as the "Good

3. It has even been suggested by those who claim Joseph Smith fabricated the Book of Mormon that he got the idea for the rod of iron from a "substantial iron railing hundreds of feet long" found in Rochester, New York. Jeff Lindsey, "The Great and Spacious Book of Mormon Arcade Game: More Curious Works from the Book of Mormon Critics," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 23 (2017): 161–235; Rick Grunder, "The Great and Spacious Building," *Worlds without End*, April 27, 2015, <http://www.withoutend.org/great-spacious-building/>.

4. Mary Abram, "A New Look at the Mesopotamian Rod and Rings: Emblems of Time and Eternity," *Studia Antiqua* 10, no. 1 (2011): 15–36.

5. For an indication as to how Joseph Smith might have conceptualized the "extended" rod of iron in Lehi's visions see note 51. Joseph Smith also tells of a dream where he used a rod of iron to help free himself from his adversaries. "Journal, December 1842–June 1844; Book 1, 21 December 1842–10 March 1843," [141–43], Joseph Smith Papers, accessed March 26, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-december-1842-june-1844-book-1-21-december-1842-10-march-1843/149>.

6. It is worth noting that Laman and Lemuel did not ask Nephi "what the rod of iron is." It appears they understood what it was and how it was used. They were merely confused as to what it meant. See 1 Nephi 15:23–24.

7. Because a rod is not a normal part of life for us today, it is harder for us to see the implied agent working on the rod, and thus the verse is read as if the rod is what extends or lengthens. This reading is clarified when the words *rod* and *extend* are replaced with words that have cultural relevance today, such as *car* and *drove*. "I beheld a car, and it drove along the bank of the river, and led to the tree by which I stood." Because a car presently can't drive itself, it would be an anachronism to assume that the car drove itself along the bank of the river to the tree. It is therefore implied that someone is behind the wheel, driving the car. However, this reading is quickly becoming less obvious because soon the majority of cars may very well drive themselves.

Shepherd.”⁸ Rethinking the rod of iron, when it is first introduced in the Book of Mormon, as a shepherd’s rod extended by Christ, significantly multiplies the symbolic potential of the image.

The Rod in an Ancient Context

In the ancient Near East, as early as 3000 BCE, rods in a variety of forms were used as a symbol of power and the authority to rule.⁹ In one form, the rod is held along with a ring as an attestation of the divine. This is the case for the ancient Mesopotamian sun god, Samas, who is often depicted holding the rod and ring. Of him it was written, “May Samas lengthen his staff, may he shepherd his people in justice.”¹⁰ Anciently the gods are often depicted extending the rod and ring to kings and priests.¹¹ In a wall painting from 1770 BCE showing “The Investiture of Zimri-Lim,” the king is seen touching a rod, which is extended by the god Ishtar, with one hand while the other is raised in a gesture of reverence.¹² Further, like Lehi’s vision the painting also incorporates water and plant imagery as another important element associated with the rod and ring motif.¹³ The rod and ring as a symbol of the divine was widely used until nearly the time of Lehi.

8. On the other hand, the scriptures contain no additional references to a railing or handrail, which complicates the handrail interpretation by making it singular. Furthermore, ironworking during Lehi’s time had not developed to the point where an iron railing could be produced, and thus the idea of an ongoing handrail is conceptually anachronistic. In Lehi’s time, structures such as walls and battlements are mentioned as a means of support or protection. Israelite law even prescribed such protection: “When thou buildest a new house, then thou shalt make a battlement for thy roof, that thou bring not blood upon thine house, if any man fall from thence” (Deut. 22:8). Zachary Nelson, “The Rod of Iron in Lehi’s Dream,” *Religious Educator* 10, no. 3 (2009): 51, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/re/vol10/iss3/5>.

9. Claus Ambos, “The Curved Staff in the Ancient Near East as a Predecessor of the Etruscan *lituus* (zusammen mit Ingrid Krauskopf),” L. Bouke van der Meer, ed., *Material Aspects of Etruscan Religion. Proceedings of the International Colloquium Leiden, May 29 and 30, 2008, Babesch Suppl.* 16 (2010): 127–53.

10. Joan Goodnick Westenholz, “The Good Shepherd,” *Melammu Symposia* 4 (2004): 292.

11. Abram, “New Look at the Mesopotamian Rod and Rings,” 35–36; Pauline Albenda, “The Burney Relief Reconsidered,” *JANES* 2 (1969): 87–93.

12. Abram, “New Look at the Mesopotamian Rod and Rings,” 29–30.

13. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and Ronan James Head, “The Investiture Panel at Mari and Rituals of Divine Kingship in the Ancient Near East,” *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 4 (2012): 1–42.

The scepter and staff symbol, like the rod and ring, was also a well-established symbol in the ancient Near East, but it symbolized the king's right to rule (see Esth. 4:11; 5:2). In the Sumerian myth of Etana's kingship, in the early third millennium BCE, the scepter, crown, and shepherd's crook were retrieved in heaven by Etana before descending from heaven on the back of an eagle to become king and shepherd of Kish.¹⁴ The scepter was an embellished form of the rod that shepherds used, along with the staff, in caring for their sheep. The Babylonian king Hammurabi in the second millennium BCE, said of himself that "the great gods having chosen me, I am indeed the shepherd who provides well-being, whose staff is straight/just."¹⁵ In the ancient Near East, the scepter and staff were the dominant symbols of the king's divinely appointed authority to shepherd the people.¹⁶ The Assyrians took these ideas further and began associating the symbol of the rod with military power.¹⁷ The prophet Isaiah warned Israel saying, "O Assyrian, the rod of mine anger, and the staff in their hand is mine indignation. I will send him against an hypocritical nation" (Isa. 10:5–6). Here the rod and staff describe the function of the Assyrian nation as the Lord's implement to return Israel to the correct path. By Lehi's lifetime, the rod had evolved from its humble beginning as the tool of the shepherd to a culturally recognizable symbol of divinely sanctioned power.

To the Israelites, the archetype of the shepherd king of the ancient Near East was David. He was anointed to gather, rule, and defend Israel from all its enemies. The record indicates that David's time spent in the care of his father's sheep taught him to be fearless.¹⁸ In facing Goliath, David would only take those tools he had used in defending his father's sheep: a staff, a sling, and a resolute belief that the Lord would be with him. David's defeat of Goliath would be the first of many triumphs that eventually led to his coronation as king of Israel. As king and shepherd of Israel, David would work to fulfill the Lord's covenant to gather his people and succeed in once again unifying the tribes of Israel. Isaiah

14. Jonathan Gan, "The Metaphor of the Shepherd in Zechariah 11:4–17" (master's thesis, University of South Africa, 2010) 6, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/43167778.pdf>.

15. Westenholz, "Good Shepherd," 291–93.

16. Abram, "New Look at the Mesopotamian Rod and Rings," 19, 34–35.

17. Dana M. Pike, "Jesus, the Great Shepherd-King," in *Celebrating Easter: The 2006 BYU Easter Conference*, ed. Thomas A. Wayment and Keith J. Wilson (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2007), 61–86.

18. 1 Samuel 17:34–36; Psalm 78:70–72.

prophesied of a future king, with authority in the form of a rod, who would arise from a branch of David's royal line to rule all Israel once again. "And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots" (Isa. 11:1 and 2 Ne 21:1). Joseph Smith inquired as to the meaning of the "rod" as quoted by Nephi and found in Isaiah 11. The answer to this inquiry is recorded in the Doctrine and Covenants:

"Who is the Stem of Jesse spoken of in the 1st, 2d, 3d, 4th, and 5th verses of the 11th chapter of Isaiah?

"Verily thus saith the Lord: It is Christ.

"What is the rod spoken of in the first verse of the 11th chapter of Isaiah, that should come of the Stem of Jesse?

"Behold, thus saith the Lord: It is a servant in the hands of Christ" (D&C 113:1-4).¹⁹

Christ as the stem of Jesse holds the rod or royal scepter in his hand to rule as king over all Israel, and it is his prophets that are commissioned to speak his words. Psalm 2 is generally considered a coronation psalm for the future King and Shepherd, the Messiah, that would come from the stem of Jesse to once again unify Israel.²⁰ Speaking of the Messiah, the psalm says, "Thou shalt break²¹ them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel" (Ps. 2:9).²² By designating

19. Being an "instrument in the hand of God" is a common theme in the Book of Mormon. See 2 Nephi 1:24; 3:24; Mosiah 23:10; 27:36; Alma 1:8; 2:30; 17:9,11; 26:3,15; 29:9-10 (has wording that relates to Lehi's vision and the rod of iron); 35:14.

20. William H. Brownlee, "Psalms 1-2 as a Coronation Liturgy," *Biblica* 52, no. 3 (1971): 321-36.

21. The Vulgate, Septuagint, Syriac, Arabic, and Ethiopic versions of Psalm 2:9 render "shalt break them" as "shall feed them," "shall rule them," or "shall shepherd them." In Egyptian coronation and jubilee rituals, the king smashes vessels inscribed with the names of foreign nations as a demonstration of his power. This imagery is symbolic of the shepherd's role as king and ruler over his flock. Assyrian kings also engaged in this practice of smashing vessels. See also Psalm 110:1-2.

22. "In Assyrian representations and in Psalm 2:8, military power and the shepherd's office are vested in the godhead. The representation of the king with a shepherd's staff is familiar amongst Assyrian sources. . . . Verse 9 alludes to the temple walls, rock walls and other depicted scene against which the king dashes his iron scepter. . . . Verses 10-12 deal with the exhortation to the nations to serve Yahweh. The psalm reaches a climax with the (messianic) king of Zion not turning to weapons, but to the word, in order to persuade the kings of the nations to take the road that leads to God's kingdom." Cas J. A. Vos, *Theopoetry of the Psalms* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 68. Psalm 2 depicts a messianic king holding a rod of iron in verse 9, and in verses 10-12 that image is transformed from one that works like a weapon to the word of God that persuades the nations to take the

the rod that Christ was to hold as one of iron,²³ the record establishes that this was no common rod. A rod of iron conveys an image of a divine power that cannot be broken. Iron's strength and, at times, cosmic origin lent it a sense of power.²⁴ That the rod in Lehi's vision and David's psalm is a symbol of strength and heavenly power and authority is made clear by its being made of iron.²⁵ This idea is conveyed in the three other cases a rod of iron is mentioned in the Bible.²⁶ The Apostle John in the book of

path that leads to God. This shift matches what Nephi saw in vision and the explanation that Nephi gave to his brothers concerning the rod of iron that their father had seen in his dream. See 1 Nephi 11:25; 15:23–24.

23. There are examples of staffs being plated in precious metals starting in the second millennium BCE. See Ambos, "Curved Staff in the Ancient Near East," 132.

24. For example, the Egyptian word for iron, Benipe, is represented by the hieroglyphical inscriptions of the squared stone and the heavens and is understood to mean the "stone of heaven." Basil Henry Cooper, "The Antiquity of the Use of the Metals, and Especially of Iron, among the Egyptians," *Report and Transactions of the Devonshire Association for the Advancement of Science, Literature, and Art* 2 (1867): 402–3. In another example, the Akkadian idiom "(cattle) of iron" paralleled the saying "(animals) which do not die" in a legal context. A. L. Oppenheim, "A Note on 'son barzel,'" *Israel Exploration Journal* 5, no. 2 (1955): 89–92. In a treaty widely distributed by the Assyrian King Esarhaddon around 660 BCE, it speaks of making the "ground like iron (so that) nothing can sprout from it" or, in other words, unbreakable. See Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty (VTE), paragraph 63, <http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/saao/saao2/corpus>, SAA 02 006. In the ancient Near East, iron was initially of ornamental and symbolic value before being widely used for its metallurgic properties. W. Revell Phillips, "Metals of the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9, no. 2 (2000): 36–41, 82; Radomir Pleiner and Judith K. Bjorkman, "The Assyrian Iron Age: The History of Iron in the Assyrian Civilization," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 118, no. 3 (1974): 283–313; Paula M. McNutt, "Inquiry into the Significance of Iron Technology in Early Iron Age Palestine" (master's thesis, University of Montana, 1983) <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/2712>.

25. Iron in the scriptures is often related to the Lord's power and strength. See Deuteronomy 8:6–10; 33:25; Job 40:18; and Jeremiah 15:12. This is in contrast to Egypt being compared to a "staff of reed" in their support of the house of Israel (Ezekiel 29:6). In the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Thanksgiving Hymn 11 (formerly 6) says, "I thank Thee, O Lord, for Thou art as a fortified wall to me, and as an iron bar against all destroyers. . . . Thou hast set my feet upon rock . . . that I may walk in the way of eternity and in the paths which Thou hast chosen." Geza Vermes, trans., *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 7th ed. (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 268. In Hebrew, the word for bar can also be translated as rod. Nephi said the rod of iron would protect against the attacks of the "adversary" or destroyer, who would "lead them away" from the path (1 Ne. 15:24).

26. Biblical scholar Margaret Barker proposes that the English translation of the Bible would be more accurate in conceptualizing the rod of iron in the context of a tool the Lord uses to shepherd the nations and that this harmonizes well with the Book of Mormon's use of the rod of iron. Margaret Barker, "Joseph Smith and Preexilic Israelite Religion," *BYU Studies* 44, no. 4 (2005): 69–82.

Revelation describes the royal scepter Christ uses to rule all the nations as a “rod of iron.”²⁷

“And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father” (Rev. 2:27).

“And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron” (Rev. 12:5).²⁸

“And he shall rule them with a rod of iron” (Rev. 19:15).²⁹

In the context of the ancient Near East culture, to be king was to lead as the shepherd, and the rod functioned as a symbol of that leadership.³⁰ This conception of leadership is illustrated in the events associated with Nephi’s initial use of the word “rod” in his record. When an angel stops Laman and Lemuel from beating Nephi and Sam outside the city of Jerusalem, the angel establishes Nephi’s right to rule over his brothers by declaring, “Why do ye smite your younger brother with a rod? Know ye not that the Lord hath chosen him to be a ruler over you” (1 Ne. 3:29). The rod wielded by Laman and Lemuel to beat their brothers is stilled, and the angel’s declaration of Nephi’s leadership figuratively passes the rod as such to Nephi.³¹ Given the background from which Nephi emerged, it is possible that the next time a rod appears within his narrative, as part of Lehi’s vision, it can likewise be understood as a symbol of kingship and the right to rule. If this is the case, then it would follow that to see a rod of iron extending, which leads those who take hold of it to the tree of life, would be to see the anticipated Messiah working as the divine Shepherd-King to gather his flock. This image also has the potential to connect future readers of Nephi’s

27. Nephi records that during his vision he was shown things that he was not permitted to write and that those things were to be written by the “apostle of the Lamb” and “that the name of the apostle of the Lamb was John” (1 Ne. 14:27). Further, the angel indicates that both Nephi’s record and John’s record are to be taken together, the one establishing the other, and both are to establish the “one Shepherd over all” (1 Ne. 13:41).

28. Nephi likewise sees a virgin bearing a child that an angel says is the Son of God, and his ministry is associated with a rod of iron (1 Ne. 11:20–25).

29. The Greek word *poimanei* is translated “rule” in the King James Version of the Bible, but the word means to act as a shepherd. The same word is also translated “feed” in the King James Version (Acts 20:28). James Strong, *The New Strong’s Expanded Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, red letter ed. (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 4165.

30. Early Christian art often depicts Christ holding a staff or rod when performing miracles such as turning water into wine. Lee M. Jefferson, “The Staff of Jesus in Early Christian Art,” *Religion and the Art* 14, no. 3 (2010): 221–51.

31. Isaiah connects the Lord’s word to a rod and staff that will beat down Assyria in Isaiah 30:31–32. See also Isaiah 14:29 for a rod that is used to smite and Val Larsen, “Killing Laban: The Birth of Sovereignty in the Nephite Constitutional Order,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 16, no. 1 (2007).

record to John the Revelator's vision, which describes Christ ruling with a rod of iron that has power over all other rods³² as "Lord of lords and King of kings" (Rev. 17:14).³³ John speaks of Christ as the lamb of God who will shepherd his people to living water, emphasizing his mode of invitational leadership (Rev. 7:17).³⁴ Nephi would further see that Christ embodies the ideal Shepherd-King because he was willing to condescend below all things for the eternal welfare of the flock (1 Ne. 11:31–33).³⁵ As the Lamb, Christ successfully walked the path that leads to the tree of life, and in Lehi's vision the rod extending can be seen as an invitation to now "follow" him.³⁶ In this way, it is the rod of iron, with all that it implies in the ancient Near East, that can symbolize the invitation to "follow" the Shepherd-King to the fountain of living water and the tree of life.³⁷

Lehi's Dream and Shepherding

Lehi's dream is essentially a pastoral dream. It engenders images of open fields with paths, trees, and flowing water. Further, its message is one of drawing people away from a flawed urban landscape to a more idyllic landscape. The dream was deeply personal to Lehi because it first dealt with drawing his immediate family to safety. However, more broadly, it dealt with the necessity to safely gather all the inhabitants of the world to the place most desirable for their eternal well-being.³⁸ In this way, it fits well within the broader context of the Israelites as a people in need

32. This image is also conveyed in the story of Moses and his interactions with the sorcerers of Pharaoh. See Exodus 7:10–12.

33. Pike, "Jesus, the Great Shepherd-King," 61–86.

34. Nephi would refer to Christ as a Lamb more than any other place in scripture (58 times).

35. Marc Zvi Brettler, "God Is King: Understanding an Israelite Metaphor," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, Supplement Series 76 (1989): 36.

36. This idea is represented in the scriptures when they speak of Christ "succoring" his people (Heb. 2:13–18; Alma 7:12; D&C 62:1), defined as giving assistance or support, a function of the shepherd's rod.

37. In Nephi's vision, it was only after seeing the ministry of Christ that he was shown the rod of iron. Those who followed Christ's words were "led to the fountain of living waters, or to the tree of life" and, as in Lehi's vision, fell "down at his feet," an action traditionally reserved for gods or kings. See 1 Nephi 8:30; 11:24–25.

38. Like Lehi, once Enos had tasted the joy of Christ (the tree) via his reception of forgiveness, he desired that his family should join him, and he began to plead on behalf of his brethren the Nephites. After he had received assurance that the Lord would visit his brethren, he began to worry for the welfare of the Lamanites—or in other words, those not of his family but the other inhabitants of the world. Enos would be reassured by the Lord that by the power of his "holy arm" or that which extends the rod, the Lamanites could find "salvation" or the tree of life (Enos 1:13).

of a shepherd to gather them. If we recognize the vision as a pastoral dream, it invites the reader to view the Lord as the Shepherd, similar to Psalm 23.³⁹

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me” (Ps. 23:1–4).

Like the shepherd of David’s psalm, it is only when Lehi realized his complete dependence on the Lord and pleaded “that [the Lord] would have mercy on [him], according to the multitude of his tender mercies” (1 Ne. 8:8) that he is delivered from the darkness that engulfed him. Lehi’s desire to follow the Good Shepherd over anyone else would,⁴⁰ for him, be but the first step in obtaining the fruit of the tree.⁴¹ It was in crying out for the Lord’s mercy in prayer that Lehi finally obtained the tree.⁴² Likewise, tender mercies are manifest in the shepherd’s ability to hear and carefully provide for every want of his flock. Like David, Lehi experienced the comfort of having the Lord as a personal shepherd, guiding his way.⁴³ As such, their narratives share many of the same elements:

David’s Psalm	Lehi’s Dream
The valley of the shadow of death	Dark and dreary waste
Restoreth my soul	Filled my soul
Lie down	Fell down
Green pastures	Large and spacious field
Leadeth me beside the still waters	Extend along the bank of the river
Leadeth me in paths of righteousness	Obtain the path which led unto the tree
Thy rod and staff ⁴⁴	Rod of iron

39. See Genesis 49:24; Psalms 79:13; 95:6–7; 100:3–4; Ezekiel 34:11–15, 31.

40. I would like to thank Terryl Givens and Loren Spendlove for pointing out that the person Lehi first encounters in his dream may not have been the Lord. It is when Lehi follows this person that he finds himself in a “dark and dreary waste” (1 Ne. 8:5–8).

41. It is also possible that the spirit guide in the early part of Nephi’s vision was also Christ. Nephi sees that this guide is replaced by an angel at the moment he sees the virgin holding the Son of God in her arms (1 Ne. 11:12–21).

42. The blind man Bartimaeus was in darkness until he cried out to Jesus, the “Son of David,” for mercy. Jesus restored his sight, and Bartimaeus followed him. See Mark 10:46–52.

43. This is in contrast to what Isaiah describes will happen to those that try to walk by the light of their own light; “ye shall lie down in sorrow” (Isa. 50:11 and 2 Ne. 7:11).

44. In Psalm 23, the Hebrew word translated as rod is *shebet* (Strong, 7626), which can mean rod, staff, club, scepter, or tribe. The Hebrew word translated as staff is *mishènah* (Strong, 4938), which can mean support or staff but is never translated as rod.

Lehi's dream taps into a rich tradition that utilizes the symbols of a pastoral life and milieu that derive from the Israelites' identity as a shepherding people.⁴⁵ To the Israelites, the shepherd and shepherding are symbols of the Lord and his covenant to gather his people; the rod is his tool for doing that work.⁴⁶ Fittingly, the anticipated Messiah would first be proclaimed by the shepherds that were tending their flocks in the field. The lambs they cared for were a similitude of the "Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep" (Heb. 13:20). Jesus the Messiah would proclaim, "I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine" (John 10:14) and "the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). Christ is the Good Shepherd, and "he gathereth his children from the four quarters of the earth; and he numbereth his sheep, and they know him; and there shall be one fold and one shepherd; and he shall feed his sheep,⁴⁷ and in him they shall find pasture" (1 Ne. 22:25).⁴⁸

The prophet Ezekiel prophesied of a day when the Lord, in his role as shepherd, would gather his people and inspect and number the sheep⁴⁹ by passing them under his rod.⁵⁰ "And I will cause you to pass under the rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant" (Ezek. 20:37).⁵¹

45. Shepherds of the Old Testament: Abel (Gen. 4:2), Abraham (Gen. 21:28), Lot (Gen. 13:5), Isaac (Gen. 26:12–14), Jacob (Gen. 31:4), Rachel (Gen. 29:9), Laban (Gen. 30:31), Jacob's twelve sons (Gen. 47:3), Moses (Ex. 2:17), David (1 Sam. 17:34), Saul (1 Sam. 21:7), and Amos (Amos 1:1). For a synopsis of shepherding in the Book of Mormon, see Don Bradley, *The Lost 116 Pages: Reconstructing the Book of Mormon's Missing Stories* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2019), 244–45.

46. To the Nephites, the resurrected Christ said, "And I will remember the covenant which I have made with my people; and I have covenanted with them that I would gather them together" (3 Ne. 20:29; see also Isa. 49:9–11; Ezek. 20:37; 1 Ne. 21:9–11).

47. See Isaiah 40:11 and Micah 7:14. See also notes 19 and 26.

48. For more examples of Jesus Christ as the Shepherd see also Mark 14:27; 1 Peter 2:25; 5:4; 1 Nephi 13:41; Mormon 5:17.

49. This is similar to the parable of the shepherd separating the sheep and the goats. See Matthew 25:31–33.

50. Similar to sheep passing under the rod of a shepherd, a king, in much the same way, grants his subjects justice and mercy with the touch of his sword. In the scriptures, the sword is often used as a symbol in much the same way as a rod, and, at times, the words are even used together. See Exodus 4:15–17; 5:1–3; Ezekiel 21:13; Revelation 19:15. The sword is also compared to the rod by its relation to the word of God (Isa. 11:4; Eph. 6:17; Alma 31:5; D&C 11:22).

51. Ezekiel also received a revelation that relates to joining two different "branches" of the tribes of Israel: Judah and Joseph with their companies (Ezek. 37:15–17). It is worth noting that Lehi taught his sons that "the house of Israel was compared unto an olive tree" (1 Ne. 15:12) and that they were a branch of Joseph, whose records, along with that of

With the aid of a rod or staff, the Lord is able to guide the sheep into the bond of the covenant. A modern shepherd, Phillip Keller, speaks of using a staff to guide his sheep in this way:

Being stubborn creatures, sheep often get into the most ridiculous and preposterous dilemmas. I have seen my own sheep, greedy for one more mouthful of green grass, climb down steep cliffs where they slipped and fell into the sea. Only my long shepherd's staff could lift them out of the water and back onto solid ground again. . . . I have seen a shepherd use his staff to guide his sheep gently into a new path or through some gate along dangerous, difficult routes. He does not use it actually to beat the beast. Rather, the tip of the long slender stick is laid gently against the animal's side and the pressure applied guides the sheep in the way the owner wants it to go. Thus the sheep is reassured of its proper path.⁵²

For millennia the rod and staff have been critical for both protecting the flock from danger and caring for their needs. Though the rod and staff were distinct tools in the hands of the shepherd, the scriptural narratives connect the two in word and symbolism.⁵³ Both are fashioned from the branch of a tree, and the Hebrew words for both (*matteh* and *shebet*) are also interchangeable with the word for branch.⁵⁴ Perhaps

Judah's records, would work together to remind Israel of the Lord's covenant with them. When the two sticks of Ezekiel's prophecy are joined end to end in the hand of the Lord, the imagery becomes that of a single rod/staff or the word of God (records of Judah and Joseph) in the hand of the Shepherd, to aid in the gathering of Israel.

52. Phillip Keller would also say, "I have been fascinated to see how a shepherd will actually hold his staff against the side of some sheep that is a special pet or favorite, simply so that they 'are in touch.' They will walk along this way almost as though it were 'hand-in-hand.'" Phillip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23* (Minneapolis, Minn.: World Wide Publications, 1970), 100–103.

53. John A. Tvedtnes, "Rod and Sword as the Word of God," in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon: The FARMS Updates of the 1990s*, ed. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1999), 32–39; R. Raymond Lloyd, "The Staff: More Than a Walking Stick," *Biblical Illustrator* 40, no. 3 (Spring 2014): 89–93.

54. *Matteh* (Strong, 4294) and *shebet* (Strong, 7626) constitute the bulk of the instances where a word is translated into English as "staff" or "rod" in the Bible. See also Ezek. 19:10–11. The Egyptian word *mdw*, pronounced *mateh* in Lehi's day, sounds much like *mattah*, and like *mattah* can mean "staff" or "rod" but also means "to speak." This is a connection Nephi made when he said the rod of iron was the word of God. See Matthew L. Bowen, "What Meaneth the Rod of Iron?" *Insights* 25, no. 2 (2005): 2–3; see also Book of Mormon Central Team with contribution by Jeffery M. Bradshaw, "The Names of Moses as 'Keywords' (Moses 1:25)," *Book of Moses Essay #39: Moses 1 in Its Ancient Context* (2021), <https://interpreterfoundation.org/book-of-moses-essays-039/>.

because of this linguistic connection, there is a resonance with the way the shepherd uses the rod and how these words can describe the different branches or tribes, which are to be grafted back to a mother tree.⁵⁵ “Thy brethren also of the tribe [*matteh*] of Levi, the tribe [*shebet*] of thy father, bring thou with thee, that they may be joined unto thee” (Num. 18:2).

As a rod or staff, the iron rod not only helps to guide an individual toward the tree of life but simultaneously draws upon the image of the scattered branches of Israel themselves returning home, gathered and grafted into their mother tree.⁵⁶ Thus, in Lehi’s vision, when he wanted his family to join him at the tree, the appearance of the iron rod extending before him carries additional nuance and meaning when it is understood not as a handrail but rather as the guiding rod or staff of the shepherd.⁵⁷

The extension of the iron rod, in Lehi’s vision, has its parallel in the scriptures with the word “stretched.”⁵⁸ Throughout the scriptures stretch and extend are used to symbolize the support the Lord provided in gathering Israel.⁵⁹ This gathering can involve action taken to correct Israel

55. See Isaiah 11.

56. This is evident in the extensive genealogies found in the scriptures. In the Book of Mormon, the recording of the genealogies was considered important as part of the sacred record. See 1 Nephi 5:14; 19:1–2; Jarom 1:1; Omni 1:1; and Alma 37:2–3. See also Jacob 5 and James E. Faulconer, “The Olive Tree and the Work of God: Jacob 5 and Romans 11,” in *The Allegory of the Olive Tree: The Olive, the Bible, and Jacob Five*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 347–66.

57. In Egyptian, the verb *m3c* means both to extend and to lead, guide, or direct. See David Calabro, “Lehi’s Dream and the Garden of Eden,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 26 (2017): 269–96, for more discussion on potential wordplays related to the words *rod* and *extend*. There is also a potential early relationship between the word *shepherd* and the term *stretch out*. See W. F. Albright, “Notes on Egypto-Semitic Etymology, II,” *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 34, no. 4 (1918): 215–55.

58. Extended and stretched are often translated from the same Hebrew word, *natah* (Strong, 5186). They were also understood to be synonymous in Joseph Smith’s time. *American Dictionary of the English Language*, s.v. “extend,” accessed June 3, 2020, <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/Extend>. John Gee, “A Different Way of Seeing the Hand of the Lord,” *Religious Educator* 16, no. 2 (2015): 113–27. Further, the Hebrew noun for rod, *Matteh* (Strong, 4294), comes from a word that means “stretched out,” which would reinforce the play on words Nephi is making in his record.

59. Doctrine and Covenants 3:8 connects the extended arm of the Lord with the support the iron rod provided against the fiery darts of the adversary (see 1 Ne. 15:24; see also Isa. 14:29). The revelation was given after the loss of the 116 pages of the Book of Mormon, which presumably contained accounts of Lehi’s and Nephi’s vision.

and at other times to comfort and protect.⁶⁰ Lehi's contemporary Jeremiah speaks of the Lord stretching out his arm to bring the Israelites out of Egypt: "And [thou] hast brought forth thy people Israel out of the land of Egypt with signs, and with wonders, and with a strong hand, and with a stretched out arm" (Jer. 32:21).

Jeremiah draws on the symbolism of the power and authority of the rod in Moses's outstretched hand as he protected the children of Israel during their exodus from Egypt. In contrast to showing divine mercy, the Lord can also stretch out his rod in a show of divine justice.⁶¹ When the Lord speaks of stretching out his hand in justice, it is usually in the context of administering punishment.⁶² "Therefore, is the anger of the Lord kindled against his people, and he hath stretched forth his hand against them, and hath smitten them; and the hills did tremble, and their carcasses were torn in the midst of the streets. For all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still" (2 Ne. 15:25; see also 2 Ne. 19:12; 20:4).⁶³

Alternatively, in the scriptures when the Lord "extends" something, it never implies a punishment. On the contrary, "extending" always expresses the Lord's mercy, such as the Lord's arm being extended, or the extension of a promise or an offering of peace.⁶⁴ It is noteworthy that many uses of the word "extend" throughout the Book of Mormon are connected to symbols found in Lehi's dream: the tree of life, holding tight, the shepherd, and filled with joy.⁶⁵

"When I see many of my brethren truly penitent, and coming to the Lord their God, then is my soul filled with joy; then do I remember what the Lord has done for me, yea, even that he hath heard my prayer; yea,

60. See also Numbers 24:17; Psalm 2:9; Proverbs 22:8; Isaiah 10:15; 14:5; 28:27; and Jeremiah 48:17.

61. Pharaoh's crook is used like the staff for support or to guide, and the flail is used like the rod for defending or punishing. See Psalm 89:13–14; Jacob 4:10; Mosiah 5:15; Alma 26:20; 32:16; 3 Nephi 26:5.

62. See Exodus 3:20; 6:6; Deuteronomy 11:2; Isaiah 5:25; Ezekiel 14:9–13; 20:33–34; Mosiah 12:2.

63. Punishment is also the Lord's intent when he speaks of his hand being stretched out still, meaning his anger is still not turned away.

64. "Extend" is a unique word in scripture and is only found fourteen times in the Book of Mormon, four times in the King James Version of the Bible, and once in the Doctrine and Covenants. See Mosiah 1:14; 16:12; 29:20; Alma 9:16, 24; 17:15; 19:36; 29:10; Ezra 7:28; 9:9; Psalm 109:12; Isaiah 66:12; Doctrine and Covenants 3:10.

65. Daniel Belnap, "'There Arose a Mist of Darkness': The Narrative of Lehi's Dream in Christ's Theophany," in *Third Nephi: An Incomparable Scripture*, ed. Andrew C. Skinner and Gaye Strathearn (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), 75–106.

then do I remember his merciful arm which he extended towards me” (Alma 29:10).

“Cleave unto God as he cleaveth unto you. And while his arm of mercy is extended towards you” (Jacob 6:5).

“Yea, I say unto you, that in the latter times the promises of the Lord have been extended to our brethren, the Lamanites. . . . And this is according to the prophecy, that they shall again be brought to the true knowledge, which is the knowledge of their Redeemer, and their great and true shepherd, and be numbered among his sheep” (Hel. 15:12–13).

Additionally in the Book of Mormon the word “extend” is frequently used in relation to repentance, an act that implies a turning away from sin.⁶⁶ In this case, what the Lord extends provides support or protection from the dangers of sin, as symbolized by the filthy water, and comfort and reassurance along the path to the tree of life.⁶⁷

“Behold, he sendeth an invitation unto all men, for the arms of mercy are extended towards them, and he saith: Repent, and I will receive you. Yea, he saith: Come unto me and ye shall partake of the fruit of the tree of life” (Alma 5:33–34).⁶⁸

Before Lehi sees the rod extend, he is occupied with the desire to gather his family at the tree of life. Seeing his two sons Laman and Lemuel, who had placed themselves near the river of filthy water,⁶⁹ Lehi called out to them to turn and come away from the water, to repent, and join him at the tree. Sadly, he says, “they would not come unto me and partake of the fruit” (1 Ne. 8:18).⁷⁰ In that moment, Lehi experienced the painful reality of a son or daughter realizing their agency and refusing to answer the call

66. The Hebrew word *shub* (Strong, 7725) is translated as “repent” and conveys the idea of turning back or returning.

67. Sin is the “awful gulf, which separated the wicked from the tree of life and . . . God” (1 Ne. 15:28). There is a Hebrew verb, *yatsa* (Strong, 3331), which is translated as “extend” in only a few translations of the Bible, that would work well in this case to convey the act of providing protection or comfort. It carries with it an underlying idea of “to come out” or “bring out.”

68. See also Jacob 6:5; Mosiah 16:12; Alma 5:33; 9:15–16, 24–25; 17:15; 19:36.

69. It was during Nephi’s vision that he learned that the water was filthy (1 Ne. 12:16). Lehi didn’t actually see that the river of water was filthy because, as Nephi said, “so much was his mind swallowed up in other things” (1 Ne. 15:27). This could be related to his oldest sons’ unwillingness to come to him, something that made him “fear exceedingly” (1 Ne. 8:4) for Laman and Lemuel.

70. It is possible that the inability of Laman and Lemuel’s to understand their father’s teachings was due to a cultural revolution taking place in Jerusalem during their lifetime, which put forward the idea that the Lord’s word or rod was no longer found in visions like Lehi and Nephi had experienced. See Neal Rappleye, “The Deuteronomist Reforms

of a pleading parent. It is at that heartbreaking moment when Lehi may have perceived not just a rod of iron that could lead his family to the tree but actually the Good Shepherd extending a rod of iron to guide and protect his wayward sons. This then changes the image from one of heartless metal to one of personal warmth as Lehi once again puts his trust in the tender mercies of the only one with power to rescue us all: Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd.⁷¹

The Rod and the Word of God

In Lehi's dream, those who were safely gathered to the tree were those "holding fast" to the rod of iron (1 Ne. 8:30).⁷² This act could be associated with "hearken[ing] unto the voice of the good shepherd" (Hel. 7:18). Nephi records that he saw the rod of iron, which his "father had seen" (1 Ne. 11:25), only after beholding the ministry of the Son of God. He goes on to say that the rod of iron "was the word of God"⁷³ and that it

and Lehi's Family Dynamics: A Social Context for the Rebellions of Laman and Lemuel," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-Day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 16 (2015): 87–99.

71. Ironically, when Laman and Lemuel were threatened with literal drowning, they were willing to repent (1 Ne. 18:20; see also Mosiah 16:12). King David likewise pled for the Lord to seek after him when he, like a sheep, went astray (Ps. 119:176).

72. Lehi indicates that the individuals always "caught hold of the end of the rod of iron" and then pressed forward either "clinging" or "holding fast" to it (1 Ne. 8:24, 30). Webster's 1828 dictionary defines the adjectival form of "fast" as "set, stopped, fixed, or pressed close," while the adverbial form is defined as "immovably": something that holds fast is something that holds in an immovable manner (American Dictionary of the English Language, s.v. "fast," accessed June 3, 2020, <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/Fast>). To hold fast to the end of a rod and then press forward are two separate, though connected actions. While it is possible to read this description as holding onto a railing while one moves along it, in this reading, the hold or grip actually goes through a series of tightening and loosening as the hand slides along the rod. In contrast, to hold fast to the rod and then press forward implies that the grip is not loosened in the act of pressing forward. In other words, the person grips the rod, and the rod—being a discrete, mobile, tool—remains in that grip, which does not change, through the action of pressing forward. This understanding seems to be reflected in what Nephi would say at the end of his record: "Wherefore, ye must press forward with a steadfastness in Christ" (2 Ne. 31:20).

73. Loren Spendlove's observation related to the phrase "word of God" is insightful here. He says, "The word of the Lord and the word of God are common expressions in the Bible. Frequently, these phrases refer to the written or spoken covenantal words of God to his people as given through the prophets. However, exegetical study of these expressions has revealed that they also serve as metonyms, or substitutions for the name of God himself. In this paper I explore these metonymous usages of the Word of the Lord and the Word of God as stand-ins for Christ in the Bible and in the Book of Mormon. . . . In the Book of Mormon we encounter several events and stories in which *the Word of the Lord* or *the Word of God* can be profitably interpreted as direct references to Christ." Loren Spendlove,

led “to the fountain of living waters, or to the tree of life” (1 Ne. 11:25). The narrative of the shepherd, the rod, and its relation to the word of God, finds its fullest expression in the life of Moses.⁷⁴ Nephi draws on the Exodus tradition when framing his family’s journey out of Jerusalem and the Lord’s shepherding them to the promised land.⁷⁵ Moses’s story of the Exodus works as a master narrative of how God works to rescue his people and shepherd them to a promised land.⁷⁶ Therefore, a better understanding of the rod in Moses’s exodus narrative adds important context for the rod as Lehi and Nephi saw it in vision and its connection to the word of God.⁷⁷ In Moses’s theophany, the rod played a prominent role in his transition from a shepherd in the service of his father-in-law⁷⁸ to a shepherd in the service of Jehovah, gathering Israel.⁷⁹

“The Word of the Lord as a Metonym for Christ,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 49 (2021): 137–66, emphasis in original.

74. In Lehi’s vision, it is possible to see that one of the roles of the rod was to draw out those caught in the filthy water, a meaning given to the name of Moses by Pharaoh’s daughter (Ex. 2:10). See also Nathan J. Arp, “Joseph Knew First: Moses, the Egyptian Son,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 32 (2019): 187–98; Mark J. Johnson, “The Lost Prologue: Reading Moses Chapter One as an Ancient Text,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 36 (2020): 145–86.

75. Bruce J. Boehm, “Wanderers in the Promised Land: A Study of the Exodus Motif in the Book of Mormon and the Holy Bible,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 187–203.

76. Just prior to the Exodus, the Israelites were told to prepare for the Lord of the Passover by each individual taking the “staff in your hand” (Ex. 12:11).

77. Nephi’s equating the rod of iron to protection against the “fiery darts of the adversary” could be an allusion to Moses’s rod and its power over Pharaoh and the god Ra when freeing the Israelites (1 Ne. 15:24). The snake on Pharaoh’s headdress was a representation of the goddess Uraeus, who defended Ra by spitting fiery darts at the enemies of Ra. John Coleman Darnell, “The Apotropaic Goddess in the Eye,” *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur* 24 (1997): 35–48; Karen Randolph Joines, “Winged Serpents in Isaiah’s Inaugural Vision,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86, no. 4 (1967): 410–15. See also Isaiah 50:8 and 2 Nephi 7:8.

78. The significance of Moses’s rod is expanded in the extracanonical traditions of the Jews, which teach that the Lord took a branch of the tree of knowledge and gave it to Adam as a sign that he, after his fall, was not cast off forever. Some writings further elaborate that the branch may have been made of pure sapphire, as an expression of God’s light (Ex. 24:10; Ezek. 1:26). That same rod was passed down through the Patriarchs until Moses received the rod from his father-in-law Jethro. The rod reflects God’s desire to bless his children with light and knowledge throughout the generations. Christine Meilicke, “Moses’s Staff and the Return of the Dead,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (1999): 345–72.

79. The biblical narrative of the exodus often refers to two different rods, one that Moses used and one that Aaron used. However, this distinction is not always clear (see Ex. 7:20), and in the symbology of the rod, they are seen as one and the same rod, an

“And calling upon the name of God, he beheld his glory again, for it was upon him; and he heard a voice, saying: Blessed art thou, Moses, for I, the Almighty, have chosen thee, and thou shalt be made stronger than many waters; for they shall obey thy command as if thou wert God. And lo, I am with thee, even unto the end of thy days; for thou shalt deliver my people from bondage, even Israel my chosen” (Moses 1:25–26).

And Moses answered and said, But, behold, they will not believe me, nor hearken unto my voice: for they will say, The Lord hath not appeared unto thee. And the Lord said unto him, What is that in thine hand? And he said, A rod. And he said, Cast it on the ground. And he cast it on the ground, and it became a serpent; and Moses fled from before it. And the Lord said unto Moses, Put forth thine hand, and take it by the tail. And he put forth his hand, and caught⁸⁰ it, and it became a rod in his hand: That they may believe that the Lord God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, hath appeared unto thee. (Ex. 4:1–5)

The Lord endowed Moses with power in the form of a rod and charged him, with his brother Aaron, to gather the children of Israel and bring them out of bondage. Consistent with the rod as both a symbol of divine justice and mercy, the Lord would command Moses to stretch out or extend his rod in aiding the Israelite’s journey to the promised land. “And the Lord spake unto Moses, Say unto Aaron, Stretch forth thine hand with thy rod over the streams, over the rivers, and over the ponds, and cause frogs to come up upon the land of Egypt” (Ex. 8:5).

In another instance, the Lord asked Moses to have Aaron stretch out the rod to bring forth lice to afflict the Egyptians. However, in this case, as in Nephi’s account of the rod, the text does not explicitly identify a hand or arm stretching out while holding the rod. Instead, the arm or hand holding the rod is implicit in the action of stretching itself. “And the Lord said unto Moses, Say unto Aaron, Stretch out thy rod, and smite the dust of the land, that it may become lice throughout all the land of Egypt” (Ex. 8:16).

Finally, after the Lord smote Pharaoh and the Egyptians seven more times, the Israelites were set free. Moses, the shepherd of Israel, with his rod gathered the Lord’s flock and brought them to the banks of the Red

expression of Jehovah’s divine authority and, ultimately, best identified as “the rod of God” (Ex. 4:20; 17:9).

80. *Chazaq* (Strong, 2388) can also mean to take hold, grasp, or bind and its relation to a rod in this context parallels those who took hold of the iron rod in Lehi’s dream (see 1 Ne. 8:24–30). Isaiah uses this same verb to describe those who take hold of the Lord’s strength, which causes them to take root and fill the world with fruit (see Isa. 27:5–6).

Sea. Pursued by the armies of Pharaoh, Moses once again raised the rod to demonstrate God's power and delivered the children of Israel from the advancing armies.⁸¹

"And the Lord said unto Moses, . . . lift thou up thy rod, and stretch out thine hand over the sea, and divide it: and the children of Israel shall go on dry ground through the midst of the sea. . . . And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the Lord caused the sea to go back" (Ex. 14:15–21).

The Israelites had been gathered and freed from an adversary that had held them captive for over four hundred years. After traveling for three days in the wilderness, they complained⁸² because the water was bitter.⁸³ The Lord instructed Moses to take the branch of a tree and cast it into the water to make it sweet. This act was to prove to the Israelites that the Lord would provide for them if they would "diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord" (Ex. 15:26). Later Moses would use the rod to provide life-sustaining water for the children of Israel as they journeyed in the wilderness.⁸⁴

"And the Lord said unto Moses, Go on before the people, and take with thee of the elders of Israel; and thy rod, wherewith thou smotest the river, take in thine hand, and go. Behold, I will stand before thee there upon the rock in Horeb; and thou shalt smite the rock, and there shall come water out of it, that the people may drink. And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel" (Ex. 17:5–6).⁸⁵

81. On the third day of Creation, God gathered the water into one place and made the dry land appear (Gen. 1:9). When Moses lifted up the rod, the waters were pushed back, and the dry land appeared. Moses's act rescued the Israelites from the armies of Pharaoh and, like God's word in the Creation story, made pasture possible for their flocks (see Isa. 50:2 and 2 Ne. 7:2).

82. After a three-day journey in the wilderness, on the same side of the Red Sea where the Israelites found themselves, Laman and Lemuel likewise complained because Lehi had followed the commandment of the Lord (1 Ne. 2:2–12).

83. Jesus Christ was willing to drink the bitter cup (Matt. 20:22; 3 Ne. 11:11) both in Gethsemane (Matt. 26:27–28, 39, 42) and on Golgotha (John 19:28–30). See also Doctrine and Covenants 19:18–19.

84. See Isaiah 48:21; 49:9–11; John 4:11–15; 1 Nephi 17:29; 20:21; 21:9–11.

85. It is worth noting that when Nephi tells the story of Moses's dividing of the Red Sea and smiting the rock to bring forth water (1 Ne. 4:2; 17:26–29), he substitutes the word "rod," as found in the biblical account, with "word." This substitution suggests Nephi connects the "rod of iron," which he learned is "the word of God" (1 Ne. 11:25) with the rod Moses used to lead the Israelites in the wilderness. Nephi next equates their being led in the wilderness not by Moses but by the Lord leading them "according to his word" (1 Ne. 17:30–31) or the "rod of iron."

The water, which came out of the rock, moved with the Israelites for nearly forty years as they wandered in the wilderness. When it finally ran dry, the Israelites murmured rather than “diligently hearken[ing] to the voice of the Lord” for their support (Ex. 15:26). Up until this point, Moses’s rod had been a symbol of support to the Israelites. Like a shepherd’s rod, Moses’s rod had gathered the Israelites, protected them from their enemies, and led them to pure water (Ps. 77:20). Now that the Israelites needed the Lord’s support again, he would make it clear to them that he was the power behind the symbol of the rod. This time, instead of commanding Moses to strike a rock with his rod to bring forth water, the Lord said to Moses, “Take the rod, and gather thou the assembly together, thou, and Aaron thy brother, and speak ye unto the rock before their eyes; and it shall give forth his water, and thou shalt bring forth to them water out of the rock” (Num. 20:8).

The rod was a symbol of the power of the Lord’s word, and by *speaking* to the rock to bring forth water, that lesson was made clear to all Israel. With the rod in hand, Moses gathered together the Israelites, but frustrated by their rebellion, Moses struck the rock twice to bring forth water. In doing this, Moses disobeyed the commandment of the Lord to “speak” to the rock. Because of this, Moses and Aaron were not permitted to enter the promised land. As a servant in the hands of the Lord, Moses had failed to “smite the earth with the rod of his mouth” (Isa. 11:4, see also 2 Ne. 21:4).⁸⁶ In doing so, Moses’s own words, “Hear now, ye rebels” (Num. 20:10), would condemn him (see Jacob 1:7–8). Moses’s actions had failed to teach the Israelites what should have been painfully clear: that the power and authority of the “rod” of God is the same as the “word” of God.⁸⁷ Significantly, the first reference in the Bible relating leadership to shepherding came when Moses asked God to make Joshua the leader

86. The apocryphal book Psalms of Solomon speaks of “an iron rod to shatter all their substance, to destroy the lawless nations by the word of his mouth” (Psalms of Solomon 17:24, <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/nets/edition/31-pssal-nets.pdf>). Hittite legal texts of the sixteenth to thirteenth century BCE state that “the words of the *tabarna*, the Great King, are of iron, not to be rejected, not to be broken” (Oppenheim, “Note on ‘son barzel,’” 91). Similarly, Nephi would tell his brothers that the unbreakable word or “iron rod . . . was the word of God” (1 Ne. 15:23–24; see also Ps. 17:4–7).

87. The Egyptian word *mdw* can mean both rod/staff or word/speak. The Israelites had just spent four hundred years in Egypt, and Nephi wrote his record in reformed Egyptian, so both Nephi and Moses were probably aware of this connection. See also Proverbs 10:13; 14:3; Ezekiel 20:37; Zechariah 11:10, 14; Ephesians 6:17; and Doctrine and Covenants 19:15. Bowen, “What Meaneth the Rod of Iron?” Raymond O. Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian* (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1962), 122.

of the people after his own death, so “that the congregation of the Lord be not as sheep which have no shepherd” (Num. 27:17).

The Exodus context for the rod broadens the conceptual space of the rod itself: in Moses’s hands, the rod is an active power effecting change in the world via the liberation, protection, and guidance of Israel.⁸⁸ Ultimately, the Exodus narrative associates the rod with the word of God in its power and efficacy. Given Nephi’s own clear understanding of his family’s journey in terms of the Exodus narrative, it is reasonable to posit a sympathetic resonance between the rod of Moses and the rod of iron in his and his father’s visions.⁸⁹ This is reflected in the Lord’s words to Nephi, “I will also be your light in the wilderness; and I will prepare the way before you, . . . ye shall be led towards the promised land; and ye shall know that it is by me that ye are led” (1 Ne. 17:13). Moses with his rod tried to take Israel to the mountain of the Lord to experience his glory (see Ex. 19:3–11). Likewise, in Lehi’s vision it is possible to see Christ extending a rod, or his word, to help light the way on the ascent back to the tree of life.⁹⁰ As such, Lehi’s visions play out as a reversal of the story of Adam and Eve.⁹¹ Adam and Eve move *from* the tree of life to the lone and dreary wilderness. In contrast, Lehi’s vision shows that Christ, with his word or his rod, can shepherd us *back to* the tree of life. Significantly, in this reversal we are no longer a lone man at the tree of life but gather as families as Lehi experienced. If we see the rod of iron in Lehi’s dream in this way, Christ with his iron rod does what no other rod in antiquity did. By offering all that will lay hold of the rod the opportunity to ascend “to the fountain of living waters, or to the tree of life,” Christ makes possible to all what was once only reserved for gods and kings (1 Ne. 11:25). The extending of a rod of iron can be seen as a symbolic gesture by Christ

88. We see this reflected in the “Song of the Sea” that Moses sang after the Lord delivered the Israelites from the Egyptians. In that song, three verbs are phonetically related: *natiata* “You stretched out,” *nahita* “You led forth,” and *neihalta* “You guided.” See Exodus 15:12–13.

89. See 1 Nephi 4:2; 17:26–30; 2 Nephi 3:17; 25:20.

90. Jehovah’s word, in the beginning, brought light to a world in darkness. That same word was symbolized by the rod that brought welcome light to Lehi in his dream, and Christ likewise offers to bring light. “I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life” (John 8:12). See also John 1:4–9; 12:35–36, 46; Revelation 21:11, 23–24.

91. Corbin T. Volluz, “Lehi’s Dream of the Tree of Life: Springboard to Prophecy,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 2 (1993): 14–38; David Calabro, “Lehi’s Dream and the Garden of Eden,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 26 (2017): 269–96.

that invites all who are willing to trust his unbreakable word to join him in becoming kings and queens in godly sociality.

Conclusion

All specific references to a rod in the Book of Mormon end after the first two books of Nephi. However, when the rod of iron in the opening chapters of the Book of Mormon is seen as a tool actively utilized by Christ to guide the children of Israel along the covenant path, allusions to that extension of the rod of iron can be seen throughout the text.⁹² This active extension is significantly illustrated in the book's central event: the visit of the resurrected Christ to the descendants of Lehi.⁹³ In this visit, Christ describes his atoning sacrifice in terms of extension: "Yea, verily I say unto you, if ye will come unto me ye shall have eternal life. Behold, mine arm of mercy is extended towards you, and whosoever will come, him will I receive; and blessed are those who come unto me. Behold, I am Jesus Christ the Son of God" (3 Ne. 9:14–15; see also 1 Ne. 8:24, 30; 11:25; 15:23–24).

Some time after hearing his voice, the people worked their way to the temple where Christ appeared to them.⁹⁴ Significantly, when Christ appeared to them there, he first "stretched forth his hand" (3 Ne. 11:9) in a gesture that resonates with the extension of the shepherd's rod. The result of this act allowed the people to witness "for themselves" and then "they did fall down at the feet of Jesus, and did worship him" (3 Ne. 11:16–17), just as those who reached the tree of life after "continually holding

92. For example, when Mormon speaks of laying hold of the word of God (the rod of iron extended by the Lord in Lehi's and Nephi's visions) in Mormon 7:8, he creates a unified record that begins and ends with an inclusio around the motif of Jesus Christ as the Lord and Shepherd. Nephi's record likewise contains an inclusio that starts with the vision of the rod of iron in 1 Nephi 8 and ends by revisiting that vision and the rod of iron in 2 Nephi 31:10, 17–21. For other examples alluding to the rod of iron, see Jacob 6:5–8; Enos 1; Alma 5:33–60; 26:15; 36:16–22; and Helaman 3:29; 15:8–13.

93. Daniel L. Belnap, "Even as Our Father Lehi Saw': Lehi's Dream as Nephite Cultural Narrative," in *The Things Which My Father Saw: Approaches to Lehi's Dream and Nephi's Vision*, ed. Daniel L. Belnap, Gaye Strathearn, and Stanley A. Johnson (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 214–39.

94. Joseph Smith's First Vision shares many of the same elements as Lehi's dream and Christ's appearance to Lehi's descendants after his resurrection. For example, Joseph found himself in darkness and was delivered from the darkness by the word of God. He also beheld God and his Son in a grove of trees (tree of life) and approached God on his knees (fell down). See Joseph Smith—History 1:15–17.

fast” (1 Ne. 8:30) to the iron rod in Lehi’s dream.⁹⁵ In each case, reading the text in terms of active extension produces a pattern of individual witness accompanied by the witness’s own embodied act of devotion and worship. Additionally, each event underscores the theme of gathering family members to provide them with their own opportunity to participate. Lehi wished for his family to eat the fruit from the tree of life (see 1 Ne. 8:12), and later the people who gathered at Bountiful saw their little ones “encircled about” (3 Ne. 17:24) with the blessings of heaven. This act of divine blessing and acceptance experienced at the resurrected Christ’s appearance to Lehi’s descendants is, at its heart, the very thing Lehi desired his “family should partake” of (1 Ne. 8:12) after he tasted the fruit of the tree of life.

When the rod of iron is conceptualized in this way, the sweetness of the fruit one obtains after reaching the tree of life grows out of an appreciation for our guide and Shepherd-King, Christ.⁹⁶ He personally extends the end of his rod to guide each of us as we make our ascent to the tree of life. The rod can still provide security and support, but as a mobile tool in the hand of a loving guide, it does so without the assumptions of fixity created in the handrail reading.⁹⁷ If the rod is no longer secured as a rail along one specific location, then the way to the tree will be unique for each of us. Furthermore, once we obtain the path, by way of the rod and the help of the Savior, our experience and progress along the covenant path will likewise be unique to each of us. This then changes the nature of the path. Instead of a handrail along a well-worn, singular path, the rod is capable of guiding us on numerous crisscrossing, overlapping, but distinctly individual paths.⁹⁸ While the destination and the direction

95. Proskynesis or the act of falling down or prostrating oneself in the presence of a king is well attested in the ancient Near East and throughout the Book of Mormon. Nephi said, “Christ is the Holy One of Israel; wherefore ye must bow down before him, and worship him” (2 Ne. 25:29). In the case of Lehi’s vision, it was the group described as a “multitude” (1 Ne. 8:30), which fell down after making it to the tree and did not later fall away. A “multitude” is also used to describe the group that fell down at the feet of Jesus in John’s apocryphal vision (Rev. 7:9–10) and of the Nephites after their conversion in the time of Jacob and King Benjamin (Jacob 7:21; Mosiah 4:1). Matthew L. Bowen, “And Behold, They Had Fallen to the Earth: An Examination of Proskynesis in the Book of Mormon,” *Studia Antiqua* 4, no. 1 (2005): 91–110.

96. See Exodus 15:13, 17; Psalm 73:23–24; John 14:6; Ephesians 1:20–23; 2:18–19; Hebrews 7:25; 1 Peter 3:18; 1 Nephi 17:12–14; and Alma 32:42–43; 36:18–22.

97. The rod can also be seen as a sort of measuring device for our life’s journey. See Abram, “New Look at the Mesopotamian Rod and Rings,” 15–16; and Nelson, “Rod of Iron in Lehi’s Dream,” 52.

98. This reading provides support for the reading that describes the path in Lehi’s dream as “strait” instead of “straight.” Strait means both narrow and close and intimate

remain the same, because of the covenants we make, following the path under the guidance of Christ and his rod becomes both a commitment to keep moving, even when one feels lost or uncertain, and a commitment to respond to the guidance and direction received during the journey as we “hear” the voice of the Lord. Additionally, in this interpretive framework, the rod itself is never beyond our reach because Christ is never distant.⁹⁹ Further, we are never alone in the darkness when we take hold of the rod and trust in the grace of Christ. In contrast to an inanimate railing, Christ, with his rod of iron, extends an active, ongoing invitation to come follow him as the central figure in both Lehi’s and Nephi’s visions. As we take hold of the rod of iron, we can walk side by side with Christ as Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Israel did.¹⁰⁰

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and reminds the traveler of the importance of an intimate relationship with Christ, via the rod of iron, as you make your way along the path. *Webster’s Dictionary 1828: American Dictionary of the English Language*, s.v. “Strait,” accessed June 3, 2020, <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/Strait>. For more on this topic see Noel B. Reynolds and Royal Skousen, “Was the Path Nephi Saw ‘Strait and Narrow’ or ‘Straight and Narrow,’” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 10, no. 2 (2001): 30–33; Paul Y. Hoskisson, “Straightening Things Out: The Use of Strait and Straight in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12, no. 2 (2003): 58–71; John S. Welch, “Straight (not Strait) and Narrow,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 16, no. 1 (2007): 18–25.

99. The parable of the Good Samaritan portrays a Savior who is willing to bind up our wounds and lead us safely along the path. See Luke 10:33–35, where the Samaritan sets the wounded traveler “on his own beast, and brought him to an inn.” The Greek word for “brought” (ἤγαγεν, Strong, 71) suggests being led by laying hold of, and in this way to bring to the point of destination, much like the way the rod of iron in Lehi’s vision was used.

100. See Genesis 5:22; 6:9; 28:15.