

Rod and Sword as the Word of God

“And I beheld a rod of iron, and it extended along the bank of the river, and led to the tree by which I stood. And I also beheld a strait and narrow path, which came along by the rod of iron, even to the tree by which I stood; and it also led by the head of the fountain, unto a large and spacious field, as if it had been a world.” (1 Nephi 8:19–20)

Thus Lehi described the rod and the path seen in his vision of the tree of life. Those who “caught hold of the end of the rod of iron” and clung to it through the “mist of darkness” were able to “come forth and partake of the fruit of the tree” (1 Nephi 8:24; compare 8:30).

The term *rod of iron* is found in Psalm 2:9 and in three passages in the book of Revelation. The first of these (Revelation 2:27) paraphrases the psalm, while the others (Revelation 12:5; 19:15) build on it. All of them imply that the rod is a symbol of ruling power.

In the Old Testament, the rod is typically used to chastise children and wrongdoers (see 2 Samuel 7:14; Proverbs 13:24; 29:15). Even the Lord is said to wield a rod in punishing the wicked (see Job 9:34; 21:9; Psalm 89:32; Lamentations 3:1). Nephi, referring to the serpent Moses placed on the pole, wrote that the Lord “did straiten [Israel] . . . with his rod” (1 Nephi 17:41). Isaiah indicated that the Lord used the power of other nations like a rod to punish the Israelites when they had gone astray (see Isaiah 10:5, 15, 24, 26; 14:29; 30:31; Micah 5:1). Similarly, the Lord used the Lamanites as a scourge (whip or flail) to punish the Nephites in times of wickedness (see 1 Nephi 2:24; 2 Nephi 5:25; Jacob 3:3) and scourged the people for their wickedness (see D&C 84:96; 97:22–24). In Isaiah 10:26 (also in 2 Nephi 20:26), the Lord declares that other nations would be a scourge to Israel and speak also of the rod. “What will ye?” Paul asked the Corinthians, “Shall I come unto you with a rod, or in love, and in the spirit of meekness?” (1 Corinthians 4:21).

Anciently, the rod was used both for correction and for gentle guidance. This dual role came from the world of the shepherd as pastor and defender of the flock. Most familiar to us is the description of the Lord as a shepherd, in which David wrote, “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” (Psalm 23:4; compare 80:1).¹ Micah used the same imagery when he wrote, “Feed thy people with thy rod, the flock of thine heritage” (Micah 7:14; see also Isaiah 40:11; Jeremiah 31:10; Ezekiel 34:6, 8, 10–17, 19, 22–24, 31; Hebrews 13:20; 1 Peter 2:25; 5:4).

The shepherd’s rod was a weapon, normally a piece of wood with a knob at one end. With it, he could defend the flock from predators. It was also used to count the sheep at the day’s end (see Leviticus 27:32; Ezekiel 20:37). The staff was a long walking stick, sometimes with a crook at the top. It could also be used for handling sheep, including separating sheep and goats.

The Rod as Scepter

The use of the rod and staff for care of the flock and for inflicting injury on predators was carried over in the ancient Near East to rulers. Israel’s rulers are termed shepherds in Ezekiel 34:2, 23 and Jeremiah 2:8. The kings of Egypt are frequently depicted with a flail in one hand and a small shepherd’s crook in the other. The staff or crook, which ultimately became the scepter used by royalty (and by bishops in various Christian churches), represented the king’s responsibility to care for his people, while the flail or whip symbolized his role as punisher of criminals.

The use of the rod or staff as a symbol of rule is mentioned in a number of Bible passages (see Psalm 110:2; Isaiah 14:5; Jeremiah 48:17; Ezekiel 19:11–12, 14; compare D&C 85:7). The Israelite crown prince Jonathan, son of King Saul, carried a rod (see 1 Samuel 14:27, 43). Ezekiel 19:11 equates rods with scepters. In Numbers 24:17, the scepter of the Messiah is symbolically used to smite Israel's enemies. Later Jewish tradition indicates that possession of the rod denotes rule over the world (Midrash *Ba-Midbar Rabbah* 13:14).

It is interesting that when Laman and Lemuel were stopped from beating their younger brothers Sam and Nephi with a rod, the angel said to them, "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, and this because of your iniquities?" (1 Nephi 3:29; compare 1 Nephi 2:22; 2 Nephi 5:19). It is possible that the elder brothers deliberately selected the rod to punish their brother to symbolize their claim to ruling authority in the family. Compare the story in Numbers 17:2–10, where Aaron's authority as high priest in Israel was established by the miraculous blossoming of his rod.

The Royal Sword

Another symbol of power in the ancient world was the sword, still used by monarchs for conferring knighthood. As we shall see later, the sword, like the rod, symbolizes the word of God in the scriptures.

Because of the scarcity of iron in the early kingdom of Israel, in Saul's day only he and his son Jonathan had a sword (see 1 Samuel 13:19–22).² Jonathan, acknowledging David as the rightful king (see 1 Samuel 23:16–17) gives him his royal garments, his sword, and his bow (see 1 Samuel 18:4).

The messianic hymn in Psalm 45:3 speaks of the royal sword, and there are a fair number of passages in which the "sword of the Lord" is mentioned (Judges 7:18, 20; 1 Chronicles 21:12; see Isaiah 27:1; 34:5–6; 66:16; Jeremiah 12:12; 47:6; Ezekiel 21:3–5; 30:24–25; 32:10; 3 Nephi 29:4; compare Numbers 22:23, 31; D&C 1:13; 35:14). It is perhaps in this light that we should understand the comparison of the sword with famine or pestilence as the means of punishing wicked nations. Jesus declared, "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10:34).

Among the Nephites, the sword of Laban, taken by Nephi and used as a pattern for other swords (see 1 Nephi 4:18–19; 2 Nephi 5:14), was wielded only by the rulers (see Jacob 1:10; Words of Mormon 1:13; compare Alma 2:29, 31). Considered to be one of the Nephites' most precious possessions, it was kept with the plates of brass and the plates of Nephi, along with the Liahona (see Mosiah 1:16), and was later shown to Joseph Smith and the Three Witnesses (see D&C 17:1).

Significantly, the sword and the rod appear together in some Bible passages (see Ezekiel 21:9–10, 13; Revelation 19:15). In Jeremiah 51:19–20, the rod is paralleled by weapons of war.

The Word of God

Nephi explained "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; which waters are a representation of the love of God; and I also beheld that the tree of life was a representation of the love of God" (1 Nephi 11:25). When his brothers asked about the meaning of the rod, he explained that "it was the word of God; and whoso would . . . hold fast unto it, they would never perish; neither could the temptations and the fiery darts of the adversary overpower them unto blindness, to lead them away to destruction" (1 Nephi 15:24).³

This makes the rod both a source of support (as the word of God) and a weapon of defense against the devil's "fiery darts," which, in Ephesians 6:16, are warded off by the shield of faith. As such, the rod reminds us of the

admonition to don the “armour of God,” including the “sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Ephesians 6:13, 17; compare Romans 13:12; 2 Corinthians 6:7; 1 Thessalonians 5:8; 2 Nephi 1:23). The passage is paraphrased in Doctrine and Covenants 27:15–17.

The use of a rod to represent words or speech is found in Proverbs 10:13 and 14:3. In other passages, it refers specifically to the word of God. In Isaiah 30:31, “the voice of the Lord” is contrasted with the rod of the Assyrians. In a few passages, the rod is compared to a covenant with God which, like a rod, can be broken (see Ezekiel 20:37; Zechariah 11:10, 14). Micah wrote, “The Lord’s voice crieth unto the city, and the man of wisdom shall see thy name: hear ye the rod, and who hath appointed it” (Micah 6:9). Isaiah wrote of the Messiah, “But with righteousness shall he judge the poor, and reprove with equity for the meek of the earth: and he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked” (Isaiah 11:4).⁴ A similar thought, obviously based on the Isaiah passage, is expressed in a modern revelation in which the Lord threatens to punish the unrepentant with “the rod of my mouth” (D&C 19:15).

In his revelation to the apostle John, the Lord also drew upon the imagery in Isaiah 11:4, placing a sword in the mouth of God, while noting that Christ is to rule “with a rod of iron” (Revelation 2:27; 12:5). In this, he follows Old Testament precedent, where the mouth, words, tongue, and even teeth are frequently compared to a sword.⁵ “A sword shall come out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God” (Revelation 19:15; compare Revelation 19:21). In Hosea 6:5, the Lord declares, “Therefore have I hewed them by the prophets; I have slain them by the words of my mouth.” The prophets, as God’s spokesmen, utter his words.

The sword has two edges, reminding us that the word of the Lord can bring either salvation or destruction, depending on whether we wield it or are judged by it (see Revelation 1:16; 2:12, 16). This is explained in Hebrews 4:12, which is one of the most frequently quoted biblical passages in the early revelations given to Joseph Smith (see D&C 6:2; 11:2; 12:2; 14:2; 33:1):

For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

The epistle to the Hebrews probably quoted a more ancient source, which was also borrowed in Helaman 3:29–30:

Whosoever will may lay hold upon the word of God, which is quick and powerful, which shall divide asunder all that is cunning and the snares and the wiles of the devil, and lead the man of Christ in a strait and narrow course across that everlasting gulf of misery which is prepared to engulf the wicked—And land their souls, yea, their immortal souls, at the right hand of God in the kingdom of heaven.

The inclusion of the “strait and narrow course” and the “gulf of misery,” along with the “snares and the wiles of the devil,” clearly ties this passage to Lehi’s vision, where it is the rod or the word of God that brings people safely past Satan’s obstacles (the mist of darkness, the gulf, the fiery darts of the adversary, and the forbidden paths) to the tree of life (see 1 Nephi 8:19–24, 28; 12:17–18; 15:24, 28). In the Helaman passage, however, the word of God seems to be compared to a sword.

The power of the word of God was emphasized by Alma; he noted that “it had had more powerful effect upon the minds of the people than the sword, or anything else, which had happened unto them” (Alma 31:5; compare 61:1–

Ecclesiastes 9:18). This reminds us that Nephi and other Book of Mormon prophets spoke with “the sharpness of the power of the word of God” (2 Nephi 1:26; see Words of Mormon 1:17; Moroni 9:4; compare Alma 1:7).

By comparing the word of God with a sword and a rod, the prophets have shown us that there is both strength and love in obedience to the Lord. With the word of the Lord, we can fight off sin and temptation as with a sword and nurture our families and ourselves as did ancient shepherds with the rod. In the end, the word of God will also serve to judge us, meting out justice to those who disobey and justifying those who follow its precepts. In this, too, it is like both the sword and the rod.

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Notes

1. It seems natural that David, who was a shepherd before he became king, should call the Lord his shepherd. (The comparison of David, the shepherd, with David, the king, is made in Psalm 151, which, though not in our current Bible, was on a Psalms scroll found at Qumran and is known from other ancient sources as well.)

2. The sword of Goliath was so revered that it was kept by the priests in the Tabernacle until David asked for it when fleeing Saul (1 Samuel 21:8–10; 22:13).

3. According to William P. Smith in an 1890 interview (William Smith, interview by J. W. Peterson and W. S. Pend in *Early Mormon Documents*, ed. and comp. Dan Vogel [Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996], 1: 508–9), the Uri and Thummim used by Joseph Smith to translate the Book of Mormon was held by a rod attached to the breastplate given to Joseph Smith. In the original wording of D&C 8:6–9 (*Book of Commandments* 7:3), Oliver Cowdery, when authorized to attempt a translation of the plates, was to have the “gift of working with the rod.” The wording was later changed to “gift of Aaron,” in line with the rod of Aaron mentioned in Exodus 7:9–10, 19–20; 8:5, 16–17; Numbers 17:6–10.

4. The passage is cited in 2 Nephi 30:9 and is paraphrased in one of the Dead Sea Scrolls, 1Q28b (1QSb 5), col. 5, lines 24–25. In another of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the *Isaiah Peshet* known as 4Q161, col. 3, line 22, the passage is explained by saying, “his sword will judge all the peoples” (Florentino Martiñez and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition* [Leiden: Brill, 1997], 317). One of the Nag Hammadi texts, *The Apocalypse of Paul* V, 22:2–10, depicts an angel with an iron rod in his hand herding souls to judgment.

5. See Job 5:15; Psalms 42:10; 55:21; 57:4; 59:7; 64:3; 149:6; Proverbs 12:18; 25:18; 30:14; Isaiah 1:20; 49:2 (see 1 Nephi 21:2); compare the longer version of Isaiah 50:8 in 2 Nephi 7:8, “I will smite him with the strength of my mouth.” In connection with the flail mentioned earlier, note that, in Job 5:20–21, “the power of the sword” parallels “the scourge of the tongue.” One of the Dead Sea Scrolls (1QH^a) speaks of lion cubs with teeth like a sword or a spear (col. 13, lines 9–10, 13, 14–15), while another compares the mouth to a sharpened sword and the tongue to words of holiness (4Q436, col. 1, line 7). *Mandaean Prayerbook* 24 speaks of being delivered “from the sword of enemies and from the third tongue which is softer than fat and sharper than a sword” (E. S. Drower trans., *The Canonical Prayerbook of the Mandaeans* [Leiden: Brill, 1959], 20). According to *Pirq de Rabbi Eliezer* 48, when Moses saw the Egyptian striking the Hebrew, he rebuked him “with the sword of his lips.” Compare Psalm 59:7; Isaiah 11:4. Clement of Alexandria, regarding the passage, says, “the mystics say that he slew the Egyptian a word only.”