

The Image of the Hand of God in the Book of Mormon and the Old Testament

David Rolph Seely

The image of the hand of God in both the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon stands for the Lord's power to intervene in the affairs of men and the events of history. Comparison between the ways this image is used in the two scriptures supports what the Book of Mormon claims about its own origin.

The hand of God is referred to frequently in both the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon. In fact, it is used with the same frequency in both volumes. Reference to the hand of God, or to the arm or finger of God, occurs 345 times in the 1184 pages of the 1979 Latter-day Saint edition of the Old Testament in English, an average of once every 3.4 pages. Those same images occur 153 times in the 531 pages of the 1981 LDS edition of the Book of Mormon in English (printed in the same format as the Old Testament), again an average of once every 3.4 pages.

The image of the hand of God is connected with important themes in both scriptures. For example, it is prominent in reference to the Creation: "We are the clay, and thou our potter; and we all are the work of thy hand" (Isaiah 64:8), and "By his hand were they all created from the beginning" (Alma 18:32). In the Old Testament, the image of the hand of God is used often in connection with the movements of God's people. The Lord "by the strength of his hand" brought Israel out of Egypt in order to bring them into the promised land (see, for example, Exodus 13:3, 9, 14, 16). In the Book of Mormon, the groups who come to the promised land in the New World are "brought by the hand of the Lord" (2 Nephi 1:5-6; Omni 1:16).

The hand of God is also cited often as the agent of judgment as well as the means of deliverance. The Lord will punish his covenant people with his "outstretched hand" (Isaiah 5:25 2 Nephi 15:25). Restoration and gathering will begin when "the Lord shall set his hand again the second time to recover his people" (Isaiah 11:11 2 Nephi 21:11; 25:17). In the Book of Mormon, the phrase "his arm of mercy is extended" also signals the Lord's power on behalf of the penitent and the believer (Jacob 6:5; Mosiah 29:20; Alma 19:36).

The hand of God was what afflicted Job (see Job 19:21) and at the same time had the power to heal him (see Job 5:18). The hand of the Lord was what once made the Jaredites prosperous (see Ether 10:28) but later destroyed them (see Ether 1:1). Moroni, quoting words of the patriarch Jacob that are lost from our present-day Old Testament, prophesied the preservation of the seed of Joseph "by the hand of God" (Alma 46:24; see also 1 Nephi 5:14). Throughout the Book of Mormon, prophets were assured that the records would be "preserved by the hand of the Lord" (Alma 37:4; see also Mosiah 1:5), and so would the interpreters necessary to translate them (see Mosiah 28:15).

Often the hand imagery should be understood symbolically. Still, the Book of Mormon reminds us that the Lord really does have a hand, providing a material basis so that our minds can grasp and interpret these metaphors. God has the ability and intention to intervene actively and concretely in the affairs of mortal men if he so chooses, even to the point of taking literal action with his hand. (Recall that the Brother of Jared saw the actual finger of the Lord touching the stones that were to give light to the Jaredites in their barges—see Ether 3:6. Alma 10:2 also reports that certain words seen on the wall of a Nephite temple had been "written by the finger of God.")

Categories of Images in the Two Scriptures

Imagery of the hand of God in the Book of Mormon can be divided into three groups according to how that record uses it in comparison to Bible usage: (1) the Nephite record uses the same images as the Bible; (2) sometimes the uses are similar, although they show certain differences; and (3) certain ways in which the hand of God is spoken of are unique in the Book of Mormon.

Since the Book of Mormon claims to come directly from the Israelite tradition of record-keeping, these three categories are what we would expect: (1) The basic idea and some particular ways of speaking about the hand of God at work among men would have continued. Lehi and his family were familiar with the biblical tradition when they left Jerusalem, bolstered by the scriptures on the plates of brass that they carried with them to America. (2) We could expect them through their history in the New World to develop variations on the biblical ways of speaking of God. (3) Having their own literary tradition in the American promised land, they would have created expressions not known to us from the Bible. They may have either originated these themselves or known and used ancient Near Eastern images not in the Old Testament as we now have it. By reviewing examples of hand-of-God imagery from each of these three categories, we will be able to appreciate that the Book of Mormon both connects with its ancient Israelite heritage and shows us independent Nephite development.

The Same Imagery

Here both the form of the language and the use to which the images are put are similar in both volumes of scripture.

Direct quotations from Isaiah. The largest set of references to the hand of God consists of thirty-six passages in the Book of Mormon quoted from Isaiah. For example, Isaiah 52:10 says, “The Lord hath made bare his holy arm in the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.” This is found quoted in four places in the Book of Mormon: Mosiah 12:24 and 15:31, and 3 Nephi 16:20 and 20:35.

Similar images in passages not quoted from the Old Testament. There are also examples of hand-of-God images in the Book of Mormon that are not quotes from the Bible yet are so similar as to suggest a direct relationship. Sometimes these statements occur in passages that seem to refer to or partially quote from Bible passages. As an example, note Nephi’s comment on the passage in Isaiah 52:10 where the Lord is said to have “made bare his holy arm.” Nephi uses this same figure twice in 1 Nephi 22:10-11, referring to the latter-day restoration and missionary work: “All the kindreds of the earth cannot be blessed unless he shall make bare his arm in the eyes of the nations. Wherefore, the Lord God will proceed to make bare his arm in the eyes of all the nations, in bringing about his covenants and his gospel unto those who are of the house of Israel.”

The phrase “holy arm” also occurs in Enos 1:13, which talks about the coming forth of the Book of Mormon: “Even if it so be by the power of his holy arm, that it might be brought forth at some future day unto the Lamanites, that, perhaps, they might be brought unto salvation.” Note that in Isaiah 52:10 this expression also occurs in the context of the prophet writing about the future restoration, and the phrase is accompanied by the word *salvation*.

In another place, Lehi speaks of writing done by the finger of God when he tells of the vision the Lord had given to Joseph of Egypt: “I will write unto him my law, by the finger of mine own hand,” no doubt referring to Moses (2 Nephi 3:17). This same image is of course found in Exodus 31:18 and Deuteronomy 9:10, which refer to “tables of stone written with the finger of God.”

It is true that prominent kinds of hand-of-God imagery in the Old Testament do not appear in the Book of Mormon (just as some images in the Book of Mormon do not occur in the Old Testament). For example, consider the well-

known expression that celebrates the Lord's saving of the children of Israel from Egypt through defeating Pharaoh's army. The statement is that he led them out of Egypt with a "mighty hand and outstretched arm." This occurs ten times in the Bible but never occurs in the Book of Mormon. If we had the full Book of Mormon record (Joseph Smith was allowed to translate only a portion of the plates), these missing instances might well show up.

Images Similar but Modified

Many Book of Mormon expressions involving the hand of God differ from those in the Bible but are similar enough to have apparently developed from Bible phrasing.

The image of the lengthened arm. One of these speaks of God's arm being "lengthened." A Hebrew phrase meaning lack of strength or power is "short of hand." This occurs three times in the Old Testament. In each of these cases, the Lord poses a rhetorical question whether mortals think that his hand is shortened; that is, whether men consider that God is powerless to save his people. Obviously, the question is a roundabout way of stating that the Lord does have power to save. For example, in Isaiah 50:2 (= 2 Nephi 7:2), the Lord asks, "Is my hand shortened at all, that it cannot redeem? or have I no power to deliver?" In the Book of Mormon, reference to the shortened hand is made only in this quotation from Isaiah.

Later however, Nephi uses a phrase that may be a reverse of the hand that is shortened. At 2 Nephi 28:32 we find, "Wo be unto the Gentiles, saith the Lord God of Hosts! For notwithstanding I shall lengthen out mine arm unto them from day to day, they will deny me; nevertheless, I will be merciful unto them, saith the Lord God, if they will repent and come unto me; for mine arm is lengthened out all the day long." The picture of the Lord's hand being "outstretched" is common in the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon, and the Book of Mormon frequently uses the image "the arm of mercy extended." Yet the specific word *lengthen* (with *arm* instead of *hand*) occurs only in verse thirty-two. In English, *lengthen* is the precise opposite of shorten, suggesting that Nephi intended this image to be the reverse of the shortened hand. Just as in the Bible passages, the Book of Mormon uses this expression in the context of God's power to save.

Interestingly, the statement about the hand of God being lengthened as a symbol of his power is known elsewhere in the ancient Near East, despite being absent from the Bible. In the Ugaritic language we read: "El's hand is lengthened like the Sea's." So perhaps Nephi was using a phrase that already existed in related Semitic cultures but happened not to make it into the Old Testament.

The image of an instrument in the hand of the Lord. This phrase occurs twelve times in the Book of Mormon but not at all in the Old Testament. It refers to servants of the Lord who help bring souls to Christ, often through missionary work. Among these are Nephi, who brought his people across the sea to the promised land (see 2 Nephi 1:24), Joseph Smith in the last days (see 2 Nephi 3:24), and Alma the elder and his converts (see Mosiah 23:10). The phrase appears several times for the younger Alma and the sons of Mosiah (see Mosiah 27:36; Alma 2:30; 17:9, 11; 26:3, 15; 29:9; 35:14). The sense of this expression is perfectly logical in relation to other biblical hand-of-God expressions.

Only a few Old Testament references to the hand of God suggest a person being "in" the hand of God. One of the most prominent is in Isaiah referring to the Suffering Servant (whom Latter-day Saints usually interpret as Christ, or perhaps any prophetic messenger). This is quoted by Nephi: "He hath made my mouth like a sharp sword; in the shadow of his hand hath he hid me, and made me a polished shaft; in his quiver hath he hid me" (Isaiah 49:2 1 Nephi 21:2). The most likely Hebrew equivalent to the English term "instrument" would be *kly*, which can refer to either a weapon or a tool. Explicit military words used in this verse ("sharp sword," "polished shaft," and "quiver")

certainly seem to make the Servant in this passage an instrument or weapon in the hand of the Lord. Thus the Book of Mormon expression “an instrument in the hand of God” is a possible development from the picture of the Servant as potential conqueror.

The image of trusting in the arm of the Lord, not in the arm of flesh. In the Bible the idea of trusting in the arm of the Lord occurs only in Isaiah 51:5, quoted by Nephi in 2 Nephi 8:5. But phrased a little differently—the divine arm as superior to the mortal arm—a similar idea is used in other places in the Old Testament. Exodus 15, the poem celebrating the Lord’s victory at the Red Sea, pictures the climax of the great contest between the hand of God and the might of Pharaoh in terms of hand imagery. The poet praised the Lord in this way: “Thy right hand, O Lord, is become glorious in power: thy right hand, O Lord, hath dashed in pieces the enemy” (v. 6). This is paralleled by the boast of Pharaoh, “I will draw my sword, my hand shall destroy them” (v. 9). The poem concludes with a final image of the Lord’s might: “Thou stretchedst out thy right hand, the earth swallowed them” (v. 12). Thus the result of relying on the arm of flesh, in this case the might of Pharaoh and his army, is destruction.

Psalm 44:3 applies the same kind of image to the conquest of the promised land: “For they got not the land in possession by their own sword, neither did their own arm save them: but thy right hand, and thine arm, and the light of thy countenance.” In 2 Chronicles 32:8, King Hezekiah says of the approaching Assyrians led by Sennacherib, “With him is an arm of flesh; but with us is the Lord our God to help us, and to fight our battles.” In Jeremiah 17:5 we read, “Thus saith the Lord; Cursed be the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm, and whose heart departeth from the Lord.” This passage may have been among the prophecies of Jeremiah preserved on the plates of brass; thus its language would have been known to Nephi and his descendants.

The idea of trusting in the arm of flesh occurs in two statements by Nephi that could be developments from Jeremiah 17:5. The first says, “O Lord, I have trusted in thee, and I will trust in thee forever. I will not put my trust in the arm of flesh; for I know that cursed is he that putteth his trust in the arm of flesh. Yea, cursed is he that putteth his trust in man or maketh flesh his arm” (2 Nephi 4:34). The other is “Cursed is he that putteth his trust in man, or maketh flesh his arm, or shall hearken unto the precepts of men, save their precepts shall be given by the power of the Holy Ghost” (2 Nephi 28:31).

This concept of the Lord’s strength as a source for humans is important throughout the Book of Mormon and is not limited to “the hand.” For example, those who have forgotten God “boast in their own strength” (see Mosiah 11:19; Mormon 3:9; 4:8), and this inevitably leads to their destruction. All these examples combined show us that the picture of trusting in “the arm of God” was common in the Old Testament, so we are not surprised to find it also in the Book of Mormon.

An interesting play on this image is found in the story of Ammon. In defense of king Lamoni’s flocks, he contended against the Lamanite rustlers, cut off their arms, and “caused them to flee by the strength of his arm” (Alma 17:37). King Lamoni then wanted to know about a man that had “such great power” that he could kill and smite off the arms of bandits. In response, Ammon explained that his arm was not the arm of God—the Great Spirit—but rather that “a portion of that Spirit dwelleth in me, which giveth me knowledge, and also power according to my faith and desires which are in God” (18:35).

Images Unique to the Book of Mormon

I will discuss just two unique images, which are part of a larger set, that explain and illustrate the Atonement.

The arm of mercy. The first is the image of the arm of mercy extended. The phrase “arm of mercy” is not in the Old Testament. The closest phrase that suggests such an image is in Psalm 94:18: “When I said, My foot slippeth; thy mercy, O Lord, held me up.” Mercy can also be extended (see, for example, Psalm 109:12), but it seems to be used in the same sense as show mercy.

The phrase occurs eight times in the Book of Mormon. It appears first when Jacob explains Zenos’ allegory of the olive tree: “While his arm of mercy is extended towards you in the light of the day, harden not your hearts” (Jacob 6:5). If read in context, this phrase is a continuation of the hand imagery that Jacob had introduced three verses earlier: “The day that he shall set his hand again the second time to recover his people, is the day, yea, even the last time, that the servants of the Lord shall go forth in his power, to nourish and prune his vineyard” (6:2).

The image of the arm of mercy also occurs in Mosiah 16:12; Alma 5:33; 19:36; 29:10; and 3 Nephi 9:14. Each time, the Lord is offering “to all people who will repent and believe on his name” (Alma 19:36) the chance to take full advantage of the Atonement. For example, “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” (Alma 5:33).

The embrace of Christ. Many of the images of God touching man with his hand in the Old Testament denote sickness, plague, judgment, destruction, and so forth. Yet his hand is also shown to reach out to man in a positive way. Often the hand of the Lord is “upon” or “with” his prophets, showing inspiration and protection (see, for example, 1 Kings 18:46; 2 Kings 3:15; Ezekiel 1:3). Also the hand of God touched Jeremiah’s mouth so that he could speak for God (see Jeremiah 1:9). It also “lifted” Ezekiel by his hair to take him to Jerusalem in a vision (Ezekiel 8:3). Elsewhere we read that the hand of the Lord “leads” and the right hand “holds” David (Psalm 139:10; see 63:8; 73:23-24); these images suggest either a handclasp or taking the person by the hand to lead him along.

The Book of Mormon has a significantly different set of imagery regarding God’s positive contacts with man. This set is consistent and well developed throughout the book. Central to it is the image of an embrace, of being circled about by the arms of Christ. The Book of Mormon invites all to “come unto Christ” (1 Nephi 6:4; Moroni 10:32). A profound picture of what this means is frequently given of Christ waiting to embrace—to encircle with his arms—his children who come to him.

Nephi expressed it this way: “The Lord hath redeemed my soul from hell; I have beheld his glory, and I am encircled about eternally in the arms of his love” (2 Nephi 1:15). Alma emphasizes the safety of the embrace: “Thus mercy can satisfy the demands of justice, and encircles them in the arms of safety, while he that exercises no faith unto repentance is exposed to the whole law of the demands of justice” (Alma 34:16). And Mormon, at the end of his ministry, is saddened by the final destruction of his people because “this people had not repented that they might have been clasped in the arms of Jesus” (Mormon 5:11). “O ye fair ones,” he exclaimed, “how could ye have rejected that Jesus, who stood with open arms to receive you!” (Mormon 6:17).

Hugh Nibley has traced the origins of this atonement imagery to a Semitic word that in the Bible is usually translated “atonement.” Nibley finds one of the primary meanings of this term to be *encircling* or *surrounding*. This means that the embrace imagery in the Book of Mormon is a continuation or variant of a Near Eastern way of speaking.

However, the Book of Mormon also uses the figure of being encircled to show the consequences of following Satan—a reverse play on the embrace by the Savior. Instead of an embrace of love, Satan waits to “encircle you about with his chains, that he might chain you down to everlasting destruction” (Alma 12:6; see also Alma 5:7, 9).

In 2 Nephi 1, language about the “awful chains [of hell] by which ye are bound” (1:13) is contrasted with the faithful’s being “encircled about eternally in the arms of his love” (1:15).

Alma and the sons of Mosiah, at first, are set forth as examples of those “encircled about by the bands of death, and the chains of hell” (Alma 5:7). But they were set free through the Atonement. Through their missionary labors, others who “were encircled about with everlasting darkness and destruction” (Alma 26:15) accepted the invitation of Christ’s extended arms of mercy: “He has brought them into his everlasting light, yea, into everlasting salvation; and they are encircled about with the matchless bounty of his love” (Alma 26:15).

The representation of the hand of God in the Book of Mormon has a consistent purpose. It helps us understand the Lord’s power and willingness to touch us and save us. That purpose is the same in the Old Testament. Overall, the connections between the way the image of God’s hand is used in the Book of Mormon and in the Old Testament support the Book of Mormon’s own claim that it is an ancient record in the tradition of the Israelites.