

# Nephi and His Asherah: A Note on 1 Nephi 11: 8â€“23

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*A stylized tree with obvious religious significance already occurs as an art motif in fourth-millennium Mesopotamia, and, by the second millennium BC, it is found everywhere within the orbit of the ancient Near Eastern oikumene, including Egypt, Greece, and the Indus civilization. The meaning of the motif is not clear, but its overall composition strikingly recalls the Tree of Life of later Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist art.*<sup>1</sup>

Given the presence of the “sacred tree” throughout the ancient Near East—one leading archaeologist says that “the familiar tree of life [was] one of the oldest and most widespread motifs in ancient Near Eastern art and iconography”<sup>2</sup>—we are scarcely surprised to find tree imagery prominently displayed in the Book of Mormon, an ancient text rooted in the eastern Mediterranean.<sup>3</sup> Thus, for instance, in order to illustrate profound lessons about the nature and cultivation of faith, Alma the Younger discusses a metaphorical seed that, if nourished and cultivated, will grow into the salvific tree of life.<sup>4</sup> And one of the most famous incidents in the Book of Mormon involves Nephi’s vision of the tree of life, which was an expanded repetition of the similar vision given earlier to his father, Lehi. I will contend in this paper that a crucial element of Nephi’s vision reflects a signification of the sacred tree that is unique to the ancient Near East and that, indeed, can only be fully appreciated when the ancient Canaanite and Israelite associations of that tree are borne in mind.

First, of course, we need to review a portion of Nephi’s experience, as it is preserved in the Book of Mormon:

And it came to pass that the Spirit said unto me: Look! And I looked and beheld a tree; and it was like unto the tree which my father had seen; and the beauty thereof was far beyond, yea, exceeding of all beauty; and the whiteness thereof did exceed the whiteness of the driven snow. And it came to pass after I had seen the tree, I said unto the Spirit: I behold thou hast shown unto me the tree which is precious above all. And he said unto me: What desirest thou? And I said unto him: To know the interpretation thereof. . . . (1 Nephi 11:8–11)

Since Nephi’s wish—expressed at the specific request of his guide—was to know the meaning of the tree that had been shown to his father, and that he himself now saw, we would expect the Spirit to answer Nephi’s question. However, the guide’s response to Nephi’s question is hardly what we would have anticipated:

And it came to pass that he said unto me: Look! And I looked as if to look upon him, and I saw him not; for he had gone from before my presence. And it came to pass that I looked and beheld the great city of Jerusalem, and also other cities. And I beheld the city of Nazareth; and in the city of Nazareth I beheld a virgin, and she was exceedingly fair and white. And it came to pass that I saw the heavens open; and an angel came down and stood before me; and he said unto me: Nephi, what beholdest thou? And I said unto him: A virgin, most beautiful and fair above all other virgins. And he said unto me: Knowest thou the condescension of God? And I said unto him: I know that he loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things. And he said unto me: Behold, the virgin whom thou seest is the mother of the Son of God, after the manner of the flesh. And it came to pass that I beheld that she was carried away in the Spirit; and after she had been carried away in the Spirit for the space of a time the angel spake unto

me, saying: Look! And I looked and beheld the virgin again, bearing a child in her arms. And the angel said unto me: Behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son of the Eternal Father! (1 Nephi 11:12–21)

Then, immediately and, to many readers, no doubt unexpectedly, the Spirit asks Nephi precisely the question that Nephi himself had put to the Spirit only a few verses before:

Knowest thou the meaning of the tree which thy father saw? (1 Nephi 11:21)

Strikingly, in view of the seeming irrelevance of the vision of Mary to the original question about the significance of the tree—for the tree is nowhere mentioned in the angelic guide’s response—Nephi himself now replies that, yes, he knows the proper reply to his own question.

And I answered him, saying: Yea, it is the love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men; wherefore, it is the most desirable above all things. And he spake unto me, saying: Yea, and the most joyous to the soul. (1 Nephi 11:22–3)

How has Nephi come to this understanding? Clearly, the glimpse given to Nephi of the virgin mother with her child is the answer to his question about the meaning of the tree. Indeed, it is evident that in some sense the virgin is the tree. This is apparent from the structure of the pericope, of course, but also in the parallel descriptions given of the tree and the virgin. Just as she was “exceedingly fair and white,” “most beautiful and fair above all other virgins,” so was the beauty of the tree “far beyond, yea, exceeding of all beauty; and the whiteness thereof did exceed the whiteness of the driven snow.”<sup>5</sup> In one sense, therefore, the fruit of the tree—which was “desirable to make one happy” (1 Nephi 8:10), “desirable above all other fruit” (verses 12, 15), “most sweet, above all that [Lehi] ever before tasted” (verse 11), and which “filled [his] soul with exceedingly great joy” (verse 12)—is clearly the fruit of Mary’s womb, Jesus.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, it is evident that the mere sight of the virgin, by herself, leaves Nephi still a bit bewildered. It is only when she appears with a baby and is identified as “the mother of the Son of God” that he grasps the meaning of the tree.

The question to be treated in this paper is, Why would Nephi, without any explicit direction from his guide, have seen an immediate connection between a tree and the virginal mother of a divine child? In other words, how, without any real explanation, would he recognize a depiction of Mary and Jesus as an elucidation of the meaning of a beautiful tree? In order to answer that question, I believe we must examine a facet of the history of ancient Israelite worship that has become much clearer only in the light of very recent research.

### **Asherah, Consort of El**

It is apparent, on archaeological and other grounds, that the cultural and religious distance between Canaanites and Israelites, though it did exist, was considerably smaller than scholars once thought. (Michael D. Coogan says clearly: “Israelite religion [was] a subset of Canaanite religion.”)<sup>7</sup> For one thing, absolute monotheism itself, supposedly the chief claim to uniqueness and the foremost virtue of the Abrahamic religions, seems to have developed relatively late (perhaps as late as the Babylonian exile) in both popular and official Hebrew circles.<sup>8</sup> “Monotheism,” declares Mark Smith, “was hardly a feature of Israel’s earliest history.”<sup>9</sup> Monolatry, the worship of only one god, “grew out of an early, limited Israelite polytheism that was not strictly discontinuous with that of its Iron Age neighbors.”<sup>10</sup> In fact, says Professor Smith, “texts dating to the Exile”—in other words, to the period

immediately following the departure of Lehi and his family from Jerusalem—”are the first to attest to unambiguous expressions of Israelite monotheism.”<sup>11</sup>

In their attempts to better understand the beliefs of the ancient Israelites, modern scholars have been greatly helped by extrabiblical documents and artifacts that have been recovered from the soil of the Near East. For many years, there had been little beyond the Bible itself for them to study. The situation has changed, however, and dramatically so. Beginning in 1929, for example, the discovery of the Ugaritic texts at Ras Shamra, in Syria, revolutionized our understanding of Canaanite religion in general, and of early Hebrew religion in particular.

The god El was the patriarch of the Canaanite pantheon. Concerning the title *el olam*, Harvard’s Frank Moore Cross Jr. noted: “We must understand it . . . as meaning originally ‘El, lord of Eternity,’ or perhaps more properly, ‘the Ancient One.’ The mythological tablets of Ugarit portray El as a greybeard, father of the gods (*ab bn ilm*) and father of man (*ab adm*).”<sup>12</sup> However, observed Professor Cross, “it seems clear that no later than the fourteenth century BC in north Syria, the cult of El was declining, making room for the virile young god Ba’l-Haddu.”<sup>13</sup> Similarly, it now seems clear that, as with the Canaanites, “the original god of Israel was El.” In the earliest Israelite conception, father El had a divine son named Jehovah or Yahweh.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, there were a *number* of “sons of El.”<sup>15</sup> Gradually, however, the Israelite conception of Yahweh absorbed the functions of El and, by the tenth century BC, had come to be identified with him.<sup>16</sup>

For the purposes of the present essay, one of the most important things to emerge from these texts was the definitive demonstration of the existence in Canaanite religion, long denied by many earlier authorities, of a goddess called Asherah.<sup>17</sup> She was, in fact, the chief goddess of the Canaanite pantheon. She was the wife of El, who was the patriarch and chief god of the Canaanites, and the mother and wet nurse of the other gods, the son of El. Just as El was called “father of the gods” and “procreator of the generations of the gods,” Asherah was the “mother of the gods” and “the one giving birth to the gods.” Thus the gods of Ugarit could collectively be called “the family of [or ‘the sons of’] El” or the “sons of Asherah.”<sup>18</sup> Not unexpectedly, in this light, Asherah was widely regarded as a goddess of fertility.<sup>19</sup> And, just as she was the mother of the gods, she was connected with the birth of earthly royal heirs and could be metaphorically considered to be their mother as well.<sup>20</sup>

She had a center of worship in the Canaanite coastal city of Tyre and seems to have had a uniquely strong tie with the city of Sidon, at least in the period following Lehi and Nephi’s departure from the Old World, and probably before.<sup>21</sup> This is interesting because Lehi, a man whose family origins appear to lie in the north of Palestine and who evidently came from a trading background, “seems to have had particularly close ties with Sidon (for the name appears repeatedly in the Book of Mormon, both in its Hebrew and Egyptian forms), which at that time was one of the two harbors through which the Israelites carried on an extremely active trade with Egypt and the West.”<sup>22</sup> Intriguingly, too, Asherah’s title *Elat* (“goddess”) persists to this day in the name of a major Israeli coastal resort and in the Israeli name for the Gulf of Aqaba.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, “Asherah . . . was the earliest female deity known to have been worshiped by the Children of Israel,” over a period extending at least from the conquest of Canaan to the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC—the time of the departure of Lehi and his family from the Old World.<sup>24</sup> Ancient Israelite women, for instance, were sometimes buried in “Asherah wigs.” Furthermore, two upright pillars, a relatively large one and a smaller one, have been found in the sanctuary of the Israelite temple at Arad, which dates to the ninth century BC. At least one leading

authority on the archaeology of ancient Palestine believes that they stood, respectively, for Yahweh and Asherah. To choose another example, at Taanach, near Megiddo, evidence suggests that images of the Queen of Heaven, perhaps Astarte but probably Asherah, were mass produced. And these very common terra-cotta figurines, of which thousands have now been found at Israelite sites, were not just a rural phenomenon. More of them have now been found in the Jerusalem area than in the countryside.<sup>25</sup> Summarizing the evidence, William Dever writes of the figurines that “most show the female form nude, with exaggerated breasts; occasionally she is depicted pregnant or nursing a child.” But there is one significant difference between the figurines from Israelite sites and those recovered from pagan Canaanite locations: the lower body of the Israelite figurines lacks the explicit detail characteristic of the Canaanite objects; indeed, the area below the waist of the Israelite figurines is typically a simple plain column. Whereas the pagan Canaanite objects depict a highly sexualized goddess of both childbearing and erotic love, in the Israelite figurines the aspect of the *dea nutrix*, the nourishing or nurturing goddess, comes to the fore. As Professor Dever writes, “The more blatantly sexual motifs give way to the nursing mother.”<sup>26</sup>

Scholarly opinions are divided about whether Asherah was a foreign goddess who had become fully assimilated into Israelite worship, or whether she was indigenous to original Hebrew belief.<sup>27</sup> For the limited purpose of this paper, though, her origins are of little consequence. Over a period of many years, worship of her seems to have been popular among all segments of Israelite society.<sup>28</sup> Few careful readers of the Old Testament will have missed the fact that Asherah was venerated in the countryside.<sup>29</sup> She was worshiped in Israel under the judges,<sup>30</sup> and she was important in later Hebrew urban centers as well. Although 1 Kings 3:3 reminds readers that King Solomon “loved the Lord,” he brought Asherah into Jerusalem, probably sometime after 1000 BC. The famous tenth-century Israelite offering stand found at Taanach, not far from Megiddo, links Asherah and Yahweh, and J. Glen Taylor argues that it is evidence of an actual “cult” of the two, a cult that once flourished “at a large-scale cultic centre which perhaps functioned under (at least indirect) royal administrative sanction during the reign of Solomon.”<sup>31</sup>

After the separation of the states of Israel and Judah, King Ahab and his Phoenician-born queen, Jezebel, daughter of “Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians,” installed Asherah in their capital city, Samaria, where, as David Noel Freedman observes, “around 800 BCE, the official cult of Yahweh included the worship of his consort Asherah.”<sup>32</sup> She seems to have remained comfortably ensconced there until Israel fell to the Assyrians in 721 BC.

But the veneration of Asherah was hardly restricted to the often-denigrated northern kingdom.<sup>33</sup> In the south, in Judah, Solomon’s son, Rehoboam, introduced her into the temple—meaning, presumably, that he erected some sort of sacred symbol (sometimes referred to in the lowercase as “an *asherah*” or “the *asherah*”) that represented the goddess Asherah. Asa and Jehoshaphat removed Asherah from the temple, but Joash restored her, whereupon the great reforming king Hezekiah removed her again, along with the so-called Nehushtan, which 2 Kings 18:4 describes as “the brasen serpent that Moses had made.” Subsequently, although he failed to restore the Nehushtan, King Manasseh reinstated Asherah in the Jerusalem temple, where she remained until the reforms of King Josiah, who reigned from roughly 639 to 609 BC. So visible was Asherah still in the period just prior to the Babylonian captivity that Lehi’s contemporary, the prophet Jeremiah, felt obliged to denounce the worship of her.<sup>34</sup> In other words, an image or symbol of Asherah stood in Solomon’s Temple at Jerusalem for nearly two-thirds of the period of its existence, certainly extending into the lifetime of Lehi and perhaps even into the lifetime of his son Nephi.<sup>35</sup>

By the time of Israel's Babylonian exile and subsequent restoration, however, opposition to Asherah was universal in Judaism.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the developing Israelite conception of Yahweh seems, to a certain extent, to have absorbed her functions and epithets, much as it had earlier absorbed those of Yahweh's father, El.<sup>37</sup> In a certain sense, therefore, Asherah disappeared from the history of Israel and subsequent Judaism.<sup>38</sup> In the text of the Bible as we now read it, hints of the goddess remain, but little survives that would enable us to form an accurate or detailed understanding of her character or nature.<sup>39</sup> As William Dever sums it up:

The "silence" regarding Asherah as the consort of Yahweh, successor to Canaanite El, may now be understood as the result of the near-total suppression of the cult by the 8th–6th century reformers. As a result, references to "Asherah," while not actually expunged from the consonantal text of the MT [Masoretic Text], were misunderstood by later editors or reinterpreted to suggest merely the shadowy image of the goddess. In this "innocent deception," they were followed by the translators of the Septuagint, the Vulgate, the Targumim, and the King James and most other modern versions, including the Revised Standard. Indeed, by the time of the Mishna the original significance of the name "Asherah" had probably been forgotten, not to be recovered until the goddess emerged again in the texts recovered from Ugarit.<sup>40</sup>

Steve A. Wiggins agrees, maintaining that the reformers actually suppressed information regarding Asherah from the Bible as we now have it.<sup>41</sup> The biblical texts must be read, Saul Olyan says, with their filtering through the Deuteronomists kept fully in mind, for they used purposeful distortion to make their case.<sup>42</sup> (Manfried Dietrich and Oswald Loretz may not be entirely off the mark when they refer to the work of the Deuteronomists as *Kriegspropaganda*, or "war propaganda.")<sup>43</sup>

So what are we to make of Asherah? Does the opposition to venerating her, as expressed and enforced by the Deuteronomists and the reforming Israelite kings, indicate that she was a foreign and evil pollution of the legitimate Hebrew religion? Not necessarily. Recall that Hezekiah removed both the asherah and the Nehushtan from the temple at Jerusalem. The Nehushtan was not a pagan intrusion; it was "the brasen serpent that Moses had made," which had been carefully preserved by the Israelites for nearly a millennium until Hezekiah, offended by the idolatrous worship of "the children of Israel [who] did burn incense to it" (2 Kings 18:4), removed it and destroyed it.<sup>44</sup> In other words, the Nehushtan had an illustrious pedigree entirely within the religious world of Israel, and there is no reason to believe that the asherah was any different in this respect.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, it should be recalled that Manasseh brought the asherah back to Yahweh's temple in Jerusalem, but not the Nehushtan.

Sherlock Holmes once solved a case because of a dog that, contrary to all expectation, did not bark. What is striking in the long story of Israel's Asherah is the identity of those who did not oppose her. No prophet appears to have denounced Asherah before the eighth century BC.<sup>46</sup> The great Yahwist prophets Amos and Hosea, vociferous in their denunciations of Baal, seem not to have denounced Asherah,<sup>47</sup> and the Elijah-Elisha school of Yahwist reformers do not appear to have opposed her. Although 400 prophets of Asherah ate with Jezebel along with the 450 prophets of Baal, Elijah's famous contest with the priests of Baal, while dramatically fatal to them, left the votaries of Asherah unmentioned and, evidently, untouched. "What happened to Asherah and her prophets?" asks David Noel Freedman. "Nothing."<sup>48</sup> In subsequent years the ruthless campaign against Baal inspired by Elijah and Elisha and led by Israel's Jehu left the *asherah* of Samaria standing. Baal was wholly eliminated, while the veneration of the goddess actually outlived the northern kingdom.<sup>49</sup>

Belief in Asherah seems to have been a conservative position in ancient Israel; criticism of it was innovative. Saul Olyan, noting that “before the reforming kings in Judah, the asherah seems to have been entirely legitimate,”<sup>50</sup> argues that ancient Hebrew opposition to Asherah emanated entirely from the so-called Deuteronomistic reform party, or from those heavily influenced by them. Other factions in earliest Israel, Olyan says, probably thought that worshipping her was not wrong and may well have worshiped her themselves.<sup>51</sup> (The book of Deuteronomy is usually associated with the reforms of the Judahite king Josiah in the seventh century BC, and many scholars believe that it was actually written during that period.) Writing of the common goddess figurines to which we have already alluded, William Dever remarks, “As for the notion that these figurines, whatever they signified, were uncommon in orthodox circles, the late Dame Kathleen Kenyon found a seventh-century BC ‘cult-cache’ with more than three-hundred-fifty of them in a cave in Jerusalem, not a hundred yards from the Temple Mount.”<sup>52</sup> (It should be kept in mind that a date for these figurines in the seventh century BC makes them at least near contemporaries of Lehi.)

What was Asherah’s role in early Israelite religious belief? As one might have predicted, given what we have already said about the history of Canaanite and Israelite religion, “Asherah may have been the consort of El, but not Yahweh, at some early point in Israelite religion.”<sup>53</sup> Gradually, however, as the concept of Yahweh began to absorb the attributes of Yahweh’s father, El, Israelite imaginations seem also to have granted to Yahweh the wife and consort of his father.<sup>54</sup> “It is well-known,” remarks Andr Lemaire, who lays out the argument clearly despite the rejection of it, “that in Israelite religion Yahweh replaced the great god El as Israel’s God. If Yahweh replaced El, it would seem logical to suppose that under Canaanite influence asherah replaced Athirat [Asherah], and that, at least in the popular religion of ancient Israel if not in the purer form of that religion reflected in the Bible, asherah functioned as the consort or wife of Yahweh.”<sup>55</sup>

Professor Lemaire’s skepticism notwithstanding, Saul Olyan is probably correct in asserting that the view of Asherah as a divine consort, the wife of Yahweh, is gaining ground among scholars of ancient Israelite religion.<sup>56</sup> “That some in Judah saw his consort as Asherah is hardly any longer debatable,” declares Thomas Thompson.<sup>57</sup> “Asherah was a goddess paired with El, and this pairing was bequeathed to Israelite religion by virtue of the Yahweh-El identification.”<sup>58</sup> Asherah seems to have been regarded as Yahweh’s consort in both state and public religion in the northern kingdom of Israel and in the southern kingdom of Judah.<sup>59</sup>

Important support for this contention has come from two recent and very controversial archaeological finds in Palestine. The first is Khirbat al-Qum, a site about eight miles west of Hebron and roughly six and a half miles east-southeast of Lachish in the territory of ancient Judah. The paleo-Hebrew inscriptions at Khirbat al-Qum can be dated to the eighth century b.c.,<sup>60</sup> and whatever their other disagreements about them, scholars agree that they represent at least a strand of the popular religion of their time.<sup>61</sup> The second is Kuntillat Ajrud, perhaps the southernmost outpost of the kingdom of Judah, which served as either a fortress or a caravansary (or both) and situated on the border between the southern Negev and the Sinai peninsula, not far from the road that linked Gaza and Elat. (It is approximately forty miles south of Kadesh-Barnea on a hill beside the Wadi Qurayya.) The archaeological ruins at this location, reflecting influences from the northern kingdom of Israel, date to the late ninth or early eighth century BC,<sup>62</sup> which would place them in the reign of Jehoahaz, king of Israel, the son and successor to the militant anti-Baalist Jehu.<sup>63</sup>

The inscription at Kuntillat Ajrud, written in red ink on the shoulder of a large *pithos* (clay vessel), seems to refer to “Yahweh of Samaria and his Asherah.” On the other side of the *pithos* is a drawing of a tree of life.<sup>64</sup> The tomb inscription at Khirbat al-Qum also appears to mention “Yahweh and his asherah” (where some sort of cultic object is intended) or, less likely, “Yahweh and his Asherah” (where the reference may be directly to a goddess-consort). With these finds explicitly in mind, the eminent archaeologist William G. Dever has contended that “recent archeological discoveries provide both texts and pictorial representations that for the first time clearly identify ‘Asherah’ as the consort of Yahweh, at least in some circles in ancient Israel.”<sup>65</sup> Raphael Patai declares that they indicate that “the worship of Asherah as the consort of Yahweh (‘his Asherah!’) was an integral element of religious life in ancient Israel prior to the reforms introduced by King Josiah [Josiah] in 621 BCE.”<sup>66</sup> David Noel Freedman concurs: “Our investigation suggests that the worship of a goddess, consort of Yahweh, was deeply rooted in both Israel and Judah in preexilic times.”<sup>67</sup>

At one stage of Hebrew religion, Yahweh appears to have been regarded as “the patriarch of all the gods, as the universal progenitor” of the heavenly “host”<sup>68</sup>—a role he probably inherited from his father, El. (Yahweh may originally have been numbered as one of the host, perhaps even worshiped as such—albeit as the sun, the most important among them.)<sup>69</sup> The “host of heaven,” in turn, were associated with the stars and heavenly bodies but were also described as heavenly councilors, and an increasing number of scholars believe that they were equivalent to the gods of surrounding Canaanite faiths.<sup>70</sup> Thus, John Day argues, just as the Ugaritic goddess Asherah was the wife of El and the mother of the gods, the Israelite Asherah, consort of the chief Hebrew deity, was the mother of the divine children of God.<sup>71</sup> In other words, at the creation of the earth, “when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy” (Job 38:7), Asherah appears to have been there too, among her children.<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, as among the Canaanites, Asherah was also associated with earthly human fertility and human childbirth.<sup>73</sup> A Hebrew incantation text found in Arslan Tash in upper Syria, dating from the seventh century BC (the period just prior to Nephi’s vision), appears to invoke the help of the goddess Asherah for a woman in delivery.<sup>74</sup>

For our present purposes, though, we need to focus more precisely on the nature of the veneration that the Israelites paid to the divine consort. What was the asherah that stood in the temple at Jerusalem and in the Israelite capital at Samaria? Some controversy attends this question. Asherah seems to have been associated with trees.<sup>75</sup> The tenth-century cultic stand from Taanach, a site located five miles southeast of Megiddo at the southern edge of the plain of Esdraelon, features two representations of Asherah, first in human form and then as a sacred tree. Asherah is the tree.<sup>76</sup> Perhaps we should think again, here, of the Israelite goddess figurines: it will be recalled that their upper bodies are unmistakably anthropomorphic and female, but their lower bodies, in contrast to those of their pagan Canaanite counterparts, are simple columns. William Dever suggests that these columnar lower bodies represent tree trunks.<sup>77</sup> And why not? Asherah “is a tree goddess, and as such is associated with the oak, the tamarisk, the date palm, the sycamore, and many other species. This association led to her identification with sacred trees or the tree of life.”<sup>78</sup> The rabbinic authors of the Jewish Mishnah (compiled around 200 AD) explain the asherah as a tree that was worshiped.<sup>79</sup>

Asherah’s symbol may have been a living tree, or a sacred grove of some sort, but scholarly consensus seems to be growing behind the proposition that the lowercase asherah was most commonly a carved wooden image, perhaps some kind of pole. Unfortunately, since the image was wooden, little if any direct archaeological evidence for it has

survived.<sup>80</sup> But we know from the biblical evidence that it could be planted (see Deuteronomy 16:21) so that it stood up (see 2 Kings 13:6), but that it could also be pulled down (see Micah 5:13), cut (see Exodus 34:13), and burned (see Deuteronomy 12:3). Very probably it symbolized a tree, and it may itself have been a stylized tree.<sup>81</sup> It was not uncommon in the ancient Near East for a god or goddess to be essentially equated with his or her symbol,<sup>82</sup> and Asherah seems to have been no exception: Asherah was both goddess *and* cult symbol. She was the tree.<sup>83</sup>

The menorah, the seven-branched candelabra that stood for centuries in the temple of Jerusalem, supplies an interesting parallel to all this: Leon Yarden maintains that the menorah represents a stylized almond tree. He points to the notably radiant whiteness of the almond tree at certain points in its life cycle and reminds his reader of the perennial association of the tree of life with light (pointing in this context even to the burning bush, from which Yahweh chose to address Moses at Sinai). It is fascinating, therefore, to see Yarden argue that the archaic Greek name of the almond (*amygdale*, reflected in its contemporary botanical designation as *Amygdalis communis*) almost certainly not a natively Greek word, is most likely derived from the Hebrew *em gedolah*, meaning “Great Mother.”<sup>84</sup>

“The Late Bronze Age iconography of the asherah would suggest,” writes Mark Smith, “that it represented maternal and nurturing dimensions of the deity.”<sup>85</sup> Raphael Patai has called attention to the parallels between Jewish devotion to various female deities and quasi deities over the centuries, commencing with Asherah, and popular Catholic veneration of Mary, the mother of Jesus.<sup>86</sup> Interestingly, it appears that Asherah, “the mother goddess par excellence,” may also, paradoxically, have been considered a virgin.<sup>87</sup> The Punic western goddess Tannit, whom Saul Olyan has identified with Israelite-Canaanite Asherah, the consort of El, the mother and wet nurse to the gods, was depicted as a virgin and symbolized by a tree.<sup>88</sup> It may be recalled, in this context, that an eleventh-century cardinal, saint, and doctor of the Roman Catholic Church, Peter Damian, declared that, as the Virgin Mary matured, she came to have such beauty and charm that God himself was filled with passion for her. It was to her, he says, that God sang the Song of Solomon, and when his business with angels and men left him fatigued, she was the golden couch upon which he lay down to take his rest. Two centuries later, another cardinal, the important Franciscan philosopher and ascetic St. Bonaventure, went so far as to label Mary “the spouse of the Eternal Father,” an expression that would be echoed in 1399 by Christine de Pisan, who also termed Mary the “Queen of Heaven”—the same title given to the goddess of ancient Israel<sup>89</sup>—and attached her to the Trinity itself.<sup>90</sup>

It should by now be apparent why Nephi, an Israelite living at the turn of the seventh and sixth centuries before Christ, would have recognized in the otherwise unexplained image of a virginal mother and her divine child an answer to his question about a marvelous tree and, derivatively, a profound statement about the depth of God’s love for humankind. The association in 1 Nephi of the New Testament’s Mary with the tree of life is not without parallel in the ancient Near East. The Coptic version of The Apocalypse of Paul, a document that probably originated in Egypt in the mid-third century of the Christian era, relates a vision of the great apostle that, in this detail at least, strikingly resembles the vision of Nephi: “And he [the angel] showed me the Tree of Life,” Paul is reported to have said, “and by it was a revolving red-hot sword. And a Virgin appeared by the tree, and three angels who hymned her, and the angel told me that she was Mary, the Mother of Christ.”<sup>91</sup> But Nephi’s vision goes even further, *identifying* Mary with the tree. This additional element seems to derive from precisely the preexilic Palestinian culture into which, the Book of Mormon tells us, Nephi had been born.

That Mary, the virgin girl of Nazareth, was not literally Asherah, “the lonely goddess of ancient Israelite religion”<sup>93</sup>—that she was, as Nephi’s guide carefully stressed, simply “the mother of the Son of God, *after the manner of the flesh*”<sup>93</sup>—is, for the purpose of this discussion, almost certainly irrelevant. Religious thinkers of later Judaism, after all, could discern Asherah in other feminine personages, both historical and mythical. In sixteenth-century Safed for instance, the Kabbalist Moses Cordovero understood Asherah to be identical with the Matronit-Shekhina of Kabbalistic Judaism.<sup>94</sup> In fact, various Kabbalistic thinkers identified the Shekhina, the deified feminine personification of God’s presence, with the historical, mortal women Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah.<sup>95</sup> Similar in a rather skewed parallel to the image of Mary in 1 Nephi, the third-century-AD murals of the Mesopotamian Dura-Europos synagogue depict the Shekhina as a nude woman holding the infant Moses, a quasi-divine child, in her arms.<sup>96</sup> There is evidence, too, that Asherah was occasionally linked to biblical Eve by ancient Hebrews.<sup>97</sup> For that matter, in rabbinic Judaism even the ordinary Jewish wife could be and was viewed as the “earthly representative of the Shekhina,” the divine consort of God.<sup>98</sup> But Mary, far more perfectly and precisely than any of these other earthly “Asherahs,” was the mortal typification of the wife of the Heavenly Father and the mother of his Son.

Indeed, as ancient Christianity developed, the image of Mary seems to have assimilated goddesses from beyond the Hebraic tradition, as well. Consider, for example, the Greek and Anatolian goddess Artemis (Diana), who was associated with childbirth, with the fertility of humans and animals, and, particularly in the Peloponnesus, with the fruitfulness of trees, and whose carefully guarded virginity only partially obscures her apparent origins as a mother goddess.<sup>99</sup> The area near Ephesus, in modern Turkey, was once strongly associated with Artemis. Her great temple stood there, one of the wonders of the ancient world (see Acts 19:23–41). Today, however, little remains of her shrine beyond a marshy pit and a single melancholy column upon which large migratory birds like to roost. Even so, tens of thousands of pilgrims still go to Ephesus each year to visit the purported home of the Virgin Mary in the hills above the city. Legends of her arrival at Ephesus in the company of Luke the evangelist, and of her lengthy sojourn there in the care of the apostle John, can be dated back to very nearly the time when the temple virgin Artemis was destroyed.

### **Asherah and Biblical Wisdom**

As a final (but, I hope, useful and instructive) exercise, we will examine a passage in the Bible that seems, in view of the discussion we have just brought to a provisional conclusion, to yield several interesting parallels to the vision of Lehi and Nephi.

Biblical scholars recognize a genre of writing, found both in the canonical scriptures (e.g., Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Solomon) and beyond the canon, that they term “wisdom literature.” Among the characteristics of this type of writing, not surprisingly, is the frequent use of the term *wisdom*. But also common to such literature, and very striking in texts from a Hebrew cultural background, is the absence of typically Israelite Jewish themes, such as the promises to the patriarchs, the story of Moses and the exodus, the covenant at Sinai, and the divine promise to David. There is, however, a strong emphasis on the teaching of parents, and especially on the instruction of the father.<sup>100</sup> Careful readers will note that all of these characteristics are present in the accounts of the visions of Lehi and Nephi as they are given in the Book of Mormon.

The Bible identifies two chief earthly sources of wisdom. It is said to come from “the East,” which is almost certainly to be understood as the Syro-Arabian desert, and from Egypt.<sup>101</sup> (The book of Job, for example, is set in “the East.”)

and lacks much if any trace of peculiarly Israelite or Hebrew lore.)<sup>102</sup> This is reminiscent of the twin extra-Israelite influences—Egypt and the desert—that the Book of Mormon and recent Latter-day Saint scholarship have identified for the family of Lehi and Nephi.<sup>103</sup> It may be significant that a section of the book of Proverbs (31:1–9) claims to represent “the words of Lemuel”—using a name that not only occurs among the sons of Lehi but also is perfectly at home in the Arabian desert.

Certain other motifs common to wisdom literature are also typical of the Book of Mormon as a whole.<sup>104</sup> For example, both the canonical and extracanonical wisdom books are much concerned with the proper or improper use of speech.<sup>105</sup> The book of Proverbs warns against the dangerous enticements of “the strange woman, even the stranger which flattereth with her words,” and advises us to “meddle not with him that flattereth with his lips.”<sup>106</sup> “Flattering” and “cunning words,” generally used for evil purposes and with an implication of deceit, are also a recurring concern of the Nephite record.<sup>107</sup> Another consistent theme in both the Book of Mormon and Near Eastern wisdom literature is the notion that wisdom or justice or righteousness brings prosperity, while folly or wickedness leads to suffering and destruction.<sup>108</sup> The vocabulary of Proverbs 1–6, which stresses learning, understanding, righteousness, discernment, and knowledge, is obviously relevant to important elements of the Book of Mormon in general, and of the visions of Lehi and Nephi in particular.<sup>109</sup> Similarly, Proverbs 3:1–12 focuses on our need to “hear” inspired wisdom, as well as on the promise of “life” and our duty to trust in the Lord rather than being wise in our own eyes.<sup>110</sup> Each of these admonitions can also be documented abundantly throughout the text of the Book of Mormon—notably Nephi’s repeated invitation to us to put our trust in the Lord rather than in “the arm of flesh.”<sup>111</sup> In Nephi’s vision of the tree of life, the “great and spacious building” symbolizes the wisdom and pride of the world, which shall fall.<sup>112</sup>

But among the interesting correspondences between ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature and the Book of Mormon, one is of special interest for the present paper. Wisdom itself is represented in Proverbs 1–9 as a personified female.<sup>113</sup> Indeed, here and elsewhere in ancient Hebrew and Jewish literature, Wisdom appears as the wife of God, which can hardly fail to remind us of ancient Asherah.<sup>114</sup> She may even have played a role in the creation: “The Lord by wisdom hath founded the earth,” says Proverbs 3:19.<sup>115</sup> “Like the symbol of the asherah, Wisdom is a female figure, providing life and nurturing.”<sup>116</sup> In fact, as Steve A. Wiggins observes of Asherah herself, “She is Wisdom, the first creature of God.”<sup>117</sup> The classical text on this subject is found in Proverbs 8:22–34:

The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old. I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was. When there were no depths, I was brought forth; when there were no fountains abounding with water. Before the mountains were settled, before the hills was I brought forth: While as yet he had not made the earth, nor the fields, nor the highest part of the dust of the world. When he prepared the heavens, I was there: when he set a compass upon the face of the depth: When he established the clouds above: when he strengthened the fountains of the deep: When he gave to the sea his decree, that the waters should not pass his commandment: when he appointed the foundations of the earth: Then I was by him, as one brought up with him: and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him; Rejoicing in the habitable part of his earth; and my delights were with the sons of men. Now therefore hearken unto me, O ye children: for blessed [ashre] are they that keep my ways. Hear instruction, and be wise, and refuse it not. Blessed [ashre] is the man that heareth me.

The use of the Hebrew word *ashre* in this connection—from the same root (*shr*) that underlies the word *asherah*—probably significant.<sup>118</sup> “Happy [*ashre*] is the man that findeth wisdom” (Proverbs 3:13). (A similar wordplay may be going on behind the word *happy* in 1 Nephi 8:10, 12, and perhaps even behind *joy* and *joyous* in 1 Nephi 8:12 and 11:23.)<sup>119</sup> Another noteworthy fact is that “the ‘tree of life,’ which recalls the *asherah*, appears in Israelite tradition as a metaphorical expression for wisdom.” Indeed, Mark Smith sees Proverbs 3:13–18 as “a conspicuous chiasm” in which the essentially equivalent “inside terms” are *hokmah* (wisdom) and *es-hayim* (a tree of life).<sup>120</sup> The apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus, which is also known as Wisdom of Ben Sira, uses various trees to symbolize Wisdom (24:12–19). “Wisdom is rooted in the fear of the Lord,” says Ecclesiasticus 1:20 (New English Bible), “and long life grows on her branches.” “She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her: and happy [*me’ushshar*]<sup>121</sup> is every one that retaineth her” (Proverbs 3:18). Similar imagery can be found elsewhere in the Bible as well, including passages where wisdom is the explicit or implicit topic of discussion:

Blessed [*ashre*] is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night. And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper. The ungodly are not so: but are like the chaff which the wind driveth away. Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous. For the Lord knoweth the way of the righteous: but the way of the ungodly shall perish.<sup>122</sup>

Several parallels between the language of Proverbs 1–9 and the language of the visions in 1 Nephi will be apparent to careful readers. Note, for example, in Proverbs 3:18, quoted above, the image of “taking hold,” which recalls the iron rod of Lehi and Nephi’s visions.<sup>123</sup> The New English Bible version of Proverbs 3:18 speaks of “grasp[ing] her” and “hold[ing] her fast”—in very much the same way that Lehi and Nephi’s visions speak of “catching hold of” and “holding fast to” the rod of iron. Proverbs 4:13 advises us to “take fast hold of instruction; let her not go: keep her for she is thy life.” Apocryphal Baruch 4:1 declares that “all who hold fast to [Wisdom] shall live, but those who forsake her shall die.” “He who holds fast to her will gain honour,” says the likewise apocryphal Ecclesiasticus 4:13.<sup>124</sup> Both the advice of Proverbs and the images of Lehi’s dream, furthermore, are expressly directed to youths, to sons specifically or to children.<sup>125</sup> (“O, remember, my son,” says Alma 37:35, echoing this theme, “and learn wisdom in thy youth; yea, learn in thy youth to keep the commandments of God.”) Both Proverbs and 1 Nephi speak constantly in the imagery of “ways,” “paths,” and “walking” and warn against “going astray,” “wandering off,” and “wandering in strange roads.”<sup>126</sup> Proverbs 3:17 declares that “her [Wisdom’s] ways are ways of pleasantness and all her paths are peace.” In subsequent Nephite tradition, King Benjamin speaks of “the Spirit of the Lord” that “guide[s] . . . in wisdom’s paths” (Mosiah 2:36), and Mormon laments “how slow” people are “to walk in wisdom’s paths” (Helaman 12:5).

Proverbs has Wisdom describing her words as “plain,” an attribute that is lauded repeatedly throughout 1 Nephi, notably in the narrative of Nephi’s vision, and throughout 2 Nephi.<sup>127</sup> The phrase *plain and precious*, recurrent in Nephi’s account of his experience with the angelic guide,<sup>128</sup> could serve as an excellent description of biblical “Wisdom,” surpassed in its aptness only by the phrasing *plain and pure, and most precious* in 1 Nephi 14:23. In Proverbs 8:19 Wisdom declares, “My fruit is better than gold, yea, than fine gold.”<sup>129</sup> “She is more precious than rubies,” says Proverbs 3:15, “and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her.” “Wisdom,” declares Ecclesiasticus 4:11, “raises her sons to greatness.” Similarly, Lehi and Nephi’s tree was “precious above :

(1 Nephi 11:9)—“a tree, whose fruit was desirable to make one happy” (1 Nephi 8:10), “desirable above all other fruit” (1 Nephi 8:12, 15; compare 11:22). Accordingly, no price is too high to pay, if it will bring us to attain wisdom. “I say unto you,” Alma the Younger remarked to the poor among the Zoramites in the context of a discussion centering on a seed and on the tree of life that could be nourished out of it, “it is well that ye are cast out of your synagogues, that ye may be humble, and that ye may learn wisdom” (Alma 32:12). Confident in the quality of what she has to offer, Wisdom invites others to partake:

Wisdom crieth without; she uttereth her voice in the streets: She crieth in the chief place of concourse, in the openings of the gates: in the city she uttereth her words.<sup>130</sup> Doth not wisdom cry? and understanding put forth her voice? She standeth in the top of high places, by the way in the places of the paths. She crieth at the gates, at the entry of the city, at the coming in at the doors.<sup>131</sup> She hath sent forth her maidens: she crieth upon the highest places of the city.<sup>132</sup>

She is not alone, however. True to his roots in ancient Israel, Lehi taught that “it must needs be that there was an opposition; even the forbidden fruit in opposition to the tree of life; the one being sweet and the other bitter” (2 Nephi 2:15). (The fourth-century Coptic Manichaean psalmbook contrasts “the King of Light who is the tree of life” to “the Darkness which is the tree of death.”)<sup>133</sup> This doctrine of divinely ordained opposites is well documented in wisdom literature.<sup>134</sup> Thus, in Proverbs, readers are told of two contradictory “ways”—that of the foolish and that of obedience to wisdom—and Lady Wisdom is contrasted repeatedly with her antagonist, “the strange woman” or “whorish woman,” who is certainly “forbidden” to the righteous.<sup>135</sup> (Likewise opposed to the truth of God is Nephi’s striking image, given to him in the same vision as the tree of life, of “the mother of abominations,” “the whore of all the earth,” which fights against the saints.)<sup>136</sup> Lady Wisdom and the “whorish woman” are, in fact, competitors:

A foolish woman is clamorous: she is simple, and knoweth nothing. For she sitteth at the door of her house, on a seat in the high places of the city, To call passengers who go right on their ways: Whoso is simple, let him turn in hither: and as for him that wanteth understanding, she saith to him, Stolen waters are sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant. But he knoweth not that the dead are there; and that her guests are in the depths of hell.<sup>137</sup> Now is she without, now in the streets, and lieth in wait at every corner.<sup>138</sup>

Furthermore, for all her exalted status, Wisdom must face “scorners,” which must surely remind the reader of 1 Nephi of those in “the large and spacious building” who point the finger of scorn at the saints coming forward to partake of the tree of life.<sup>139</sup> This building seems, as we have already noted, to represent a human alternative to the true wisdom, the divine wisdom of God: Nephi records that it symbolizes “the world and the wisdom thereof” (1 Nephi 11:35).

While Wisdom holds out the promise of great blessings to those who accept and listen to her, she predicts disaster for those who reject her teaching:

But ye have set at nought all my counsel, and would none of my reproof: I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh; When your fear cometh as desolation, and your destruction cometh as a whirlwind; when distress and anguish cometh upon you. Then shall they call upon me, but I will not answer; they shall seek me early, but they shall not find me: For that they hated knowledge, and did not

choose the fear of the Lord: They would none of my counsel: they despised all my reproof. Therefore shall they *eat of the fruit* of their own way, and be filled with their own devices. For the turning away of the simple shall slay them, and the prosperity of fools shall destroy them. But whoso hearkeneth unto me shall dwell safely, and shall be quiet from fear of evil.<sup>140</sup>

Wisdom represents life, while the lack of wisdom leads to death.<sup>141</sup> (Perhaps the juxtaposition of a living and nourishing tree in 1 Nephi with the inanimate structure from which the worldly lean out to express their disdain intended to make this point.) “For the upright shall dwell in the land, and the perfect shall remain in it. But the wicked shall be cut off from the earth, and the transgressors shall be rooted out of it.”<sup>142</sup> “For whoso findeth me findeth life,” Wisdom says in Proverbs 8:35–6, “and shall obtain favor of the Lord. But he that sinneth against me wrongeth his own soul: all they that hate me love death.” The sinner, in fact, falls into the clutches of the “whorish woman,” the rival to Lady Wisdom: “For her house inclineth unto death, and her paths unto the dead. None that go unto her return again, neither take they hold of the paths of life.”<sup>143</sup> “O how marvelous are the works of the Lord” exclaims the Book of Mormon’s Ammon<sup>1</sup>, “and how long doth he suffer with his people; yea, and how blind and impenetrable are the understandings of the children of men; for they will not seek wisdom, neither do they desire that she should rule over them!” (Mosiah 8:20).<sup>144</sup> Similarly, Ecclesiasticus 4:19 says of Wisdom and of the individual who “strays from her” that “she will desert him and abandon him to his fate.” In Lehi’s vision, those who rejected the fruit of the tree “fell away into forbidden paths and were lost” (1 Nephi 8:28) or “were drowned in the depths of the fountain” (1 Nephi 8:32). “Many were lost from his view, wandering in strange roads” (1 Nephi 8:32). It was for fear of this possible outcome that, after partaking of the fruit of the tree, Lehi was “desirous that [his] family should partake of it also” (1 Nephi 8:12). In a parallel vein, Ecclesiasticus 4:15–16 tells us that Wisdom’s “dutiful servant . . . will possess her and bequeath her to his descendants.”

In 1 Nephi 8:13–14, Lehi’s tree is associated with a river and spring of water. “The symbols of fountain and tree of life are frequent” in wisdom literature too.<sup>145</sup> Nephi himself, in 1 Nephi 11:25, actually equates the “tree of life” with “the fountain of living waters,” “which waters,” he relates, “are a representation of the love of God.” “And I also beheld,” he continues, “that the tree of life was a representation of the love of God.”

And, truly, there can be no greater illustration of God’s care for his children than this: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”<sup>146</sup> The inclusion in 1 Nephi of an authentically preexilic religious symbol that could scarcely have been deduced by the New York farmboy Joseph Smith from the Bible—especially given his severely limited knowledge of that book in the late 1820s, when he was translating the golden plates<sup>147</sup>—suggests that the Book of Mormon is, indeed, an ancient historical record. And that, in turn, suggests that God did, indeed, so love the world that he gave his Only Begotten Son to save us. The Book of Mormon is, as it claims to be, a second witness for Christ.

## Notes

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William J. Hamblin, Paul Y. Hoskisson, Dana M. Pike, Matthew Roper, and John A. Tvedtnes furnished several interesting references and, with Deborah D. Peterson, offered useful comments on earlier drafts of this essay. O

course, the author alone is responsible for the paper's arguments and conclusions.

So that there will be no mistake about my position, let me briefly speak rather more personally: This essay should not be misinterpreted as a brief for theological or ecclesiological innovation within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Members of that church have long understood and accepted the idea of a divine Mother in Heaven. If further information or instruction relating to her is to be made public, my conviction is that this will come through revelation to the proper authorities, not through agitation nor even, in any significant way, through scholarship. Unless and until revelation dictates otherwise, I believe that we are to stay within the bounds set by our canonical scriptures on this matter. I suspect that the ancient notion of Asherah as the wife of El reflects true doctrine, albeit frequently garbled and corrupted. I suspect, furthermore, that it was such garbling and corruption that impelled the Deuteronomistic reformers, whom I believe to have been inspired, to oppose and suppress the veneration of Asherah, just as they opposed and suppressed the veneration of the Nehushtan of Moses. My suspicions are not, however, essential to the fundamental thesis of this paper, which is simply that the representation, by a tree, of a divine consort bearing a divine child—to us a rather unexpected juxtaposition—was intelligible to Nephi because, whatever his personal opinion of Asherah may have been, such symbolism was familiar to him.

1. Simo Parpola, "The Assyrian Tree of Life: Tracing the Origins of Jewish Monotheism and Greek Philosophy," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 52/3 (1993): 161. Another useful treatment of the theme can be found in Geo Widengren, *The King and the Tree of Life in Ancient Near Eastern Religion* (Uppsala, Sweden: Lundequistska Bokhandeln, 1951). Asko Parpola discusses the tree of life motif as it appears in the ancient Indus River valley (see his *Deciphering the Indus Script* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994], 256–71). In his book *The Tree of Life: Image for the Cosmos* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1974), Roger Cook supplies many images of the motif, from ancient times to the contemporary period. John S. Crawford, in "Multiculturalism at Sardis" (*Biblical Archaeology Review* 22/5 [September/October 1996]: 44), features a photograph of a terra-cotta flask found at an early-fifth-century AD Christian site in modern-day Turkey. It is decorated with a cross from which branches and leaves grow, obviously intended to suggest a tree of life.
2. William G. Dever, *Recent Archaeological Discoveries and Biblical Research* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990), 153. On p. 160 Professor Dever notes the popularity of the tree of life image on ancient Israelite seals (i.e., engraved gemstones used in signet rings) and on ivory furniture inlays. In conversation, my Assyriologist colleague Paul Hoskisson tells me that he doubts that the tree of life actually existed in Mesopotamia—or, at least, that iconographic materials without literary explanations (and, he says, we have none) cannot establish by themselves that it did. He thinks, rather, that the tree was West Semitic, which, if true, would still certainly be compatible with the argument advanced in this paper. For further references on the sacred tree, see Manfred Dietrich and Oswald Loretz, "*Jahwe und seine Aschera*": *Anthropomorphes Kultbild in Mesopotamien, Ugarit und Israel: Das biblische Bilderverb* (Münster: UGARIT-Verlag, 1992), 178 n. 32.
3. The motif is American, no less than Mediterranean. Linda Schele sketches the centrality of the sacred tree as an iconographic theme in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica and includes numerous illustrations in her study "The Olmec Mountain and Tree of Creation in Mesoamerican Cosmology" (in Jill Guthrie, ed., *The Olmec World: Ritual and Rulership* [Princeton: Art Museum, Princeton University Press in association with Harry N. Abrams, 1995], 104–17). David Freidel, Linda Schele, and Joy Parker, in their book *Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman's Path* (New York: William Morrow, 1993), discuss the "World Tree" at length. Those who have visited the ancient Mexican site will recall that both the Temple of the Cross and the Temple of the Foliated Cross at Palenque are adorned, in the words of Michael D. Co

(*The Maya*, 3rd ed. [New York: Thames and Hudson, 1984], 99), with “a branching world-tree (which bears an astonishing resemblance to the Christian cross) surmounted by a quetzal bird.” Allen J. Christenson, a Latter-day Saint Mesoamericanist, surveys the subject in his article “The Sacred Tree of the Ancient Maya,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6/1 (1997): 1–23. According to Kevin Locke, a prominent student and exponent of the culture of the Lakota (Sioux) people who was interviewed in the newsletter of the Bahá’í International Community, “The central prayer of the Lakota is to be sheltered under the ‘Tree of Life’” (*One Country* 8/2 [July–September 1996]: 10).

4. See Alma 32. The famous allegory of the olive tree, found in Jacob 5, may also be related to this motif. For extended discussions of that chapter, see Stephen D. Ricks and John W. Welch, eds., *The Allegory of the Olive Tree: The Olive, the Bible, and Jacob 5* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1994). Eric Neumann’s book *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype* (trans. Ralph Mannheim [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983], 50–2, 70), although seriously marred by arrant Jungianism, contains interesting discussion of seeds and growth that could be used to relate Alma 32 to the subject of the present paper.
5. In Lehi’s vision of the tree, his attention was specifically on the fruit, which was “white, to exceed all the whiteness that I had ever seen” (1 Nephi 8:11). Such language occurs elsewhere in the Book of Mormon as well. Echoing Nephi’s vision of “the tree which is precious above all,” Alma says of his own “tree springing up unto everlasting life” that its fruit “is most precious, . . . sweet above all that is sweet, . . . white above all that is white, yea, and pure above all that is pure” (Alma 32:41, 42). This fruit is also described as precious in 1 Nephi 15:36 (to which we should probably compare Jacob 5:61, 74). Alma describes Mary as “a precious and chosen vessel” (Alma 7:10). The adjectives under consideration here seem to form a kind of conceptual complex. Moroni’s hope is that his unbelieving readers may yet repent and “be found spotless, pure, fair, and white . . . at that great and last day” (Mormon 9:6). The whiteness mentioned here, by the way, is no more to be taken in a racial sense than is the ancient Arabic expression *iswadda wajhuhu* (“His face became black”), which denotes sorrow or shame, or the statement of the Qur’an that, at the last day, the faces of the righteous will be white while those of the wicked will be black (see 3:106–7; compare 39:60; 75:22–4; 80:38–42; see also 16:58; 43:17).
6. Compare Luke 1:42. The well-known Coptic Manichaean psalmbook, which dates perhaps to the fourth Christian century in Egypt, likewise seems to identify Christ with the notably sweet fruit of a sacred tree. See C. R. C. Allberry, ed., *A Manichaean Psalm-Book, Part II* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1938), 134, 151, 158, 171, 176, 185.
7. Michael D. Coogan, “Canaanite Origins and Lineage: Reflections on the Religion of Ancient Israel,” in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*, ed. Patrick D. Miller Jr., Paul D. Hanson, and S. Dean McBride (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 115. Compare Dever, *Recent Archaeological Discoveries*, 121, 128, 166.
8. For the relative recentness of absolute Hebrew monotheism, see Baruch Halpern, “‘Brisker Pipes Than Poetry’: The Development of Israelite Monotheism,” in *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel*, ed. Jacob Neusner, Baruch A. Levine, and Ernest S. Frerichs (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 77–115; Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*, 3rd ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), especially pp. 27, 30, and 35 (where Patai observes that some non-monotheistic materials have been edited out of the Bible as we have it today); Lowell K. Handy, “The Appearance of Pantheon in Judah,” in *The Triumph of Elohim: From Yahwisms to Judaisms*, ed. Diana Vikander Edelman (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996), 27–43; Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Yahweh—the Patriarch: Ancient Images of God and Feminist Theology*, trans. Frederick J. Gaiser (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 2–3, 13, 35, 82, 86, 92, 136; and Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1987), 58–65. Many other references could be given. On the cultural similarities between Canaanites and

Hebrews, see Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 31, 35, 40 (on the temple); Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), xxii, 1, 3, 4, 25; and William Dever, "Is the Bible Right After All?" interview by Hershel Shanks, *Biblical Archaeology Review* 22/5 (September/October 1996): 31–4. According to Professor William G. Dever, in a lecture at Brigham Young University on 14 February 1997, as yet unpublished Israelite inscriptions from Kuntilet Ajrud mention four gods: Yahweh, Baal, Asherah, and El.

9. Smith, *Early History of God*, 154.

10. Ibid., 156.

1. Ibid., 152. Compare Dever, *Recent Archaeological Discoveries*, 165, 166.

2. Frank Moore Cross Jr., "Yahweh and the God of the Patriarchs," *Harvard Theological Review* 55 (1962): 240.

3. Ibid., 234; compare 241–2; Conrad E. L'Heureux, *Rank among the Canaanite Gods: El, Ba'al, and the Repha'im* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1979), 29–70, 72.

4. See Smith, *Early History of God*, 7; and Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel's Second God* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992). Compare Larry W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988).

5. See, among the many references that could be given on this subject, Halpern, "Brisker Pipes Than Poetry," 85; John Day, "Asherah in the Hebrew Bible," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105/3 (1986): 387 and n. 9; and Peter Hayman, "Monotheism—a Misused Word in Jewish Studies?" *Journal of Jewish Studies* 42 (spring 1991): 1–15. Significant evidence can be found in Deuteronomy 32:8–9, where the Septuagint's "children/sons of God" disagrees with the Masoretic text's "children of Israel." The Septuagint's reading has recently been confirmed by a fragment from Qumran (see Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992], 269, 365). One thinks also of Job 1:6 and 2:1, to say nothing of Psalm 29 (in its original Hebrew), Psalm 82, and Micah 4:5.

6. See Smith, *Early History of God*, xxiii, xxvii, 8–11, 15, 21, 22, 23, 163; Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 133; Cross, "Yahweh and the God of the Patriarchs," 253–7; Otto Eissfeldt, "El and Yahweh," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 1 (1956): 25–37; J. A. Emerton, "The Origin of the Son of Man Imagery," *Journal of Theological Studies* 9 (1958): 225–42; and Dietrich and Loretz, "*Jahwe und seine Aschera*," 86, 93, 101, 118, 134, 146–7, 149, 157; further references to this viewpoint are given by L'Heureux, *Rank among the Canaanite Gods*, 57–9. Halpern seems to dissent on this matter, albeit unconvincingly (see his "Brisker Pipes Than Poetry," 88), and Herbert Niehr summarizes the majority view but appears vaguely to disapprove of it (see his "The Rise of YHWH in Judahite and Israelite Religion," in *Triumph of Elohim*, ed. Edelman, 45). On the common motif of the withdrawal of the elder gods, see Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 128; and Halpern, "Brisker Pipes Than Poetry," 80. Many more references could be given, but they would be beyond the scope of the present discussion.

7. See Day, "Asherah in the Hebrew Bible and Northwest Semitic Literature," 385–7, 398; Steve A. Wiggins, "The Myth of Asherah: Lion Lady and Serpent Goddess," *Ugarit-Forschungen: Internationales Jahrbuch für die Altertumskunde Syrien-Palästinas* 23 (1991): 384; and Steve A. Wiggins, *A Reassessment of "Asherah": A Study according to the Textual Sources of the First Two Millennia BCE* (Kevelaer: Butzon und Bercker, 1993), 192, which suggests that the name *Asherah* means "holy place" or "sanctuary."

8. See J. C. de Moor, "asherah," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1974), 1:439. On Asherah as divine wet nurse, see Wiggins, *Reassessment of "Asherah"*, 26, 27, 71, 76, 89, 190; on her maternal aspect, see pp. 37, 71, 89.

9. There is, moreover, evidence that she was a chief goddess among the Akkadians and Sumerians and at Ebla, and that she received worship as mother of the gods among the Amorites and Hittites. For this and

for the attributes of Asherah alluded to earlier, see Saul M. Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh in Israel* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 39, 57 n. 82, 58 n. 88, 61; Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 36, 37, 38, 54, 55, 58–9, 61, 119–20, 122; compare 23, 24; de Moor, “asherah,” 1:439; Wiggins, “Myth of Asherah,” 392; Day, “Asherah in the Hebrew Bible,” 385–7, 391; and Wiggins, *Reassessment of “Asherah,”* 150–2. Extra-biblical evidence for Asherah appears earliest in ancient Mesopotamia and, somewhat thereafter, in South Arabia (see Wiggins, *Reassessment of “Asherah,”* 2, 132–50, 153–63).

0. See Wiggins, *Reassessment of “Asherah,”* 27, 71, 108–10, 131, 190. On p. 147 Wiggins cites the Babylonian personal name *Ashratum-unni* (“Ashratum [= Asherah] is my mother”).
1. See John Wilson Betlyon, “The Cult of Aserah/Elat at Sidon,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 44/1 (1985): 53–6. Compare de Moor, “ashrah,” 1:440; and Day, “Asherah in the Hebrew Bible,” 387–8. Patai notes that the goddess Astarte had apparently replaced Asherah in Sidon by the fourth century BC (see his *Hebrew Goddess*, 56). Perhaps the two were assimilated. Like Asherah, of course, Astarte was a fertility goddess (see *ibid.*, 57, 59–60).
2. Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 47; compare 84, 88–9, 92, 98; and Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 12, 23–4.
3. See Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 37–8, 41, 42, 55; Smith, *Early History of God*, 6; Day, “Asherah in the Hebrew Bible,” 387; and Wiggins, *Reassessment of “Asherah,”* 29, 30, 32, 35 n. 71. “Athirat [Asherah] of the two Tyres” seems to be identical with “Elat of the Sidonians” (Wiggins, “Myth of Asherah,” 388). Lehi and his party very likely passed through or by Elat on their journey from Jerusalem to the land of promise (see the map in Lynn M. Hilton and Hope Hilton, *In Search of Lehi’s Trail* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976], 22–3). *Qur’an* 53:19–23, incidentally, refers to three goddesses, daughters of Allah (whose name or title is manifestly cognate with El or Elohim), one of whom is Allat (compare 6:100; 16:57; 37:149). Some Qur’anic commentators allegedly identify another of the daughters with a sacred tree, but I have not yet confirmed this.
4. See Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 34; compare Dietrich and Loretz, “*Jahwe und seine Aschera*,” 120. In *Reassessment of “Asherah”* (149), Wiggins notes that the goddess was known in Palestine during the Amarna period (fourteenth century BC).
5. The immediately foregoing information comes from Professor Dever’s 14 February 1997 lecture at Brigham Young University. See also J. Glen Taylor, *Yahweh and the Sun: Biblical and Archaeological Evidence for Sun Worship in Ancient Israel* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 58–9; and Gerstenberger, *Yahweh—the Patriarch*, 66. On the Arad temple, see Dever, *Recent Archaeological Discoveries*, 139–40. In his lecture, Professor Dever noted a lion figure found at the base of an offering table at Arad. Asherah was often associated with lions (and was called “the Lion Lady”).
6. Dever, *Recent Archaeological Discoveries*, 157–9. The objects are pictured in figs. 57 and 58, on pp. 158–9.
7. Patai maintains Asherah’s foreign origin in *Hebrew Goddess* (31–2, 38, 45, 52). Smith (*Early History of God*, xxiii, 80–1, 146), Olyan (*Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 4–7, 9, 13–14, 18, 22, 88), Saul M. Olyan (“The Cultic Confessions of Jer 2,27a,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 99 [1987]: 259) and Taylor (*Yahweh and the Sun*, 183) appear to argue that, in some sense, she was natively Israelite. As will be seen later (see below), both Canaanites and Israelites associated Asherah with childbirth. Thus, Leah’s exclamation at the birth of a child she significantly named Asher, recorded in Genesis 30:13, may reflect a very early Hebrew devotion to the goddess: “Happy [*be-asher*] am I, for the daughters will call me blessed [*isheru-ni*].”
8. See Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 39; and Thomas L. Thompson, “The Intellectual Matrix of Early Biblical Narrative: Inclusive Monotheism in Persian Period Palestine,” in *Triumph of Elohim*, ed. Edelman, 119 n.

9. See Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 47, 52.
0. See Smith, *Early History of God*, 6, 145.
1. J. Glen Taylor, "The Two Earliest Known Representations of Yahweh," in *Ascribe to the Lord: Biblical and Other Studies in Memory of Peter C. Craigie*, ed. Lyle Eslinger and Glen Taylor (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988), 566. For a relatively complete discussion of the find at Taanach, see Taylor, *Yahweh and the Sun* 24–37 (focus on Asherah on pp. 28–9; photographs at plates 1a–1d). Dever also discusses the Taanach stand, which, among other things, bears an image of the tree of life (see his *Recent Archaeological Discoveries*, 134–6, 137, fig. 40).
2. David Noel Freedman, "Yahweh of Samaria and His Asherah," *Biblical Archaeologist* 50/4 (December 1987): 248. See Niehr, "Rise of YHWH," 57, 59.
3. See Edelman, "Introduction," 19; and Handy, "Appearance of Pantheon in Judah," 27–43.
4. Jeremiah 2:27 condemns the veneration of Asherah, carefully switching the roles of mother and father in an act of mockery. See Olyan, "Cultic Confessions of Jer 2,27a," 254–9.
5. Brian Schmidt reportedly thinks that an image of Yahweh himself may have stood in the temple at Jerusalem, at least during the period subsequent to Nephi's departure from the city (see Diana V. Edelman, "Tracking Observance of the Aniconic Tradition through Numismatics," in *Triumph of Elohim*, ed. Edelman, 223 n. 118). Pictorial representations of an anthropomorphic or partially anthropomorphic Yahweh are not unknown in antiquity. See, for example, Taylor, "Representations of Yahweh"; Brian B. Schmidt, "The Aniconic Tradition: On Reading Images and Viewing Texts," in *Triumph of Elohim*, ed. Edelman, 75–105; Gerstenberger, *Yahweh—the Patriarch*, 33–4; and Edelman, "Aniconic Tradition," 189–225. On images of Yahweh among the ancient Israelites, see also Taylor, *Yahweh and the Sun*, 109; and Dietrich and Loretz, "*Jahwe und Seine Aschera*," 100–3, 106–10, 112–17, 163.
6. This summary of Asherah's history among the Hebrews relies upon Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 39, 41–2, 45–50; Smith, *Early History of God*, 80, 94; Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 19, 70–2; W. G. Dever, "Asherah, Consort of Yahweh? New Evidence from Kuntillet ajrud," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 255 (1984): 31; and de Moor, "asherah," 1:444. These sources provide abundant biblical references. Patai argues that Ezekiel saw the image of Asherah in the Jerusalem temple in 592 BC, only a few years before Jerusalem's destruction and the Lehigh departure (see his *Hebrew Goddess*, 50–2). Dever asserts that Asherah was worshiped in Israel down to the end of the monarchy (see his *Recent Archaeological Discoveries*, 164, 166; compare Wiggins, *Reassessment of "Asherah,"* 125).
7. See Smith, *Early History of God*, 98, 161–3; compare Gerstenberger, *Yahweh—the Patriarch*, 92, 136.
8. In another sense, of course, she never vanished at all. That is the whole point of Raphael Patai's fascinating book, *Hebrew Goddess* (see n. 8).
9. See Wiggins, *Reassessment of "Asherah,"* 130.
0. Dever, "Asherah, Consort of Yahweh?" 31. See his *Recent Archaeological Discoveries*, 123–4, 166; and his "Is the Bible Right After All?" 36–7. Diana V. Edelman, in her introduction to *The Triumph of Elohim* (16–17, 18, 19–20), also discusses the possible suppression in the Old Testament of information relating to early Hebrew views of God and the gods (especially as it relates to Asherah), as does Lowell K. Handy in "Appearance of Pantheon in Judah," 30.
1. See Wiggins, *Reassessment of "Asherah,"* 105. A Book of Mormon parallel may be found at Alma 37:21–34, where the prophet Alma advises his son Helaman to suppress certain information about Jaredite secret combinations, lest it prove seductive to his audience.
2. See Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 10–13, 73. He points specifically to what he regards as the false claim that Asherah was the consort, not of El or of Yahweh, but of Baal (see pp. 38, 39, 61, 65, 73,

74; compare Wiggins, *Reassessment of "Asherah,"* 93–4). Freedman hypothesizes that Yahweh took Asherah over as a consort from Baal following Elijah's victory over Baal's priests (see his "Yahweh of Samaria and His Asherah," 249). Olyan denies that Asherah was ever the consort of Baal, contending rather that the Deuteronomist reformers created this relationship as part of their polemic against her veneration among the Israelites, in order to render her guilty by association (see his "Cultic Confessions of Jer 2,27a," 258). Wiggins agrees that, in the Ugaritic texts, Asherah is never presented as either the consort or even the close associate of Baal, but is solely the consort of El (see his "Myth of Asherah," 383–94). Indeed, although many scholars of the Bible would agree with Lynn Clapham that it assigns Asherah to Baal, Wiggins denies even this (see Lynn Clapham, "Mythopoeic Antecedents of the Biblical World-View and Their Transformation in Early Israelite Thought," in *Magnalia Dei, the Mighty Acts of God: Essays on the Bible and Archaeology in Memory of G. Ernest Wright*, ed. Frank Moore Cross, Werner E. Lemke, and Patrick D. Miller Jr. [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976], 117).

3. Dietrich and Loretz, "*Jahwe und seine Aschera*," 120. On pp. 117–18 they argue against the "objectivity" of the biblical writers.
4. The Book of Mormon alludes repeatedly to the "brazen serpent" of Moses without a trace of condemnation. In fact, it is described as a symbol of Christ (see Helaman 8:14–15; compare Alma 33:19–22; 2 Nephi 25:20), just as the Savior himself uses it in John 3:14–15. (It is tempting to speculate that, in the asherah and the Nehushtan, we may have temple symbols of a divine mother and son.)
5. Taylor contends that both the Nehushtan and the asherah were "Yahwistic icons" (see his *Yahweh and the Sun*, 183).
6. See Smith, *Early History of God*, 80; compare Wiggins, *Reassessment of "Asherah,"* 96, 101, 106, 128. According to Wiggins, pp. 126–8, possible denunciations of Asherah at Isaiah 17:8, 27:9, Jeremiah 17:2 and Micah 5:13 (= English 5:14) are all later additions to the texts.
7. See Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 9, 73; and Smith, *Early History of God*, 80. See, however, Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 53 (Patai, in turn, is opposed by Day, "Asherah in the Hebrew Bible," 404–5); and Freedman, "Yahweh of Samaria and His Asherah," 248–9. Many years ago Julius Wellhausen proposed a reading of Hosea 14:9 (= English 14:8) that would refer to Asherah. For a recent discussion of the status of the debate, see Dietrich and Loretz, "*Jahwe und seine Aschera*," 110–12, 173–82.
8. Freedman, "Yahweh of Samaria and His Asherah," 248. The story is recounted in 1 Kings 18:1–46. See also Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 42–3, 45, 46; and Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 17.
9. See 2 Kings 10:18–28; 13:6; see also Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 4; Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 43–6; and Smith, *Early History of God*, 80.
0. Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 73.
1. See *ibid.*, 3–4, 9, 13–14, 22, 33, 43, 73, 74; Smith, *Early History of God*, 150; Olyan, "Cultic Confessions of Jer 2,27a," 257; and Halpern, "Brisker Pipes Than Poetry," 83. Olyan notes "what were evidently the close associations between Jeremiah and the Deuteronomistic school" ("Cultic Confessions of Jer 2,27a," 258). I suspect, by the way, that Lehi and his posterity could be classed with the Deuteronomists; their philosophy of history is a major clue in this direction but is the subject for another paper. So we would not expect a Deuteronomistic text like the Book of Mormon to praise Asherah nor, perhaps, even to mention her explicitly. But we can reasonably expect contemporaries of the controversies about her to understand the symbolic idiom in which they were carried out, and it is the thesis of this paper that Nephi did just that.
2. Dever, *Recent Archaeological Discoveries*, 159.
3. Smith, *Early History of God*, 89.
4. This is the contention, for instance, of Day ("Asherah in the Hebrew Bible," 393).
5. André Lemaire, "Who or What Was Yahweh's Asherah?" *Biblical Archaeology Review* 10/6 (1984): 46.
6. See Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, xiv, 74; and Dever, "Is the Bible Right After All?" 37.

7. Thompson, "Intellectual Matrix of Early Biblical Narrative," 119 n. 10.
8. Smith, *Early History of God*, 19; compare 89, 92–3; and Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, xiv.
9. See Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 29, 33–4, 38, 74.
0. See Lemaire, "Who or What Was Yahweh's Asherah?" 42, 44; André Lemaire, "Les inscriptions de Khirbat el-Qum et l'asherah de YHWH," *Revue biblique* 84 (1977): 602–3 (compare pp. 596, 597); Ziony Zevit, "The Khirbat el-Qum Inscription Mentioning a Goddess," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, no. 255 (1984): 39; Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 23; and Day, "Asherah in the Hebrew Bible," 394. Incidentally, the personal names appearing in the Khirbat al-Qm inscription are, as Zevit points out, those of Yahwists, or worshipers of Yahweh (p. 46). Lemaire ("Les inscriptions de Khirbat el-Qum et l'asherah de YHWH," 597–9) provides a good verbal description of the Khirbat al-Qum find, accompanied by a photograph on p. 600 and a much clearer line drawing on p. 598. A good illustration also appears in Dever, *Recent Archaeological Discoveries*, 149, fig. 50. See also the discussions in Dietrich and Loretz, "*Jahwe und seine Aschera*," 93–5, and Wiggins, *Reassessment of "Asherah"*, 166–71.
1. See Lemaire, "Les inscriptions de Khirbat el-Qum et l'asherah de YHWH," 608; Lemaire, "Who or What Was Yahweh's Asherah?" 44, 51; and Freedman, "Yahweh of Samaria and His Asherah," 246–9.
2. On northern influences at Kuntillat Ajrud, see Ze'ev Meshel, "Did Yahweh Have a Consort?" *Biblical Archaeology Review* 5/2 (1979): 32; and Lemaire, "Who or What Was Yahweh's Asherah?" 44. For the results of recent radiocarbon dating, see an unsigned news item on the subject in *Biblical Archaeology Review* 22/4 (July/August 1996): 12; compare Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 32; Day, "Asherah in the Hebrew Bible," 392; Dietrich and Loretz, "*Jahwe und seine Aschera*," 95; and Wiggins, *Reassessment of "Asherah"*, 171–81. Judith M. Hadley, "Kuntillet Ajrud: Religious Centre or Desert Way Station?" *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 125 (1993): 115–24, persuasively argues that the ruins are those of a caravansary rather than of a shrine or fortress.
3. See Freedman, "Yahweh of Samaria and His Asherah," 248.
4. See Meshel, "Did Yahweh Have a Consort?" 31 (pictured on p. 32); Dever, "Asherah, Consort of Yahweh?" 26–7 (illustration on p. 26); and Day, "Asherah in the Hebrew Bible," 391–2. Another image of the *pithos* is that of a cow licking her suckling calf, which Dever suggests may be related to the fact that the chief epithet of the head of the Canaanite pantheon was "Bull El" (see his "Asherah, Consort of Yahweh," 27–8). In *Recent Archaeological Discoveries* (140–9), Dever discusses the find at Kuntillet Ajrud and includes illustrations (for "Bull El," see pp. 130–1 and figs. 33, 34). In an unfortunately still-unpublished paper, my colleague Paul Hoskisson argues that the golden calf of Exodus was chosen to represent Yahweh because he was the son of "Bull El" (compare Taylor, *Yahweh and the Sun*, 31 n. 2). A figurine of a bull, perhaps representing "Bull El," is pictured in Dever, "Is the Bible Right After All?" 34.
5. Dever, "Asherah, Consort of Yahweh?" 21; compare p. 30. See also Olyan, "Cultic Confessions of Jer 2,27a," 257, 259; and Dever, "Is the Bible Right After All?" 37. Intriguingly, Meshel suggests that one of the figures on the *pithoi* at Kuntillat Ajrud may be a drawing of Yahweh himself (see his "Did Yahweh Have a Consort?" 27, 31). More recently, Schmidt, in "The Aniconic Tradition: On Reading Images and Viewing Texts" (75–105), presents an extended argument for the identification of the two figures as Yahweh and Asherah. Gerstenberger, in *Yahweh—the Patriarch* (33–4) concurs.
6. Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 52–3; compare Gerstenberger, *Yahweh—the Patriarch*, 33–4.
7. Freedman, "Yahweh of Samaria and His Asherah," 249; compare Day, "Asherah in the Hebrew Bible," 392; and Niehr, "Rise of YHWH," 54–5, 59.
8. Halpern, "Brisker Pipes Than Poetry," 85. Halpern includes references.
9. See Taylor, *Yahweh and the Sun*, 74 n. 4, 99–111, 116, 171, 172 (where the Deuteronomists are said to have rejected the worship of the heavenly host), 174, 175, 183 and nn. 2–3, 201 and nn. 2–3, 203, 257–

60 (to the exilic period, and even beyond).

0. See Deuteronomy 4:19; 17:3; 2 Kings 17:16; 21:3, 5; 23:4, 5; 2 Chronicles 33:3, 5; Nehemiah 9:6; Psalm 33:6; 148:1–5; Isaiah 34:4; 45:12; Jeremiah 8:2; 19:13; 33:22; Daniel 8:10; Zephaniah 1:5. Compare Halpern, “Brisker Pipes Than Poetry,” 94, 100, 111 n. 44, and throughout.
1. See Day, “Asherah in the Hebrew Bible,” 387, 399–400.
2. See Proverbs 8:22–34. This image that is emerging from very recent scholarship—an enthroned God who sits with his consort in the midst of a divine council composed of his children, who are linked with the sun and moon and stars—sheds fascinating light on Lehi’s vision as it is recorded in 1 Nephi 1:9–11. That account describes “One descending out of the midst of heaven,” whose “luster was above that of the sun at noon-day” and who was followed by twelve others whose “brightness did exceed that of the stars in the firmament” and who then, together, “came down and went forth upon the face of the earth.” Clearly, this refers to the Savior, Jesus Christ, and his twelve apostles. (Taylor, throughout his book *Yahweh and the Sun*, argues for an ancient link between Yahweh or Jehovah [whom Latter-day Saints identify as the premortal Jesus Christ] and the sun.) Read in light of recent biblical scholarship, however, the account of Lehi’s vision also appears to imply notions of the premortal existence and the literally divine lineage of humanity that are often presumed to have arisen only in the later doctrinal development of Mormonism.
3. See Dever, “Is the Bible Right After All?” 36; and Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 39, 52.
4. Cited in Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 39; but see the skeptical remarks of Wiggins (*Reassessment of “Asherah,”* 182–4). On p. 182, though, Wiggins appears willing to acknowledge the possibility of *Philistia* veneration of the goddess at Ekron (Tel Miqne) during the same period.
5. See Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 49; and Day, “Asherah in the Hebrew Bible,” 397. During his lecture at Brigham Young University on 14 February 1997, Professor William G. Dever displayed photographs of many ancient Israelite pendants depicting Asherah with a tree.
6. See Taylor, “The Two Earliest Known Representations of Yahweh,” 558–60, 565 n. 19; and Taylor, *Yahweh and the Sun*, 29. A photograph of the cultic stand (unfortunately backwards) appears in Paul J. Achtemeier et al., eds., *Harper’s Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), 1012. Dever also alludes to Asherah’s connection with the “sacred tree” (see his “Asherah, Consort of Yahweh?” 27). See also de Moor, “asherah,” 1:441–3, wherein de Moor suggests that the stylized image of a tree came to replace an actual asherah-tree in the ancient cult of the goddess. Wiggins, in *Reassessment of “Asherah”* (13), cites the work of V. L. Piper, who contends that ancient Hebrews would have seen a reference to Asherah in the tree of life mentioned in the story of the Garden of Eden.
7. William G. Dever, lecture at Brigham Young University, 14 February 1997.
8. Wiggins, “Myth of Asherah,” 383, with references to the relevant literature. On the tamarisk as a sacred tree, see Dietrich and Loretz, “*Jahwe und seine Aschera*,” 30; compare Olyan, “Cultic Confessions of Je 2,27a,” 256; and Day, “Asherah in the Hebrew Bible,” 398, 400. Ancient goddesses were frequently associated with trees. Consider Babylonian Ishtar, for instance, who was linked with human fertility and with a sacred (palm) tree. The Greek goddess Leto seems to have been related to Ishtar and may have been a “Great Asiatic Mother” goddess. She was also probably a goddess of vegetation and was associated with trees—specifically with a sacred palm tree (see David R. West, “Some Minoan and Hellenic Goddesses of Semitic Origin,” *Ugarit-Forschungen: Internationales Jahrbuch für die Altertumskunde Syrien-Palästinas* 23 [1991]: 377–9). The Sumerian “Queen of Heaven and Earth,” the goddess Inanna (= Babylonian Ishtar), was associated with—and perhaps, in a sense, even identified with—a “*huluppu*-tree” originally planted by the Euphrates (see Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer, *Inanna: Queen of Heaven and Earth* [New York: Harper and Row, 1983], 5–9, 137–46). Hugh Nibley discusses the association of goddesses with trees in ancient Egypt (see his *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1975], 166–7). See also Leon

Yarden, *The Tree of Light: A Study of the Menorah, the Seven-Branched Lampstand* (Uppsala, Sweden: Skriv Service AB, 1972), 44. Lemaire and Parpola supply several images of sacred trees in ancient Near Eastern art (see Lemaire, “Who or What Was Yahweh’s Asherah?” 48–9; and Parpola, “The Assyrian Tree of Life,” 161–208). Perhaps significantly in this context, in her article “The Olmec Mountain and Tree of Creation” (see n. 3), Linda Schele argues that ancient Mesoamerican rulers were frequently viewed as the personification or embodiment of the “world tree,” which was itself (at least at Teotihuacan) equivalent to the “Great Goddess.” Widengren notes the identification of the king (and eventually of the Messiah) with the tree of life in ancient Mesopotamia and in the Hebrew Bible (see his *The King and the Tree of Life*, 42–58). In a private communication to me dated 11 November 1996, John A. Tvedtnes contends that the tree of life represents Christ himself (Yarden indicates that this identification is common, especially in medieval literature; see his *Tree of Light*, 42). Tvedtnes may well be correct; certainly the evidence shows that the tree was interpreted in this way in late antiquity and the Middle Ages. But this does not, in and of itself, rule out an identification with a female divine consort, nor does it necessarily rule out the assumption of this paper that the *fruit* of Nephi’s tree symbolizes Christ. Powerful symbols like the tree of life can be, and generally are, polyvalent. As we have seen, in Mesoamerica and the ancient Near East the sacred tree could represent both goddess and mortal male, sometimes simultaneously. The Manichaean psalmbook, which, as we saw in note 6 identifies Christ with the fruit of the tree, identifies him elsewhere with the tree in its entirety (see Allberry, *Manichaean Psalm-Book*, 66, 116). Allen J. Christenson observes that “in ancient Maya inscriptions, the human soul was called *sak nik’ nal* (‘white flower thing’), referring to the white flowers of the ceiba tree” (“Sacred Tree of the Ancient Maya,” 11; see 22 n. 13). Even today, the huge and impressive ceiba is revered by the Maya as a manifestation of the sacred world tree.

9. See Day, “Asherah in the Hebrew Bible,” 397–8, 401–4, and references supplied there. (The rabbis do not point to any particular type of tree but include grapevines as well as pomegranate, walnut, myrtle, and willow trees and argue that the wood and fruit of such trees must not be used.) Lemaire argues that, although Asherah was a goddess in Canaanite religion, the word *asherah* in biblical materials and ancient Hebrew inscriptions refers *only* to a sacred tree or, perhaps, to a grove of such trees (see his “Les inscriptions de Khirbet el-Qom et l’asherah de YHWH,” 603–7; and his “Who or What Was Yahweh’s Asherah?” 42–51). Ziony Zevit defends the idea that the asherah of the inscription refers to a divine person, as do most if not all of the other materials on the subject cited in this paper (see his “The Khirbet el-Qom Inscription Mentioning a Goddess,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, no. 255 [1984]: 39–47). Even Lemaire suggests that the asherah was in the process of hypostatization as a truly independent divine being during Hebrew biblical times (see his “Les inscriptions de Khirbet el-Qom et l’asherah de YHWH,” 608; and his “Who or What Was Yahweh’s Asherah?” 51).

10. See Wiggins, *Reassessment of “Asherah,”* 92.

1. See *ibid.*, 94–5, 101, 109, 129 (with rabbinic references); Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 38–9, 42, 45, 48; Smith, *Early History of God*, 81–5; Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 1–3 (which suggests a date palm as the most likely botanical candidate); Meshel, “Did Yahweh Have a Consort?” 31; Freedman, “Yahweh of Samaria and His Asherah,” 247; Day, “Asherah in the Hebrew Bible,” 392, 397, 406; de Moor, “asherah,” 1:441–3; and Gerstenberger, *Yahweh—the Patriarch*, 27–8, 32 (which points to the existence of symbols of both masculine and feminine deities in early Israelite shrines). The personified female figure of the Sabbath in later Judaism is associated with a “sacred apple orchard” (see Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 270–3). The Old Testament is rather unclear in its treatment of the *asherah*, except to associate it with pagan worship. This unclarity is heightened by the fact that, in virtually every one of the forty instances where *asherah* and its variants occur, the Greek Septuagint translation gives us *groves* (αλοος, αλοη).

2. Levenson suggests that the oak associated with the temple at Shechem in Joshua 24:26–8 was a sacred tree (see his *Sinai and Zion*, 34, 36). On pp. 20–1 he hypothesizes that Yahweh himself was symbolized by a tree.
3. See Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 26, 28, 31–2; W. L. Reed, “Asherah,” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 1:250–2; de Moor, “asherah,” 1:441; Day, “Asherah in the Hebrew Bible,” 408; and Dietrich and Loretz, “*Jahwe und seine Aschera*,” 82–5, 99. Reed allows for the possibility that the Septuagint has been misinterpreted and that its Greek terminology refers to a wooden cultic object rather than to literal groves (see his “Asherah,” 1:250). But early rabbinic commentaries also rendered *asherah* as “grove” (see Lemaire, “Who or What Was Yahweh’s Asherah?” 50). There are four exceptions. In Isaiah 17:8 and 27:9, the Septuagint renders the term as “tree” (*dendra*), and in two other instances (2 Chronicles 15:16; 24:18) it mistakenly identifies *asherah* with a quite distinct goddess, Astarte. The Latin Vulgate follows the Septuagint, using the renderings “wood” (*lucus*) or “grove” (*nemus*) and the proper name “Ashtaroth.” The King James Version is based on the readings of the Septuagint and the Vulgate and, on this issue, follows them into error. This can easily be seen in such passages as Judges 3:7 (where the reference is clearly to some sort of personal being or beings, analogous to Baal) and in 2 Kings 23:6 (where the removal of an entire grove of trees seems somewhat far-fetched). Joseph Smith could not have derived an accurate notion of the nature of the asherah from the King James Bible.
4. Yarden, *Tree of Light*, 44–7, 103–6. Widengren, in *The King and the Tree of Life* (62–7), agrees that the menorah is a stylized tree, as does Levenson, who also connects it with the burning bush of Sinai (see his *Sinai and Zion*, 20–1). For the Egyptian Manichaeans who used the Coptic psalmbook, the tree of life symbolized “the King of Light” (see Allberry, *Manichaean Psalm-Book*, 66).
5. Smith, *Early History of God*, 84; compare Wiggins, *Reassessment of “Asherah,”* 37, 71, 89; and Neumann, *Great Mother*, 48–50, 52, 241–3. The Mesoamerican sacred tree was also associated with creation, birth, life, and a primordial mother goddess (see Schele, “Olmec Mountain and Tree of Creation” 110).
6. See Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 20, 116, 139–40, 151–2, 199, 265, 280.
7. The quotation is from Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 57 n. 82; compare Olyan, “Cultic Confessions of Jer 2,27a,” 259.
8. See Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 56–61, 65–7. Olyan acknowledges, on p. 56, that some have identified Tannit as Anath precisely because of her alleged virginity. John Day is among those (see his “Asherah in the Hebrew Bible,” 397). Things often get a bit muddled because of the tendency in antiquity to confuse and blend deities. On this tendency consult Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh* 10–11. Patai notes the frequent confusion of Asherah and Astarte (see his *Hebrew Goddess*, 37, 41); compare Day, “Asherah in the Hebrew Bible,” 400; see also n. 21 above. The goddess Anath was “virgin and yet wanton . . . chaste and promiscuous,” and, like Asherah, she was wet nurse to the gods (see Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 61; compare p. 120, where the Greek goddess Hera is adduced as a parallel; see also Smith, *Early History of God*, xix, 164; Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 45–6; and de Moor, “asherah,” 1:439). Chastity, promiscuity, and motherliness were combined in many ancient Near Eastern goddesses, including the Sumerian virgin and lover Inanna, who can be equated with Mesopotamian Ishtar and Anath, and the Persian Anahita (see Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 136–8, 140, 147). Inanna characterized herself as possessing “truth” and “deceit,” “forthright speech” and “slandering speech,” “treachery” and “straightforwardness” (see Wolkstein and Kramer, *Inanna*, 16–17). The late Jewish goddess figure Matronit is simultaneously virgin, lover, and mother, as is the personified Sabbath of some Jewish lore (see Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 140–3, 146–7, 154, 159, 203–4, 218–220, 249, 252–257–70). On the notion of the virgin-mother, see Neumann, *Great Mother*, 104, 196–7, 267, and for the

general phenomenon of contradictory attributes residing in the same goddess, see pp. 12, 21–2, 38, 45, 50, 52, 65–7, 72, 75, 80–1. “Albright, Cross, Stadelmann, and many other commentators have long pointed out an extraordinary, almost bewildering fluidity in the conception of many Northwest Semitic deities, seen in the overlap in their roles, their tendency to coalesce and split off, and even their ability to combine opposites. El-Asherah are paralleled by Baal-Anat. Anat is both wife and sister to Baal; perpetual virgin and mother-figure; goddess of love and of war” (Dever, “Asherah, Consort of Yahweh?” 28; compare de Moor, “asherah,” 1:439–41, 444; Day, “Asherah in the Hebrew Bible,” 389). Cross remarks that “there is a basic syncretistic impulse in Near Eastern polytheism which tends to merge gods with similar traits and functions” (see his “Yahweh and the God of the Patriarchs,” 235).

9. See Jeremiah 44:17–19, 25; compare Halpern, “Brisker Pipes Than Poetry,” 83. Day, in his article “Asherah in the Hebrew Bible” (386), cites a Mesopotamian reference to the goddess Ashratum—whose name students of Semitic languages will immediately recognize as an almost certain equivalent to the familiar *Asherah*—as *kallat shar shami*, “bride of the king of heaven.”

0. See Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 280. Qur’an 5:116 denounces a Christian trinity consisting of Allah (whose name or title, as noted previously, is cognate with El or Elohim), Mary, and Jesus. Compare the implicit argument of 5:75. Intriguingly, according to Wiggins (*Reassessment of “Asherah,”* 154, 163), ancient South Arabia knew a divine father/mother/son triad in which Asherah was the mother.

1. See Ernest A. Wallis Budge, *Egyptian Tales and Romances: Pagan, Christian and Muslim* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1935), 280. Compare the versions of the Apocalypse of Paul (chapters 45–6), based on Greek and Latin texts, in J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 639–40, and in Montague Rhodes James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), 549–50, where the connection between the virgin and the tree is perhaps a bit less direct.

2. The phrase is from Wiggins, “Myth of Asherah,” 384.

3. 1 Nephi 11:18.

4. See Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 152. In support of this, it might be noted that the Kabbalistic divine mother was sometimes pictured, just like her predecessor, Asherah, as a wet nurse (see *ibid.*, 127).

5. See *ibid.*, 128, 145–6, 275. Wiggins notes the association of the goddess Asherah with human women (see his *Reassessment of “Asherah,”* 37).

6. See the discussion in Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 219, 282–94.

7. See Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 71 n. 4.

8. See Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 272–5.

9. See *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, ed. N. G. L. Hammond and H. H. Scullard, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 126–7. Those familiar with her statue at Ephesus will have little trouble seeing Artemis in the role of a wet nurse as well.

0. Roland E. Murphy describes the characteristics of wisdom literature, giving abundant references (see his *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans 1996], 1–4, 103).

1. See, for example, 1 Kings 4:29–34; Job 1:3; compare Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 23–5, 175, 195. An ancient Egyptian text dating from roughly the time of Lehi, entitled “The Instruction of Amenemope,” seems to have a very close relationship to Proverbs 22:17–24:22. It is partially translated in James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 421–5.

2. See Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 33.

3. See 1 Nephi 1:2; and Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites*, 34–4

4. To the extent that it may be validly linked with wisdom literature at all, the Book of Mormon clearly resembles most the admonitory style, as it is sketched in Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 7–9.

5. See Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 22.
6. Proverbs 2:16 (compare 6:24; 7:5, 21–3); 20:19 (compare 12:6; 26:28; 29:5). See also Psalm 5:9; 12:2; 78:36.
7. See, for example, 2 Nephi 28:22; Jacob 7:2, 4; Mosiah 7:21; 9:10; 10:18; 11:7; 26:6; 27:8; Alma 20:13; 30:47; 46:5, 7, 10; 50:35; 52:19; 61:4; Helaman 1:7; 2:4–5; 13:28; 3 Nephi 1:29; 7:12; Ether 8:2. Daniel 11:21 nicely summarizes a frequent effect of flattery in the Book of Mormon.
8. See Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 15, for this theme in the ancient Near East. The notion is omnipresent in the Book of Mormon. Although the Deuteronomistic biblical tradition, which also stresses the connection of righteousness with prosperity, is obviously not to be identified with the wisdom tradition, a number of scholars have pointed out points of contact between the two (see *ibid.*, 194–6). Likewise, the Book of Mormon bears evidence of unmistakable Deuteronomistic influence. But that is a subject for another paper.
9. “Discernment” is mentioned in Alma 32:35 in a discourse on the tree of life that is manifestly connected to the tree that Lehi and Nephi had seen.
0. Compare Proverbs 26:12.
  1. 2 Nephi 4:34; 28:31.
  2. See 1 Nephi 11:35–6.
  3. See Proverbs 1:20–1; 4:5–9, 13; 7:4; 8:1–3, 22–36; 9:1–3. The Hebrew term translated as “wisdom,” *hokmah*, is, of course, a feminine noun. For Proverbs 1–9 as a literary unit or subdivision within the book as a whole, see R. A. Dyson and J. McShane, “Proverbs,” in *A New Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, ed. Reginald C. Fuller (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1975), 500; Carole R. Fontaine, “Proverbs,” in *Harper’s Bible Commentary*, ed. James L. Mays, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 495, 497; J. Terence Forestell, “Proverbs,” in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy, 2 vols. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 1:496; Charles G. Martens, “Proverbs,” in *The International Bible Commentary*, ed. F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1986), 658. Murphy (*Tree of Life*, 133–49 and throughout) offers a useful discussion of “Lady Wisdom.”
  4. Patai supplies references that I do not have space here to discuss (see his *Hebrew Goddess*, 97–8). Proverbs 7:14 advises its audience to take Wisdom as a sister or kinswoman.
  5. There are, of course, no uppercase or lowercase letters in biblical (or any other) Hebrew.
  6. Smith, *Early History of God*, 95.
  7. Wiggins, “Myth of Asherah,” 383.
  8. See Smith, *Early History of God*, 95.
  9. If so, the language of the plates must be Hebrew, or something like it. Compare Genesis 30:13.
  0. See Smith, *Early History of God*, 95; compare Proverbs 11:30; 15:4.
    1. Again, from the root *shr*.
    2. Psalm 1:1–6.
    3. Compare Proverbs 4:13 and 1 Nephi 8:24, 30; 15:24.
    4. Cited here and elsewhere from the Revised English Bible.
    5. Compare Proverbs 1:4, 8, 10, 15; 3:1, 11, 21; 4:1, 3, 10, 20; 5:1, 7–8, 20; 6:1, 3, 20; 7:1, 7; 1 Nephi 8:12–18.
    6. See Proverbs 1:15, 19, 20; 2:1, 8, 9, 12, 13, 15, 18–20; 3:6, 12, 17, 23; 4:11, 12, 14, 18–19, 26–7; 5:5, 6, 8, 21, 23; 6:12, 23; 7:8, 12, 25, 27; 8:2, 13, 20, 32; 9:6. Compare the “paths” (1 Nephi 8:20–3, 28) and “ways” (1 Nephi 8:23, 30–1) and “roads” (1 Nephi 8:32) of Lehi’s vision. Compare also Psalm 1:1–6, quoted earlier. Ecclesiasticus 4:17 takes a somewhat different view, suggesting that Wisdom tests her neophyte devotee: “At first she will lead him by devious ways.”

7. See Proverbs 8:6–9; compare 1 Nephi 13:26–9, 32, 34–40; 14:23; 2 Nephi 4:32; 9:47; 25:4; 26:33; 33:56.
8. See 1 Nephi 13:26, 28, 29, 32, 34, 35, 40. The only place outside of Nephi’s vision where any version of the phrase *plain and precious* occurs within the Book of Mormon is 1 Nephi 19:3.
9. Compare Proverbs 3:14; 8:11, 19; also 2:4; Job 28:12–28; Wisdom of Solomon 7:8; 8:5.
0. Proverbs 1:20–1.
  1. Proverbs 8:1–3.
  2. Proverbs 9:3.
  3. Allberry, *Manichaeon Psalm-Book*, 66.
  4. See, for example, Wisdom of Ben Sira 33:7–15; 42:15–43:33; and Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 103.
  5. For the two “ways,” see Proverbs 1:32–3; 10–15. Compare Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 103. On the “strange woman,” see Proverbs 2:16–19; 5:3–23; 6:24–35; 7:4–27; 9:13–18; and Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 194. Neumann sees “the character of enchantment leading to doom”—an apt description of the “whorish woman”—as a separable component of the archetypal mother goddess (see his *Great Mother*, 81). Patai (*Hebrew Goddess*, 25) cites and echoes Neumann. Against Neumann’s overall theory, though, Wiggins discounts “the connection of Asherah with the amorphous ‘mother goddess.’ Asherah is the mother of the gods at Ugarit, not *The Great Mother*. . . . She does not appear in the role of a cosmic mother of all living. This very concept is now becoming increasingly rejected in the studies of European prehistory. It is ironic that this concept is slowest to give way in the ancient Near East, where it began” (“Myth of Asherah,” 39 emphasis in the original). In a remarkable illustration of the joining of opposite characteristics in the character of a single “goddess,” some Jewish thinkers have linked Proverbs’s wanton woman with the Shekhina (see Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 150).
6. 1 Nephi 14:9–17.
7. Proverbs 9:13–18.
8. Proverbs 7:12.
9. As in Proverbs 1:22; 3:34; compare 9:6–8, 12; 1 Nephi 8:26–7, 33; 11:35.
0. Proverbs 1:25–33. For the promise of safety to those who hearken to Wisdom, see Proverbs 3:25. Prosperity in the Book of Mormon is often prelude to disaster.
  1. On wisdom equated with life, see Proverbs 3:2, 18, 22; 4:4, 10, 13, 22; 6:23–35; 8:35–6; 9:6–11. On unwisdom as the way to death, see Proverbs 2:18; 5:5; 7:22–3, 26–7; 9:18.
  2. Proverbs 2:21–2.
  3. Proverbs 2:18–19. Recall the much-mocked language of Lehi in 2 Nephi 1:14, where he speaks of “the cold and silent grave, from whence no traveler can return.” Critics have claimed that Joseph Smith plagiarized the thought from Shakespeare—as if the idea were not rather obvious and attested from all over the ancient world, including here in Proverbs.
  4. Note the feminine pronoun used here to refer to wisdom.
  5. Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 29 (with references). See Widengren, *The King and the Tree of Life*. Proverbs 5:15–18 also mentions waters and rivers.
  6. John 3:16.
  7. For information suggestive of Joseph Smith’s lack of direct contact with the Bible during the translation of the Book of Mormon, see John A. Tvedtnes and Matthew Roper, review of “Joseph Smith’s Use of the Apocrypha,” by Jerald Tanner and Sandra Tanner, *FARMS Review of Books* 8/2 (1996): 330–2. Dictating her memoirs, his mother recalled that, as a boy of eighteen (i.e., in 1823 or 1824) young Joseph “had never read the Bible through in his life.” Moreover, “he seemed much less inclined to the perusal of book than any of the rest of our children,” although he was “far more given to meditation and deep study” (Luc Mack Smith, *Joseph Smith and His Progenitors* [Independence: Herald House, 1969], 92).