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## First Visions and Last Sermons: Affirming Divine Sociality, Rejecting the Greater Apostasy

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# FIRST VISIONS AND LAST SERMONS: AFFIRMING DIVINE SOCIALITY, REJECTING THE GREATER APOSTASY

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Val Larsen

**Abstract:** *There is a kinship between Lehi and Joseph Smith. They are linked to each other by similar first visions, and they faced roughly the same theological problem. Resisted by elites who believe God is a Solitary Sovereign, both prophets affirm the pluralistic religion of Abraham, which features a sôd ʔlôhim (Council of Gods) in which the divine Father, Mother, and Son sit. These prophets are likewise linked by their last sermons: Lehi's parting sermon/blessings of his sons and Joseph's King Follett discourse. Along with the first visions and last sermons, the article closely reads Lehi's dream, Nephi's experience of Lehi's dream, and parts of the Allegory of the Olive Tree, John's Revelation, and Genesis, all of which touch on the theology of the Sôd (Council).*

A kinship between Lehi and Joseph Smith has been too little noticed and appreciated. It is surprising, given the temporal and spatial distance that separates them, but these prophets seem to have roughly the same ecclesiastical duty: establish a new priesthood line authorized to administer the gospel, build temples, and perform temple ordinances. They seem to confront roughly the same theological problem posed by elites who teach roughly the same incorrect ideas about who God is. They receive their prophetic calling and are given their mission in the same way: through similar First Visions. And there are thematic linkages between the prophets' last sermons. Indeed, Lehi makes his connection to Joseph Smith the main theme of his very last sermon. These similarities in their experiences and circumstances may be tokens of an important partnership. We may better understand the mission of Lehi if we see how it overlaps the mission of Joseph, and we may likewise

better understand the still unfolding Restoration Joseph bequeathed us if we read Lehi closely.

The parallel First Visions of Lehi and Joseph begin with a pillar of fire followed by a theophany in which the prophet sees the Father and the Son.<sup>1</sup> First noting the presence of the Father, both Lehi and Joseph are instructed mostly or entirely by the Son, Joseph receiving verbal instructions from the Son and Lehi reading a book the Son gives him. The joint appearance of the Father and Son as corporeal beings, accompanied by a retinue of angels,<sup>2</sup> contains an implicit message — the most important message each prophet receives: God is a social being who lives in community with other divine beings. Lehi and Joseph must reject the orthodox religion espoused by elites that frames the Father as a transcendent, solitary sovereign, a Being without face, feet, or family because God rejects that creed. In his first few words to both Lehi and Joseph, the Son declares the creeds/deeds of their respective days to be an *abomination* (1 Nephi 1:13; Joseph Smith 2:19). When each prophet subsequently shares with those in authority his message about the nature and being of the Gods, they persecute him (1 Nephi 1:19–20; Joseph Smith 2:21–22).<sup>3</sup>

In the wake of a first vision that affirmed the existence of a corporeal Father and divine Messiah Son, thus indicating that the official faith of his day was false, Lehi appears to have clung to the older religion of Abraham that kings and priests were trying to supplant. And Joseph rejected beliefs of those same kings and priests that had, by his time, successfully supplanted original doctrine. He restored beliefs once held by the patriarchs and Lehi. In later visions and revelations, Lehi and Joseph suggest the work and glory of the Gods, who live in the community

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1. Lehi's experience as the Book of Mormon opens can be read as one vision with two parts, as I read it, or as two separate visions.

2. Joseph Smith's 1835 account of his first vision will be less familiar to most readers than the Pearl of Great Prices account: "and I saw many angels in this vision." So like Lehi, Joseph saw the Father, the Son, and concourses of angels. "Journal, 1835–1836," The Joseph Smith Papers, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-1835-1836/25>.

3. While Lehi and Joseph both face persecution when they offer a conception of God and the Gods that differs from the orthodoxy of their time, the deed (persecution) does not automatically follow from the creed (belief in a Solitary Sovereign God). Many have believed in the orthodox God without persecuting those who have a different view. As Joseph noted, "It dont [sic] prove that a man is not a good man, because he errs in doctrine." See *The Words of Joseph Smith*, ed. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 184.

of the exalted, is to bring to pass membership in that community for all their sons and daughters who are willing to receive it.

Forces that, in their respective times, sought to suppress belief in divine sociality and the community of the exalted gave Joseph and Lehi another thing in common. Preaching to the public the doctrine that God is a social being was dangerous for both. Those who heard Lehi preach sought to take his life, as they had taken the lives of Zenos and Zenock, who taught as he did. And 81 days before his death, Joseph stated in his last, most revelatory conference sermon that people in his Latter-day Saint audience would seek his life were he to discuss ideas his hearers held to be nonbiblical.<sup>4</sup> For both men, the most fraught of fraught topics may have been the idea that God has a wife. The dangers these men long faced if they commented on the community of the Gods or the wife of God seems to have conditioned them to be rhetorically cautious.

Providentially, their caution allowed those who read their words to see what they needed to see as the gospel was gradually restored. With little attention given to its actual content when first published, the Book of Mormon first functioned as a sign that the heavens were again open and that prophets again walked the earth.<sup>5</sup> As Joseph indicated in that last sermon, had many of the book's first readers seen more, they would have turned away. Now, almost 200 years since publication, we focus intensively on the content of the Book of Mormon. Additional voices have spoken from the dust, providing context for Lehi's words. And changes in the *zeitgeist* have created a strong interest in the feminine Divine. Taken together, these factors have positioned the Book of Mormon to play a role that it could not play when first published. This keystone text in the Restoration may now help disclose truths understood by Lehi and Joseph about God, humanity, and their relationship to each other.

### A Word on Method

The degree of overlap between the missions of Lehi and Joseph is most apparent if we read the Old Testament and Book of Mormon through the lens of Joseph Smith's (and his successors') mature and presumably normative theology, a theology in which Elohim, the Father, is distinguished from

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4. Stan Larson, "The King Follett Discourse: A Newly Amalgamated Text," *BYU Studies* 18, no. 2: 193–208.

5. James B. Allen, "The Significance of Joseph Smith's 'First Vision' in Mormon Thought," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1, no. 3 (Fall 1966): 29–45; Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Jehovah/Yahweh, the Son, and in which Yahweh and all of us are understood to have a Heavenly Mother as well as a Heavenly Father.<sup>6</sup> The fruitfulness of reading scripture through the lens of Joseph's theology is apparent in John Welch's *The Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon at the Mount* and Grant Hardy's *Understanding the Book of Mormon*. On point after point, Welch greatly illuminates Christ's two most important sermons by viewing them through the lens of the modern temple endowment that Joseph revealed to us. The coherence and point of the sermons becomes much clearer when they are read as an endowment.<sup>7</sup>

Grant Hardy likewise demonstrates the value of reading the Book of Mormon as if it were what Joseph Smith claimed it to be, a text mostly written or edited by Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni. Writing for an audience that includes many who are not members of the Restored Church, Hardy brackets the question of whether Mormon, Moroni, and Nephi are in fact historical figures. But he amply demonstrates that the Book of Mormon is most intelligible and thus most fruitfully read if we take at face value the idea that it reflects the world views and preoccupations of its claimed authors. Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni each have different conceptions of who their audience is and of what messages are likely to be relevant and persuasive for them. We more fully understand the text, Hardy sufficiently demonstrates, if we recognize the different voices and rhetorical purposes of its putative authors.<sup>8</sup>

Having accepted revelations of Joseph Smith and his successors, members of the restored Church generally believe that heaven is governed by a Divine Council presided over by Father and Mother in Heaven. They regard Jehovah/Yahweh as the First-Born Son of those Heavenly Parents, as one who has special status in the council and who played the pivotal role in redeeming humanity from sin. Most hold that Adam, Eve, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph of Egypt, and Lehi each understood much about the role of Yahweh in redeeming humanity from sin.<sup>9</sup> And they believe that apostasies from the truth over the course of time explain why Jews and modern

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6. For Joseph's teaching on Mother in Heaven, see footnotes 87 and 88 and associated text.

7. John W. Welch, *Illuminating the Sermon at the Temple and Sermon on the Mount* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1999).

8. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

9. "Council in Heaven," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Mother in Heaven," <https://www.lds.org/topics/mother-in-heaven?lang=eng>; Russell M. Nelson, "Come Follow Me," *Ensign* 49, no. 5 (May 2019), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2019/05/46nelson?lang=eng>.

Christians do not believe in this governing council and Divine Family. If this Latter-day Saint theology correctly describes how heaven is populated and organized, there should be traces of the Divine Council and its members in the scriptures that have been handed down to us that have ancient provenance: the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and the Pearl of Great Price. In this study I read scriptural texts with that expectation.

In a more limited and ad hoc way, I also build upon insights from secular Bible scholarship, which, through brilliant, creative, and often persuasive reasoning, has constructed a set of coherent narratives that integrate and make intelligible seemingly disparate and contradictory strands in the Old Testament. To be sure, the evidential foundation for this scholarship is often thin, the work being mostly grounded in intelligent close reading of the text. As Meir Sternberg has observed,

the independent knowledge we possess of the “real world” behind the Bible remains absurdly meager. ... For better or worse, most of our information is culled from the Bible itself, and culling information entails a process of interpretation. ... There is no escaping this necessity — though, again, many would like to and may even pretend they do. Source-oriented critics often imply that they deal in hard facts. ... If seriously entertained, this is a delusion.<sup>10</sup>

Where historical evidence outside the Bible is so limited, any evidence that survives by chance and is discovered, e.g., the Ugarit library, can dramatically change the conclusions of Bible scholars.<sup>11</sup> Were secular scholars to accept the writings of Lehi and Nephi as well-attested sixth century BC documents, many foundational assumptions and lines of interpretation would change.<sup>12</sup> And yet, while Joseph taught that the Bible was systematically changed as it passed through the hands of those who

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10. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 16.

11. Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). The importance of a single archaeological discovery is discussed in William G. Dever, “Asherah, Consort of Yahweh? New Evidence from Kuntillet ‘Ajrūd,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 255 (Summer 1984): 21–37. For the effects of presuppositions and paradigms on interpretation, with special attention to Margaret Barker’s work, see Kevin Christensen, “Light and Perspective: Essays from the Mormon Theology Seminar on 1 Nephi 1 and Jacob 7,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 31(2019): 25–69.

12. See D. John Butler, *The Goodness and the Mysteries: On the Path of the Book of Mormon's Visionary Men* (self-pub., 2012), and D. John Butler, *Plain and Precious*

translated/transmitted it to us, he also believed it still contains many truths. And secular scholars have surely uncovered many of those truths through extraordinarily diligent application of much human creativity and intelligence. I accordingly draw on that scholarship where it converges, as it often does, with major themes in the theologies of Joseph and his successors. But to be clear, Joseph's theology is the main lens through which the text is read. In this article, secular scholarship is merely adjunct.

In various reflections on scriptural hermeneutics, Kevin Christensen has highlighted the importance of interpretive paradigms as determinants of what we see or don't see in a text. He played an important role in bringing the scholarship of Margaret Barker to the attention of Restoration scholars and the wider membership of the restored Church. Barker illustrates well the importance of baseline assumptions. Building as she does on the ideas she and Joseph Smith share — the central importance of the temple, the expectation that Christ will be present in the Old Testament, and the significant role of the Divine Mother — Barker often arrives through scholarship at readings that overlap Joseph's revelatory insights. While Joseph's theology is the most important foundation for the readings offered in this essay, Barker, Christensen, Daniel Peterson, and D. John Butler have each provided important insights I incorporate in this essay.

Grant Hardy has suggested that the broad approach to the Book of Mormon with the odd combination of most promise and least past use is the literary approach.<sup>13</sup> A literary reading of a text is sensitive to structure, symbols, archetypes, intertextuality, and how the text speaks to present issues or concerns. While a textual historian may properly focus on the author's communicative intent in the moment of composition, a reception historian on how a text was understood at a given moment in time, those who offer literary readings typically seek to create a new moment in reception history by revealing unseen dimensions of meaning now cognizable and compelling. Such meanings, unlike historical meanings in their narrowest sense, are not fixed in time or by time. They are shaped by events that occur *ex post facto*, including events happening now. So while history may add important dimensions of meaning to a text, in a literary reading it subserves other larger truths and rhetorical purposes.

Consider an example discussed below: Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. For Christians, the true meaning of that narrative is determined not by the intent of the author who composed it in the moment of composition but

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*Things: The Temple Religion of the Book of Mormon's Visionary Men* (self-pub., 2012).

13. Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*.

by God's sacrifice of his Son in the meridian of time. Intertextual linkages with an event that occurred and a narrative that was written long after Genesis became the decisive determinants of the text's emergent meaning. In this instance, the archetype is far more important than the episode. It expresses an underlying, universal truth that the episode merely exemplifies in a particular historical moment. (To be sure, that story, rather than others, was probably preserved precisely because it embodied an especially important and resonant archetype.) It was the fact that literature expresses these enduring, archetypal, probable or necessary truths that led Aristotle to say, rightly, that literature is higher, more philosophical, more profoundly true than history.<sup>14</sup> Thus, to understand more fully the ways the Book of Mormon is true, we need to shift some of our attention from narrow questions of historicity to larger questions of archetypal, eternally consequential, sometimes emergent literary meaning.

In a section of the Book of Mormon closely read below, Nephi models the kind of creative, literary reading of a text that reveals its archetypal, eternally consequential meaning. He reads Lehi's dream by seeing its far-flung connections across time and space with events ranging from a birth in Bethlehem to the final collapse of Nephite civilization. These far-flung events are connected thematically by symbol and archetype, not by narrow, local historical causation. And Nephi underscores the intertextuality of his own vision by linking it to another, similarly wide-ranging vision, the Revelation of John. In the opening sections of this article, I do something similar as I read Joseph Smith through the lens of Lehi and vice versa. Though I believe it no accident that Lehi's core theological problem is very similar to that of Joseph Smith, and I believe there are causal connections between the theology of elites in Lehi's and Joseph's day, in my view even these important contingent, historical correlations reflect an archetypal opposition between monism and pluralism within a larger cosmic master narrative.

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14. Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. S.H. Butcher. "It is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen — what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity. The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose. ... The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular. By the universal I mean how a person of a certain type on occasion speak or act, according to the law of probability or necessity; and it is this universality at which poetry aims." See <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.mb.txt>.

## The Religion of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob

Any comprehensive discussion of Old Testament theology inevitably involves a great deal of inference and conjecture. The corpus of textual and archaeological evidence is so inescapably limited that many gaps in our knowledge must be filled by informed speculation. Since later speculations build on earlier ones (now implicitly accepted as fact), the entire intellectual edifice may be undermined if new evidence or reasoning throws foundational assumptions into question. The outcome of this type of theological work varies greatly depending on initial assumptions. The most consequential assumption will often be the degree of inerrancy, if any, that readers ascribe to the biblical text. That will be an important issue for readers of this article because the article suggests, based on Book of Mormon evidence, that a large group of plain and precious theological truths were scrubbed from Hebrew theology and the Bible in Lehi's time and that those truths were replaced by doctrines God condemns.<sup>15</sup> Readers who hold the Bible as inerrant or largely inerrant will naturally reject the reading offered here.

Those whose views are not inerrantist may be open to an important premise of this article: that before Lehi's time, the Hebrews in the Kingdom of Judah had a theology very different from the one that developed during and after Lehi's life.<sup>16</sup> In its broad outlines, this point is not controversial among non-fundamentalist Bible scholars. There is considerable agreement that the earliest books of the Bible

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15. Secular scholarship also affirms that major theological changes were made in the Hebrew religion during Lehi's time. Weinfeld refers to changes made in this time as a "theological revolution." Moshe Weinfeld, "Deuteronomy's Theological Revolution," *Bible Review* 12, no. 1 (1996): 38–41, 44–45. See also Jeffrey G. Audirsch, *The Legislative Themes of Centralization: From Mandate to Demise* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014).

16. "We are entering the all-decisive phase for Old Testament theology: only in the exile were the traditions of ancient Israel collected, set down in writing and worked on as the fundamental documents of faith. ... For only from the sixth century BCE in Israel was the exclusive faith in one God Yahweh established firmly for all parts of the population and all social groupings." Erhard S. Gerstenberger, "The Faith Community of 'Israel' after the Deportations," in *Theologies in the Old Testament*, trans. John Bowden (New York: T & T Clark, 2002), 207. See Margaret Barker for a discussion of the issues that focuses on dimensions of special interest to Latter-day Saints. Margaret Barker, *The Mother of the Lord* vol. 1, *The Lady in the Temple* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012); and Margaret Barker, "Joseph Smith and Preexilic Israelite Religion," *BYU Studies* 44, no. 4:69–82. Kevin Christensen, "The Deuteronomist De-Christianizing of the Old Testament," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 16, no. 2 (2004): 59–90.

— Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers — were written by authors whose overarching theological outlook and conception of God differed from that of authors who wrote after Lehi’s time.<sup>17</sup> Of course books written earlier had to pass through later hands to get to us. And there is evidence that as they did, changes were made to conform those earlier texts to the later theology. Those changes increase the degree to which reconstruction of the early beliefs must be conjectural. But a measure of respect for the text seems to have constrained the zeal with which later scribes deleted or changed the ancient writings, so many traces of the older theology remain. Nor is relevant evidence limited to the Bible text. Though their numbers are limited, ancient nonbiblical texts sometimes add important context to our Bible reading. The discovery of a library in the ruins of Ugarit in 1929 greatly added to our understanding of how the ancients viewed their pantheon. It revealed some overlap in gods, i.e., El was the high god of Ugarit as of Israel, and overlap in poetic and narrative forms. Archaeological discoveries also add relevant context. Taking all the sources together, a sufficient body of evidence exists for some scholars to believe the following.

In the theology prevalent when the older Bible books were written, the high god, El, was understood to be an anthropomorphic being who lived in heaven in a royal court much like the royal courts of Middle Eastern kings on earth at that time.<sup>18</sup> Like the Middle Eastern kings, El was thought to govern his dominions through the ministrations of those one would typically expect to see at court: Elah, the wife of El the king, the bene Elohim, the sons and daughters of El, *noble and great* heavenly servants,<sup>19</sup> e.g., the *malākīm* or angels, and various representatives of the

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17. Douglas A. Knight, “Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomists,” in *Old Testament Interpretation: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. James Luther Mays, David L. Petersen, and Kent Harold Richards (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 65–66.

18. David M. Carr, “Genesis,” in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, ed. Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) 7–11; Taylor Halverson, “The Path of Angels: A Biblical Pattern for the Role of Angels in Physical Salvation,” in *The Gospel of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament*, ed. D. Kelly Ogden, Jared W. Ludlow, and Kerry Muhlestein (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2009), 154; Jon D. Levenson, “Genesis: Introduction,” in *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 8–11; Steven O. Smoot, “The Divine Council in the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Mormon,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 27 (2017): 155–80.

19. Abraham 3:22–24

divine army, the host of heaven, El being the Lord of Hosts.<sup>20</sup> These and other participants in the court were part of the  $\text{סֹד}$ , *Sôd*, the governing council, who shared to one degree or another the divinity of El and the governance of El's kingdom.

This reading is uncontroversial in its broad outlines. Few mainstream scholars doubt that the governing council was believed to exist before Lehi's time. There is more controversy about details, e.g., what specific named figures besides El were members of the Biblical *Sôd*. A reading with some ancient support consistent with what we find in Joseph's theology and the Book of Mormon acknowledges El Elyon as the most high Father God. It casts the goddess Asherah as Elah, wife of God and Mother of the bene Elohim.<sup>21</sup> It frames Yahweh, a ben Elohim, the son of El and Elah, as the God of Israel. These gods have associated symbols. God is signified by the sun, the host of heaven by the stars, and Elah/Asherah by a tree, often an almond tree cut to grow in the shape of a menorah.<sup>22</sup> Were the Book of Mormon broadly accepted as the single most extensive and best attested document we have from 600 BC, this reading would have broader support because the Book of Mormon quite clearly affirms it.<sup>23</sup> Since the Book of Mormon isn't generally regarded as our most reliable text from that period, the reading is controversial.

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20. Gerald Cooke, "The Sons of (the) God(s)," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 76, no. 1 (January 1964): 22–47; E. Theodore Mullen, Jr., *The Assembly of the Gods: The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1980); Matitiah Tsevat, "God and the Gods in Assembly: An Interpretation of Psalm 82," *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 40/41 (1969–70), 123–37.

21. "Before Josiah and Deuteronomy, ... when Yahweh assumed all the ancient roles and titles of El, Asherah would have been the consort of El, and Yahweh would have been the son of El and his consort, Asherah." Barker, *Mother of the Lord*, 122. El, the singular for *God*, is used in the Old Testament, but the plural *Elohim* is much more common. John Day notes that the wife of El is sometimes called *Elat*, meaning "goddess." See John Day, "Asherah in the Hebrew Bible and Northwest Semitic Literature," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105, no. 3 (1986): 387. I refer to the goddess as *Elah*, a form Barker mentions as reflecting English morphology inherited from Hebrew. Barker mentions the connection to *elah*, the terebinth tree. See also Daniel C. Peterson, "Nephi and His Asherah," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9, no. 2 (2000): 23–24.

22. Joan E. Taylor, "The Asherah, the Menorah and the Sacred Tree," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 66 (June 1995): 29–54.

23. As Sternberg asserts, most reasoning about how theology developed in Old Testament times is grounded in close reading of the text. Were the Book of Mormon to become part of the canonical text scholars reason from, conclusions about what was known anciently would change dramatically. See footnote 10.

For reasons we discuss in the next section, Elohim and Yahweh are not generally differentiated in the biblical text. They are often conflated. The grammatically plural Elohim, which literally means “Gods,” is usually, though not always, coupled with singular verbs and adjectives and is normally translated as *God* rather than *Gods*. But in Joseph Smith’s account of creation, attributed to Abraham, both the Gods and the verbs are plural (Abraham 4:1-21). Joseph said the same would be true of the Bible were it translated correctly.<sup>24</sup>

Less controversial than the particular membership of the *Sôd* are the following points. The earthly home of the Elohim, which corresponded with their heavenly home, was Solomon’s temple. In the inner sanctum of the temple behind the temple veil in the Holy of Holies was the mercy seat, the throne of El, which was formed by Cherubim atop the ark of the covenant. Like El, Elah Asherah was very much at home in Solomon’s temple. For most of its history, a statue representing her stood in the temple courtyard.<sup>25</sup> The temple was decorated with tree images (1 Kings 6:29–36; Psalms 52:8) and was lighted by the menorah, a symbolic almond tree and the specific symbol of Asherah (Exodus 25:31–33). Inside the ark of the covenant was another almond tree, Aaron’s staff (Hebrews 9:4), which had miraculously blossomed and borne fruit (Numbers 17:8). So along with symbols of El, symbols of Elah/Asherah were pervasive in the temple.

Elements of this underlying story can be seen in foundational narratives in Genesis. God was known to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as אֱלֹהֵי שָׁדַי, *El Shaddai*, a title that can be read as signifying a divine male

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24. “In the very beginning the Bible shows there is a plurality of Gods beyond the power of refutation. ... The word Eloheim [sic] ought to be in the plural all the way through. ... When you take [that] view of the subject, it sets one free to see all the beauty, holiness and perfection of the Gods.” Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, compiled by Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1961), 372.

25. “Of the 370 years during which the Solomonic Temple stood in Jerusalem, for no fewer than 236 years (or almost two-thirds of the time) the statue of Asherah was present in the Temple, and her worship was a part of the legitimate religion approved and led by the king, the court, and the priesthood.” Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*, 3rd Enlarged Edition (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 50. Taylor, “The Sacred Tree,” 32. William Dever, *Did God Have a Wife?: Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 58, 121. 2 Kings 21:7 says the object in the courtyard was a “graven image of Asherah,” so it was probably a statue. This supposition is also supported by the fact that woven clothing or hangings dressed the Asherah (2 Kings 23:7).

and female couple, El and Shaddai (Exodus 6: 3).<sup>26</sup> When Abraham first entered the covenant land of Canaan at Shechem, a place most religiously notable for its great sacred oak tree, he built there an altar and saw God for the first time (Genesis 12:1-6). (As Genesis 21:33 indicates, Abraham's standard place of worship and covenant making seems to have been at altars constructed under sacred trees.) The Hebrew word for *oak* is אֵלֶּה, *elah*, which may be translated either as *oak* or as *Goddess*. So the association between Elah and her sign, the sacred tree or grove, seems to be established in Abraham's first religious experience in the Promised Land. Jacob later returned to Shechem — where Abraham had begun their covenant life and first seen God — and sacrificed the false gods of his household members under that same sacred oak tree (Genesis 35: 4). This initial visual experience with El Shaddai in Shechem is the first of many. These visual encounters in which the patriarchs see their God suggest that El and Shaddai were corporeal beings.

After an only begotten covenant son was born to Abraham of Sarah, Abraham was commanded by El Shaddai to take that son, Isaac, to Mount Moriah, the temple mount now at the heart of Jerusalem, and sacrifice him there as a burnt offering (Genesis 22:1-14). This in the same place where, in Jewish tradition, Adam and Eve first constructed an altar and offered a sacrifice to God after being expelled from the Garden of Eden.<sup>27</sup> As father and son approached the mountain, Isaac asked Abraham where the sacrificial lamb was. Abraham replied, אֱלֹהִים יִרְאֶה, *Elohim yir'eh*, the Elohim will see it or, less literally, will provide it.<sup>28</sup> Elohim is a plural, meaning Gods, and so we could read this as saying that El and Shaddai, the divine Father and Mother, will provide the sacrificial lamb, though it can also be read more conventionally as Father El will provide. Abraham bound Isaac, placed him on the altar, and raised his hand to slay him.

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26. Since El Shaddai is coupled with singular verbs, this reading, like my reading of Elohim, would be on the assumption that the High God is constituted by the union of a male/female dyad, that the High God does not exist except in this form, and that the two always act as one. For a more extended discussion of the various plural/singular forms and ways of construing them that are consistent with this male/female dyad reading, see Val Larsen, "Hidden in Plain View: Mother in Heaven in Scripture," *SquareTwo* 8, no. 2 (Summer 2015), <http://squaretwo.org/Sq2ArticleLarsenHeavenlyMother.html>.

27. Johnathan Z. Smith (1969), "Earth and Gods," *The Journal of Religion* 49, no. 2 (Apr. 1969): 115. Cf. Maimonides in *Beit Abachria*, cap. 2.

28. God's seeing is foreseeing, and foreseeing can imply providing — as in the colloquial *see to it*. Indeed, the English word *provide* derives from Latin, *pro*, signifying before, as in *prospectivei*, and *videre* signifying *to see*, as in *video*.

But he was stopped and told that he had proven himself to the Elohim. Abraham then saw a ram caught in the thicket, sacrificed it instead of Isaac, and named the place, יהוה יראה, *Yahweh yir'eh*, Yahweh will provide.

In this story, Yahweh provides the sacrificial lamb Isaac asked about that takes the place of Isaac as proxy on the altar. The Elohim provide the suffering Parent or Parents who take the place of Abraham, whose suffering in sacrificing his son would likely have equaled or exceeded the suffering of Isaac. The deepest possible bond is formed between El Shaddai and Abraham, between Yahweh and Isaac. They understand each other. Each has been or will be in the place of the other. This mutual knowledge is the foundation of the covenant between them. And this all happens in the very place where the altar of Solomon's temple will later be built of unhewn stones (Deuteronomy 27:5). The unhewn stones of the temple altar presumably commemorate the unhewn stones used in that same location by Adam, Eve, and Abraham to construct their unhewn altars and make covenants with God through burnt offerings. Those offerings anticipate the atonement and death of the ben Elohim, Yahweh, who will voluntarily lay himself upon the altar, take away the sins of the world, and thus open to humanity the entrances of the *Sôd* council so that all the children of El Shaddai can have the opportunity to enter and join it.

The tangible, corporeal anthropomorphism of El, implied by the ability of the patriarchs to see him, is made explicit in Genesis 32:24–30, an important passage in which Jacob receives the new name by which he and his people will be known. In this passage, Jacob literally wrestles all night with El, then receives the new blessing name *Israel*. El is initially described as an unspecified אִישׁ, *'ish*, man, suggesting that this divine being has the form of a man. After Jacob and El have wrestled through the night, El asks Jacob to let him go because the day is approaching. Jacob refuses unless El gives him a blessing. El asks, “What is your name?” Jacob replies. Holding and being held by Jacob in a tight embrace, El then gives Jacob a new, sacred name that incorporates El's own: “Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for [thou hast] power with God, and with men, and hast prevailed.” Jacob then names the place פְּנֵי אֵל, *Peniel*, a combination of the words פְּנִים (*penim*, “face”), and, אֵל (El, God), “for I have seen God face to face.” The Gods of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are Beings one can touch on earth and speak with face to face.

The name *El Shaddai* is important because, as noted, it may refer to the divine partners El and Saddai. This name is prominently featured on the two occasions when the blessing of posterity is most conspicuously pronounced on Abraham and Jacob. This fits the general pattern in the

Old Testament, where Shaddai appears 48 times and in almost every instance is associated with fruitfulness, procreation, birth, and posterity. In the King James Bible, the divine name *Shaddai* is always translated as “Almighty.” Every occurrence of that word in the KJV marks an appearance of Shaddai. That conjectural translation assumes a linkage with the word  $\text{שָׁדַד}$ , *shadad*, meaning “destroyer” or “plunderer.” An alternative conjectural translation assumes a linkage with the word  $\text{שָׁדַיִם}$ , *shadayim*, meaning “breasts” and yields a translation of El Shaddai as the God with breasts or the Goddess.<sup>29</sup> Given the nearly universal association with procreation and posterity, this reading seems more plausible than *plunderer* or another conjecture that links the word with the Akkadian word for *mountain*.

The first appearance of El Shaddai is in Genesis 17:1-19, a passage in which 99-year-old Abram and Sarai receive the sacred new names *Abraham* and *Sarah* and are promised that, despite Sarah’s old age, they will have a son and a great posterity. That posterity will become the covenant community of the faithful and ultimately the community of the exalted. The second appearance is in Genesis 28:1-5 where Isaac commands Jacob to go get a wife. Isaac then says: “And El Shaddai bless thee, and make thee fruitful, and multiply thee, that thou mayest be a multitude of people; And give thee the blessing of Abraham, to thee, and to thy seed with thee.”

In yet another passage, Genesis 49:22-25, which would have been of special interest to Lehi, Joseph receives a patriarchal blessing that will be most conspicuously fulfilled by his descendant Lehi. In this blessing, Jacob separately invokes El (Father), Shaddai (Mother), and Yahweh (Son and Good Shepherd). Yahweh is called  $\text{אֲבִיר}$  *Abir*, a term that is always and only associated with him and that Lehi may use to refer to Yahweh.<sup>30</sup> In this passage, Shaddai is explicitly linked to the blessings of the breasts and of the womb: “Joseph is a fruitful bough ... whose branches run over the wall: ... his hands were made strong by the hands of the mighty one [ $\text{אֲבִיר}$  *Abir*, always Yahweh] of Jacob (from thence is the shepherd, the stone [ $\text{אֶבֶן}$ , *eben*] of Israel). Even by El [ $\text{אֱל}$  translated *God*] ... who

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29. Biale, David, “The God with Breasts: El Shaddai in the Bible,” *History of Religions* 21, no. 3 (February 1982): 240–56.

30. The other five occurrences of  $\text{אֲבִיר}$ , *Abir* (Psalms 132:2, 5; Isaiah 1:24, 49: 26, 60: 16) all explicitly state that the *mighty one* (sometimes as here in the KJV rendered *mighty God*) is Yahweh. The American Standard Version, the Jerusalem Bible, and the Holman Christian Standard Bible all translate the *Abir* in Genesis 49:24 as “Mighty One.”

shall help thee; and by *Shaddai* [שדי translated *Almighty*], who shall bless thee with ... blessings of the breasts [שדים, *shaddaim* in Hebrew], and of the womb.” Important meanings in this passage are expressed through wordplay. *Shaddai*, שדי, is connected with breasts, *shaddaim*, שדים, suggesting that she is a Goddess. And Yahweh is characterized as the rock of Israel through wordplay (אבן, *Abir* of Jacob = אבן, *eben* of Israel), a linkage that becomes salient in Lehi’s First Vision.

### The Deuteronomist Greater Apostasy

Lehi lived in *the* pivotal moment in theological history: the moment when the pluralist theology and ethos of the corporeal *Sôd* council seems to have been displaced by the monist theology and ethos of the incorporeal Solitary Sovereign.<sup>31</sup> The ethos of a council is consensual, consultative, collaborative, and open to compromise and negotiation. Social and ontological distance within a council is comparatively low. The intimate grappling of Jacob and El, the negotiation between them and compromise that lets each achieve his objective and remain friends with the other, reflects this ethos. In this wrestling narrative, God and Jacob are, ontologically, of one kind, both being an איש, *ish*, “a man.” A pluralist council ethos is also reflected in the patriarchal blessing of Joseph. Joseph receives blessings from multiple members of the *Sôd*, the divine beings El, Shaddai, and Yahweh, who all share an interest in and work together to promote his well-being. As will be discussed below, the monist ethos of the Solitary Sovereign is grounded in the presumption of infinite social and ontological distance between the sole creator of heaven and earth and all his creations.

The agents of change from the *Sôd* to the Solitary Sovereign were probably the Deuteronomists, aggressive theological reformers, including refugees from the Kingdom of Israel<sup>32</sup> who were allied with

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31. The shift from corporeal to incorporeal divine beings is reflected in emergent Deuteronomist aniconism. Nathan MacDonald notes, “Programmatic aniconism was the creation of the YHWH-alone movement, and we should be suspicious of any representation of Israel’s history which describes aniconic worship prior to Hezekiah or Josiah. An early aniconism, *de facto* or otherwise, is purely a projection of the post-exilic imagination.” See Nathan MacDonald, “Aniconism in the Old Testament,” in *The God of Israel*, ed. Robert P. Gordon, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 26–27.

32. John Sorenson notes that the E textual tradition is generally thought to be associated with the Northern Kingdom of Israel. More than the J tradition, it has “a relatively spiritualized, distant and abstract conception of God,” i.e., it expresses the logic that at its limit becomes the Solitary Sovereign. John L. Sorenson, “The ‘Brass

King Josiah. These reformers seem to have been stringent monotheists who rejected the concept of the *Sôd* and the community of Gods. They believed in Yahweh alone. Their signature scripture was “Hear, O Israel. The Lord our God is one Lord. . . . I, even I, am he, and there is no god with me” (Deuteronomy 6:4; 32:39). Evidence suggests these reformers subsumed all the functions and stories associated with El in Yahweh.<sup>33</sup> Thus their Yahweh had no companions.

The Deuteronomists apparently viewed themselves as the true disciples of Moses, whom they followed above all other prophets. Their Yahweh required one thing of Israel: strict adherence to the entirely sufficient Law of Moses. All figures in the community were required to subserve this all-encompassing behavioral code. The king was subordinate to the Law, which contains a kingship code that forbids abuses typical of kings (Deuteronomy 17:14-20). Prophets were subordinate to it, since any prophecy or teaching that contradicted the Law merited death (Deuteronomy 13:1-5). All had obligations to the poor and the stranger. Many good things were prescribed, many bad things prohibited. And importantly, the canon was closed. There was nothing left to say after God revealed to Moses his fully sufficient revelation, the Law: “Hearken, O Israel, unto the statutes and unto the judgments, which I teach you, for to do them. . . . Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it” (Deuteronomy 4:2).<sup>34</sup> Above all, the Law prescribed exclusive worship of Yahweh, the one true and living God, and prohibited notice of any other divine being. Any violation of this prescription merited death (Deuteronomy 17:3-7).

In their conception of God and emphasis on the Law, the Deuteronomists exhibited a centralizing, monist impulse at odds with the pluralism inherent in the council ethos. The implementation of their vision required an earthly analogue of their heavenly Solitary Sovereign, a Yahwist monarch.<sup>35</sup> Thus the most important Deuteronomist was

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Plates’ and Biblical Scholarship,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 10, no. 4 (Fall 1977): 36. The themes emphasized by the Deuteronomists are similar to those of Hosea, a Northern prophet who wrote shortly before the Deuteronomist revolution.

33. Smith, *Biblical Monotheism*, 141.

34. Missionaries sometime cite this scripture to refute those who quote Revelation 22:18-19 to show that the scripture canon is now closed. Using this verse to demonstrate that the canon is not closed is valid but ironic. The Deuteronomists wrote the statement with the intent to close the canon.

35. “The scribes gave full expression to the religious national aims of Hezekiah and Josiah in the laws dealing with cult centralization and the extirpation of the foreign cult. . . . The Deuteronomist could not conceive of the implementation of the

Josiah, the king. Without his leadership, the Deuteronomist revolution would have been impossible. Worship of the Abrahamic Gods of the *Sôd* was too entrenched and widespread to be eliminated without a strong monarch leader. This is apparent from the fact that a large number of Asherah figurines have been discovered in and around Jerusalem from the time and just before the time of Josiah and Lehi.<sup>36</sup> But Josiah had attributes that made him the perfect revolutionary: “like unto him was there no king before him, that turned to Yahweh with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; neither after him arose there any like him” (2 Kings 23:25). Josiah was precisely the kind of honest, idealistic, incorruptible, energetic, uncompromising, puritanical, relentless, pitiless ideologue that must take the lead if massive social change is to be forced on an unwilling populace in a short period.<sup>37</sup>

In a multidimensional push to centralize theology, ritual, worship, and governance, Josiah took things in hand (2 Kings 23:4-20).<sup>38</sup> The Jerusalem temple was full of things associated with members of the *Sôd*. He destroyed them. He dragged the Asherah statue — in the temple for at least 236 of its 370 years<sup>39</sup> — down into the Kidron valley and burned it. He destroyed all the ancient temples and sacred groves in the high

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moral law contained in the ‘book of the Torah’ in the absence of the monarchy.” Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomist School* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1992), 166–70.

36. Barker cites Kletter on the distribution of the Asherah figurines (Barker, *Mother of the Lord*, 119). See Raz Kletter, *The Judean Pillar-Figurines and the Archaeology of Asherah* (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1996), 4, 10, 45, 47. Dever strongly affirms that the figurines represent Asherah (Dever, *Did God Have a Wife?*, 58).

37. Liverani refers to the “reforming fury of Josiah.” See Mario Liverani, *Israel’s History and the History of Israel*, trans. Chiara Peri and Philip R. Davies (London: Routledge, 2007), 177. Halpern calls Josiah’s reform “bloody minded. . . . It aimed at anything cultic that moved. . . . This reform was fundamentally, radically, and self-consciously monotheistic.” 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), 97. Weinfeld notes, “The severity with which Josiah executed his programme is echoed in the laws of Duet. 13, which . . . reflect a typical revolutionary atmosphere.” Weinfeld, *Deuteronomist School*, 166.

38. Josiah “made the centralization of the cult a ‘device of cult control’ and primarily served the king’s interests.” Audirsch, *Legislative Themes: 27*. See also Ingrid Hjelm, “Cult Centralization as a Device of Cult Control?,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 13, no. 2 (1999): 298–309.

39. Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*, 50.

places, Shechem, Bethel, etc., where the patriarchs had worshipped the Gods of the *Sôd*. As Deuteronomy 12:19 required, he centralized all public ritual in one place, Jerusalem, where he could oversee and control it. As Deuteronomy 3:1-11 mandated, he killed all the priests who facilitated the worship of *Sôd* members and all the prophets who taught that there was any God with God. There is a nontrivial possibility that he killed Zenos and Zenock. Zenock taught that there was a God with God, a ben Elohim who would come down to redeem humanity from its sins (Alma 33:13-16). Zenos taught that and also emphasized the importance of humanity being closely, rather than distantly, connected with the “mother tree” (Jacob 5:54-60).<sup>40</sup> If Josiah didn’t kill Zenos and Zenock, he would have if they had been alive teaching these things during his reign.

On their own terms, Josiah’s reforms were a smashing success. With respect to rhetoric, he remains almost preeminently celebrated in the Old Testament because those who came after him and preserved or wrote the scriptures were almost all Deuteronomists. The Old Testament we have is a substantially Deuteronomist text. Josiah’s reform endured such that 600 years later, the Jews remained devoted Deuteronomists. Their rejection of Christ, a man claiming to be the Son of God, God with God, would have pleased Josiah.

But while triumphant culturally, Josiah did not fare as well with respect to objective political facts reported in the text.<sup>41</sup> The Deuteronomist prophetess Huldah had prophesied that because of his righteousness, Josiah would die in peace (2 Kings 22:18-20). He did not. The chronicler reports that he died needlessly because he heedlessly attacked Pharaoh Necho, who was passing peacefully through his kingdom. He died prematurely because he was unwilling to hear the word of God coming from an unexpected place, the mouth of Necho (2 Chronicles 35:21-24). Politically, his actions were disastrous for his country. Israel had survived for 360 years under kings the Deuteronomists regarded as mostly wicked. It lasted only 22 years after Josiah putatively purged it of its sins. In the wake of Josiah’s death, in the

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40. John Sorenson has suggested that Zenos and Zedock were Northern prophets. Some scholars believe refugees from the Northern Kingdom inspired the Yahwist exclusivism of the Deuteronomists. So it is possible that Zenos and Zedock were killed by Northern predecessors of the Southern Deuteronomists. Sorenson, “The ‘Brass Plates,’” 33-34.

41. “The supreme role claimed for the king and temple had not justified itself in history, and there emerged an urgent need for a fresh interpretation of events.” Andrew D. H. Mayes, “Deuteronomistic Ideology and the Theology of the Old Testament,” *Journal of the Study of the Old Testament* 82 (March 1999): 70.

reign of his son Zedekiah, it suffered the greatest calamity of its history: utter destruction. Only a small remnant survived, carried away captive into Babylon. Non-Deuteronomist critics attributed the fall to Josiah's attacking the Gods of the *Sôd*.<sup>42</sup> The Deuteronomists carried to Babylon, who wrote the more enduring, widely read histories in the Bible, offered other, self-justifying rationales for the destruction.

The Deuteronomist concept of God as Solitary Sovereign may have been rooted in a perceived revelatory linkage between God's name and the Hebrew verb *to be*, which yields a sophisticated reading of Moses's first encounter with God in Exodus 3:1-15. There Yahweh declares that his name is אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה, 'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh, "I Am that I Am." This name statement can be read, philosophically, as saying that Yahweh is pure BEING, BEING as such, the only thing that exists in and of and by itself.<sup>43</sup> Speaking in the first person, God says אֶהְיֶה, 'ehyeh, "I Am," and reveals his unique status as pure BEING. Speaking of God in the third person, we say יְהוָה, *yahweh*, "He Is," so we refer to God, the great I Am as Yahweh, He Is. And we may think of him as the one and only thing that purely, self-existently IS.<sup>44</sup> This monistic way of thinking about

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42. Mother in Heaven was known as *Wisdom*. Critics were "surprisingly consistent in their account of what happened in the time of Josiah. ... The godless people in the temple became 'blind' and abandoned Wisdom just before the temple was burned and the people scattered. Those who set up the second temple and its cult, ... that is, those who collected and edited the Hebrew Scriptures as we know them, were described as apostates." Barker, *Mother of the Lord*, 8. Citing a specific group, Barker writes, "There were also refugees at that time who fled to Egypt. Those in Pathros had been devotees of the Lady, and it was neglecting her, they said, that had caused the fall of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 44.15-19)." Barker, *Mother of the Lord*, 231.

43. "The concept of 'being' is the presupposition and the basis for all branches of philosophy. ... Religion, also, in so far as it is pure monotheism, is built upon the idea of 'being,' which is best proven by the classical and first monotheistic declaration, with which God introduced Himself to Moses during the revelation of the bush, proclaiming as His being 'I am that I am' (Exodus 3:14). The God of pure religion ... introduces Himself as 'being,' thus transporting 'being' from the sphere of philosophy ... to the sphere of religion. ... God [is] the only and incomparable being, thus eliminating the possibility of any other being besides Him. ... [Nature] is not independent, and does not exist by itself, for God is the presupposition for its existence, and He is its creator. In this way God, the only and unique being, enters the relationship with creation, which arises as the result of the singularity of God. He thus acquires in addition to the meaning of being the only cause for everything in existence." Trude Weiss Rosmarin, *Religion of Reason: Herman Cohen's System of Religious Philosophy* (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1936), 22-23, 83.

44. "The Being of God is now defined as the absolute Otherness in contrast to the world of things. The Jewish monotheistic revelation expressed in the divine

God as pure BEING, as the ground of all being,<sup>45</sup> makes him abstract, transcendent, prior to and separate from all created things.<sup>46</sup>

Whether derived philosophically or not, Yehezkel Kaufmann has suggested that the conception of God as the Solitary Sovereign was the defining characteristic of the Israelite religion which the Deuteronomists promulgated: “The basic idea of Israelite religion is that God is supreme over all. There is no realm above him or beside him to limit his absolute sovereignty. He is utterly distinct from, and other than, the world; he is subject to no laws, no compulsions, or powers that transcend him.”<sup>47</sup> This change from seeing God as of a kind with man and part of the world to seeing him as a transcendent Solitary Sovereign led to a recasting of an important Sinai narrative. Exodus portrayed the leaders of Israel as seeing an embodied God: “Then went up Moses ... and seventy of the elders of Israel: And they saw the God of Israel: and there was under his feet as it were a paved work of a sapphire stone” (Exodus 24:9-10). The Deuteronomists changed that, declaring, “ye heard the voice of the words, but saw no similitude; ... ye saw no manner of similitude on the day that the Lord spake unto you in Horeb: ... Lest ye corrupt yourself and make ... the similitude of any figure ... male or female” (Deuteronomy 4:12, 15-16). God was then framed as a being who cannot be seen, who is different in kind from human beings who have gender, shape, and form. This was a critically important change, because being

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proclamation ‘I am that I am’ (Exodus 3:14) [leads] to such statements as the following: ‘In fact there is no greater miracle in the history of thinking than that which is revealed in this sentence. A primitive language ... stammers the deepest saying of all philosophy. God’s name shall be: I am that I am. God is the Being. God is the ego which is the same as being.’ But does this conception of God not imply the annihilation of every other being save Himself? Is then the world not conceived as a mere function of God? [The answer:] The uniqueness of God with regard to the world means the causation by God of the world. For the becoming of things has its logical origin in Him. The essence of the Being of God is to cause the Becoming of the world of things. Thus the origin of Becoming is in God’s Being.” Adolph Lichtigfeld, *Twenty Centuries of Jewish Thought* (London: E. O. Beck Limited, 1938), 57.

45. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, *Existence and the Christ*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 10.

46. On connections between name theology and Josiah’s political/theological centralization, see Audirsch, 29–40. “Variants of the name theology idiom occur eight times in Deuteronomy, all of which accompany a centralization motif.” Audirsch, *Legislative Themes*, 29.

47. Yehezkal Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, trans. Moshe Greenberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 60.

a seer and seeing God had earlier been the proper goal and defining characteristic of authentic religious experience.<sup>48</sup>

Given the limited data available, it is hard to know how fully the Deuteronomists themselves understood the implications of their monism. (Lehi's apparent response to them suggests they articulated their views with some measure of philosophical sophistication.) But those implications and the associated reasoning were later specified with impeccable logical rigor by two brilliant theologians, Maimonides and Calvin, whose views I briefly recount. In Maimonides's list of Thirteen Principles of Faith<sup>49</sup> (possibly Joseph Smith's inspiration for the Articles of Faith<sup>50</sup>), the first four principles focus on the attributes of the Solitary Sovereign God who was held to be (a) the self-existent ground of all being who created all other things *ex nihilo*, (b) a monad, the essence of indivisible oneness, (c) incorporeal and (d) outside of time. As noted above, this conception of God created infinite ontological distance between God and humanity, distance so great that God ceased to be in any ordinary sense a father.

Calvin then most fully worked out the implications of God being the only self-existent entity and the ground of all being. From these Deuteronomist assumptions, it follows that God alone acts. All other events and behaviors must be expressions or enactments of the Divine will. If one is saved, another damned, it is because God created and predestined the one for salvation and the other for damnation. All apparent human choices are foreknown and have as their first, fully sufficient cause an act of God. Calvin's God acts always and only for his own glory and honor, saving and damning souls eternally in accordance with his "mere arbitrary Will."<sup>51</sup>

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48. Margaret Barker and Kevin Christensen, "Seeking the Face of the Lord: Joseph Smith and the First Temple Tradition," in *Joseph Smith Jr.: Reappraisals after Two Centuries*, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Terryl L. Givens (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 143–72.

49. "Maimonides' 13 Foundations of Judaism, translated by Marc Mermelstein," Mesora. <http://www.mesora.org/13principles.html>.

50. Maimonides's Thirteen Principles of Faith would have been the logical text for Joshua Seixas to use to teach the basic theology of Judaism when he taught Joseph and others in Kirtland.

51. Important tenets of Calvinism in the New England form Joseph Smith encountered them are well described by Jonathan Edwards in his sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Other Christian denominations frame matters differently and, from a Latter-day Saint point of view, more correctly than Calvin. But they do so by reasoning with less rigor from first principles they share with

From the point of view of the Restored Gospel of Jesus Christ, this Deuteronomist conception of God as the Solitary Sovereign ground of Being was the Ur error of antiquity. It was the Greater Apostasy that served as the essential foundation for the later Great Apostasy. The moment it supplanted the *Sôd* was the moment in which the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints — which, like the faith of Abraham, remains pluralistic in its conception of God — became separated from the other major religions with Old Testament roots: Judaism, Islam, and Western Christianity.<sup>52</sup> So this was the moment when the Restoration became necessary. And it was the most important error the Restoration corrects.

### Lehi and the Elohim

As the Book of Mormon opens, Jerusalem is in the throes of the theological revolution just discussed. The religion of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is being violently purged by the aggressive new Deuteronomist orthodoxy. In a quintessential prophetic vision, Lehi is called to join the losing side, to defend the old theology being suppressed. Heeding the call to be a visionary man and speak prophetically, he boldly declares that Jerusalem has abandoned true faith and is therefore on the verge of destruction. It must repent and believe in a ben Elohim, a God with God, the Messiah who will come down from heaven to redeem the world or it will be destroyed. The Deuteronomist religious and political leaders of Jerusalem mock these teachings, then seek to take Lehi's life.<sup>53</sup> Lehi lives because God commands him to flee into the wilderness.

As mentioned above, Lehi's First Vision is analogous in important respects — fiery pillar, appearance of the Father and Son and angels — to

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Calvin. They use concepts such as free will to separate God from humanity, suggesting that God creates free beings capable of making choices contrary to his will. But a God outside of time/space foreknows all freely chosen acts before they are chosen. He has the option of creating only that subset of beings who freely choose to do good. If he creates beings who, he foreknows, will do monstrous evil, then he, the creator, must have willed that the evil be done or he would not have created the perpetrator. Knowing all things and being the cause of all things, God is responsible for all that happens. The logically gifted Calvin understood that what *is* and God's *will* are tautologically equivalent, given Solitary Sovereign premises. "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God. A Sermon Preached at Enfield, July 8th, 1741," Electronic Texts in American Studies, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1053&context=etas>.

52. The Church of Jesus-Christ of Latter-day Saints is less disconnected from Eastern Orthodoxy because the *filioque* of that religion preserves a measure of pluralistic sociality in God and, by extension, between God and humanity.

53. See 1 Nephi 1:18–20 and 2 Chronicles 36:15–16.

the First Vision of Joseph Smith. Lehi prayed fervently, then “there came a pillar of fire and dwelt upon a rock before him; and he saw and heard much” (1 Nephi 1:6). This first vision is deeply symbolic. The pillar of fire signifies both Father El and Son Yahweh who come to Lehi in vision. They appear here in the form they took as they led Israel through darkness on its journey to the Promised Land (Exodus 13:21). Their appearance in this form suggests that Deuteronomist Israel is sunk in darkness but that El and Yahweh will lead Lehi and his family out of the darkness and on to the Promised Land. The rock in the vision signifies that Son Yahweh is the Messiah Redeemer and that Father El is the King of Heaven. It places them in the locations where they were found in the ancient temple — upon the altar and behind the veil.

The unhewn rock on which the pillar of fire rests signifies both the altar, the beginning, and the Holy of Holies, the end of a ritual life journey. As noted above, the altar was located on Mount Moriah in the very spot where Adam and Eve were thought to have first offered a sacrifice after being cast out of the Garden of Eden and where Abraham sacrificed Isaac. It is on this spot that our journey back to the Tree of Life and the presence of God begins, with sacrifices that symbolize Christ’s atonement.

By appearing to Lehi as a fire that burns on an unhewn stone like that of the temple altar, Yahweh marks himself in this first vision as the proxy who replaced Isaac, the ultimate holocaust sin offering, the promised Messiah Redeemer who mediates our return through the veil into the Holy of Holies and the presence of God.<sup>54</sup> El marks himself in this vision as the King of Heaven. In addition to signifying the temple altar, the rock in Lehi’s vision signifies the *eben shetiya*, the raw foundation stone behind the temple veil upon which rested the Holy of Holies, the ark of the covenant, and the mercy seat — the earthly throne of the Elohim. The *eben shetiya*, often called simply the *Rock*, is located today beneath

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54. The rock altar is the Old Testament equivalent of the New Testament cross. It may signify an unhewn stone upon which Christ leaned as he suffered the sins of the world in the Garden of Gethsemane. Adam S. Miller also reads the stone on which the pillar of fire appears as an unhewn altar on which holocaust offerings are made. He links it with other occasions when God manifests himself as a pillar of fire (Exodus 13: 21) or as fire descending from heaven to rest on rock altars (Leviticus 9:23–24; 2 Chronicles 7:1–2; Judges 13:19–20; 1 Kings 18:37–39). Adam S. Miller, *Future Mormon: Essays in Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2016), 15–18.

the Dome of the Rock on Mount Moriah and remains a sacred place for Jews, Christians, and Muslims.<sup>55</sup>

This reading of the first vision in the Book of Mormon and the supposition that Lehi believed in the old theology are supported when Lehi returns home and casts himself upon his bed. The vision resumes, the heavens again open, and Lehi sees “God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels” (1 Nephi 1:8). This is the El of the *Sôd*, the corporeal Lord of Hosts celebrated in the old theology. In token of El’s desire to exalt him, Lehi has been invited to look into the *Sôd*. The heavenly throne Lehi sees is twin to the earthly throne, the mercy seat that rests upon the Rock, the *eben shetiya* (Isaiah 6:1; Psalms 11:4).

Then as believed in the old Abrahamic but denied in the new Deuteronomistic theology, Lehi sees a God with God — *One* (in Hebrew possibly אביר, *Abir*, an epithet that always means Yahweh),<sup>56</sup> who descends “out of the midst of heaven, [whose] luster was above that of the sun at noon-day” (1 Nephi 1:8). This second God is linked, as often happens in the old theology, with the sun. Twelve angel figures, the host of heaven, follow after the One and, as is typical in the old theology, are linked with the stars: “he also saw twelve others following him, and their brightness did exceed that of the stars in the firmament” (1 Nephi 1:10).<sup>57</sup> Yahweh (and the apostles) who have descended to Lehi mediate between him and El. This pattern will be repeated in Lehi’s dream and Nephi’s experience of Lehi’s dream. Yahweh comes to Lehi, gives him a book, and bids him read. Having read its prophecies, Lehi exclaims, “Great and marvelous are thy works, O Lord God Almighty!” (1 Nephi 1:14). In saying this Lehi may praise the Son, Father, and Mother, the major figures in the *Sôd*. *Lord God Almighty* is the King James translation of *Yahweh El Shaddai*.<sup>58</sup>

The text then continues: “Because thou art merciful, thou wilt not suffer those who come unto thee that they shall perish! And after

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55. Wise Solomon built his temple upon a rock, the *eben shetiyya*. Matthew 7:24 may allude to the *eben shetiyya*.

56. The word *One* may translate the Hebrew אביר (*Abir*), which, as noted in the text above and footnote 30, is often rendered as “mighty *one*” in Joseph’s patriarchal blessing, as it is in 1 Nephi 21:26 and Isaiah 49:26. *Abir* derives from the primitive root אבר (*abar*), which signifies to *soar* or *fly*, wordplay appropriate for this descent from heaven. *Abir* always refers to Yahweh, as does *One* here. As noted above, *Abir* and *Eben*, Yahweh and the rock, are equated in the Genesis wordplay (Genesis 49:24).

57. Deuteronomy 4:19 condemns these linkages of divine beings with sun and stars that Nephi uses without compunction.

58. Nephi and Jacob also use this phrase, Nephi in 2 Nephi 28:15 and Jacob in 2 Nephi 9:46.

this manner was the language of my father in the praising of his God [Elohim, seen on the throne]; for his soul did rejoice and his whole heart was filled, because of the things which he had seen, yea, which the Lord [Yahweh, the One coming down] had shown unto him” (1 Nephi 1:14-15). If we back translate *Lord* and *God* through King James English to their Hebrew equivalents, we get *Yahweh* and *Elohim*. The Hebrew plural Elohim may refer to the divine couple, El and Elah. Having seen and heard, Lehi caps his testimony to the people of Jerusalem by saying that his vision “manifested plainly of the coming of a Messiah, and also the redemption of the world” (1 Nephi 1:19).

When Lehi’s testimony is rejected by the Deuteronomist leadership of the Jerusalem Jews and they seek to take his life, God validates Lehi’s exclamation — that God is merciful and will not suffer that the faithful perish — by fulfilling through Lehi the patriarchal blessing given jointly by Yahweh, El, and Shaddai to Lehi’s progenitor, Joseph of Egypt (1 Nephi 5:14).<sup>59</sup> This branch of Joseph’s posterity runs over the wall and is ultimately planted on a fertile new continent (Genesis 49: 22, 24-25).

### Lehi’s Dream

After fruitful Lehi runs over the wall by leaving Jerusalem, these important themes in the old theology are further developed in a second great vision. In this second vision, Lehi’s dream, the old theology seems to be again affirmed and the new theology rejected. This meaning of the dream will be more apparent if we recognize that it is set in the Jerusalem Lehi knew so well and reflects events then occurring there. The highest point in Lehi’s Jerusalem is Mount Moriah, where the temple sat, temples being archetypically located in a high place. On the east side, the temple mount declined steeply into the narrow Kidron valley and then ascended up the slope of the Mount of Olives. Water flowed through the Kidron valley.

In the dream, there is a great and spacious building high in the air that is full of mocking people who are dressed in fine clothing. The highest and, other than the king’s palace, the greatest and most spacious building known to Lehi was Solomon’s temple, then completely controlled, as was the palace, by the Deuteronomists. The priests in the temple were instructed to wear fine clothing (Exodus 28:5-8, 39; 39:27-29), and among those who rejected the warnings of prophets like Lehi, 2 Chronicles tells us, were “the chief of the priests” (36:14-16). The large middle room of the temple was called the *Hekal*, a word also commonly used to refer to the

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59. See Michael Austin, “How the Book of Mormon Reads the Bible: A Theory of Types,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 26, 58–59.

entire temple or to any great building. If Lehi said *Hekal* when recounting his dream, as seems likely, the alternative translations of the word were “great and spacious building” and “great and spacious temple.”<sup>60</sup> The connection between the great building in the dream and Zedekiah’s palace and Solomon’s temple is supported by the fact that all are filled with people hostile to sacred trees and Sons of God, and all are on the verge of a great fall because those who are in them mock the prophets and reject their warnings (1 Nephi 11:36; 2 Chronicles 36:16-19). So thus far, Lehi’s dream corresponds closely, as dreams often do, to what he experienced as he sought to warn the people of Jerusalem and tell them about the Son of God who would come to redeem them.

Lehi’s guide in the dream is a man dressed in a white robe and again Yahweh acting as mediator. Yahweh will be Nephi’s initial guide through the same dream, and Lehi twice invokes the “Lord,” meaning Yahweh, before he beholds a sacred tree and the remainder of the dream. Eventually, Lehi sees the sacred tree on the side of the valley opposite from the great and spacious building. In Jerusalem topography, that places the tree on the Mount of Olives, where the Garden of Gethsemane will be located and where the Son of God will atone for the sins of the world. It was also the place where Josiah had chopped down an Asherah tree that had been located there, apparently, since the time of Solomon (2 Kings 23:13-14).<sup>61</sup>

In an act that affirms his belief in the older theology of Abraham and the appropriateness of worshipping in the groves of Elah/Asherah/Shaddai which the Deuteronomists are destroying, Lehi comes to the sacred tree and begins to eat its fruit, which is “desirable to make one happy” (1 Nephi 8:10). Asherah and the tree may be linked by Hebrew word *play*, the words *happy*, אֲשֵׁרֵי, *ashre*, and *Asherah*, אֲשֵׁרָה, differing only in their final consonant.<sup>62</sup> Nephi’s experience of the dream will later confirm that this tree is an Asherah that symbolizes the Mother of the Son of God. In the context of the time when the elites in the great buildings, the palace and the temple, were aggressively chopping down sacred trees, making that symbol salient for Lehi and his family, the tree is quite clearly a high-place grove. Lehi is practicing the old-time religion that includes worship of Elah and the bene Elohim; and Yahweh is the mediator who has led him to the tree, to his Heavenly Mother, and to

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60. See Butler, *Plain and Precious Things*, 57.

61. The “mount of corruption” is the Mount of Olives. The word *groves* translates the Hebrew word אֲשֵׁרָה, *Asherah*.

62. Peterson points out the possible word play. “Nephi and His Asherah,” 24.

the fruit that comes from her, Yahweh himself being the fruit.<sup>63</sup> Details support the supposition that Yahweh is the fruit. The fruit Lehi eats is “sweet, above all that I had ever before tasted [and] white, to exceed all the whiteness that I had ever seen” (1 Nephi 8:11). The superlative *sweetness* and *whiteness* of the fruit signifies that it is a thing of heaven. The only white thing mentioned before as part of the dream is the white robe of the guide, Yahweh. So the fruit born of Elah, mother of the ben Elohim, whose symbol is a tree, is Yahweh, divine Son of El and Elah. The fruit Lehi eats is the body and blood of Christ.

Lehi next describes an iron rod that leads to the tree and numberless concourses of people pressing forward that they may come to the tree. But there arose “a mist of darkness; yea, even an exceedingly great mist of darkness, insomuch that they who had commenced in the path did lose their way, that they wandered off and were lost” (1 Nephi 8:23). As noted above, Lehi is at what seems to be the most consequential pivot point in theological history, the moment when the purge of the Deuteronomists enduringly obscures the true nature of God and humanity and in particular, our relationship with our Mother in Heaven. An exceedingly great mist of darkness that still swirls around us is an apt metaphor for the creed then arising which continues to affect our worship and which God will later declare to be “an abomination in his sight” (Joseph Smith 1:19). Reading the mists of darkness onto the topography of Jerusalem and what was happening at the time, they would seem to be product of the burning in Kidron of the Asherah and other temple vessels associated with the bene Elohim and the *Sôd* council, i.e., they are the monist doctrines arising to supplant the religion of Abraham.

Lehi concludes the dream by refocusing on the great and spacious building full of people whose “manner of dress was exceedingly fine” (1 Nephi 8:27). These people in a great, public building whose dress is what we would expect the Deuteronomist king, high priest, and community elites to wear, are scoffing, mocking, and shaming those who publicly worship at the sacred tree. Many worshipers fall away because of the social pressure against affiliating themselves with the tree, Heavenly Mother, and her fruit, the Son of God. This image apparently reflects what was happening at the time: the pressure elites were successfully putting on the

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63. Taylor notes that “up until Josiah there is no denouncing of any asherah at Bethel [the house of El, also known as *Lûz*, almond tree], either by Amos or Hosea, indicating probably that it was considered by Hebrews an acceptable part of the cult of Yahweh until the Deuteronomistic Reform.” Taylor, “The Sacred Tree,” 48, 50. Lehi’s behavior supports the view that the groves were an integral part of the Abrahamic religion.

people to discontinue their traditional worship of the *Sôd* Gods and, in particular, the Mother God Asherah, whose symbol was a sacred tree.

In the midst of the dream, Lehi, seeing his family in the distance, beckoned them to join him in eating the sacramental fruit. Sariah, Nephi, and Sam did. Laman and Lemuel refused, perhaps, as Rappleye has argued, because they themselves were Deuteronomists who did not approve of sacred trees and Sons of God.<sup>64</sup> Lehi, Sariah, Nephi, and Sam remained with the heavenly tree, the divine fruit, with Mother and Son. Their ending there, like Lehi's initial vision of Father El on his throne, suggests that this faithful family is building a relationship with Father, Mother, and Son and is being inducted into the community of the exalted.

### **Lehi and Zenos's Allegory of the Olive Tree**

Nephi gives three main accounts of his father's teaching (the dream, the olive allegory, and the last blessings/sermons). In each, the Mother tree is a core thematic element. Lehi's olive allegory teaching is very briefly recounted (1 Nephi 10:12-14). Nephi has more to say on the topic (1 Nephi 15:12-16). Jacob gives the full account, quoting Zenos, Lehi's fellow prophet and apparent exponent of the Abrahamic religion. In the full account, the allegory clearly describes the efforts of the *Sôd* to save souls. The Lord of the Vineyard is El. The Servant, a council composite,<sup>65</sup> is mostly Yahweh. The laborers brought in at the end would seem to be a mix of heavenly and earthly members of the *Sôd*.

The other key part of the allegory, the tree, has three distinct parts: a trunk and roots, branches, and fruits. The trunk and roots, four times referred to as the "Mother tree" (Jacob 5:54, 56, 60) and celebrated "because of their goodness" (Jacob 5:36-37, 59), seem to be Elah/Asherah. Zenos may allude here to the Asherah artifact, a common archeological find in the 600 BC layer of Jerusalem, which represents the Goddess as torso and head of a woman atop the trunk of a tree, hence Elah as trunk and roots. The branches of the tree are the nations/cultures of the world. The fruit is individual human souls. Thus, in this allegory, Elah/Asherah is portrayed as the spiritual Mother, not just of Yahweh as in Lehi's dream, but of all souls.

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64. Neal Rappleye, "The Deuteronomist Reforms and Lehi's Family Dynamics: A Social Context for the Rebellions of Laman and Lemuel," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 16 (2015): 87-99.

65. Jacob 5:21-22 is a poor fit for the Father/Son relationship, so the servant is probably a composite. See Val Larsen, "A Mormon Theodicy: Jacob and the Problem of Evil," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 15 (2015): 239-66.

In the allegory, the fruits go bad and the Lord of the Vineyard asks, “Who is it that has corrupted my vineyard?” The Servant replies:

Is it not the loftiness of thy vineyard — have not the branches thereof overcome the roots which are good? And because the branches have overcome the roots thereof, behold they grew faster than the strength of the roots, taking strength unto themselves. Behold, I say, is not this the cause that the trees of thy vineyard have become corrupted?

As the branches grow and become lofty, distant from the Mother root, they lose their connection with something essential. The implication may be that when separated from the Mother trunk and root by cultures that do not recognize her, the fruit, souls, go bad. As the Hebrew religion turns from Father, Mother, and Son to the lofty Solitary Sovereign of the lofty political and cultural elites, it apparently loses some of its capacity to save souls.

In his introduction to the allegory, Jacob seems to comment aptly on the Deuteronomists who are then rejecting the plain truths of the Abrahamic religion:

But behold, the Jews were a stiffnecked people; and they despised the words of plainness, and killed the prophets, and sought for things that they could not understand. Wherefore, because of their blindness, which blindness came by looking beyond the mark, they must needs fall; for God hath taken away his plainness from them [the Divine Family of the Sôd, Father, Mother and Son], and delivered unto them many things which they cannot understand [a Solitary Sovereign who is pure BEING], because they desired it. And because they desired it God hath done it, that they may stumble. (Jacob 4:14)

### **Lehi’s Last Sermons**

In a blessing/sermon given to his son Jacob, the next to last of his life, Lehi engaged philosophically the issues that seem to have differentiated his worldview from that of the Deuteronomists. Using abstract, philosophical language, he affirmed his commitment to the pluralism characteristic of the Sôd council. As a kind of pluralist statement of first principles, he tells Jacob: “It must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things, ... Wherefore, all things must be a compound in one” (2 Nephi 2:11). He suggests that a monad, pure unitary BEING of the sort that seems to be the first principle of the centralizing Deuteronomists, is nihilistic. “If it should be one body it must needs remain as dead, having no life neither

death, nor corruption nor incorruption, happiness nor misery, neither sense nor insensibility” (2 Nephi 2:11). Lacking any dynamic potential, any internal disequilibrium, this divine monad would be “a thing of naught,” a thing with “no purpose,” with no potential to be other than what it already is.

Lehi actually says, and a Deuteronomist would focus on this point in responding to his argument, “created for a thing of naught” and having “no purpose in the end of its creation.” To speak of creation, a Deuteronomist would reply, when talking about the pure BEING that is the I Am, is to miss the point. Yahweh is the one thing among all that exists which could never be created. He is self-existent, prior to creation, the uncreated and uncreatable ground of all created things. Given this reply, Lehi would have to admit that he spoke imprecisely, and yet his central argument would remain unanswered. Granted that it is uncreated, what reason would there be for the Deuteronomists’ monad of self-complete, fully self-consistent, pure unchangeable BEING to act? And what would it have but its own, completely finished and unchangeable self to act upon?<sup>66</sup>

Lehi flips the argument. For him, God is a being who always exists in community, in the Sôd, having the attributes of wisdom, eternal purposes, a commitment to justice and mercy that are the form of his relationship with other existing and acting entities. If, as in the monad, there is no underlying matrix of acts and consequences in binary opposition, with predictable linkages between them, e.g., between righteousness and happiness versus sin and misery, then there is no field within which a relational God can act. So that God will not exist and, therefore, will not create, leaving nothing extant to act or be acted upon, meaning that all has vanished, and there is nothing.<sup>67</sup> And that nothing is, arguably, indistinguishable from the pure, static, unchangeable BEING of the Deuteronomists. Again, by a different chain of reasoning, Lehi asserts that the centralizing Deuteronomists are nihilistic.

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66. The answer is *nothing*. The only thing outside the monad of pure being is nothing. Thus, in mature Deuteronomist theology, creation is held to be *ex nihilo*, from nothing.

67. Granting the important difference between their pluralist/monist assumptions, there is a kinship between Lehi’s argument here and Maimonides’ First Principle of faith: “This Creator is perfect in all manner of existence. He is the cause of all existence. He causes them to exist and they exist only because of Him. And if you could contemplate a case, such that He was not to exist, ... then all things would cease to exist and there would remain nothing.”

After making his abstract, philosophical statement, Lehi rounds out his pluralist theology of opposition by alluding to the great heavenly Sôd council in which Satan and Yahweh presented plans of salvation, during which Satan rebelled when his plan was rejected, having been found to be “evil before God” (2 Nephi 2:17). Satan’s rebellion created a symmetrical, oppositional relationship between the two most prominent ben Elohim of the council. Each being a prominent child of Elah, that opposition was signified by the opposition between two trees (both symbols of Elah) with their fruits being symbols of the two great bene Elohim who opposed each other. These trees mark a cycle of departure and return. We begin in the presence of our divine parents, signified metonymously by a Mother Tree (the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil), and we return to their presence, signified metonymously by a Mother Tree (the Tree of Life).

The richness and openness of the Sôd ethos is embodied in these trees. Having dwelled in heaven (or Eden) with God, we knew good in a flat, unidimensional way. But to fully comprehend what good was, we had to add another dimension to our experience. We had to taste evil. The fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is Satan. It is he that gives us the fruit — himself — and persuades us to eat it. Having eaten it, Eve knows who Satan is because she understands his essence, evil. Having encountered Satan, we have a new depth of knowledge about what good is, seeing it more clearly from its contrast with Satanic evil. Knowing Satan, having the taste of him in our mouths, separates us from the Elohim. But if, as in Lehi’s dream, we come to the tree in its other guise, the Tree of Life that bears its other Son as fruit, if we then eat the fruit of that tree, the taste or influence of Satan is washed out of us and we qualify ourselves to be reintegrated into the divine Sôd — but now having the deep, full knowledge of good and evil that makes us as one of the Gods.

Lehi may have had several cogent reasons to share these philosophical thoughts with Jacob. In his discussion of the need for opposition in all things, Lehi provides a rationale for the existence of evil in the world. Jacob is an especially sensitive, spiritual, depressive soul who is deeply troubled by the problem of evil. Lehi here helps him see the linkages between opposition and agency.<sup>68</sup> And Lehi may intuit through prophetic insight that Jacob will in later years be confronted by Sherem, an influential Deuteronomist theologian, backed by the second Nephite king.

In his final blessing/sermon (he subsequently blesses Laman and Lemuel’s children without any sermon), Lehi focuses at length on the relationship

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68. Larsen, “A Mormon Theodicy,” 39–266.

between himself and his relative and mission partner Joseph Smith. He cites Joseph of Egypt, who is their common ancestor and who foresaw their intertwined missions. Lehi and his descendants would flourish, write, and fall into apostasy. Joseph Smith would play the crucial role of restoring to them their words and, ultimately, their ancient, Abrahamic faith.

### **Nephi and the Elohim**

In his First Vision, Nephi sees what Lehi saw in his dream. But while Lehi's recounting of the dream reflects quite narrowly his conflict with the Deuteronomists in his time, Nephi's vision enlarges the meaning of the symbols with linkages to a wide variety of key events in the cosmic drama of exaltation and damnation. Indeed, Nephi explicitly links his First Vision with the expansive last vision of John the Revelator. Like his father, Nephi sees the sacred tree, but he makes its meaning more explicit. He underscores its connection with Elah, the spiritual Mother of Yahweh.

As the vision opens, Nephi is "caught away in the Spirit of the Lord ... into an exceedingly high mountain" (1 Nephi 11:1). This will be a temple vision, high mountains being the conventional temple location and the earthly threshold of heaven. As was true for Lehi, Yahweh, the mediator between heaven and earth, is Nephi's guide. He has brought Nephi to heaven's threshold. There, he asks what Nephi wants. Nephi replies that he wants to see what his father saw, i.e., the tree, its fruit, and a vision of heaven. His worthiness to enter heaven, David Bokovoy suggests,<sup>69</sup> is now tested with a question: "Believest thou that thy father saw the tree?"

When Nephi says "yea," it appears that he immediately enters heaven and the presence of the most high God. The Spirit exclaims, as if suddenly in God's presence, "Hosanna to the Lord, the most high God; for he is God over all the earth, yea, even above all." "Most high God" translates the Hebrew "El Elyon," the Father God who heads the Sôd council. The man Nephi, in a temple context like the man Adam, now appears to be in heaven in the presence of the Father and the Son.

As seems to be the pattern of heaven and the temple, the Son now gives Nephi a two-step presentation in which the thing first occurs as plan (conceptual or spiritual creation) and then occurs as act (physical creation). Nephi is told what he will see, and then sees it. The Spirit tells him: "Behold this thing shall be given unto thee for a sign, that after thou hast beheld the tree which bore the fruit which thy father tasted,

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69. David E. Bokovoy, "'Thou Knowest That I Believe': Invoking The Spirit of the Lord as Council Witness in 1 Nephi 11," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, 1 (2012): 1–23.

thou shalt also behold a man descending out of heaven, and . . . ye shall bear record that it is the Son of God.” In heaven where he now is, Nephi will first see the symbol of Elah/Asherah, the tree that bears Yahweh as its fruit. (He probably also [or instead] sees the symbol’s referent, Elah herself.) He will then see the fruit, Yahweh, descending from heaven. This juxtaposition of images is a sign that signifies something significant. The Mother bearing fruit, then the Son of El and Elah descending, could signify the heavenly, spiritual birth of Yahweh. This supposition receives support at the end of the vision.

In what will become the key structural marker in the vision, the Spirit now gives Nephi a command, “Look!” What had been described conceptually now occurs physically: “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.”

Nephi is still in heaven. The superlative descriptors, “beauty that exceeds all other possible beauty, whiteness that exceeds all possible earthy whiteness,” mark the heavenly aspect of the thing he now sees. These attributes, superlative beauty and radiant glory, are what we might expect to see if we were to look at our Heavenly Mother. In the remainder of the vision, the word *precious* will be used nine times to refer to things wrongly taken out of scripture. The excision of plain and precious things from scripture is one of the vision’s major themes. The frequent repetition of the word *precious*, first used here in the vision, may underscore the idea that knowing we have a Mother in Heaven is among the plainest and most precious things taken from scripture. (As we have seen, there are indications that Lehi’s adversaries, the Deuteronomists, did indeed scrub Elah from the text.)

The Spirit now asks Nephi, “What desirest thou?” And Nephi replies, “To know the interpretation thereof — for I spake unto him as a man speaketh; for I beheld that he was in the form of a man; yet nevertheless, I knew that it was the Spirit of the Lord; and he spake unto me as a man speaketh with another.” This verse alludes to Exodus 33:11, “And the Lord [Yahweh] spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend” and to the four other Pentateuch passages that refer to Moses speaking with Yahweh “face to face.” It suggests that the Spirit of the Lord with whom Nephi speaks is the premortal Yahweh. That supposition is confirmed in what follows.

“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.” Yahweh commands Nephi to look at him, but when Nephi does, the Lord disappears. The setting then suddenly shifts. Nephi is no longer in heaven. He is on earth, where he complies with the command. “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.”<sup>70</sup> When Nephi looks to see the Lord Yahweh, he sees instead a virgin in Nazareth who has the same two attributes that characterized the tree Nephi saw in heaven: exceptional beauty and whiteness.

Now on earth without a guide, Nephi next says, “I saw the heavens open; and an angel came down and stood before me.” The descent of the angel from heaven confirms that Nephi is now on earth. The angel asks, “Nephi, what beholdest thou?” Nephi says, “A virgin, most beautiful and fair above all other virgins.” This reiteration of her superlative beauty again links this young woman to the tree in heaven, but the domain of comparison for her beauty is more limited than that of the tree/woman in heaven. It is an earthly comparison, with all other young women, not a comparison with all things that exist.

The angel now asks Nephi: “Knowest thou the condescension of God?” Given the context, this refers to the birth or coming down of Yahweh as a mortal man. The logic of Nephi’s seemingly non sequitur reply — “I know that he loveth his children” — is probably the following: the greatest token of the Elohim’s love for us is the birth of their beloved Son that Nephi will next witness. As Nephi will soon make clear in his interpretation of the tree’s meaning, Christ the Son is the tangible manifestation of God’s love.

The angel now says, “Behold, the virgin whom thou seest is the mother of the Son of God, after the manner of the flesh.” If the Son of God had only one mother, this statement would have been unqualified. The qualifier “after the manner of the flesh” implies that the Son of God has another Mother “after the manner of the spirit,” the Heavenly Mother, signified by the glorious tree Nephi saw while still in heaven, from whom the Son

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70. Nephi here uses the same strategy Lehi used to connect things and show they were different representations of the same thing. Lehi linked his guide and the fruit using the whiteness attribute they shared. Nephi here links the tree symbol and what it represents, Mothers of Yahweh, through their shared whiteness. Nephi adds one other shared attribute, beauty, to make the connection.

descended. As the narrative continues, the mother after the manner of the flesh is “carried away in the Spirit” for a space of time.

The angel now, for the first time, repeats the command Yahweh had previously given Nephi: “Look!” When that command was last given and Nephi tried to look, the Spirit of the Lord disappeared. Hearing the command again, Nephi again looks and this time sees Yahweh: “And I looked and beheld the virgin again, bearing a child in her arms.” The Spirit of the Lord in this vision has sometimes been held to be the Holy Ghost.<sup>71</sup> Close reading makes clear it is the premortal Yahweh. Were it the Holy Ghost, it would have remained as Nephi’s guide. Yahweh disappeared at the command “Look!” in order to reappear at the repetition of the command “Look!” in new guise as the baby Jesus.

The angel now says, “Behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son of the Eternal Father!” The title “Lamb of God” is significant. It highlights the role of Christ as holocaust offering, as he who will shed his blood to purify the hearts of the children of men, a role alluded to in Lehi’s First Vision when the holocaust fire burns upon a rock. The phrases *Lamb of God* and *Son of the Eternal Father* are grammatically and semantically parallel with the definition Nephi will now give for the meaning of the tree, the *Love of God*.

The angel comes to the point: “Knowest thou the meaning of the tree which thy father saw?” Nephi answers, “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 [echoing Lehi’s *desirable to make one happy, ashre*, 1 Nephi 8:10]. And he spake unto me, saying: Yea, and the most joyous to the soul [echoing *it filled my soul with exceedingly great joy*, 1 Nephi 8:11].” This statement, rich in meaning, is linked to the Lamb of God, Son of the Father just mentioned, and to the fountain of living waters that is about to be mentioned as also signifying the Love of God.

*Love* in this phrase can refer to a person or thing loved, as when one says “she is the love of his life,” or it can refer to a feeling God possesses. Here, “a person or persons” is the primary meaning. This is apparent from the fact that this *Love* is an agent that acts. It sheds itself abroad. In fact, it is Yahweh, the Lamb/Son/Love of God, metonymically signified by his blood that sheds itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men each time they partake of the sacrament. This metonymic meaning is

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71. James E. Talmage, *Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988); Terryl L. Givens, *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Cosmos, God, Humanity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

marked by the word *shed*, a verb associated with blood in all but two of its 39 Old Testament and 46 Book of Mormon appearances (and the exceptions are also atonement related). Christ is the beloved of God who sheds his blood to redeem all humankind.

But the Love of God is not just the Son. In Lehi's account of the dream, tree and fruit, Mother and Son, are inseparable objects of worship. Here, too, they are confounded as the dual objects of God's love. As the vision resumes, Nephi underscores the fact that Elah, too, is the Love of God by equating the Tree of Life with another feature of Jerusalem topography, the Gihon spring. Spring and tree are the joint terminus of the iron rod: "the iron rod . . . led to the fountain of living waters, or to the Tree of Life, which waters are a representation of the Love of God; and I also beheld that the Tree of Life was a representation of the Love of God." The Gihon spring, a fountain of pure water that flowed into the Kidron Valley near the temple, was associated with the divine Mother and also known as the Virgin's Spring.<sup>72</sup> Josiah's closest ideological ally, Hezekiah, had blocked its flow, diverting it into the city, but in Lehi's vision it flows again into the valley. It is, however, displaced from the now corrupt great and spacious temple that is about to fall. It flows instead out of Gethsemane from the sacred tree. Both tree and fountain signify objects of God's love, wife Elah, and the fruit of her womb, Yahweh the Son.

Nephi next connects these pure, maternal waters by juxtaposition and textual echo with the birth and baptism of Christ. Earlier in the vision, Nephi characterized Christ's physical birth as "the condescension of God," bracketing that phrase with mentions of the virgin who would give birth (1 Nephi 11:14-20). He now echoes what he said there by repeating the phrase "the condescension of God" to characterize Christ's baptism, a spiritual rebirth from the fountain of pure water. Because it signifies birth, baptism is an inherently female symbol, and the associated fountain of water from which one emerges is maternal.<sup>73</sup> In the baptism described here, symbolically enfolded in and born of the fountain that signifies his spiritual Mother, Christ reluctantly begins the ministry that will end with him hung upon a tree, the other symbol of his spiritual Mother. Nephi later hints at Christ's reluctance to be baptized, saying that to be baptized, he had to "humble himself before the Father" and be "obedient unto him" (2 Nephi 31:7). This reluctance,

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72. Barker, *Mother of the Lord*, 82, 100.

73. Given this association of Heavenly Mother with the baptismal fountain of pure water, all of us are symbolically born again spiritually of our Heavenly Mother when we are baptized.

also evident in Gethsemane (Matthew 26:39), is understandable. Unlike all other baptisms that cleanse a soul from sin and are an occasion for joy, this baptism that makes all others possible loads upon Christ all the sins of the world.<sup>74</sup> As he surely understands, this baptism is the alpha of a ministry that will end with the omega of Gethsemane and the cross.

In Alma<sub>1</sub>'s restoration of the Gospel following Deuteronomist apostasy in the New World, Nephi's three related symbols — the tree, the fountain of pure water, and baptism — combine to reveal the purposes of the *Sôd*. At the Waters of Mormon, the place that provided Latter-day Saints with the historical nickname Mormon, protected in his ministry by a grove of trees at the edge of "a fountain of pure water" (Mosiah 18:5), Alma baptizes his people into "the fold of God." They thus join the covenant *Sôd* community, where they will communally bear one another's burdens that they may be light, mourn with those who mourn, comfort those who stand in need of comfort, and stand as witnesses of the Elohim in all times and places. By doing these things, they will be redeemed of the Elohim and be numbered with those of the first resurrection who have eternal life, the exalted life of a member of the *Sôd* (Mosiah 18:8-10).

When these same people shortly thereafter fall into the hands of Noah's priests and are oppressed by them, Yahweh demonstrates that they have joined him in the covenant community. He is obligated to them, as they are obligated to each other. Echoing their baptismal covenant, he comforts them: "Lift up your heads and be of good comfort." He bears their burdens that they may be light: "I will ease the burdens ... put upon your shoulders that ... you cannot feel them. ... And now ... the burdens which were laid upon Alma and his brethren were made light" (Alma 24:13-15). Unlike the Deuteronomist Solitary Sovereign whose glory is to stand alone, the work and glory of the Gods of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob — Yahweh, El, and Shaddai — is to ever enlarge the circle of their spiritual children who live with and are like them.

At the eighth command from the angel to Look, Nephi says, "I looked and beheld the Lamb of God; ... yea, the Son of the everlasting

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74. The links between Christ's mother, water, and wine are apparent in the wedding in Cana where Christ performed his first miracle just before his baptism, turning water into wine (John 2:1-11). Read through the prism of the Last Supper, water becomes wine, which becomes blood. (These links are particularly salient for Latter-day Saints, who use water rather than wine in the sacrament.) So we are baptized in pure maternal waters which are also the blood of Christ, and Christ was baptized in his own blood, an apt symbol for what he would suffer to take away the sins of the world. Cf. John 5:5-8.

God ... was lifted up upon the cross and slain for the sins of the world” (1 Nephi 11:32-33).<sup>75</sup> As in Lehi’s dream, so in Nephi’s vision Christ hangs from a tree (Acts 5:30, 10:39, 13:29), the cross. Here as in Lehi’s dream, Elah is connected with Yahweh as he redeems the world. She is present not only in her symbol, the tree, but in her surrogate Mary, who stands at the foot of the cross, suffering with her son (John 19:25-27).

As the story of Abraham and Isaac shows and as King Benjamin shows in his great sermon, the Father and Mother are an integral part of the Son’s atonement. Benjamin positions Christ’s parents — El the Father and Mary the mother after the manner of the flesh, who is surrogate for Elah, Mother after the manner of the spirit — in the midst of the atonement between Gethsemane and the Cross (Mosiah 3:7-9). This positioning of the parents signifies the involvement of the *Sôd* in Christ’s redeeming mission. In Gethsemane, the *Sôd* sends an angel to strengthen the Savior in his suffering (Luke 22:43). And as Christ hangs on the Cross, symbolically upon his suffering Mother, the Father who is in Abraham’s place but with no reprieve, sorrowfully wields the sacrificial knife by withdrawing his spirit from his Son, leaving him to exclaim, “My El, my El, why hast thou forsaken me” (Mark 15:24). This withdrawal of the Father pierces the souls (Luke 2:35) of Christ’s mother and Mother, who are with him where he hangs (John 19:25-26). It takes nothing away from the Son who fully paid the price of our sins through his suffering to know that he did not pay the price alone, to understand that all the Gods of the council were pained by his pains and suffered with his suffering.

### John’s Last Vision

At the 11th and last command from the angel to Look, Nephi says, “I looked and beheld a man, ... one of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. ... And I, Nephi, heard and bear record, that the name of the apostle of the Lamb was John” (1 Nephi 14:19-20, 27). Nephi’s vision is to be read as the companion piece of John’s Revelation, for “the things which this apostle of the Lamb shall write are many things which thou hast seen” (1 Nephi 14:24).

In Revelation, John describes literally what Nephi had described symbolically: glorious Elah and the spiritual birth of Yahweh in heaven.

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75. Ernest Martin argues that the cross was located on the summit of the Mount of Olives at the site of the altar of the red heifer where Israel burned sin offerings to expiate their sins. Ernest L. Martin, *Secrets of Golgotha: The Lost History of Jesus’ Crucifixion*, 2nd Edition, (Portland, OR: Academy for Scriptural Knowledge, 1996). The two sites most widely believed to be those of the crucifixion, Gordon’s Golgotha and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, are not on the Mount of Olives.

“And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars: And she being with child cried, travailing in birth, and pained to be delivered. . . . And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron: and her child was caught up unto God, and to his throne” (Revelation 12:1-5).

John notes the special hatred Satan feels toward his Mother, his special effort to make her hidden and unknown after he is cast out of heaven: “And when the dragon saw that he was cast unto the earth, he persecuted the woman which brought forth the man child” (Revelation 12:13). “And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she hath a place prepared of God, . . . into her place, where she is nourished for a time. . . . And the dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ” (Revelation 12:6, 13-14, 17). The Woman is the Mother of the Son born in heaven, but also as Zenos indicates, of all spirit children of God, and doubly so for those born again from the maternal fountain of pure water, the baptized, who then keep the commandments and have the testimony of Jesus Christ. Lehi lived in the moment when Satan’s war on the Woman, a key figure in the true Abrahamic faith, and on those who had a testimony of her Son, the Ben Elohim Jesus Christ, was most successfully prosecuted. In his day, Elah, who had been known to her children, was driven into the wilderness, where she mostly remains to this day.

But while Satan makes war on her, Mother Elah continues to play a redeeming role. As the last chapter of Revelation opens, she again appears in her symbolic guises as the Tree of Life and the fountain of pure water that Lehi and Nephi saw. “And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the midst of [it] . . . *was there* the tree of life, which bare twelve *manner of* fruits, *and* yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree *were* for the healing of the nations” (Revelation 22:1-2). Apparently linked to the menstrual cycle, this bearing of fruit is a birth, and the fruit that is born brings salvation. The setting here, Butler argues, is the Holy of Holies in the temple where the Tree of Life is represented by the Menorah and where the twelve fruits are the twelve loaves of shewbread, a food offering given to the Gods.<sup>76</sup> Like Lehi, as we come to the Tree of Life and partake of its fruit, we eat the food that makes us like God because that food is the atonement. Along with signifying the bread of

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76. Butler, *Plain and Precious Things*, 73–78.

the presence in the temple, these 12 fruits signify the sacramental bread offered to the 12 apostles at the Last Supper and to all of us each Sunday. As we partake of the sacrament, we eat the Last Supper, the shewbread, the fruit of the Tree of Life, all of which transform us, if we consume them worthily, into members of the *Sôd*, into the Gods that El, Elah, and Yahweh invite us to become.

### Joseph Smith and the Elohim

Exactly 200 years ago, the Restoration opened with Joseph Smith's First Vision and a hard saying. Joseph reports the first words Christ spoke to him as follows:

My object in going to inquire of the Lord was to know which of all the sects was right, that I might know which to join. ... I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong; and the Personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight. (Joseph Smith 1:18-20)

The modern church no longer emphasizes this declaration. It is not mentioned in missionaries' First Vision account, and in 1990, the temple ceremony was changed to delete a section consistent with this condemnation of other religions' concept of God. In a world that is increasingly and aggressively secular, contemporary Latter-day Saints tend to view other religions as allies in their struggle to preserve space in the public square for the free exercise of religion. Moreover, as two different articles entitled "Are Christians Mormon?"<sup>77</sup> have suggested, the distance between the Latter-day Saint understanding of God and that of other Christian denominations has generally narrowed in the years that have intervened since the First Vision.

These important changes notwithstanding, this opening declaration of Christ cannot be ignored, given its source and primacy in the Restoration. It says something noteworthy about how God looks at how we look at Him. In *The Christ Who Heals*, Fiona and Terryl Givens provide a framework for understanding the import of this opening declaration. The Givenses suggest that a wholesale restoration would not have been needed in the 19th century if Christianity had not lacked plain and precious truths. "The Lord's message to Joseph in the grove, using

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77. Truman G. Madsen, "Are Christians Mormon?" *BYU Studies Quarterly* 15, no. 1, 73-94. David L. Paulsen, "Are Christians Mormon?: Reassessing Joseph Smith's Theology in His Bicentennial," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 45, no. 1, 35-128.

disturbingly stark language, was that certain crucial, creedal declarations about Christian fundamentals were devastatingly, destructively wrong. . . . No religious contribution of Joseph Smith could possibly transcend in significance a restored knowledge of the true nature and character and conduct of God.” “Clearly, the Lord knew the religious world we have inherited from well-meaning Reformers is rife with teachings, assumptions, doctrines, and dogmas that take us further away, rather than closer to, the gospel Christ taught.”<sup>78</sup>

The foundational assumption upon which error compounded was the idea that God is the Solitary Sovereign, a transcendent being “without body, parts, or passions,”<sup>79</sup> “not then in space, but above space and time and name and conception.”<sup>80</sup> The Deuteronomists were the source and scriptural warrantors of that assumption. Their legacy of stringent monotheism, combined with the Greeks’ similar monism and disparagement of materiality, created pressure for early Christians to develop an understanding of God compatible with those theological and philosophical ideals. The paradoxical, nonbiblical concept of the Trinity, a Triune Three-One God, met these requirements and provided a foundation for further reasoning.<sup>81</sup> The Greater Apostasy thus provided the foundation for the Great Apostasy.

As noted above, Calvin worked out the predestinarian implications of these assumptions with impeccable logic. Augustine had earlier provided a congruent conception of humanity. In reasoning that became foundational in Western Christianity, he developed a theology/anthropology that coupled the utter perfection and completeness of God with the utter depravity and emptiness of human beings, who are universally contaminated by original sin.<sup>82</sup> These creatures had no capacity to become like God, but some could be saved by God’s grace and return to his presence to adore him.

Augustine, Calvin, and other like-minded reformers directly influenced the New England Puritans and New York Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists who contended for the allegiance of

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78. Fiona Givens and Terryl Givens, *The Christ Who Heals: How God Restored the Truth that Saves Us* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 3, 6. Some quotations are paraphrased.

79. *Ibid.*, 21.

80. *Ibid.*, 19.

81. See *ibid.*, 17–25.

82. *Ibid.*, 41–42.

Joseph Smith.<sup>83</sup> Speaking of the theology current (but waning) in Joseph's day, the Givenses write:

One can understand ... why God would have condemned such creeds to the boy prophet Joseph. For they declare our Heavenly Father to be arbitrary, fickle, as content to damn as to save, all-controlling and manipulative. He foreordains to damnation, without reason or recourse. ... These particular creeds emphasize his total independence from human concerns, human suffering, human conceptions of fairness, or human yearning to understand him. His counsels are "unsearchable," and his concern is only with "his own will." The ... catechism refers to his "fervent zeal for his own worship" and "his revengeful indignation" of incorrect forms of worship.<sup>84</sup>

The characteristic response to this God was fear, even terror. In his first account of the First Vision, Joseph reports that he suffered the anxiety characteristic of people taught that they were sinners in the hands of an angry God. That first account suggests that relief from anxiety about the welfare of his soul was the most salient immediate takeaway Joseph received from his experience. But an element of all four First Vision accounts — visitation in a pillar of fire or light — suggested that much more was at stake in this visit than the welfare of a single soul. Echoing Exodus 13:20-22 as in Lehi's vision, the pillar of light suggested that God's children in Joseph's time, like those in Lehi's, were sunk in darkness and that he intended to lead them, too, out of the darkness and on to the Promised Land. The most explicit message in all four accounts was the statement that the fullness of the gospel was not then on the

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83. Ibid., xvi. The Givenses note that the degree of deviation from original Christianity was roughly the opposite of what Mormons have often supposed. Eastern Orthodoxy, little influenced by Augustine, preserved ideas about the dignity/perfectibility of humanity (28-29) and the role of free will (34) that align its theology in many ways with the restored gospel of Jesus Christ (9). Thus, Orthodoxy shares the Latter-day Saint belief in theosis, though theosis cannot be as complete. For Latter-day Saints, God and humanity share ontology, so human beings can become fully like God. In Orthodoxy, God is ontologically different from humanity, so human beings can never be fully like God. Though it was strongly influenced by Augustine, Catholicism, too, was less dissonant with Mormon views than the Protestant faiths. On the influence of Calvin on Methodism, see Allen C. Clifford, "John Calvin and John Wesley: An English Perspective," <http://www.nrchurch.co.uk/pdf/CalvinAndWesley.pdf>.

84. Givens and Givens, *The Christ Who Heals*, 24.

earth. The most consequential revelation was the appearance of God the Father in the form of a man.

That most consequential element of the vision is also the most underplayed in Joseph's accounts of the experience. He does not mention it at all in the first account and passed over it lightly in the three later accounts, noting only that the Father appeared and spoke to introduce the Son. It is worth asking why this most important fact is so little emphasized. One possibility is that Joseph did not initially understand how important the appearance of the Father was. A more likely explanation is that he fully understood that the appearance of the Father was the most heretical element in the vision, the element that most put him at odds with the beliefs of all around him and that would most evoke resistance from those who heard him. God's appearance in anthropomorphic form collapsed the distance between God and man. It completely transformed both theology (our understanding of who God is) and anthropology (our understanding of who we are). Implicit in this initial revelation that God is anthropomorphic were all Joseph's most distinctive subsequent theological doctrines.

Since the existence of a Father strongly implies the existence of a Mother,<sup>85</sup> the First Vision appearance of the corporeal Father in the Sacred Grove implied the existence of a corporeal Mother in Heaven. Present at the First Vision by implication in the body of the Father, Mother in Heaven may also have been present symbolically. The First Vision is now inseparably connected with the Sacred Grove, a term with Old Testament resonance that Lehi would have instantly recognized. *Grove* appears in the Old Testament 41 times. In 40 of the 41, it translates some variant of the name אֲשֵׁרָה, *Asherah*, the figure understood in Lehi's time to be the wife of El. Lehi's contemporaries went to sacred groves to know and worship the being they perceived to be Heavenly Mother. As noted above, when Lehi worships at the Tree of Life, he appears to endorse that practice. An essential element of the Restoration inaugurated in the Sacred Grove — the place one goes to know a divine Mother — was the knowledge that we have a Mother as well as a Father in Heaven. Intimations of that revelation

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85. "Can you think of having a father without a mother?" Harold B. Lee, *The Teachings of Harold B. Lee*, ed. Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1996), 22. "Logic and reason would certainly suggest that if we have a Father in Heaven, we have a Mother in Heaven." Gordon B. Hinckley, "Daughters of God," *Ensign* 21, no. 11 (November 1991): 100, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1991/11/daughters-of-god?lang=eng>.

may be present in the name, known to all Latter-day Saints, of the place where the Restoration began: the Sacred Grove.

### Joseph's Last Sermon

In his last conference sermon, Joseph did for the religion of the patriarchs and Lehi what Calvin had done for the Deuteronomists: he provided a clear statement of their faith that made explicit important implications of their beliefs.<sup>86</sup> In that last sermon, the King Follett Discourse, Joseph noted the importance of beginning with a correct understanding of who God is: “If we start right, it is very easy for us to go right all the time; but if we start wrong, ... it is a hard matter to get right.”<sup>87</sup> With the theological revolution of the Deuteronomists, Judeo Christian theology took a major and enduring wrong turn. Twenty-five centuries later, the Deuteronomists’ misperceptions of the character of God and man were deeply entrenched orthodoxy. Thus, just as the political power of the king, priests, and elites had made it dangerous for Lehi to defend the old-time religion of Abraham, even so the entrenched orthodoxies of the Deuteronomists, now the old-time religion, made it dangerous for Joseph to promote a return to the faith of Abraham. Like Lehi, Joseph was surrounded and opposed by guardians of the Solitary Sovereign who would put his life at risk if he deviated from the approved dogma of

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86. Evangelical scholars, citing other prominent Christian and Jewish scholars, have acknowledged apparent parallels between Joseph’s beliefs and strands of Jewish belief not directly available to him in upstate New York in 1829 and 1830. “James H. Charlesworth, in a lecture delivered at Brigham Young University entitled ‘Messianism in the Pseudepigrapha and the Book of Mormon,’ points to what he describes as ‘important parallels ... that deserve careful examination.’ He cites examples from 2 *Baruch*, 4 *Ezra*, *Psalms of Solomon* and the *Testament of Adam*. If [the] world’s leading authority on ancient pseudepigraphal writings thinks such examples deserve “careful examination,” it might be wise for evangelicals to pay attention. ... Yale’s Harold Bloom is perplexed as to how to explain the many parallels between Joseph Smith’s writings and ancient apocalyptic, pseudepigraphal, and kabbalistic literature. He writes, ‘Smith’s religious genius always manifested itself though what might be termed his *charismatic accuracy*, his sure sense of relevance that governed biblical and Mormon parallels. I can only attribute to his genius or daemon his uncanny recovery of elements in ancient Jewish theurgy that had ceased to be available either to normative Judaism or to Christianity, and that had survived only in esoteric traditions *unlikely to have touched Smith directly*.’” Carl Mosser and Paul Owen, “Mormon Scholarship, Apologetics, and Evangelical Neglect: Losing the Battle and Not Knowing It?” *Trinity Journal* 12, no. 2 (Fall 1998): 179–205.

87. All quotations from the discourse are taken, not always in the order they occur in the speech, from Larson, “King Follett Discourse.”

the Deuteronomist Bible: “The doctors ... say, ‘If you say anything not according to the Bible, we will cry treason.’ Men bind us with [doctrinal] chains. ... The Scriptures say thus and so, and we must believe the Scriptures, for they are not to be altered. ... I am not allowed to go into an investigation of anything that is not contained in the Bible. If I should, you would cry treason, and ... there are ... many learned and wise men here who would put me to death for treason.”

This danger notwithstanding, in his last sermon, Joseph professed the pluralistic religion of Abraham that recognized the essential sociality of God and the governance of the *Sôd*: “In the beginning the Head of the Gods called a council of the Gods. The Gods came together ... to create this world and the inhabitants.” As noted above, *ex nihilo* creation was a necessary implication of the Solitary Sovereign. Joseph understood this. “The learned doctors ... say that God created the heavens and the earth out of nothing. They account it blasphemy to contradict the idea.” Joseph nevertheless contradicted it, asserting its logical opposite. The elements of creation are coeval with God and can be neither created nor destroyed: “Element had an existence from the time [God] had. The pure principles of element ... may be organized and reorganized, but not destroyed. ... They never can have a beginning or an ending; they exist eternally.”

Like the elements, human beings are self-existent and coeternal with God: “Where did [the soul — the immortal spirit — the mind of man] come from? All doctors of divinity say that God created it in the beginning, but it is not so. ... We say that God Himself is a self-existent God. ... It’s correct enough, but ... who told you that man did not exist in like manner upon the same principle? ... The mind of man — the intelligent part — is as immortal as, and is coequal with, God Himself. ... God never had the power to create the spirit of man at all. ... The first principles of man are self-existent with God.” Ontologically, God and man are of one kind. God himself was once a man, and human beings have the capacity and calling to be like God: “God Himself who sits enthroned in yonder heavens is a Man like unto one of yourselves — that is the great secret! ... If you were to see Him today, you would see Him in all the person, image, fashion, and very form of a man, like yourselves.” “He once was a man like one of us and ... God Himself, the Father of us all, once dwelled on an earth. ... Here then is eternal life. ... You have got to learn how to make yourselves Gods in order to save yourselves ... the same as all Gods have done — by going from a small capacity to a great capacity, ... from grace to grace, ... from exaltation to exaltation — till you are able to sit in everlasting burnings and everlasting power and glory.”

God's First Vision appearance in anthropomorphic form collapsed the distance between God and man. It implied that he is indeed our spiritual father, that as children have the capacity to grow and become like their parents, so we have potential to be like God. In this last sermon, Joseph made that truth explicit. What he did not explicitly state in the sermon, or otherwise publicly state, is that this exhortation to achieve theosis was as applicable to women as it was to men. But while he is the one, and only, Restoration prophet who did not mention Mother in Heaven publicly before his death,<sup>88</sup> probably due to fears discussed above, Joseph affirmed her existence privately.<sup>89</sup> His confidant W. W. Phelps wrote poems celebrating her just before<sup>90</sup> and just after<sup>91</sup> Joseph's death. And Joseph's plural wife, Eliza R. Snow, wrote "O My Father" near the time of Joseph's martyrdom, then stated, "I got my inspiration from the Prophet's teachings."<sup>92</sup> Most importantly, because he viewed it as being the most important part of his mission, Joseph affirmed the existence of divine couples ritually by capping the endowment with the sealing of husband and wife. A man, he taught, could not achieve the highest degree of exaltation without a woman nor a woman without a man (Doctrine and Covenants 132:19-20). If we must be sealed, male and female, to be exalted and attain the kind of life God lives, it follows

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88. All Joseph's successors have stated we have a Heavenly Mother. See David L. Paulsen and Martin Pulido, "A Mother There: A Survey of Historical Teachings about Mother in Heaven," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 1, 71-97. The Church's most basic introduction to Mormon doctrine states that we have "heavenly parents": *Gospel Principles* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2009), 9.

89. Paulsen attests that Phelps's presentation of the idea as a commonplace suggests that he presented what Joseph was known to be teaching. David L. Paulsen, "Response to Professor Pinnock," in *Mormonism in Dialogue with Contemporary Christian Theologies*, ed. David L. Paulsen and Donald W. Musser (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2007), 536-38. For Zina Huntington's testimony about Joseph's teaching, see *Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days, Vol. 1, The Standard of Truth, 1815-1846* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018), 404.

90. W. W. Phelps, "A Song of Zion," *Times and Seasons* 5, no. 3 (1 February 1844): 431.

91. W. W. Phelps, "A Voice from the Prophet: 'Come to Me,'" *Times and Seasons* 6, no. 1 (15 January 1845): 783.

92. Linda P. Wilcox, "The Mormon Concept of a Mother in Heaven," in *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism*, ed. Maxine Hanks (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 5.

that God himself is sealed and that the Elohim, the Gods, exist through the eternal union of a divine male and divine female.

### Conclusion

Along with priesthood keys, the most important thing Joseph Smith bequeathed us was an understanding that there is a community of Gods, that we are of a kind with God, and that the work and glory of our Heavenly Parents and Savior is to draw us into community with them such that we live with and like them. The temple endowment ritually enacts the process of theosis that brings us back into their presence. As noted above, the Book of Mormon, and especially the writings of Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob, contributes to the restoration of these truths. The visions and teachings of these prophets suggest that Christ is as bonded to his Heavenly Mother as to his Heavenly Father and that the Mother plays a role in our salvation commensurate with the role played by the Father.

But human beings have joined God in co-creating the world in which we live. And revelation is path-dependent. What can be revealed, understood, and accepted at any given moment depends upon what preexisting beliefs people have who hear the revelation. For two millennia, the Judeo-Christian tradition has been shrouded in the Deuteronomists' mists of monist darkness that Lehi describes so well. Even "Latter-day Saints are still too reliant upon the assumptions, the implications, and especially the language that generations of well-intentioned but misguided theologians and Reformers alike introduced into the domain of religious thought."<sup>93</sup> It thus remains an open question whether members of the restored Church of Jesus Christ are culturally prepared to fully emerge from the mists of darkness, ignore the inevitable mocking that would ensue from various great and spacious buildings, and more openly and consistently speak of their Mother in Heaven as Lehi and Nephi seem to have done. But ready or not, additional truths will be restored, very likely among them additional knowledge of our Mother in Heaven. Some of that knowledge may come to us through closer reading of the scriptures we already have. Other knowledge may come to us through revelation to living prophets and apostles.<sup>94</sup> As President Russell M. Nelson recently

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93. Givens and Givens, *The Christ Who Heals*, 3.

94. This article has an important limitation. The literary reading advanced here is a work of theology. As Adam Miller has noted, "theology is always tentative and nonbinding. Theology, though sensitive to what is normative, never decides doctrine." Its approach is hypothetical. Given the path dependency of revelation, theology may open minds and hearts to receive new knowledge by identifying

declared: “We are witness to the process of restoration. If you think the Church has been fully restored, you’re just seeing the beginning. Wait till next year, and then the next year. Eat your vitamin pills, get your rest. It’s going to be exciting!”<sup>95</sup>

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possibilities in a scriptural text, but the doctrinal validity of its readings rests, ultimately, on whether they are endorsed and disseminated by the men and women in governing councils, the appointed earthly *Sôd*, which is authorized to declare doctrine. On this as on other matters, the Saints will likely and rightly follow the lead of Church General Authorities. Adam S. Miller, *Rube Goldberg Machines: Essays in Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2012), 61.

95. Russell M. Nelson, Twitter, November 1, 2018, <https://twitter.com/nelsonrussellm/status/1058116730352893953?lang=en>.