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## Theosis in the Book of Mormon: The Work and Glory of the Father, Mother and Son, and Holy Ghost

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## **Theosis in the Book of Mormon: The Work and Glory of the Father, Mother and Son, and Holy Ghost**

Val Larsen and Newell D. Wright

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# THEOSIS IN THE BOOK OF MORMON: THE WORK AND GLORY OF THE FATHER, MOTHER AND SON, AND HOLY GHOST

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Val Larsen and Newell D. Wright

**Abstract:** *While some scholars have suggested that the doctrine of theosis — the transformation of human beings into divine beings — emerged only in Nauvoo, the essence of the doctrine was already present in the Book of Mormon, both in precept and example. The doctrine is especially well developed in 1 Nephi, Alma 19, and Helaman 5. The focus in 1 Nephi is on Lehi and Nephi’s rejection of Deuteronomist reforms that erased the divine Mother and Son, who, that book shows, are closely coupled as they, the Father, and Holy Ghost work to transform human beings into divine beings. The article shows that theosis is evident in the lives of Lehi, Sariah, Sam, Nephi, Alma, Alma<sub>2</sub>, Ammon<sub>2</sub>, Lamoni, Lamoni’s wife, Abish, and especially Nephi<sub>2</sub>. The divine Mother’s participation in the salvation of her children is especially evident in Lehi’s dream, Nephi’s vision, and the stories of Abish and the Lamanite Queen.*

This dispensation of the Gospel opens with two accounts of First Visions (those of Lehi and Joseph Smith) in which a prophet initially sees a pillar of fire or light and then sees the corporeal Father and corporeal Son. Implicit in the corporeal appearance of the Father and Son is this message: God is of a kind with us. He is not, as other religions teach, an entity wholly different from us. Like us, he is a social being who lives in community with others.<sup>1</sup> His intent is that we who are of a kind

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1. “Deification among the Latter-day Saints is not a matter of the lonely individual buried in contemplation. To become a god, one must become a god in the midst of family — as a husband, wife, daughter, son, father, or mother progressing with the family into higher and higher levels of godhood. Mormonism does not so much teach the deification of the individual as the deification of the family and the larger family of the church. Godhood is eternal communion, and

with him experience *theosis*, deification,<sup>2</sup> and become fully like him. Both Lehi and Joseph Smith are told that contrary creeds and associated practices are an “abomination” in the sight of God (1 Nephi 1:13, Joseph Smith — History 2:19).

The core of the condemned abominable creed is the false doctrine that God is infinitely and eternally, completely, and irrevocably different from humanity, the idea that he exists outside of space and time as pure BEING, as the only entity that fundamentally and necessarily exists,<sup>3</sup> all other things being created by him *ex nihilo* and existing only contingently. From this premise, it necessarily follows, as the rigorous logician John Calvin understood and argued, that everything happening in creation happens because God willed and caused it to be so.<sup>4</sup> This doctrine, Fiona and Terryl Givens write, declares “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.’”<sup>5</sup> It cannot surprise us that the loving God hundreds of millions have known intimately rejects as

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the increase of this communion with God and with each other. It is not just the rule and domination of other planets; it is the progression and infinite multiplication of love,” M. David Litwa, *Becoming Divine: An Introduction to Deification in Western Culture* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013), 203–204.

2. Andrew Skinner describes theosis as “the restoration of ancient doctrine, specifically the doctrine of deification or, as it is called in classical Christian theology, theosis — the teaching that mortals can become gods,” Andrew C. Skinner, *To Become Like Gods* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2016), x.

3. Keith E. Norman, “Deification, Early Christian,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1992), 369–70, [https://eom.byu.edu/index.php/Deification,\\_Early\\_Christian](https://eom.byu.edu/index.php/Deification,_Early_Christian).

4. If God exists outside of space and time, nothing that happens in creation can surprise him. He is the ground of its possibility and the cause of all that occurs. Knowing all that happens before it happens and being the sole reason why it or anything else does happen, God is the author of every good or evil act. Free will, the concept typically used to absolve him of responsibility for evil, cannot relieve him of that responsibility. He foreknows the choices of all his contingent creations and has the option of creating only those beings who will not freely choose to do monstrous evil. Thus, as Calvin argues with cogent logic, evil doers are predestined by God to do evil and to experience eternal damnation. They were created to that end, an end that somehow enhances his glory.

5. Fiona and Terryl Givens, *The Christ Who Heals: How God Restored the Truth that Saves Us* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 24.

an abomination this conception of him. Nor is it surprising that those hundreds of millions defy logic and, accurately, think of their God as an inherently benign Being who nurtures and blesses his children and saves all who are willing to be saved.

But while most orthodox Christians reject the impeccable Calvinist logic of their own position, many nevertheless insist that others must share their conception of God to be classified as Christian. Thus, Lehi and Joseph Smith's doctrine that God is of a kind with us and that through theosis we can become fully like him<sup>6</sup> separates Latter-day Saint Christianity from the other branches of Christianity and motivates the common assertion that Latter-day Saints are not Christian. Orthodox Christians may — indeed must — concede that the Restored Church of Jesus Christ does not differ appreciably from their own denominations in its teachings about the earthly life and saving mission of Christ. Were its earthly Christology the focus of their analysis, they would be obligated to classify the Restored Church as a Christian religion.<sup>7</sup> They

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6. "As the Son partakes of the fullness of the Father through the spirit, so the saints are, by the same spirit, to be partakers of the same fullness, to enjoy the same glory, for as the Father and the Son are one, so in like manner the saints are to be one in them: through the love of the Father, the mediation of Jesus Christ, and the gift of the holy spirit they are to be heirs of God and joint-heirs with Jesus Christ." "The Godhead, Lecture Fifth," *Lectures on Faith*, <https://lecturesonfaith.com/5/>. Note that there is no author specified for the *Lectures on Faith*. The official website of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints suggests that they were written by Sydney Rigdon but states that "the inclusion of the lectures in the Doctrine and Covenants in 1835 strongly suggests that Joseph Smith approved of the content of the lectures" ("Lectures on Theology," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/topics/lectures-on-faith>). The *Lectures on Faith*, according to the official Church website, was decanonized and taken out of the Doctrine and Covenants beginning with the 1921 edition.

7. Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997). For example, "Here in the area of soteriology we have again found much more in common than we expected to find. Both Mormons and Evangelicals trust that they will be brought into a right relationship with God by Jesus Christ, who is both the Son of God and God the Son. Both believe in the substitutionary atonement of Christ, justification by faith in Christ and salvation by grace. Both believe in the power of his redeeming blood, and both hold the conviction that there is no other way to be right before God than through faith in Christ. Both believe that our relationship with Christ begins through faith, but that evidence of the transformation brought about by the indwelling Spirit must inevitably ensue. If we do not demonstrate good works, some sign over time, of a changed life, our

classify it as non-Christian primarily because it rejects the Trinitarian formulation of the Godhead,<sup>8</sup> a variant of the Jewish/Christian/Muslim formulation discussed above in which God is a being outside of space and time who is, ontologically — in his essential being — utterly and irrevocably different from humanity.<sup>9</sup> Within orthodox Christianity, the eternal Trinitarian God may join humanity in history, incarnated as Christ, who mysteriously remains One with the Father who is outside of space and time.<sup>10</sup> But humanity can never transcend its contingent existence and join God as self-existent BEINGS, as true companions, whose existence is, like his, necessary and eternal.

Since that is true in the orthodox Christian view, a distinction must be made between *soft* (partial, limited) and *hard* (full, extensive) theosis.<sup>11</sup> The word *theosis* is a coinage of Eastern Orthodoxy, by all accounts a branch of Christianity. In Orthodoxy, theosis denotes the

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professions of faith are ultimately futile. ... Differences between most Evangelicals and Mormons include our respective assessments of (1) the possibility of responding to the gospel after death, (2) how crucial a role baptism actually plays in a believer's life and (3) many of the specific details about the nature of the life to come" (ibid., 186–87). Given the Latter-day Saint embrace of these core and shared Christian doctrines, it is inaccurate to say that the Restored Church is not Christian. The accurate descriptor is "non-Trinitarian Christian." On the other hand, differences persist. "Does God the Father currently have a physical body or not? ... Was God at some point in eternity past a human being like the mortal Jesus, or has he always been the infinite Supreme Being?" (ibid., 195–96).

8. Stephen E. Robinson, *Are Mormons Christians?* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991). Note that in addition to the rejection of the Trinity, Robinson gives seven other reasons why traditional Christians deny that members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are Christian. But as he notes in his conclusion, "Surely now it will have dawned on the discerning reader that all of the various arguments against Latter-day Saints being considered Christians, not one — not a single one — claims that Latter-day Saints don't acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord. Consider the enormous implications of this fact. The only issue that really matters is the only issue that is carefully avoided ... When the charge is made that "Mormons aren't Christians," the very first impression created in the mind of the average individual is that Latter-day Saints don't believe in Jesus Christ" (ibid., 111).

9. Ibid., 71–89. The Trinitarian formulation is a variant of the monistic conception of God the Jews and Muslim's have in common with orthodox Christianity.

10. Daniel C. Peterson, "Notes on Mormonism and the Trinity," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 40 (2020): 97, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/notes-on-mormonism-and-the-trinity/>.

11. The authors wish to thank one anonymous reviewer for suggesting this distinction between hard and soft theosis and another for suggesting the distinction be further defined by the words in parentheses.



beautiful, compelling idea that the proper telos of contingent human beings is to achieve, through the ministrations of Christ and the Holy Ghost, mystical union with God. It is not heretical to affirm that humanity may become maximally like God within the narrow confines of what is possible for a contingent being. But if God is the sole self-existent BEING who exists outside of space and time, it is heretical to affirm and logically impossible to cogently argue that contingent beings, the created creatures of the uncreated God, become — as Nephi and Joseph Smith indicate — fully like their creator.<sup>12</sup> *Soft theosis* denotes Orthodoxy's mystical union of contingent beings with the transcendent God.<sup>13</sup> *Hard theosis* denotes the Restoration's literal and complete

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12. Jordan Vajda gives an excellent review of the similarities and differences between orthodox Christian and Restoration conceptions of theosis, a review that underscores the critical importance of contrasting divine ontologies. “The [orthodox Christian] doctrine of theosis presupposes that there is a fundamental distinction between uncreated being and created being. God, that is, the three divine persons who are the one God, are understood to be uncreated and eternal. God always has been divine and always will be divine. Human persons, on the other hand, are created from nothing — *creatio ex nihilo*. They are forever dependent on God for existence. Thus, the divine nature, the nature of God, is fundamentally different from human nature, the nature of human persons. In fact, one can speak of an ontological divide or chasm separating the two: the former is unoriginate, the latter is originate. The [Restoration] doctrine of exaltation presupposes that God is of the same species as human persons. There is no distinction between uncreated and created beings or persons since all persons, divine as well as human, are uncreated. In other words, intelligence, the core or essence of every person (whether divine or human) is self-existent and eternal, uncreated and uncreatable. Through the process of spirit birth, intelligences are clothed by divine parents with spirit bodies and become autonomous, conscious selves. And just as with human children in relation to their human parents, the spirit children of divine parents possess the innate capacity, as a fact of their spirit birth, to progress and grow up into the likeness of their divine parents.” Jordan Vajda, “Partakers of the Divine Nature” (paper, FARMS, Provo, UT, November 3, 2002), 62.

13. Mark Shuttleworth, a Greek Orthodox writer, describes theosis as “the understanding that human beings can have real union with God, and so become like God to such a degree that we participate in the divine nature. Also referred to as deification, divinization, or illumination . . .” He goes on to describe it as “sharing in the divine nature through grace.” Mark Shuttleworth, *Theosis: Partaking of the Divine Nature* (Chesterton, IN: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2005), 1, 3, <http://ww1.antiochian.org/content/theosis-partaking-divine-nature>. Greek Orthodox Father David Hester defines theosis as “the gradual process by which a person is renewed and unified so completely with God that he becomes by grace what God is by nature.” David Hester, *The Jesus Prayer* (Chesterton, IN: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2001), 13–14.



transformation of humans — through Christ’s gracious atonement on which the transformation eternally depends — into beings who are in all material respects exactly like their divine Father, Mother, and Savior Brother.<sup>14</sup> The fact that hard theosis is an integral part of Latter-day Saint theology is now broadly accepted and institutionally affirmed.<sup>15</sup> When it became a part of Latter-day Saint theology is a more open question.<sup>16</sup> Most scholars believe it to be a Nauvoo theology,<sup>17</sup> a doctrine that emerged only late<sup>18</sup> in Joseph Smith’s life.<sup>19</sup>

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14. As Dallin H. Oaks has said, “Our theology begins with heavenly parents. Our highest aspiration is to be like them.” Dallin H. Oaks, “Apostasy and Restoration,” *Ensign* 25, no. 5 (May 1995): 84, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1995/04/apostasy-and-restoration>.

15. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Becoming Like God,” *Gospel Topics Essays*, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/becoming-like-god>.

16. Jordan T. Watkins examined many documents and journals and demonstrated that the idea of theosis was already present in the writings of Joseph Smith, the revelations, and even in the First Vision years prior to the King Follet address. BYU Religious Education, “Sperry Symposium 2020 - Jordan T. Watkins,” YouTube video, 53:02, October 22, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I0TOcwHF7KA>.

17. Joseph M. Spencer, “Faith Hope, and Charity: Alma and Joseph Smith,” in *An Experiment on the Word: Reading Alma 32* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University, 2014), 57–70, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1006&context=mi>. Spencer cites Boyd Kirkland, “The Development of the Mormon Doctrine of God,” in *Line Upon Line: Essays on Mormon Doctrine*, ed. Gary James Bergera (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 38, as an example of an article on “Nauvoo theology.” Terryl Givens mentions the idea that theosis emerged in Nauvoo in “The Prophecy of Enoch as Restoration Blueprint,” *Leonard J. Arrington Mormon History Lecture Series* 18 (Logan, UT: Utah State University, 2012), 8, [https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/arrington\\_lecture/19/](https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/arrington_lecture/19/). While theosis was strongly suggested by the corporeal appearance of the Father with the Son in 1820, that appearance was not reported in writing before 1835.

18. Litwa states that “[d]eification . . . is not a prominent feature of Smith’s early revelations, in particular, the Book of Mormon.” Litwa, *Becoming Divine*, 197. This contrasts with what Watkins states in footnote 16.

19. While he does not explicitly affirm late development, Andrew Skinner may implicitly support it in *To Become Like God*, which reviews the doctrine of and evidence for theosis, gleaned deification data from the Bible, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price — all the standard works except for the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon is not entirely absent in *To Become Like God*. However, it is not central to the development of the idea of theosis, unlike the other standard works, prophetic voices, the witness of Greek Orthodoxy, and other witnesses from the Protestant tradition. Its relevance to theosis is not fully

The central thesis of this article is that hard theosis is a Book of Mormon doctrine,<sup>20</sup> a doctrine that entails the existence of a divine Mother<sup>21</sup> who, with the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, facilitates the deification of her children. The Book of Mormon opens in *the* pivotal moment in theological history, when the ontology of God and the existence of the divine Mother are very much in play.<sup>22</sup> In Lehi's day, the pluralist theology Latter-day Saints continue to embrace was an old-time religion that was being displaced by a new, radically monist theology, ultimately understood to situate God entirely outside space and time. This is the theology, discussed above that by Joseph Smith's time had, itself, become the old-time, orthodox religion. Lehi's contemporary, King Josiah, ushered in this new, monist theology. Lehi rejected it, remaining faithful to the older, pluralistic theology of Abraham with its divine council, the *Sôd Elohim*.<sup>23</sup> While other readings are possible,<sup>24</sup>

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developed until the very last page of the text (p. 142). Building on an earlier quote by President Ezra Taft Benson (*ibid.*, 60), Skinner suggests that if we want to become like God, we should obtain charity by, as Moroni 7:48 teaches, praying "unto the Father with all the energy of heart, that ye may be filled with this love, which he hath bestowed upon all who are true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ; that ye may become the sons of God; that when he shall appear we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is; that we may have this hope; that we may be purified even as he is pure. Amen" (Moroni 7:48).

20. "But human deification is implied even in the Book of Mormon, which was dictated before the April 1830 organization of the Church: In mathematics, the so-called 'transitive property of equality' that if  $a=b$  and  $b=c$ , then  $a=c$ . At 3 Nephi 28:10, Christ promises three Nephite disciples that 'ye shall be even as I am, and I am even as the Father; and the Father and I are one.' Analogously, if those mortal Nephites will someday be like Christ, and Christ is like the Father, they will someday be like the Father. Though rarely emphasized, this verse, which builds directly on 3 Nephi 12:48 and 19:23, seems nonetheless to contain an unmistakable, culminating promise of deified exaltation." Peterson, "Review of Becoming Divine," 168. The thrust of this article is that there is more evidence of theosis in the Book of Mormon.

21. David L. Paulsen and Martin Pulido, "A Mother There: A Survey of Historical Teachings about Mother in Heaven," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (2011), 70–97, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol50/iss1/7/>.

22. Val Larsen, "First Visions and Last Sermons: Affirming Divine Sociality, Rejecting the Greater Apostasy," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 36 (2020): 51–58, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/first-visions-and-last-sermons-affirming-divine-sociality-rejecting-the-greater-apostasy/>.

23. *Ibid.*, 58–68.

24. The reading offered here is consistent with Margaret Barker's "What Did Josiah Reform?" and Kevin Christensen's "Paradigms Regained." For a summary of

the opening of the Book of Mormon can plausibly be read as Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob's polemic against the monist theological changes wrought by Josiah. Joined with the later, independent, pluralist polemic of Joseph Smith in the King Follett sermon, these Book of Mormon prophets firmly establish hard theosis as a theological foundation of the Restoration.

To develop our Book of Mormon theosis thesis, we first set the historical stage, focusing on Josiah's reform and evidence that Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob rejected it. We then discuss in considerable detail sections in the Book of Mormon that are especially rich in their treatment of theosis: Lehi's First Vision and associated dream, Alma 19, and the Book of Helaman. We also examine at some depth evidence of theosis in the lives of Alma, Alma<sub>2</sub>, Ammon<sub>2</sub>, Lamoni, Lamoni's wife, Abish, and Nephi<sub>2</sub>.<sup>25</sup>

### Josiah Purges the Gods of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob

To understand the theological issues in play as the Book of Mormon opens, one must read the text in *situ*, that is with an awareness of what seems to have been happening in Jerusalem when Lehi and Sariah lived there. The context is discussed at some length in the *Interpreter* article *First Visions and Last Sermons: Affirming Divine Sociality, Rejecting*

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Christensen's view, see Kevin Christensen, "Prophets and Kings in Lehi's Jerusalem and Margaret Barker's Temple Theology," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 4 (2013): 177–93. See also Margaret Barker, "What did Josiah Reform?" in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2004): 523–42, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BtFsFdINbN8>. Christensen's article is paired with one by William J. Hamblin that provides a more sympathetic, favorable view of Josiah. William J. Hamblin, "Vindicating Josiah," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 4 (2013): 165–78, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/vindicating-josiah/>. For a dispassionate review of Margaret Barker's work and various LDS responses to Josiah, see, Eric. A. Eliason, "Is the Bible Reliable? A Case Study" *BYU Studies* 60, no. 2 (2021): 159–81, <https://byustudies.byu.edu/article/is-the-bible-reliable-a-case-study/>. For a rebuttal to Eliason, see Kevin Christiansen, "'Paradigms Regained' Part 2: Responding to Margaret Barker's Critics and Why Her Work Should Matter to Latter-day Saints," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 55 (2023): 31–106, <https://interpreterfoundation.org/twenty-years-after-paradigms-regained-part-2-responding-to-margaret-barkers-critics-and-why-her-work-should-matter-to-latter-day-saints/>.

25. Subscripts following names are used in this manner: The first person with a name is never subscripted, but all other people with the same name will have a subscript, e.g., Alma and Alma<sub>2</sub>.

*the Greater Apostasy*, which describes the religion of Abraham and the Deuteronomist changes Josiah made in it. Abraham's religion is described as follows:

[T]he 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. 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 [aka, Asherah or Shaddai], the wife of El the king; the *bene Elohim*, the sons and daughters of El; *noble and great* heavenly servants, e.g., the *malākîm* or angels; and various representatives of the divine army, the host of heaven, El being the Lord of Hosts. These and other participants in the court were part of the  $\text{לְוִי}$ , *Sôd*, the governing council, who shared to one degree or another the divinity of El and the governance of El's kingdom.<sup>26</sup>

In this older theology, the ontology of El is not radically different from that of his wife, sons and daughters, and servants. While this divine community, the *Sôd Elohim*, council of gods, is obviously hierarchical, its members seem to be similar in appearance to each other and to human beings. Thus, when Jacob wrestles God face to face at *Peniel* (*face of God*), El is initially described as an unspecified  $\text{אִישׁ}$ , *'ish*, man, a confounding of God and man that suggest God is, in form and essence, much like Jacob (Genesis 32:22–31). God's willingness to wrestle Jacob as one man might wrestle another may likewise suggest ontological equivalence between God and his human son, Jacob.<sup>27</sup>

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26. Larsen, "First Visions and Last Sermons," 45–46.

27. For Latter-day Saints, this encounter with God, in which Jacob receives a new name, has temple significance that has been noted by various scholars. Those temple meanings underscore a premise of this article, that God is personally involved in transforming his children into beings who are like him. See Matthew L. Bowen, "And There Wrestled a Man with Him' (Genesis 32:24): Enos's Adaptations of the Onomastic Wordplay of Genesis," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 10 (2014): 151–80, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/and-there-wrestled-a-man-with-him-genesis-3224-enos-adaptations-of-the-onomastic-wordplay-of-genesis/>. See also Stephen D. Ricks, "The Sacred Embrace and the Sacred Handclasp in Ancient Mediterranean Religions": *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 37 (2020): 319–30, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-sacred-embrace-and-the-sacred-handclasp-in-ancient-mediterranean-religions/>. Given that this episode includes the giving of a new name to Jacob (symbolizing Jacob's entering a new, higher stage in his life) and God's hesitance

The ontological equality that is strongly implied here — e.g., corporeality and sociality of God with God and God with human beings — is crystalized in what some scholars call “Divine Kinsman theology,”<sup>28</sup> the idea that human beings have a kind of blood relationship with God. Some biblical names seem to reflect this theology. Human kinship with the Father is reflected in the name *Abiel*, which translates as *El is my Father*. Human kinship with the Son is reflected in the name *Ahijah*, which translates *Yahweh is my Brother*. Human kinship with the divine Mother is reflected in the name *Ammishaddai*, which translates *Shaddai is my kin or the people of Shaddai*.<sup>29</sup> Human kinship with the Mother may also be implied when Leah calls herself happy, אֲשֶׁרִי, and names her surrogate son Asher, אֲשֶׁר, probably to honor the divine Mother, Asherah, אֲשֶׁרָה, who as Shaddai, שְׁדַי, “shall bless thee with ... blessings of the breasts [שְׁדַיִם, shaddaim] and of the womb” (Genesis 49:25).<sup>30</sup> Kinship theology suggests that theosis, if it occurs, would, presumptively, be hard theosis.

But while Lehi lived in Jerusalem, the theology of Israel changed dramatically. During a renovation of the temple, Hilkiyah, the high priest found (or some think, wrote, because it greatly enhanced his

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to disclose his name, may we not also understand the Hebrew *yē'āvēq* (“wrestle”) in an additional sense of “embrace?” Nibley also makes this point: “[T]he word conventionally translated as ‘wrestled (*yē'āvēq*)’ can just as well mean ‘embraced,’” Hugh W. Nibley, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment, Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* 16 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 434.

28. Christopher B. Hayes, “‘Lest Ye Perish in the Way’: Ritual and Kinship in Exodus 4:24–26,” *Hebrew Studies* 48 (2007): 39–54. See also Frank Moore Cross, *From Epic to Canon: History and Literature in Ancient Israel* (Baltimore, MD: JHU Press, 2000), 12, and Matthew L. Bowen, “‘My People Are Willing’: The Mention of Aminadab in the Narrative Context of Helaman 5–6,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 19 (2016): 92, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/my-people-are-willing-the-mention-of-aminadab-in-the-narrative-context-of-helaman-5-6/>.

29. Bowen, “My People Are Willing,” 86n13 and 92n33. Bowen notes that the name *Abiel* is attested in the Old Testament in Numbers 13:12; 2 Samuel 9:4–5; 17:27; and 1 Chronicles 3:5; 26:5; *Ammishaddai* is referenced in Numbers 1:12; 2:25; 7:66, 71; and 10:25; and *Ahijah* is found in 1 Kings 11:29–30; 12:15; 14:2–6, 18; 1 Kings 15:27, 29, 33; 21:22; 2 Kings 9:9; 1 Chronicles 2:25; 11:36; 26:20; 2 Chronicles 9:29; 10:15; and Nehemiah 10:26.

30. These blessings come from the Almighty, in Hebrew, *Shaddai*, with word play connecting the Goddess with breasts, *shaddaim*. *Shaddai* is an alternative name for the divine Mother, Asherah.



power)<sup>31</sup> the Book of the Law, which many scholars believe to be part of the current book of Deuteronomy. The book condemned Israel for worshipping the gods of the *Sôd*. It predicted that Josiah's kingdom would be destroyed because the people did not strictly keep the Law of Moses and worship Yahweh alone. Hilkiah gave the book to Shaphan the Scribe who, accompanied by Ahikam, Achbor, and Asahiah, carried it to King Josiah. Upon hearing the book's content, Josiah rent his clothes, then initiated a violent theological and social reform.

In a multidimensional push to centralize theology, ritual, worship, and governance, Josiah took things in hand (2 Kings 23:4-20). The Jerusalem temple was full of things associated with members of the *Sôd*. He destroyed them. He dragged the Asherah [Mother in Heaven] statue — in the temple for at least 236 of its 370 years — down into the Kidron valley and burned it. He destroyed all the ancient temples and sacred groves in the high 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” [symbol of Asherah] (Jacob 5:54-60). If Josiah didn't kill Zenos and Zenock, he would have if they had been alive teaching these things during his reign.<sup>32</sup>

This theological revolution replaced the corporeal, pluralistic Divine Kinsmen of the *Sôd* and their Heavenly Host<sup>33</sup> with a Solitary Sovereign,

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31. For example, see L. W. Batten, “The Origin and Character of Deuteronomy,” *The Biblical World* 11, no. 4 (1898): 246–54, <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/472239>.

32. Val Larsen, “First Visions and Last Sermons,” 53–54.

33. Josian reforms “forbad veneration of the heavenly hosts ... even though ‘LORD of Hosts’ was an ancient temple title for the God of Israel, who Isaiah had seen in the temple and described as ‘the King, the LORD of Hosts’ (Isaiah 6:5).” ...

the transcendent One God, Yahweh. The reasoning behind the change 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. 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. This monistic way of thinking about God as pure BEING, as the ground of all being, makes him abstract, transcendent, prior to and separate from all created things.<sup>34</sup>

Lehi seems to allude to and deprecate this new, monist theology when, in what may be the most philosophical, metaphysical passage in all scripture, he asserts the need for "opposition in all things," that "all things must be a compound," that pure Oneness is nihilistic, for "if it should be one body it must remain as dead, having no life, neither death, nor corruption nor incorruption." Without plurality, Lehi says, "there is no God. And if there is no God we are not, neither the earth; ... wherefore, all things must have vanished away" (2 Nephi 2:11, 13). For Lehi, a monist metaphysics like that of Josiah is nihilistic and fundamentally false.

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"Fourth, they were not to look up to the sun, moon and stars, the host of heaven, lest they be tempted to worship them, and the punishment for such worship was death by stoning (Deuteronomy 17:2-5). The ancient title for the LORD, however, had been LORD of Hosts — the same heavenly hosts — a title that appears 56 times in Isaiah 1-39, 40 times in Jeremiah, and 42 times in Zechariah, but only 6 times in Isaiah 40-55 and not at all in Ezekiel. It seems that the title LORD of Hosts had characterized the Zion and temple tradition of the monarchy, hence its use by Isaiah of Jerusalem, and by Zechariah who was trying to reestablish this after the exile. Its absence from Ezekiel, who was a temple priest immediately after Josiah's changes and went into exile (Ezek. 1:3), suggests that he had adopted new ways and abandoned the hosts. In ancient poetry, the hosts were the stars, but they fought the wars of the LORD and so must have been warrior angels (e.g., Judges 5:20, 23)." Margaret Barker, *The Mother of the Lord* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 32, 35.

34. Val Larsen, "First Visions and Last Sermons," 55-56.



The person Lehi was speaking to as he made this argument, his son Jacob, also seems to allude to and deprecate this change in theology. In his introduction to the martyr Zenos's Allegory of the Olive, in which God portrays himself<sup>35</sup> as a social being working with other similar beings, Jacob wrote (interpolations added):

[Josiah's Jerusalem] Jews were a stiffnecked people; and they despised the words of plainness, and killed the prophets [Zenos and Zenoch], and sought for things that they could not understand [a radically other, Solitary God]. Wherefore, because of their blindness, which blindness came by looking beyond the mark [Gods in form like us], they must needs fall; for God hath taken away his plainness from them [the *Sôd Elohim* with its Divine Family (Father, Mother, Son) and Heavenly Host], and delivered unto them many things which they cannot understand [a Solitary Sovereign, outside of space and time, 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 son Nephi also alludes to and deprecates this change in theology as he opens the Book of Mormon with a Lehi experience — the receipt of a sacred book — which parallels the experience that motivated Josiah to initiate his Deuteronomist purge. All Nephi's Lehi parallels seem calculated to discredit their Josiah counterparts. They discredit them by having obviously superior theological provenance and diametrically opposite theological meaning. Thus, the initial location of Josiah's book is the temple, the house of God's *name*<sup>36</sup> where the mercy seat, God's symbolic throne, is located. The initial location of Lehi's book is heaven, the place the temple merely symbolizes, where the actual throne of God and God Himself are located. Hilkiyah, the human High Priest, chief administrator of the temple, sends the book to Josiah. El

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35. Zenos frames the allegory as a story told by God: "thus saith the Lord" (Jacob 1:3).

36. "Consistent with this Deuteronomist denial that God could be seen was Josiah's militant aniconism, his aggressive destruction of all images of purported gods. Likewise consistent was Deuteronomy's new 'name theology,' the repeated suggestion that it was the imperceptible, intangible name of God, not God himself as previously suggested, which dwelled in the Holy of Holies (e.g., Deuteronomy 14:23, 16:2, 26:2)." Val Larsen, "Josiah to Zoram to Sherem to Jarom and The Big Little Book of Omni," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 44 (2021): 222.

Elyon, the Most High God and divine High Priest, who sits upon the heavenly throne and administers heaven and earth, sends the book to Lehi. Hilkiyah gives the book to Shaphan, the scribe, who carries it to Josiah accompanied by other scribes. These scribes bearing and reading texts mark the advent of a text-centered, sophic, rabbinic religion,<sup>37</sup> that will reject Jesus, God with God, when he comes to them in the meridian of time. El Elyon gives the book to Yahweh, ben Elohim, who carries it to Lehi accompanied by twelve of the Host of Heaven.<sup>38</sup> This divine Son and his apostle companions anticipate the advent of the mantic,<sup>39</sup> revelatory religion they will promulgate in the meridian of time. Josiah's book prophesies that Jerusalem will be destroyed because it believes in and worships other gods with God. Lehi's book prophesies that Jerusalem will be destroyed because it fails to worship God with God, the Messiah who will be sent to redeem the world, and who works, side by side, in heaven and on earth, with the divine Father, Mother, Holy Ghost, and Heavenly Host.

God's approval of Lehi and the patriarchs' theology and his disapproval of the new Deuteronomist theology is reflected in Nephi's contrasting uses of the expression *carried away* in his account of Lehi's First Vision. Lehi, he tells us, is "carried away" in vision to heaven (1 Nephi 1:8). He will also be carried to a symbolic heaven, the Promised Land. Those who embrace Deuteronomist theology, Lehi prophesies, speaking in the voice of God, will be "carried away captive into Babylon," a symbolic hell and striking contrast with Lehi's Promised Land (1 Nephi 1:13).

### Theosis in the Visions of Lehi and Nephi

The visions of both Lehi and Nephi are foundational in the Book of Mormon. The key to understanding both Lehi and Nephi is understanding the visions they received.

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37. The origin of Rabbinic Judaism "had its roots in the time of Josiah when the process of canonization of scripture started [and when] in national, social, and military matters the written scribal Torah already prevailed." Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomist School* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972): 162–63.

38. Read *in situ*, it is highly unlikely that Lehi would have recognized the twelve as future apostles. That is a New Testament reading of the text.

39. H. Curtis Wright, "A Sophic and a Mantic People," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (1991): 51–65, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol31/iss3/5>.

## Lehi and the *Sôd Elohim*

Lehi's story begins in the desert outside of Jerusalem, a prototypical location for theophany and the commissioning of a prophet, when a pillar of fire descends and sits before him upon an unhewn stone.<sup>40</sup> Evoking as it does the burning bush and the pillar of fire that nightly led Israel during the exodus, this pillar signifies Lehi's calling to be a new prophet who will lead Israel out of the new Egypt Jerusalem has become, then on to the Promised Land. Evoking as it likewise does the holocaust offering on the temple's unhewn stone altar and the *eben shetiya*, the unhewn rock floor of the Holy of Holies where the throne of God sits, this fire on unhewn stone likewise signifies Lehi's calling to be the High Priest of his people, one who will build altars, offer sacrifices, and lead the people through the veil back to the throne of God.<sup>41</sup>

After being credentialed in the desert as prophet and priest,<sup>42</sup> Lehi returns home, a symbolic act because he will next pass through the veil and see into heaven, our true home. He casts himself on his bed, then "overcome with the Spirit, [is] carried away in a vision." As we shall see through multiple examples, the enrolling role the Spirit plays is vitally important. The Spirit carries Lehi into the presence of God, whom he sees "sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels." The Spirit enrolls Lehi as one of the Heavenly Host.<sup>43</sup> As John W. Welch says, "he functionally, if not constitutionally, join[s] the

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40. Adam S. Miller, *Future Mormon: Essays in Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2016), 15–18. See also Val Larsen, "First Visions and Last Sermons," 59.

41. Don Bradley, *The Lost 116 Pages: Reconstructing the Book of Mormon's Missing Stories* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2019), 145–46.

42. Adam S. Miller, "Burnt Offerings: Favor, Afflictions, and the Mysteries of God," in *A Dream, a Rock, and a Pillar of Fire: Reading 1 Nephi 1*, ed. Adam S. Miller (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University, 2017), 17–29, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/mi/2/>.

43. "Following his interaction with the council mediator, Jesus Christ, Lehi could perform the very same act identified with the 'numberless concourses of angels' (1 Nephi 1:8). Given the way biblical prophets like Isaiah were seen as official members of the council, Nephi's account may suggest that Lehi had become one of these angels, or messengers, praising God." David E. Bokovoy, "On Christ and Covenants: An LDS Reading of Isaiah's Prophetic Call," *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 3 (2011): 38–39, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1016&context=sba>. See also Michaël Ulrich, "Joining the Heavenly Chorus," in *A Dream, a Rock, and a Pillar of Fire: Reading 1 Nephi 1*, ed. Adam S. Miller (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University, 2017), 111–23, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/mi/2/>.

council as one of its members.”<sup>44</sup> Lehi next sees One, a divine being, “descending out of the midst of heaven” whose “luster [is] above that of the sun at noon-day.” The One is followed by twelve other seemingly divine beings whose “brightness did exceed that of the stars in the firmament.” The One comes to Lehi, gives him a book, and bids him read. He reads that Jerusalem is about to be destroyed because it has rejected the One, the Messiah God with God, who has been tasked in heaven to redeem the earth.

*In situ*, the One and the Twelve who descend from heaven are divine members of the *Sôd Elohim*: a Ben Elohim and some Heavenly Host. Lehi certainly would have seen them that way. Nephi marks their membership in the *Sôd* by associating them with symbols of divine beings in the old theology: the sun and the stars, the very symbols Josiah took care to remove from the temple and destroy in the Kidron valley (2 Kings 23:4–6, 11).<sup>45</sup> The obvious divinity of the One who descends in this episode will later be underlined in Lehi’s dream. Continuing the mission there that he begins here, Yahweh will lead Lehi back to his *Sôd* home. The divinity of the twelve descending beings of light will also later be underlined when an angel tells Nephi that they will sit as last judgment judges (1 Nephi 12:9), a quintessentially divine role. Last judgement is the prerogative of the Father, who signifies the Son’s divinity by conferring that role on him.<sup>46</sup> The Son, in turn, signifies the divinity in the Twelve by conferring the judgment role on them. Like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the exalted 12 apostle judges at the last judgment “sit upon thrones, and are not angels but are gods” (D&C 132:37).

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44. John W. Welch, “The Calling of Lehi as a Prophet in the World of Jerusalem,” in *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann Seely (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 432, <https://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/calling-lehi-prophet-world-jerusalem>.

45. The Host of Heaven are framed as both servants or armies of God (1 Kings 22:19) and as stars in the heavens (Deuteronomy 4:19; Isaiah 24:21–23; 40:26; Jeremiah 8:2). “Ahaz had a strong interest in the heavenly host: the temple roof with its altars, built by several kings, was remembered as the upper chamber of Ahaz (2 Kings 23:12), and presumably the altars were for the cult of the host of heaven. A century later, such worship was condemned by Zephaniah — ‘those who bow down on the roofs to the host of heaven’ (Zeph. 1:5) — and by Jeremiah (Jer. 19:13; 32:29), but the heavenly host were part of the older religion. The stars had been warriors in the ancient wars of the LORD (Judges 5:20).” Margaret Barker, *The Mother of the Lord*, 93.

46. John 5:22: “For the Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son.”

Having read the New Testament, we, of course, recognize the Twelve as Christ's human apostles,<sup>47</sup> but they are not merely human. And it is very important for us to combine Lehi's recognition of their divinity with our recognition of their humanity. Lehi's First Vision is a temple vision, and in temple contexts a member of the *Sôd*, i.e., the archangel Michael, may create worlds as a divine being, then inhabit them as a human being. In temple contexts, the descending Heavenly Host Lehi sees, i.e., Peter, James, and John, may blur the boundary between heaven and earth, between the divine and the human, working to redeem humanity side by side with the One they follow.

The descent of the Twelve from heaven affirms two vital truths: a) the Twelve and all of us are divine beings passing briefly through mortality, whose proper telos is to rejoin the *Sôd Elohim* with our divinity fully expressed, and b) the Gods develop our inherent divinity by involving us in their divine work. Rather than reserving the soul saving for themselves, they involve all who are willing in soul-saving apprenticeships. Where their companions, the Heavenly Host, have the capacity to play a redeeming role, they assign them that role.

Thus, when the Son hands Lehi the heavenly book, he "inducts him into the chorus of angels around the throne." Speaking with the "tongue of angels,"<sup>48</sup> Lehi exclaims with that chorus "Great and marvelous are thy works, O Yahweh, El, Shaddai," praising the governing heads and loving core of the heavenly council, Son Yahweh, Father El, and Mother Shaddai.<sup>49</sup> "[F]illed with the Spirit of the Lord," i.e., after the Holy Ghost plays for Lehi its *Sôd* enrolling roll, Lehi receives the Heavenly Host honor of voicing God's word of warning: "Wo, wo, unto Jerusalem, for

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47. The word *apostle* and its derivatives are never mentioned in the Old Testament.

48. Several scholars have noted that angelic speech may be a form of deification. See Joseph M. Spencer, *An Other Testament: On Typology*, 2nd ed. (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University, 2016), 51–52; John W. Welch, "The Calling of Lehi as a Prophet," 432; and Neal Rappleye, "With the Tongue of Angels": Angelic Speech as a Form of Deification," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 21 (2016): 303–23, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/with-the-tongue-of-angels-angelic-speech-as-a-form-of-deification/>.

49. Lehi praises the "Lord God Omnipotent." These terms have corresponding Hebrew meanings that were translated into English from the original Hebrew. The terms can be back translated to recover the original term. Back translating these words through the King James Bible to the original Hebrew, we get *Yahweh* (Lord), *El* or *Elohim* (God), and *Shaddai* (Almighty).



I have seen thine abominations! ... Jerusalem [will] be destroyed, and the inhabitants thereof; many [will] perish by the sword, and many [will] be carried away captive into Babylon” (1 Nephi 1:13–14). So Lehi’s First Vision ends with the new prophet/priest cast as God’s companion and surrogate. Lehi has already modeled for us incorporation within the saving circle of love that is the *Sôd Elohim*.

But the vision is not finished. When the Son descends from the throne of Father El and comes to Lehi in that First Vision, he has a two-part charge. He will first give Lehi the book that will lead him out of Jerusalem. He will then fulfill the temple task of leading Lehi through life in a dark and dreary world and bringing him again home to the *Sôd Elohim*. There, Lehi will be incorporated in the *Sôd* circle of love through the ministrations of the two most salient objects of the Father’s love, the divine Mother and Son, Shaddai and Yahweh, who will henceforth be consistently coupled as they jointly work to save souls.

So having given Lehi the book that led him out of Jerusalem in his First Vision, the Son fulfills the second part of his charge in Lehi’s dream. This dream, to reiterate, should be read as a continuation of the First Vision.<sup>50</sup> Like the vision, the dream will begin in the wilderness and end at the *Sôd*. It begins when the One, the Son, still dressed in white as when he descended from heaven, approaches Lehi and says, come, *follow me* (1 Nephi 8:6–7). Lehi faithfully follows his guide for some time through “a dark and dreary waste,” wilderness symbol of a challenging mortal life. After many hours in this darkness, Lehi prays to Yahweh, “the Lord,” for mercy. His prayer is immediately answered. He sees a sacred Tree, set in a spacious field, whose fruit is “desirable to make one *happy*,” in Hebrew אֲשֶׁרֵי, *ashre*. Symbol and sound<sup>51</sup> link this Tree with Asherah, אֲשֶׁרָה, the divine Mother, whose symbol is a tree trained to grow in the shape of a menorah.<sup>52</sup> The Tree Lehi sees bears a fruit that like Yahweh’s sun-lustrous robe is “white, to exceed all whiteness that I had ever seen” and “sweet, above all that I had ever before tasted” (1 Nephi 8:11). The

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50. “[O]ne possible reason is that the revelations Nephi received in 1 Nephi 11 can be seen, in part, as divinely given interpretations of Lehi’s throne theophany.” Ulrich, “Joining the Heavenly Chorus,” 111–12.

51. The words אֲשֶׁרֵי (*ashre*) and אֲשֶׁרָה (*Asherah*) differ only in their final Hebrew consonant or, with English sounds, only in their final vowel sounds: -ee versus -ah. See Daniel C. Peterson, “Nephi and His Asherah,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9, no. 2 (2000): 23–24, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol9/iss2/4/>.

52. Joan E. Taylor, “The Asherah, the Menorah, and the Sacred Tree,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 66 (1995): 33.

Son is the fruit borne by the Mother Tree.<sup>53</sup> Thus, we have in the dream the pairing of Mother and Son, a pairing that will become a powerful motif that underscores the critical role the Mother plays in saving us.

Now having partaken of the sacramental fruit and been, himself, enrolled in the *Sôd*, Lehi takes up the Heavenly Host role of apprentice soul saver. He looks around and sees Sariah, Sam, and Nephi, who have not yet been saved. He beckons them in a loud voice to join him at the Tree and partake of the fruit, which they do. He beckons Laman and Lemuel as well, but they refuse to join him at the Tree. If we understand the setting of this scene, their refusal is unsurprising.

Lehi's dream has the topography of Jerusalem. Lehi is located in the one place where the divine Son and Mother might most aptly be worshipped — the Mount of Olives. This is the place where Gethsemane will be located, the place where Christ will ascend into heaven following his earthly ministry, and where, at the Second Coming, he will descend from heaven and enter the temple through the eastern gate, in one Jewish tradition, accompanied by the Shekhina, the Feminine Divine.<sup>54</sup> This is also the place where a sacred Asherah Tree had stood from the time of Solomon until the time of Lehi, when Josiah chopped it down (2 Kings 23:13–14).

On the other side of the Kidron valley, opposite the Mount of Olives, stands Mount Moriah, the temple mount, the highest point in Jerusalem, with the temple sitting at its summit. The great and spacious temple,<sup>55</sup> high in the air, and the other great building in Jerusalem, the king's palace, are full of high-status people, priests by mandate (Exodus 28:5–8, 39; 39:27–29) and princes by custom, dressed in exceedingly fine clothing. Influenced by Josiah, these Jerusalem elite, in buildings that will soon be utterly destroyed, mock, persecute, and kill those who, like Lehi, worship Sons of God at sacred Mother Trees. In response to the mocking, some who have joined Lehi at the Tree become ashamed and fall away. The responses of Laman and Lemuel and the unvaliant worshippers at the Tree have important implications for the location or

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53. 1 Nephi 11:7: "...after thou hast beheld the tree which bore the fruit which thy father tasted ..."

54. Howard Schwartz, *Tree of Souls: The Mythology of Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 55–56.

55. The Hebrew word translated *building* was probably *Hekal*, a word that can refer to any great building, e.g., the palace or temple. But is specifically refers to the large, middle room in Solomon's temple. See D. John Butler, *Plain and Precious Things: The Temple Religion of the Book of Mormon's Visionary Men* (self-published, 2012), 57.



boundary of the *Sôd Elohim* and for the ontology and moral obligations of the Heavenly Host.

In Lehi's First Vision, Father El and the concourses of angels were located in heaven. In Lehi's dream, Mother and Son, the sacred Tree and its Fruit, are located on earth. The important point is that the *Sôd Elohim* exists in both places. Its boundaries circumscribe all of heaven but also sacred places and people on earth.<sup>56</sup>

Moral agency also exists in both places. The Heavenly Host, as described in the Old Testament, are moral agents who sometimes act contrary to God's will<sup>57</sup> and are then expelled from the council.<sup>58</sup> The same is true for manifestations of the *Sôd* on earth. In Lehi's theology and ours, moral agency creates real drama, real joy and pain for *Sôd* members. For Lehi, this drama and pain is most manifest in his dealings with Laman and Lemuel. His relationship with these rebellious sons is an important element of this *Sôd* narrative because Lehi models the unfailing love that Mormon will later say is obligatory when *Sôd* members interact with others who reject them and their beliefs (Moro 9:4–6). That love is sometimes expressed in affirmation and praise, sometimes in sharp rebukes.<sup>59</sup>

Lehi and his eldest sons are at odds, much evidence suggests, because Laman and Lemuel are devout followers of Josiah,<sup>60</sup> the great reforming king of their youth. They agree with the people in the dream's great and spacious buildings. They testify, "we know that the people who were in the land of Jerusalem were a righteous people; for they kept the statutes and judgements of the Lord, and all his commandments according to the Law of Moses; wherefore, we know that they are a righteous people" (1 Nephi 17:22). Nephi confirms what they themselves say: "they were

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56. Someone might object that God must be present for the *Sôd* to exist. But as Mathew 18:20 tells us, wherever those committed to the Savior gather, he is there with them: "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

57. Orthodox Christianity views the Hosts of Heaven "as spiritual beings created by God which are either in service or rebellion against him" (Father Stephen De Young, "The Hosts of Heaven," *Ancient Faith* (blog), March 19, 2019, <https://blogs.ancientfaith.com/wholecounsel/2019/03/19/the-hosts-of-heaven/>).

58. For example, "a third part of the hosts of heaven turned he away from me because of their agency" (D&C 29:36).

59. E.g., D&C 95:2: "Wherefore, ye must needs be chastened and stand rebuked before my face ..."

60. Julie M. Smith, "Huldah's Long Shadow," in *A Dream, a Rock, and a Pillar of Fire: Reading 1 Nephi 1*, ed. Adam S. Miller (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University, 2017), 3–4.

like unto the Jews who were at Jerusalem, who sought to take away the life of my father” (1 Nephi 2:13). Laman and Lemuel behave as the book Josiah received mandates they behave. Deuteronomy 13 requires them to kill “a prophet or dreamer of dreams,” even one who like Lehi and Nephi “giveth thee a sign or a wonder.... That prophet or dreamer of dreams shall be put to death” if he causes you “to go after other gods,” e.g., Son and Mother Gods. And “if thy brother, the son of thy mother ... say[s] let us go and serve other gods ... thou shalt surely kill him” (Deuteronomy 13:6–9). Laman and Lemuel are motivated by fierce piety.

They predictably refuse to join Lehi at the sacred Mother Tree on the Mount of Olives because it is the Tree their hero had cut down. And they first rebel against Lehi when, imitating Moses (Exodus 3:18), he ritually separates himself from Josiah’s Jerusalem Jews with a three-day journey, then violating the Deuteronomist mandate that sacrifices be made only in Jerusalem and only by a Levite, builds an altar and offers sacrifices that signify the Son he worships (1 Nephi 2:6–7).

We thus find that the people and places in Lehi’s dream correspond closely, as is often true in dreams, to the people, places, and events that are salient in the dreamer’s waking life. Lehi’s dream has obvious local significance. The politicians and priests who persecuted him are there, still pointing and mocking. Total destruction impends for their palace and temple high on Mount Moriah. Mists of darkness arise from the Kidron Valley, where Josiah burned symbols of the divine Mother and the Host of Heaven. Dangerous flash floods flow through the valley, as does the Gihon spring, a fountain of pure water. The sacred Tree is on the Mount of Olives, where the Asherah tree stood for 350 years. Josiah’s disciples, Laman and Lemuel, being true to their Solitary Sovereign God, refuse to worship the divine Mother and Son. And the elites persuade many others to give up their worship of Mother and Son on the Mount of Olives and make their way back across Kidron to the palace and temple high in the air.

As his account of the dream ends, Lehi focuses on the most local, personal meaning of all: on the wellbeing of his own family. The dream ends with a family group — father Lehi, mother Sariah, older brother Sam, younger brother Nephi — standing together at the divine Mother Tree partaking of the sacramental fruit. But “Laman and Lemuel partook not of the fruit.” Lehi is preoccupied with their refusal to do so. Knowing that the tree and its fruit are essential for salvation, he exhorts Laman and Lemuel “with all the feeling of a tender parent, that they would hearken to his words, that perhaps the Lord would be merciful

to them,” but true to their Deuteronomist faith, they do not heed his exhortation.

### **Nephi and the *Sôd Elohim***

Fortunately, Nephi is not satisfied to see only the immediate, local, familial meaning. He has a burning question: what does the dream mean? He is full of desire to know any mysteries of God that are encoded in the dream, so seeks further enlightenment:

And ... I, Nephi, having heard all the words of my father, concerning the things which he saw in a vision, and also the things which he spake by the power of the Holy Ghost, ... was desirous also that I might see, and hear, and know of these things, by the power of the Holy Ghost.... For he that diligently seeketh shall find; and the mysteries of God shall be unfolded unto them, by the power of the Holy Ghost. (1 Nephi 10:17, 19)

In response to his earnest search for understanding, Nephi has his own visionary experience of the dream that reveals what its implications are for his immediate family, his future posterity, and all the world. Nephi learns that when the One descended from heaven in Lehi’s First Vision, he was charged to lead not just Lehi, but Lehi’s family, and all others who will follow him back to the sacred Tree. The Tree is the *axis mundi*, the point at which heaven and earth intersect.

Nephi’s vision begins where Lehi’s dream left off: with the family group of father, mother, older brother, and Nephi. But the group of related beings gathered at the Tree on earth is now gathered in heaven. And the divine destiny of Nephi and each member of his family seems to be revealed. The destiny of father Lehi is revealed when he is replaced by El Elyon, the Most-High God, model of the divine Father Lehi may become. The destiny of mother Sariah is revealed when she is replaced by the divine Mother, Shaddai, model of the divine Mother Sariah may become. The destiny of Sam is revealed when he is replaced by the divine Older Brother, Yahweh, Redeemer and Exemplar for Sam and all other human beings who are charged to become like him. Nephi is the one constant between the two family groups. His kinship to his earthly father, mother, and older brother is obvious. As he now stands in the presence of the corresponding divine Beings, he is transformed as each member of his family was symbolically transformed. His own divine destiny begins to be revealed. He is *Abiel* (son of the Father), *Ammishaddai* (kin

of the Mother) and *Abijah* (brother of the Son, Yahweh). He now has the experience not of the man he has been but of the god he will eventually become.

**Table 1.** Human Family becomes Divine Family.

Lehi's Dream Earthly Kin	Nephi's Vision Heavenly Kin
Father Lehi	Divine Father, El Elyon
Mother Sariah	Divine Mother, Shaddai
Older Brother Sam	Divine Older Brother, Yahweh
Nephi	Nephi
Question: What does it mean?	Answer: Theosis, deification.

Like Lehi, Nephi is led to the Tree by the pre-mortal Yahweh, the Spirit of the Lord, the One who descended in Lehi's First Vision. Nephi then encounters those whose names his father had exclaimed in praise: Yahweh, El, and Shaddai. He meets them not on the earth but in heaven, their and our true home. His experience begins when he is "caught away in the Spirit of the Lord, yea, into an exceedingly high mountain" (1 Nephi 11:1).<sup>61</sup> Now at the threshold of heaven, Yahweh asks him what he wants. Nephi replies, "I desire to behold the things which my father saw." Yahweh then asks whether he believes his father saw the Tree. When Nephi replies that he believes all the words of his father, the gates of heaven suddenly open and he is ushered into the presence of God. Yahweh exclaims "Hosanna to *Adonai*,<sup>62</sup> *El Elyon*," signifying that Nephi now stands before the Father, El Elyon, the Most-High God.<sup>63</sup> In the temple manner, Yahweh now gives Nephi a two-step introduction to the Mother, emphasizing as he does her close connection with himself. Nephi is first told what will happen. It then happens.

Yahweh says, "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, thou shalt also behold a *man* descending out of heaven, and ... ye

61. Verse 1 says "caught away," but in three subsequent references to this event, Nephi describes himself as being "carried away" in the Spirit (1 Nephi 14:30; 15:1; and 2 Nephi 4:25), aligning himself not only with Lehi (1 Nephi 1:8), but also Mary (1 Nephi 11:19), the 12 apostles (1 Nephi 11:29), King Lamoni (Alma 19:12) and Alma<sub>2</sub> (Alma 29:16), all of whom were "carried away" by God or by the Spirit.

62. The word *Lord* in the King James Bible translates two different words, *Yahweh* and *Adonai*. *Adonai* is a plural meaning *Lords*, which fits with the plural *Elohim*, meaning Gods. Thus, in this context, *Adonai* is more likely than *Yahweh* to be the Hebrew word that is translated *Lord*.

63. Neal Rappleye, "With the Tongue of Angels," 313.

shall bear record that it is the *Son of God*.” These words couple Mother and Son, marking how their actions are intertwined. And they confound *man* and *God*, an important motif, marking them as being of one kind. What Yahweh had described as plan, now begins to happen. “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<sup>64</sup> above all.” Still in heaven, Nephi has encountered the divine Mother, in person or symbol, whose glory and beauty exceeds anything possible on earth.

As he had stood with his father, mother, and older brother in Lehi’s dream, Nephi now stands in the presence of Father El, Mother Shaddai, and Son Yahweh. The divine transformation of each family member who stood with him partaking of the Tree in Lehi’s dream signifies his own transformation, a transformation that is underscored in text that again blurs the distinction between man and God: “for *I* spake unto him as a *man* speaketh, for *I* beheld *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*” (1 Nephi 11:11). Is Yahweh a *man* or a *God*? Is Nephi a *man* or a *god*? Both are both, or eventually will be both! And Nephi’s symbolic transformation is powerfully emblematic of the proper telos of all human souls. Each of us, like Nephi, are personally known by Father, Mother, and Son, and each needs to return to them and, having been deified, individually stand in intimate relationship with them.

Nephi now asks for a deeper understanding of the divine Mother/Tree who stands before him. To more fully reveal who she is, Yahweh commands Nephi to look at him, but when Nephi does, he disappears. The scene suddenly shifts. Nephi is now on the earth, in Nazareth where he sees a virgin who has the same two attributes that characterized the divine Mother in heaven, exceptional beauty and whiteness.<sup>65</sup> Nephi’s new companion, an angel who has descended from

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64. The word *precious* is used nine times in the remainder of the vision to refer to things wrongly taken out of scripture, a major theme in the vision. Repetition of the word *precious*, first used here in connection with the divine Mother, may suggest that Mother in Heaven is one of the plainest and most precious things taken from scripture.

65. While Mary is connected with the divine Mother by sharing the same two attributes, exceptional beauty and whiteness, for Mary, these attributes are exceptional by earthly standards. Mary is “most beautiful and fair above all other [earthly] virgins.” The beauty and whiteness of the divine Mother is transcendent,



heaven to replace Yahweh, who disappeared, asks Nephi if he knows “the condescension of God.” The phrase refers in the first instance to Yahweh’s sudden disappearance and descent from heaven to earth, but it is probably a double entendre. Moments before, Nephi personally experienced the “condescension of god” as he, having the experience of a god, moved instantaneously from heaven to earth. The angel now tells Nephi that “the virgin whom thou seest is the mother of the Son of God, *after the manner of the flesh.*” The qualifier, “after the manner of the flesh,” implies that the Son of God has another Mother, *after the manner of the spirit*, the divine Mother from whom, as promised, Yahweh has descended out of heaven.

Nephi now witnesses the virgin Mary have the same experience he just had. Like him, “she was carried away in the Spirit.”<sup>66</sup> Time passes during which she, too, presumably encounters the Father, the Mother, and the Son in heaven. This encounter reveals that Mary, like Nephi, is intrinsically divine.<sup>67</sup> “And after she had been carried away in the Spirit for the space of a time, the angel spake unto me, saying: Look!” The descent of the Son, which began in the presence of the Mother/Tree in

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“far beyond, yea, exceeding all beauty” and whiteness that exceeds all possible earthly whiteness.

66. 1 Nephi 11:19 mentions twice that Mary was “carried away in the Spirit.”

67. If Mary’s experience parallels Nephi’s, she stands in heaven with Father, Mother, and Son/Brother. The corresponding earthly group would be Joseph, the father; Mary, the Mother; and Christ, both Brother and Son. Given that she played a role in human history arguably second only to that of the Son she bore and raised, there is a strong *prima facie* case that Mary has the status of Heavenly Host. Details in the Book of Mormon confirm her importance and connection with heaven. She is linked to the divine Mother through shared attributes of beauty and whiteness. Her importance and tight connection with her Son is evident in King Benjamin’s great discourse, which positions God the Father and Mary in the middle of the atonement, between Gethsemane and the Cross. Benjamin says Christ “shall suffer temptations, and pain of body, hunger, thirst, and fatigue, even more than man can suffer, except it be unto death; for behold, blood cometh from every pore, so great shall be his anguish [in Gethsemane] for the wickedness and the abominations of his people.” He then pauses his description of the atonement to feature the Father and Mary, each of whom, as noted in the text, suffered with the Son. He then takes us to the cross: “after all this they shall consider him a man, and say that he hath a devil, and shall scourge him, and shall crucify him” (Mosiah 3:7–9). We thus find the divine agent of heaven, Mary, at both the beginning and end of the most important human life ever lived. Perhaps the elements of divinity in Mary are also evident in Christ’s instruction that John take her away (John 19:25–27). Perhaps as with the Father, she had to depart because Christ could not bear the sin of the world fully alone while she remained with him.

heaven when Yahweh commanded Nephi to “Look,” now ends. The angel repeats Yahweh’s earlier command that Nephi “Look!” “And I looked and beheld the virgin again, bearing a child in her arms.” The angel now says, “Behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son of the Eternal Father!” As he was promised in heaven, Nephi now “behold[s the] man descending out of heaven, and [can] bear record that it is the Son of God.” He has seen Mary descend out of heaven carrying the Son of the Eternal Father inside her, and he has seen her holding the Lamb of God in her arms.

The title here given the Son, *Lamb of God*, is significant. It provides a hermeneutical key to what follows. The angel now asks Nephi, “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.” In all but two of its 39 Old Testament and 46 Book of Mormon appearances, the word *shed* is connected with blood, often, the blood of a sacrificial lamb. The Love of God is the Son, the fruit of the Tree, the Being who voluntarily sheds his sacramental blood each week, throughout the world, to redeem the hearts of the children of men.

But the preeminent object and sign of God’s love is also the Mother,<sup>68</sup> who is inseparably connected with the Son. Thus, Nephi adds that the Tree of Life, from which the sacramental fruit hung in Lehi’s dream, is also the object and sign of God’s love, as is a fountain of pure water that flows from the Tree.<sup>69</sup> In the narrative that follows, Nephi uses these two symbols of the divine Mother, first the fountain, then the Tree, to reveal the symbiotic relationship Mother and Son have as they work together to redeem humanity.

Immediately following his declaration that Tree and Fountain are also the object and sign of God’s love, Nephi recounts the baptism of Christ. Baptism is an inherently female symbol, a kind of birth, and Nephi links Christ’s baptism with his physical birth, characterizing both with the distinctive epithet “the condescension of God” (1 Nephi 11:16, 26). So juxtaposed as it is here, the maternal fountain of pure water that flows from the Tree becomes the waters of baptism. As in heaven, so

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68. “Both tree and fountain, Nephi tells us, signify the ‘love of God’ (1 Nephi 11: 22, 25). The divine Mother and divine Son are the ‘love of God’ (1 Nephi 11: 22, 25) in multiple senses. They are the objects of God’s love but also preeminent earthly manifestations of his love for all humanity because they make people *ashre*, happy, full of joy (1 Nephi 8: 9, 12).” Val Larsen, “Hidden in Plain View: Mother in Heaven in Scripture,” *SquareTwo* 8, no. 2 (2015), <https://squatwo.org/Sq2ArticleLarsenHeavenlyMother.html>.

69. This fountain is likely the Gihon Spring, associated with the Mother God, and also known as the Virgin Spring. Margaret Barker, *Mother of the Lord*, 82, 100.



on earth, our divine Mother plays a role in our spiritual birth/rebirth. Christ sets the example, here rising from the amniotic waters to a new life, a new ministry as Savior of the world. Following his example, we too rise to new spiritual life, born of and cleansed by both the symbolic amniotic waters of the Mother and the redeeming blood of the Son.

And as our spirits enter our bodies at our physical birth, so at our spiritual rebirth through baptism, the Holy Ghost descends upon us. Mother, Son, and Holy Ghost join together with the Father in whose name we are baptized to enroll us as members of the *Sôd Elohim*. By being filled with the Holy Ghost, we become Heavenly Host, *malākîm*, angels, companions and surrogates of the *Sôd* principals. Nephi later explains: “by following your Lord and your Savior down into the water, according to his word, behold, then shall ye receive the Holy Ghost... and then can ye speak with the tongue of angels .... And now, how could ye speak with the tongue of angels save it were by the Holy Ghost? Angels speak by the power of the Holy Ghost; wherefore, they speak the words of Christ” (2 Nephi 31:13, 32:2–3).

But Nephi’s experience in this vision suggests that we become more than mere angels. We become gods. Nephi, who stood in the *Sôd Elohim* at the beginning of his vision declares that his own words, like those of his father, are the words of the Gods: “if ye shall believe in Christ ye will believe in these words, for they are the words of Christ, and he hath given them unto me.... Christ will show unto you, with power and great glory, that they are his words, at the last day; and you and I shall stand face to face before his bar; and ye shall know that I have been commanded of him to write these things” (2 Nephi 33:10–11). Along with the twelve divine apostle judges, exalted Nephi will appear as a divine witness or judge at the judgment bar.<sup>70</sup>

Nephi’s vision of Yahweh’s ministry ends at a Tree (Acts 5:30), the cross, where the Savior’s body hangs as the white fruit hung from the sacred Tree in Lehi’s vision. Mary, the mother of the Son of God, after the manner of the flesh, stands at the foot of the cross and shares the pain of her Son (John 19:25–27). As Simeon had prophesied, that which pierces him “shall pierce through thy own soul also” (Luke 2:35). In both surrogate (Mary) and symbol (Tree), the Mother of the Son of God after the manner of the spirit is also present with her Son while he suffers for the sins of all her other children. And the symbols suggest that, like Mary, the divine Mother is pierced as her Son is pierced. When the nails

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70. And so will his brother Jacob (Jacob 6:13) and descendant (see 3 Nephi 5:20) Moroni (Moroni 10:34).

pierce his body, they also pierce the cross, the Tree, symbol of the body of the divine Mother. She deeply feels his pain. Her suffering, his suffering may be reflected in an Old Testament era scripture quoted in the early Christian work, *the Epistle of Barnabus*: “[God] points to the cross of Christ in another prophet, who saith, ‘And when shall these things be accomplished? And the Lord saith, When a tree shall be bent down, and again arise, and when blood shall flow out of wood.’”<sup>71</sup> These words may poetically describe the suffering of a divine Mother who feels the agony of and metaphorically bleeds with her Beloved Son.

For Christ to fully bear our sins, he had to lose his intimate connection with Father, Mother, and Holy Ghost. He could not have fully experienced the consequences of our sins, which include separation from the *Sôd Elohim*, if he had maintained his normal unity with them. That necessary separation is documented in Isaiah’s prophesy, “I have trodden the winepress alone; and of the people there was none with me” (63:3). It is more proximately documented in Christ’s cry on the cross, “*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani*” (Matthew 27:46). But while Christ could not be with them as he suffered, those who loved him could not avoid being with him. His suffering caused suffering for all who were unified with him in the *Sôd*’s circle of shared purpose and love. His pains pained the Father,<sup>72</sup> Mother, Holy Ghost, and all the Host of Heaven. It takes nothing away from the Savior who fully bore the pain of our sins to know that his pains as our proxy were and are shared in substantial measure by all who profoundly love him. Indeed, our own broken-hearted contrition as we contemplate what he suffered on our behalf seems to be an essential component of our transformation into beings who “have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually” (Mosiah 5:2; see also 2 Nephi 2:7; 3 Nephi 9:20).

The especially strong coupling of Mother and Son that is manifest in the visions of Lehi and Nephi is signified by the fact that the marks in the Son’s body are matched by marks in the Mother’s symbolic body. As Lehi taught (2 Nephi 2:15–27), our passage back to the *Sôd* is mediated by the Son but also by the divine Mother, who in symbol (the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil) facilitates our entry into mortal life where

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71. Epistle of Barnabas in *The Sacred Writings of Barnabas* (Altenmünster, DEU: Juzzybee Verlag, 2012), 389.

72. Abraham’s suffering in the pending sacrifice of Isaac is meant to help us understand what the Father felt when his Son was sacrificed, but for the Father, with no reprieve from the fortunate sudden sighting of a ram caught in a thicket to replace the beloved Son.

we become as the Gods, knowing good and evil, and who in symbol (the Tree of Life) then facilitates our entry into eternal life where our divine potential is fulfilled.<sup>73</sup>

Like Lehi, Nephi sees the Twelve Heavenly Host who descended with Yahweh in Lehi's First Vision. As previously noted, he sees them ultimately sitting as divine last judgment judges (1 Nephi 12:9). But he also witnesses a kind of echo of the collapse of Lehi's great and spacious temple, a collapse precipitated by the Jerusalem Jews rejection of the One and Twelve Heavenly Host who descended. That local event is echoed when Nephi attributes the collapse of his more cosmic great and spacious building, "the pride of the world" (1 Nephi 11:34–36), to its rejection of and fight against the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

The vast scope of Nephi's vision makes it clear that he sees not as a man sees but as a god sees. Thus, he sees the history of his own descendants from beginning to end. He sees their wars across many generations, the destruction that precedes the visitation, then the visitation of Christ. He sees the twelve apostles chosen from among his descendants who also become divine last judgment judges (1 Nephi 12:10). He sees the apostasy of his people and their final destruction at the hands of the Lamanites, who themselves are then scattered by gentiles arriving in the New World.

At the conclusion of his god's eye vision, Nephi sees John, one of the Twelve who descended with the One, still dressed in white. John, he is told, "shall write ... many things which thou hast seen" (1 Nephi 14:24). Among those things will be a more literal description of the Mother/Tree in Heaven, from whom Christ descends: "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

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73. "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." Val Larsen, "First Visions and Last Sermons," 67.

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 12:1–2, 5). John also explains why the divine Mother has become mostly invisible, except in symbols: “And when the dragon saw that he was cast unto the earth, he persecuted the woman which brought forth the man child.” “And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she hath a place prepared of God.” (Revelation 12:13, 6).

What is evident in Nephi’s expansive vision is the fact that the core members of the *Sôd Elohim* work together “to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39). All contribute and cooperate and, whenever possible, involve others in their work of salvation. Their involvement of others is not incidental, for others may become like them only if they, too, consecrate their time and talent to the soul-saving work of the *Sôd Elohim*. If we so consecrate ourselves, the divine destiny of Lehi, Sariah, Sam, and Nephi may be ours. Like them, we may be transformed into precisely the kind of divine being that our Father, Mother, and Older Brother now are. This is the essence of *hard* (full, extensive) theosis.

### Theosis in the Visions of the Almas

While Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob vigorously defended the religion of Abraham, that faith did not prevail in the Small Plates.<sup>74</sup> By the time of Amaleki, last Small Plates author, revelation and prophesy have ceased. Amaleki must learn the gospel of Christ by reading the words of Nephi and Jacob. The prevailing religion among the Nephites appears to have been the one taught and administered by the priests of Noah, in which Christ and the *Sôd Elohim* play no part. It having been lost, the gospel of Christ must be restored through revelations to Benjamin and Abinadi, and those restorations do not seem to have fully reestablished understanding of the communal nature of the Gods and the *Sôd Elohim*. But there is, nevertheless, evidence that theosis and incorporation of followers of Christ into the *Sôd Elohim* continued. We discuss several examples below.

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74. Val Larsen, “Josiah to Zoram to Sherem to Jarom and the Big Little Book of Omni,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 44 (2021): 248–56, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/josiah-to-zoram-to-sherem-to-jarom-and-the-big-little-book-of-omni/>.

### **Alma and the *Sôd Elohim***

The important prophet Alma began his ministry as one of the priests of Noah. His beliefs, like those of the other priests, did not include Christ. But having heard Abinadi preach, full of the power of the Spirit, Alma learns about Christ, repents of his sins, and begins teaching others who will listen (Mosiah 18:1). In a narrative containing elements that echo Nephi's vision, he takes his followers to a "fountain of pure water" near a grove of trees (Mosiah 18:5), a place reminiscent of the "fountain of living waters" near the tree of life in Nephi's vision. There, in the pure maternal waters of Mormon, Alma cries unto the Lord, "saying: O Lord, pour out thy Spirit upon thy servant, that he may do this work with holiness of heart. And when he had said these words, the Spirit of the Lord was upon him" (Mosiah 18:12–13). Alma now repeatedly uses variations on the word desire: "now, as ye are desirous," "if this be the desire of your hearts." These words, Matthew Bowen tells us, recall "Lehi and Nephi's visions of the tree of life and the fruit which was 'desirable to make one happy' (1 Nephi 8:10) and 'desirous above all other fruit' (8:12) and the 'love of God' which was 'most desirable above all things' (11:22). They also recall Lehi's being 'desirous that [his] family should partake of [the fruit] also' (8:12)."<sup>75</sup> So as Lehi, Sariah, Sam, and Nephi were enrolled in the *Sôd Elohim* by partaking of the fruit, Alma's followers are likewise enrolled through baptism.

These converts have a communal orientation. They love one another much as Christ loves them. They have compassion for others in need and are willing to suffer vicariously with them (Mosiah 18:8–9).<sup>76</sup> Manifesting the charity that "beareth all things" (Moroni 7:45), they are willing to "bear one another's burdens, that they may be light" (Mosiah 18:8). Again, manifesting the charity that "suffereth long, and is kind" (Moroni 7:45), they "mourn with those that mourn" and "comfort those that stand in need of comfort" (Mosiah 18:9–10). To have his Spirit more abundantly with them (Mosiah 18:9–10), they "stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things." And having done these things, they are "filled with the grace of God" (Mosiah 18:16).

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75. Matthew L. Bowen, "Most Desirable above All Things: Onomastic Play on Mary and Mormon in the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 13 (2015): 47, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/most-desirable-above-all-things-onomastic-play-on-mary-and-mormon-in-the-book-of-mormon/>.

76. D. Kelly Odgen and Andrew C. Skinner, *Verse by Verse: The Book of Mormon, Volume 1: 1 Nephi to Alma 29* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 362.



The text later underscores the fact that those who were baptized at the waters of Mormon have joined the *Sôd Elohim* by making the same covenant the Gods make. This happens when the Lord, himself, repeating the covenant language, fulfills the covenant obligations that the people took upon themselves through baptism. Alma's people fall into the hands of Noah's priests and allied Lamanites, who oppress them by loading them with tasks and forbidding them to pray. When the people silently pray for relief, the Lord, echoing their baptismal covenant, 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).<sup>77</sup> In using this language and doing these things, the Lord signifies that the covenant they have made is the covenant he has made. He and all the *Sôd* members are obligated to serve them by the same covenant that obligates them to serve one other. Having made and kept the same covenants as the Gods, Alma's converts are enrolled in the *Sôd Elohim*.

### **Alma<sub>2</sub> and the *Sôd Elohim***

Raised in Alma's righteous household, Alma<sub>2</sub> rebelled against his father's teachings.<sup>78</sup> Being "a very wicked and an idolatrous man" (Mosiah 27:8) and a man of many words, he used flattery to lead "many of the people to do after the manner of his iniquities" (Mosiah 27:8). But while he and the sons of Mosiah were "going about to destroy the church of God," an angel appears and admonishes them to "seek to destroy the church no more," even if they, themselves, would be destroyed (Mosiah 27:15; Alma 36:9, 11). Astonished by this encounter, Alma<sub>2</sub> falls into a stupor and for the space of two days and two nights experiences eternal damnation, "everlasting burning" (Mosiah 27:28).<sup>79</sup> Then, remembering the words of

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77. Heather Hardy, "Another Testament of Jesus Christ: Mormon's Poetics," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 16, no. 2 (2007), <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol16/iss2/4>.

78. Kylie Nielson Turley argues persuasively that Alma<sub>2</sub> was not a rebellious youth but a mature man when he rebelled against his father's teachings. See *Alma 1-29: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University, 2020): 10-18.

79. How could Alma<sub>2</sub> experience eternal damnation and everlasting burning in the space of only a few days? "The feeling that suffering is eternal is an essential experiential attribute of hell. The endlessness of this state does not consist in an extreme extension of linear time, but in its transcendence. The individual

his father, Alma<sub>2</sub> cries out to Christ for redemption, is born again, and is filled with the Holy Ghost (Alma 36:17–18; Mosiah 27:24–26). His sins are washed away, and he is harrowed up no more by their memory (Alma 36:19). Like Lehi, he penetrates the veil and is incorporated into the *Sôd Elohim*: “methought I saw, even as our father Lehi saw, God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels, in the attitude of singing and praising their God; yea, and my soul did long to be there” (Alma 36:22).<sup>80</sup> From that moment on, Alma<sub>2</sub> engaged in the charitable work of the Gods, saving souls and enrolling them in the divine community: “Yea, and from that time even until now, I have labored without ceasing, that I might bring souls unto repentance; that I might bring them to taste of the exceeding joy of which I did taste; that they might also be born of God, and be filled with the Holy Ghost” (Alma 36:24).

Having himself been called to repentance by an angel, by one already enrolled in the *Sôd Elohim*, Alma<sub>2</sub>, after his own enrollment, expresses the fervent wish that he could likewise cry repentance to all the world. He says:

O that I were an angel, and could have the wish of mine heart, that I might go forth and speak with the trump of God, with a voice to shake the earth, and cry repentance unto every people! Yea, I would declare unto every soul, as with the voice of thunder, repentance and the plan of redemption, that they should repent and come unto our God, that there might not be more sorrow upon all the face of the earth. (Alma 29:1–2)

After uttering this fervent wish, Alma humbly says: “But behold, I am a man, and do sin in my wish; for I ought to be content with the

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undergoes tortures beyond any imagining which at that point are the only available reality; since the sense of the linear flow of time is lost, there appears to be no way out. It is only when this situation is fully accepted that one has experienced hell, and the journey can continue. In Alma’s account of his torment, the terms ‘everlasting’ and ‘eternal’ do not refer to duration, but to quality. Alma reports that his ‘eternal torment’ lasted for three days (cf. D&C 19:1–21).” Kevin Christensen, “Nigh unto Death,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 1 (1993): 1–20, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol2/iss1/2/>.

80. Alma<sub>2</sub> longs for heaven. In Alma 29:16, his “soul is carried away, even to the separation of it from the body, as it were, so great is my joy” when he contemplates the success of the Sons of Mosiah. In Alma 31:26, he asks, “O Lord, wilt thou suffer that thy servants shall dwell here below in the flesh, to behold such gross wickedness among the children of men?” He clearly yearns to return and dwell in heaven and, like Lehi, join the heavenly choir and speak with the tongue of angels.



things which the Lord hath allotted unto me” (Alma 29:3). Here, Alma underestimates the degree to which the Lord will grant his righteous wish. Ironically, in our day, Alma’s voice and testimony have thundered in the hearts and minds of millions in their own tongues in all parts of the earth. Now having the status of an angel in heaven or of a god, Alma has spoken and continues to speak to more people in more of the world than he could ever have imagined when he expressed that fervent wish.

Like that of Nephi<sub>2</sub>, as we shall see, Alma<sub>2</sub>’s death (if it happened) signifies that he is already a member of the *Sôd Elohim* while living on earth. At the end of his life, while enroute from the land of Zarahemla to the land of Melek, he disappeared without a trace. No one saw him die or be buried. People in the church speculate “that he was taken up by the Spirit, or buried by the hand of the Lord, even as Moses; and we suppose that [God] has also received Alma in the spirit, unto himself” (Alma 45:18–19). A person who is buried by God or entirely avoids death has attributes that position him as godlike or even as a god. Whatever the facts may be, the church members regard Alma<sub>2</sub> as having transcended normal humanity.

### **Ammon<sub>2</sub>, Lamoni, Abish, Lamoni’s Wife, and the *Sôd Elohim***

Theosis, divinization, and the interconnectedness of male and female divinity is a theme that is very much manifest in the interwoven lives and interrelated stories of Ammon<sub>2</sub>, Lamoni, Abish, and Lamoni’s Wife. In this deeply symbolic narrative, we see how the divine Father, Mother, and Son involve their human children in the *Sôd* project of making themselves and others divine. Here, the Father and Son are symbolically present in the two male protagonists, Ammon<sub>2</sub> and Lamoni. The divine Mother and other women whose lives are closely bound up with the births and mission of Christ are likewise symbolically present in the two female protagonists, Abish and Lamoni’s wife.

Each divine figure, the Son and the Mother, is first represented by a spiritually powerful servant who initiates the salvation of others. That service having been performed, each is then represented by a royal figure, a person who manifests the Mother and Son’s high status and sovereign power. This sequence — servant then sovereign — marks the path all must follow as they strive to be more like their Savior and Heavenly Parents.

**Table 2.** Servant becomes Sovereign.

Christ Figures	Divine Mother Figures
Male Servant: Ammon	Female Servant: Abish
Male Sovereign: King Lamoni	Female Sovereign: Queen

Ammon<sub>2</sub> and Lamoni's role as god figures and the kinship between God and man are signified, in part, by a name these men share with God, Ahman, which means *God* (D&C 78:20; 95:17). Ammon's name may also be a variant of a related Egyptian name for God, Amon/Amun.<sup>81</sup> Lamoni's name, L-amon-i, incorporates Ammon's name. It providentially has the plausible Hebrew form לֵאמֹן and the meaning *to my God* or *for my God*, the ל meaning *to* or *for* and the ם meaning *my*. Given the importance of Ammon in Lamoni's life, wordplay on *to* or *for my Ammon* might also be relevant. The confounding of man and God is an important theme in this narrative, a theme that is inherent in theophoric naming — giving human beings divine names. Since theophoric names and word play on names is ubiquitous in the Old Testament, Mormon was equipped to recognize and build on the theophoric meaning of these names and the more subtle theophoric meaning of the name Abish.<sup>82</sup> As we shall see, Abish seems to have had a remarkable vision of the divine Father. Her name, Abish, may suggest that she encountered God, as did her ancestor Jacob, in the form of a man, in Hebrew an *'ish*. Her name combines the

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81. *Ahman* can signify either the Father or the Son. The name *Ammon* may have cued Mormon's recognition of the allegorical potential of these narratives. Amon was the great universal god of the Egyptians, the being in their theology most akin to Jehovah and the most popular name in the Egyptian empire in Zedekiah's time. See Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 25. Amon, a popular king of Judah during Lehi's youth, was named after this Egyptian god and seems to have worshipped his namesake (2 Kings 21:18–24). See J. P. Lesley, "Notes on an Egyptian Element in the Names of Hebrew Kings, and Its Bearing on the History of the Exodus," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 19, no. 109 (1881): 419–20. So the cult of Amon was surely well known to the migrating Mulekites who may, therefore, have used Amon as one of the names of God, a fact that would be known to Mormon if true.

82. There is, of course, no reason to think that any of the suggested meanings of Lamoni or Abish's names would have been intended by their parents. But as a reader of the brass plates, Mormon would have known that name wordplay was a ubiquitous feature of Hebrew scripture. That awareness would have made him attentive to potential wordplay in his own writing. On Mormon's recognition and use of Hebrew name meanings, see Matthew L. Bowen, "My People Are Willing," 83–107.

Hebrew *Abi*, “my father,” with *‘ish*, “man,” and can be translated as “my Father is a man.”<sup>83</sup> It reflects the confounding of God and man that, as noted above, is an important theme in this narrative.

In this section, we begin with a discussion of ways in which Ammon<sub>2</sub>, who bears a divine name, is framed as symbolically and literally divine. We then discuss the transformation of Lamoni from murderer into Christ figure. We then discuss multiple dimensions on which Abish and the Queen signify the divine Mother and show how integrally the Mother is involved in the salvation of her children.

One sign that theosis is occurring is the confounding of men and gods, as in Nephi’s heavenly encounter with Yahweh, who is referred to as both *man* and *God*. That confounding of *man* and *God* occurs over and over again in the story of Ammon<sub>2</sub>. Matthew Bowen has suggested that the word *man* here becomes a *Leitwort* that interacts with allusions to God, suggesting that God, too, is a *man*.<sup>84</sup>

This story begins inauspiciously. Ammon<sub>2</sub>, his brothers, and Alma<sub>2</sub> initially abuse their talents and princely power and are confronted by one of the *malākīm* of the *Sôd*, an angel who shakes the earth with the power of his voice (Mosiah 27:15). But after having that experience, Ammon<sub>2</sub> twice renounces worldly power, first declining to be the king of the Nephites (Mosiah 29:3), then declining to take one of Lamoni’s daughters to wife and become a nobleman among the Lamanites (Alma 17:24–25). Instead, he fully embraces the service ethos of the *Sôd Elohim* where greatness is measured by degree of service (Matthew 23:11) and becomes the servant of Lamoni. It is in that service role that he is most emblematic of his true master, Christ.

Ammon<sub>2</sub> first becomes a Christ figure when, at the Waters of Sebus, his fellow servants are caught in a tragic dilemma.<sup>85</sup> If they do not protect

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83. One indication that Mormon thought the name Abish was meaningful is that he did not report the name of another female servant who played a similarly dramatic role in a Book of Mormon narrative, the maid servant of Morianton, who changed the course of history (Alma 50:28–33).

84. Matthew L. Bowen, “Father Is a Man: The Remarkable Mention of the Name Abish in Alma 19:16 and Its Narrative Context,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 14 (2015): 77–93, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/father-is-a-man-the-remarkable-mention-of-the-name-abish-in-alma-1916-and-its-narrative-context/>.

85. For close readings that show why the political dynamics briefly summarized here are probably in play, see Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007): 4:274–78; and Val Larsen, “In his Footsteps: Ammon<sub>1</sub> and Ammon<sub>2</sub>,”

Lamoni's flocks from being scattered and stolen, they will be killed by Lamoni. If they are violent toward any noble kinsman of the Great King, Lamoni's father, they will be killed, probably with all their family. When Lamoni's noble enemies attack and scatter his flocks, the servants are doomed. They will die if the flocks remain scattered and will die if they resist those who have scattered them. They begin to weep in despair, for all is lost (Alma 17:28).

But because noble Ammon<sub>2</sub> has condescended to be one with them, because he encourages them to recover the scattered flock while he faces their adversaries "in number not a few," because he miraculously defeats their numerous adversaries who are "astonished at his power," these servants, unlike their predecessors, are through Ammon<sub>2</sub>'s gracious act, able to keep both laws that bind them. They return to their lord with the flock intact and without having struck a blow against any noble kinsman of the Great King.

After his fellow servants describe Ammon<sub>2</sub>'s exploits, King Lamoni exclaims: "Surely, this is more than a *man*. Behold, is not this the *Great Spirit*?" Having heard still more, he subsequently adds: "Now I know that it is the Great Spirit; and he has come down at this time to preserve your lives.... Now this is the Great Spirit of whom our fathers have spoken." The moral code of the powerful Lamanite nobles held that "whatsoever they did was right." But Ammon<sub>2</sub>'s actions cause Lamoni to reject that view and adopt the moral code of the *Sôd*, in which the lives even of slaves have intrinsic value. Thus, "Lamoni began to fear exceedingly, with fear lest he had done wrong in slaying his servants." He then learns the depth of Ammon<sub>2</sub>'s faithfulness as a servant, for upon his return, as previously commanded, Ammon<sub>2</sub> immediately began preparing for Lamoni's journey to see his father. Ammon<sub>2</sub>'s devotion to duty causes Lamoni to be still "more astonished ... [and say]: Surely there has not been any servant among all my servants that has been so faithful as this *man*; for he doth remember all my commandments to execute them. Now I surely know that this is the *Great Spirit*."

Coming shortly thereafter to Lamoni, Ammon<sub>2</sub> demonstrates additional superhuman powers. "Lamoni marveled again, for he beheld that Ammon could discern his thoughts.... Lamoni did open his mouth, and said unto him: Who art thou? Art thou that Great Spirit, who knows all things?" Ammon replies, "I am not." Lamoni says: "How knowest thou the thoughts of my heart? .... I would guard thee with my armies;

but I know thou art more powerful than all they.” Ammon<sub>2</sub>’s power is so great that he not only can read thoughts but could, Lamoni believes, single handedly defeat entire armies.

In the midst of all these observations about his superhuman devotion and powers, Ammon<sub>2</sub> had said, “I am a man, and am thy servant,” but he is clearly more than a mere man. Lamoni’s servants will soon see him raise Lamoni from the dead much as Christ raised Lazarus.<sup>86</sup> These are not the acts of a mere man. Many others soon conclude “that Ammon [is] the Great Spirit” (Alma 19:25). But Lamoni now learns the actual source of Ammon<sub>2</sub>’s power. He asks, “Art thou sent from God?” Ammon<sub>2</sub> replies, “I am a *man*; and *man* in the beginning was created after *the image of God*, and I am called by his Holy Spirit... And a portion of *that Spirit dwelleth in me*, which giveth me knowledge, and also power according to my faith and desires which are in God.” Ammon<sub>2</sub>’s will, like that of Nephi<sub>2</sub> (as we shall see), is fully aligned with the will of God. Because of that alignment, he how shares a portion of God’s power.

God is a social being, who dwells in heaven with “all his holy angels” (18:30). Ammon<sub>2</sub> and all men are created in the image of God, look like God, are kin with God. When a man puts his faith in his Father, God, and aligns his desires with those of God as Ammon<sub>2</sub> has, the Holy Ghost can possess him,<sup>87</sup> making him, from a human point of view, as the attestations of Lamoni and others indicate, indistinguishable from a god. Ammon<sub>2</sub> is an especially pronounced case of inherent godhood becoming substantially expressed, but as Nephi before him and Nephi<sub>2</sub> after him show, he is not alone in his demonstration that human beings may become gods.

Of course, his brothers Aaron, Omner, Himni, and their companions are no less members of the *Sôd Elohim* than Ammon<sub>2</sub> is, though they have manifested no superhuman powers apart from exceptional desire to save others spiritually and patience in suffering. They had been “taken and cast into prison, and bound with strong cords, and kept in prison for many days” (Alma 20:30). When Ammon<sub>2</sub> came to rescue them, “they were naked, and their skins were worn exceedingly because of being bound with strong cords. And they also had suffered hunger, thirst, and all kinds of afflictions; nevertheless they were patient in all their

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86. At least some of Lamoni’s servants believe him to be two-days dead when he arises as Ammon<sub>2</sub> said he would (Alma 19:5, 12), so whatever the truth of the matter may be, they see the “dead” rise.

87. Newell D. Wright and Val Larsen, “The Holy Ghost in the Book of Moroni: Possessed of Charity” (forthcoming in *Interpreter*).



sufferings” (Alma 20:29). It is arguable that this suffering in the service of others is the most godlike behavior of all. While the healings and other miracles Christ performed helped signify that he was the Son of God, his suffering the sins of all humanity was by far the most divine thing he did. So divinity is most revealed in service *Sôd* members give, not in superhuman powers. This probably explains why God preached the gospel to Lamoni’s father (who wrongly believed might made right) through Aaron, an emaciated man much acquainted with grief, a man who bore in his hands and feet the mark of his bonds, rather than, as the king had requested, through Ammon<sub>2</sub>, the man who had bested him in battle (Alma 22:1–4). The high king needed to understand that suffering and service, not marshal might, are the most salient attributes of his Savior. And yet, the powers Ammon<sub>2</sub> possessed are, nonetheless, a divine attribute and help demonstrate that the proper telos of a human being is to be not a man but a god.

While immersed in a culture that believed marshal might made right and that failures to fulfill the king’s commands merited death, Lamoni unjustly killed a number of his servants. That culture gives mighty Ammon<sub>2</sub> great credibility. Now persuaded by godlike Ammon<sub>2</sub> that his might is nothing, Lamoni repents of those murders and embraces the gospel of Christ. Textual elements suggest he now has a vision similar to the paradigmatic visions of Lehi, Nephi, Mary, and Alma<sub>2</sub>. Like Lehi (1 Nephi 1:8), Nephi (1 Nephi 11:1, 14:30, 15:1), and Mary (1 Nephi 11:19), all of whom were “carried away” in the Spirit of God, Lamoni is “carried away in God” (Alma 19:6).

In the detailed accounts of Lehi and Nephi’s visions (and of Joseph Smith’s First Vision), the most salient feature of the divine Beings they encounter while carried away is the luster, the brightness, the whiteness of the light they exude. Here, the text speaks of “the light which did light up [Lamoni’s] mind, which was the light of the glory of God, which was a marvelous light of his goodness” (Alma 19:6). The text seems to suggest that, like Nephi, Lamoni has seen God the Father in his glory. It then suggests that he saw Yahweh the Son and the divine and earthly mothers of Yahweh as well. When he regains consciousness, Lamoni says, “I have seen my Redeemer and he shall come forth, and be born of a woman” (Alma 19:13). This two-part phrase — “shall come forth, and be born of a woman” — fits what Nephi witnessed. Yahweh “came forth” when he descended from the Woman in heaven, the Mother of the Son of God after the manner of the Spirit, then was “born of a woman,” the mother of the Son of God after the manner of the flesh



on earth. As we shall see, this reading receives support from Lamoni's response to his wife when he arises from apparent death.

We first encounter the Queen, Lamoni's wife, with her children around her, "mourn[ing her two-day dead husband] after the manner of the Lamanites, greatly lamenting his loss" (Alma 18:43). Others believe Lamoni's body is decomposing and want to bury him, but the Queen resists. Instead of burying Lamoni, she asks that Ammon<sub>2</sub>, the Christ figure who had redeemed her servants, be sent to her. Ammon<sub>2</sub> tells her that after lying "as if he were dead"<sup>88</sup> for "two days and two nights," on the third day her husband, like Christ, will rise again to new life, indeed immortal life. The Queen has faith in the Christlike messenger Ammon<sub>2</sub> and in her Christlike husband Lamoni. She replies, "I believe that it shall be according as thou hast said" (Alma 19:9). On the third day, her faith in Ammon<sub>2</sub>, the first Christ surrogate, is rewarded, when Lamoni, the second Christ surrogate, rises and says, "Blessed be the name of God, and blessed art thou. For as sure as thou livest, behold, I have seen my Redeemer; and he shall come forth, and be born of a woman" (Alma 19:12–13).

What is striking in Lamoni's statement is the anomalous grammatical equation of God and a woman: "blessed be the name of God, and blessed art thou." What has Lamoni seen that would cause him to grammatically coordinate a divine Being and a human being? What leads him to view the life of his wife as the surest of sure things and swear by that?<sup>89</sup> If as textual echoes indicate, he has seen something like what Nephi saw — the divine Woman Shaddai manifesting the divine destiny of a mortal woman, Lamoni's wife — the grammatical equation makes sense. Now understanding who the Gods are, Lamoni has double vision and sees

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88. Kylie Nielson Turley, "Acting As If the Dead Shall Arise: Faith in the Real World" (presentation, Book of Mormon Studies Association Annual Meeting, Logan, UT, 8 October 2020).

89. Since human lives are ephemeral, an oath sworn on a human life has attenuated force. The life of a divine being is not ephemeral. If Lamoni, having seen the divine Mother, now appreciates the immortality of his wife, his oath may have double meaning, referring to the immortality of both. Speaking a short time later about this episode and its meaning, Mormon uses the oath in its strongest form: "And as sure as the Lord liveth, so sure as many as believed, or as many as were brought to the knowledge of the truth, through the preaching of Ammon and his brethren, according to the spirit of revelation and of prophecy, and the power of God working miracles in them — yea, I say unto you, as the Lord liveth, as many of the Lamanites as believed in their preaching, and were converted unto the Lord, never did fall away" (Alma 23:6).

two Queens, with the mortal Queen on earth being destined to become an immortal Queen in heaven. Strictly speaking, Lamoni equates the Queen not with God but with the name of God, *Elohim*, the plural whose literal translation is “Gods.” “Gods” suggests that God exists not as the Father alone but as a Father/Mother dyad. This dyad creates human beings in their image, “male and female” (Genesis 1:27). Having spoken to his Queen and called her blessed, Lamoni sinks “again with joy; and the queen also sunk down, being overpowered by the Spirit,” carried away to her own personal encounter with divine Beings.

Ammon<sub>2</sub> and all his fellow servants but one are likewise overcome by the Spirit and fall to the earth unconscious. While unconscious, they converse with angels, and are enrolled in the *Sôd Elohim* (Alma 19:33–34). The one exception is Abish, the only long-standing Christian in the room, the only person whose own visions and spiritual seasoning have prepared her to consciously endure a visitation of such spiritual power. Abish knows what is happening to the others — “she knew that it was the power of God” (Alma 19:17 — most likely because she has previously had the same experience, “a remarkable vision of her father” (Alma 19:16). This phrasing is ambiguous. Did Abish see her earthly father in vision? Did her earthly father have a vision he told her about? It was certainly a vision of her Father in the sense of having been caused by God. But in this context where all others see God in vision, the most likely meaning is that Abish had “a remarkable vision of her [F]ather” in which she directly experienced “the power of God” the same way that Lamoni and the Queen are now experiencing it.<sup>90</sup>

Eager for others to witness this outpouring of spiritual power, Abish runs through the town urging people to go to the palace and see what is happening. Those who gather know that some superhuman power is operative, though they disagree sharply on what it may be. When Abish returns and sees the contention, she weeps, then goes to the Queen and takes her by the hand. “As soon as [Abish] touched her hand [the Queen] arose and stood upon her feet, and cried with a loud voice, saying: O blessed Jesus, who has saved me from an awful hell! O blessed God [Elohim], *have mercy on this people!*” The Queen, who has seen the

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90. The one indication that the vision might be of Abish’s earthly father is her use of the singular “my” rather than plural “our” pronoun when referring to her father. But the “my Father” can be accounted for by the fact that this vision remained a personal experience which Abish “never ... made ... known” (Alma 19:17). So she did not experience it as a vision of “our” Father, even if it was an experience with God, Father of all.

Father, Son, and perhaps the Mother, now shares the mission of the *Sôd*, saving others. Having the tongue of an angel, she speaks “many words which were not understood, and when she had done this, she took the king, Lamoni, by the hand, and behold he arose and stood upon his feet” (Alma 19:29–30). Standing side by side with the Queen, Lamoni, the man who rose from the dead on the third day, now begins to teach the people the gospel of Christ and, thus, initiates a great spiritual awakening in their kingdom.

Let us now ask, as Nephi did after hearing his father’s dream, what this narrative means. One thing that became apparent with Nephi was the coupling of the saving work of the divine Son and Mother. That coupling is replicated here. It is striking that the Lamoni and Queen salvation narratives both begin with the Christ surrogate Ammon<sub>2</sub> sharing a message that his companion whole heartedly believes, and both end with a divine Mother surrogate raising the spiritual newborn to her/his feet. The parallelism of “she arose and stood upon her feet” and “he arose and stood upon his feet” suggests that Queen and King stand side by side, emblems of the Mother and Father in whose *Sôd* kingdom they are now enrolled and in whose soul-saving work they now jointly participate. Other surrogate symbolism underscores the importance of this Elohim partnership.

The divine Mother surrogates, Abish and the Queen, each reveal something essential but different about the Mother in whose image they were created,<sup>91</sup> and about other women closely connected with the

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91. Though neither is very young, Abish seems older (see Turley, *Alma 1–29: A Brief Theological Introduction*, 118) and is at least spiritually older than the Queen. The aptness of an older and a younger woman jointly representing the divine Mother is beautifully illustrated in the following Jewish narrative about the Shekhinah, the feminine Divine: “[Rabbi Abraham] walked through the streets of [his hometown] Safed, crying out ‘Arise, for the Shekhina is in exile. ...’ He longed, more than anything else, to bring back the Shekhinah out of exile. ... [Advised to go to the Wailing Wall, after fasting, he set off on foot.] With every step he took, he prayed God to reveal ... a vision of the Shekhina to him. By the time Rabbi Abraham reached Jerusalem, he felt as if he were floating, as if he had ascended from his body. And when he reached the Wailing Wall, Rabbi Abraham had a vision there. Out of the wall came an old woman, dressed in black, deep in mourning. And when he looked into her eyes, he became possessed of a grief as deep as the ocean, far greater than he had ever known. It was the grief of a mother who has lost a child; the grief of Hannah, after losing her seven sons; the grief of the Shekhinah over the suffering of Her children. ... At that moment Rabbi Abraham fell to the ground in a faint, and he had another vision. In this vision, he saw the Shekhinah once more, but this time he saw Her dressed in Her robe woven out of light, more magnificent than the

births and most salient actions of Christ. As apostate monist theology and violence have forced Shaddai into the wilderness and hidden her from the world, so the wickedness and violence of her surrounding culture have forced Abish to remain hidden, her deep Christian faith and spiritual power unknown to the world. Abish nevertheless exists and blesses all around her. She has known the Father longer than anyone else in this narrative, she “having been converted to the Lord many years” on account of that remarkable vision of her Father. And as Abish, the surrogate Mother, was with the Father before the newer convert Ammon<sub>2</sub>, the surrogate Son was, so Shaddai was with El Elyon before their Son Yahweh was.<sup>92</sup>

Being a servant, Abish intrinsically symbolizes the service ethos that governs the *Sôd Elohim*. As she rushes from place to place in the city bidding all to gather to the palace where they may be born again spiritually, Abish symbolizes the divine Mother’s desire and efforts to gather her children back to her, the Tree of Life, where they may be spiritually reborn and permanently return to live with her. As Abish sees those she has gathered sharply contending with one another and begins to weep, so the divine Mother sorrows when her children so often contend with each other and refuse to be saved. The nature of Shaddai is then most saliently symbolized by the power of Abish’s touch to help a soul become spiritually conscious and live a holy life that qualifies her to be part of her divine Parents’ *Sôd Elohim*.

Lamoni’s wife, the Queen, like Abish, signifies who the Mother is, in part, by virtue of her social role, which is prominent and powerful.

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setting sun, and Her joyful countenance was revealed. Waves of light arose from her face, an aura that seemed to reach out and surround him, as if he were cradled in the arms of the Sabbath Queen. ‘Do not grieve so, My son Abraham,’ She said. ‘Know that My exile will come to an end, and My inheritance will not go to waste.’” Schwartz, *Tree of Souls*, 63–64.

92. The divine Mother, in her Wisdom guise, may refer to her primordial partnership with the divine Father when she speaks as follows in Psalm 8:22–36. “The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old. I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning. ... Before the mountains were settled, before the hills was I brought forth. While as yet he had not made the earth, nor the fields. ... when he prepared the heavens, I was there. ... Then I was by him, as one brought up with him: and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him ... and my delights were with the sons of men. Now therefore hearken unto me, O ye children: for blessed [*ashre*] are they that keep my ways. Hear instruction, and be wise, and refuse it not. Blessed [*ashre*] is the man that heareth me.... For whoso findeth me findeth life, and shall obtain favour of the Lord. But he that sinneth against me wrongeth his own soul: all they that hate me love death.”

Along with being among those who most serve, the divine Mother is the powerful Queen of Heaven. As previously noted, when we first encounter this human Queen, she is mourning a dead man who, she doesn't yet understand, will rise on the third day. Here, she is much like the virgin Mary, Mary of Bethany, and Mary Magdalene, faithful women who mourned for Christ at his death. Each of those mourning women is a divine Mother surrogate. The virgin Mary we have already discussed. Mary of Bethany anoints Christ, head and feet, with the Tree-derived precious oil that signifies healing and resurrection, just before his atonement, death, and resurrection (Mark 14:3–9; John 11:2, 12:1–8). In doing this she makes him the Messiah, the anointed one. The virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene sit with and minister to the body of Christ in the tomb (Mark 15:46–47) much as the Queen sits with the body of Lamoni.

But the Queen, like Abish, most saliently symbolizes the nature of Mother Shaddai through the power of her touch. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were blocked from putting forth their hands to touch the Tree of Life (Genesis 3:22–24). Still unrepentant, had they done so, they would have lived forever in their sins. But while sinful human beings are blocked from putting forth their hands and touching the Tree of Life, the Tree of Life, the divine Mother, may graciously put forth her hand and touch repentant human beings, Lamoni and the Queen, raising them from spiritual death to eternal life in the *Sôd Elohim*. Indeed, when at the touch of the Queen's hand, Lamoni rises to new spiritual life, all the many life-giving roles of the divine Mother are symbolized: her role in our birth into mortality as we each partake of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and take leave of her and the Father; her role in our spiritual births as we are born in heaven and emerge from the amniotic baptismal waters on earth; her role as we receive new life from the Cross, the Tree of Life, where Mother and Son are jointly pierced by nails and jointly produce the sacramental fruit that redeems us from sin and makes us members of the *Sôd Elohim*.

In addition to all these meanings, the Queen joins Mary Magdalene as the enactor of an ancient and potent type scene in which the dyadic nature of proper governance is signified by the presence of the Queen at the resurrection of the King, with King and Queen then standing side by side as the proper rulers of the world. As Kevin and Shauna Christensen have noted, narratives in which the divine Woman resurrects the divine Man are common in the religions of the ancient Middle East and also



appear in Mesoamerica.<sup>93</sup> Christ appearing after his resurrection, first to Mary Magdalene, his possible wife,<sup>94</sup> even before ascending to the Father, is an important example. The Queen raising Lamoni and standing before the people with him is another. These narratives imply that in the *Sôd Elohim*, an exalted Man is fully empowered only if he has as his consort and co-ruler a divine Woman.

### **Nephi<sub>2</sub>: The Assumption of Divine Powers**

Like his namesake Nephi, Nephi<sub>2</sub> provides a clear Book of Mormon example of theosis, perhaps the clearest in all scripture. He becomes the chief judge at the death of his father, Helaman<sub>3</sub> (Helaman 3:37). In that purely human role, he is not a success. Almost all of the Nephite lands are lost during his judgeship, then only half of what was lost is regained. Few politicians could survive as leader in the wake of a military collapse of

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93. “Significantly, the story of Abish and the Lamanite queen qualifies as a ‘type-scene,’ a prophetic prefiguring not only of the resurrection of Christ, but also of the role of women in that event. As Robert Aller remarks, ‘The type-scene is not merely a way of formally recognizing a particular kind of narrative moment; it is also a means of attaching that moment to a larger pattern of historical and theological meaning.’ Compare the general features of this account in Alma with a conspicuous pattern in ancient Near Eastern religion: ‘One of the most striking features of the ancient Sacred Marriage cult was that the goddess had an important part to play in the resurrection of her husband.... We will recall how Anath made possible Baal-Hadad’s resurrection by attacking and destroying his enemy, Mot, the god of death. In Mesopotamian myth it was Inanna-Ishtar who descended into the realm of death to destroy Erishkigal’s power so that dead Dumuzi-Tammuz could be restored to life. Aristide’s Apology describes how Aphrodite descended into Hades in order to ransom Adonis from Persephone. Cybele likewise made possible the resurrection of Attis on the third day, while in Egypt it was Isis who made possible the restoration of her husband, Osiris. ... But no matter what the details of these ubiquitous Near Eastern death-and-resurrection legends, the underlying theme is the same: the god is helpless without the ministrations of his consort. ... The reunion of Jesus and Mary Magdalene at the tomb on Resurrection Morning therefore clearly fits within this well-known tradition.’ The same motif also appears in the Mesoamerican Popol Vuh in the story of One Hunahpu’s death and the maiden daughter of the underworld lords, through whose courageous actions life was renewed.” Kevin and Shauna Christensen, “Nephite Feminism Revisited: Thoughts on Carol Lynn Pearson’s View of Women in the Book of Mormon,” *FARMS Review of Books* 10, no. 2 (1998): 17–18. The Christensens cite Eugene Seach, “A Great Mystery: The Sacred Marriage and Bridal Chamber in Early Christianity and Judaism” (Salt Lake City, unpublished MS, 1979), 198–99.

94. Christopher James Blythe, “Was Jesus Married?” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (2021): 75–84, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol60/iss3/7>.



that magnitude. Unsurprisingly, Nephi<sub>2</sub> loses his position as chief judge. The text blames the people for this loss (the Book of Mormon is, among many other things, a sympathetic history of Alma family rule), but the people surely blamed Nephi<sub>2</sub>. It is very unlikely that his resignation from the chief judgeship (Helaman 5:1) was entirely voluntary.

No longer the chief judge, Nephi<sub>2</sub> “[takes] it upon himself to preach the word of God all the remainder of his days” (Helaman 5:4). In this new mission, the preternaturally spiritual Nephi<sub>2</sub> is joined by his younger brother, Lehi<sub>4</sub>, who is “not a whit behind him as to things pertaining to righteousness” (Helaman 11:19). With the Holy Ghost filling their souls, the pair have “power and authority given unto them that they might speak, and they also [have] what they should speak given unto them” (Helaman 5:18). They first preach in all the northerly lands held by the Nephites. Moving south, they then preach, with notable success, to the Lamanites and dissenting Nephites who hold the land of Zarahemla. Moving still further south, they attempt to preach to the Lamanites who hold the land of Nephi. Here, they are accosted by an army and thrown into the same prison into which Ammon and Abinadi had been cast.<sup>95</sup> As Kimberly Matheson and D. John Butler both note, this prison becomes a temple like the one Isaiah saw in vision (Isaiah 6:4; 2 Nephi 16:4), filled with smoke as the temple would be on the Day of Atonement.<sup>96</sup> Nephi<sub>2</sub> and Lehi<sub>4</sub> will now serve as temple guides who help patrons part the veil and pass through it into communion with heavenly beings. They are assisted by Aminadab, whose name, Matthew Bowen notes, is theophoric, meaning “my [divine] Kinsman is willing” to provide salvation or “my people are willing” to receive it. Here again, Mormon seems to recognize and incorporate Hebrew name meanings that are relevant to his narrative.

In this prison temple, Nephi<sub>2</sub> and Lehi<sub>4</sub> recapitulate experiences of Abinadi, of Alma (their great, great grandfather), and of Alma<sub>2</sub> (their great grandfather), experiences that were foundational in the establishment

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95. The text specifically mentions that this is the prison into which Limhi cast Ammon (Helaman 5:21). We know that Abinadi was also imprisoned by Noah in the land of Nephi. That Abinadi was cast into this same prison and was executed in or by this prison is a reasonable inference. If there were more than one prison, it is likely that the best-fortified, most secure prison would have been used for each of these prominent prisoners.

96. Kimberly Matheson Berkey, *Helaman: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University, 2020), 42. See also D. John Butler, *The Goodness and the Mysteries* (self-published, 2012), 88–94 and Bowen, “My People are Willing,” 95.

of the church Nephi<sub>2</sub> now heads. First, like Alma<sub>2</sub> and Amulek — figures twice explicitly mentioned in this chapter (Helaman 5:10, 41) — they are denied food for many days while imprisoned (Alma 14:22; Helaman 5:22),<sup>97</sup> then are saved, in part, by an earthquake that shakes the walls of the prison (Alma 14:27; Helaman 5:27) and makes it impossible for their adversaries to flee (Alma 14:26–27; Helaman 5:34). Like Abinadi (with Alma as witness) Nephi<sub>2</sub> and Lehi<sub>4</sub>'s faces “shine exceedingly” (Mosiah 13:5; Helaman 5:36). This attribute marks their theosis, a shining face being a feature of God and Christ (Joseph Smith 1:17). Like Abinadi, the brothers are protected by divine light, such that their enemies (Noah/Lamanites) “durst not lay their hands upon *him/them*” (Mosiah 13:5; Helaman 5:23). The phrasing is identical in the two episodes, apart from the use of the singular/plural pronouns. Other similar phrasing follows. Abinadi says, “ye have not power to slay me” (Mosiah 13:7); Nephi<sub>2</sub> and Lehi<sub>4</sub> say, “ye cannot lay your hands on us to slay us” (Helaman 5:26). This protection enables each of them to fulfill their mission.

The heavenly light having disempowered their adversaries, Abinadi, Nephi<sub>2</sub> and Lehi<sub>4</sub>, now mediating between heaven and earth, bring some or all of the people who see and hear them to Christ. To be sure, Nephi<sub>2</sub> and Lehi<sub>4</sub>, assisted by Aminadab, are more successful with their audience than Abinadi and Alma<sub>2</sub> were with theirs. But in all three narratives, people who have heard the word enter the *Sôd Elohim* by passing through a ring of fire. This is a painful passage for Abinadi and the women and children Alma and Amulek converted in Ammonihah, for they enter the *Sôd* through the fires of martyrdom. This is a joyful passage for Nephi<sub>2</sub>, Lehi<sub>4</sub>, and their prison converts. Aminadab urges them to plead for Christ's mercy. They do and are then encircled by pillars of heavenly fire that do not burn them (Helaman 5:43). The brothers' converts are again touched by fire as the Holy Ghost possesses them: “the Holy Spirit of God did come down from heaven, and did enter into their hearts, and they were filled as if with fire, and they could speak forth marvelous words” (Helaman 5:45). As Bowen notes, the prison converts are “commissioned in a divine council setting” but “in this instance [as in Lehi's dream], they do not ascend into heaven, but rather the divine council (or a portion thereof) descends to them.”<sup>98</sup> Nephi<sub>2</sub> and Lehi<sub>4</sub>, who are already one with the Holy Ghost and members of the *Sôd*

97. Given the outcome, Nephi<sub>2</sub> and Lehi<sub>4</sub> probably combined prayer for the wellbeing of those who were imprisoning them with the forced fast.

98. Bowen, “My People are Willing,” 95.

*Elohim*, do the work of the Gods: enabling others to become one with God through possession by the Holy Ghost.<sup>99</sup>

In addition to echoing what Abinadi and the Almas did, the work the mortals Nephi<sub>2</sub> and Lehi<sub>4</sub> do here anticipates what Christ, a divine being, will do when he visits Bountiful. In both episodes, there are smoke and earthquakes that shake the earth *as if it were about to divide asunder* (Helaman 5:33; 3 Nephi 8:6), a *still voice of perfect mildness*, not a harsh voice, neither was it a loud voice that *pierces the very souls* of those who listen (Helaman 5:30; 3 Nephi 11:3). The voice speaks *three times* (Helaman 5:33; 3 Nephi 11:5) from heaven lamenting the people's sin and calling for repentance. Then in both episodes, angels descend from heaven, and the ones the angels visit are encircled by fire (Helaman 5:43, 48; 3 Nephi 17:24). So Nephi<sub>2</sub> and Lehi<sub>4</sub> here do at least some of the work of a God.

That they minister as members of the *Sôd Elohim* is signified not only by their shining faces but also by their orientation to and conversation with a heavenly being, God or Christ (Helaman 5:36), and with angels of God (Helaman 5:39), those whom Lehi (1 Nephi 1:8) and Alma<sub>2</sub> (Alma 36:22) had seen populating heaven in their visions. Aminadab and the other people in the prison first witness the brothers' interactions with divine beings, then are themselves incorporated into the *Sôd Elohim*. Following ministrations of those already incorporated — Nephi<sub>2</sub> and Lehi<sub>4</sub> and the visiting angels — the three hundred prison-temple converts themselves become agents of the Holy Ghost and participate in the work and glory of God:

And it came to pass that they did go forth, and did minister unto the people, declaring throughout all the regions round about all the things which they had heard and seen, insomuch that the more part of the Lamanites were convinced of them, because of the greatness of the evidences which they had received. And as many as were convinced did lay down their weapons of war, and also their hatred and the tradition of their fathers.

And it came to pass that they did yield up unto the Nephites the lands of their possession. (Helaman 5:50–52)

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99. See Newell D. Wright and Val Larsen, "The Holy Ghost in the Book of Moroni: Possessed of Charity" (forthcoming in *Interpreter*), for a full discussion of possession by the Holy Ghost.

What Nephi<sub>2</sub> had been unable to accomplish as the secular chief judge — the recovery of Nephite lands lost to the Lamanites — he now accomplishes as a spiritual member of the *Sôd Elohim* who preaches the Gospel of Christ.

Nephi<sub>2</sub>'s mediation between God and humanity in the prison temple foreshadows his receipt of all God's divine power to move within and affect the world. The predicate for this conferral of power is the alignment of Nephi<sub>2</sub>'s mind with the mind of God. As the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are one in will and one in work, so, the text tells us, Nephi<sub>2</sub> is now and forever one with the Godhead in will and work, a unity that only possession by the Holy Ghost could make possible. Thus, God speaks to Nephi, using the same words Lamoni used when he equated his wife with divine beings:

*Blessed art thou, Nephi, for those things which thou hast done; for I have beheld how thou hast with unwearyingness declared the word, which I have given unto thee, unto this people. And thou hast not feared them, and hast not sought thine own life, but hast sought my will, and to keep my commandments. And now, because thou hast done this with such unwearyingness, behold, I will bless thee forever; and I will make thee mighty in word and in deed, in faith and in works; yea, even that all things shall be done unto thee according to thy word, for thou shalt not ask that which is contrary to my will. Behold, ... I am God. Behold, I declare it unto thee in the presence of mine angels, that ye shall have power over this people. ... Behold, I give unto you power, that whatsoever ye shall seal on earth shall be sealed in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven; and thus shall ye have power among this people. ... [T]hus saith the Lord God, who is the Almighty. ... (Helaman 10:4–7, 11)*

At this point in his life, Nephi<sub>2</sub>, like his master and guide, Christ, has become an incarnation of God on the earth.<sup>100</sup> As he would be the first to insist, he did not, like the Savior, live a perfect life. Unlike the Savior, on whom his own perfection depends, he was not born as an incarnation

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100. In orthodox Christian theology, this statement is logically incoherent. Only Christ incarnates God, and even his incarnation of and oneness with God is an incomprehensible mystery. In Restoration theology, our divine Father and Mother desire that all their children fully attain the telos proper to a child of God and become full incarnations of Father and Mother's divinity. Thus, what Nephi<sub>2</sub> here models — becoming an incarnation of God — is what God calls all of us to do.

of God. But through the grace and power of Christ's atonement, he has become one with the Savior and one with God. He has become what Christ commands all of us to become: perfect, even as our Father in heaven is perfect (Matthew 5:48; 3 Nephi 12:48). He is a full-fledged member of the *Sôd Elohim* and by all but the most abstract, philosophical standards, is a god.<sup>101</sup> Like Nephi, he knows what only God could know (Helaman 9:41). Like Nephi, he moves from place to place as only God could move (Helaman 10:16). Unsurprisingly, as was true for Ammon<sub>2</sub>, some of the people declare, more in truth than in error, "Behold, he is a god" (Helaman 9:41).

Nephi<sub>2</sub>'s dual citizenship on earth and in heaven, but primarily in heaven, is signified, like that of Alma<sub>2</sub>, by the last thing we are told about him. His death was not witnessed or recorded. All we know is that he "departed out of the land of Zarahemla ... and whither he went, no man knoweth" (3 Nephi 1:3). We are left to infer that, perhaps, like Moses, Nephi<sub>2</sub> was buried by God (Deuteronomy 34:5–7) or that like Elijah, without dying, he passed from earth to heaven (2 Kings 2:1, 11). These ambiguities in how he passed separate him from ordinary mortals, again positioning him between earth and heaven or just in heaven. Taken together with the account we have of his receipt of divine power, Nephi<sub>2</sub> becomes our best scriptural example of how mortal man "receiveth my Father's kingdom; therefore all that my Father hath [is] given unto him" (D&C 84:38). Having been filled with the Holy Ghost, he has become a perfected son of God like his master and exemplar Christ (Moroni 7:48).

### Conclusion

While scholars have suggested that theosis is a Nauvoo addition to Restoration theology, much evidence suggests that it was present in the Book of Mormon long before the Nauvoo period. The fact that theosis is independently articulated in the Book of Mormon and the King Follett discourse is evidence that the doctrine is an integral part of the gospel. There is no reason to believe that Joseph saw theosis in the Book of Mormon when he translated the book or that he developed his understanding of theosis from reading the Book of Mormon. Our ability to see it there is a function of insightful modern scholarship and voices speaking from the dust at Ugarit and elsewhere that have given us an understanding of what was happening in Lehi's Jerusalem that Joseph

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101. Nephi<sub>2</sub> is not like the god of the philosophers, the unmoved mover, the being without body, parts, or passions who exists outside of time and space, who is ontologically wholly unlike human beings — but neither is God.



did not have. So the articulations of the doctrine are independent, and our understanding of theosis is made richer by these related but distinct articulations. In his sermon, Joseph clarified aspects of theosis that are not fully apparent in the Book of Mormon. Joseph's pronouncements about the ontology of God and man are particularly forceful and clear. What he clearly states is only implied in the Book of Mormon. Conversely, some elements of theosis theology are developed with greater clarity in the Book of Mormon than in Joseph's deservedly famous sermon. For example, the close coupling of the divine Mother and Son as they play their linked role in salvation is especially clear there. Likewise, especially clear is the desire of the Father to feature the two most salient objects of his love, the Mother and Son, who are also his two most important gifts to humanity. We return to the Father, the Book of Mormon suggests, by coming to the Mother and Son, the Tree of Life and its fruit. And our ability to know the Father, the Mother, and the Son depends entirely on our being possessed by their fellow member of the Godhead, the Holy Ghost. We know them, we become like them, only to the degree that we become one with the being who is one with them, the Holy Ghost.

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