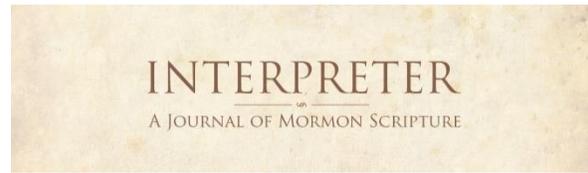




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“With the Tongue of Angels”: Angelic Speech as a Form of Deification

Author(s): Neal Rappleye

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Neal Rappleye

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“WITH THE TONGUE OF ANGELS”: ANGELIC SPEECH AS A FORM OF DEIFICATION¹

Neal Rappleye

Abstract: The “tongue of angels” has long been a point of interest to Latter-day Saints, who wonder whether it really is as simple as speaking under the influence of the Spirit or if it might mean something more. Drawing on the structure of Nephi’s record and the interactions with angels that Nephi recorded, we learn that this notion of speaking with the tongue of angels has connections with ancient Israelite temple worship and the divine council. Nephi places the act of speaking with the tongue of angels at the culmination of a literary ascent, where one must pass through a gate (baptism) and by a gatekeeper (the Holy Ghost). This progression makes rich allusions to imagery in the visions of Lehi, Nephi, and Isaiah, where these prophets were brought into the presence of the Lord, stood in the divine council, and were commissioned to declare the words of the Lord. Nephi’s carefully crafted narrative teaches that all are both invited and commanded to follow the path that leads to entrance into the Lord’s presence, and ultimately grants membership into the heavenly assembly.

Toward the end of his record, Nephi introduces the notion of “speak[ing] with the tongue of angels” (2 Nephi 31:13–14; 32:2–3).

¹ The core idea behind this paper first appeared in a KnoWhy by Book of Mormon Central on March 23, 2016. See Book of Mormon Central, “What is It to Speak with the Tongue of Angels? (2 Nephi 32:2),” *KnoWhy* 60 (March 23, 2016), online at <https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/what-is-it-to-speak-with-the-tongue-of-angels> (accessed July 24, 2016). When I wrote the initial draft for the KnoWhy, I knew there was much more that could be said on the topic, and started drafting what became this paper. I would like to thank David J. Larsen for discussing several of the ideas in this paper with me as I was doing research on the topic. Jasmin Gimenez and Stephen Smoot also gave feedback on an earlier draft, which substantively helped improve the quality of this paper.

As Nephi explains it, after receiving the ordinances and principles of the gospel (see Articles of Faith 1:4), “then can ye speak with the tongue of angels, and shout praises unto the Holy One of Israel.” Indeed, you “can speak with a new tongue, yea, even with the tongue of angels” (2 Nephi 31:13–14). What it means to *speak with the tongue of angels* is not entirely clear. It seems that Nephi’s own people were perplexed by this because when he takes up the matter again, he writes:

And now, behold, my beloved brethren, I suppose that ye ponder somewhat in your hearts concerning that which ye should do after ye have entered in by the way. But, behold, why do ye ponder these things in your hearts? Do ye not remember that I said unto you that after ye had received the Holy Ghost ye could 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. Wherefore, I said unto you, feast upon the words of Christ. (2 Nephi 32:1–3)

From this, most Latter-day Saint commentators have gathered that speaking with the *tongue of angels* is to have the Holy Ghost with you, giving you the words to say, and hence, “speak[ing] the words of Christ.” In short, angels declare the words of Christ, and thus speaking “with the tongue of angels” is likewise to proclaim the words of Christ.² While this interpretation resonates well with modern readers, the phrase may have a more nuanced meaning in ancient Israelite theology. If one takes 1 and 2 Nephi as progressing through the Nephite temple narrative, the phrase *speaking with the tongue of angels* may represent breaching the veil to

2 See Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987–1992), 1:369–70; Robert L. Millet, “Tongue of Angels,” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 757–58; Ed J. Pinegar and Richard J. Allen, *Commentaries and Insights on the Book of Mormon*, 2 vols. (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2007), 1:243–44; Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007–2008), 2:451–52; D. Kelly Ogden and Andrew C. Skinner, *Verse by Verse: The Book of Mormon*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 1:251–52; Thomas R. Valletta, *The Book of Mormon Study Guide: Start to Finish* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 207; Kathryn Jenkins Gordon, *Scripture Study Made Simple: The Book of Mormon — Complete Text and Commentary in a Single Volume* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2015), 127.

enter into the Lord's presence, becoming divine, and thereby joining the divine council.

Nephi and the Temple

Events leading up to the time when Nephi makes his small plates, provide important background and context for the record Nephi creates.³ Just before Nephi began his record, he and his people built a temple (see 2 Nephi 5:16). The temporal proximity of the building of the temple and the beginning of Nephi's record suggests that Nephi's record of "the more sacred things" (1 Nephi 19:5) may have been made in connection with the newly built temple (see 2 Nephi 5:28–32).⁴

This connection appears to be evident in the first few verses of 1 Nephi 1. Hugh Nibley noticed that Nephi begins with a colophon, introducing himself and his reasons for making his record.⁵ Nephi's colophon mentions "the *mysteries* of God" (1 Nephi 1:1). The term *mystery* comes from the Greek μύστηριον (*mystērion*), and commonly referred to initiation rites connected to temples or sacred space in antiquity.⁶ Though generally associated with Greco-Roman religion, similar concepts and practices are found in the Judeo-Christian tradition.⁷ The Israelite roots are very ancient indeed. Late Catholic biblical scholar Raymond E. Brown noted, "The connection of the prophets with mysteries dates back to the role

3 See John W. Welch, "When Did Nephi Write the Small Plates?" in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon: The FARMS Updates of the 1990s*, ed. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 75–77.

4 See Joseph M. Spencer, *An Other Testament: On Typology* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2016), 47.

5 Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert/The World of the Jaredites/There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City/Provo, UT: Deseret Book/FARMS, 1988), 17–18.

6 See Herodotus, *The Histories*, 2.51; Euripides, *The Suppliants*, 173; Plato, *Meno*, 76e; Andocides, *On the Mysteries*, 1.11; Lysias, *Against Alcibiades*, 14.42; Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, 6.28. I appreciate Jasmin Gimenez for providing these references to the primary sources.

7 See Raymond E. Brown, "The Semitic Background of the New Testament Mysterion (I)," *Biblica* 39/4 (1958): 426–448; Raymond E. Brown, "The Semitic Background of the New Testament Mysterion (II)," *Biblica* 40/1 (1959): 70–87; Andrew I. Miller, "Able to Know Heavenly Things: The Ante-Nicene Mysteries and their New Testament Sources," *FairMormon Papers and Reviews* 2 (2015); David J. Larsen, "Angels among Us: The Use of Old Testament Passages as Inspiration for Temple Themes in the Dead Sea Scrolls," *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 5 (2013): 91–110.

of the prophet as witness in the heavenly *sôd* where he heard the secret counsels of God and conveyed them to men.”⁸

Nephi says he “had a great knowledge ... of the mysteries of God.” The very next statement from Nephi is “*therefore*, I make a record of my proceedings in my days” (1 Nephi 1:1, emphasis added), meaning that his knowledge of the *mysteries* is Nephi’s justification for making a record. This is reinforced by the chiastic structure of 1 Nephi 1:1–3, as identified by Donald W. Parry.⁹

I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents, therefore I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father; and having seen many afflictions in the course of my days, nevertheless having been highly favored of the Lord in all my days;

A yea, having had a great knowledge of the goodness and the mysteries of God,

B therefore I make a record of my proceedings in my days.

C Yea, I make a record in the language of my father,

D which consists of the learning of the Jews

C’ and the language of the Egyptians.

B’ And I know that the record which I make is true: and I make it with mine own hand:

A’ and I make it according to my knowledge. (1 Nephi 1:1–3)

In the chiastic structure, Nephi’s *knowledge* of the mysteries is paired with the *knowledge* by which he makes his record. This suggests that his knowledge of the mysteries *is* the knowledge by which he makes his record.

8 Brown, “The Semitic Background of the New Testament Mysterion (I),” 448.

9 See Donald W. Parry, *Poetic Parallelism in the Book of Mormon: The Complete Text Reformatted* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2007), 1.

In that light, Hugh Nibley has commented that in some ancient cults, after going through the initiation (i.e., “the mysteries”) the initiate was required to record their experiences.¹⁰ The final line of 1 Nephi 1:1 even bears a striking resemblance to the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead — understood by some to be a temple text.¹¹

The temple, then, seems to be at the heart of Nephi’s small plates project — a record that is supposed to consist of “the more sacred things” (1 Nephi 19:5). According to theologian Joseph M. Spencer, this manifests itself in how Nephi structured his account.

These structural divisions order Nephi’s record as a four-part progression, from (1) the journey to the New World (1 Nephi 1–18) through (2) a series of theological sermons (1 Nephi 19–2 Nephi 5) to (3) the culminating, commanded heart of Nephi’s record (2 Nephi 6–30) and (4) a brief conclusion (2 Nephi 31–33).¹²

Having identified the four-part progression, Spencer then identifies the theological pattern embedded within this structure.

10 Hugh W. Nibley, *Teachings of the Book of Mormon: Transcripts of Lectures Presented to an Honors Book of Mormon Class at Brigham Young University, 1988–1990*, 4 vols. (American Fork and Provo, UT: Covenant Communications and FARMS, 1993), 1:2: “At the end of the mysteries, you were required to record this before you could leave the cave, or the temple or whatever it was. You would leave a record of your experiences in the mysteries — whatever visions it was you had.”

11 Spencer, *An Other Testament*, 64n11: “In a vein still more speculative than the one followed above, one might moreover suggest that Nephi — given his Egyptian connections — makes an allusion with the last line of 1 Nephi 1:1 to the temple text of the Egyptian Book of the Dead, the title of which — *rhw nw prt m hrw* — can be translated as ‘the book (or record) of going forth (proceeding) by day.’” For the Book of the Dead as a temple text, see John Gee, “The Use of the Daily Temple Liturgy in the Book of the Dead,” in *Totenbuch — Forschungen: Gesammelte Beiträge des 2. Internationalen Totenbuch — Symposiums 2005*, ed. Burkhard Backes, Irmtraut Munro, and Simone Stöhr (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2006), 73–86; Alexandra Von Lieven, “Book of the Dead, Book of the Living: BD Spells as Temple Texts,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 98 (2012): 249–67. I appreciate Stephen Smoot bringing these to my attention. Also see Stephen O. Smoot and Quinten Barney, “The Book of the Dead as a Temple Text and the Implications for the Book of Abraham,” in *The Temple: Ancient and Restored, Proceedings of the Interpreter Matthew B. Brown Memorial Conference, 25 October 2014*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and Donald W. Parry (Orem, UT and Salt Lake City: Interpreter Foundation and Eborn Books, 2016), 183–209.

12 Spencer, *An Other Testament*, 36.

The basic theological pattern at work is relatively straightforward: (1) 1 Nephi 1–18 recounts the founding of the Lehite colony in the New World; (2) 1 Nephi 19–2 Nephi 5 relates the breaking up of this colony into two rival factions, one of which is cut off from the presence of the Lord; (3) 2 Nephi 6–30 consists of prophecies and sermons focused on the eventual return of that cut-off faction to the Lord’s favor; and (4) 2 Nephi 31–33 offers summary reflections on baptism as a crossing of a limit.¹³

From here, Spencer categorizes the four sections as Foundation (1 Nephi 1–18); Division (1 Nephi 19–2 Nephi 5); Redemption (2 Nephi 6–30); and Conclusion (2 Nephi 31–33).¹⁴ Using only a little imagination, Spencer quickly recasts these categories as follows:

- Creation (1 Nephi 1–18)
- Fall (1 Nephi 19–2 Nephi 5)
- Atonement (2 Nephi 6–30)
- Veil (2 Nephi 31–33)¹⁵

This pattern bears a striking resemblance to ancient Israelite temple theology, as outlined by Margaret Barker.¹⁶

The temple background is important for understanding what it means to *speak with the tongue of angels*. Specifically, it is important that all instances of *speak with the tongue of angels* appear in the section Spencer classifies as “veil.”

The last three chapters of Second Nephi are saturated with the theme of the veil. After a few introductory words, Nephi speaks of baptism as “the gate by which ye should enter” (2 Nephi 31:17), associating passage through the gate with

13 Ibid., 41–42.

14 Ibid., 42.

15 Ibid., 42.

16 See Margaret Barker, *Temple Theology: An Introduction* (London, UK: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004). Spencer notes, “I had been working with the creation/fall/atonement/veil interpretation of Nephi’s record for several years before I came across Margaret Barker’s work for the first time.” (Spencer, *An Other Testament*, 65, n.19.). While I acknowledge that some scholars disagree with Spencer’s structural analysis, and others have proposed different organizational structures for the text, Spencer’s will be used for the purposes of this paper.

passage through the veil of the Old Testament temple — something indicated when he describes those who pass through the gate as able to “speak with the tongue of angels, and shout praises to the Holy One of Israel” (31:13). The holy of holies in the Old Testament temple was, according to ancient Israelite belief, the dwelling place, precisely, of the angels.¹⁷

The procession toward the temple was an ascent (see Psalm 24:3),¹⁸ and the tripartite division of the tabernacle, and later temple, was seen as analogous to ascending Mount Sinai — with the holy of holies being the summit.¹⁹ In the end, you passed through the veil, where you ascended to heaven to join God and the angels (i.e., the divine council).

The Temple and the Divine Council

In recent decades, biblical scholars have come to understand that ancient Israelite religion was not strictly monotheistic. God — or the “most high God” — was not the only divine being but rather the supreme divine being, ruling over a council of other divinities.²⁰ The members of the divine council are called (in English), variously, *the hosts of heaven, gods, sons of the Most High, sons of God, the heavens, morning stars, and angels*.²¹

In Hebrew, the council is commonly referred to as שֵׁד (sôd), which is also used to refer to its *counsel* or secrets (as in Amos 3:7 in the KJV). The

17 Spencer, *An Other Testament*, .

18 David J. Larsen, “Ascending into the Hill of the Lord: What the Psalms Can Tell Us about the Rituals of the First Temple,” in *Ancient Temple Worship: Proceedings of the Expound Symposium 14 May 2011*, ed. Matthew B. Brown, Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, Stephen D. Ricks, and John S. Thompson (Orem, UT and Salt Lake City: Interpreter Foundation and Eborn Books, 2014), 174–75.

19 See L. Michael Morales, “The Tabernacle: Mountain of God in the Israelite Cultus,” in *Ancient Temple Worship*, 27–70.

20 For useful discussions by Latter-day Saints of the divine council, see Daniel C. Peterson, “‘Ye Are Gods’: Psalm 82 and John 10 as Witness to the Divine Nature of Humankind,” in *The Disciple as Scholar: Essays on Scripture and the Ancient World in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Daniel C. Peterson (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2000), 471–594; David E. Bokovoy, “‘Ye Really Are Gods’: A Response to Michael Heiser concerning the LDS Use of Psalm 82 and the Gospel of John,” *FARMS Review* 19/1 (2007): 267–313; Daniel O. McClellan, “Psalm 82 in Contemporary Latter-day Saint Tradition,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 15 (2015): 79–96.

21 See Stephen O. Smoot, “The Divine Council in the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Mormon,” *Studia Antiqua* 12/2 (Fall 2013): 5–6. Smoot provides the Hebrew and scripture citations.

Hebrew *sôd* was connected to the Greek *mystērion* by both Christians and Jews,²² hinting at its connection with the ancient temple. The meeting place of the heavenly council was the heavenly temple, of which the temple on earth was a replica, and temple rituals were considered a dramatic reenactment of the divine council.²³ “In short,” explains Joseph Spencer, “the temple is where human beings are inducted into the divine council.”²⁴ Such an induction came from passing through the veil.

Nephi and the Divine Council

This divine council manifests itself throughout both the Bible and the Book of Mormon.²⁵ “Following a lucid biblical pattern,” writes Stephen O. Smoot, “the Book of Mormon provides a depiction of the divine council and several examples of those who were introduced into the heavenly assembly and made partakers in divine secrets.”²⁶ Within Nephi’s record alone is no less than three visions of the divine council: Lehi’s, Nephi’s, and Isaiah’s.

Lehi’s Prophetic Call

John W. Welch has noted that Nephi appropriately makes the significant connection between the *mysterries* (*sôd*) and his father’s vision of the heavenly assembly (*sôd*) (see 1 Nephi 2:16; cf. 1:8).²⁷ As Smoot explained,

Nephi begins his account by describing the prophetic commission of his father Lehi. Embedded within his account

22 See David J. Larsen, “Mysterries,” Book of Mormon Central — Notes, online at <http://www.notes.bookofmormoncentral.org/Mysterries> (accessed February 27, 2016); John W. Welch, “Lehi’s Council Vision and the Mysterries of God,” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon: A Decade of New Research*, John W. Welch, ed. (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1992), 24–25. Also see Brown, “The Semitic Background of the New Testament Mysterion (I),” 426–448; Brown, “The Semitic Background of the New Testament Mysterion (II),” 70–87.

23 See William J. Hamblin, “The Sôd of YHWH and the Endowment,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 4 (2013): 147–154.

24 Spencer, *An Other Testament*, 51.

25 Smoot, “The Divine Council,” 1–18.

26 *Ibid.*, 2.

27 Welch, “Lehi’s Council Vision and the Mysterries of God,” 24–25: “it is remarkable yet understandable that when Nephi described his desire to receive a personal confirmation of the truth of his father’s words, he said that he wanted to ‘know of the mysterries of God.’ Those ‘mysterries’ (*sod*) were apparently synonymous, in Nephi’s inquiring mind, with the decrees and knowledge that Lehi had received in the council (also *sod*).”

is specific language indicating that Lehi followed the example of the prophets in the Hebrew Bible who also received Yahweh's שׁוֹד [sôd].²⁸

The specific language Smoot is referring to is found in 1 Nephi 1:8:

And being thus overcome with the Spirit, he was carried away in a vision, even that he saw the heavens open, and he thought he saw God sitting upon his throne, *surrounded with numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God.* (Emphasis added)

Joseph Spencer notes, “Lehi at first sees this whole scene from a distance, but one of the angelic figures brings him a book, and then, it seems, inducts him into the chorus of angels around the throne.”²⁹ Spencer’s inference stems from Lehi’s reaction to his vision:

Great and marvelous are thy works,
O Lord God Almighty!
Thy throne is high in the heavens.

And thy power, and goodness, and mercy
Are over all the inhabitation of the earth;

And, because thou art merciful,
Thou wilt not suffer those who come unto thee
That they shall perish! (1 Nephi 1:14)³⁰

John W. Welch pointed out that these “words seem to reflect poetic composition similar to exaltations of God’s controlling power and wisdom found in ancient Near Eastern literature,” and thus, “it may have been that Lehi, too, sang his words of praise, like other hymns or psalms of praise in his day were sung.”³¹ This leads Welch to conclude, “He spontaneously and eloquently joined the heavenly host in praising God. By so doing he functionally, if not constitutionally, joined the council as one of its members.”³²

28 Smoot, “The Divine Council,” 11.

29 Spencer, *An Other Testament*, 51.

30 Structure and punctuation taken from 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 H. Seely (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 433.

31 Welch, “The Calling of Lehi,” 432–33.

32 *Ibid.*, 432.

Latter-day Saint biblical scholar David E. Bokovoy likewise made this connection:

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. ... Lehi fulfills the assignment specifically given the *šaba’*, or “host,” in Psalm 103:20–21 to “praise/bless” the Lord. ... Lehi appears to have become a fully inducted member of the *mal’akim* to bear witness of the Book of Mormon’s great dual focus.³³

In becoming a member of the divine council, Lehi is now an authorized messenger, commissioned “to prophesy and to declare” all “the things which he had both seen and heard” (1 Nephi 1:18). He can now speak the decrees of the council.

Nephi’s Vision

Without question, Nephi’s understanding of *speaking with the tongue of angels* must have been informed by his personal experience conversing and interacting with an angel in 1 Nephi 11–14. Nephi is “caught away in the Spirit of the Lord, yea, into an exceedingly high mountain” (1 Nephi 11:1) where he is first interviewed by the Spirit before conversing with an angel (1 Nephi 11:1–7).

Bokovoy has argued that Nephi’s encounter with the Spirit of the Lord has a number of motifs associated with the divine council visions.³⁴ Specifically, “the prophet’s reference to an ‘exceedingly high mountain’ suggests that the Spirit of the Lord brought Nephi to the heavenly temple, the traditional meeting place of God’s divine assembly.”³⁵ Bokovoy goes on to explain:

33 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.

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

35 Bokovoy, “‘Thou Knowest That I Believe,’” 3.

Though the Book of Mormon does not specify the reason that Nephi was brought to the location of the divine council or heavenly temple, a careful reading of the account suggests that as a representative of the assembly, the Spirit of the Lord assumed the customary role of council witness, meaning one who could offer testimony in a legal setting.³⁶

There, in the meeting place of the divine council, the Spirit questions Nephi. Bokovoy explains: “This exchange may have served a profound purpose reflecting the common Near Eastern motif of invoking members of the heavenly host as council witnesses who could testify of human righteousness.”³⁷ After Nephi declares this testimony, and thus proves his worthiness, the Spirit of the Lord sings a hymn of praise:

Hosanna to the Lord,
the most high God;
for he is God over all the earth,
yea, even above all. (1 Nephi 11:6)

As Bokovoy points out, this is one of only seven times in which the Book of Mormon uses the title “most high God.”³⁸ This is significant because this is “one of the traditional biblical terms for the head God of the divine assembly.”³⁹ As has already been pointed out, the act of singing praises unto God is a common function of the heavenly hosts. Since such praises are usually given in the presence of the most high God, whilst he sits on his throne, this — like the location upon a high mountain — implies that they are in the presence of the Lord, before the heavenly court.

The implication is also made when Nephi prefaces the vision with the phrase, “I, Nephi, was desirous also that I might *see*, and *hear*” (1 Nephi 10:17), and he uses the similar phrase “the things which I *saw* and *heard*” toward the end of his vision (1 Nephi 14:28). Bokovoy explains:

Ancient Israel witnessed its fair share of false prophets who feigned divine authority with their predictions. Hence Lehi’s

36 Ibid., 7.

37 Ibid., 11.

38 The others are 1 Nephi 11:6 (a second time); 2 Nephi 24:14 (quoting Isaiah); Alma 26:14; 3 Nephi 4:32 (2x); 11:17. Bokovoy mistakenly includes Jacob 2:13 in his list of references. See Bokovoy, “‘Thou Knowest That I Believe,’” 6.

39 Bokovoy, “‘Thou Knowest That I Believe,’” 6.

biblical contemporary, the prophet Jeremiah, specifically identified a true messenger as one who had “perceived and heard [God’s] word” (Jeremiah 23:18). In Jeremiah 23:18, “perceived” is the King James translation for the Hebrew verb *ra’ah*, which means, in its most basic sense, “to see.” Therefore, according to the stipulations provided by Jeremiah, a true prophet had both *seen* and *heard* God’s word.⁴⁰

Jeremiah specifically asks, “For who hath stood in the counsel [*sôd*] of the Lord, and hath perceived [*ra’ah*] and heard his word?” So *seeing* and *hearing* is connected to the divine council. Kevin L. Tolley, a Hebrew Bible PhD candidate at Claremont, explains:

This veiled reference, “saw and heard,” becomes a credential for being a spokesman or messenger of the council of Jehovah. The implication of the phrase is that one has seen the divine council and heard the decrees thereof. A person who claims to have “seen and heard” can be identified as a legitimate representative of Jehovah without going into detail concerning the sacred nature of his experience. The concept of a prophet justifying his claim to divine authority is reduced to what he has “seen and heard.”⁴¹

Bokovoy goes on to point out that Nephi appropriately places emphasis on the fact that Lehi had both *seen* and *heard* the divine council (1 Nephi 1:6, 18–19).⁴² Nephi’s use of the phrase at both the beginning and the end of his vision effectively serves as a shorthand to indicate that in the course of the vision, he had stood in the divine council. As Tolley explains, Nephi “solidifies his own prophetic status as one who ‘saw and heard,’ standing shoulder to shoulder with his father and Jeremiah.”⁴³

The presence of the divine assembly is also implied by the fact that the Spirit bears witness of Nephi’s righteousness (1 Nephi 11:6). If the Spirit is acting as a council witness, it only makes sense that he stands before the council when he bears testimony of Nephi’s worthiness.

Returning to the sequence of the vision, what happens next is crucial to understanding Nephi’s teaching about the tongue of angels. “By

40 David E. Bokovoy, “The Bible vs. the Book of Mormon: Still Losing the Battle,” *FARMS Review* 18/1 (2006): 8.

41 Kevin L. Tolley, “To ‘See and Hear,’” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 18 (2016): 142–43.

42 Bokovoy, “The Bible vs. the Book of Mormon,” 8.

43 Tolley, “To ‘See and Hear,’” 147.

presenting Nephi with an opportunity to officially declare his testimony,” wrote Bokovoy, “the Spirit of the Lord could, from a Near Eastern perspective, function as a divine witness *concerning Nephi’s worthiness to be introduced to further revelatory knowledge*.”⁴⁴ As the witness to the council of Nephi’s righteousness, the Spirit of the Lord is the one who has power to grant Nephi access to the heavenly assembly and the greater knowledge it can impart. And he does exactly that, declaring, “Wherefore, thou shalt behold the things which thou hast desired” (1 Nephi 11:6). Nephi is, in effect, passing through the veil. He now begins to see visions and converses with one of the heavenly host.

Nephi’s experience speaking with an angel, then, comes only after he is questioned by the Spirit of the Lord, and found worthy of revelatory knowledge from the divine assembly, being granted access by the Holy Spirit.

Isaiah’s Prophetic Call

Nephi took care to not only record his and his father’s visions, he also copied Isaiah’s vision of the divine council into his record (see 2 Nephi 16). While in the temple, Isaiah saw “the Lord sitting upon a throne, high, and lifted up” (2 Nephi 16:1; Isaiah 6:1), surrounded by heavenly hosts (seraphim, in this instance), singing praises to the Lord (2 Nephi 16:2–3; Isaiah 6:2–3).

Of specific interest to the topic at hand is that Isaiah’s induction into the council involves the purification of his *lips*. The Hebrew here is שפה (*śāpāh*), which is sometimes used, as here, as a metaphor for language/speech. Isaiah is concerned because he has “unclean lips,” then a seraph comes and places a hot coal against his lips, which purifies him. After that, Isaiah is able to participate in the council, and thus volunteers to be sent by the council (see 2 Nephi 16:5–8; Isaiah 6:5–8). Isaiah’s commission is, “Go and *tell* this people — Hear ye indeed, but they understood not; and see ye indeed, but they perceived not” (2 Nephi 16:9; Isaiah 6:9). Bokovoy observes, “through a mouth-cleansing ritual at the altar, Isaiah received a divine status as one fully capable of participating in God’s council and eventually of speaking his message.”⁴⁵

Nephi’s Contemporaries: Jeremiah and Ezekiel

44 Bokovoy, “‘Thou Knowest That I Believe,’” 11, emphasis added.

45 Bokovoy, “On Christ and Covenants,” 35.

Bokovoy has pointed out that Isaiah is *not* the only one to make an association between the mouth and becoming a member of the divine council. “Each book of the Major Prophets contains examples of the symbolic use of the mouth as an allusion to prophetic participation in the divine council.”⁴⁶ As part of Jeremiah’s prophetic call, “Then the Lord put forth his hand, and *touched my mouth*. And the Lord said unto me, Behold, *I have put my words in thy mouth*” (Jeremiah 1:9). Here it is made explicit that because of the ritual involving the prophet’s mouth, the prophet can speak the words of the Lord.

Ezekiel’s experience is a little different but still interesting in light of Nephi’s teaching on *speaking with the tongue of angels*. Ezekiel 1–3 describes an elaborate vision of the Lord on his throne, accompanied by other divine beings. The Lord converses with Ezekiel, and tells him, “open thy mouth, and eat that I give thee” (Ezekiel 2:8). Ezekiel is then given a book, and again commanded, “eat that thou findest; eat this roll, and go *speak* unto the house of Israel” (Ezekiel 3:1). So, he eats the book (or roll), and the Lord tells him that now he can “speak with my words unto them” (Ezekiel 3:4). So Ezekiel is empowered to speak the words of the Lord by actually *eating them* first.

Passing through the Veil: Angelic Speech and Deification

When Nephi first introduces the notion of *speaking with the tongue of angels*, he does so with a literary form called *progression parallelism* or sometimes *staircase parallelism*. This form gives the reader a sense of progressing forward or ascending upward until reaching a pinnacle or culmination of thought.⁴⁷ *Speaking with the tongue of angels* is at the pinnacle of the progression that Nephi sets out twice, paired together as an extended alternate, in 2 Nephi 31:13–14.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Ibid., 34.

⁴⁷ See Parry, *Poetic Parallelism*, xxviii–xxix for explanation of progression parallelism.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 127.

Wherefore, my beloved brethren, I know that if ye shall follow the Son, with full purpose of heart, acting no hypocrisy and no deception before God, but with real intent,

- A repenting of your sins,
- B witnessing unto the Father that ye are willing to take upon you the name of Christ,
- C by baptism — yea, by following your Lord and your Savior down into the water, according to his word, behold, then shall ye receive the Holy Ghost,
- D yea, then cometh the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost;
- E and then can ye speak with the tongue of angels, and shout praises unto the Holy One of Israel.

But, behold, my beloved brethren, thus came the voice of the Son unto me, saying:

- A After ye have repented of your sins,
- B and witnessed unto the Father that ye are willing to keep my commandments,
- C by the baptism of water,
- D and have received the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost,
- E and can speak with a new tongue, yea, even with the tongue of angels, and after this should deny me, it would have been better for you that ye had not known me.

Nephi unexpectedly positions *speaking with the tongue of angels* at the pinnacle of a literary ascension, which involves passing through a “gate” and being purged of sin by a fiery being (see 2 Nephi 31:17). Although this overall progression is a familiar one, we expect enduring to the end and receiving salvation to come at the top of the ascent. When

using 2 Nephi 31 to illustrate the Nephite Gospel,⁴⁹ Noel B. Reynolds completely removes *speaking with the tongue of angels* from Nephi's formulation. Instead, he jumps to 2 Nephi 31:15, which reads: "And I heard a voice from the Father, saying: Yea, the words of my Beloved are true and faithful. He that endureth to the end, the same shall be saved."

A careful reading here reveals at least two things. First, that the Father is *not* speaking to *add* anything to the Son's words (in 2 Nephi 31:14) but rather to *reaffirm* what the Son has already said. Second, that the Son never actually mentions enduring to the end or being saved. The progressive structure of 2 Nephi 31:14 (the words of the Son) would suggest that *enduring to the end* is continuing the ascent until you reach the pinnacle, and being *saved* is arriving at that culminating point. Hence, *speaking with the tongue of angels* is in some sense represents being saved.

Joseph Spencer illuminates this connection by lining up 2 Nephi 31:13 with 1 Nephi 1:8,⁵⁰ from Lehi's vision of the divine council. Spencer writes, "Nephi's record opens by displaying what *can* happen to the righteous and Lehi's induction into the heavenly council serves as a model."⁵¹

49 Noel B. Reynolds, "The Gospel of Jesus Christ as Taught by the Nephite Prophets," *BYU Studies* 31/3 (Summer 1991): 31–50.

50 Spencer, *An Other Testament*, 52.

51 *Ibid.*, 51.

2 Nephi 31:13	1 Nephi 1:8
<p>Wherefore, my beloved brethren, I know that if ye shall follow the Son, with full purpose of heart, acting no hypocrisy and no deception before God, but with real intent, repenting of your sins, witnessing unto the Father that ye are willing to take upon you the name of Christ, by baptism — yea, by following your Lord and your Savior down into the water, according to his word, behold, then shall ye receive the Holy Ghost; yea, then cometh the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost; and then can ye <i>speak with the tongue of angels, and shout praises unto the Holy One of Israel.</i></p>	<p>And being thus overcome with the Spirit, he was carried away in a vision, even that he saw the heavens open, and he thought he saw God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with <i>numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God.</i></p>

Remember that singing and praising the Lord is a function of the divine council. Lehi joins the angels in singing praises to God on his throne (1 Nephi 1:14). The Spirit sings praises to the “Most High” when he inducts Nephi into the council (1 Nephi 11:6), and in Isaiah, fiery beings sing praises to the Lord (2 Nephi 16:2–3; Isaiah 6:2–3). Speaking with the tongue of angels means *doing as the angels do* — “shout[ing] praises unto the Holy One of Israel.” Hence, Spencer explains, “Nephi offers in 2 Nephi 31 a promise that the obedient can, as Lehi had done, *join the angelic council* to sing and shout praises.”⁵²

This same concept can be found in ritual practice of Jews and early Christians. David J. Larsen found that in the liturgical texts of the Dead Sea Scrolls, members of the community were “enabled to participate in the heavenly vision and praise God together with the angels, often singing or shouting for joy; some texts suggest that they may have been subsequently clothed with heavenly robes in imitation of the heavenly beings.”⁵³ This can be seen in 4Q403 1, i (“Song of the Sabbath Sacrifice”), where it says, “Sing (or chant) with joy, you who rejoice with rejoicing among the wondrous godlike beings. And chant (or recount) His glory with the tongue of all who chant with knowledge; and [recount] his wonderful songs of joy.”⁵⁴ Clement of Alexandria (c. AD 150–215), an important early Christian writer, also tied singing with the angels with

52 Spencer, *An Other Testament*, 52.

53 Larsen, “Angels Among Us,” 92.

54 As cited in Larsen, “Angels Among Us,” 107.

initiation into the mysteries. “If it is thy wish, be thou also initiated; and thou shall join the choir along with angels around the unbegotten and indestructible and the only true God, the Word of God, raising the hymn with us.”⁵⁵

Spencer calls this *angelicization*, i.e., becoming an angel. The term is synonymous with *deification*, or becoming a god. In Latter-day Saint nomenclature, it is called *exaltation*, or being saved in the truest sense of the word.

This connection between *speaking with the tongue of angels* and actually becoming angelic/divine is strengthened by role that the Holy Ghost plays in 2 Nephi 31–32. Baptism by water is the gate (2 Nephi 31:17), while the Holy Ghost is the *gatekeeper*. Nephi’s direct experience teaches that “the Spirit of the Lord” proves ones’ worthiness to enter into the presence of the Lord and converse with angels (1 Nephi 11:1–6). Thus, Nephi asks, “how could ye speak with the tongue of angels save it were by the Holy Ghost?” (2 Nephi 32:2).

Significantly, Nephi repeatedly associates the Holy Ghost with *fire* (2 Nephi 31:13, 14, 17), and for Nephi it is the baptism of *fire*, rather than water, that cleanses sin (2 Nephi 31:17). This calls to mind the vision of Isaiah, which Nephi recorded, where a seraph — in Hebrew, שרָפ (sārāp), literally meaning “fiery one” — purges Isaiah of his sins by placing a hot coal to his mouth (2 Nephi 16:6–7; Isaiah 6:6–7).⁵⁶ It may also be important that Lehi’s vision of the council was preceded by a “pillar of fire” (1 Nephi 1:6).

The symbolism of the mouth or lips potently representing the power to *speak* the words of the Lord also tie into Nephi’s understanding of the *tongue* of angels. When Isaiah’s lips are purged, he is then able to speak in the council and deliver its message (2 Nephi 16:8–9; Isaiah 6:8–9). When the Lord touches Jeremiah’s mouth, the Lord’s words are put in Jeremiah’s mouth for him to speak (see Jeremiah 1:9). Likewise, Nephi teaches that after being purged of sin by fire, we receive a “new tongue,” and can speak “with the tongue of angels” (2 Nephi 31:14). Angels, Nephi explains, “speak the words of Christ” (2 Nephi 32:3). Lehi has no

55 Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortations to the Heathen*, Christian Classics Ethereal Library (ccel.org), <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf02.vi.ii.xii.html> (accessed April 11, 2016).

56 Spencer, *An Other Testament*, 56 aligns the Holy Ghost/baptism of fire with the seraph/live coal both as “mediating elements” in a table comparing 2 Nephi 31, 1 Nephi 1, and Isaiah 6 but offers no commentary on the connection between the Holy Ghost as the baptism of fire and seraph as a “fiery” being.

interaction with the mouth, but he is given a book — also a common motif — by a figure commonly identified as Christ, reads the message in the book, and then is able to “declare” its message (1 Nephi 1:9–13, 18).⁵⁷

Ezekiel brings together the mouth/speech symbolism with the heavenly book motif found in Lehi’s vision. Like Lehi, Ezekiel is given a book, but it is only by opening his mouth and eating the book that he is able to speak the words of the Lord (Ezekiel 2:8–3:4). In this light, it is interesting that Nephi says that in order to “press forward” toward “eternal life” (salvation and exaltation) we must do so while “feasting upon the word of Christ” (2 Nephi 31:20). This is then brought together with speaking with the tongue of angels when Nephi says, “Angels speak . . . the words of Christ. Wherefore, I said unto you, feast upon the words of Christ” (2 Nephi 32:3). In order to speak with the tongue of angels, we must feast upon the words of Christ, just as Ezekiel did.

What is striking about all of this is the way these themes are worked into 2 Nephi 31–33 to illustrate that Nephi himself had been angelicized, to use Spencer’s term. As Nephi bids the reader farewell, he bears witness that he, himself, is a member of the divine council who speaks the words of Christ. First, Nephi subtly uses an extended alternate, setting his own words up as parallels to the words of Christ in 2 Nephi 31:13–14. Nephi bears his own witness, saying, “I know that if ye shall follow the Son” (2 Nephi 31:13). After going through points A–E, culminating with the tongue of angels, Nephi then says, “thus came the voice of the Son unto me, saying” followed by a repeat of the same points (A–E) culminating in the tongue of angels. The effect of the parallelism is to signal that Nephi’s words *are* the words of Christ — and hence Nephi speaks (or writes) with the tongue of angels.

After again explaining that it is “by the power of the Holy Ghost” that angels speak (2 Nephi 32:3), Nephi tells us that his own speech is constrained by “the Spirit,” who “stoppeth mine utterance” (2 Nephi 32:7). Nephi then gets more explicit in 2 Nephi 33. Nephi says that he is “mighty” in speaking, because he “speaketh by the power of the Holy Ghost” (2 Nephi 33:1). Nephi then explicitly states that his words *are* the words of Christ.

And now, my beloved brethren, and also Jew, and all ye ends of the earth, hearken unto these words and believe in Christ; and if ye believe not in these words believe in

⁵⁷ On the heavenly book motif, see Brent E. McNeely, “The Book of Mormon and the Heavenly Book Motif,” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, 26–28.

Christ. And 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; and they teach all men that they should do good. And if they are not the words of Christ, judge ye — for 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*, notwithstanding my weakness. (2 Nephi 33:10–11)

By promising to stand “face to face” with the reader at the judgment bar, Nephi is placing himself directly in the council. The divine council functioned as a heavenly court, where divine judgment was rendered. Bokovoy specifically notes that “the God of ancient Israel ... could invoke his סוד [*sôd*] to assist in the important process of rendering a divine judgment.”⁵⁸ As one biblical scholar put it, “[The *sôd*] is a vital decision-making agency responsible for juridical judgments directed both to divine beings and human beings.”⁵⁹ When we see Nephi at the judgment bar, we shall then know that his words were commanded by Christ because we will know he has been inducted into the heavenly council and hence a commissioned messenger of the Lord.

Conclusion

The “tongue of angels” has long been a point of interest to Latter-day Saints, who wonder whether it really is as simple as speaking under the influence of the Spirit or if it might mean something more. Drawing on the structure of Nephi’s record, and the interactions with angels that Nephi recorded, we learn that this notion of *speaking with the tongue of angels* has connections with ancient Israelite temple worship and the divine council.

Nephi’s record taken as a temple text carries the reader through the progression of creation, fall, atonement, and entering the presence of the Lord through the veil. Nephi only discusses *speaking with the tongue of angels* in the final portion of the text, which represents passing through the veil (or “gate”) and coming into the Lord’s presence. There, Nephi places the act of *speaking with the tongue of angels* at the culmination of a literary ascent, where one must pass through a gate (baptism) and by

58 David E. Bokovoy, “שמעו והעידו בבית יעקב: Invoking the Council as Witnesses in Amos 3:13,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127/1 (2008): 51.

59 Min Suc Kee, “The Heavenly Council and its Type-scene,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 31/3 (2007): 259.

a gatekeeper (the Holy Ghost). This progression makes rich allusions to imagery in the visions of Lehi, Nephi, and Isaiah, where these prophets were brought into the presence of the Lord, stood in the divine council, and were commissioned to declare the words of the Lord.

Here in these final chapters, Nephi makes it clear that he himself has stood in this council, has become one of the heavenly hosts, and now speaks with the tongue of angels. Nephi also makes it clear, however, that this is not merely the prerogative of the prophets. Nephi's carefully crafted narrative teaches that all are both *invited* and *commanded* to follow the path that leads to entrance into the Lord's presence, and ultimately grants membership into the heavenly assembly.

Neal Rappleye is a research project manager for Book of Mormon Central. He blogs about Latter-day Saint topics at <http://www.studioetquoquefide.com/>

