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Assyria and the “Great Church” of Nephi’s Vision

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Abstract: The Book of Mormon begins at a pivotal point in Israelite history and in the history of the ancient Near East more broadly. With the fall of Assyria and the power vacuum that grew out of Assyria’s demise, questions of sovereignty were of paramount concern. It was at that time that Lehi led his family into the wilderness after witnessing the impending destruction of Jerusalem in vision. Nephi, “desir[ing] to know the things that his father had seen” (1 Nephi 11:1), describes his own vision, where he saw the coming of the “Son of God” (1 Nephi 11:7), the destruction of his own people, and the “formation of a great church” (1 Nephi 13:4) that would “destroy the saints of God” (1 Nephi 13:9). These elements, along with others in Nephi’s vision, seem to reflect the underlying insecurity of the time concerning divinely appointed sovereignty and the right to rule. Because of the deeply personal nature of Nephi’s vision and its pressing relevance, we might expect it to contain elements that represent the cultural and social realities of his time. When we approach Nephi’s vision in this way, surprising parallels can be found between the “great church” of his vision and the Assyrian Empire. These parallels help provide a new context for viewing Nephi’s vision that can heighten our awareness of the loving kindness the “Son of God” displays as the universal sovereign.

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the universal sovereignty of YHWH is imagined and described based on Assyrian claims of universal dominion.” Aster further claims that there is a “consistent use of Neo-Assyrian⁴ royal motifs throughout [Isaiah,] ... motifs which are borrowed, subverted, and adapted to fit the prophet’s message.”⁵ If Isaiah was using and subverting Assyrian rhetoric when he crafted his rhetorical arguments, this implies that the intended audience of those writings were familiar with Assyrian ideology.⁶

These suggestions have implications related to how we are to interpret Nephi’s record given Nephi’s apparent training as a scribe⁷ and his extensive use of Isaiah’s writings.⁸ Furthermore, if, as Noel Reynolds proposes, Nephi and his father, Lehi, are also “participants in a Manassite scribal circle,”⁹ we might expect to find parallels¹⁰ within Nephi’s record to Assyrian rhetoric given their connection to Mesopotamian scribal culture.¹¹ These parallels might be most apparent if we are to look at Nephi’s apocalyptic vision.¹² The account of Nephi’s vision is unique within the record of the Book of Mormon, as it is a first-person, unabridged account of a deeply personal experience. Nephi received that vision because of a desire to know the things his father had seen (1 Nephi 11:1). Unlike the other parts of Nephi’s record, which he presumably crafted for an audience that would read his record at some future point in time, Nephi’s vision was first and foremost intended to teach him. It, therefore, has the greatest potential to reflect the cultural milieu familiar to Nephi.¹³

In that vision, Nephi’s “Spirit” guide first praised Nephi for believing in the words of his father concerning the coming of the “Son of the most high God” (1 Nephi 11:6). Next, an angel showed Nephi the Son of God, whom he called the “Lamb of God,” condescending to come to Earth. However, the radiance of those scenes soon faded as Nephi saw his descendants slip into unbelief and civil war. Presumably anticipating Nephi’s anxiety at witnessing such a scene, the angelic guide “spake unto [Nephi], saying: Look! And [he] looked and beheld many nations and kingdoms. And the angel said unto [Nephi]: What beholdest thou? And [he] said: I behold many nations and kingdoms. And [the angel] said unto [Nephi]: These are the nations and kingdoms of the Gentiles. And it came to pass that [Nephi] saw among the nations of the Gentiles the formation of a great church” (1 Nephi 13:1–4).

The angel showed Nephi this “great church” presumably to teach him what led to the destruction of his envisioned descendants and how the devil works to destroy other “great” nations (1 Nephi 14:9). In evaluating the identity of this “great church,”¹⁴ the instruction of Hagedorn and

Tzoref seems apt: “As far as the foreign nations are concerned the beginning of the literary development is marked by the individual judgment against a concrete people, which threatens the existence of Israel.”¹⁵ The Assyrian Empire provides just such a “concrete” example of a nation that “threaten[ed] the existence of Israel” and was also capable of teaching Nephi about the future destruction of his own people. After all, it was the Assyrians who were initially responsible for the destruction of Israel and the exile of Nephi’s ancestors.¹⁶

Hagedorn and Tzoref further assert that in the book of Nahum we see that “after the fall of Assyria, the fate of Nineveh is transferred to Babylon, which is now seen as the aggressor that threatens Israel and no longer as the welcome destroyer of the Assyrian tyrant. Prerequisite for this addition has been the fact that Nineveh indeed fell . . . thus providing proof for the authenticity of the prophecy.”¹⁷ The contemporary relationship between Nahum’s record¹⁸ and Nephi’s vision suggests the possibility that, when Nephi saw the “great church,” it was actually the Assyrian Empire.¹⁹ Assyria’s fall is “proof of the authenticity of the prophecy” Nephi received as he witnessed their fate being transferred to the Nephites.

Many of the ideas presented in Nephi’s vision are without a parallel in the Bible. Yet through the recent availability of Assyrian records, we find helpful context that seems to ground Nephi’s vision in a particular time and place. The parallels I suggest in this paper between the “great church” in Nephi’s vision and the Assyrian Empire remain conjectural, yet they offer an insightful and historically relevant reinterpretation of the vision. Through the repetition of Assyrian imagery, which often undergoes a subversive reversal, Nephi’s vision seems to contrast the historical claims of the Assyrians against the Lamb’s future victory over the “Great and Abominable Church” (1 Nephi 13:6).

These Assyrian precursors provide added depth to elements of Nephi’s vision, such as the flood, mists, rod, lamb, and blood. For example, as I document shortly, the Assyrian kings in their hubris claimed to destroy those that opposed them as if they were “lambs.” Understanding this can provide new context for evaluating the repeated references to the “Lamb of God” as the universal sovereign of Nephi’s vision. Such a title is given greater meaning if it is also seen to be subverting the claims of the Assyrian kings. Using these new insights, we can see how the behavior of the Assyrian kings contrasts sharply with that of the “Lamb of God.” Furthermore, against this backdrop, the “Lamb of God” can be seen as a uniquely loving and merciful universal sovereign. As such, the

Assyrian Empire and its ideology can work as a foil capable of grounding the greater typology of Nephi's vision concerning the fall of the great and abominable church.²⁰

Parallels to Assyrian Traditions

Biblical scholars have proposed many parallels connecting the motifs and ideologies found in the Assyrian records to what is found in the Bible. It is important to recognize why the Assyrian records may have left this imprint. Shawn Aster suggests that

all ideologies of empire seek to perpetuate the empire while simultaneously according it legitimacy, and Assyria's was no exception. But Assyria's ideology was more clearly defined and effectively communicated than that of any previous empire. It was relentlessly broadcast using a deft combination of art, ritual performance, oral communication, and written text, all designed for the consumption of two audiences: the administrative personnel of the empire, and the states and regions it sought to dominate.²¹

Because the Assyrians put so much effort into the distribution of their state ideology, it is not surprising that we find parallels in the biblical record, and it is what we should expect to find in Nephi's writings.²²

Important to the record of the Book of Mormon is the idea that the use of Assyrian rhetoric didn't end after their demise.²³ According to Eckart Frahm, "The Assyrian Empire continued to serve as a cipher for imperial hubris in newly written Biblical texts."²⁴ As Shawn Aster points out, Isaiah's writings "contain unique linguistic features that cannot easily be explained without reference to the Assyrian material."²⁵ That is to say, it is hard to understand the rhetorical arguments behind Isaiah's narrative unless we first see that he is borrowing from Assyrian writings. If Nephi did understand Assyrian rhetoric and how it was being used by Isaiah, this provided an ideal way for the "spirit" messenger in his vision to teach him. However, this potentially creates a problem for modern readers unfamiliar with this rhetoric. Nephi potentially hints at this difficulty when describing the challenge that the Nephites faced when they were taught the words of Isaiah (see 2 Nephi 25:1–3).

In Aster's paper looking at an Assyrian influence on Isaiah 2, he shows that the set of motifs found in the Assyrian campaign reports "provides the most appropriate comparative context within which to

analyze the passage.”²⁶ For example, when looking at “imperial hubris” or the “opposition to the haughty and lofty,” Aster points out,²⁷

The declared objective of this divine campaign is to [bring] low the “haughty” and the “lofty,” as is emphasized by the repetition of this theme in vv. 11, 12, and 17 (using the words *ge’eh* and *ram*), and in vv. 13–16 (God attacks possessions that feed pride). This corresponds precisely to one of the standard elements in Assyrian characterizations of the enemy, which appear in royal inscriptions from the thirteenth century down to the Neo-Assyrian period. It is against these enemies that the Assyrian king’s campaigns are directed. The characterization of the enemy as “arrogant,” “obstinate,” or “proud” is part of a stylized “moral profile” found in Assyrian royal inscriptions. . . . The goal of the campaigns, according to this formula, is to subdue the “proud.”²⁸

This comparative context also matches the way “proud” is used in Nephi’s vision to describe those that oppose the divine campaign of the “Lamb of God.” Nephi writes “that the great and spacious building was the pride of the world; and it fell, and the fall thereof was exceedingly great. . . . Thus shall be the destruction of all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people, that shall fight against the twelve apostles of the Lamb” (1 Nephi 11:36). Further establishing the relationship of the “great and spacious building” to the concept of pride and loftiness, Nephi records that this is the same building that his father saw which was standing “as it were in the air, high above the earth”²⁹ (1 Nephi 8:26). Nephi’s vision suggests that the fall of the “great and spacious building” was due to the things that feed pride, things described in Nephi’s record as “exceedingly fine” (1 Nephi 8:27). This understanding of pride matches the way Isaiah used the Assyrian writings to frame his rhetorical arguments.

However, when evaluating this particular parallel in Nephi’s vision, caution must be taken. Frahm points out that “Assyrian ‘motifs’ have also left — more indirect — traces in a number of Biblical narratives and poetic sections. Tracking down such traces is, unfortunately, charged with significant methodological problems. It is not enough to hunt for isolated parallels — if one wants to establish an Assyrian background for a Biblical story, the parallels have to be numerous and/or specific.”³⁰ The parallels between Nephi’s use of *pride* and the Assyrian records are not unique to Nephi’s record and they can best be explained by a relationship to Isaiah’s writings. Therefore, when evaluating whether the “great church” Nephi envisioned shares some relationship to Assyria

and their rhetoric, we need to find numerous specific and unique points of contact to Assyrian materials. It is in evaluating Nephi's account of the "great church" in his vision that we seem to find numerous specific and unique points of contact to Assyrian materials.

Nephi's "Great Church" and Assyrian Rhetoric

After Nephi sees the "great church" in his vision he goes on to say, "And the angel said unto me: Behold the formation of a church which is most abominable above all other churches, which slayeth the saints of God, yea, and tortureth them and bindeth them down, and yoketh them with a yoke of iron, and bringeth them down into captivity" (1 Nephi 13:5). In this passage describing the "great church," we are presented with specific descriptive elements that can be used to evaluate potential parallels between the "great church" of Nephi's vision and the Assyrian Empire and ideology.

In Gordon Johnston's work looking at Nahum's use of rhetorical allusions to the Assyrian Empire, he points out that "one of the most common Assyrian metaphors is the 'yoke' as a symbol to depict Assyrian suzerainty. ... This metaphor is distinctly Assyrian; it occurs rarely in the literature of other ancient Near Eastern nations."³¹ Assyrian kings referred to this metaphor often in their records with such sayings as, "The heavy yoke of my rule I laid upon them, and I made them subject to Ashur my Lord."³² Both Israel and Judah came under the "heavy yoke" of Assyrian rule.³³ After the fall of the Assyrian Empire, Jeremiah warned Judah that if they did not trust in the Lord, another nation, such as the Babylonians, would "put a yoke of Iron upon" them (Jeremiah 28:13–14).³⁴ Yet, Nephi's use of the yoke metaphor is unique in that it contains the elements *slayeth*, *tortureth*, *bindeth them down* and *bringing them down into captivity* that are not easily explained by a relationship to the Biblical record. These elements potentially provide our first unique points of contact between Nephi's "great church" and the Assyrian Empire. The records of Ashurbanipal, the last dominant Assyrian king to live during Lehi's lifetime, display a striking resemblance to what the angel showed Nephi in vision. In the accounts of his campaigns, we read;

[I am] Ashurbanipal, the great king ... who has made all the other rulers bow to his feet and who has laid the yoke of his overlordship upon them and they pulled the straps of his yoke.³⁵

He further describes those who opposed Assyrian sovereignty by saying,

[I] pierced the lips [and] took them to Assyria as a spectacle for the people of my land.³⁶

Or on another occasion he said,

[T]he living men I impaled on stakes round about his city, of the others I put out the eyes. The rest of them I transported and brought to Assyria.³⁷

The documentation of what Ashurbanipal did was not just limited to the written record. His brutality was also recorded in reliefs carved to commemorate his victories.³⁸ Of the destruction of Judah’s neighbors, the Elamites, Ashurbanipal had images carved that depicted

naked men, tied to the ground by staked ropes, with two Assyrians flaying them with knives. To the right is an Assyrian carrying away a head on a string. At the bottom are two Assyrians removing the tongue of an Elamite prisoner, and just above them the next victim is being thrown down with his arms tied behind his back to wait his turn. In related scenes, Elamite heads are shown being collected as trophies.³⁹

As gruesome as the depictions above may sound, they are not isolated occurrences within the Assyrian records. They are in fact part of a long history of Assyrian kings recording, and then transmitting, what happens to those that failed to acknowledge Assyrian sovereignty and thus were compelled to carry the Assyrian yoke. Given that this was a fate which presumably many of Nephi’s ancestors would have experienced it is unlikely that these horrific accounts of Assyrian brutality were unknown to Nephi and his family.⁴⁰ The fact that we find so many of the same elements used to describe the Assyrian campaigns in Nephi’s description of the “great church” is compelling evidence that the two might be related.

In Isaiah 8:7–8, we see two parallels that appear to be borrowed from the Assyrian records of their campaigns. According to Peter Machinist, “The first is the image of the king advancing into battle like raging water. In Assyrian texts, the waters are called *abubu*, i.e., ‘flood,’ recalling the primeval Flood; and the *abubu* can either appear as the weapon of the king or be directly likened to him. . . . The second parallel concerns the ‘glory’ of the king which overwhelms all his enemies.”⁴¹ It appears that in Nephi’s vision, the angel draws a connection between the wars that lead

to the destruction of Nephi's descendants in the promised land and the Assyrian *flood* and *glory* tropes. However, in what Nephi saw in vision, there seems to be a destabilizing adaptation, as the *flood* water became filthy, and the *glory* became darkness that covered the land. Further, in Nephi's record the darkness is not simply described as darkness but as a "mist of darkness." This unique qualifier helps to further identify what Nephi saw with the Assyrian records, which often describes the terrifying *glory* of the approaching Assyrian army using a cloud metaphor.⁴² For those who did not avoid the approaching cloud that was the Assyrian army, destruction and being carried away captive was most often their fate. In Nephi's vision the effect of the "mists of darkness" is the same; the people are led away, perish, and are lost.⁴³

Fear of the yearly campaigns also ensured that those under Assyria's yoke continued to pay tribute to the empire. That tribute fueled future campaigns. This relationship provides another unique element to the metaphor of the "yoke" found within Nephi's vision and which again cannot easily be explained without reference to the Assyrian records. When explaining why the "great church" slayed, tortured, bound down, yoked, and carried captive the "saints of God," Nephi wrote,

I also saw gold, and silver, and silks, and scarlets, and fine-twined linen, and all manner of precious clothing; and I saw many harlots. And the angel spake unto me, saying: Behold the gold, and the silver, and the silks, and the scarlets, and the fine-twined linen, and the precious clothing, and the harlots, are the desires of this great and abominable church. And also for the praise of the world do they destroy the saints of God, and bring them down into captivity. (1 Nephi 13:7–9)

This combination of the yoking metaphor with the acquisition of "gold," "silver," "fine-twined linen," and "harlots" is unparalleled in the Bible.⁴⁴ However, the records of the Assyrian king's campaigns are full of such parallels. Assurnasirpal reported on his campaign against the city of Suru saying,

I built a pillar over against his city gate, and I flayed all the chief men who had revolted, and I covered the pillar with their skins; some I walled up within the pillar, some I impaled upon the pillar on stakes, and others I bound to stakes round about the pillar; many within the border of my own land I flayed, and I spread their skins upon the walls; and I cut off the limbs of the officers, of the royal officers who had rebelled.

Ahiababa I took to Nineveh, I flayed him, I spread his skin upon the wall of Nineveh. My power and might I established over the land of Lake. While I was staying in the city of Suru, (I received) tribute from all the kings of the land of Lake, — silver, gold, lead, copper, vessels of copper, cattle, sheep, garments of brightly colored wool, and garments of linen, and I increased the tribute and taxes and imposed them upon them.⁴⁵

In another account he said,

All the rebels they seized and delivered them up. My officers I caused to enter into his palace and his temples. His silver, his gold, his goods and his possessions, copper, iron, lead, vessels of copper, cups of copper, dishes of copper, a great hoard of copper, alabaster, tables with inlay, the women of his palaces, his daughters, the captive rebels together with their possessions, the gods together with their possessions, precious stone from the mountains, to the yoke, trappings of men and trappings of horses, garments of brightly colored wool and garments of linen.⁴⁶

The Assyrian kings also boast that even the approach of the king’s army was all that was needed to obtain tribute: “During my advance I received much tribute ... silver, gold, lead, vessels of copper, and garments of brightly colored wool, and garments of linen.”⁴⁷ Fear of the Assyrian campaigns was often enough to keep vassal states paying onerous tributes to the Assyrian Empire.⁴⁸ Chief among those things collected were what Nephi saw in vision; gold, silver, fine linen, and women.⁴⁹ This was the terrifying reality that hung over Judah, right up until Nephi’s lifetime, while they were under the Assyrian “yoke.” This was the same association Nephi’s messenger chose to make between the “yoke of iron” and the campaign of fear that defined the “great church” in Nephi’s vision.⁵⁰ The behavior of the Assyrian Empire and their eventual demise would be a fitting analog for a “great church” that was meant to help Nephi understand how a great nation of his own descendants would one day fall.

The drama that plays out in Nephi’s vision corresponds well with the way the Assyrian royal inscriptions describe their campaigns to maintain sovereignty over the known world. According to Eckart Frahm, typically these records begin with an introduction, “which focus[es] on the general qualities of the king,” and second, focuses on the “campaign reports,”

which “can be labeled ‘epic’” and records the triumph of the king over those opposing his sovereignty.⁵¹ In much the same way, we are first introduced in Nephi’s vision to the “Most High God” (1 Nephi 11:6) and the appointment of his earthly king, the “Lamb of God” (1 Nephi 11:21). The bulk of the vision then consists of the actions of the king or “Lamb of God” and those who oppose his sovereignty or “church of the devil” (1 Nephi 14:10). Much like the writings of the Assyrian kings’ campaigns, the “epic” nature of Nephi’s vision develops in such a way as to show the inevitable victory of God’s appointed King.⁵² During a time of great uncertainty for Nephi and his family, this assurance should have provided Nephi with some comfort and hope.

A New Look at Nephi’s Vision

Pride or failure to put one’s trust in the Lord led to the fall of Nephi’s people, and in his vision, the fall of the “great and spacious building” was used as a symbol for that fall. Destruction came because the Nephites sought for possessions that fed their “vain imaginations and [their] pride” (1 Nephi 12:18), i.e., the gold, silver, and fine apparel. If what Nephi saw in vision was to help him understand the fall of his own people, it is possible that by witnessing the fall of the palace of Nineveh, Nephi was given a powerfully relevant example that is critical of the claims made by the Assyrian kings.

The Assyrians had used their palaces as part of their efforts to ensure loyalty. According to John Postgate, those that came to the palace to deliver tribute “were fed at the state’s expense. They were also given presents of clothing and of shoes for their journeys. The practice of rewarding the loyal — or bribing the potentially loyal — by presenting them with rich garments and other gifts is not restricted to ambassadors.”⁵³ All this was done to persuade those who entered the palace to be loyal to Assyria and then work to influence others’ loyalty. This brings to mind how Lehi describes those he saw in the “great and spacious building,” where “their manner of dress was exceedingly fine; and they were in the attitude of mocking and pointing their fingers towards those who” (1 Nephi 8:27) had not entered the building.⁵⁴

The Assyrian palace also provides an important literary link between the “great and spacious building” and the “great church” of Nephi’s vision. To the Assyrians, the palaces and temples of Nineveh were repeatedly referred to as “great” and their production and maintenance depended on the terrifying campaigns waged by the Assyrian army.⁵⁵ As such the king’s palace was designed to psychologically overwhelm

those who came to court to pay tribute and acknowledge Assyrian sovereignty. The Assyrian word *ekallu* means palace, but according to Simo Parpola it also “had a more specific religious meaning. In Assyrian royal inscriptions, it often referred to the temple. ... The semantics of Assyrian *ekallu*, ‘palace’, thus were exactly the same as those of the biblical Hebrew, Jewish Aramaic, Syriac and Arabic words for ‘temple, church’... Although these words, all of them certainly loanwords from Akkadian, also mean ‘palace’ or ‘great building’ in general, their primary meaning is ‘temple, church.’”⁵⁶ Therefore the semantics of Nephi’s time equate a “great and spacious” palace, like those found in Nineveh, with a “great church.” It is fitting then that when Nephi needs to understand the destruction of his own people, the angel begins by showing him the formation of a “great church” which linguistically is related to the “great and spacious building.”⁵⁷ This relationship had its most salient parallel during Nephi’s lifetime to that of the fall of the “great and spacious” palaces of the Assyrian Empire.⁵⁸ This is something Nephi presumably known from first-hand accounts that the “fall thereof was exceedingly great” (1 Nephi 11:36).

With the rise and then apparently precipitous fall of the Assyrian Empire, we find in the scriptures a growing rhetoric around issues of sovereignty. This rhetoric is often subversive to the Assyrian claims to universal sovereignty.⁵⁹ In Nephi’s vision there seems to be a similar phenomenon at work where the “Lamb of God” is presented as the universal sovereign: the “one Shepherd over all the earth” (1 Nephi 13:41). On a later occasion, Nephi builds on the idea saying, “The Holy One of Israel must reign in dominion, and might, and power, and great glory. And he gathereth his children from the four quarters of the earth;⁶⁰ and he numbereth his sheep, and they know him; and there shall be one fold and one shepherd; and he shall feed his sheep, and in him they shall find pasture” (1 Nephi 22:24–25).⁶¹ The image of a king shepherding over the “four quarters of the earth” in power and glory⁶² is common in the Assyrian records and is often associated with the king holding a scepter.⁶³ The scepter symbolized the power of the Assyrian king’s word, which he used to spread destruction and terror via the yearly campaigns to maintain control of the “four quarters of the earth.” In what appears to be a subversive reversal to the actions of the Assyrian kings, we see in Nephi’s vision that the “Lamb of God” brought peace, healing, and order through his words or “rod of iron” (see 1 Nephi 11:24–31). Nephi said that he saw the “Lamb of God” going “forth among the children of men; and I saw many fall down at his feet and worship him. And it

came to pass that I beheld that rod of iron, which my father had seen, was the word of God” (1 Nephi 11:24–25). Bowing down at the feet of the one who possesses the rod or scepter is a motif that is used by Assyrian kings to legitimize their right to rule.⁶⁴ Therefore, when the Assyrian ideologies are contrasted with what Nephi writes, our understanding of the “Lamb of God” as the universal sovereign is enhanced.⁶⁵

This association is further developed within Nephi’s vision with the use of another common motif found within the Assyrian records. Nephi records that the “angel said unto [him]: Look! And I looked, and beheld three generations pass away in righteousness; and their garments were white even like unto the Lamb of God. And the angel said unto me: These are made white in the blood of the Lamb, because of their faith in him” (1 Nephi 12:11). When this exchange is viewed in relation to what the Assyrian kings did to those that were the focus of their campaigns, Nephi’s record gains important context. The motif of objects being dyed by blood like a red garment was commonly used by the Assyrian kings in the records describing the king’s campaign. For example, Sargon II when describing the fate of a defeated Hittite king says he “D[yed] the skin of Ilu-bi’di, the wretched, red, like wool.” The use of this motif in Nephi’s vision contrasts the power of the “Lamb of God” to the claims of the Assyrian kings. Nephi saw in vision that those who put their trust in the “Lamb of God” need not fear the boasts made by the powerful Assyrian kings. The Assyrian kings might claim the power to shed the blood of those that oppose them, turning things red like dyed wool, but the “Lamb of God” has the power to heal our wounds and make our garments white again through his blood (1 Nephi 12:10–11). This again seems to be a reversal of the Assyrian king’s claims of sovereignty. Therefore, what Nephi saw in vision further reinforces the position of the “Lamb of God” as a uniquely compassionate sovereign.

The love and care the “Lamb of God” shows as shepherd contrasts sharply with the cruelty and depravity depicted in the records of Assyrian campaigns. Those records describe the Assyrian kings as shepherds of a different sort. Gordon Johnston points out that “[w]hile peoples in the ancient Near East were often compared to sheep, the Assyrians took the sheep metaphor to new heights, comparing their victims to sheep that had been slaughtered. Assyrian kings often used sheep imagery when boasting of the ease and brutality with which they defeated their enemies.”⁶⁶ For example, Ashurbanipal wrote, “I entered that city; its inhabitants I slaughtered like lambs.”⁶⁷ The repeated accounts of the Assyrian kings “slaughtering” people “like lambs” contrasts sharply

with the constant repetition of the title “Lamb of God” to describe the sovereign of Nephi’s vision.⁶⁸

The title “Lamb of God” is no doubt a reference to the role Jesus Christ would play in offering his life as an act of redemption.⁶⁹ However, there is something unique to the way this title is used in Nephi’s vision when viewed in the context of the struggle for sovereignty around 600 BCE. For those familiar with the claims of the Assyrian kings, this constant reference to the “Lamb of God” in Nephi’s vision begins to sound like a steady drum beat that mocks the claims of the kings who were once the most powerful sovereigns in the ancient Near East. The Assyrian kings claim to be able to destroy their enemies “like lambs,” yet when Nephi sees the coming of the universal sovereign and King,⁷⁰ he is introduced as the “Lamb of God.” The overemphasized reference to the “Lamb” throughout Nephi’s vision works in a profound way if it counters the Assyrian kings’ boast of easily slaughtering their enemies “like lambs.”⁷¹ This humble title highlights the ironic difference between the actions of God’s appointed sovereign, the “Lamb,” who truly cares for those he shepherds, and the hubris of those that oppose him in order to obtain the riches of this world through violent and oppressive means, like that of the Assyrian Empire.

Using this new conceptual framework, a new picture emerges from Nephi’s vision. The Assyrians accumulated “fine” things and built their “great” palaces by spreading fear and death through their relentless wars. Their ideology of bringing order to the world through compulsion and terror is therefore contrasted in Nephi’s vision by a symbol of Assyrian derision, the “Lamb.” In Nephi’s vision we see that the actions of the “Lamb of God” brought order and peace through his care and covenant.⁷² Seen in this light, Nephi’s vision recapitulates the great War in Heaven as it now plays out in mortality. Lucifer’s premortal fall now has an analog in Nephi’s vision with mortal struggles tied to the fall of the great and abominable church.⁷³ Furthermore, we learn from Nephi’s vision that we must once again put our trust in the “Lamb of God” if we are to avoid another fall.⁷⁴ Nephi’s vision teaches us that those who trust in the “Lamb of God” as their sovereign will avoid such a fall by being armed with his “righteousness” and “power” (1 Nephi 14:14).⁷⁵ This is the same power the “Lamb of God” used when “ministering unto the people” (1 Nephi 11:28) and healing “multitudes of people who were sick, and who were afflicted” (1 Nephi 11:31). This suggests that only in covenanting to do the same will we be “delivered by the power of God” (1 Nephi 13:19) and avoid the fate of Assyrians, the Nephites, and ultimately that of the *great and abominable church*.⁷⁶

Conclusion

Understanding how the transmission of Nephi’s vision might have been influenced by Assyria’s interactions with Israel and Judah can help strengthen the relationship of his record with other contemporary accounts found within the Bible. Matthijs de Jong has proposed that an “identifiable layer of the Isaiah tradition consists of passages dealing with the destruction of Assyria and the restoration of Judah. In these passages, it is emphasized that it is Yahweh who carries out Assyria’s destruction as part of his dealings with the entire world. Closely related to the theme of Assyria’s destruction is that of Judah’s restoration: the reign of a new, ideal, Judean king. The themes of Assyria’s downfall and the reign of the ideal king are two sides of the same coin, as both result from Yahweh’s intervention.”⁷⁷ The parallels contained in Nephi’s vision to Assyrian tradition suggest a similar theme. Using this conceptual framework, we see that, like Isaiah’s prophecies, we have in Nephi’s vision two sides of the same coin. Nephi’s vision describes the fall of the *great and abominable church* and the reign of the ideal king or “Lamb of God,” who works to restore Israel. Nephi further sees in his vision that essential to this restoration effort was the coming forth of his record in the Book of Mormon, which “shall make known to all kindreds, tongues, and people, that the Lamb of God is the Son of the Eternal Father, and the Savior of the world” (1 Nephi 13:40).

The rise and fall of the Assyrian Empire played a dominant role in shaping the history of Israel leading up to Nephi’s lifetime. The power vacuum that grew out of Assyria’s fall was certainly being felt by Nephi and his family. Assyrian domination had created a general anxiety in the ancient Near East related to questions of sovereignty and this anxiety would last long after their fall. These questions were central for those living in Jerusalem around 600 BCE, and the message of Nephi’s vision seems to reflect this uncertainty.⁷⁸ Isaiah suggests that the Lord had used Assyria as a tool in his hand to correct “hypocritical nations” (Isaiah 10:6). It is not surprising then that within Nephi’s vision there seems to be found parallels to motifs used by the Assyrian Empire to assert their control over other nations, such as Israel. Recognizing these parallels can help connect us to the milieu of that time and broadens our understanding of the message of his vision.

During that vision, Nephi saw the rise and then fall of his descendants, the Nephites, in a land the Lord prepared for them. After witnessing the devastating destruction of the Nephite nation, Nephi next saw many more nations. From these nations, Nephi saw — much like he witnessed

earlier with the Nephite nation — the formation and fall of a “great church.” The “great church” that Nephi describes as part of his vision contains an extensive number of specific and seemingly unique parallels to the records and iconography of the Assyrian Empire. The nature of these parallels suggests that such a connection is not by chance but rather reflects a real link that ties Nephi’s record to that particular time and place. It is therefore possible that the historic demise of the Assyrian Empire and the fall of the great palace of Nineveh provided Nephi with a compelling and relevant real-world example capable of explaining the dramatic fall of the Nephite nation. Looking at Nephi’s vision through this interpretive lens does not limit other possible interpretations for the “great church” but instead highlights the polyvalent nature of Nephi’s vision and the tension between the past, present, and future found within the vision.

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Endnotes

- 1 Eckart Frahm helps explain the importance of this history. “In 701 BCE, Judah, after suffering heavy losses of life and property, became an Assyrian vassal state. These central events, as well as several others, explain why Assyria’s imperial domination and eventual downfall, as well as the history of the period from roughly 744 to 612 BCE in general, are so prominently reflected in the Hebrew Bible.” Eckart Frahm, “Assyria in the Hebrew Bible,” in *A Companion to Assyria*, Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World, ed. Eckart Frahm (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), 556–69. This is around the same time the Book of Mormon narrative begins.

- 2 K. Lawson Younger, Jr., “Neo-Assyrian and Israelite History in the Ninth Century: The Role of Shalmaneser III,” in *Understanding the History of Israel*, ed H. G. M. Williamson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007): 246.
- 3 Again, Eckart Frahm’s comments prove insightful. “One might be inclined to argue that the Biblical authors’ fascination with Assyria is of no more than ‘historicist’ interest. But such a view would overlook something rather crucial: the fact that Assyria’s penetration into the Levant helped initiate and catalyze the ‘axial’ revolution of religious and political thought that is codified in the Bible. To phrase it differently: the emergence of a new religious and ‘national’ identity in Israel and Judah in the wake of Tiglath-pileser’s campaigns to the West can be seen as a direct response to the political and intellectual challenges posed by Assyrian imperialism” (Frahm, “Assyria in the Hebrew Bible,” 556). Frahm indicates that Assyria may have also impacted the “legal, theological, and ideological positions” of the Bible. This impact could be related to the “plain and precious things taken away from the book [or Bible]” (1 Nephi 13:28) that Nephi saw in vision and which would lead many to stumble because of what they read.
- 4 The Neo-Assyrian period was the fourth and final stage of the Assyrian Empire. During this final stage, Assyria dominated the ancient Near East during the eighth and seventh centuries.
- 5 Shawn Zelig Aster, “Isaiah 19: The ‘Burden of Egypt’ and Neo-Assyrian Imperial Policy,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 135, no. 3 (2015): 454. Michal Chan also suggests that “this rhetorical reversal has been crafted in order to construct a counter-theology to the intimidating royal rhetoric” of the Assyrians (Chan, “Rhetorical Reversal,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128, no. 4 (2009): 717–33).
- 6 Weinfeld contends that “a similar kind of ideological resistance to imperial tyranny developed in the wake of Assyrian imperialism and is clearly reflected in Israelite prophetic literature of the eight century B.C.E. Isaiah the prophet, who saw the apogee of Assyrian imperialistic policy, starting with Tiglath-Pileser III and ending with Sennacherib, was the first to raise his voice against Assyrian imperialism and to predict the coming of a new divine rule which would replace Assyrian tyrannic dominion. Like his followers in

the Persian and Hellenistic period he decried bitterly the heavy tribute and corvee imposed on the nations by Assyria and foresaw its collapse.” Moshe Weinfeld, “The Protest Against Imperialism in Ancient Israelite Prophecy,” in *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations*, ed. S. N. Eisenstadt (New York: State University of New York Press, 1986), 170.

- 7 Noel B. Reynolds, “Lehi and Nephi as Trained Manassite Scribes,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 50 (2022): 161–216. Taylor Halverson, “Reading 1 Nephi with Wisdom,” *Interpreter A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, Vol. 22 (2016): 279–93. Brant A. Gardner, “Nephi as Scribe,” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 1989–2011 23, no. 1 (2011): 45–55.
- 8 Nephi wrote that his “soul delighteth in the words of Isaiah, for I came out from Jerusalem, and mine eyes hath beheld the things of the Jews, and I know that the Jews do understand the things of the prophets, and there is none other people that understand the things which were spoken unto the Jews like unto them, save it be that they are taught after the manner of the things of the Jews” (2 Nephi 25:5). Significant to the thesis of this paper, Nephi would copy in his record Isaiah 2–14, chapters that deal directly with the Assyrian threat to Israel and Judah. This supports the suggestion that Nephi was aware of the actions of the Assyrian Empire in relation to Israelite history.
- 9 Noel B. Reynolds, “Lehi and Nephi as Trained Manassite Scribes,” 169.
- 10 The Book of Mormon was published before Assyrian records were made accessible to the general public. All parallels must therefore be due to chance, its reliance on the Bible, or the book’s authenticity as an ancient record.
- 11 The nature and complexity of Nephi’s records suggest that he had received scribal training prior to writing what is found in the Book of Mormon. This may have furthered his exposure to Assyrian rhetoric. See Taylor Halverson, “Reading 1 Nephi with Wisdom,” *Interpreter A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, Vol. 22 (2016): 279–93 and Gardner, “Nephi as Scribe,” 45–55.
- 12 Nephi’s vision is often considered to be apocalyptic and, in this way, matches Assyrian texts from his time. See Book of Mormon Central, “Why can Nephi’s Vision be Called an

Apocalypse?” Book of Mormon KnoWhy #471, September 27, 2018, <https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/knowhy/why-can-nephis-vision-be-called-an-apocalypse>.

- 13 Nephi created the small plate record that we have today because he was commanded by the Lord to do so. See 2 Nephi 5:29–33. Presumably this record was crafted with a future audience in mind. However, it needs to be remembered that Nephi was the intended audience of his vision, which sets it apart from other narratives within his record.
- 14 There have been numerous suggestions over the years as to the identity of the “great church,” and the interpretation I present in this paper is not intended to challenge those ideas. Often ideas presented in vision can have relevance for multiple historical moments. Historically, most of the explanations that have been offered for interpreting the “great church” are forward looking from Nephi’s lifetime. That is, they envision a “great church” that would come at some future point in time from when Nephi received his vision. What I present in this paper is unique in that it looks back in time for a culturally relevant example Nephi could potentially relate to in attempting to identify the “great church.” This is exactly what we see in Revelation where John sees the fall of Babylon as the symbol for all nations that oppose the “Lamb.”
- 15 C. Hagedorn and S. Tzoref, “Attitudes to Gentiles in the Minor Prophets and in Corresponding Pesharim,” *Dead Sea Discoveries* 20, no. 3 (2013): 483.
- 16 Israel became a vassal state under the rule of Tiglath-Pileser III (744–727 BCE). He is also the first Assyrian king to be mentioned in the Bible (See 2 Kings 15:29–31 and 2 Kings 15:32–16:20, 2 Chronicles 27:1–28:27, Isaiah 7:1–25 for events related to his reign. Following a rebellion of Israel’s king, Hoshea, Shalmaneser V (726–722 BCE) began a three-year siege of Israel from 724 to 722 BCE, which led to the capture of Israel and their deportation (descriptions of these events can be found in 2 Kings 17). It is during this time period that Lehi’s descendants were probably displaced by the Assyrians and Judah began paying tribute to Assyria. Sargon II (721–705 BCE) also claims to have conquered Israel and dispersed the inhabitants of that region; however, it is possible that this was already accomplished by Shalmaneser V. Sennacherib (704–681 BCE) campaigned from 689 to 691 BCE to put down the

revolts of the vassal states, which included Judah, following the death of Sargon. In 701 BCE, he besieged Jerusalem and carried away most of the population living outside of Jerusalem. During the rule of Esarhaddon (680–668 BCE) and Assurbanipal (668–627 BCE), Judah remained a vassal state of Assyria and presumably paid tribute yearly. Following the death of Assurbanipal, Assyrian control over Judah waned. By 612 BCE, the Assyrian Empire collapsed, and Nineveh was destroyed by a coalition led by the Babylonians. Judah would become a short-lived vassal of Egypt in 608 BCE, and in 605 BCE they became a vassal to Babylon with certain leaders and artisans deported to Babylon. In 597 BCE, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon sacked Jerusalem and deported the remaining population of Jerusalem.

- 17 Hagedorn and Tzoref, “Attitudes to Gentiles,” 480.
- 18 We have no evidence that Nephi would have had access to Nahum’s record as part of the Brass Plates. However, it is possible the book of Nahum was available to Nephi given that most scholars believe the book was produced between 660 and 606 BCE. Regardless of whether Nephi had access to the book of Nahum, the timing of its proposed production suggests that the ideas presented in the book were part of the world view at the time Nephi received his vision.
- 19 Some of the language found in Nahum that describes Nineveh is also used by John in Revelation. However, in the book Revelation, it is Babylon that is used as an image of divine disfavor indicating that the fate of Nineveh is being transferred to another nation that threatens Israel. Nephi indicates that during his vision he was shown the Revelations of John. See 1 Nephi 14:20–25.
- 20 This is a point that Stephen Robinson makes: “How can the devil’s church or churches be one and many at the same time? The apparent contradiction actually gives us the solution to the larger puzzle and ultimately our identification of the great and abominable church. The answer is that the term is used in two different ways in 1 Nephi 13–14. In chapter 13 it is used historically, and in chapter 14 it is used typologically. ... [W]e understand that the term *great and abominable church* has two uses, the one open (inclusive and archetypal), the other closed (exclusive and historical).” Stephen E. Robinson, “Nephi’s ‘Great and Abominable Church,’” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7, no. 1 (1998): 36–37.

- 21 Shawn Zelig Aster, *Reflection of Empire in Isaiah 1–39: Responses to Assyrian Ideology*, Ancient Near East Monographs 19 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017), 4. A counterpoint to Shawn Aster can be found in Ariel M. Bagg, “Palestine under Assyrian Rule: A New Look at the Assyrian Imperial Policy in the West,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 133, no. 1, (2013): 119–44. He suggests that the Assyrian influence was primarily military and not cultural.
- 22 “[E]very religious movement that arises in a particular historic era, which has real texts, will produce parallels ‘in such great number, distribution, and uncanny resemblance to the literary, doctrinal and social structures with its environment.’ If we were to find a movement that had none of these features, which did not have such great numbers of seeming ‘parallels,’ we would have to start from the position that it wasn’t real religion but was fictional, and that it must have come from some other time and place. Without these points of contact, such a religion would be completely inaccessible to its potential adherents.” Benjamin L. McGuire, “Finding parallels: some cautions and criticisms, part one,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 5 (2013): 42–43.
- 23 “[T]he presence in Judah of Assyrian ‘religious and ideological motifs ... on locally manufactured seals and cult objects’ in the seventh century suggests that Assyrian influence there only grew with time.” Daniel C. Timmer, “Nahum’s Representation of and Response to Neo-Assyria: Imperialism as a Multifaceted Point of Contact in Nahum,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 24, no. 3 (2014): 351.
- 24 Frahm, “Assyria in the Hebrew Bible,” 560.
- 25 Aster, “Reflection of Empire,” 7.
- 26 Shawn Aster, “The Image of Assyria in Isaiah 2:5–22: The Campaign Motif Reversed,” *The Journal of the American Oriental Society* 127, no.3 (2007): 259.
- 27 Aster also points out that there is another term that “more directly expresses the arrogance inherent in the enemy’s refusal to submit. This is the accusation that the enemy ‘trusted (*takalu*) in his own strength,’ frequently found in royal inscriptions.” Aster, “The Image of Assyria,” 266. Nephi’s ill-fated descendants in the promised land would be destroyed because they trusted in “their own strength,” or as it is recorded by one of those descendants,

they “boast[ed] in their own strength” (Mormon 3:9, 4:8), and Nephi would say, “O Lord, I have trusted in thee, and I will trust in thee forever” (2 Nephi 4:34). In contrast to what Nephi writes, Isaiah portrays the Assyrian kings’ achievements entirely to their hubris. For example, “By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom; for I have understanding” (Isa. 10:13).

- 28 Aster, “Image of Assyria,” 265. “One of the terms used to express this characterization is the adjective *mustarhu* (or in later Assyrian, *multarhu*) ‘proud,’ which is a precise parallel to Heb. *ge’eh*” (Ibid.).
- 29 Aster, “Image of Assyria,” 262. See *ibid.*, 262n51 dealing with the connection between pride/haughtiness and high buildings in the Old Testament.
- 30 Frahm, “Assyria in the Hebrew Bible,” 561. Shawn Aster also writes that “to demonstrate literary dependence, the motifs that appear in both works must have unusual elements that are unlikely to have been independently generated in both works.” and the question should be asked “is it probable that the second work was independently generated, without reference to the first?” (Aster, “Reflection of Empire,” 23–25.)
- 31 Gordon H. Johnston, “Nahum’s Rhetorical Allusions to Neo-Assyrian Conquest Metaphors,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159 (January–March 2002): 27. Daniel Timmer adds that “the Assyrian invasion that ended Hezekiah’s rebellion severely affected Judah’s economic and military capacities, and she reverted to her role of faithful vassal through at least some of the reign of Manasseh, who paid tribute to Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal” (Timmer, “Nahum’s Representation,” 351).
- 32 Or “I declared them Assyrian vassals and they bore my yoke,” Johnston, “Nahum’s Rhetorical Allusions,” 28. In an adaptation of this metaphor, Israel was warned that if they did not serve the Lord “with joyfulness and with gladness of heart” (Det. 28:48) the Lord would send against them enemies which would “put a yoke of iron upon thy neck, until he have destroyed thee” (Det. 28:48).
- 33 Tiglath-Pileser III would first bring northern Israel under the “heavy yoke” of Assyrian sovereignty and require them to pay tribute to Assyria yearly. From that point on, northern Israel would experience the burden inherent in the “heavy yoke” of Assyrian sovereignty. Trying to free themselves from this burden would

eventually lead to their destruction and the scattering of Israel by the Assyrian king Sargon II. In the case of Judah, Sargon II states “I laid waste the large district of Judah and put the straps of my yoke upon Hezekiah its king.” Johnston, “Nahum’s Rhetorical Allusions,” 28.

- 34 Isaiah also makes use of the yoke metaphor. Peter Machinist comments that “if Isaiah’s use of the yoke owes something to Assyrian idiom, then while the Assyrian rulers talk constantly about putting their ‘yoke’ upon their subject peoples or about a rebel sinfully throwing off the yoke, the prophet turns this sin inside out, when he has Yahweh predict, in a defiant pun: ‘And his yoke shall depart from them,’” Machinist, “Assyria and its Image,” 734.
- 35 Johnston, “Nahum’s Rhetorical Allusions,” 28.
- 36 Ben McGuire, “Did Lehi Use Egyptian? Examining Jewish-Egyptian Relations in the Seventh Century B.C.” (paper, Foundation for Apologetic Information & Research, 2002), 4.
- 37 Daniel David Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, vol. 1 Historical Records of Assyria from the Earliest Times to Sargon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1926), 1:168–69. In Nephi’s vision, the “mists of darkness” resulted in men being blinded and led “away into broad roads, that they perish and are lost.” See 1 Nephi 12:17. In Nahum 2:4 Nahum prophesies of the Assyrian chariots raging within Nineveh’s “broad ways” prior to Nineveh’s destruction. The Hebrew word *rechob* is most often translated as broad open place but it can also mean broad roads. It is related to the Akkadian word *ribitu* meaning main street or thoroughfare within the city walls. Therefore, Nephi’s reference to “broad roads” in this passage is an example of a “blind motif.” Without reference to Assyrian records the idea of being led “into” broad roads lacks context.
- 38 This is not to suggest that Nephi or Lehi would have seen these reliefs. However, a report of these reliefs would have presumably been related by those who did bring tribute to the Assyrian kings. Furthermore, these reliefs presumably represent what the Assyrians did while on campaign and what they hoped those that witnessed the devastation would pass along via word of mouth.
- 39 McGuire, “Did Lehi Use Egyptian?” 4.

- 40 It was the Assyrian Empire that was responsible for the initial scattering of Israel, and Nephi seemingly makes reference to his knowledge of these events when he writes that the “most part of all the tribes have been led away” (1 Nephi 22:4).
- 41 Peter Machinist, “Assyria and its Image in First Isaiah,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 103, no. 4 (1983): 727.
- 42 For example, Sargon II says; “That city I ‘covered like a cloud.’ They feared the (terrible) brilliance of my weapons and ... Tarhunazi, their ruler, together with his warriors, I threw into fetters of iron. His wife, his sons, his daughters, with 500 of his captive fighters, I carried away to my city of Assur.” Daniel David Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, vol. 2 Historical Records of Assyria from Sargon to the End (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1927), 2:12.
- 43 See 1 Nephi 12:15–17. Nahum also subverts the “flood” trope in Nahum 1:8.
- 44 In the Assyrian records, these things are repeatedly mentioned together. There are other places in the Bible that connect gold, silver, and fine linens, but none of these are in relation to being “yoked.” Further, as far as I can tell, only one place in the that connects gold, silver, and fine linens with harlots and — Ezekiel 16 — but again, it is not in the context of being yoked.
- 45 Luckenbill, *Ancient Records*, 1:145.
- 46 *Ibid.*, 1:144–45.
- 47 *Ibid.*, 1:144.
- 48 Using imagery similar to the claims of the Assyrian kings, which describe their enemies hiding underground in response to the campaign, Nephi would record seeing a “great pit which hath been digged for the destruction of men shall be filled by those who digged it, to their utter destruction, saith the Lamb of God” (1 Nephi 14:3). “The reaction of the humans to the advent of the campaign has few parallels in Biblical literature. They hide in the rock and dirt ... in caves in the rock and dugouts in the dirt ... and in clefts in the rock and crevices in the stone. ... The common denominator of all these places is their inaccessibility, which makes them suitable refuges. The goal aimed at in hiding is not entirely clear: It would seem that the humans hope in this way to escape the onslaught of the campaign, but there is no mention of their

escaping punishment, nor is punishment explicitly mentioned as an activity of the campaigner in the passage.” Aster, *Reflections of the Empire*, 303–304.

- 49 These “fine things” were also associated with the “large and spacious building” in Nephi’s vision and Lehi’s dream and like the Assyrian palaces and empire ultimately contributed to their fall. See 1 Nephi 8:26–7, 11:35–36, 12:18.
- 50 It was the Assyrian campaigns that provided the people and wealth needed to accomplish the building of “broad roads” and “great and spacious buildings” within the walls of Nineveh. Nephi’s reference to the “mist of darkness” resulting in being led away “into broad roads” fits this description.
- 51 See Eckart Frahm, “The Neo-Assyrian Royal Inscriptions as Text: History, Ideology, and Intertextuality,” *Writing Neo-Assyrian History: Sources, Problems, and Approaches*, *State Archives of Assyria Studies* 29 (2019): 149.
- 52 On a microscopic level, the Assyrian campaign reports “are marked by a frequent use of tropes and figures of elocution. These include parallelism, chiasmic patterns, direct speech, alliteration, word play and especially comparison and metaphorical expressions” (Ibid., 149). Nephi’s record also makes use of all these literary tools.
- 53 John Nicholas Postgate, *Taxation and Conscription in the Assyrian Empire* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1974), 3:127–28.
- 54 There is another intriguing potential parallel in Lehi’s dream, where he describes seeing a “strait and narrow path” that leads to a tree with fruit that is by water, found in a letter by Sargon II. In it he describes details of his eighth campaign: “I crossed, among Sheiak, Ardikshi, Ulaiau and Alluriu, high mountains, lofty ridges, steep mountain peaks (?) which defy description, through which there is no trail for the passage of foot soldiers, among which mighty waterfalls tear their way, the noise of whose fall resounds for a *beru*, like Adad (the thunder-god), which are covered, (thick) as reeds, with all kinds of trees — the choicest fruit trees, and vines, and are full of terrors for (the one) attacking their passes; where no king had ever passed, whose trail no prince who went before me had ever seen; their great wild tree trunks I tore down and cut through their steep peaks(?) with bronze axes.

- A narrow road, a strait passage, where the foot soldiers passed sideways, I prepared (‘made good’) for the passage of my army between them.” Luckenbill, “Ancient Records,” 2:93–94.
- 55 Jonah repeatedly refers to Nineveh as “that great city.” See Jonah 1:2, 3:2–3, 4:11.
- 56 Simo Parpola, “Mount Nisir and the Foundations of the Assyrian Church,” in *From Source to History Studies on Ancient Near Eastern Worlds and Beyond*, ed. Salvatore Gaspa et al. (Munster, DE: Ugarit-Verlag, 2014): 475.
- 57 Amy Easton-Flake points out that “a new symbol, ‘this great and abominable church’ (v.6), displays striking similarities to the great and spacious building — so much so that this church should be seen as a historical analogue of the building. In both function and characteristics, the great and abominable church mirrors the great and spacious building.” Amy Easton-Flake, “Lehi’s Dream as a Template for Understanding Each Act of Nephi’s Vision” in *The Things Which My Father Saw: Approaches to Lehi’s Dream and Nephi’s Vision*, ed. Daniel L. Belnap, Gaye Strathern, and Stanley A. Johnson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011): 188.
- 58 “[E]ven those who hated the city had to concede one thing: that in her heydays, Nineveh’s size and power were almost unparalleled. It is an apt description when the Biblical book of Jonah calls Nineveh ‘the great city’ ... for during the period of her greatest fame, in the 7th century BCE, when most of Western Asia was subjected to the iron-fisted rule of Assyria’s Nineveh-based rulers, the city covered no less than 750 hectares.” Echart Frahm, “The Great City: Nineveh in the Age of Sennacherib,” *Journal of the Canadian Society for Mesopotamian Studies* (2008), 13.
- 59 “The literary interactions...with the Assyrian royal inscriptions operate on several levels. One is the level of the individual motif, which cannot reasonably have been formulated absent reference to the Assyrian material. A second is the subversion of these motifs and their reformulation so as to impugn the ideas of Assyrian ideology” (Aster, *Reflections of Empire*, 7).
- 60 The records of the Assyrian kings are replete with examples of the kings claiming to be rulers of the “four quarters of the earth.” It is likewise used multiple times in the Book of Mormon after Nephi first uses it in 2 Nephi 22:25. This phrase can only be found two

other times in the scriptures; one time each in Revelation 20:8 and Moses 7:62. Jeff Lindsay and Noel B. Reynolds connect the use of this phrase in the Book of Mormon to the Book of Moses via the Brass Plates. (See Jeff Lindsay and Noel B. Reynolds, “‘Strong Like unto Moses’: The Case for Ancient Roots in the Book of Moses Based on Book of Mormon Usage of Related Content Apparently from the Brass Plates,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 44 (2021): 1–92.) The related phrase “four corners of the earth” is found in Revelation 7:1 and Isaiah 11:12 which Nephi quotes in 2 Nephi 21:12.

- 61 One chapter earlier, Nephi quotes a prophet named Zenos using a similar expression. See 1 Nephi 19:16.
- 62 The Akkadian word *melammu* can mean both power and glory. A. L. Oppenheim, “Akkadian Pul(u)h(t)u and Melammu,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 63, no. 1 (1943): 31–34. “*Melammu* frequently refers to the overwhelming power of the king in the Neo-Assyrian annals. One clear example is the common phrase ... ‘I unleashed upon them the *melammu* of my lord ship.’ The *melammu* of lordship clearly refers to the devastating power of the king’s armies” (Aster, “Image of Assyria,” 253n21).
- 63 One example by Adad-nirari II says, “After the great gods had decreed (my destiny, after) they had entrusted to me the scepter for the shepherding of the people, (after) they had raised me above crowned kings (and) crowned me with the royal *melammu*.” *Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium BC I (1114–859 B.C.)*, ed. A. Kirk Grayson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), A.0.99.2, 147,11. 7–9. See also Ali. Y. Aljuboori, “The Relationship Between The Assyrian Kings and Their Gods,” *Athar Alrafedain* 1, no.1 (2012): 3–19. The “rod of iron” that Lehi and Nephi describe can be seen as an equivalent symbol.
- 64 Gordon Johnston points out that the “propaganda pictured the Assyrian kings as such mighty warriors that mountains and seas, not just mortals, trembled and fled in fear before them.” Johnston, “Nahum’s Rhetorical Allusions,” 37. Nephi’s record uses many of the same metaphors that describe the approach of the Assyrian king when describing the arrival of the “Lamb of God” or universal sovereign. Without this context we are left to question what the point is of the destruction Nephi saw prior to the coming of the “Lamb of God.” See 1 Nephi 12:2–6.

- 65 This provides a new way of viewing the “rod of iron,” not as a railing or banister but as the shepherd’s rod or staff in the hand of Jehovah. (See T. J. Uriona, “Rethinking the Iron Rod,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2022) 141–63.) Isaiah subverted this relationship when he declared “O Assyrian, the *rod of my anger*, and the staff in their hands is their indignation” (Isaiah 10:5 and 2 Nephi 20:5, emphasis added). The king of Assyria’s staff was no longer the weapon of Assur but was now doing the work of Jehovah in reminding Israel to trust in the Lord. See for example one of Esarhaddon’s records that reads, “The great god Ashur . . . put in my hand a *rod of anger* to destroy the enemies” (Weinfeld, “Protest Against,” 176, emphasis added.)
- 66 Johnston, “Nahum’s Rhetorical Allusions,” 39.
- 67 *Ibid.*, 40. Other examples include “Tiglath-Pileser I: ‘I cut off their heads like lambs,’ Sargon II: ‘I besieged and slaughtered them like lambs.’ ‘The Sutu . . . together with the Marshanians I slaughtered like lambs.’ ‘I cast down the lands of Andia and Zikirtu, slaughtering all of their warriors like lambs.’ ‘His warriors I slaughtered before his feet like lambs, I cut off their heads.’ ‘Its warriors I slaughtered in front of its gates like lambs,’ Sennacherib: ‘ . . . I cut their throats like lambs.’ . . . ‘In the anger of my heart I made an assault upon Kutha; its troops about its walls I slaughtered like lambs and took the city.’ ‘The people of Hilakku I slaughtered like lambs’” (Johnston, “Nahum’s Rhetorical Allusions,” 39–40).
- 68 The use of the title “Lamb of God” in Nephi’s vision stands out within the scriptural record for the frequency in which it is used. In Nephi’s vision, the “Lamb of God” or the “Lamb” is used 52 times to refer to Christ yet these terms are only used 14 more times in the rest of the Book of Mormon. It is only used two times in the Bible (1 John 1:29,36) and the related term, “The Lamb” is used nine times in the book of Revelation. There is a reference to the “Lamb” in Ether 13:10 that contains other elements that are similar to Nephi’s record. The Jaredite record was not available to Nephi so it is possible that these similarities reflect the editorial influence of Moroni and his familiarity with Nephi’s record.
- 69 Nephi would see in his vision the “Lamb of God” perform that very act. See 1 Nephi 10:10 and 1 Nephi 11:27.
- 70 Simo Parpola points out that in Assyrian art, “it was observed some time ago that in some reliefs the king takes the place of the Tree. . . .

Thus if the Tree symbolized the divine world order, then the king himself represented the realization of that order in man, in other words, a true image of God, the Perfect Man.” Simo Parpola, “The Assyrian Tree of Life: Tracing the Origins of Jewish Monotheism and Greek Philosophy,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 52, no. 3 (July 1993): 167–68. What we see in Nephi’s vision is a subversive adaptation of the relationship between the Assyrian god and his king where the tree is replaced and finds meaning in the coming of the “Lamb of God” and not the Assyrian king. Parpola indicates that “according to the Assyrian royal ideology, the king was not only Assur’s representative upon earth; he was his very image radiating heavenly light to the darkness of the world. ... [H]e also was the son of god, the good shepherd leading his flock to the right path” (Parpola, “Mount Nisir,” 474). In Nephi’s vision, the radiance implied in the descriptions of the tree and the mother of the “Lamb of God” fit this imagery. Assyrian kings often claimed to have received their commission while still in the womb of their mothers, something we also find in Nephi’s vision. See 1 Nephi 11:6–24.

- 71 In Nephi’s record the arrival of the sovereign or “Lamb of God” led to garments turning white through the blood of the Lamb. In contrast, the Assyrian kings dyed things red with the blood of those who opposed their sovereignty. Sargon II: “Dyeing the skin of Ilu-bi’di, the wretched, red, like wool” (Luckenbill, *Ancient Records*, 2:61). Ashurbanipal: “I stormed the mountain peaks and took them. In the midst of the mighty mountain I slaughtered them, with their blood I dyed the mountain red like wool” (Ibid., 1:148). Shalmaneser III: “With their blood I dyed the mountains like red wool” (Ibid., 2:219). The motif of objects being dyed by blood like a red garment was commonly used, especially leading up to Nephi’s life, in the records describing the Assyrian king’s campaign. Its use in Nephi’s vision contrasts the power of the “Lamb of God” to that of the claims of the Assyrian kings. The Assyrian kings might have had the power to shed blood turning things red like dyed wool, but the “Lamb of God” had the power to make them white again through his blood. Therefore, what Nephi saw constitutes a subversive reversal of the Assyrian king’s claims and its use in his vision helps to reinforce the position of the “Lamb of God” as the most powerful sovereign.

- 72 “Crouch, with others, follows Weissert in linking this chaos-order opposition in Neo-Assyrian sources to the creation myths, especially Enuma Elish. In Enuma Elish, order is established through violent combat, and Marduk becomes king of the gods only after dispatching his enemies, Tiamat in particular. The text thus emphasizes the sequence ‘warfare, kingship, order.’ These facets of divine activity have a bearing on the Assyrian king due to a royal ideology that established a definitive analogy between divine and human behavior. As war is inseparable from kingship as exercised by Anshar/Assur (Marduk having been replaced by the primordial Babylonian god in the Assyrianized version of Enuma Elish), so too for the human king, who thereby establishes order.” Timmer, “Nahum’s Representation,” 355.
- 73 Isaiah 14 depicts the devil’s fall by likening it to the downfall of an oppressive anonymous king that was “cast out of thy grave like an abominable branch, and as the raiment of those that are slain, thrust through with a sword, that go down to the stones of the pit; as a carcass trodden under feet” (Isaiah 14:19). Some biblical scholars believe this is a veiled reference to the death of the Assyrian King Sargon II, whose body was never recovered after dying on the battlefield. What Nephi saw in his vision seems to be related to what Isaiah describes because the outcome for the anonymous king and those that belonged to the “church of the devil” is the same. They both end up within a “pit” (1 Nephi 14:3). This might further support the idea that the “great church” that Nephi saw, which is part of the “church of the devil,” can be understood as the Assyrian Empire. See also 1 Nephi 14:9.
- 74 See 2 Nephi 2:17–18, Moses 4:1–4, Abraham 3:25–28, D&C 29:36.
- 75 This was an ancient Near East motif that connects covenantal trust with the protection of the gods. “The writers of the Hebrew Bible used the repertoire of ancient Near Eastern cosmic battle motifs and patterns to articulate certain aspects of faith and commitment to God/Yahweh in ancient Israel. They used them precisely because these stories were powerful in the conceptual world of the ancient Israelites and, therefore, provided a set of motifs that could be used to speak powerfully about Yahweh.” R. E. Averbeck, “Ancient Near Eastern Mythography as It Relates to Historiography in the Hebrew Bible: Genesis 3 and the Cosmic Battle,” in *The Future of Biblical Archaeology: Reassessing Methodologies and Assumptions*,

ed. J. K. Hoffmeier and A. R. Millard (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 345.

- 76 See Mosiah 18:8–10 for the obligations associated with the covenant of baptism and how they relate to what Nephi saw.
- 77 Matthijs de Jong, *Isaiah Among the Ancient Near Eastern Prophets: A Comparative Study of the Earliest Stages of the Isaiah Tradition and the Neo-Assyrian Prophecies* (Netherlands: Brill, 2007), 161–62.
- 78 At the time Lehi led his family out of Jerusalem, Judah was a vassal to Babylon, and it had been hundreds of years since they existed as an independent nation.