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“UPON THE WINGS OF HIS SPIRIT”: A NOTE ON HEBREW *rûaḥ* AND 2 NEPHI 4:25

Matthew L. Bowen

ABSTRACT: *Nephi, in composing his psalm (2 Nephi 4:15–35), incorporates a poetic idiom from Psalm 18:10 (2 Samuel 22:11) and Psalm 104:3 to describe his participation in a form of divine travel. This experience constituted a part of the vision in which he saw “the things which [his] father saw” in the latter’s dream of the tree of life (see 1 Nephi 11:1–3; 14:29–30). Nephi’s use of this idiom becomes readily apparent when the range of meaning for the Hebrew word *rûaḥ* is considered. Nephi’s experience helps our understanding of other scriptural scenes where similar divine travel is described.*

Recent studies have shown that 2 Nephi 4:15–35, what Sidney B. Sperry originally identified as Nephi’s “psalm,”¹ relies heavily on the language of the biblical psalms.² In 2 Nephi 4:25, he states, “And upon the wings of his Spirit hath my body been carried away upon exceedingly high mountains.” In making this statement, Nephi poetically referred to the experience he describes in greater depth in 1 Nephi 11:1 (“I was caught away in the Spirit of the Lord, yea, into an exceedingly high mountain”)

1. Sidney B. Sperry, *Our Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Stevens & Wallis, 1947), 110–11. See also Steven P. Sondrup, “The Psalm of Nephi: A Lyric Reading,” *BYU Studies* 21, no. 3 (1981): 357–72; Book of Mormon Central, “Is ‘Nephi’s Psalm’ Really a Psalm?” *KnoWhy* 30 (February 10, 2016), <https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/knowhy/is-nephis-psalm-really-a-psalm>.

2. See, e.g., Kenneth L. Alford and D. Bryce Baker, “Parallels between Psalms 25–31 and the Psalm of Nephi,” in *Ascending the Mountain of the Lord: Temple, Praise, and Worship in the Old Testament* (2013 Sperry Symposium), ed. Jeffrey R. Chadwick, Matthew J. Grey, and David Rolph Seely (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2013), 312–28; John Hilton III, “Old Testament Psalms in the Book of Mormon,” in *Ascending the Mountain of the Lord: Temple, Praise, and Worship in the Old Testament*, 291–311.

and 1 Nephi 14:30 (“I was carried away in the Spirit”). Nephi’s use of the phrase “upon the wings of his Spirit” reflects a poetic idiom found in Psalm 18:10/2 Samuel 22:11 and Psalm 104:3, *‘al-kanpê-rûah*, usually translated “upon the wings of the wind.”

The textual dependency of 2 Nephi 4:25 on Psalm 18:10/2 Samuel 22:11 and Psalm 104:3 becomes especially clear when the polysemy of Hebrew *rûah* as both “wind” and “spirit” is considered. Moreover, when Nephi’s use of the phrase “upon the wings of his Spirit” is analyzed in the context of what Nephi experiences with “the Spirit of the Lord” in 1 Nephi 11 and in the broader contexts of theophanies and iconography in ancient Israel, it emerges as something much more than a poetic conceit. Nephi makes a bold declaration regarding his participation in the type of divine travel that few human beings have ever been privileged to experience.

A Methodological Note

John W. Welch has described Nephi’s psalm as a “post-Lehi document” that was “written while Nephi was feeling painfully vulnerable after losing his father.”³ As such, the actual composition of Nephi’s psalm almost certainly preceded his engraving of the small plates, which he undertook about thirty years after Lehi’s and Ishmael’s families left Jerusalem.⁴ In other words, the fact that Nephi’s small plates account was made at that time does not preclude the likelihood that Nephi’s psalm was composed much earlier, shortly after the time of Lehi’s death. It was also very likely composed in Hebrew, Nephi’s native language, rather than Egyptian, even if it was later incorporated into Nephi’s small plates record in Egyptian or using an Egyptian script. For the purposes of my thesis, which includes comparison with the biblical psalms, I will proceed on the assumption that Nephi composed his psalm in Hebrew, whatever its later form in his small plates record.

Wind, Spirit, Breath: The Polysemy of Hebrew *rûah*

The range of meaning for the Hebrew noun *rûah* includes “breath,” “wind,” and “spirit,” including “the natural spirit of humanity, as sense,

3. John W. Welch, “The Psalm of Nephi as a Post-Lehi Document,” 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), 72.

4. Noel B. Reynolds, “Nephi’s Small Plates: A Rhetorical Analysis,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 50 (2022): 101–105, <https://interpreterfoundation.org/nephis-small-plates-a-rhetorical-analysis/>.

mind, intellectual frame of mind.”⁵ How one best translates this term, however, depends largely upon the context within which it occurs. For example, *rûaḥ* in Isaiah’s prophecy of a Davidic messianic figure requires the translation “spirit”: “And the spirit of the Lord [*rûaḥ yhwḥ*] shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding [*rûaḥ hokmâ ûbînâ*], the spirit of counsel and might [*rûaḥ ’ēšâ ûgēbûrâ*], the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord [*rûaḥ da’at wēyir’at yhwḥ*]” (Isaiah 11:2). Neither “wind” or “breath” make sense here. Similarly, in the collocation *rûaḥ ḥayyîm*, “breath of life” (Genesis 6:17; 7:15, 22), *rûaḥ* makes less sense as “spirit” and no sense as “wind.”

Sometimes the context allows for ambiguity. The King James translators, following Tyndale⁶ and other early modern English translators,⁷ rendered *rûaḥ* as “spirit”: “And the Spirit of God [*wērûaḥ ’ēlōhîm*] moved upon [*mēraḥepet*] the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:2). Nevertheless, some recent translations have rendered *rûaḥ* as “wind”: “while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters” (NRSV, Updated Edition); “and a wind of God sweeping over the water” (NJPS). The same ambiguity carries over into Aramaic (*rûḥā*) and into Greek, as is famously evident in Jesus’s conversation with Nicodemus as preserved in John 3:8: “The wind [*to pneuma*, or the Spirit] bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit [*tou pneumatōs*, or the wind].”

Whether Hebrew *rûaḥ* is a “spirit” or “wind,” the surrounding language in the Genesis creation account uses the image of a mother bird hovering over the earth. Many commentators have noted the lexical connection to Deuteronomy 32:11: “As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth (*yērahēp*, i.e., hovers) over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings.” Michael LeFebvre writes: “The verb hovering (*rāḥap*) indicates God’s presence and care, like a mother bird that hovers over its young.”⁸ Although the Egyptian

5. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 1197–1201.

6. Genesis 1:2 (Tyndale): “The erth was voyde and emptie ad darcknesse was vpon the depe and the spirite of god moved vpon the water.”

7. See, e.g., Genesis 1:2 (Coverdale): “and ye earth was voyde and emptie, and darcknes was vpon the depe, & ye sprete of God moued vpo the water.”

8. Michael LeFebvre, *The Liturgy of Creation: Understanding Calendars in Old Testament Context* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2019), 151.

spirit-terms *b₃* (“soul”),⁹ *k₃* (“soul, spirit; essence”; “personality”),¹⁰ and *ṣḥ* (“spirit,”¹¹ i.e., glorified spirit) do not possess the range and ambiguity of meaning as Hebrew *rûaḥ*, *b₃* and *ṣḥ* are both written with bird-form hieroglyphs, suggesting the cognitive association of the bird with the soul/spirit prevalent in the ancient world.

Whether *rûaḥ ʿēlōhîm* denotes “spirit of God,” “wind of God,” or even “mighty wind,” the author of the Genesis creation account conceptualizes that *rûaḥ* as a birdlike entity or force that can perform the action of *r-ḥ-p* — i.e., with wings. We might compare this creation image with the descent of the Holy Ghost “in the form of a dove” at Jesus’s baptism as a creation image (1 Nephi 11:27; 2 Nephi 31:8). This point becomes even more germane when we encounter the image of the divine *rûaḥ* with wings in the psalms in 2 Nephi 4:25.

“Upon the Wings of the Wind”: A Metaphor for Divine Travel

Associations of birds and wings with various deities and those deities’ modes of travel were nearly ubiquitous in antiquity. Undertaking even a cursory study of this rich subject will not be possible here. Nevertheless, it should be noted that forms of these associations recur in ancient Israelite tradition.¹²

The phrase *ʿal-kanpê-rûaḥ*, usually translated “upon the wings of the wind,” occurs three times in the Hebrew Bible. Two of these instances are in parallel texts which represent a common original: “And he [Yahweh] rode upon a cherub, and did fly: and he was seen [*wayyērā*] **upon the wings of the wind** [*ʿal-kanpê-rûaḥ*]” (2 Samuel 22:11); “And he [Yahweh] rode upon a cherub, and did fly: yea, he did fly [*wayyēde*] **upon the wings of the wind** [*ʿal-kanpê-rûaḥ*]” (Psalm 18:10). In one of the poetic couplets in this liturgical temple hymn,¹³ the psalmist matches (or sets in parallel) the winged *rûaḥ* with a cherub — a divine being

9. Raymond O. Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian* (Oxford: Griffith Institute/Ashmolean Museum, 1999), 77. Hereafter cited as CDME.

10. CDME, 283.

11. CDME, 4.

12. On the “wings of God,” see Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms*, trans. Timothy J. Hallett (1978; repr., Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 190–91.

13. See also Gary A. Rendsburg, “The Psalms as Hymns in the Temple of Jerusalem,” in *Jesus and Temple: Textual and Archeological Explorations*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 95–122.

seen in vision¹⁴ and depicted in the temple iconography with wings,¹⁵ which in this poetic conception serves Yahweh as a kind of steed. In other words, like the winged cherub, the winged *rûah* serves as a mode of divine transportation. The symbolism of the wings in this context would be congruent with Joseph Smith’s explanation that “wings are a representation of power, to move, to act, etc.” in divine visions (D&C 77:4).¹⁶

This same phrase occurs again in Psalm 104:3, this time in parallel with “clouds” as Yahweh’s “chariot” or mode of transportation: “Who layeth the beams of his chambers in the waters: who maketh the clouds his chariot: who walketh **upon the wings of the wind** [*‘al-kanpê-rûah*]: Who maketh his angels spirits; his ministers a flaming fire” (Psalm 104:3–4), or as the NRSV (updated edition) renders it: “You set the beams of your chambers on the waters; you make the clouds your chariot; you ride **on the wings of the wind**; you make the winds your messengers, fire and flame your ministers.”

“Upon the Wings of His Spirit”: Nephi’s Appropriation of a Hebrew Metaphor

Nephi appropriates the language and imagery of Psalm 18:10 (2 Samuel 22:11) and Psalm 104:3 when he reports, “And **upon the wings of his Spirit** [cf. Hebrew *wē‘al-kanpê-rûhō*] hath my body been carried away upon exceedingly high mountains. And mine eyes have beheld great things, yea, even too great for man; therefore I was bidden that I should not write them” (2 Nephi 4:25). Nephi modifies the collocation *‘al-kanpê-rûah* only slightly to reflect his own experience. His use of the psalmic idiom reflects his recognition of the polysemic nature of *rûah* as “wind” and “spirit.” However, his addition of the third-person pronoun “his” ensures that *rûah* is understood more narrowly and translated more personally as “Spirit.” This translation befits the very personal experience that he has with the “Spirit of the Lord” (see further below).

Nephi understood “the things of the Jews” (2 Nephi 25:5) or “the manner of the Jews” (2 Nephi 25:1–2) in the broader context of the ancient Near East and the cultural crosscurrents of symbolism (“I, of myself, have dwelt at Jerusalem, wherefore I know concerning the regions round

14. See Ezekiel 10:5, 8, 12, 16, 19, 21; cf. the “living ones” in Ezekiel 1:6, 8–9, 11, 23–25.

15. See, e.g., Exodus 25:20; 37:9; 1 Kings 6:24, 27; 2 Chronicles 3:11–13; 5:7–8.

16. The poetic description of heavenly bodies with “wings” in D&C 88:45 is also interesting in view of the symbolism given in D&C 77:4.

about,” 2 Nephi 25:6). In 2 Nephi 25:13, he gives his understanding of the Egyptian winged sun disk, an image with well-attested use as a royal symbol during the eighth century BCE reign of Hezekiah,¹⁷ as a reference to the Messiah: “he shall rise from the dead, with healing in his wings” (2 Nephi 25:13); “But the Sun of Righteousness shall appear unto them; and he shall heal them”¹⁸ (2 Nephi 26:9),¹⁹ consonant with the later prophecy of Malachi (see Malachi 4:2; 3 Nephi 25:2).²⁰ Nephi readily identified the meaning of the symbols of his father Lehi’s dream of the tree of life within this context (see, e.g., 1 Nephi 11:25; 15:12–36). Nephi knew — certainly better than we know — the depth and weight of his appropriation of *‘al-kanpê-rûah* from the psalms with reference to the Spirit of the Lord.

Nephi’s statement in 2 Nephi 4:25 gives poetic expression to the experience he describes in an *inclusio* — a bracketing device in which a textual unit is demarcated through the repetition of key phraseology at the beginning and ending of the unit. Nephi’s *inclusio* brackets his vision of the tree of life — his seeing “the things which [his] father saw” — as a distinct textual unit within the larger structure of his small plates record. Notably, Nephi’s experience with the Lord’s *rûah* and divine travel constitutes an integral part of this *inclusio*,²¹ the opening

17. Robert Deutsch, “Lasting Impressions: New Bullae Reveal Egyptian-Style Emblems on Judah’s Royal Seals,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* (July–August 2002): 42–51.

18. The spelling of “Sun” for “Son” follows Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022), 134.

19. See Book of Mormon Central, “Why Does Malachi Refer to the Sun of Righteousness? (Malachi 4:2),” *KnowWhy* 653 (December 13, 2022), <https://knowwhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/knowwhy/why-does-malachi-refer-to-the-sun-of-righteousness>.

20. Based on Nephi’s citation of the brazen serpent tradition from Numbers 21 in 2 Nephi 25:20. Neal Rappleye suggests that Nephi may be blending elements of the brazen serpent tradition and winged sun disk symbolism in 2 Nephi 25:13. The similarity of language between Nephi and Malachi’s winged sun disk prophecies may constitute a relic of the translation process or reflect the language of a common winged sun disk tradition that both knew. See Neal Rappleye, “Serpents of Fire and Brass: A Contextual Study of the Brazen Serpent Tradition in the Book of Mormon,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 50 (2022): 233n119, <https://interpreterfoundation.org/serpents-of-fire-and-brass-a-contextual-study-of-the-brazen-serpent-tradition-in-the-book-of-mormon/>.

21. See Matthew L. Bowen, “Not Partaking of the Fruit: Its Generational Consequences and Its Remedy,” in *The Things Which My Father Saw: Approaches to Lehi’s Dream and Nephi’s Vision (2011 Sperry Symposium)*, ed. Daniel L. Belnap,

and closing brackets of which are 1 Nephi 11:1–3 and 1 Nephi 14:29–30 respectively:

1 Nephi 11:1–3	1 Nephi 14:29–30
For it came to pass after I had desired to know the things that my father had seen , and believing that the Lord was able to make them known unto me , as I sat pondering in mine heart I was caught away in the Spirit of the Lord, yea, into an exceedingly high mountain , which I never had before seen, and upon which I never had before set my foot. And the Spirit said unto me: Behold, what desirest thou? And I said: I desire to behold the things which my father saw.	And I bear record that I saw the things which my father saw, and the angel of the Lord did make them known unto me. And now I make an end of speaking concerning the things which I saw while I was carried away in the Spirit ; and if all the things which I saw are not written, the things which I have written are true. And thus it is. Amen.

In addition to the phrase “the things which my Father saw,” which occurs verbatim in both 1 Nephi 11:3 and 1 Nephi 14:29 (cf. also “the things which my father had seen” in v. 1), the brackets of the *inclusio* also use other key matching terminology. For example, the clause “the Lord was able to make them known unto me” (1 Nephi 11:1) is matched by the statement “and the angel of the Lord did make them known unto me” (1 Nephi 14:29). Crucially, both brackets include descriptions of Nephi’s divine travel via *rûah*: “I was caught away in the Spirit of the Lord” (1 Nephi 11:1) is matched by the phrase “while I was carried away in the Spirit” (1 Nephi 14:30). Nephi’s explanation in his psalm, “And upon the wings of his Spirit hath my body been carried away upon exceedingly high mountains” (2 Nephi 4:25) makes clear that his tree-of-life vision was not an out-of-body (ecstatic) experience. In other words, where some visionaries remain undecided on the nature of their visions — “whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell” (2 Corinthians 12:3; 3 Nephi 28:15; D&C 37:1) — Nephi affirms that he experienced this and other visions in the “body.”

Regarding the *rûah* who transported Nephi to the “exceedingly high mountain” where he had his vision and with whom Nephi conversed, Nephi himself records, “I spake unto him as a man speaketh; for I beheld that he was in the form of a man; yet nevertheless, I knew that it was the Spirit of the Lord; and he spake unto me as a man speaketh with another” (1 Nephi 11:11). The two likeliest identifications for this figure, as Latter-day Saint exegetes have long recognized, are the Holy Ghost

Gaye Strathearn, and Stanley A. Johnson (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2011), 241.

(the third member of the Godhead)²² and Jehovah (the premortal Jesus Christ).²³ When taken together with 1 Nephi 11:1–3, 11 and 14:29–30, Nephi’s poetic description in 2 Nephi 4:25, at minimum, constitutes evidence that the “Spirit of the Lord” is to be understood as referring to a personal, divine being and not an abstract force. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, David Larsen, and Stephen Whitlock connect Nephi’s poetic description, “And upon the wings of his Spirit hath my body been carried away upon exceedingly high mountains,” with an imagistic description of divine ascent or divine travel in the Apocalypse of Abraham, “The angel [Yaho’el] took me with his right hand and set me on the right wing of the pigeon and he himself sat on the left wing of the turtledove ... and carried me up” (Apocalypse of Abraham 15:2–3).²⁴

We should additionally note here that Nephi’s statement, “I was caught away in the Spirit of the Lord, yea, into an exceedingly high mountain” (1 Nephi 11:1), bears a strong resemblance to the introduction to the Visions of Moses: “The words of God, which he spake unto Moses at a time when Moses was caught up into an exceedingly high mountain, and he saw God face to face, and he talked with him” (Moses 1:1–2). Jeffrey D. Lindsay and Noel B. Reynolds have adduced evidence that the brass plates that Lehi and Nephi used had a version of Genesis similar to what we find in the Joseph Smith Translation.²⁵ If their thesis is correct,

22. See, e.g., James E. Talmage, *A Study of the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1959), 159–60; Marion G. Romney, “The Holy Ghost,” *Ensign*, May 1974, 90–92. See also discussion in David 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): 20–22, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/thou-knowest-that-i-believe/>.

23. See discussion in Book of Mormon Central, “Why Were Lehi and Nephi Guided by Angelic Escorts in Their Visions? (1 Nephi 11:11),” *KnowWhy* 492 (December 11, 2018), <https://knowwhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/knowwhy/why-were-lehi-and-nephi-guided-by-angelic-escorts-in-their-visions>.

24. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, David J. Larsen, and Stephen T. Whitlock, “Moses 1 and the Apocalypse of Abraham: Twin Sons of Different Mothers?” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 38 (2020), 209, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/moses-1-and-the-apocalypse-of-abraham-twin-sons-of-different-mothers/>. For the translated text, see “The Apocalypse of Abraham,” (Adam Jerome [translator unknown], 2004), http://www.pseudepigrapha.com/pseudepigrapha/Apocalypse_of_Abraham.html.

25. Jeffrey D. 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, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/strong-like-unto-moses/>.

then the language Nephi used to describe his vision was plausibly influenced by language from the fuller brass plates texts.²⁶

**“He Was Taken by the Spirit and Conveyed Away”:
Additional Examples of Divine Travel**

There are other examples in the Hebrew Bible in which a human being is conceived of as participating in the same type of divine travel that Nephi affirms to have experienced. For instance, Ezekiel, a priest-turned-prophet and a contemporary of Lehi and Nephi, records several instances in which he describes being “taken up” or “lifted up” (*nś’*), “taken” (*lqh*), “brought” (*bw*), or “carried” (*yś*) to various locales. “Then the spirit took me up [*wattissā’ēnî rūah*], and I heard behind me a voice of a great rushing, saying, Blessed be the glory of the LORD from his place. ... So the spirit lifted me up [*wērūah nēsā’atnî*], and took me away [*wattiqqāhēnî*], and I went in bitterness, in the heat of my spirit; but the hand of the LORD was strong upon me. Then I came to them of the captivity at Tel-abib” (Ezekiel 3:12, 14–15). Ezekiel describes a vision of Judah, Jerusalem, and the idolatry practiced in the Jerusalem temple also in terms of divine travel: “And he [the Lord] put forth the form of an hand, and took me [*wayyiqqāhēnî*] by a lock of mine head; and the spirit lifted me up [*wattissā’ ’ōtî rūah*] between the earth and the heaven, and brought me [*wattābē’ ’ōtî*] in the visions of God to Jerusalem, to the door of the inner gate that looketh toward the north...” (Ezekiel 8:3). Elsewhere Ezekiel describes being transported by the Spirit in vision to a community of exiles in Babylon: “Afterwards the spirit took me up [*wērūah nēsā’atnî*], and brought me [*wattēbi’ēnî*] in a vision by the Spirit of God into Chaldea, to them of the captivity. So the vision that I had seen went up from me” (Ezekiel 11:24–25). Ezekiel’s vision of the bones that were resurrected included divine travel: “The hand of the Lord was upon me, and carried me out [*wayyōṣi’ēnî*] in the spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the midst of the valley which was full of bones” (Ezekiel 37:1). Ezekiel records one of his most vivid examples and one that includes divine travel to “a very high mountain” (*har gābōah mē’ōd*, or “an exceedingly high mountain,” as in 1 Nephi 11:1 and Moses 1:1; cf. Ether 3:1):

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26. Ibid., 76, 85.

In the five and twentieth year of our captivity, in the beginning of the year, in the tenth day of the month, in the fourteenth year after that the city was smitten, in the selfsame day the hand of the LORD was upon me, and brought me [wayyābē' ōtî] thither. In the visions of God brought he me [hēbi'anî] into the land of Israel, and set me upon a very high mountain, by which was as the frame of a city on the south. And he brought me [wayyābē' ōtî] thither, and, behold, there was a man, whose appearance was like the appearance of brass, with a line of flax in his hand, and a measuring reed; and he stood in the gate. And the man said unto me, Son of man, behold with thine eyes, and hear with thine ears, and set thine heart upon all that I shall shew thee; for to the intent that I might shew them unto thee art thou brought [hubā'tâ] hither: declare all that thou seest to the house of Israel. (Ezekiel 40:1–4)

Much of the remainder of the book of Ezekiel, which records Ezekiel's vision of the restoration of the temple, includes similar divine travel language (see, e.g., Ezekiel 40:17, 24, 28, 32, 35, 48–49; 41:1; 42:1, 15; 43:1, 5; 44:1, 4, 7; 46:19, 21; 47:1–4, 6, 8). The case of Ezekiel's vision accounts is particularly interesting and relevant — not because Nephi had any access to Ezekiel's prophecies and writings, but because Ezekiel was Nephi's near Judahite contemporary and expressed some revelation-related concepts in similar contemporary language.

But there are further salient examples earlier²⁷ in ancient Israel's history. After the translation of Elijah (2 Kings 2:1–11), the “sons of the prophets” (i.e., disciples of the prophets) did not grasp that he had been taken to heaven. Indeed, they believed that the Lord had *spirited* Elijah away to another earthly location through *divine* travel. To Elisha, they pled, “Let them go, we pray thee, and seek thy master: lest peradventure the Spirit of the Lord **hath taken him up** [nēšā'ô], and cast him upon some mountain, or into some valley” (2 Kings 2:16). The key point is that the “sons of the prophets” believed that travel by means of “the Spirit of

27. Although the Deuteronomistic History to which Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel, and 1–2 Kings putatively belong was edited together during a time probably contemporaneous with Nephi, its sources originate in much earlier time periods. On the basic concept and theory of a Deuteronomistic History, see Martin Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History*, JSOTSup 15 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981). German original: Martin Noth, *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien* (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1943).

the Lord" was possible. Several additional scriptural texts depict divine travel as a mysterious reality.

Later in the Book of Mormon, Nephi the son of Helaman, after receiving the sealing power (like Elijah),²⁸ participates in this type of divine travel when his life was threatened by those to whom he was "declar[ing] the word of God" (Helaman 10:15). Mormon records, "But behold, the power of God was with him, and they could not take him to cast him into prison, for **he was taken by the Spirit and conveyed away** out of the midst of them" (Helaman 10:16). In the next verse, Mormon states that Nephi "**did go forth in the Spirit**, from multitude to multitude, declaring the word of God, even until he had declared it unto them all, or sent it forth among all the people" (Helaman 10:17). It is possible, though not conclusive, that this represents a continuation of this type of travel.

In the New Testament, Luke preserves at least one instance of divine travel through "the Spirit of the Lord" in his account of Philip's teaching and baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch in the book of Acts. Luke states that after the baptism, Phillip was taken away by the Spirit: "And when they were come up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord [*pneuma kyriou*] caught away [*hērpasen*] Philip, that the eunuch saw him no more: and he went on his way rejoicing" (Acts 8:39). Paul uses this same Greek term (*harpazō*) to describe being "caught up" into the third heaven (2 Corinthians 12:2) and being "caught up" into paradise. Like Nephi's use of a verb "caught away" in 1 Nephi 11:1, Paul uses this verb in the context of divine travel to receive revelation. These revelations were indescribable or not permissible for Paul to describe.

**"Jesus Was in the Spirit, and It Taketh Him Up into an
Exceeding High Mountain": Excursus on Jesus's
Divine Travel in the Wilderness Temptation**

All of the foregoing has implications for the Prophet Joseph Smith's understanding of Jesus's temptation in the wilderness as recorded in the Synoptic gospels. Following Jesus's baptism, Mark 1:12 records "And immediately the Spirit driveth [*ekballei*] him into the wilderness." JST Mark 1:10 alters this to read, "And immediately the Spirit took him into the wilderness." While on its face that might not seem to be a description of divine travel, the Joseph Smith translation of the other

28. See Helaman 10:1–11.

Synoptic accounts of the temptation suggest that this is exactly how the prophet understood it.

Matthew's account begins with the statement, "Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil." The JST changes the entire telos of this experience: "Then Jesus was led up of the Spirit, into the wilderness, to be with God" (JST Matthew 4:1). The statement in the canonical text, "Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple," is emphatically changed to represent the type of divine travel that Nephi and Ezekiel describe and that we have been exploring here: "**Then Jesus was taken up** into the holy city, and **the Spirit setteth him** on the pinnacle of the temple" (cf. Ezekiel 37:1; 40:2). "Then the devil came unto him and said, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down, for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee, and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone" (JST Matthew 4:5–6). Similarly, the canonical text of Matthew 4:8 reads, "Again, the devil taketh him up **into an exceeding high mountain** [*eis oros hypsēlon*], and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them." Again, the JST removes any intimation of the devil having any agency over Jesus beyond being able to tempt him, describing divine travel that is reminiscent of Nephi's and Moses's experiences: "And again, Jesus was in the Spirit, and it taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and showeth him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them" (JST Matthew 4:8). JST Luke 4:5 makes a similar adjustment to the narrative there.²⁹

Conclusion

Nephi's poetic statement that "upon the wings of his Spirit hath my body been carried away upon exceedingly high mountains" incorporates the Hebrew idiom *'al-kanpê-rûah*, usually rendered "upon the wings of the wind," from Psalm 18:10 (2 Samuel 22:11) and Psalm 104:3. Recognizing the polysemy (or range of meaning) of Hebrew *rûah* as "wind" and "spirit" makes this borrowing clear.

Nephi's poetic description of having his body carried "upon the wings of [the Lord's] Spirit" is quite at home in ancient Israelite psalms, including Nephi's psalm, and within a corpus of biblical and ancient Near Eastern iconographs and descriptions of divine travel involving divine beings with wings serving as modes of divine transportation.

29. JST Luke 4:5: "And the Spirit taketh him up into a high mountain, and he beheld all the kingdoms ..."

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