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“ALL CAN PARTAKE, FREELY”

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Abstract: *The Interpreter Foundation welcomes faithful ideas, insights, and manuscripts from people of all backgrounds. In this brief essay, I share some that were recently shared with me regarding Lehi’s vision of the tree of life, as recorded in 1 Nephi 8. Among other things, Lehi seems to have been shown that the divine offer of salvation extends far beyond a small elite. As Peter exclaims in the King James rendering of Acts 10:34, “God is no respecter of persons.” Other translations render the same words as saying that he doesn’t “play favorites” or “show partiality.” The passage in James 1:5 with which the Restoration commenced clearly announces that, if they will simply ask, God “giveth to all men liberally.”*

A few weeks before my sitting down to write this introduction, I received a couple of emails from a relative. Among other things, they contained several ideas that had arisen from his recent reading of 1 Nephi 8. I intend to briefly share one or two of those observations here. I do so for three principal reasons:

- My relative preferred to remain anonymous and to have me write up his observations.
- They were quite interesting to me, and I think they may interest other readers.
- They illustrate the fact that thoughtful readers of the scriptures from all backgrounds can arrive at fascinating insights; no membership in any sort of guild of professional scholars of religion is required.¹

1. My relative, as it happens, holds a doctorate in engineering from a program consistently ranked among the top ten in the United States. But engineering is obviously quite a distinct field from archaeology or biblical studies, and he works in private industry rather than in academia.

This last is an important point directly related to the nature, mission, and function of the Interpreter Foundation and, specifically, to its flagship periodical, *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*. While, like almost all other serious academic journals, *Interpreter* employs a rigorous process of peer review to evaluate articles submitted to it, the focus of such review is on the content and suitability of those submissions and not at all on the degrees or the academic status of the authors. In other words, we welcome article proposals from any and all, and no particular academic certificate or field of specialization is required. We obviously can't guarantee acceptance of particular articles, but we're delighted to receive them. And I personally believe that a wide variety of backgrounds in authors, which will almost inevitably yield a wide variety of perspectives, is likely to generate a richer and more varied profusion of insights.²

But now, on to some of what my relative noticed and passed on to me:

Quite a few years ago, I published a rather lengthy article regarding Nephi's vision of the tree of life, which is recorded in 1 Nephi 11, one of the best-known passages in the Book of Mormon. Nephi's vision expands upon the vision or dream that had been received just a few days earlier by his father, Lehi, and that is recorded in 1 Nephi 8.³

And it came to pass that the Spirit said unto me: Look! And I looked and beheld a tree; and it was like unto the tree which my father had seen; and the beauty thereof was far beyond, yea, exceeding of all beauty; and the whiteness thereof did exceed the whiteness of the driven snow.

2. I think, in this context, of an article that I recall reading many, many years ago — but that, unfortunately, I was unable to locate in time to use in this essay — about a shepherd (in the United Kingdom, if I'm not mistaken). A part of what led to his eventual conversion to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints involved his noting some feature in the relationship between sheep and shepherd as mentioned in the Book of Mormon that struck him as authentic and deeply significant. I don't even recall precisely what the feature was, but I do remember realizing that, given my own background, it was something that I myself would never, ever, have noticed without having it pointed out to me in his article.

3. See Daniel C. Peterson, "Nephi and His Asherah: A Note on 1 Nephi 11:8-23," in Davis Bitton, ed., *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World: Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 191–243. A derivative and much shorter piece — much less satisfactory to its author — is Daniel C. Peterson, "Nephi and His Asherah," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9/2 (2000): 16–25, 80–88, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1253&context=jbms>.

And it came to pass after I had seen the tree, I said unto the Spirit: I behold thou hast shown unto me the tree which is precious above all.

And he said unto me: What desirest thou?

And I said unto him: To know the interpretation thereof
(1 Nephi 11:8-11)

Because Nephi wanted to know the meaning of the tree that his father had seen and that he himself now saw, we would expect "the Spirit" to answer Nephi's question. But instead, Nephi is first shown a young virgin and then, after an interval, sees the same virgin holding a child in her arms. And he is told that she is "the mother of the Son of God, after the manner of the flesh" (1 Nephi 11:18).

Then "the Spirit" asks Nephi the question Nephi himself had posed only a few verses before: "Knowest thou the meaning of the tree which thy father saw?" (1 Nephi 11:21).

Strikingly, although the vision of Mary seems irrelevant to Nephi's question — for the tree is nowhere mentioned in the angelic guide's response — Nephi himself now replies that, yes, he knows the answer (1 Nephi 11:22).

But how has Nephi come to this understanding?

What struck me was the suddenness of his recognition that the tree represented something divine, an aspect of deity, although nothing in the text itself explains anything of the sort. The specific character of the connection between God and the tree is opaque to modern readers.

In fact, I argued, his vision seems to reflect a meaning of the "sacred tree" that is unique to the ancient Near East and in Israelite history, specifically, to the period before the Babylonian captivity — Nephi's own era. This can be fully appreciated only when the ancient Canaanite and Israelite associations of that tree are borne in mind. In fact, a representation of such a tree stood within the temple at Jerusalem during the time of Lehi.

The inclusion in 1 Nephi 11 of an authentically pre-exilic religious symbol that could scarcely have been derived by a New York farm boy from his Bible, I contended, strongly suggests that the Book of Mormon is indeed an ancient historical record in the Semitic tradition. What Nephi "read" from his symbolic vision was culturally colored. That vision, I said, reflects a meaning of the "sacred tree" that is unique to the ancient Near East.

Writing to me in the light of my earlier argument, my relative suggests that, just as Nephi's prior understanding helped him to recognize the interpretation of the symbol of the tree of life, Lehi too, in the account of

his vision, somehow recognized the tree of life as a representation of the divine without ever having been told that this was so.⁴

With the exception of his own rather desperate prayer for mercy (see verses 8–9), there is no mention of anything explicitly religious from the moment in 1 Nephi 8 when Lehi follows the angel and finds himself in a dark and dreary waste (verse 7) until he completes the sharing of his vision in verse 35.⁵ There is no mention of God, or the Lord, of heaven or hell. Yet we are told in verse 36 that, because Laman and Lemuel refused to come to the tree, Lehi “feared lest they should be cast off from the presence of the Lord.” Although he was given no apparent instruction to connect the two, Lehi plainly associated the tree of life with the presence of the Lord.

Implicitly, his very choice of words suggests precisely that:

When he describes “a strait and narrow path, which came ... even to the tree by which I stood” (20), we cannot help but think of Matthew 7:13–14, which, in the King James Version, reads as follows:

Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.

And the consequences of diverging from the “strait and narrow path” are grievous, indeed:

And I saw numberless concourses of people, many of whom were pressing forward, that they might obtain the path which led unto the tree by which I stood.

And it came to pass that they did come forth, and commence in the path which led to the tree.

And it came to pass that there arose a mist of darkness; yea, even an exceedingly great mist of darkness, insomuch that

4. In a private communication to me on 23 January 2021, Allen Wyatt points out that “If the understanding of the tree of life is a cultural understanding, then one would expect Laman and Lemuel to understand it, as well. I think it significant, therefore, that of all the questions they asked Nephi, the answer Nephi gave to ‘What meaneth the tree which he saw?’ (1 Nephi 15:21) was the very shortest answer given by Nephi: ‘And I said unto them: It was a representation of the tree of life’ (1 Nephi 15:22). All the other answers required much more explanation on Nephi’s part, but this one required only 9 words, and they understood.”

5. References to 1 Nephi 8 will occur hereafter within parentheses, in the main body of the text, by verse alone.

they who had commenced in the path did lose their way, that they wandered off and were lost. (21-23)

It seems that Lehi's fear for his sons Laman and Lemuel, mentioned in verse 36, implies that true worship as he understood it included or could have included a symbol of the tree of life that stands in the presence of the Lord. In terms of the ancient Israelite temple, that would place it in or near the Holy of Holies. And this coheres nicely with the British biblical scholar Margaret Barker's observation that a "true" version of the Menorah — in the form or shape of an almond tree — stood in or near the Holy of Holies of the temple in Jerusalem before the reforms of King Josiah and others removed and changed some of the sacred temple symbols.⁶

My anonymous relative also suggested another line of thought that had occurred to him in connection with 1 Nephi 8: Plainly, as noted above, Lehi associated the tree he saw in his vision with the presence of the Lord. Let's assume, for the sake of argument, that in making that association, he was also linking it with the symbolic tree in or near the Holy of Holies of the temple.

Modern Latter-day Saints might profitably consider some of the elements of Lehi's dream:

- He finds himself in "a dark and dreary wilderness" (4), "a dark and dreary waste" (7).
- Then he sees a "a man ... dressed in a white robe" (5), clearly an angel, whom he follows (6).
- Thereupon, he prays: "And after I had traveled for the space of many hours in darkness, I began to pray unto the Lord that he would have mercy on me, according to the multitude of his tender mercies" (8).
- His prayerful appeal for mercy and deliverance seems to allow him to escape the lonely, dreary world in which he had been wandering: "And it came to pass after I had prayed unto the Lord I beheld a large and spacious field" (9). It is in this new realm, larger and lighter, that he sees the tree that is at the focal point of his vision:

6. See, for example, Margaret Barker, *The Great High Priest: The Temple Roots of Christian Liturgy* (London and New York: T. & T. Clark, 2003), 244; Margaret Barker, *The Older Testament: The Survival of Themes from the Ancient Royal Cult in Sectarian Judaism and Early Christianity* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005), 230; Margaret Barker, *The Mother of the Lord: The Lady in the Temple* (London and New York: Bloomsbury T. & T. Clark, 2012), 1:64-65. My thanks to Kevin Christensen for his help in locating these references when I was nowhere near a library.

And it came to pass that I beheld a tree, whose fruit was desirable to make one happy.

And it came to pass that I did go forth and partake of the fruit thereof; and I beheld that it was most sweet, above all that I ever before tasted. Yea, and I beheld that the fruit thereof was white, to exceed all the whiteness that I had ever seen.

And as I partook of the fruit thereof it filled my soul with exceedingly great joy; wherefore, I began to be desirous that my family should partake of it also; for I knew that it was desirable above all other fruit.
(10-12)

In his vision, Lehi reached the tree while in mortality, and he called to his family members, hoping they would also come and partake of its fruit with him (11-12). Most of them eventually did so (16). In arriving at the tree, they arrived at what Lehi considered, symbolically speaking, to be the presence of the Lord (36).

On the assumption made above, this might suggest that, in Lehi's mind, they had effectively arrived, again in symbolic form, at the Holy of Holies of the temple — a place that, while sacred, existed by and for mortals.

We know the temple and temple worship were important to Lehi and his family. This is shown by the action taken by his son and prophetic successor Nephi shortly after Lehi's death:

And I, Nephi, did build a temple; and I did construct it after the manner of the temple of Solomon save it were not built of so many precious things; for they were not to be found upon the land, wherefore, it could not be built like unto Solomon's temple. But the manner of the construction was like unto the temple of Solomon; and the workmanship thereof was exceedingly fine. (2 Nephi 5:16)

Nephi patterned his temple architecturally after Solomon's, which suggests that — in line with the modern architectural dictum of Louis Sullivan that “form follows function” — it was also patterned after Solomon's temple in terms of its liturgy or ritual.

And this in turn suggests that the Nephite temple also had a high priest who entered the Holy of Holies on behalf of his people. Most likely this was Nephi himself, who would have succeeded his father Lehi in that respect as well as in his role as leader of the community and as

prophet. But please note also that, in the visions of Lehi and Nephi, the tree is accessible to all if they will only follow the path that leads to it. This points to one of the most obvious ways in which modern temple ordinances differ from the rituals of the ancient Jewish temple as they appear in the sources: All, and not merely a priestly elite (let alone only a single chief priest), are invited to enter symbolically into the presence of the Lord as a foretaste of a real entrance in the world to come.

There is, I think, rich food for thought in these ideas. There are topics to be considered, evaluated, and perhaps elaborated. I've shared only a portion of what my relative sent to me, but even so, I like the concluding paragraph of the relevant email:

About the observation in 1 Nephi 8, I'm excited to see something so subtle suddenly appear with a whole new dimension, which is also ridiculously implausible for Joseph Smith to have deliberately crafted and remained silent about. You'd think that Joseph and his fellow conspirators who wrote the Book of Mormon, having deliberately woven and layered so many historical and linguistic nuances into its pages, would have pointed them out to their gullible followers to boost their influence, since that is what a religious mountebank, by definition, seeks. Craft a chiasmus and not find some way to use it for advantage, but allow it to go unnoticed, unmentioned, and unglorified? Not exactly the sign of a fraudulent egotist, but of someone unaware.

I appreciate my relative's kindness in sharing such stimulating, thought-provoking insights with me, although I would have liked him to lay them out himself. I'm grateful, too, for and to all those who have produced the articles and reviews in this issue of *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*, and who have prepared them for publication. Almost all of them labor without any financial reward. I'm especially appreciative of Allen Wyatt and Jeff Lindsay, who ensure that this production continues as it has week after week after week. I also express my thanks for everybody else who is involved with the Foundation. (Many of them — necessarily omitting our peer reviewers, who are anonymous as a matter of policy — are listed on pages ii–iii of the present volume.) Without the time and the effort and the financial support offered by a large number of generous people who owe us literally nothing, the Interpreter Foundation would cease to exist.

Daniel C. Peterson (PhD, University of California at Los Angeles) is a professor of Islamic studies and Arabic at Brigham Young University and is the founder of the University's Middle Eastern Texts Initiative, for which he served as editor-in-chief until mid-August 2013. He has published and spoken extensively on both Islamic and Mormon subjects. Formerly chairman of the board of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) and an officer, editor, and author for its successor organization, the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, his professional work as an Arabist focuses on the Qur'an and on Islamic philosophical theology. He is the author, among other things, of a biography entitled *Muhammad: Prophet of God* (Eerdmans, 2007).