

# INTERPRETER

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A JOURNAL OF MORMON SCRIPTURE

Volume 1 · Issue 1 · 2012 · Pages 1-23

## **“Thou Knowest That I Believe”: Invoking The Spirit of the Lord as Council Witness in 1 Nephi 11**

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Offprint Series

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# “THOU KNOWEST THAT I BELIEVE”: INVOKING THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD AS COUNCIL WITNESS IN 1 NEPHI 11

*David Bokovoy*

*Abstract: The Book of Mormon features an esoteric exchange between the prophet Nephi and the Spirit of the Lord on an exceedingly high mountain. The following essay explores some of the ways in which an Israelite familiar with ancient religious experiences and scribal techniques might have interpreted this event. The analysis shows that Nephi’s conversation, as well as other similar accounts in the Book of Mormon, echoes an ancient temple motif. As part of this paradigm, the essay explores the manner in which the text depicts the Spirit of the Lord in a role associated with members of the divine council in both biblical and general Near Eastern conceptions.*

The opening chapters of the Book of Mormon feature an interesting conversation between Nephi and the Spirit of the Lord. This discussion includes a question-and-answer session on a mountaintop that results in Nephi receiving a sacred “sign” (1 Nephi 11:1–7). A careful reading of 1 Nephi 11 illustrates that this esoteric exchange follows an ancient configuration reflected in Israelite ritual performances. The conversation in 1 Nephi 11 not only echoes an ancient temple motif, it also depicts the Spirit of the Lord as a witness in a manner that typifies one of the traditional roles fulfilled by members of the divine council in both biblical and general Near Eastern conceptions. By successfully expressing his testimony in the truthfulness of Lehi’s teachings, Nephi invoked the Spirit of the

Lord as a divine witness to the prophet's worthiness to receive advanced spiritual insights.

## Nephi's Vision

Nephi's description of his exchange with the Spirit of the Lord commences with the prophet in the act of pondering the words his father had shared regarding a sacred dream: "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" (1 Nephi 11:1).

While not a part of Lehi's parallel vision, Nephi's experience of being "caught away" reflects his father's initial dream recorded in the Book of Mormon in which Lehi was "carried away" to God's throne (1 Nephi 1:8). From a biblical perspective, references to an individual being "caught away" function as a technical expression denoting an extraordinary spiritual encounter. A textual parallel with Nephi's language appears, for instance, in Acts 8:39 concerning Philip the Evangelist: "And when they [Philip and the eunuch] were come up out of the water, *the Spirit of the Lord caught away* Philip, that the eunuch saw him no more" (Acts 8:39; emphasis added).

The term translated in this New Testament passage as "caught away" is the Greek word *herpazen*, which derives from the form *harpazō* meaning "to steal" or "to take away forcefully."<sup>1</sup> The verb can carry the nuance of a type of spiritual abduction, referring to the process of a "divine power transferring a person marvelously and swiftly from one place to another."<sup>2</sup> In the New Testament, the same grammatical form appears in Revelation 12:5 in reference to the manchild "*caught*

1. Horst Robert Balz and Gerhard Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 1: 156.

2. Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson 1996), 74–75.

up unto God, and to his throne,” and in 2 Corinthians 12:2–4 in reference to Paul who was “*caught up* into paradise, and heard unspeakable words.” Nephi’s statement that while pondering over his father’s teaching, Nephi was suddenly “caught away in the Spirit of the Lord,” and taken into an “exceedingly high mountain,” parallels these biblical experiences.

Reading the account of Nephi’s spiritual journey from an Old Testament perspective, the prophet’s reference to an “exceedingly high mountain” suggests that the Spirit of the Lord brought Nephi to the heavenly temple, the traditional meeting place of God’s divine assembly. As one scholar has observed:

The events taking place on earth are rigidly informed and determined by heavenly decree; the sites that facilitate the flow of information from above attain amplified significance. These pertain especially to mountains, traditionally associated with theophanies in many Ancient Near Eastern cultures, and temples or places connected with temples that are directly or indirectly derived from or related to mountains.<sup>3</sup>

According to this, mountains functioned as sacred places connected with spiritual manifestations and prophetic interaction with members of the heavenly host. The fact that Nephi’s mountain was not only depicted as “high,” but with the extra descriptive element that it was “exceedingly” high, suggests that it was a place on earth that allowed access to the heavenly court.

### The Cosmic Mountain and Divine Assembly

All throughout the Bible, mountains appear as sacred space. Ezekiel 28:13–15 places the Garden of Eden on a mountain;

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3. Carla Sulzbach, “The Function of the Sacred Geography in the Book of Jubilees,” *Journal for Semitics* 14 (2005): 290.

Abraham proves his faithfulness to the Lord on a mountain-top (Gen. 22:1–14); and similarly, God appears to both Moses and Elijah on an exceedingly high mountain (Ex. 3:1–2; 1 Kgs. 19:8–18). Isaiah’s great eschatological vision featured in Isaiah 2 directly links the temple with the “mountain of the Lord’s house.” As the setting of the celestial temple, the holy mountain appears in early Northwest Semitic conceptions influencing both the Bible and the Book of Mormon as the traditional residence of the divine council of gods, and hence, the heavenly temple.

In Ugaritic mythology, for example, the two terms *phr m’d* “Great Assembly” and *gér il* the “Divine Mountain” appear as synonymous expressions (see KTU 1.2 I lines 19–21). This ancient account from the world of the Bible depicts the messengers of the Semitic god Yam arriving on the holy mountain, or assembly of El, the high god in the Canaanite pantheon:

The messengers depart, they do not delay.  
Immediately they head to the divine mountain.  
To the Great Assembly.<sup>4</sup>

The text concerning the god Yam’s messengers from ancient Canaan illustrates the commonly held Semitic tradition that links the cosmic mountain with the divine assembly. An ancient audience reading Nephi’s description of being carried away to an exceedingly high mountain, would have connected this experience to a prophetic interaction with the divine council.

Like early Northwest Semitic traditions, biblical theology features an attestation of a heavenly council of Gods that gov-

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4. As translated by the author. For a transliteration of the cuneiform text, see M. Dietrich, O. Loretz, and J. Sanmartín, *The Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts from Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani and other Places*, 2nd ed. (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1995). The meaning of the mountain’s name has been highly contested. For an analysis of emending *gér Il* as *gér il*, see Mark S. Smith, “Mt. Il in KTU 1.2 I 19–20,” *Ugarit-Forschungen* 18 (1986): 458.

erned the affairs of the universe. “God has taken his place in the divine council,” reports the Psalmist, “in the midst of the gods he holds judgment” (Psalm 82:1; NRSV). Though somewhat obscured in the King James translation of the Bible, the ancient Semitic view that places the divine council on a holy mountain, appears in Deuteronomy 33:2:

He said, ‘the Lord came from Sinai. He beamed  
forth from his Seir.<sup>5</sup> He shone from Mount  
Paran. With him were myriads of Holy Ones.  
At his right hand proceeded the gods.<sup>6</sup>

In terms of textual criticism, this biblical passage presents scholars with many challenges. While some of the grammatical details concerning the text remain open for debate, beyond these difficulties lies the clear contextual representation of the God of Israel and his divine assembly appearing in glory from their abode in the holy mount.<sup>7</sup>

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5. Following O'Connor's proposal that the term functions as a periphrastic genitive, modifying the proper noun Yahweh which grammatically cannot take a suffix, see Michael Patrick O'Connor, *Hebrew Verse Structure* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1980), 208.

6. As translated by the author from *Biblia hebraica stuttgartensia* (BHS). The latter half of v. 2 contains multiple challenges and has probably suffered a similar textual tampering to that witnessed in Deut. 32:8. In light of the context and parallelism, I have followed Clifford's proposal with “gods,” since no matter what the original form, the line certainly referred to the heavenly host; see Richard J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 114; Cross renders the final term as “the divine ones;” see Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 101.

7. As Levinson explains, “the Hebrew can also be understood . . . as ‘with Him were thousands of holy ones,’ i.e., the divine council who accompany God into battle (32:8 n.; Pss. 68:18; 89:8). This alternative translation, which only changes the vowels of one word in the MT, (from *approached* to *with Him*), is to be preferred since it preserves the poem's representation of God as Divine Warrior.” Bernard M. Levinson, “Deuteronomy,” in *The Jewish Study Bible* ed. Adele Berlin, Marc Zvi Brettler, and Michael A Fishbane (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 446, note 2.

In an interesting link with these Near Eastern perspectives, the Book of Mormon reports that after the Spirit of the Lord transported Nephi to the “exceedingly high mountain,” the Spirit repeatedly praised the Lord as “the most High God,” one of the traditional biblical terms for the head God of the divine assembly (see 1 Nephi 11:6). In the King James translation of the Old Testament, the expression “most High God” appears as a reflection of the Hebrew title *El Elyon* or its Aramaic equivalent (see for example Gen. 14:18, 19, 20, 22; Ps. 78:56; Dan. 3:26; 5:18, 21). As a divine name, Elyon derives from the Hebraic root *‘ālā* meaning “to ascend.”<sup>8</sup> It is a reflection of the fact that the deity serves as the “most high” God over the gods of the heavenly council.

As a result of his position in the assembly, the deity Elyon appears in the Bible as the recipient of both human and divine praise: “I will sing praise to thy name, O thou most High [Elyon]” (Ps. 9:2). In the Book of Mormon, the title “most High God” appears a total of seven times (see 1 Nephi 11:6; 2 Nephi 24:14; Jacob 2:13; Alma 26:14; 3 Nephi 4:32; 11:17). With the exception of 2 Nephi 24:14 (which is a citation of Isaiah 14), all of the Book of Mormon references to deity by the title “most High God” appear specifically in the context of praise. “Hosanna to the Most High God,” cried the Nephite armies after defeating the Gadianton Robbers, “blessed be the name of the Lord God Almighty, the Most High God” (3 Nephi 4:32). Texts such as Psalm 103:20–21 demonstrate that praising the highest deity of the council appears as an action frequently associated with the heavenly host in biblical tradition:

Praise the Lord, O his angels . . .

Praise the Lord, all his host . . .<sup>9</sup>

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8. E. E. Elmes and P. D. Miller, “Elyon,” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 560.

9. As translated by the author from *BHS*.



By offering the words, “Hosanna to the Lord, the most high God; for he is God over all the earth, yea, even above all,” in the physical setting of the “exceedingly high mountain,” the Spirit of the Lord appears engaged in an activity frequently conceptualized with members of the heavenly host. He was therefore an important member of the divine council that governed heaven and earth.

In biblical and general Near Eastern conceptions, the divine council served in a type of cosmic judicial capacity. Though the Book of Mormon does not specify the reason that Nephi was brought to the location of the divine council, or heavenly temple, a careful reading of the account suggests that as a representative of the assembly, the Spirit of the Lord assumed the customary role of council witness, meaning one who could offer testimony in a legal setting.

The view of the council and/or its members serving as a judicial institution appears prominently in ancient Near Eastern thought.<sup>10</sup> In one of the Akkadian literary texts from Ur, the invocation of the gods of the assembly to act as witnesses in a judicial decision assumes an important role in the appeal made by one Kuzulum against his adversary Elani:

He swore, ‘I am doing you no wrong;  
He said, ‘These gods are my witnesses.’<sup>11</sup>

For Kuzulum, as members of the divine assembly, the gods could be invoked as witnesses of his “righteousness.” Similarly, in Esarhaddon’s memorial stele commemorating the restoration of the city of Babylon, the Assyrian king invoked a curse upon any ruler who in future days might destroy Esarhaddon’s inscribed name, shatter the record, or eradicate Babylon’s free-

10. See David E. Bokovoy, “שמעו והעירי בבית יעקב: Invoking the Council as Witness in Amos 3:13,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127 (2008): 37–51.

11. U.16900 F as cited in C.J. Gadd, “Two Sketches From the Life at Ur,” *Iraq* (1963): 179.

dom: "In Upshuginna, the court of the assembly of the gods, the abode of judgment, may he (i.e., Marduk) impugn (*lit.*, make evil) his word. May he command that his life (last) not a single day."<sup>12</sup>

Conceptually, these Mesopotamian texts provide an important link with biblical and, by extension, Book of Mormon depictions of council administration, including the role apparently fulfilled by the Spirit of the Lord in 1 Nephi 11 as a divine witness.

A few passages in the Old Testament which present the council presided over by God acting as a type of law court include Daniel 7:9–14, Isaiah 6, and I Kings 22:19ff. One of the clearest attestations, however, of a biblical text describing the responsibility of the council to render judgments and to serve as witnesses is Psalm 82, a text that presents a view of the Lord standing in the *‘edāh* or “assembly” accusing the gods in the heavenly court of rendering poor decisions.<sup>13</sup> This use of the Hebrew word *‘edāh* as a term for the heavenly council in Psalm 82 provides important evidence for the judiciary nature of the assembly in Israelite thought. As biblical scholar Jacob Milgrom has illustrated, though *‘edāh* frequently carries the general nuance “assembly,” as a bureaucratic expression, the term describes: “A political body invested with legislative and judicial functions, such as I) to bring trial and punish violators of the covenant, be they individuals (Num. 35:12, 24–25; Josh. 20:5, 9), cities, or tribes (Josh. 22:16; Judg. 21:10); 2) arbitrate intertribal disputes (Judg. 21:22; cf. v. 16); 3) crown kings (I Kings 12:20) and 4) reprimand its own leaders (Josh. 9:18–19).”<sup>14</sup>

12. Daniel David Lukenbill, “Esarhaddon; The Building Inscriptions,” *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), 2:249.

13. For a historical survey of Psalm 82 that remains sensitive to these issues see Simon Parker, “The Beginning of the Reign of God: Psalm 82 as Myth and Liturgy,” *Revue Biblique* 102 (1995): 532–59.

14. Jacob Milgrom, *Studies in Cultic Theology and Terminology* (Leiden: Brill, 1983), 5–6.

In Israelite thought, the heavenly *‘edāh* mirrored the functions and purposes of the earthly *‘edāh*. Several texts from the Bible parallel the view of the heavenly host operating as a judicial court featured in Psalm 82, including the account of the “angel of the Lord” in Genesis 22.

### Divine Witnesses

Though seldom read in this manner, the story of Abraham’s near sacrifice of his son Isaac on a mountain peak can be interpreted to provide an example of a member of the heavenly host serving as an official witness of human righteousness.<sup>15</sup> While Abraham experienced his trial on the mountain, the “angel of the Lord” appeared suddenly, informing the biblical patriarch that he had successfully passed God’s test: “Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me” (Genesis 22:12).

The immediate switch between the words expressed personally by the angel to the statement spoken by God through his messenger need not present interpretive challenges. As a messenger sent by God, the angel spoke the words of the Lord as direct speech. The clause, “for now I know that thou fearest God” may simply reflect the view of the angel serving as an official witness able to testify concerning Abraham’s righteousness.

Including Genesis 22:12, the expression “for now I know that” appears only four times in the Old Testament (see Ex. 18:11; Jdg. 17:13; Ps. 20:7). Significantly, the Lord himself never speaks any of the attestations of this declaration. Instead, outside of Genesis 22, the phrase in Hebrew appears in the mouth of a human being who can serve as a witness of the Lord’s extraordinary power. Based on this evidence, it seems most likely that the initial portion of the utterance spoken by the angel in

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15. This proposal first appeared in the author’s previously cited *JBL* article “Invoking the Council as Witness.”

Genesis 22:12 reflects the role of this heavenly being as a witness for God's ability to fulfill the covenant described in verses 15–18 followed by the message of direct speech, "seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me."

This interpretation of the technical role assumed by members of the heavenly host in the Old Testament parallels religious concepts held by the Prophet Joseph Smith regarding the possibility of invoking God and angels as official witnesses in human acts. Toward the end of his earthly ministry, Joseph stood before the Saints in Nauvoo and declared: "I call God and angels to witness that I have unsheathed my sword with a firm and unalterable determination that this people shall have their legal rights, and be protected from mob violence, or my blood shall be spilt upon the ground like water."<sup>16</sup>

Joseph's testimony reveals that the Prophet believed that God and angels could function as official witnesses in a covenant-making occasion. This same perspective appears in the Book of Mormon in the context of God's promise given to the prophet Nephi: "Behold, thou art Nephi, and I am God. Behold, I declare it unto thee in the presence of mine angels, that ye shall have power over this people, and shall smite the earth, with famine, and with pestilence, and destruction, according to the wickedness of this people" (Helaman 10:6).

The view concerning the role of heavenly beings was also important to President Brigham Young, who specifically linked the heavenly witnesses motif with the sacred temple endowment administered in the House of the Lord:

Your endowment is, to receive all those ordinances in the house of the Lord, which are necessary for you, after you have departed this life, to enable you to walk back to the presence of the Father, passing the angels who stand as sentinels, being enabled to give them

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16. Joseph Smith in *History of the Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 5:499.

the key words, the signs and tokens, pertaining to the holy Priesthood, and gain your eternal exaltation in spite of earth and hell.<sup>17</sup>

Conceptually, these examples of heavenly beings serving as official witness in the process of covenant making and the determination of spiritual worthiness to receive sacred blessings appear to parallel the role fulfilled by the Spirit of the Lord in 1 Nephi 11.

By applying this background as an interpretive lens to Nephi's experience, the account depicts Nephi arriving at the mountain (the heavenly temple/setting for the divine assembly), and the Spirit of the Lord questioning Nephi regarding what was wanted: "And the Spirit of the Lord said unto me: Behold, what desirest thou?" (v. 2). When Nephi responded by stating that he desired to behold the things that his father saw, the Spirit of the Lord presented a second question directly related to Nephi's spiritual preparation to comprehend these sacred matters: "Believest thou that thy father saw the tree of which he hath spoken?" (v. 4). Clearly, the Spirit of the Lord knew prior to presenting the question that Nephi believed his Father's vision. It would seem, therefore, that the Spirit of the Lord simply needed to hear the words spoken of Nephi's mouth. This exchange may have served a profound purpose reflecting the common Near Eastern motif of invoking members of the heavenly host as council witnesses who could testify of human righteousness. By presenting Nephi with an opportunity to officially declare his testimony, the Spirit of the Lord could, from a Near Eastern perspective, function as a divine witness concerning Nephi's worthiness to be introduced to further revelatory knowledge.

Though later in the Book of Mormon, Moroni clearly uses the word *witness* to refer to a spiritual manifestation of truth

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17. Brigham Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 416.

rather than a person who can offer testimony, this reading of 1 Nephi 11 can be seen to parallel Moroni's doctrinal statement concerning the trial of one's faith: "And now, I, Moroni, would speak somewhat concerning these things; I would show unto the world that faith is things which are hoped for and not seen; wherefore, dispute not because ye see not, for *ye receive no witness until after the trial of your faith*" (Ether 12:6).

By asking Nephi a question regarding his belief, the Spirit of the Lord presented Nephi with a trial that once successfully completed, allowed the Spirit to function as an official witness of Nephi's worthiness to see those things that he had hoped for in faith. The fact that this exchange takes place on a mountain, i.e. the traditional residence of the divine council in Semitic conceptions, provides additional support for this reading.

## Parallels with Temple Rituals

### 1. Nephi

As previously noted, Nephi's act of verbally speaking his testimony that he believed "all" of his father's words to a council witness on an "exceedingly high mountain" parallels religious concepts associated with temple rituals in the Old Testament: "Lord, who shall abide in thy tabernacle? who shall dwell in thy holy hill? He that walketh uprightly, and worketh righteousness, and speaketh the truth in his heart" (Psalm 15:1–2).

By speaking the truth concerning his belief, Nephi demonstrated that he was worthy to receive spiritual knowledge in the holy hill. This interaction with the Spirit, together with the physical setting in which it occurred, may reflect the fact that in ancient Israel, temple worshippers would apparently address priests sitting at the temple gates, serving as guardians of sacred space (see, for example, 1 Sam. 1:9). Evidence from the biblical psalms suggest that much like the Spirit of the Lord in

Nephi's vision, these priests would ask worshippers questions in order to judge their worthiness.

In his classic study of ancient Near Eastern iconography, Othmar Keel specifies Psalms 15 and 24 as two examples of this ancient ritual exchange: "The pilgrim addressed the priest (or priests) sitting at the temple gates (cf. 1 Sam. 1:9), asking who might set foot on the mountain of Yahweh (c.f. Pss 15:1; 24:3). The gates of the Jerusalem temple, as 'Gates of Righteousness,' were open only to the 'righteous' (Ps. 118:19–20)."<sup>18</sup>

In this system, the priest would act as sentinel, presenting questions such as "who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? or who shall stand in his holy place?," which would then elicit the temple worshipper's response, "he that hath clean hands, and a pure heart" (Ps. 24:3–4). This temple-based imagery whereby an individual proved himself worthy to "set foot on the mountain of Yahweh," and pass through the sacred temple "gates of righteousness," had an important impact upon Nephi's writings.

In the psalm composed in connection with his father Lehi's death, Nephi incorporated these traditional temple/ascent themes: "Because that my heart is broken and my spirit is contrite, O Lord, wilt thou not shut the gates of thy righteousness before me . . . O Lord, wilt thou encircle me around in the robe of thy righteousness!" (2 Nephi 4:32–33)<sup>19</sup>

From an Old Testament perspective, this poetic passage shares a notable thematic connection with the spiritual ascent and inquiry that Nephi experienced on the holy mountain,

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18. Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms*, trans. Timothy J. Hallett (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 126.

19. In accordance with the pattern of verbal ellipsis in biblical poetry, I have ignored the standard punctuation and linked the opening clause with Nephi's subsequent statement. For an introduction to the literary technique, see Cynthia L. Miller, "A Linguistic Approach to Ellipsis in Biblical Poetry: O, What to Do When Exegesis of What is There Depends on What Isn't," *Bulletin For Biblical Research* 13/2 (2003): 251–70.

whereby Nephi established his worthiness to understand the things his father saw.

In his psalm, Nephi declared that as a result of his “broken heart” and “contrite spirit,” the Lord could rightfully open the temple gates, encircle Nephi in the sacred robe of righteousness, and allow Nephi access to the heavenly realm. Through this passage, Nephi demonstrated that he possessed the qualities that would enable him to successfully pass a divine trial and “ascend into the hill of the Lord” and “stand in his holy place.” Conceptually, therefore, Nephi’s psalm in 2 Nephi 4 and his exchange with the Spirit of the Lord in 1 Nephi 11 appear theoretically linked. By bearing his testimony to the Spirit of the Lord who assumed the traditional role of temple priest/guardian, Nephi was able to receive the greater light and knowledge he desired on the mountain of God. Later in the Book of Mormon, the connections between Nephi’s question-and-answer exchange and ancient Israelite temple inquires reappears in the account of King Benjamin’s sermon delivered at the Nephite temple (see Mosiah 2:6–7).

## 2. King Benjamin

At the conclusion of his speech, the account reports that Benjamin “sent among [his people] *desiring to know* . . . if they *believed* the words which he had spoken unto them” (Mosiah 5:1). In this context, Benjamin appears to function in the same religious capacity as the Spirit of the Lord in 1 Nephi 11 who asks Nephi what *he* desired to know (v. 2). Both accounts present an authorized witness (Benjamin in Mosiah 5, the Spirit of the Lord in 1 Nephi 11) asking candidates if they believe the words spoken by a prophet of God as a condition of offering spiritual blessings.

The fact that Mosiah 6:1 states that Benjamin gathered up the names of all those who believed his words and entered into a covenant with God, illustrates that Benjamin’s inquiry did not



reflect a mere casual interest on the part of the Nephite king. From a Near Eastern legal perspective, Benjamin's inquisition and the subsequent collecting of names allowed Benjamin to serve as an official witness of the people's covenant with the Lord. Benjamin's desire to know whether or not his people believed, directly parallels the question presented to Nephi by the Spirit of the Lord, "believest thou that thy father saw the tree of which he hath spoken?" (1 Nephi 11:4). Significantly, even though each account assigns the key verbs to *desire*, *know*, and *believe* in different ways, both narratives incorporate these specific terms in describing interactions between witness and worshipper.

When like Nephi, Benjamin's people confirmed their testimony to the Lord's witness, the account states: "And now, these are the words which king Benjamin *desired* of them; and therefore he said unto them: Ye have spoken the words that I *desired*; and the covenant which ye have made is a righteous covenant" (v. 6).

Benjamin then completed his sermon, explaining to his people the great spiritual benefits of their new covenant: "And now, because of the covenant which ye have made, ye shall be called the children of Christ, his sons, and his daughters; for behold, this day he hath spiritually begotten you" (v. 7).

King Benjamin's interaction with his people at the temple provides a strong literary and conceptual link with Nephi's exchange with the Spirit of the Lord. In terms of Book of Mormon narratives, both of these stories parallel the account of the Brother of Jared in the book of Ether.

### 3. *The Brother of Jared*

Like Nephi, who was taken to an "exceedingly high mountain," the Brother of Jared ascended the ancient mount Shelem, which the account in Ether indicates received *its* name "because of its exceeding height" (Ether 2:1).<sup>20</sup> While on the mountain,

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20. Since according to the Book of Mormon itself, the writings of Ether derive from a distinct time and cultural context, these connections, and the

the Lord addressed the Brother of Jared in the form of a question that directly parallels Nephi's exchange with the "Spirit of the Lord," as well as Benjamin's temple-based inquiry: "Believest thou the words which I shall speak?" (Ether 2:11). The Brother of Jared then responded like Nephi, declaring his testimony, and is so doing, provided evidence for his spiritual preparation for further revelatory truth: "And he answered: 'Yea, Lord, I know that thou speakest the truth, for thou art a God of truth, and canst not lie'" (v.12). The account reports that the Brother of Jared then received advanced spiritual insights: "And when he had said these words, behold, the Lord showed himself unto him, and said: Because thou knowest these things ye are redeemed from the fall; therefore ye are brought back into my presence; therefore I show myself unto you" (Ether 3:13).

This narrative from Ether illustrates that these Book of Mormon stories follow a well-established pattern. As an additional literary marker connecting the story of the Brother of Jared with Nephi and Benjamin's accounts, Ether 3 contains explicit references to the words *desire*, *believe*, and *know*. "From thee we may receive according to our *desires*," testified the Brother of Jared (Ether 3:2). "*Believest* thou the words," the Lord asked (v. 11). And the Brother of Jared's response: "Yea, Lord, I *know*" (v. 12).

Analyzing these three narratives as a whole suggests the possibility of a Book of Mormon "type scene" for a spiritual exchange between witness and worshiper. In his analysis of this

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identification of a type scene, represent a synchronic literary observation (treating the Book of Mormon as a whole), rather than a diachronic, historical analysis. In this section, I am presenting an argument for the way an Israelite familiar with ancient religious experiences and scribal techniques might have interpreted these Book of Mormon texts, rather than an analysis of original authorial intent. However, taking the Book of Mormon claims seriously, the book of Ether appears in the text because of Mosiah's translation, which seems to have been informed by not only early Nephite writings, but also his understanding of brass plate, and therefore, "biblical" material.

ancient literary device, R. L. Fowler has provided the following useful explanation:

A type scene is a literary convention employed by a narrator across a set of scenes, or related to scenes (place, action) already familiar to the audience. The similarities with, and differences from, the established type are used to illuminate developments in plot and character. The technique of the type-scene offers the poet a basic scaffolding, but it also allows the poet to adapt each scene for specific purposes.<sup>21</sup>

Studies in the area of “form criticism” have shown that Old Testament authors relied heavily upon the use of type scenes in the formation of biblical narrative and poetry. In their literary efforts, Israelite authors made use of this rhetoric as a type of template to recount stories of everything from patriarchal encounters at a well, to highly structured narratives regarding prophetic commission.

Reading the accounts of Nephi, Benjamin, and the Brother of Jared as a reflection of a Book of Mormon type scene allows for the identification of the following commonly shared literary motifs:

1. Attestation of sacred space: temple/mountain
2. Expression of a desire to know
3. Inquiry regarding the words spoken by God or his prophet
4. Testimony that the tried believes the words
5. Introduction to advanced religious truths

Though each Book of Mormon story incorporates these elements in its own unique way, these motifs appear to provide a type of template for depicting an official encounter between witness and worshiper in preparation for the introduction

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21. R. L. Fowler, *The Cambridge Companion to Homer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

to advanced revelatory truths. In addition to their reflection of ancient temple ritual, these Book of Mormon narratives preserve a well-known literary pattern from antiquity. Similar accounts abound in Near Eastern tradition.

#### 4. *Moses in the Book of Jubilees*

The second century BC religious work, the book of Jubilees, reports that during the first year of the Exodus, the prophet Moses experienced a forty-day epiphany on a sacred mountain in which God shared with his prophet a panoramic vision concerning the history of the world (see Jubilees 1:1–4). According to the account, the Lord intended this vision and the subsequent testimony Moses would record to provide a witness to the descendants of Israel concerning the covenants of the Lord. The account presents God's words to Moses:

Set your mind on every thing which I shall tell you on this mountain, and write it in a book so that [Israel's] descendants might see that I have not abandoned them on account of all of the evil which they have done to instigate transgression of the covenant which I am establishing between me and you today on Mount Sinai for their descendants. (Jubilees 1:5–6)<sup>22</sup>

In a manner that reflects the pattern witnessed in the Book of Mormon stories of Nephi and the Brother of Jared, Jubilees states that while Moses was on Mount Sinai, the prophet interacted with a heavenly messenger sent as a guide to interpret the vision and assist in recording the revelation (2:1).

#### 5. *Enoch*

An even closer parallel to 1 Nephi 11 appears in the book 1 Enoch, a Jewish religious work written between the third through first centuries BC. The account states that during a celestial ascent and vision of a tall mountain, Enoch interacted per-

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22. As cited in OTP 2:52.

sonally with the angel Michael through a question and answer session. In his vision, the ancient patriarch witnessed a beautiful tree of life and expressed to the angel a desire to understand the tree's meaning:

At that moment I said, 'This is a beautiful tree, beautiful to view, with leaves (so) handsome and blossoms (so) magnificent in appearance.' Then Michael, one of the holy and revered angels—he is their chief—who was with me, responded to me. And he said unto me, Enoch, 'What is it that you are asking me concerning this fragrance of this tree and you are so inquisitive about?' At that moment, I answered saying, 'I am desirous of knowing everything, but specifically about this thing.' He answered, saying, 'This tall mountain which you saw whose summit resembles the throne of God is (indeed) his throne, on which the Holy and Great Lord of Glory, the Eternal King, will sit when he descends to visit the earth with goodness. And as for this fragrant tree, not a single human being has the authority to touch it until the great judgment, when he shall take vengeance on all and conclude (everything) forever. This is for the righteous and the pious. And the elect will be presented with its fruit for life. (1 Enoch 24:5–25:5)<sup>23</sup>

Surveying the popular heavenly ascent motif in ancient sources illustrates that in addition to connections with other Book of Mormon narratives, Nephi's encounter with the Spirit of the Lord in 1 Nephi 11 parallels many important ancient religious beliefs.

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23. As cited in OTP 1:26.

## Divine Witnesses in Modern Revelation

In what was ultimately, from an Old Testament perspective, a council setting, the Spirit of the Lord presented a trial of Nephi's faith through a formal question-and-answer exchange. Having heard Nephi's testimony, the Spirit was able to function in the role of a testator regarding Nephi's personal righteousness. Hence, the account of Nephi's declaration of faith and the subsequent reaction of the Spirit of the Lord parallels revelation given to the Prophet Joseph Smith regarding the effect in the heavenly realm of bearing testimony: "Nevertheless, ye are blessed, for the testimony which ye have borne is recorded in heaven for the angels to look upon; and they rejoice over you, and your sins are forgiven you" (D&C 62:3).

The Lord's authorized servants render the same judgment in an earthly context. As a Bishop in Zion, Edward Partridge, for instance, was commanded in modern revelation to "judge his people *by the testimony of the just*, and by the assistance of his councilors according to the laws of the kingdom which are given by the prophets of God" (D&C 58:18; emphasis added).

In 1 Nephi 11, the precise identity of the Spirit who served as an official witness bearing record of Nephi's testimony remains somewhat of a mystery. Many Latter-day commentators, including Elder James E. Talmage, have understood the Spirit of the Lord in Nephi's initial encounter as the Holy Ghost.<sup>24</sup> This

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24. "The Holy Ghost undoubtedly possesses personal powers and affections; these attributes exist in him in perfection. . . . That the Spirit of the Lord is capable of manifesting himself in the form and figure of man, is indicated by the wonderful interview between the Spirit and Nephi in which he revealed himself to the prophet, question him concerning his desires and belief, instructed him in the things of God, speaking face to face with the man" James E. Talmage, *Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 144. After analyzing all occurrences of the phrase *Spirit of the Lord* in the Book of Mormon, Dr. Sidney B. Sperry concluded, "In not a single passage where it occurs can there be shown a clear-cut example favoring the interpretation that it represents the pre-existent Christ instead of the Holy Ghost," in *The Problems of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1964), 29.

interpretation works well with the perspective that the Spirit served as an official witness in the council setting depicted in 1 Nephi 11.<sup>25</sup> As Elder Talmage wrote, “the Holy Ghost may be regarded as the minister of the Godhead, carrying into effect the decisions of the Supreme Council.”<sup>26</sup> In a sermon describing the fundamental administrative roles assumed by the members of the Godhead prior to the organization of the earth, the Prophet Joseph specifically referred to the Holy Ghost as *the* “Witness” or *the* “Testator”: “[An] Everlasting covenant was made between three personages before the organization of this earth, and relates to their dispensation of things to men on the earth; these personages... are called God the first, the Creator; God the second, the Redeemer; and God the third, the witness or Testator.”<sup>27</sup>

While it is natural for Latter-day Saints to recognize that the Holy Ghost serves as an official witness of truth *for* man, in the administration of God, the Holy Ghost also functions as a witness or testator *of* man *for* God. Fulfilling this role as witness, the Holy Ghost serves as the scriptural “Holy Spirit of promise,” ratifying or sealing the testimonies and righteous acts of believers. As explained by Elder Bruce R. McConkie: “The Holy Ghost is the Holy Spirit; he is the Holy Spirit promised the saints at baptism, or in other words the Holy Spirit of Promise . . . any act which is sealed by the Holy Spirit of

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25. Elder Bruce R. McConkie, however, was of the opinion that the Spirit of the Lord in 1 Nephi was Christ: “When we read the account of the appearance of ‘the Spirit of the Lord’ to Nephi (1 Ne. 11), we are left to our own interpretive powers to determine whether the messenger is the Spirit of Christ or the Holy Ghost. Presumptively it is the Spirit of Christ ministering to Nephi much as he did to the Brother of Jared” in *Mormon Doctrine*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996), 752.

26. Talmage, *Articles of Faith*, 145.

27. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 190.

Promise is one which is justified by the Spirit, one which is approved by the Lord, one which is ratified by the Holy Ghost.”<sup>28</sup>

In this capacity as witness *of* man *for* God, the Holy Ghost serves as the testator of all righteous acts. As declared in modern revelation, “All covenants, contracts, bonds, obligations, oaths, vows, performances, connections, associations, or expectations, that are not made and entered into and sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise . . . are of no efficacy, virtue, or force in and after the resurrection from the dead” (D&C 132:7).

Significantly, having had this spiritual encounter ratified by the Spirit of the Lord, Nephi specifically introduced the retelling of his narrative with the statement, “the Holy Ghost giveth authority that I should speak these things, and deny them not” (1 Nephi 10:22).

## Conclusion

Having been taught the mysteries of godliness by Lehi, Nephi demonstrated a sincere desire to come to know all the great truths his father saw. As a result of this yearning, Nephi participated in a celestial ascent to an exceedingly high mountain possessed by the most high God. The description of this experience in 1 Nephi 11 shares much in common with traditional Near Eastern imagery concerning the divine assembly and invocation of heavenly beings as council witnesses. In this context, Nephi’s exchange with the Spirit of the Lord provides a dramatic portrayal of the faith necessary to receive introduction to advanced spiritual truth. Through his testimony, as born to the Spirit of the Lord, Nephi proved himself worthy to pass by the heavenly sentinel and enter the realm of greater light and knowledge.

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28. Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1992), 3:333–34.



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