

Interpreter

**A Journal of Latter-day Saint
Faith and Scholarship**

**Progressing through
Gradations of Holiness in the
Temple: 2 Nephi 4:32–35 as
a Hymn Inspired by Ritual**

Nelson Chung

Article Print

Pages 451–464

© 2026 The Interpreter Foundation. A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution — NonCommercial — NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.

ISSN 2372-1227 (print)
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

Mission Statement

Supporting The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints through scholarship.

The Interpreter Foundation supports the Church in the following ways:

- **Promotion:** We provide tools to encourage and facilitate personal learning by study and faith, and disseminate accurate information to the public about the Church.
- **Explanation:** We make the results of relevant scholarship more accessible to non-specialists.
- **Defense:** We respond to misunderstandings and criticisms of Church beliefs, policies, and practices.
- **Faithfulness:** Our leadership, staff, and associates strive to follow Jesus Christ and be true to the teachings of His Church.
- **Scholarship:** Our leadership, staff, and associates incorporate standards of scholarship appropriate to their academic disciplines.

The Interpreter Foundation is an independent organization that supports but is not owned, controlled by, or affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The material published by the Interpreter Foundation is the sole responsibility of the respective authors and should not be interpreted as representing the views of The Interpreter Foundation or of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

This journal compiles weekly publications. Visit us online at InterpreterFoundation.org

Progressing through Gradations of Holiness in the Temple: 2 Nephi 4:32–35 as a Hymn Inspired by Ritual

Nelson Chung

Abstract: *Sidney Sperry identified 2 Nephi 4:15–35 as “Nephi’s Psalm.” Using form-critical analysis, Matthew Nickerson classified it as a personal lament psalm. In this article, I build on biblical turns of phrase, imagery, symbolism, and the archaeological record established by previous scholarship to demonstrate how verses 32–35 constitute Nephi’s movement through gradations of increasing holiness in the temple. Nephi’s movement also exemplifies the use of thematic and rhetorical intensification, a method used by biblical poets. The ordered presentation of temple elements through those four verses suggests intentional artistry rather than random borrowing and affirms the literary sophistication of the Book of Mormon. This article adds to the substantial body of work demonstrating that Book of Mormon authors possessed a sophisticated command of Hebrew literary conventions.*

Nephi’s Psalm, comprising 2 Nephi 4:15–35, occupies a prominent place in the Latter-day Saint tradition. Mission presidents often recommend it to missionaries in times of trial. The Book of Mormon Institute Student Manual describes it as an “inspired poem or hymn” that contains Nephi’s “heartfelt pleadings” and encourages the student to vocalize it.¹

John Hilton III proposed that although the biblical Psalms were

1. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Book of Mormon Student Manual: Religion 121–122* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2009), 59, churchofjesuschrist.org/bc/content/shared/content/english/pdf/language-materials/32506_eng.pdf.

likely absent from the brass plates, Nephi would have been familiar with them through his experience with the Jerusalem temple.² If the temple provided Nephi's connection to the Psalms, one should not be surprised to find temple imagery when he penned his own psalm in 2 Nephi 4:15–35, shortly after his father's death.³ The psalm's final four verses reflect precisely this influence, tracing a progression through the temple's increasing degrees of holiness. The depiction of the escalation in holiness associated with the passage through the temple represents *intensification*, a rhetorical technique of biblical poets.

Sidney Sperry first coined the term *Psalm of Nephi* in 1947.⁴ Using form-critical analysis, Matthew Nickerson identified Nephi's Psalm as an individual lament because it includes the essential elements—invocation, complaint, confession of trust, petition, and vow of praise.⁵

In this article, I first consider the question of what a psalm is, then identify key markers of intensification, review previous works on the temple setting of Nephi's Psalm, and finally trace Nephi's poetic progression through the temple grounds.

2. John L. 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*, ed. David Rolph Seely, Jeffrey R. Chadwick, and Matthew J. Grey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013), 219–311, rsc.byu.edu/ascending-mountain-lord/old-testament-psalms-book-mormon. Some (I suspect many) Latter-day Saints object to the notion that the practices of the Solomonic temple can be known, as "plain and precious things" were removed. Joseph Fielding Smith reasoned, likely from Alma 13, that the Melchizedek Priesthood was operative during the Nephite era. The author is sympathetic to these positions. Yet, if we hold temples of the dispensation of the fullness of times (that is, our era) for comparison, it becomes clear that some elements of the Tabernacle, Second Temple, and even Babylonian and ancient Israelite temples are present in latter-day temples. Some of what has been demonstrated through research on temples we know exists in the eternal temple. Research is useful in our understanding though not definitive. For Joseph Fielding Smith's explanation, see "The Priesthood of the Nephites," *Improvement Era*, March 1956, 142–43, catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/e2e1852a-55f0-4957-9c98-7a6cab3fa7cb/0/0.

3. No agreement exists on whether verse 15 should be inclusive.

4. Sidney B. Sperry, *Our Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Steven & Wallis, 1947), 110, archive.org/details/ourbookofmormon0000sidn/page/110/mode/2up.

5. Matthew Nickerson, "Nephi's Psalm: 2 Nephi 4:16–35 in the Light of Form-Critical Analysis," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6, no. 2 (July 1997): 26–42, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol6/iss2/3/.

What Is a Psalm?

Psalms were not merely beautiful expressions; they could also be sung. The Greek word *psalmos* denotes a song sung to a plucked instrument. In early Judaism, psalms were understood to be largely King David's responses to life events. By the early twentieth century, Hermann Gunkel had begun categorizing psalms into different genres. Gunkel, the founder of form criticism, was interested in identifying genres so he could understand the settings that produced the texts. Setting is also key to understanding Nephi's Psalm. Gunkel made a higher-level division by separating psalms into "liturgical poetry" (relating to public worship) and "non-liturgical" (spiritual songs).⁶ Gunkel went so far as to argue that "very many of the psalms which have come down to us do not belong to the poetry of the cult."⁷

Sigmund Mowinckel, one of Gunkel's students, entered the conversation in the 1930s by focusing on what he believed were the festival and temple settings underlying all psalms. *Salme* also means "hymn" in his native Norwegian and, as he pointed out, the Hebrew word for the canonical book of Psalms, *tehillim*, means "cultic [ritualistic] songs of praise."⁸ Mowinckel grounded his argument in the origin of religious poems in temple worship and even tried to reverse engineer festivals from the psalms. Mowinckel broke decisively with his mentor on this point.

Prayers also share a close relationship with psalms. Gunkel believed many later psalms did not contain the prayer form, but "consist entirely of pious reflections."⁹ Some may infer that Gunkel meant nearly all *early* psalms served as cultic prayers. Mowinckel maintained that while prayer (normally "a petition to a powerful, willing and personally acting God") predates formal worship, in this instance "the natural form of the cultic prayer is the *psalm*."¹⁰

Almost one hundred years later, the literary scholar Robert Alter sided primarily with Gunkel: "Many but by no means all the psalms

6. Hermann Gunkel, *The Psalms: A Form-Critical Introduction*, trans. Thomas M. Horner (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 10, 26, archive.org/details/psalmsformcritic0000gunk/page/10/mode/2up.

7. Gunkel, *Form-Critical Introduction*, 26.

8. Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, trans. D. R. Ap-Thomas (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977), 2, archive.org/details/psalmsinisraelsw0012unse_u6z5/page/n29/mode/2up.

9. Gunkel, *Form-Critical Introduction*, 38.

10. Mowinckel, *Psalms in Israel's Worship*, 22, emphasis in original.

were composed for use in the temple cult.”¹¹ For Alter, what unites all psalms is not their function as temple ritual but their character as poems derived from a “deep and often passionate faith.”¹² Alter likely had in mind the rhetorical studies of Walter Brueggemann, who acknowledged that this “faithful” speech encompasses the full range of faith, “from profound praise to the utterance of unspeakable anger and doubt.”¹³ More recently, the pendulum has swung again as biblical scholars have shifted from their near-exclusive focus on Israelite history to the study of worship in the Bible, once again renewing interest in the Psalms’ liturgical function.¹⁴

Nickerson’s identification of Nephi’s Psalm as an individual lament used Gunkel’s more detailed framework. However, I argue that relying on Gunkel’s classification scheme to understand 2 Nephi 4 as entirely non-liturgical undervalues the cultic imagery and experience evident in Nephi’s Psalm.

Intensification

The essence of biblical poetry is *parallelism*, in which the same idea is expressed in different ways. Alter asserted that within this genre, “Psalms is the one set of texts whose poetic status has been most strongly felt throughout the generations.”¹⁵ He illustrated how biblical writers deployed the poetic medium to give their messages greater weight.¹⁶ He further explained, while describing prophetic poetry, that since poetry is the most elevated form of human speech, it was often thought that divine speech should therefore be presented in such a format.¹⁷

Parallelism often includes a technique used by biblical poets known as *intensification*. Perhaps the best-known example of this

11. Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), xvi.

12. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 142, archive.org/details/class-214-h-the-art-of-biblical-poetry/page/141/mode/2up.

13. Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 15, archive.org/details/messageofpsalmst0000brue/page/14/mode/2up.

14. See Richard J. Clifford, “Psalms of the Temple,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*, ed. William P. Brown (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 327.

15. Alter, *Biblical Poetry*, 139.

16. Alter, *Biblical Poetry*, 256.

17. Alter, *Biblical Poetry*, 176.

method among Latter-day Saints is Isaiah's warning of the impending Assyrian invasion, quoted in 2 Nephi 20, as towns progressively closer to Jerusalem fall before the advancing foreign army. Alter analyzed the intensification in Psalm 13, which expresses a lament over escalating abandonment but abruptly turns to trust in Yahweh in the final verses.¹⁸ He also examined Amos 8:9–10, a prophecy of intensifying grief that moves from the periphery of human experience to its center: from light being turned into darkness (the world), to festivals being turned into mourning (human institutions), to sackcloth and a shaved head (outward manifestations of grief), to mourning for the loss of an only son (inward pain).¹⁹

Previous Research on the Temple Setting of Nephi's Psalm

That the temple aspect of Nephi's Psalm is easily overlooked is underscored by a statement from Hugh Nibley, who argued that because "a psalm is a ritual hymn connected with the rites of the Temple," Nephi's Psalm is no psalm at all.²⁰ Nibley's reflexive dismissal echoed Mowinckel, who, as noted above, originated the idea that all psalms were exclusively cultic hymns. Ironically, Nibley classified Nephi's Psalm as a "thanksgiving hymn," although according to Gunkel the roots of thanksgiving hymns "reach down into the cult."²¹ It seems you can take the psalm out of the temple, but it is harder to take the temple out of the psalm.

More recent scholarship has sought to uncover temple themes in Nephi's Psalm. Kenneth Alford and Bryce Baker observed parallels between 2 Nephi 4:16–35 and Psalms 25–31.²² Scripture Central—a website that popularizes scholarship on Latter-day Saint scriptures—linked those similarities to Peter Craigie's argument that, based on their central theme of trust, Psalms 25 and 28 have a covenant-making

18. Alter, *Biblical Poetry*, 77.

19. Alter, *Biblical Poetry*, 89–90.

20. Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah: The Book of Mormon in the Modern World* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1967), 158, archive.org/details/sincecumorah00hugh/page/157/mode/2up.

21. Gunkel, *Form-Critical Introduction*, 17.

22. 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*, ed. David Rolph Seely, Jeffrey R. Chadwick, and Matthew J. Grey (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University [BYU], 2013), 312–28, rsc.byu.edu/sites/default/files/pub_content/pdf/18%20Alford-Baker-corrected.pdf

context. The Scripture Central article concluded that Nephi's Psalm, with its declaration of allegiance to the Lord and reliance on his salvation, incorporates "themes of temple and covenant."²³ Additionally, David Bokovoy noted that 2 Nephi 4:32–35 described priestly screening activity at temple gates.²⁴

Building on these insights, I explore the temple's physical organization as depicted in the closing verses of Nephi's Psalm, deepening our appreciation of both the themes and Nephi's artistry. I demonstrate that 2 Nephi 4:32–35 embeds cultic elements within the personal lament and that these verses are best understood as explicitly reflecting Nephi's progression through the gradations of holiness symbolized in the temple setting. To that end, I build on biblical idioms, imagery, typology, and archaeological attestations uncovered by previous scholarship to trace Nephi's movement through the temple. The material I present does not establish whether these verses were composed for use in the temple. Rather, if one examines the song for its context, function, and purpose, one can infer a context of temple worship. Recognition of the temple themes allows the reader to more fully appreciate the rich meaning of Nephi's Psalm.

Nephi's Ritual-Themed Song

The closing verses of Nephi's Psalm trace a progression through increasingly sacred temple space. Beginning at the gates, Nephi moves inward through imagery associated with admission, covenant, and priestly clothing before his prayer culminates in an ascent toward God in the Holy of Holies. The following analysis traces this progression through the temple imagery of verses 32–35.

The gates of righteousness

Nephi turns to imagery of temple worship as he seeks the Lord's presence in his psalm. Second Nephi 4:32 invites us to consider Nephi's walk through the temple, beginning at the gate:

May the gates of hell be shut continually before me, because
that my heart is broken and my spirit is contrite! O Lord, wilt

23. Scripture Central Staff, "Is 'Nephi's Psalm' Really a Psalm?" *KnoWhy* 30, 20 August 2020, scripturecentral.org/knowhy/is-nephis-psalm-really-a-psalm.

24. 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): 1–23, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/thou-knowest-that-i-believe.

thou not shut the gates of thy righteousness before me, that
I may walk in the path of the low valley, that I may be strict in
the plain road!

Here Nephi contrasts “gates of hell” (*sharei sheol*, Isaiah 38:10) with “gates of righteousness” (*sharei tzedek*, Psalm 118:19). Roman Catholic scholar Steven Smith emphasized that the layout of the temple symbolizes different realms: the Holy of Holies signifies heaven, the Holy Place corresponds to the Garden of Eden, and the outer court represents *sheol*.²⁵ When this typology is coupled with the widely accepted interpretation among Bible scholars that the “gates of righteousness” refer to the gates separating the outer court from the inner parts of the temple — and that these gates often serve as a synecdoche for the temple as a whole — a clearer picture emerges. In this light, Nephi’s plea for the Lord to shut the gates of hell and open the gates of righteousness can be understood as his yearning to leave the outer court and enter the Holy Place, drawing nearer to God’s presence.

Furthermore, Nephi is presenting himself as worthy of entry. Levite gatekeepers stood between the outer and inner courts of the temple to assess the righteousness of those seeking entry. The Hebrew Bible depicts this process in *gate liturgies*. The psalmist cries, “Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord. This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it” (Psalm 118:19–20 ESV). Additionally, “Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart” (Psalm 24:3–4 ESV). Thus, when Nephi utters, “May the gates of hell be shut continually before me, because that my heart is broken and my spirit is contrite,” he is stating his qualifications for entering the sanctuary — the inner court — from the outer court, substituting an inversion of Psalm 51:17 consistent with Seidel’s law.²⁶ As David Bokovoy asserts, “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

25. Steven C. Smith, *The House of the Lord: A Catholic Biblical Theology of God’s Temple Presence in the Old and New Testaments* (Steubenville, OH: Franciscan University Press, 2017), 52–53.

26. Moshe Seidel was the first to discover inverted quotations in the Bible. See Moshe Seidel, “Parallels between Isaiah and Psalms,” *Sinai* 38 (1955–56): 149–72. David Bokovoy discovered them in the Book of Mormon. See David E. Bokovoy and John A. Tvedtnes, *Testaments: Links between the Book of Mormon and the Hebrew Bible* (Tooele, UT: Heritage Press, 2003), 56–60.

allow Nephi access to the heavenly realm.”²⁷ The reason for Nephi’s precise formulation is Christological, as explained shortly.

The robe of righteousness

Nephi continues: “O Lord, wilt thou encircle me around in the robe of thy righteousness!” (2 Nephi 4:33). Bokovoy and John Tvedtnes perceived that in both the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Mormon, clothing carries symbolic value. More specifically, the “robe of righteousness” (Isaiah 61:10) represents covenant-making.²⁸ Nephi’s inclusion of that phrase thus lends additional support to the claim made by Scripture Central that he wrote it in a covenant context. Importantly, the reader can also visualize Nephi donning a priestly robe as part of his progression within the temple. A chamber in the inner court adjacent to the Holy Place allowed priests to change into and out of their priestly garments, as attested by Ezekiel’s vision:

When the priests enter the Holy Place, they shall not go out of it into the outer court without laying there the garments in which they minister, for these are holy. They shall put on other garments before they go near to that which is for the people. (Ezekiel 42:14 ESV)

Nephi’s enrobing indicates he has reached the inner court.

The parallelism emphasizes not only the *place* of the temple, but also the *nature* of the temple covenants. One should note that in verses 32 and 33, Nephi inserts the word “thy,” transforming “gates of righteousness” into “gates of *thy* righteousness” and “robe of righteousness” into “robe of *thy* righteousness.” This move harmonizes these phrases with a recurring theme in 2 Nephi: humankind is redeemed by Christ’s righteousness. Representative passages include “thou art redeemed, because of the righteousness of thy Redeemer” (2 Nephi 2:3), “there is no flesh that can dwell in the presence of God, save it be through the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah” (2 Nephi 2:8), and “relying wholly upon the merits of him who is mighty to save” (2 Nephi 31:19). Accordingly, Nephi reworks the expressions from Psalms and Isaiah about righteousness and requirements for entry and imbues them with Christological significance. He portrays the temple as a physical manifestation of Christ’s personal interactions with him, and Christ as the only way through which he can be considered righteous.

27. Bokovoy, “Spirit of the Lord,” 14.

28. Bokovoy and Tvedtnes, *Testaments*, 63.

Additionally, the phrase "that I may walk in the path of the low valley, that I may be strict in the plain road!" (2 Nephi 4:32) teaches, through intensified parallelism, the behavior that characterizes and produces a broken heart and contrite spirit. In terms of the progression through the geography of the temple, this parallelism moves the speaker from standing at the gates and answering the gatekeeper's requirements to walking forward on the Lord's way.

In verse 33, this motion continues along a path that only the Lord can provide. If the "robe of thy righteousness" represents covenant-making, the following plea outlines the nature of the covenant. As mentioned earlier, trust is a prerequisite for covenant-making:

O Lord, I have trusted in thee, and I will trust in thee forever. I will not put my trust in the arm of flesh; for I know that cursed is he that putteth his trust in the arm of flesh. Yea, cursed is he that putteth his trust in man or maketh flesh his arm. (2 Nephi 4:34)

Nephi's trust intensifies from personal declaration to moral principle to universal warning. This progression is likewise characteristic of covenant-making.

The ascent of Nephi's voice

Finally, we proceed to verse 35:

- A Yea I know that God will give liberally to him that asketh.
- A' Yea, my God will give me, if I ask not amiss;
- B (a) therefore I will lift up my voice
- (b) unto thee;
- B' (a) *yea, I will cry*
- (b) unto thee,
- my God,
- the rock of my righteousness.
- B'' (a) Behold, my voice shall forever ascend up
- (b) unto thee,
- my rock and
- mine everlasting God. Amen.

Here Nephi deploys synonymous parallelism with the following formula in each B line: (a) voice rises; (b) to God/rock. This imagery immediately draws the reader even further into the physical reality of the temple. The (a) units of each line describe Nephi's voice first being lifted, then crying, and finally, more explicitly, "forever ascend[ing]." This progression strongly evokes the rise of incense burning in the temple.

Yahweh commanded Moses to construct an incense altar out of acacia wood and set it in the Holy Place near the veil in front of the Holy of Holies (Exodus 30:1, 6). John Walton, Victor Matthews, and Mark Chavalas explained the significance of rituals from this altar: “The smoke of the incense represented the prayers of the people going up to God.”²⁹ Echoing this symbolism, the psalmist proclaims, “Let my prayer be counted as incense before you” (Psalm 141:2 ESV). Thereby Nephi makes clear that he has entered the Holy Place, has approached the Holy of Holies, and is burning incense.

The spiritual intensity of the last line, as Nephi’s prayer crescendos from lifting his voice to crying out and finally to his voice reaching the heavens and forever ascending, represents a profound instance of intensification. Nephi moves forward and upward through the temple precincts into the holiest place of the temple, then sends his voice vertically, even higher, to resolve his estrangement from God due to sin.

The rock and the Holy of Holies

The (b) units of these lines show us, in a tripartite crescendo, that “thee” is “thee, my God, the rock of my righteousness,” and is even more explicitly “thee, my rock and mine everlasting God.” At least rhetorically, Nephi has brought us into God’s presence, represented by the imagery of the rock. In terms of the physical temple, the (b) units’ repeated invocation of Nephi’s rock may also indicate he has arrived in the Holy of Holies at last.³⁰ Granted, the Bible makes no mention of rocks in the inner sanctum. But archaeological discoveries raise two possibilities for understanding how “his rock” might symbolize the Most Holy Place.

Very late Jewish traditions about the Solomonic temple’s foundation stone protruding from the ground in the Holy of Holies would have been unknown to Nephi. However, evidence for the possible ancient origin of those traditions started to surface in 1992 when the architectural archaeologist Leen Ritmeyer toured the Dome of the Rock, a well-known Islamic shrine that sits on Temple Mount in Jerusalem. The edifice houses a rocky mass (henceforth the “Rock”). Researchers had previously rejected the Rock as the location of the Holy of Holies because it was smaller than the dimensions of the inner sanctuary

29. John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic), 123.

30. I thank Rebecca Lambert for suggesting that I explore this possibility.

would require. But if the Rock was an outcrop from underneath — as portrayed in Jewish tradition — rather than comprising the entire floor, one could not rule out the possibility that the tradition was accurate. Additionally, Ritmeyer noticed flat surfaces on the Rock that could serve as the foundation trench for part of the southern temple wall.³¹

Ritmeyer returned to the location in 1994 and measured the distance from the potential southern wall to the northern line of the flat areas along the western side of the Rock and found it to be twenty cubits, aligning with the inner dimensions of the Holy of Holies described in 1 Kings 6:20. After using the twenty-cubit measurement to establish the eastern edge and thus complete all four sides, he discovered at its center a rectangular sunken area of 1.5 by 2.5 cubits, matching the width and length of the Ark of the Covenant. He argued that, because the Bible makes no mention of the Ark of the Covenant in connection with the Second Temple, the apparent location of the Ark indicated that he had found Solomon's temple and had verified the proposition that "the Foundation Stone or *Even ha-Shetiyah*, would truly live up to its name."³² If myths about the protruding foundation stone were based on the First Temple's actual architecture, Nephi could very well have had the Holy of Holies in mind when he spoke of "my rock and my everlasting God." In light of Ritmeyer's findings, the contrast between the cypress floor of the palace area (1 Kings 6:15 ESV) and the rocky floor of the Holy of Holies allows the allusion to the "rock of righteousness" mark Nephi's transition into the inner sanctuary quite beautifully.

Ritmeyer was not without critics. Eric Cline of the Biblical Archaeological Society — while enthusiastically endorsing the book in which Ritmeyer presented his discovery — remarked that Ritmeyer's search for the original depository of the Ark of the Covenant was fraught with hyperbole and speculation.³³ Cline admitted he was not qualified to evaluate the architecture. But it is unclear why he did not similarly criticize Ritmeyer's proposed locations for the temple and its inner sanctuary and singled out the sunken rectangle for judgment. That Ritmeyer estimated the inner sanctuary's parameters by pacing them out because the Rock was fenced off from direct measurement

31. Leen Ritmeyer, *The Quest: Revealing the Temple Mount in Jerusalem* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2006), 243–44.

32. Ritmeyer, *Quest*, 244.

33. Eric H. Cline, "Review of *The Quest: Revealing the Temple Mount in Jerusalem* by Leen Ritmeyer," *Bible History Daily* (blog), *Biblical Archaeology Society*, 12 January 2012, biblicalarchaeology.org/reviews/the-quest/.

deserves more scrutiny. Furthermore, he derived his measurement of the sunken rectangle from a photograph. More modern methods such as lidar have not been applied due to religious sensitivities. These limitations make Ritmeyer's inferences suggestive rather than conclusive.

Additional evidence points to a possible "Holy of Holies" interpretation of Nephi's rock. In 1962, Yohanan Aharoni excavated a Judahite temple at Tel Arad with two standing stones (*mattzevoth*) in its Holy of Holies that represented Yahweh and his consort, Asherah.³⁴ The larger stone may be the rock of which Nephi speaks. Other discoveries pointing to this divine pairing have interested Latter-day Saints because they accord with teachings concerning a divine feminine.³⁵ The temple is located in the northwest corner of a fortress erected by the Southern Kingdom to protect against nomadic harassment and Egyptian incursions.³⁶ The temple, most recently dated to the ninth century BCE, was oriented on an east-west axis with a tripartite layout that resembled the Tabernacle. The entrance to its Holy of Holies was flanked by two carved limestone altars with burnt organic remains on top, suggesting they were incense altars. Inside the Holy of Holies stood two upright ritual limestones. The larger one stood forty inches tall and had a flat face, rounded back, and strips of red paint on one side.³⁷

Israeli archaeologist Uzi Avner explained how the two stones represent God and his wife: the stones fit the pattern of other Iron Age *mattzevoth* arrangements in which the stone on the left is larger than the one on the right.³⁸ From the deities' perspective, the larger one stands to the right of the smaller, reflecting the biblical pattern of placing male names before female names, as in "Adam and Eve." This pattern is also found elsewhere in scripture: "His left hand is under my head, and his right hand doth embrace me" (Song of Solomon 2:6).³⁹

34. I have chosen to spell the plural *mattzevoth* as shown (singular is *mattzevah*), but it can also be spelled *mattzeboth* or *massebot*.

35. See Alyson S. Von Feldt, "Review of *Does God Have a Wife?: Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel*," *The FARMS Review* 19, no. 1 (2007): 81–118.

36. Leslie J. Hoppe, "Tel Arad," *The Bible Today* 53, no. 2 (March/April 2015): 107–13.

37. Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, "Massebot Standing for Yhwh: The Fall of a Yhwistic Cult Symbol," in *Worship, Women, and War: Essays in Honor of Susan Niditch*, ed. John J. Collins, T. M. Lemos, and Saul M. Olyan (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 2015), 101.

38. Uzi Avner, "Sacred Stones in the Desert," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 27, no. 3 (2001): 30–41.

39. See Avner, "Sacred Stones in the Desert," 35–36.

Many other artifacts that fit this larger-left/smaller-right pattern carry some form of the inscription "Yahweh and his Asherah." Leslie Hoppe claimed that if the stones represent Yahweh and Asherah, worship of those deities "would make the worship at the temple unorthodox."⁴⁰ Avner contested this notion, pointing to on-site pottery fragments that are inscribed with the names of two Israelite priestly families, evidence that places the stones within the official cult.⁴¹

Also revealing about the Tel Arad temple is Elizabeth Bloch-Smith's observation that *mattzevoth* in the Bible often mark the spot of theophanies. Her note is striking in light of Andrew Skinner's work establishing temple theophanies as a major theme in Israel's canonical psalms.⁴²

Regarding the Tel Arad temple's demise, Bloch-Smith concluded that the archaeological evidence pointed away from its destruction at the hands of Sennacherib. Israel Finkelstein and Neil Silberman postulated that Hezekiah decommissioned the temple as part of his religious reforms. Aharoni posited that the process started with Hezekiah's burial of the courtyard and altar and ended with Josiah's destruction of the entire edifice. However, Avner believed the temple and its *mattzevoth* survived the reforms of both Hezekiah and Josiah, leaving the cause of the temple's destruction to either an Edomite invasion or a Babylonian invasion in 586 BCE.⁴³ Bloch-Smith disputed these specific inferences on the grounds that they overestimated archaeology's precision. Instead, she proposed, more modestly,

textual references viewed in conjunction with archaeological attestations attest to Yhwistic stones as a focus of Israelite worship through the eighth century [BCE]. Biblical writers would have been familiar with the phenomenon into the seventh century; thereafter writers and editors likely drew on memories of earlier instances.⁴⁴

If she is correct, and if Nephi received scribal training comparable

40. Hoppe, "Tel Arad," 110.

41. Avner, "Sacred Stones in the Desert," 34.

42. Andrew C. Skinner, "Seeing God in His Temple: A Significant Theme in Israel's Psalms," in *Approaching Holiness: Exploring the History and Teachings of the Old Testament*, ed. Krystal V. L. Pierce and David Rolph Seely (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, BYU; Salt Lake City: Deseret, 2021), 255–76, rsc.byu.edu/approaching-holiness/seeing-god-his-temple.

43. Avner, "Sacred Stones in the Desert," 37.

44. Bloch-Smith, "Massebot Standing for Yhwh," 112.

to that of biblical writers, as is well-attested,⁴⁵ then it is at least possible that Nephi, writing in the sixth century BCE, drew upon the memory of the larger standing stone representing Yahweh in the Holy of Holies of the Tel Arad temple when he used the phrase “the rock of my righteousness.” Such an interpretation is consistent with the timeframe.

Although there is no explicit identification of the rock with a *mattze-vah*, it is also worth noting that Nephi depicts Lehi’s opening vision in the Book of Mormon using suggestively similar imagery, saying, “there came a pillar of fire and dwelt upon a rock before him; and he saw and heard much” (1 Nephi 1:6). Robb Smith argues in a forthcoming article that verse six is chiasmatically parallel to verses 11–12, a Christophany wherein the Twelve follow Jesus in his descent to Lehi and give him a book.⁴⁶ The structural evidence from 1 Nephi indicates that Nephi could have been aware of the temple-based connection between “the rock” and Christ/Yahweh.

Whether the phrase “rock of righteousness” alludes to either the foundation stone that protrudes from the ground in the Holy of Holies of Solomon’s temple or the Yahwistic standing stones found in the Holy of Holies of the pre-exilic Judahite temple at Arad — or perhaps to both — Nephi is signaling his arrival in the inner sanctuary. He gradually reveals to us that the rock is “mine everlasting God.” Thus, with increasing emotional impact, the last four verses of 2 Nephi 4 elegantly deploy the imagery of rising through gradations of holiness in the temple, allowing the reader to imagine Nephi’s movement toward God.

The ascending holiness evoked by Nephi’s ritual-themed hymn is an additional instance of intensification and offers a useful contrast to Psalm 13. Whereas the psalm’s author feels increasing alienation from God but precipitously turns to trust in God, Nephi’s progression also begins with alienation, but the heightening occurs as he resolves that alienation by walking through the temple grounds into the inner sanctum.⁴⁷

45. See Brant A. Gardner, “Nephi as Scribe,” *Mormon Studies Review* 23, no. 1 (2011): 45–55, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1831&context=msr. See also Noel B. Reynolds, “Nephi and Lehi as Trained Manassite Scribes,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 50 (2022): 161–216, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/lehi-and-nephi-as-trained-manassite-scribes.

46. C. Robb Smith, “Framing Judgment and Deliverance: Structure and Meaning in 1 Nephi 1,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 70 (2027), forthcoming.

47. The amplification of Nephi’s voice detailed earlier represents what Alter

Thy Righteousness, Thy Righteousness, My Righteousness

Distinct from the parallel phrases "gates of *thy* righteousness" and "robe of *thy* righteousness," 2 Nephi 4:35 declares God as "the rock of *my* righteousness." This last expression recognizes Jesus as the source of Nephi's righteousness. Christological debates have raged over *imputed* versus *infused* righteousness, and the semantic unit "thy righteousness" favors the former. Jesus, as the source of Nephi's uprightness, could support either understanding. Considering that "rock of my righteousness" is distinct from the two phrases that indicate imputation, and considering the context of the entire Book of Mormon—Amulek taught, "the Lord . . . should not come to redeem them in their sins, but to redeem them from their sins" (Helaman 5:10)—I prefer to read "rock of my righteousness" as infusion. More significantly, Nephi doesn't address those theological issues. Instead, he outlines his physical and spiritual approach to God's presence. Having covenanted with the Lord and entered the Lord's presence, Nephi's righteousness is wholly dependent on Christ and is portrayed as the result of a specific kind of journey.

As noted earlier, Nephi replaces "clean hands and a pure heart" with a Seidel inversion of a verse from a penitential psalm, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart" (Psalm 51:17 ESV). Gunkel regarded this psalm as reflecting the shift in religion from cultic acts to personal piety.⁴⁸ Thus, Nephi's qualifications for entering through the gates consist of a penitent reliance on Christ and faithful obedience within his covenantal relationship, rather than reliance on ritual purity or morality. This psalm is at once deeply personal and deeply tied to temple ritual.

Conclusion and Implications

This article demonstrates that explicit temple imagery in 2 Nephi 4:32–35 frames Nephi's movement from the outer court of the temple to the inner court, then to the Holy Place, and finally to the Holy of Holies. Nephi draws progressively closer to God's presence. The thematic and rhetorical crescendo of holiness that accompanies the psalmist's progression reflects the biblical poetic technique of

called a "stepping up of assertion" while his entire movement through the temple grounds exemplifies a "thematic intensification" that implies a temporal sequence. See Alter, *Biblical Poetry*, 76.

48. Gunkel, *Form-Critical Introduction*, 26, 36.

intensification and reduces the likelihood that the author haphazardly strung together biblical phrases. The sayings “gates of hell,” “gates of righteousness,” “contrite spirit and a broken heart,” and “robe of righteousness” were deployed and refined in an ordered, deliberate, and coherent manner. The rhetorical intensification focuses the reader on the personal covenantal relationship between Christ and Nephi, which is the source of Nephi’s trust and hope. Additionally, this article adds to the vast corpus demonstrating that Book of Mormon authors possessed a sophisticated command of Hebrew literary conventions. These conclusions affirm the Book of Mormon as truly a marvelous work and a wonder.



Nelson Chung graduated from Brigham Young University where he double-majored in economics and political science and minored in computing. He received his master’s degree in applied and computational mathematics at Johns Hopkins University and studied Hebrew under Dan McClellan. He works for the United States Census Bureau as a statistician. His article, “The Brigham Young University Football Program and the Analytics Revolution,” was among BYU Studies Quarterly’s more popular articles. His hobbies include working out (though he doesn’t consider himself a gym bro), biking, batting cages, and international travel.

Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship is a peer-reviewed academic journal published by The Interpreter Foundation. Our mission is simple: Supporting The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints through scholarship.