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Revisiting the Meaning of an
Enduring Metaphor**

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The Iron Rod Reimagined: Revisiting the Meaning of an Enduring Metaphor

Todd J. Uriona

Abstract: *The iron rod, presented so prominently in Lehi's visionary dream (1 Nephi 8:19–24), has traditionally been conceptualized as a static handrail or balustrade guiding travelers toward the tree of life. While this imagery has provided meaningful theological guidance for many years, the metaphor of the rod of iron can profitably be viewed through another lens: that of the Ancient Near Eastern shepherd-king. From this perspective, the rod functions as a scepter or staff symbolizing Christ's divine authority and active leadership in gathering his flock. Rather than a fixed handrail lining a predetermined route, Christ's staff or rod is an instrument of rescue actively extended to travelers as they traverse the strait and narrow path. This article expands on that premise by demonstrating that the iron rod may encompass a deeper, dualistic functionality that is rooted in the Hebrew terms for the word, rod. The central thesis of this paper posits that the metaphor of the rod of iron functions simultaneously on two levels. First, as the Shepherd's authoritative staff, and second, as an organic branch that is actively extended to the scattered house of Israel to enable their restoration and covenantal grafting. This second horticultural dimension fuses Christ's roles as the divine Shepherd-King with his role as the True Vine. This coupling allows for an intertextual synthesis. It maps the specific vocabulary of adherence ("clinging" vs. "holding fast") in Lehi's dream (1 Nephi 8) onto the established covenantal metaphors found in Zenos's Allegory of the Olive Tree (Jacob 5), which describes the grafting of a branch as either withering or firmly taking hold.*

For generations, the iconic image of the iron rod in Lehi’s dream (1 Nephi 8:19–24) has been commonly understood to be a static handrail or balustrade, requiring a simple, physical grip to follow the path toward the tree of life.¹ In a previous article, I offered an initial reevaluation of this symbolism as part of a growing scholarly discussion.² In that earlier paper, I suggest that viewing the rod through the lens of the Ancient Near East (circa 600 BCE) reveals a different interpretation, one in which the rod is a symbol of divine authority, power, and governance. That research establishes the rod as a dynamic instrument — a shepherd’s staff or royal scepter extended by an implied agent (Christ) — who actively guides those who take hold of it to the tree of life. As discussed later in this paper, the *rod* functions as a physical manifestation of the “arm of mercy” (Jacob 6:5), which is extended out as a divine invitation to protect and guide those seeking the “tree of Life.”

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1. While archaeological evidence for a freestanding iron handrail in the sixth-century BCE is absent, scholars have identified functional analogues in later traditions where railings or chains were used to facilitate movement during sacred climbs or ritual ascents. For example, Hugh Nibley said, “There is an account of the iron rod from Jerusalem that led to the temple. That’s grasping the iron rod. We’re told that there used to be.” Unfortunately, he gives no source for this statement. Hugh W. Nibley, “Lecture 16: Mountain of the Lord’s House,” in *Ancient Documents and the Pearl of Great Price*, ed. Robert Smith and Robert Smythe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies [FARMS], 1986), 4. See also Jeffery M. Bradshaw, *In God’s Image and Likeness I: Creation, Fall, and the Story of Adam and Eve* (Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2014), 143, 206–7, 473.
 2. T. J. Uriona, “Rethinking the Rod of Iron,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2022): 141–63. See also Jeff Lindsay, “The Great and Spacious Book of Mormon Arcade Game: More Curious Works from Book of Mormon Critics,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 23 (2017): 161–235, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/the-great-and-spacious-book-of-mormon-arcade-game-more-curious-works-from-book-of-mormon-critics; John A. Tvedtnes, “Rod and Sword as the Word of God,” in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon: The FARMS Updates of the 1990s*, ed. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 32–33; Zachary Nelson, “The Rod of Iron in Lehi’s Dream,” *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 10, no. 3 (2009): 49–58; Matthew L. Bowen, “What Meaneth the Rod of Iron?” *Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship* 25, no. 2 (2005): 2–3; Margaret Barker, “Joseph Smith and Preexilic Israelite Religion,” *BYU Studies* 44, no. 4 (2005): 69–82; David M. Calabro, “Lehi’s Dream and the Garden of Eden,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 26 (2017): 269–96.

A Closer Look at the Wording

Though the text notes that the rod of iron “extended along the bank of the river” (1 Nephi 8:19), its textual presentation allows it to be conceptualized in terms of active bestowal rather than mere static length. This shifts the imagery away from a fixed architectural handrail lining the river. Instead, it introduces the possibility that the rod functions as a dynamic extension of divine mercy, serving as a purposeful rescue instrument offered to help safely navigate those who “caught hold of the end of the rod” (v. 24) forward toward the tree. This reading highlights a potentially important structural nuance found in the text, which states next that “I also beheld a strait and narrow path, which came along by the rod of iron” (v. 20). In this case, the rod led “by,” not denoting proximity like a handrail, but was the very instrumentality used to advance those on the path toward the tree.

This new reading is deeply rooted in the iconography of the Ancient Near East, where the rod, often paired with a ring, is one of the oldest and most powerful symbols of divine authority in Mesopotamian art (see figure 1). The prevailing scholarly view emphasizes that the rod and ring are fundamentally insignia of deity and divine authority. These images are often part of a divine investiture scene, which includes imagery of gardens (or sacred trees) and guides.

These iconographic elements were not incidental, they were essential to the Mesopotamian message of divine kingship, prosperity, and order. In some cases, these images depict a rod held by a god or goddess that is extended to the king, as in the famous Code of Hammurabi Stela and the Investiture Panel at Mari. In describing the Investiture Panel at Mari, Jeffrey Bradshaw and Ronan Head note,

With respect to the royal insignia, there is no question that Ishtar is holding out the well-known Mesopotamian rod and ring that—according to the most recent major study of the subject, by Kathryn Slanski—was “employed for almost 2,000 years, in both Babylonian and Assyrian royal monuments and in non-royal works.”³

Bradshaw and Head go on to relate the Mesopotamian rod to the Old Testament rod that Moses received:

3. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and Ronan James Head, “The Investiture Panel at Mari and Rituals of Divine Kingship in the Ancient Near East,” *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 4 (2012): 35.



Figure 1. The throne dais of the Assyrian king, Shalmaneser III (reigned 859–824 BCE), depicting his handshake with the king of Babylon. Both of them are holding their rods (royal staffs or scepters).

Citing Moses as the prototype of king, priest, and prophet in the Old Testament, Geo Widengren notes his possession of three objects as emblems of these respective offices: the verdant rod or staff (Exodus 4:17), the manna (Exodus 16:33–34), and the tablets of law (Exodus 31:18). The first and third of these can be compared to the cedar staff and the Tablets of Destiny that the Mesopotamian king Enmeduranki received at his enthronement. These tangible “tokens of the covenant,” emblems of Moses’s threefold office that were provided in each case by God himself, seem to have been the very objects that were later transferred to the temple ark (Hebrews 9:4).⁴

This paper builds upon this understanding of a royal endowment, introducing a new dimension of linguistic complexity around the polysemic nature (or multiple meanings) of the ancient source terms for *rod*. This allows the term for *rod* to simultaneously signify not only an extended scepter or staff but also an organic branch or scion, which is the vital, living limb of a tree. This new added dimension develops the idea that the iron rod functions not only as the instrument of the Shepherd-King’s power and an offer of potential kingship, but also as the physical, salvific mechanism through which we are covenantally grafted into the True Vine (Christ). This linguistic and symbolic fusion allows one to map the precise vocabulary of adherence in Lehi’s dream—“clinging” (1 Nephi 8:24) vs. “holding fast” (1 Nephi 8:30)—onto the horticultural requirements found in Zenos’s Allegory of the Olive Tree—“withered” (Jacob 5:40, 43, 45) vs. “taken hold” (Jacob 5:18)—thereby enhancing the language of covenant adherence found in Nephi’s record and anchoring his theology in the cultural imagery of his time.

A Royal Endowment

The interpretation of the rod as an emblem of divine conferral and shepherding authority reveals a profound theological implication: the rod of iron represents an endowment of potential kingship for all who hold fast to it. This suggests that God is willing to endow upon all who will hold fast to his word the opportunity to become kings and queens. Bradshaw and Head, referencing the Mari Investiture Panel, assert that the rod and ring symbols originally depicted the endowment of

4. Bradshaw and Head, “Investiture Panel,” 38–39.

the king with the divine right to rule. They go on to show that in ancient locations such as the desert of Qumran (the home of the Dead Sea Scrolls) and Dura Europos (a Roman military stronghold in modern Syria) similar rites were made available to others. They write:

Findings at Qumran and Dura Europos suggest that in at least some strands of Jewish tradition these rituals of royal priesthood were further democratized, enabling members of the community, and not just their ruler and his priests, to participate. . . . Indeed, a precursor of this tradition is evident in the account of God’s promise to Israel that, if they kept his covenant, not just a select few but all of them would have the privilege of becoming part of “a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation” (Exodus 19:6). Going back to the beginning of the Bible, scholars have concluded that the statement that Adam and Eve were created in the “image of God” (Genesis 1:26–27) is meant to convey the idea that “each person bears the stamp of royalty.”⁵

Though Bradshaw and Head do not suggest that the rod in Lehi’s dream played a similar function, this ancient, democratized view of endowed kingship finds continuity in later revelations, where the concept of believers becoming “kings and priests” and “queens and priestesses”⁶ to God is reiterated.⁷ Revelation 1:6 says, “And hath made us kings and priests unto God and Father,” a sentiment Revelation 5:10 restates: “And has made us unto our God kings and priest: and we shall reign on the earth.” Central to this royal imagery in the book of Revelation is the “rod of iron,” which serves as the quintessential symbol of kingship and authority.

Modern revelation reiterates this focus, emphasizing an association between receiving with the hand (in other words, “holding fast”) and becoming kings and priests and queens and priestesses. Doctrine and Covenants 76:55–56 reads, “They are they into whose hands the Father has given all things—They are they who are priests and kings, who have received of his fulness, and of his glory.” This couples with

5. Bradshaw and Head, “Investiture Panel,” 39–40.

6. Joseph Fielding Smith, “Relief Society—an Aid to the Priesthood,” *Relief Society Magazine*, January 1959, 5–6.

7. From this perspective, Lehi’s dream could be seen as an analogue to the modern temple ritual, where the iron rod extending represents an endowment of potential kingship and queenship and holding fast leads to a sealing of the blessing.

Doctrine and Covenants 121:46, which adds, "[A]nd thy scepter and unchanging scepter of righteousness and truth; and they dominion shall be an everlasting dominion . . . forever and ever," explicitly linking the scepter (rod) to everlasting dominion.

This interpretation is reinforced by the Biblical scholar Margaret Barker's reading of the "rod of iron" in Lehi's vision. She explains a potential mistranslation in the King James Version of Psalm 2:9, where the rod of the Messiah is used to "break" the nations. Barker points out that in the ancient Greek translation (the Septuagint), Psalm 2:9 reads, "He will *shepherd* them with a rod of iron." She notes that the two Hebrew verbs for *break* and for *shepherd*, (or *tend*, and *lead*) look very similar and in some forms are identical. Barker further notes that "Lehi's vision has the iron rod guiding people to the great tree—the older and probably the original understanding of the word."⁸ If Barker is correct, the Hebrew behind Nephi's term naturally connects the rod with shepherding and guidance. Significantly, the only reference there is to a *rod of iron* in the Old Testament is in Psalm 2:9, making it the most direct parallels to the *rod of iron* in Nephi's record. Furthermore, it is possible that Psalm 2:9 might have been part of the liturgical literature found in the brass plates. In this light, it is telling that there is only one time where we have a record of Joseph Smith using the phrase *rod of iron*, outside of the Book of Mormon. He recalls:

I dreamed this morning that I was in the Lobby of the Representatives Hall at Springfield, when some of the Members, who did not like my being there, began to mar, and cut, and pound my shins with pieces of Iron, I bore it as long as I could, then jumped over the Rail into the Hall, caught a rod of Iron, and went at them. . . . I thought they would not have the privilege of getting me, so I took a rod of Iron, and mowed my way through their ranks.⁹

In addition to Joseph Smith using the phrase *rod of iron* in this description of his dream, he also uses the same verb here, *caught*, that is used to describe those who "caught hold of the end of the rod of iron" in Lehi's dream (1 Nephi 8:24, 30).¹⁰ Additionally, he uses

8. Barker, "Preexilic Israelite Religion," 77.

9. "History, 1838–1856, volume D-1 [1 August 1842–1 July 1843]," p. 1456, *Joseph Smith Papers*, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-d-1-1-august-1842-1-july-1843/99.

10. Lucy recounts a series of seven dreams her husband, Joseph Smith Sr., had between 1811 and 1819. Describing one of those dreams she writes,

it in much the same way it is used in Psalm 2:9 (“Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron”) and the way Nephi first uses the word *rod* in 1 Nephi 3:28 (“[Laman and Lemuel] did smite us even with a rod”). This suggests that this is how Joseph might have conceptualized the rod in Lehi’s dream.¹¹

The Linguistic Nexus of Lehi’s Dream

Though Nephi’s account describing the rod of iron has traditionally been viewed as a handrail, when the rod is viewed as a shepherd’s tool, it suggests that an implied agent, the Lord, is actively extending a rod to shepherd his flock as the Israelite Messiah (see Moses 7:53). Trevan Hatch notes,

I travelled a short distance farther, and came to a narrow path; I entered it, and traveling a short proceeding some distance farther, beheld a beautiful stream of water, which ran from the east to the west. Of this stream, I could see neither the source nor the outlet; but as far as my eyes could extend, I could see a rope running along the bank, about as high as a man could reach; and beyond me was a low but very pleasant valley, in which stood a tree.

Lucy Mack Smith, “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1845,” p. 53, *Joseph Smith Papers*, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1845/60. In Lucy’s description of this dream, a “rope” is seen extending instead of a rod, suggesting that the rod in Lehi’s dream might have worked much like the “rope” in Joseph Smith Sr.’s dream. In his biography of Joseph Smith, Richard Bushman addresses the striking parallel between this dream and Lehi’s dream saying,

Since no other member of the family gave an account of the dreams or even referred to them, and Lucy recorded them thirty years later, there is no way of testing the accuracy of her memory. One of Lucy’s accounts echoes passages in the Book of Mormon, suggesting a tendency to make her husband the predecessor of her son.

Richard Lyman Bushman. *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), 36. Lucy’s account of Joseph Sr.’s dreams is so close to the Book of Mormon that we must wonder if her memory was colored by what was recorded in the Book of Mormon. In this regard it should be noted that her account of the dream came fifteen years after the Book of Mormon was published, after Joseph Smith’s death, and after he described his own dream where he used a “rod of iron” much like a staff.

11. In an appendix, I have included all the other relative example I could find from early Church records that mention a “rod” or “iron rod” (excluding its use in measurements and the repeated examples of it being used as a weapon). It is apparent that, to the early Church members, the “iron rod” did not have the same conceptual meaning as a handrail that it has for Church members today.

The Israelite king was not only a Messiah but a “son of God.” Surrounding Near Eastern cultures — Canaanite, Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Ugaritic — influenced Israelite conceptions of kingship. Ancient Near Eastern kings were thought to be divine — specifically to be sons of god. . . . Like their neighboring nations, early Israelite texts described the king in relation to deity, or even as a deity himself. For example, many Near Eastern gods and kings were associated with shepherd imagery — “Good Shepherd” (Egyptian), “Noble Shepherd” (Sumerian), “Shepherd of mankind” (Hittite), and “Wise Shepherd” (Assyrian). In Israelite literature, just as God was identified as a shepherd of Israel, so too was the king.¹²

Appreciating the complexity of the iron rod imagery as it relates to the Israelite Messiah requires a careful delineation of the primary Hebrew synonyms for *rod* or *staff* (*shebet*¹³ and *mattah*¹⁴). The combined semantic range of these terms illuminates the rod’s dual purpose in Lehi’s vision. The term *shebet* is derived from a root meaning “to strike” and initially conveyed the idea of a rod used for disciplinary purposes. However, its application consistently migrated toward representing instruments of authority, such as a scepter held by kings, judges, or priests.¹⁵ This is reflected in a prophecy anticipating a Messiah coming through the house of David in Balaam’s fourth oracle. In this prophecy, *shebet* is used to refer to “a Scepter [that] shall rise out of Israel” (Numbers 24:15–19).¹⁶ This prophecy confirms the association that *shebet* carries to royal and imperial dominion in the Israelite tradition.¹⁷ *Shebet* can also mean *tribe* as a political entity, underscor-

12. Trevan G. Hatch, “Messianism and Jewish Messiahs in the New Testament Period,” in *New Testament History, Culture, and Society: A Background to the Texts of the New Testament*, ed. Lincoln H. Blumell (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2019), 72.

13. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1907), 986.

14. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 641.

15. Uriona, “Rethinking.”

16. An anonymous reviewer pointed out, “Scepters were not just employed by the king. Agents were often given a rod when they traveled and spoke in the name of the king. For example, Aaron carried Moses’ rod because he was the spokesman. Perhaps Laman beat Nephi with the rod given him by Lehi to speak to Laban in Lehi’s name. Could it be that Christ is extending his scepter so that we will hold it and act as his agents?”

17. This oracle was delivered by the non-Israelite prophet Balaam, who was

ing the authority figure, such as the Messiah, ruling over a collective. The descriptor *iron* in Lehi's dream aligns powerfully with this aspect, conveying *unbreakable, divine, royal, and authority*, as prophesied of the Messiah (Psalm 2:9).

However, the key to unlocking the rod's extended symbolism in Lehi's dream seems to lie in the verb describing its action. Like *shebet*, there is another Hebrew noun for rod, *mattah*, which is derived from the root *natah*,¹⁸ meaning "to stretch out" or "to bend down" or "extend."¹⁹ The synthesis of these two terms is evident in the Mosaic narrative, where the rod of Moses is the active instrument of deliverance. Moses was repeatedly commanded to *stretch out* the rod, such as, "And Moses stretched out (*natah*) his rod (*mattah*) toward heaven" (Exodus 9:23). This pairing links the action of extension directly with what is described in 1 Nephi 8:19, when the rod of iron is first introduced in Nephi's narrative of his father's dream. Jeff Lindsay points out that

those who gained the benefits of the rod "caught hold of the end of the rod of iron" and then pressed forward by "clinging to the rod" (1 Nephi 8:24), and finally reached the tree of life by "continually holding fast to the rod of iron" (1 Nephi 8:30). The interaction with the rod seems to be one of grabbing and not letting go. This could be advancing along the rod, one grip or handhold at a time, but the language leaves open the possibility that the rod might have been extended toward people on the bank to then *pull* them toward the tree of life if they would but grab the end and hold on.²⁰

Though *mattah* can mean *rod* or *staff*, its extended semantic range also refers to a *tribe* and, most significantly, a *branch*.²¹ This understanding of *mattah* signifies both the shepherd's implement and, as mentioned earlier, an organic component of a tree. Because of that,

compelled by God to bless Israel instead of cursing them. It functions as a profound messianic prophecy, foretelling the rise of a great ruler—a "Star out of Jacob" and a "Scepter out of Israel"—who would exercise ultimate, divine dominion.

18. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 639. *Mattah* and *shebet* are used in much the same way as another Hebrew word, *maqel* (see p. 603).

19. Bowen, "Rod of Iron?," 3n4.

20. Lindsay, "Great and Spacious," 192.

21. *Shebet* can also be referred to as a branch.

mattah can provide an essential linguistic bridge connecting the pastoral dream of Lehi with Zenos's detailed allegory of covenantal horticulture, a connection that will be discussed in more detail later in this paper.

An example of this linguistic duality occurs in Numbers 17, where Aaron's rod functions simultaneously as a staff of governance and a fruit-bearing branch. "And it shall come to pass, that the man's rod, whom I shall choose, shall blossom," (v. 5) and "behold, the rod of Aaron . . . brought forth buds, and bloomed blossoms, and yielded almonds" (v. 8). In this sense the term *rod of iron* in Lehi's vision represents a profound linguistic and theological synthesis such that the *rod/branch* extending describes the Lord offering a branch to which Israel can be attached.²² By extending the iron rod, the Lord provides a mechanism that moves beyond purely symbolic authority.²³ The rod also acts as the essential physical means to affect the spiritual grafting process, ensuring covenant union.

This type of polyvalence (or layered meaning) is characteristic of Nephi's writings and is readily apparent in the way Nephi introduces his father's dream. On that occasion, Nephi prefaces his father's dream by saying, "We had gathered together all manner of seeds of every kind" (1 Nephi 8:1). The main Hebrew word for *seed*, is *zera'*.²⁴ It carries a strong polyvalent meaning such that the literal meaning of a plant's seed also extends to a broader figurative concept of origin and beginning. It is often used to refer to descendants, such as the "seed of Abraham" (for example, Genesis 13:15). Thus, by carefully introducing the literal gathering of *zera'* (*seeds*) to begin the narrative, Nephi immediately primes the reader to interpret the subsequent vision—which centers on a fruit-bearing tree—as a profound statement about the destiny and gathering of Lehi's *zera'* (descendants) and the

22. To a modern reader, mixing metaphors such as iron with organic elements might seem strange. However, in ancient Hebrew writing, the goal was not logical consistency of the image but rather a robust, layered understanding of the subject. A text might use a variety of metaphors to evoke a multifaceted impression without concern for whether the literal image made sense. See for example Deuteronomy 32:1–18, where God is depicted as a rock, father, mother, and eagle.

23. See for example Esther 5:2, which, though from a later period, depicts the risk of death for an unbidden audience with the king and the life-sparing extension of the scepter. This detail in the text seems to match other extrabiblical descriptions.

24. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 281.

greater house of Israel (see 1 Nephi 15:12–13, 18). This initial focus on *zera'* (*seeds* or *descendants*) serves as a vital rhetorical and thematic primer, teaching the reader to expect and appreciate the very same kind of multi-layered symbolism that follows in the narrative's image of a rod or branch.

The comprehensive meaning of these terms (*mattah* and *zera*) reveals that the imagery of the iron rod in Lehi's vision is not a single symbol. Rather, it can be seen as a powerful convergence of ancient Hebrew polyvalence that unifies the themes of divine authority, covenant restoration, and spiritual nourishment. The seamless rhetorical bridge that Nephi creates between the concrete and the figurative — moving from the literal *zera'* (plant seeds) that sustain physical life to the figurative *zera'* (descendants) that constitute a covenant people — prepares the reader to accept what may be a deeper meaning of the word *rod*. This deep linguistic texture transforms the vision of the iron rod from a guide into an essential mechanism by which the gathered sons and daughters of Christ are grafted into the house of Israel (Mosiah 26:25; Doctrine and Covenants 25:1).

The strength of iron assures the covenant's permanence, while the "branch" quality assures the covenant's organic capacity for restoration and spiritual growth inherent in a branch. The implication is that Christ, the true Shepherd-King, uses his unbreakable power (symbolized by *iron*) to fulfill the covenant by facilitating the gathering and restoration of the tribes (*mattah* as tribe). Jared Marcum points out:

There are two other valuable insights found by interpreting the iron rod as Christ's scepter. First, in the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for *scepter*, *šēḇeṭ*, is sometimes figuratively translated as *tribe*. Members of a tribe were under the leadership and authority of their tribal head, the bearer of the scepter.²⁵

He accomplishes this by extending himself as the True Branch (*mattah* as *branch*) and the Word of God to which covenant participants must securely attach themselves. This layered understanding integrates the symbols of shepherd-kingship and organic life found in

25. Jared T. Marcum, "Withstanding Satan's Siege through Christ's Iron Rod: The Vision of the Tree of Life in Context of Ancient Siege Warfare," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 58, no. 4 (2023): 16, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/withstanding-satans-siege-through-christs-iron-rod-the-vision-of-the-tree-of-life-in-context-of-ancient-siege-warfare.

Nephi's rhetorical question: "Will they not receive the strength and nourishment from the true vine? Yea will they not come unto the true fold of God?" (1 Nephi 15:15). In answer to his rhetorical question, Nephi adds, "Yea; they shall be remembered again among the house of Israel; they shall be grafted in, being a natural branch" (1 Nephi 15:16).²⁶ This metaphoric pairing by Nephi helps ensure that the reader sees the rod as simultaneously the divine scepter, the means of gathering, and the mechanism for receiving spiritual nourishment by grafting. Significantly, Nephi asks, "Will they not rejoice and give praise unto their everlasting God, their rock and their salvation?" (1 Nephi 15:15) just before asking these rhetorical questions. This phrase brings to mind an image of Moses striking the rock — with his rod (Exodus 17:5–6) — to bring forth water. The account reads that he was to take "thy rod . . . and thou shalt smite the rock, and there shall come water out of it" (Exodus 17:5–6). This event symbolizes the Lord's support and provision for his people. Interestingly, when Nephi tells this story, he says,

Yea, and ye also know that Moses, *by his word* according to the power of God which was in him, smote the rock, and there came forth water, that the children of Israel might quench their thirst. And notwithstanding they being led, the Lord their God their Redeemer, going before them, leading them (1 Nephi 17:29–30).

Nephi uses the term *word* to describe the action of the rod of Moses that struck the rock. This appears to be the same connection presented to Nephi in his vision, where the iron rod — which is the word of God — similarly "led" to the tree of life. In describing this scene in his vision, Nephi says,

I beheld the Son of God going forth among the children of men; and I saw many fall down at his feet and worship him and it came to pass that I beheld that the rod of iron, which my father had seen, was the word of God, which led to the fountain of living water, or to the tree of life (1 Nephi 11:24–25).

The juxtaposition of these two ideas [the Son of God, going

26. Matthew Scott Stenson, "'This Stone Shall Become the Great, and the Last, and the Only Sure Foundation': A Nephite Poetics of Dramatic Fusion and Transfer in Jacob 5," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 61 (2024): 375–414, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/this-stone-shall-become-the-great-and-the-last-and-the-only-sure-foundation-a-nephite-poetics-of-dramatic-fusion-and-transfer-in-jacob-5.

forth among the children of men (v. 24) and the vision of the rod of iron (v. 25)] is compelling. That they occur in such close proximity strongly suggests a close connection between the elements of the dream. Furthermore, just as those who held fast to the rod of iron in Lehi's dream, those in Nephi's vision fall down at the feet of the Son of God—a covenantal image—after Nephi sees him “going forth among the children of men.”²⁷

Contrasting attachment styles: *Clinging* versus *holding fast*

The distinction drawn in Lehi's vision between different modes of adherence to the iron rod is crucial to understanding the horticultural application of the *mattah* or *rod* imagery. The narrative explicitly contrasts two groups: those who “caught hold of the end of the rod of iron” (1 Nephi 8:24) but were described as “clinging to the rod of iron” (v. 24), and those who were “continually holding fast to the rod of iron” (v. 30). In the context of the rod as a divine branch (*mattah*), this contrast operates as a horticultural test. The initial action of “holding fast” versus “clinging” is posited as analogous to the attempt to determine if a new graft will “wither” or “take hold.” In both cases, a secure connection was made as is evident by the fact that both groups made it safely to the tree. However, a successful graft must achieve a secure, permanent, and even vascular union to receive the necessary “nourishment from the true vine” (1 Nephi 15:15). On the other hand, a graft that does not do this will inevitably fail. It will result in the branch withering and breaking off or falling away, just like those who were “clinging” to the rod in Lehi's dream (1 Nephi 8:24) but soon “fell away into forbidden paths and were lost” (v. 28).

The choice of the English word *clinging* to describe the failed attempt at adherence is perhaps significant. The word *cling* appears nowhere else in the Book of Mormon, nor is it used in the King James translation of the Bible. While *clinging* and *holding fast* share the meaning of being firmly attached, a question arises: why do we have this one instance where *clinging* is used in the text if it is saying the same thing as *holding fast*? The fact that two different words were

27. Falling down is an ancient form of worship, and it contrasts with those who “fell away” (1 Nephi 8:28). See Matthew L. Bowen, “‘They Came Forth and Fell Down and Partook of the Fruit of the Tree’: Proskynesis in 3 Nephi 11:12–19 and 17:9–10 and Its Significance,” in *Third Nephi: An Incomparable Scripture* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2012), 107–30.

used suggests that something more is potentially being said. It is possible that in the use of *clinging*, the text used distinct, older meanings for *clinging* to convey a deeper difference between the two groups. The English term *cling* possesses a dual semantic heritage. Though its primary modern definition is "to adhere closely," the Webster's 1828 Dictionary notes that in the Old English (Saxon) language, *clingan* is rendered *marcesco*, meaning *to shrivel, fade, or wither*. This now archaic meaning persisted into Early Modern English, which some scholars assert is the language of the Book of Mormon.²⁸ The dictionary provides the 1828 definition of *cling* as, "To dry up, or wither," giving, as one example, the phrase, "Till famine cling thee."²⁹

William Shakespeare also uses *cling* in this way in *Macbeth*. In this play, Macbeth reacts with fury at the report from a messenger by issuing the threat, "If thou speak'st false, Upon the next tree shall thou hang alive Till famine cling thee."³⁰ Here, "cling" means to shrivel or shrink. Macbeth is telling the messenger he will hang until he is dehydrated and wasted away from hunger. In an 1830 publication, the same association is made: "Ask Death—Death? without a resurrection! the last agonizing clinging to life, the pallid corpse, the damp of the lone charnel the worm, and corruption, and handful of dust—these give the answer."³¹ By using "clinging," here, the author captures both the emotional desire to live and the grim, physical shriveling of the flesh. This suggests that the dual meaning of *withering* was still in use for *clinging* at the time the Book of Mormon was published.

This understanding of what it means to *cling* sheds new light on Lehi's dream where those who were "clinging" to the rod (1 Nephi 8:24) were, by the very nature of that word's meaning, already beginning to wither or lose vitality. This may help explain their subsequent feeling "ashamed" and then "they fell away" and departed from the tree (vv. 25, 28). *Clinging* describes not just an action of adherence, but an internal

28. Stanford Carmack, "A Look at Some 'Nonstandard' Book of Mormon Grammar," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 11 (2014): 209–62. See also Royal Skousen, "The Language of the Original Text of the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2018): 81–110, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/a-look-at-some-nonstandard-book-of-mormon-grammar.

29. Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: S. Converse, 1828), s.v. "Cling."

30. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (Washington, DC: Folger Shakespeare Library, n.d.), folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/macbeth/read/5/5/.

31. "The Resurrection," *Halifax Monthly Magazine* 1, no. 7 (December 1830): 269, canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.8_04924_7/30.

state where one fails to take “strength and nourishment” (1 Nephi 15:15) from the word of God or rod of iron. Using *clinging* serves as an effective dynamic equivalent, prioritizing the nuanced idea of adherence of a withering branch. In the contrasting ideas of a branch that is “holding fast” versus one that is “withering,” the word *clinging* bridges those ideas. This is a clever translation because, while the two words may seem synonymous in current English, it plays off the dual meaning. It suggests that a branch is *withering* but has not yet let go and uses the rich shades of meaning available in older English.

This reading of *clinging* in Lehi’s dream finds a profound parallel in Hebrew terminology. The verb *yabesh*³² means “to wither; to be, or become, dry.” It is specifically used for the drying up of plants and vegetables, but also, metaphorically, for souls.³³ In certain grammatical contexts, *yabesh* becomes indistinguishable from the verb *bōsh*,³⁴ meaning “to be ashamed” or publicly disgraced, even to the point of being “expelled or cast out.”³⁵ The concepts of dryness, weakness, and shame were recognized as kindred in Hebrew. This association seems to be made in Lehi’s dream (vv. 25, 28) and can potentially be seen when Nephi warns his brothers that they will “wither” if they touch him (1 Nephi 17:48).

As another example, the writings of Jeremiah, a contemporary of Lehi, provide an explicit connection between *withering* and being *ashamed*. In Jeremiah 17:5, those who “trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm, and whose heart departeth from the Lord” are described as a tree “in the desert . . . [who] shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness, in a salt land and not inhabited” (v. 6). A few verses later, the consequence of this state is explicitly tied to being ashamed: “O Lord, the hope of Israel, all that forsake thee shall *be ashamed*, and they that depart from me [the Lord]; shall be *written in the earth* because they have forsaken the Lord, the fountain of living waters” (v. 13, emphasis added). To be “written in the earth” (dust) is a picture of transience — like dust blowing away — which is the ultimate form of withering. This contrasts with those who “trusteth in the Lord” (v. 7), who are described as “a tree planted by the water . . . [whose] leaf shall be green . . . neither shall cease from yielding fruit” (vv. 7–8).

These same associations are made in Lehi’s dream, where those

32. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 386.

33. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 386.

34. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 101.

35. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 101.

who were "clinging" (withered, *yabesh*) left the tree, failing to trust in the Lord and his extended rod, because they were "ashamed" (*bōsh*).³⁶ This failure to trust in the Lord ultimately led to their falling away and being lost (1 Nephi 15:24, 28; see also Alma 16:17). This reinforces and mirrors the horticultural fate of unsuccessful branches in the Allegory of the Olive Tree (Jacob 5:7, 40, 43, 45).

Job's lament: Hope for a tree, despair for man

The failed attachment described in Lehi's dream as "clinging" finds a powerful parallel in the Book of Job, where the prophet laments the fragility of human life and the finality of death in contrast to the regenerative power of the natural world. Job notes the irony that even a mighty man who is strong enough to cut down a tree will eventually fade away, yet the tree retains a hope he lacks. "For there is hope of a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again" (Job 14:7). Job's despair is centered on this contrast between a man and a tree. A cut-down tree, though its stump may appear to have died in the dry soil, holds the potential for new life to emerge from its roots. At the mere "scent of water," it will flourish again, producing sprigs and branches as if newly planted (Job 14:7–9).

Job's sorrowful conclusion is that mankind has no such hope of immediate physical regeneration: "But man dieth, and wasteth away: yea, man giveth up the ghost, and where is he? As the waters fail from the sea, and the flood decayeth and dried up [*yabesh*, withered/ashamed]" (Job 14:10–11). The contrast highlights that failure to secure the spiritual graft to the True Vine leads to the desiccation-driven destruction Job describes for the unredeemed man.

The hope of the graft: The un-withering tree

The despair articulated by Job finds its theological counterpoint in the prophetic literature, where the metaphor of the rooted, non-withering tree is used to describe the fate of the righteous and the coming Messiah. This theological counterpoint directly addresses Job's concern by identifying the source of life springing from apparent ruin. The prophetic answer to the cut-down tree is found in Isaiah 11:1: "And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots." This metaphor speaks of the life that will spring forth from the Davidic royal line, reduced to a seemingly dead stump.

36. Similarly, the same associations are made in Isaiah 1 and Psalm 129.

Modern revelation identifies the core elements of this promise: the Stem of Jesse is Christ (Doctrine and Covenants 113:2), and the rod is identified as “a servant in the hands of Christ” (v. 4) who assists in the gathering of Israel in the latter days. The prophetic rod and the perpetual branch thus provide the regenerative hope that Job sorrowfully feared was lost.

The Psalmist confirms the blessed condition of the righteous covenant participant: “He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither,³⁷ and whatever he does shall prosper” (Psalm 1:3). This vision of permanence is echoed by Jeremiah, who speaks of the faithful man:

For he shall be as a tree planted by the waters, and that spreadeth out her roots by the river, and shall not see [notice] when heat cometh, but her leaf will be green; and shall not be careful [require special care] in the year of drought, neither shall cease from yielding fruit. (Jeremiah 17:8)

This imagery directly counters the spiritual desiccation suggested by the term *clinging*, illustrating that secure adherence to the word/rod leads to perpetual vitality. The horticultural image is united by Isaiah’s messianic prophecy: “In that day the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the earth shall be excellent and comely for them that are escaped of Israel” (Isaiah 4:2; 2 Nephi 14:2).³⁸ This “branch” is the object of the successful gathering and grafting, which brings the source of the promised fruit (see Alma 26:36).

The righteous branch: The grafting of God’s planting

This prophetic imagery builds on Isaiah’s vision of the restored covenant people, who are destined to become vigorous, strong, and majestic, fruitful trees. Speaking of those who have suffered oppression by calamity and sin, the prophet concludes “that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he might be glorified” (Isaiah 61:3). A few verses earlier, God speaks similarly of the future inheritance of his people: “Thy people also shall be all righteous: they shall inherit the land for ever, the branch of my planting, the

37. *Navel* not *yabesh* here. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 614.

38. “Escaped” can also mean remnant and is twice used to describe green things that remain. It can be seen in the metaphor that Isaiah uses here (see for example Exodus 10:5 and Job 2:3).

work of my hand, that I may be glorified" (Isaiah 60:21). The linguistic precision inherent in the phrase "the branch of my planting" warrants closer exploration. The Hebrew word translated *planting* is *matta*,³⁹ meaning "an act of planting something." The underlying root word is *nata'*,⁴⁰ which clarifies the action. While *nata'* can mean "to establish" or "to found," its more fundamental meaning is "to strike in, fix, and be fastened." Given that Isaiah 60:21 specifically describes God planting a *branch*, this fundamental definition of striking in and fastening the branch confirms that the divine "planting" (*matta'*) of the covenant people is the horticultural act that is identified as *grafting* (see Exodus 15:17, Doctrine and Covenants 124:61). The core idea of *nata'* as permanently striking in the branch or securing a graft confirms the covenantal relationship exemplified by those who hold fast to the rod of iron. The bond between Christ and those who take hold of his word demands an unyielding union to prevent the desiccation associated with mere "clinging."⁴¹

This establishes God's people as a *branch* that he plants, the work of his own "hands." This concept finds specific fulfillment in the Nephite covenant. The Lord declared that he had led the people forth from Jerusalem "by the power of mine arm, that I might raise up unto me a righteous branch from the fruit of the loins of Joseph" (Jacob 2:25). Jacob later further develops this imagery when he records the Allegory of the Olive Tree. Following this allegory, Jacob returns to the image of the Lord's arm, when he pleads with the people to "cleave unto God as he cleaveth unto you. And while his arm of mercy is extended towards you, harden not your hearts" (Jacob 6:5). Here, the *arm of mercy* is extended much like the rod of iron in Lehi's vision, and in both cases, individuals must *cleave* to what is being extended. Jacob further develops the association of the rod as a branch when he says, "For behold, after ye have been nourished by the *good word of God* all the day long, will ye bring forth evil fruit, that ye must be hewn down and cast into the fire" (Jacob 6:7), effectively bringing together the concept

39. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 101, 642.

40. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 101, 642.

41. The promise to Abraham—that he would be the instrument through which all families of the earth would be grafted in—is realized through the rod of iron, the binding Word and Covenant of God. Nephi speaks of this promise, saying that "the earth cannot be blessed unless [Lord] shall make bare his arm" (1 Nephi 22:10). The Lord's extended arm, accompanied by the rod of iron, provided the necessary guidance to restore the scattered generations Lehi saw, bringing them back to the tree of life.

of the *word* (or rod) to the branch's survival as found in the Allegory of the Olive Tree.

As can be seen in the example above, in both the Book of Mormon as well as in the Bible, the word *extend* seems to be reserved for the active reach of an agent. In both books, things do not *extend* on their own; they are extended by a personified force—most notably in the extension of the Lord's arm or the extending of his mercy to those in need.⁴² Lexical consistency suggests that when *extend* is paired with the rod in Lehi's vision, it also involves an active agent (like the arm of God) rather than a static existence, as in the handrail interpretation. When Nephi is asked by his brothers, "What meaneth the rod of iron which our father saw?" (1 Nephi 15:23), Nephi replies with just such a personification. He says,

It was the word of God; and whoso would hearken unto the word of God, and would hold fast unto it, they would never perish; neither could the temptations and the *fiery darts of the adversary* overpower them unto blindness, to lead them away to destruction. (1 Nephi 15:24)

It is telling that the only time *extend* is used in the Doctrine and Covenants, it once again involves a personified force: the extended arm of God, which provides protection from the "fiery darts of the adversary" (Doctrine and Covenants 3:8). After the loss of the 116 pages of the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith was told, "You should have been faithful; and he would have extended his arm and supported you against the fiery darts of the adversary" (Doctrine and Covenants 3:8). Significantly, this scripture equates the protection of the extended arm of God with the very same protection that Nephi attributed to the extended rod of iron: "the fiery darts of the adversary." By viewing the rod not as a preexisting fixture but as something actively extended by a personified shepherd-king, the vision is transformed from a journey along a railing into an encounter with the divine. In this light, the rod is not a railing people merely happen to find; it is the very arm of God's mercy extended into the mists to lead and nourish those who take hold of it on their way to the tree of life.⁴³

42. See 1 Nephi 8:19; Jacob 6:5; Mosiah 1:14; 16:12; 29:20; Alma 5:33; 9:16, 24; 17:15; 19:36; 29:10; Helaman 15:12; 3 Nephi 9:14; Ezra 7:28; 9:9; Psalm 109:12; Isaiah 66:12; Doctrine and Covenants 3:10.

43. In Egyptian, the verb *m3c* means both to extend and to lead, guide, or direct. See David M. Calabro, "Lehi's Dream and the Garden of Eden," *Interpreter: A*

Intertextual Unification: Universal Efficacy of the Tree Metaphor

This extended imagery of the iron rod provides a unified theological framework for the Book of Mormon narrative. It demonstrates that the gathering of Israel and adherence to the word are inextricably linked to the covenantal process of grafting. The initial wandering that Lehi described in his vision, before he found the tree, parallels the scattering of the house of Israel. Lehi was clearly aware of the allegory of Zenos, as he spoke to his family of the captivity and gathering of Israel immediately after recounting his vision (1 Nephi 10:12–14; 15:7). John Tvedtnes notes that Lehi's subsequent teachings provide "direct evidence that Lehi's vision of the tree of life is related to the parable of Zenos."⁴⁴ Nephi confirms this understanding, stating that his father taught that,

After the house of Israel should be scattered they should be gathered together again; or, in fine, after the Gentiles had received the fulness of the Gospel, the natural branches of the olive tree, or the remnants of the house of Israel, should be grafted in, or come to the knowledge of the true Messiah, their Lord and their Redeemer. (1 Nephi 10:14)

Lehi interpreted this process to mean that the grafting of the natural branches back into the olive tree would be understood as regaining knowledge of Christ. This established a direct covenantal context for interpreting the events of the dream in relation to Zenos's allegory.

This dual understanding of *mattah* (rod/branch) is leveraged when Nephi seeks to explain the meaning of the rod of iron to his skeptical brothers. As discussed earlier, Nephi plays on the dual meaning of the iron rod as both a staff/rod used for gathering and a branch used in grafting. This is evident when he asks his brothers, "Yea, at that day, will they not receive the strength and nourishment from the true vine? Yea, will they not come unto the true fold of God?" (1 Nephi 15:16). He immediately supplies the answer, "They shall be grafted in, being a natural branch of the olive tree, into the true olive tree" (v. 16). This rhetorical bridge demonstrates that, for Nephi, the concepts of gathering

Journal of Mormon Scripture 26 (2017): 269–96, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/lehis-dream-and-the-garden-of-edem.

44. John A. Tvedtnes, "Borrowings from the Parable of Zenos," in *The Allegory of the Olive Tree: The Olive, The Bible, and Jacob 5*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1994), 375.

and grafting were inseparable and that the instrument of gathering — the rod, defined by Nephi as the word of God (vv. 23–24) — is the very mechanism facilitating the grafting process into Christ, the True Vine.

The metaphor of the tree is one of the most powerful and enduring images in the Hebrew tradition. This is a fact that Kirsten Nielsen, in her study of its use in Isaiah, attributed to its “evident accuracy” and connection to shared human experience: “Everyone knows from his own experience that this is the way things are with trees.” She further notes,

The tree as a metaphor is among the elementary metaphors whose suitability and capacity to survive are evidenced by their continual reuse. But in regard to the Old Testament’s tree images there is the additional fact that they came into being in a culture in which the tree’s holiness was a natural assumption.⁴⁵

Beyond its traditional power, the tree image is also ideally suited for communicating an evolving message, as its “many different aspects . . . have made it possible to produce new text here, where new aspects of the image are utilized.”⁴⁶ The Book of Mormon’s use of the Allegory of the Olive Tree in relation to the rod of iron, though unique in its detail, seems to be directly tied to the Israelite prophetic tradition. This inherent adaptability is present across diverse prophetic traditions, and its sophisticated use by the Book of Mormon prophets speaks to its authenticity. See Romans 11:16–24 for a New Testament example.

The thematic consolidation of the rod, the word of God, and grafting is echoed throughout the subsequent Nephite record. Alma explicitly links adherence to the “word of God” (the rod or staff) with successful horticultural union, speaking of those who receive the word with joy: “And as a branch be grafted into the true vine” (Alma 16:17). This action is necessary to prevent destruction, paralleling Nephi’s declaration that holding fast to the rod prevents the traveler from perishing to destruction (1 Nephi 15:23–25). The linking of the word of God and the grafting into the house of Israel thus reinforces the functional identity of the rod of iron, despite the fact that Alma never used that precise language.⁴⁷

45. Kirsten Nielsen, *There Is Hope for a Tree: The Tree as Metaphor in Isaiah* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1989), 140.

46. Nielsen, *Hope for a Tree*, 234.

47. Alma 32 also seems to parallel Lehi’s dream and Nephi’s visions with the

Jacob's extensive copy of Zenos's allegory likewise employs language highly reminiscent of the rod imagery as it is presented in Lehi's dream and speaks to its importance. Jacob notes that the branches of the wild tree have "have *taken hold* of the moisture of the root thereof" (Jacob 5:18). This terminology directly parallels the concept of the covenant seeker "holding fast" or "taking hold" of the rod of iron. The rod leads to the "fountain of living water or the tree of life" (1 Nephi 11:25.) Zenos describes the successful grafting as securing the "moisture of the root" (Jacob 5:18), confirming that the act of grasping the word/rod secures the spiritual, life-giving nourishment necessary for survival. Jacob summarizes the Lord's constant, merciful labor, noting,

And how merciful is our God unto us, for he remembereth the house of Israel, both roots and branches; and he stretches forth his hands unto them all the day long. . . . Wherefore, my beloved brethren, I beseech of you in words of soberness that ye would repent, and come with full purpose of heart, and cleave unto God as he cleaveth unto you. And while his arm of mercy is extended towards you. . . . For behold, after ye have been nourished by the good word of God all the day long, will ye bring forth evil fruit, that ye must be hewn down and cast into the fire? (Jacob 6:4–7).

Jacob's words mirror both the imperative in Lehi's dream to hold fast to the rod when it is extended and the destructive judgment described in Ezekiel that "the east wind dried up her fruit: her strong rods were broken and withered; the fire consumed them" (Ezekiel 19:12).

Table 1. Book of Mormon grafting terminology coupled with the rod of iron.

Narrative Source	Grafting Terminology	Iron Rod Terminology
Lehi's Dream (1 Nephi 8:24, 30)	" <i>Clinging</i> " (<i>fall away/wither/shrivel</i>)	" <i>To the rod of iron</i> "
Lehi's Dream (1 Nephi 8:30)	" <i>Continually holding fast</i> "	" <i>To the rod of iron</i> "
Lehi's Teaching (1 Nephi 10:14)	"The natural branches of the olive tree . . . should be grafted in"	"Or come to the knowledge of the true Messiah"

tower and the great and spacious building as well as those who have nice clothing mocking those who came to hear the word of God. Further, the planted seed that is not nourished is said to "wither" (Alma 32:38).

Narrative Source	Grafting Terminology	Iron Rod Terminology
Nephi's Teaching (1 Nephi 15:16)	"They shall be grafted in, being a natural branch"	Restoration of Israel (the natural branch) "come into the fold of God"
Nephi's Teaching (1 Nephi 15:23–24)	"Hold fast unto [the rod of iron], would never perish"	"What meaneth the rod of iron?"
Jacob's Zeno's Allegory (Jacob 5:18)	Branches "have taken hold of the moisture of the root thereof"	"Continually holding fast"
Jacob's Teaching (Jacob 6:5, 7)	"Nourished by the good word of God all the day long, will ye bring forth evil fruit"	"Cleave unto God as he cleaveth unto you. And while his arm of Mercy is extended towards you"
Alma's Teaching (Alma 16:17)	"As a branch be grafted into the true vine" (via the word)	The salvific act of union with Christ to "receive the word with joy"

Conclusion: The Gathering and Restoration of Israel

The iron rod presented in Lehi's vision of the tree of life seems to be a symbol of far greater complexity and theological depth than the metaphor of a handrail, though this enduring imagery has inspired millions of readers. Through linguistic and intertextual analysis, it is possible to see the rod of iron as a sophisticated, layered metaphor for royal authority. By means of divine extension, the rod can facilitate the covenantal *gathering* and *grafting* needed to restore the scattered house of Israel. Viewed in this way, the function of the rod is defined by the polysemy of *mattah*. Christ, the Shepherd-King, actively stretches out the word of God and as the True Branch, offers a permanent connection to the source of eternal life. The gathering of Israel is therefore intrinsically linked to the process of grafting. The rod or word of God ensures that the separated branches (*mattah* as *tribe*) are restored by being securely affixed to the True Vine (Christ), allowing them to receive spiritual strength and nourishment (1 Nephi 15:15, Omni 1:13, Moroni 6:4).

This framework clarifies the essential difference between temporary commitment and salvific adherence. The distinction between "clinging" (a term carrying the semantic range of "wither" or "shrivel") and "holding fast" (a secured, immovable union) illustrates that covenant participation requires a permanent, sustained spiritual connection. This mirrors the requirements of a successful horticultural graft.

Holding fast in effect seals the family of Adam and Eve to the tree of life through the blessings promised to Abraham. Those who are susceptible to becoming ashamed of the word of God can wither and fall away, while those who hold fast ensure that they remain "trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord" (Isaiah 61:3). The linguistic depth and intertextual precision embedded within the Book of Mormon narrative — particularly the reliance on the dualistic meaning of the rod — demonstrate the profound sophistication of Lehi's vision. This enhanced understanding confirms the richness of the imagery in the text. That imagery provides a deeper appreciation for Jesus Christ's active and comprehensive role as the Shepherd who uses his unbreakable word (the iron rod) to perpetually gather and graft Israel into the tree of life. He thereby makes all who hold fast to his rod, heirs to his kingdom. Holding fast to the rod of iron reinforces the necessity to "hear" and "follow" Jesus Christ, the Shepherd-King and the True Vine.⁴⁸

Appendix: Early Historical Examples of the Usage of Rod or Rod of Iron

The following includes all the examples that I could find from early Church records that mention a "rod" or "iron rod." This includes Joseph Smith's dream (mentioned earlier). This appendix excludes the mention of a rod as used in measurements and the repeated examples of it being used as a weapon. To the early Church, it did not seem to have the same conceptual meaning of a handrail, which is almost an automatic reading today.

Joseph Smith History

"I dreamed this morning that I was in the Lobby of the Representatives Hall at Springfield, when some of the Members, who did not like my being there, began to mar, and cut, and pound my shins with pieces of Iron, I bore it as long as I could, then jumped over the Rail into the Hall, caught a rod of Iron, and went at them, cursing and swearing at them in the most awful manner, and drove them all out of the house. I went to the door and told them to send me a Clerk and I would make some laws that would do good. There was quite a collection around the State House trying to raise an army to take me — and there were

48. This is a message that Russell M. Nelson repeatedly admonished the Saints to do.

many horses tied round the square[.] I thought they would not have the privilege of getting me, so I took a rod of Iron, and mowed my way through their ranks, looking after their best race horse thinking they might catch me, where they could find me, when I awoke.”⁴⁹

Revelation, April 1829

“In preparing the text of Revelation Book 1 for publication [now Doctrine and Covenants 8], Sidney Rigdon replaced ‘sprout’ with ‘rod.’ Green, flexible shoots or rods cut from hazel, peach, or cherry trees were sometimes used as divining rods.”⁵⁰

Mason Brayman letter

On 29 July 1843, Mason Brayman, a lawyer from Springfield, Illinois, wrote to Joseph Smith to convey Governor Thomas Ford’s position regarding the recent attempt to extradite Smith to Missouri.⁵¹

His decision in your case, will be precisely the same whether he makes it before the election, or whether you vote for one or the other of the political parties. Do give heed to the insinuation, made only to answer bad purposes, that a rod is held over you. This rod, is turned to ashes and can do no harm.⁵²

Sidney Rigdon blessing

“Blessed of the Lord is brother Sidney [Rigdon]: notwithstanding he shall be high and lifted up, yet he will humble himself like an ass that coucheth beneath his burden, that learneth his master’s will by the stroke of the rod, thus saith the Lord.”⁵³

49. “History, 1838–1856, volume D-1 [1 August 1842–1 July 1843],” p. 1456, *Joseph Smith Papers*, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-d-1-1-august-1842-1-july-1843/99.

50. “Revelation, April 1829-B [D&C 8],” p. 13n5, *Joseph Smith Papers*, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-april-1829-b-dc-8/2?foot-notes.

51. For more historical context, see “Letter from Mason Brayman, 29 July 1843,” Historical Introduction, *Joseph Smith Papers*, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-from-mason-brayman-29-july-1843/1#historical-intro.

52. “Letter from Mason Brayman, 29 July 1843,” p. 6–7, *Joseph Smith Papers*, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-from-mason-brayman-29-july-1843/6.

53. “Appendix 5, Document 8. Blessing to Sidney Rigdon, 2 October 1835,” p. 13, *Joseph Smith Papers*, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/appendix-5-document-8-blessing-to-sidney-rigdon-2-october-1835/1.

History draft

“Come all ye lovers of Liberty, break the oppressors rod, loose the iron grasp of Mobocracy, & bring to consign punishment all those who trample under foot the principles of our glorious Constitution.”⁵⁴

Joseph Smith letter

On 15 April 1844, Joseph Smith wrote a letter to Francis P. Blair, editor of the Washington, DC, *Daily Globe*. Commenting on the actions of men in governmental positions, Smith quoted from the poet Alexander Pope’s *Essay on Man*:

A Wit’s a feather and a chief’s a rod,
But an honest man’s the noblest work of God.⁵⁵

Times and Seasons

“We have been chastened by the hand of God heretofore for not obeying his commands, although we never violated any human law, or transgressed any human precept: yet we have treated lightly his commands, and departed from his ordinances, and the Lord has chastened us sore, and we have felt his arm, and kissed the rod: let us we [be] wise in time to come, and ever remember that ‘to obey is better than sacrifice; and to hearken than the fat of rams.’”⁵⁶

“The following account of preparing and managing books, is taken from Dr. Jahn’s Biblical Archaeology. Tablets, tables, and plates, are all of the same import, and the mode of fastening *leaves*, plates or tablets together at the back with *rings*, is the same way the Book of Mormon was connected. We may, at some future day, pursue this subject far enough to convince honest people, that the stone tables of the Bible, and gold plates of the Book of Mormon, were constructed and carried alike. . . . Those books, which were inscribed on tablets of wood, lead, brass, or ivory, were connected together by rings at the back, through which a rod was passed to carry them by.”⁵⁷

54. “History Draft [1 January–21 June 1844],” p. 65a, *Joseph Smith Papers*, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-draft-1-january-21-june-1844/88.

55. “Letter to Editor, 15 April 1844,” p. 3, *Joseph Smith Papers*, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-editor-15-april-1844/3.

56. “*Times and Seasons*, 15 July 1842,” p. 857, *Joseph Smith Papers*, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/times-and-seasons-15-july-1842/11.

57. “*Times and Seasons*, 1 September 1842,” p. 908–9, *Joseph Smith Papers*,

Heber Kimball address

“Will those who hold the Priesthood govern with a rod of tyranny? No; but it will be done by the power of the Priesthood of the Almighty, which is compared to an iron rod. The nations will eventually have to come and bow down before this Priesthood and to this people.”⁵⁸

John Taylor address

“If we have drank of that water which the Savior spoke of to the woman of Samaria; if we have laid hold of the rod of iron, and continue to cling to it; if we adhere to the principles of righteousness, and pray unto God and keep his commandments continually, we shall have His Spirit at all times to discern between good and evil, and we shall always know the voice of the good shepherd, and cleave to the principles of righteousness.”⁵⁹

Thomas Marsh address

“I do not know that I can make all this vast congregation hear and understand me. My voice never was very strong, but it has been very much weakened of late years by the afflicting rod of Jehovah. He loved me too much to let me go without whipping. I have seen the hand of the Lord in the chastisement which I have received. I have seen and known that it has proved he loved me; for if he had not cared anything about me, he would not have taken me by the arm and given me such a shaking.”⁶⁰

Erastus Snow address

“But shall all people be thus converted unto the Lord? Shall the king

josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/times-and-seasons-1-september-1842/15.

58. Heber C. Kimball, “Cultivation of the Spirit of Truth—Trials of the Church & c.,” 14 April 1861, *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 9 (London: Latter-day Saints Book Depot, 1862), 54, archive.org/details/per_utah-and-the-mormons_journal-of-discourses-_brigham-young-_1862_9/page/54/mode/2up.

59. John Taylor, “Confidence of the Saints in the Ultimate Triumph of the Kingdom of God—The Condition of the Nations,” 10 October 1863, *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 10 (London: Latter-day Saints Book Depot, 1865), 261, archive.org/details/per_utah-and-the-mormons_journal-of-discourses-_brigham-young-_1863_10/page/260/mode/2up.

60. Thomas B. Marsh, “Remarks by Thomas B. Marsh,” 6 September 1857, *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 5 (London: Latter-day Saints Book Depot, 1858), 206, archive.org/details/per_utah-and-the-mormons_journal-of-discourses-_brigham-young-_1858_5/page/206/mode/2up.

upon the throne, the judges who have judged for reward, the Prophets who have divined for money, the priests who have taught for hire, the murderer, the idolater, the abominable, those who have oppressed and ruled mankind with a rod of iron, who have said to the souls of men, ‘Bow down, that we may walk over you?’ Shall all these be converted unto the Lord of hosts and receive of these blessings? Would to God that it were possible!”⁶¹

John Taylor address

“We started in with the intention of carrying out the views of President Young, and we purpose to do it; but should we, by and by see a better way, one that suits us better, that would be more pleasant all around, we will then adopt it. In the meantime, we will stick to the rod of iron, and humble ourselves before God, seeking to do His will in all things; and by and by, when we shall have done our work on earth, will obtain an inheritance in the celestial kingdom of our Father. Amen.”⁶²

Brigham Young address

“When I say rule, I do not mean with an iron hand, but merely to take the lead —to lead them in the path I wish them to walk in. They may be determined not to answer my will, but they are doing it all the time without knowing it. Kindness, love, and affection are the best rod to use upon the refractory. Solomon is said to have been the wisest man that ever lived, and he is said to have recommended another kind of rod. I have tried both kinds on children. I can pick out scores of men in this congregation who have driven their children from them by using the wooden rod.”⁶³

61. Erastus Snow, “Discourse by Elder Erastus Snow,” 14 September 1873, *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 16 (London: Latter-day Saints Book Depot, 1874), 205, archive.org/details/per_utah-and-the-mormons_journal-of-discourses-_brigham-young-_1874_16/page/204/mode/2up.

62. John Taylor, “Discourse by President John Taylor,” 21 October 1877, *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 19 (London: Latter-day Saints Book Depot, 1878), 249, archive.org/details/per_utah-and-the-mormons_journal-of-discourses-_brigham-young-_1878_19/page/248/mode/2up.

63. Brigham Young, “Robbing the Dead—Dancing, Not a Part of the Saints’ Religion—Kindness in Government—More Telegraphic Wires,” 9 February 1862, *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 9 (London: Latter-day Saints Book Depot, 1862), 195–96, archive.org/details/per_utah-and-the-mormons_journal-of-discourses-_brigham-young-_1862_9/page/194/mode/2up.

Erastus Snow address

“Dark clouds may gather around us from time to time; then is the time not to fear, but to watch and pray and patiently await the Lord of Hosts to dispel them and cause the sun to shine again upon us; remembering the vision of Nephi, in which he saw the rod of iron which led to the tree of life, along the turbulent stream of muddy water, and through mists and clouds which at intervals beset his pathway; and that those who clung to it were led safely through and reached the tree and partook of the fruit thereof, while those who ceased their hold to the rod of iron wandered off and were lost.”⁶⁴

Orson Pratt address

“I recollect that Lehi had a very great and important dream communicated to him, and his son Nephi had the same renewed to him. While Lehi was on his way to this country he dreamed that he wandered many hours in darkness; that there was a certain rod of iron, notwithstanding this darkness that seemed to gather around him, on which the old man leaned steadfastly. So great was the darkness that he was fearful he should lose his way if he let go the rod of iron; but he clung to it, and continued to wander on until, by and by, he was brought out into a large and spacious field, and he also was brought out to a place where it was lighter, and he saw a certain tree which bore very precious fruit. And he went forth and partook of the fruit of this tree, which was the most precious and desirable of any fruit that he had ever tasted; and it seemed to enlighten him and fill him with joy and happiness . . . But notwithstanding this gift of prophecy, and the gifts of the Spirit which he enjoyed, the Lord showed him by this dream that there would be seasons of darkness through which he would have to pass, and that even then there was a guide. If he did not all the time have the Spirit of God upon him to any great extent, there was the word of God, represented by an iron rod, to guide him; and if he would hold fast to that in his hours of darkness and trial, when everything seemed to go against him, and not sever himself therefrom, it would finally bring him

64. Erastus Snow, “Discourse by Elder Erastus Snow,” 8 October 1879, *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 20 (London: Latter-day Saints Book Depot, 1880), 374, archive.org/details/per_utah-and-the-mormons_journal-of-discourses-_brigham-young-_1880_20/page/n381/mode/2up.

where he could partake of the fruit of the precious tree — the Tree of Life.”⁶⁵



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65. Orson Pratt, “Discourse by Elder Orson Pratt,” 24 November 1872, *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 15 (London: Latter-day Saints Book Depot, 1873), 233–34, archive.org/details/per_utah-and-the-mormons_journal-of-discourses-_brigham-young-_1873_15/page/232/mode/2up.

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