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“His Secret is with the Righteous”: Instructional Wisdom in the Book of Mormon

Alyson Skabelund Von Feldt

Abstract: *This study argues that the Book of Mormon both adopts and develops the instructional wisdom tradition found in Proverbs 1–9 and other pre-exilic Near-Eastern texts. After outlining the structure, rhetoric, and themes of Hebrew instructional wisdom, it tracks those features through major Book of Mormon discourses. Particular attention is given to the personification of Wisdom, the tree-of-life and great-whore polarity, temple motifs, and the democratic invitation to pursue the “mysteries of God” through personal revelation. The analysis suggests that Book of Mormon authors preserve a strand of Israelite temple wisdom largely suppressed in the post-exilic biblical record. By reading restored scripture back into its ancient literary context, the paper offers fresh insight into both corpora: Proverbs’ “enigmas” become transparently eschatological, while the Book of Mormon’s doctrinal core takes on new depth as a deliberate wisdom inheritance. The study concludes that recognizing this shared sapiential framework clarifies the Book of Mormon’s purpose as a covenant guide and underscores its claim to recover “plain and most precious” truths lost from the biblical canon.*

[Editor’s Note: *This article originally appeared as Alyson Skabelund Von Feldt, “His Secret Is with the Righteous: Instructional Wisdom in the Book of Mormon,” FARMS Occasional Papers 5 (2007): 49–83. As this important paper is not currently available online, it is reprinted here for the benefit of our readers. It has been updated and edited by the author.]*

While studying the topic of personal revelation a number of years ago, a furious cross-referencing of Doctrine and Covenants 76 landed me in the Old Testament book of Proverbs, and I stopped to explore the territory. I turned to chapter 1 and read straight through until the wonder wore off somewhere after chapter 8. I first understood the dominant message to be an impassioned invitation to search for the knowledge of the mysteries of God, to seek personal revelation. But a note fell out of my Bible that I must have made some time before when preparing a Gospel Doctrine lesson or studying for a BYU religion test. It characterized Proverbs as “a collection of folk sayings; hard to see as scripture.” This did not seem an apt description of the passages I had just breathlessly encountered.

Over the years, I have learned that my reading of Proverbs 1–9 that night was unusual. Though scholars recognize that the author beseeches the reader to find wisdom, they almost always take this to be practical knowledge about how to live life richly, rather than how to obtain the riches of eternal life.¹

What has also surprised me is that many of the writers of the Book of Mormon were familiar with the literary forms, themes, and vocabulary of Hebrew wisdom literature, of which Proverbs 1–9 is an example, and made them part of their own sacred recordkeeping. What’s more, Book of Mormon authors clearly understood the search for wisdom to be a quest for eternal life and the mysteries of God.

This paper begins with a short introduction to Hebrew wisdom literature. I will then turn to an exploration of similarities between selected Old Testament wisdom texts, primarily Proverbs 1–9, and passages in the Book of Mormon, and I will investigate how the two sources elucidate each other.

Instructional Wisdom in Ancient Israel and the Near East

Scholars believe that wisdom sayings develop naturally in families and villages because of the human need to capture and distill the lessons of life and make them memorable. A literary wisdom tradition emerged anciently throughout the Near East, particularly in Egypt and Mesopotamia.² Similar individual proverbs, coined originally by ordi-

1. Compare Doctrine and Covenants 6:7.

2. For a survey and brief analysis of Egyptian and Mesopotamian wisdom documents, see James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction*, rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 205–26, archive.org/details/oldtestamentwisd0000cren/mode/2up; or Roland E. Murphy, *The*

nary people, found their way into writing independently in these and other cultures, but at some point the Near Eastern traditions certainly came into contact with and borrowed from each other.

After many centuries of relative neglect, the study of the Hebrew wisdom tradition, sometimes simply called Hebrew wisdom, was reborn in the past century after the 1923 publication of *The Instructions of Amenemopet*, an Egyptian wisdom document from approximately 1186 to 1069 BC. A renewed and unprecedented surge in Old Testament wisdom scholarship began about 1970.³ Joseph Smith and his contemporaries could have known very little about the wisdom tradition, as its study was not pursued in modern times with any vigor until over a hundred years after the publication of the Book of Mormon.

The corpus of wisdom is defined by similarities of intent, form, terminology, content, and even setting. Hebrew wisdom literature includes Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes from the canonical Old Testament, and the Wisdom of Solomon (often simply called Wisdom) and Ecclesiasticus (also known as Sirach or ben Sira) from the Apocrypha. Wisdom texts are also found among the Pseudepigrapha and in other ancient Near Eastern writings.

Wisdom is sometimes classified broadly into two main genres known as *sentence wisdom* (or *experiential wisdom*) and *instructional wisdom* (or *theoretical wisdom*).⁴ Sentence wisdom passages are comprised of short, pithy sayings, usually couplets, that express an observation or suggestion memorably. An example is this couplet about the benefits of being generous with one's possessions: "There is

Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 151–79.

3. Old Testament wisdom studies surged after the publication of Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972), archive.org/details/wisdominisrael0000radg_z3b7/page/n7/mode/2up. Other major studies during this time include William McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), archive.org/details/proverbsnewappro0000mcka_w3i6/page/n7/mode/2up; William McKane, *Prophets and Wise Men* (London: SCM Press, 1965), archive.org/details/prophets-wisemen0000mcka; and R. N. Whybray, *The Book of Proverbs* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1972), archive.org/details/bookofproverbs0000unse. For more recent analyses of Old Testament wisdom, superb sources are Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom* (which includes a concise survey of recent wisdom scholarship in the introduction); Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, *The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 2000); and Murphy, *Tree of Life*.
4. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 5, 64.

that scattereth, and yet increaseth; and there is that withholdeth more than is meet, but it tendeth to poverty” (Proverbs 11:24). The bulk of Proverbs 10–31, as well as Ecclesiastes, reflects the sentence genre.

The instructional genre is characterized by longer poems with a clearly didactic intent—that is, they are meant to teach—usually in the form of a father offering counsel to his son or a wisdom sage offering counsel to his pupils. Proverbs 1–9, 22:17–24:22, and 31:1–9 belong to the genre of instructional wisdom, as do the speeches in Job and the apocryphal books Wisdom and Sirach.

Modern analysis reveals that Hebrew writers were influenced at times by Egyptian wisdom but that they did not incorporate it wholesale. Even in the case of Proverbs 22:17–24:22, which clearly resembles *The Instruction of Amenemopet*, the author freely adapts the Egyptian material in order to express his own unique beliefs.⁵

Turning to a comparison of Old Testament wisdom and the Book of Mormon, the most obvious similarities between the two involve the instructional writings of Proverbs, comprising chapters 1–9. For this paper, I will for the most part limit my comparison of Book of Mormon passages to biblical instructional wisdom as expressed in Proverbs 1–9.

A quick note about the dating of Proverbs: to the extent that Proverbs 10–31 is a set of collections of folk wisdom, the origins of some of the individual sayings could be very ancient, at least as old as the time of Solomon (mid-tenth century BC) and probably older.⁶ Some of the collections seem to have been made during the period of the monarchy, in preexilic times (see Proverbs 25:1). Scholars do not agree on the dating of Proverbs 1–9. Since it appears to be an introduction to the sentence proverbs of chapters 10–31 and, for other reasons, many postulate that it was written at a later date, after the exile and possibly after the Macedonian conquest.⁷ As we shall see, the earliest Book of Mormon prophets were clearly familiar with motifs more fully developed in Proverbs 1–9 than in the earlier collections of 10–31. We are justified in postulating that Proverbs 1–9 or an earlier version of the literary/rhetorical tradition which it expresses did, in fact, exist before the exile, during the time Lehi lived in Jerusalem. Since the first version of this paper, Noel B. Reynolds has persuasively

5. Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 24.

6. 1 Kings 4:29–34; Proverbs 1:1; 10:1; 25:1.

7. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 48–49. Fox’s possible Hellenistic dating derives from Greek influences that he finds in Proverbs 8.

argued that Lehi and Nephi were highly trained scribes who wrote in the rhetorical patterns of a Josephite scribal school and taught those patterns to their posterity. This paper focuses on the wisdom strand of that scribal curriculum.⁸ Reynolds quotes André Lemaire: “The weight of evidence suggests that schools were the setting of the wisdom texts and more precisely of the wisdom books in the Bible.”⁹

Characteristics of Hebrew Instructional Wisdom: Structure, Content, Literary Forms, and Terminology

With a goal of identifying instructional wisdom in the Book of Mormon, we will quickly study the composition of Proverbs 1–9, and we will look at the literary forms, terms, and motifs of instructional wisdom in general.

Proverbs 1–9 is composed of ten *instructions*, also known as *lectures*, *discourses*, or *admonitions*, which are interspersed with five *interludes* or *hymns* (table 1). The interludes, with the exception of C, elaborate a similar theme: the persistence and excellence of wisdom. The whole collection is introduced by a prologue.¹⁰

8. Noel B. Reynolds, “Lehi and Nephi as Trained Manassite Scribes,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 50 (2022): 161–215, interpreterfoundation.org/lehi-and-nephi-as-trained-manassite-scribes/; and Noel B. Reynolds, “The Last Nephite Scribes” (2021), Faculty Publications 5590, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/5590. See also Karel van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Robert L. Maxwell, “Karel van der Toorn. *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible*,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 51, no. 2 (2012): 181–85, byustudies.byu.edu/article/scribal-culture-and-the-making-of-the-hebrew-bible; and 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.

9. André Lemaire, “The Sage in School and Temple,” *The Sage in Israel*, 180–81, as quoted in Reynolds, “Lehi and Nephi,” 171. Reynolds notes, as I did in the original version of this paper, that Stuart Weeks contends the wisdom books were not written for these schools, only preserved by them. Reynolds, “Lehi and Nephi,” 171n25; Alyson Skabelund Von Feldt, “His Secret Is with the Righteous: Instructional Wisdom in the Book of Mormon,” *FARMS Occasional Papers* 5 (2007): 80n109.

10. The composition given here is from Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 44–47, although he uses the term *lecture* for the main discourses. I prefer the term *instruction* because *lecture* connotes a one-way discourse, whereas similar Book of Mormon texts, to which I will be applying the term, sometimes involve interaction between the teacher (father, king, priest, or angel) and those being taught.

Table 1. Composition of Proverbs 1–9.

Element	Verses	Purpose
Prologue	1:1–7	
Instruction I	1:8–19	Avoid gangs (“secret combinations” in Book of Mormon terms)
<i>Interlude A</i>	1:20–33	<i>Wisdom’s warning</i>
Instruction II	2:1–22	The path to wisdom
Instruction III	3:1–12	The wisdom of piety
<i>Interlude B</i>	3:13–20	<i>In praise of Wisdom</i>
Instruction IV	3:21–35	The wisdom of honesty
Instruction V	4:1–9	Loving wisdom, hating evil
Instruction VI	4:10–19	The right path
Instruction VII	4:20–27	The straight path
Instruction VIII	5:1–23	Another man’s wife and one’s own
<i>Interlude C</i>	6:1–19	<i>Four epigrams on folly and evil</i>
Instruction IX	6:20–35	Adultery kills
Instruction X	7:1–27	Beware the seductress
<i>Interlude D</i>	8:1–36	<i>Wisdom’s self-praise</i>
<i>Interlude E</i>	9:1–18	<i>Two banquets</i>

Like Near Eastern instructions in general, most of the instructions of Proverbs have a tripartite structure. They are introduced by (1) an *exordium* in which a father (a) *addresses* his son, (b) *exhorts* him to pay attention, and (c) *motivates* him by emphasizing the value or rewards that will flow from heeding his teachings. Following the *exordium* is (2) a *lesson*, summed up by (3) a *conclusion*.

In almost all cases of both Hebrew and Near Eastern instructional wisdom where the teacher’s gender can be identified, it is male—a father or wise man.¹¹ In some cases, such as instructions I and IX of Proverbs, the mother who stands behind the teachings is also mentioned. We have no sure indication that the voice is even hers, but we might imagine that the parents take turns offering counsel—the father giving the instruction, with the mother speaking the interludes or dramatizing the voice of the wisdom woman.¹² Proverbs 31:1–9 is the only instance in extant wisdom documents where the lesson is clearly taught by a woman, in this case the queen mother of the Old

11. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 258.

12. Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 16.

Testament king Lemuel. Instructional lectures are sometimes called *patriarchal admonitions* when the setting is that of a Hebrew patriarch/prophet addressing his sons at the end of his life.

Wisdom speech in the Bible, the Apocrypha, and the Pseudepigrapha, because of its didactic intent, employs frequent use of words and concepts such as *wisdom, understanding, knowledge, counsel, discipline, instruction, and learning*. These concepts are not always clearly distinct. Another hallmark of wisdom teaching is the use of contrasts: most characteristically wisdom versus folly, but also life versus death, righteous versus wicked, happiness versus cursedness, rich versus poor, industrious versus idle, safety versus destruction, light versus dark, pride or vanity versus humility, sight versus blindness, awake versus asleep, remembrance versus forgetfulness, and so on. The tree of life and fountains of water are important motifs, as are other images from nature. Wisdom teaching contrives analogies and parables about plants and animals, farming and husbandry. Indeed, the wise men appeal frequently to empirical experience and to the natural order of the world to elucidate their case.

Instructional Wisdom in the Book of Mormon

With this overview of the defining characteristics of Hebrew instructional wisdom, we can search for Book of Mormon passages with similar characteristics. Most of those I have identified are listed in table 2. Many of the texts can be classified as patriarchal or final admonitions.¹³ Other examples of passages with wisdom overtones include the Beatitudes of 3 Nephi 12; the sacrament prayers of 3 Nephi 18:7, 11, and Moroni 4:3, 5:2; and the related administration of the sacrament of 3 Nephi 20:7–9. I will omit a discussion of these and other short pieces. So, the list in table 2 does not exhaust every wisdom affinity in the Book of Mormon, but it certainly suffices for an initial study.

Table 2. Instructional wisdom in the Book of Mormon.

Nephi	1 Nephi 1:1–4; 10:17–15:36; 19–22, 2 Nephi 25–33 (final admonition)
Lehi	2 Nephi 1–4 (patriarchal admonition)

13. Also, John Tvedtnes identifies the patriarchal admonitions in the Book of Mormon and compared them with *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* and other wisdom passages in pseudepigraphical texts in an unpublished paper, “Patriarchal Admonitions.”

Jacob	2 Nephi 6–10, Jacob 2–6 (patriarchal admonition)
Joseph of Egypt, as excerpted by Lehi	2 Nephi 3:4–22 (short excerpt of patriarchal admonition)
King Benjamin	Mosiah 1–5 (final admonition with tripartite structure commencing in 2:9)
Ammon	Alma 26
Alma	Alma 32, 36–42 (patriarchal admonition)
Helaman	Helaman 5:5–13 (short excerpt of patriarchal admonition)
Mormon	Helaman 12
Samuel	Helaman 13–15

Of the passages listed in table 2, 2 Nephi 25–33,¹⁴ 2 Nephi 6–10, Mosiah, Alma 36–42, and Helaman 13–15 all evidence the classic tripartite structure of a wisdom instruction. Nephi’s instructions in 1 Nephi are not tripartite. Lehi’s testament (2 Nephi 1–4) does not have the usual tripartite structure either, and this may be because Nephi is clearly abridging his father’s full admonition. Likewise, Joseph of Egypt’s admonition (2 Nephi 3:4–22) and Helaman’s admonition (Helaman 5:5–13) are also excerpts and are not tripartite. Ammon’s extended reflection on “boasting” (Alma 26) is properly neither a patriarchal admonition nor an instruction — we might call it an exultation — but it has strong wisdom affinities nevertheless. Mormon’s editorial comment in Helaman 12 as such lacks tripartite structure as well.

14. Beginning at 2 Nephi 25:4, Nephi’s admonition starts with an *exordium* and continues with an extended lesson and testament. It ends first with a false conclusion (2 Nephi 31:21) but then is followed by an addendum (2 Nephi 32) and a final conclusion (2 Nephi 33:10–15).

Although Jacob’s discourse in 2 Nephi 6–10 is recognizably divisible into at least three parts, John S. Thompson has shown in finer detail that it follows the basic six-part covenant/treaty pattern of the ancient Near East. He also suggests that it represents “a prophetic imitation” of the liturgy associated with preexilic autumn festivals. See John S. Thompson, “Isaiah 50–51, the Israelite Autumn Festivals, and the Covenant Speech of Jacob in 2 Nephi 6–10,” in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies [FARMS], 1998), 123–50, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?filename=7&article=1042&context=mi&type=additional. This understanding of the setting for Jacob’s sermon, joined with a similar understanding of King Benjamin’s sermon—which we will explore below—and an observation of the sapiential elements in both, might lead us to the conclusion that wisdom speech was a form of expression deriving from the ancient temple cult. I will explore a related argument in greater detail below.

All of these passages use terms, motifs, and other devices familiar from the Hebrew wisdom corpus. The admonitions of Nephi (2 Nephi 25–33), Lehi, Joseph, Benjamin, and Alma (Alma 36–42) all show strong internal consistency as well. The authors seem to be following a model for passing knowledge between generations that we see only partially in Proverbs 1–9¹⁵ but more completely in the Pseudepigraphal patriarchal admonitions.¹⁶

Elements of the pattern include a father—who is often also a prophet, high priest and teacher, or king—

- providing instruction or counsel near his death or at the end of his ministry
- advising sons, other descendants, or the people in general, sometimes at the temple in association with a ritual festival (Jacob, Benjamin, and arguably portions of Proverbs 1–9)
- promoting the keeping or transmission of a written record (and sometimes other artifacts)
- expressing joy
- giving promises about the blessings of keeping the commandments (especially the promise of prosperity/fertility in the land)
- advocating the search for the mysteries of God and prayer in general
- administering temple ordinances
- giving warnings about the consequences of rejecting temple or sacred knowledge
- recounting instruction by an angel and other mystical experiences (“example stories”)
- reviewing the Lord’s work in history, or even rehearsing the creation account
- teaching of Christ and the plan of redemption (in the Book of Mormon)
- using wisdom vocabulary and themes to teach about living

15. That Proverbs 1–9 partially expressed this formula first occurred to me after reading John Tvedtnes’s comparison of 1 Nephi 1:1–4 and Mosiah 1:2–6. See John A. Tvedtnes, “A Note on Benjamin and Lehi,” *Insights* 22, no. 11 (2002): 3, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1371&context=insights.

16. See the pseudepigraphal *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, chapter 4 of Tobit, and *Sentences of the Syriac Menander* for other patriarchal admonitions. Tvedtnes’s “Patriarchal Admonitions” includes a study of these texts as well as a discussion of patriarchal admonitions in the Bible and the Book of Mormon.

an upright daily life, such as avoiding pride or vanity, caring for the poor, and recognizing the dangers of sexual transgression

I will now take a closer look at how each of the Book of Mormon passages identified above (omitting treatment of the short excerpt of Joseph's blessing in 2 Nephi 3:4–22) compares to Proverbs 1–9, highlighting formal, thematic, and linguistic similarities.

Wisdom in the Small Plates of Nephi

Prologue to Nephi's Record

The correspondences start at the very beginning of the Book of Mormon. Nephi's prologue to his writings (1 Nephi 1:1–3) has much in common with the prologue of Proverbs (Proverbs 1:1–7), as well as with wisdom texts from other cultures. The purpose is to introduce the work, convey the qualifications of its author, and commend it to the recipient.

Often, prologues to wisdom texts “detail the titles, posts, ancestry, and position of the teacher” to demonstrate his qualifications.¹⁷ The author of Proverbs 1–9 is said to be “Solomon the son of David, king of Israel” (Proverbs 1:1). Scholars doubt that Solomon wrote Proverbs itself or even sponsored it, but his reputation as a great sage lends credibility to the collection.¹⁸

The prologue to Proverbs then immediately introduces some of the language characteristic of wisdom texts: *wisdom*, *instruction*, *understanding*, *knowledge*, and *learning* (Proverbs 1:2–5). It also hints that there is a riddle to be solved:

A wise man will hear, and will increase learning; and a man of understanding shall attain unto wise counsels: To understand a proverb, and the interpretation; The words of the wise, and their dark sayings. (Proverbs 1:5–6)

“Words of the wise,” *ḥakamīm*, seems to indicate the teachings of a specific group, and “dark sayings,” *ḥidāh*, is sometimes translated as “enigmas” or “riddles.”¹⁹ So, the promise seems to be that those who

17. Fox, *Proverbs* 1–9, 55.

18. For a discussion of Solomon as a sage, see Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 35–44.

19. Fox, *Proverbs* 1–9, 64.

listen carefully will be able to discern and interpret an enigma in the text.²⁰ Michael V. Fox tells what characterizes an enigma:

The outstanding figure of an enigma is its immediate obscurity. . . . Words and images must be read as tokens of entities and events in another domain. An enigma deliberately blocks immediate understanding by ambiguities and obscurities before allowing the audience to push through to a deeper understanding.²¹

Jesus used another wisdom rhetorical form, the parable, to accomplish much the same function: to hide "the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 13:10–17).

The problem is that scholars do not see much that is hidden or cryptic in Proverbs. As Fox jokes, "Having been informed in the Prologue that the wise will understand the enigmas to follow, one hesitates to volunteer for the other category by failing even to detect them."²² He suggests that the sage who wrote Proverbs is making an exaggerated claim to esoteric knowledge in order to give the book greater prestige.²³

However, read in light of Book of Mormon passages in 1 and 2 Nephi, Mosiah, and elsewhere, the riddle, as well as its solution, becomes clear: the knowledge discussed in Proverbs 1–9 about the path to a good, long life can be understood at a deeper level to represent knowledge about the path to *eternal* life.

There is even a clue in Proverbs 1:5–6: "a man of understanding shall attain unto wise counsels" can be understood as the wise counsels of Yahweh's heavenly assembly, the *sod*, which mortals are occasionally permitted to observe in vision.²⁴ The Hebrew words used

20. The later wisdom text Sirach understood that proverbs and parables hid divine mysteries. See Sirach 39:2–3, and, for a discussion, Raymond E. Brown, *The Semitic Background of the Term "Mystery" in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), 9–10.

21. Fox, *Proverbs* 1–9, 65.

22. Fox, *Proverbs* 1–9, 66.

23. Fox, *Proverbs* 1–9, 66–67.

24. Daniel C. Peterson has written at length about the divine assembly in "'Ye Are Gods': Psalm 82 and John 10 as Witnesses to the Divine Nature of Humankind," in *The Disciple as Scholar: Essays on Scripture and the Ancient World in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2000), 471–594. John Welch has shown that Lehi's admission to this council in 1 Nephi 1 (his vision of God sitting upon his throne) would have given him all the qualifications

here are not the same words used in classic Old Testament passages about the assembly or *sod*,²⁵ but there would not be much of a riddle if they were. The actual word *sod* is used in Proverbs 3:32: “For the froward²⁶ is abomination to the Lord: but his *secret* is with the righteous” (emphasis here and in all subsequent scriptural quotations is added).²⁷ As Daniel Peterson notes, *sod* is never used to mean only “secrets,” but rather, it always refers to the intimate group that counseled together, as well as to the decision upon which they agreed.²⁸ John Welch also notes that “mysteries” can be a translation of the word.²⁹ In Job 15:8, another passage from the wisdom genre, *sod* is parallel to wisdom: “Hast thou heard the secret of God? and dost thou restrain wisdom to thyself?” Allusions in the text push us toward elucidation of the enigmas, and our first clue is that the kind of wisdom discussed in Proverbs 1–9 has to do with the council of heaven and the mysteries of God.

Now, let’s compare the Proverbs prologue to Nephi’s prologue in 1 Nephi 1:1–3. Nephi identifies himself as the author of the record and then invokes his pedigree by simply noting that he was “born of goodly parents” (1 Nephi 1:1). Nephi’s credit to his parents is similar, incidentally, to Proverbs 4:3–4, where the writer also reflects on the teachings of parents who loved him.

Nephi then gives his qualifications. Aside from being “taught somewhat in all the learning of [his] father,” which included “the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians,”³⁰ he has obtained

that would have been expected in the ancient world for an authentic claim to authority. See John W. Welch, “The Calling of Lehi as a Prophet in the World of Jerusalem,” in *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 427–29.

25. 1 Kings 22:19–22; Isaiah 6; Ezekiel 1–3; Daniel 7; Amos 3:7; Job 15:8. See Peterson, “Ye Are Gods,” 500.

26. *Froward* is the translation of the root *lwz*, which can mean “to depart, to go crooked, or to be lost from view.” This is an image that also appears in Nephi’s dream; see below.

27. *Sod* is also used in Proverbs 11:13.

28. Peterson, “Ye Are Gods,” 507.

29. Welch, “Calling of Lehi as a Prophet,” 435. See Brown, *Semitic Background of the Term “Mystery.”*

30. Reynolds argues Nephi is announcing that he is a scribe trained at the highest level, probably by his father, Lehi. See Reynolds, “Lehi and Nephi,” 171. Reynolds shows that there’s evidence of this throughout the small plates.

a "knowledge of the goodness and the mysteries of God" (1 Nephi 1:1–2). (Remember that "mysteries" is a possible translation for *sod*.) This knowledge authorizes him as a source of wisdom more than any other sort of education, occupation, or title could, because, as Nephi will proceed to recount, he has effectively solved the riddle hinted at in the prologue to Proverbs. By seeking diligently, he has seen and felt, through transcendent visionary experiences, the unfolding of God's loving plan for the world, including Christ's redemption and the joys of eternal life. He has been taught by angels and lifted upon the wings of the Spirit to mountaintops for instruction. He himself has found wisdom.

However, unlike the author of Proverbs, Nephi does not attempt to disguise any teachings. Although he admits that his father's teachings are "hard to be understood, save a man should inquire of the Lord," yet he insists that the meaning will be made known if one asks "in faith . . . with diligence in keeping [the] commandments" (1 Nephi 15:3, 11). Having done so himself, he is eager to lay out Lehi's teachings as they have been explained to him in vision. He does the same with passages from Isaiah. Thereafter, he repeatedly emphasizes the "plainness" of his teachings: "I have spoken plainly . . . that ye cannot misunderstand" (2 Nephi 25:28; see also 2 Nephi 25:20; 32:7); in fact, he "glor[ies] in plainness" (2 Nephi 33:6).

Wisdom personified and the tree of life

One of the most remarkable features of Proverbs 1–9 is the personification of wisdom. This figure is first introduced in Proverbs 1:20–33. She is pictured here as a herald, crying out to get the attention of the masses "in the streets," "in the chief place of concourse," and at "the gates" of the city from where all the roads of the city fan out (Proverbs 1:20–21). These are all crowded, bustling places. Her message is directed to the general public. In Proverbs 8, she herself says that she calls to "the sons of man" (v. 4). In Proverbs 9, she sends forth "maidens" (v. 3) to help get the word out, much like the king in the parable of the marriage of the king's son sends servants to the highways to extend the invitation to as many as can be found (Matthew 22:1–14). What Wisdom has to offer is not reserved for a cadre of claimants privileged by status or inheritance, and she goes to great lengths to make sure her call is heard by all.

Likewise, Nephi teaches that Jesus "manifesteth himself unto all those who believe in him, by the power of the Holy Ghost; yea, unto

every nation, kindred, tongue, and people, working mighty miracles, signs, and wonders, among the children of men according to their faith” (2 Nephi 26:13). He goes on to elaborate. Beginning with “I say unto you that the Lord God worketh not in darkness,” Nephi emphasizes that the Lord God “layeth down his own life that he may draw all men unto him” and that “he inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile” (2 Nephi 26:23–33).

The father in Proverbs 2:1–22 explains that wisdom is more precious than silver (v. 4), and Proverbs 3:13–20 teaches that Wisdom’s merchandise is better than gold or rubies. “All the things thou canst *desire* are not to be compared unto her” (Proverbs 3:15; see also Proverbs 8:10–11, 18–19). What does she offer that is so precious and important? “She is a *tree of life* to them that lay hold upon her: and *happy* is every one that retaineth her” (Proverbs 3:18).

This calls to mind the visions of Lehi and Nephi in the Book of Mormon. When Lehi sees the *tree of life*, he knows that the “fruit [is] *desirable* to make one *happy*.” He tastes it himself, and it fills his soul with “exceedingly great *joy*,” and he finds that it is “*desirable* above all other fruit” (1 Nephi 8:10–12). Later, Nephi explains that the tree (and the fountain of living waters, an image that appears several times in Proverbs 10–31) represents “the love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of . . . men; wherefore, it is the most *desirable* above all things . . . and the most *joyous* to the soul” (1 Nephi 11:21–23).

Peterson argues that given the iconography and religious practices of Nephi’s Jerusalem, Nephi would have instantly recognized the tree of life as a symbol for the goddess Asherah. Her image stood in the temple on and off until the time of Josiah, where she may have been worshipped alongside Yahweh, apparently as his consort or wife, although not without controversy.³¹ Her image was finally removed from the temple by Josiah during his reform, which extended into Lehi’s lifetime, and from the canon after the Babylonian exile by a group of editors known as the Deuteronomists. Knowledge of this goddess was lost from the dominant religion for two and a half millennia. But in the last century, archaeological finds have confirmed her place in

31. Daniel C. Peterson, “Nephi and His Asherah: A Note on 1 Nephi 11:8–23,” in *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World: Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson*, ed. Davis Bitton (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 194–200.

the preexilic Hebrew tradition, and scholars have pieced together her ancient history and traced her memory in Judaism, Jewish mysticism, and Christianity down to the present.³²

Mainstream modern wisdom scholars remain reluctant to interpret the wisdom woman as a version of the Hebrew goddess, mostly because they date Proverbs 1–9 after the exile when Israel had become very strictly monotheistic.³³ At best, they describe her as an *emanation* of God or a *hypostasis*,³⁴ but more often just as an ordinary if vivid literary personification of an important virtue of either God or man.³⁵ Sometimes scholars suggest that she was an image borrowed from the Egyptian, Canaanite, or Greek pantheon (Ma’at, Ishtar, or Isis, respectively).³⁶

For his part, Nephi in interpreting his and his father’s visions never overtly describes the tree of life as a woman or a goddess. He never personifies wisdom at all. However, wisdom does receive an “inchoate personification”³⁷ later in the Book of Mormon. The first instance occurs when King Benjamin warns that having been taught the prophecies contained in the scriptures,

32. See generally Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*, 3rd ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990); Margaret Barker, *The Great High Priest: The Temple Roots of Christian Liturgy* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 229–61, archive.org/details/margaret-barker-the-great-high-priest-the-temple-roots-of-christian-liturgy-2003_202409/page/229/mode/2up; Peterson, “Nephi and His Asherah”; Margaret Barker, *The Mother of the Lord: Volume 1: The Lady in the Temple* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2012); and William G. Dever, *Did God Have a Wife? Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), archive.org/details/DidGodHaveAWife.

33. Alternatively, her appearance in a postexilic text could be evidence that monotheism was not universally accepted. Or it could be evidence that the text is not postexilic.

34. These are technical terms. An *emanation* is very broadly a manifestation of (otherwise transcendent) God in the world in such a way as to be apprehended by mankind. The spirit, the word, and the Shechinah are examples that non-Latter-day Saint scholars might give. A *hypostasis* is a concept or abstract quality that has developed into a deity; for example, in the Egyptian religion, the god Sia is a hypostasis of perception.

35. For example, Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 133.

36. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 334–38. Fox refutes the possibility that she was modeled on Ishtar or Ma’at but is tempted by comparisons to Isis in her late, Greek form. But the Hellenistic Isis religion did not spread abroad until the late third century BC, so Fox points out that dating presents an impediment to this hypothesis.

37. The term is Fox’s, *Proverbs 1–9*, 331. An *inchoate personification* is “where person-metaphors are used in passing but not developed as figures.”

if ye should transgress and go contrary to that which has been spoken, that ye do withdraw yourselves from the Spirit of the Lord, that it may have no place in you to guide you in wisdom's paths that ye may be blessed, prospered, and preserved — I say unto you, that the man that doeth this, the same cometh out in open rebellion against God; therefore he listeth to obey the evil spirit. (Mosiah 2:36–37)

The second instance of the personification of wisdom is when King Limhi, after receiving assurance from Ammon that the king of Zarahemla, as a seer, would be able to translate the Jaredite plates, exclaims:

O how marvelous are the works of the Lord, and how long doth he suffer with his people; yea, and how blind and impenetrable are the understandings of the children of men; for they will not seek wisdom, neither do they desire that she should rule over them! (Mosiah 8:20)

The third and final example of wisdom's personification in the Book of Mormon is in what appears to be an editorial remark by Mormon. Commenting on the descent of the Nephites into wickedness shortly before the birth of Christ, he appropriates wisdom vocabulary to lament their foolishness, vanity, and pride:

How slow are they to remember the Lord their God, and to give ear unto his counsels, yea, how slow to walk in wisdom's paths! (Helaman 12:5)

These three Book of Mormon personifications are all consistent with the personification of wisdom in Proverbs 1–9. In King Benjamin's warning, submission to the Spirit for guidance on wisdom's paths is contrasted with submission to the evil spirit, which results in psychological pain described in terms of hell: "guilt, and pain, and anguish, which is like an unquenchable fire, whose flame ascendeth up forever and ever" (Mosiah 2:38). This is like the contrast in Proverbs between wisdom's shining path and folly's dark path toward Sheol, which we will discuss in greater detail below.

King Limhi's exclamation recalls the fools of Proverbs 1:20–33, who refuse the counsel and reproof of wisdom. Moreover, the translation preserves the *feminine* personification of wisdom, using *she* rather than the neuter pronoun *it* to refer to the antecedent *wisdom*.³⁸

38. *îokmāh*, the Hebrew word most often behind the English translation

The translation as well as the literary image both nod toward Hebrew wisdom materials.

But all of these Book of Mormon personifications occur hundreds of years after Nephi recorded his vision of the tree of life. His interpretation of the tree is that it (and the fountain of waters) represents the love of God.³⁹ He also interprets for his brothers the other symbols related to the tree, introducing terminology and concepts that are shared with Proverbs 1–9. He explains, for example, that those who hold fast to the word of God (the iron rod) that leads to the tree will “never perish; neither [will] the temptations and the fiery darts of the adversary . . . lead them away to destruction” (1 Nephi 15:22–24). He tells them that the tree’s fruit “is most precious and most desirable above all other fruits . . . and it is the greatest of all the gifts of God” (1 Nephi 15:36). The evil power of flattery, paths toward destruction or happiness, and joy itself are three themes from Proverbs 1–9.

Eternal life

As the similarities between Nephi’s writings and Proverbs 1–9 begin to mount, it is worth turning aside from our comparison momentarily to use Nephi’s plainness to help clarify the message of Proverbs. Most commentators on Proverbs understand that the *happiness*⁴⁰ derived from finding wisdom means a pleasant or successful earthly existence, and that the *length of days* that wisdom promises (Proverbs 3:2, 16; see 8:34–35 and 9:11) refers to a long mortal life. Nephi’s teachings, though, make it clear that on a deeper level, what is promised is *eternal life*. Most explicitly, Nephi in his final testament says that the “straight and narrow path . . . leads to eternal life” (2 Nephi 31:18; see 1 Nephi 14:7; 2 Nephi 31:19–21; 2:27–29). “The wise shall inherit glory,” reads Proverbs 3:35; and the verses in Proverbs 4:6, 9 promise that

wisdom, is a feminine noun and thus requires feminine pronouns in Hebrew. The English noun, however, is neuter, and usually takes the genderless pronoun *it*.

39. “The love of God” in English can be a double entendre. In this context, it could mean a feeling of love from or about God. It could also refer to the person whom God loves, in the same way that I might say that my husband is “my love.” My thanks to Kevin Christensen for making this observation.

40. There seems to be wordplay in Proverbs 3:18, where the promise is made that those who find the tree of life will be happy. The word *ašrē*, here translated as “happy” and elsewhere as “blessed,” comes from the root *šr* and underlies the word *asherah* as well. Peterson, “Nephi and his Asherah,” 212. See also Proverbs 8:32, 34. Bliss formulas (happy is the man . . . blessed is he . . .) are sometimes called *’ashrē* sayings.

wisdom will “preserve thee” and “keep thee,” delivering “a crown of glory.” In view of instructional wisdom from the Book of Mormon, we can be sure that these Old Testament passages are promising *eternal* glory to those who love and follow wisdom. It is increasingly clear that Proverbs 1–9 is hardly mundane, practical advice but rather counsel of eternal import.

The strange woman and the great whore

We return to our search for motifs common to both the small plates and Proverbs 1–9. In Proverbs, a significant figure known as the “strange woman” is contrasted with Wisdom. Lectures on the strange woman include Proverbs 2:16–22, 5:1–13, 6:20–35, and 7:1–27. The figure is most fully developed in Proverbs 9:13–18, and is sometimes referred to here as “Lady Folly” or “Dame Folly.” In Proverbs 2:1–22, the strange woman has a wicked male counterpart, the “evil man” (v. 12). The strange woman is a seducing adulteress, and illicit relations with her are contrasted with legitimate relations with one’s wife.

The strange woman is characterized primarily by her smooth, flattering tongue and her disloyalty to her husband. She ventures forth from her house to entice her victims, calling them “in the high places of the city” (Proverbs 9:14), not unlike Wisdom. Her words “drop as an honeycomb, and her mouth is smoother than oil” (Proverbs 5:3). But like the evil man (Proverbs 2:12–15), she dupes the fools she hunts into leaving the path of life and following her downward on paths of death, resulting in the destruction of their souls. The father in Proverbs 7:1–27 elaborates the seduction, vividly describing the scene and the strange woman’s flattering words in order to imprint the danger—and the allure—of sexual transgression on the mind of his offspring. “Her house is the *way to hell*, going down to the chambers of *death*” (Proverbs 7:27). “Her guests are in the *depths of hell*” (Proverbs 9:18). Instead of veering off on this perilous path, the youth in Proverbs 5:15–19 is encouraged to “drink waters out of thine own cistern,” meaning that he should find sexual pleasure with his own wife, and to be “ravished always with her love.”

Protection from the seductive dangers of the strange woman comes by “attend[ing] to wisdom” (Proverbs 5:1), by keeping the commandments and embracing Wisdom as one’s friend and intimate. “Say unto wisdom, Thou art my sister; and call understanding thy kinswoman,” teaches Proverbs 7:4. Where the strange woman’s way leads downward to Sheol, Wisdom’s followers stay on the “*the paths of life*”

(Proverbs 2:19). She leads "in *the way of righteousness*" (Proverbs 8:20). Her path is pleasant (Proverbs 3:17) and bright, shining "more and more unto the perfect day" (Proverbs 4:18).

Now we turn to the Book of Mormon for a comparison. Admonitions about sexual behavior are infrequent in biblical wisdom literature outside of Proverbs 1–9,⁴¹ though they do occur in extrabiblical wisdom sources such as *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*. Extended warnings about sexual sin occur twice in the Book of Mormon. Jacob, taking note of a declining family structure among his people, gathers them in the temple and delivers an admonishment from the Lord:

There shall not any man among you have save it be one wife; and concubines he shall have none; For I, the Lord God, delight in the chastity of women. And whoredoms are an abomination before me. (Jacob 2:27–28)

The husbands are not to "*lead away captive* the daughters of my people because of their tenderness, save I shall visit them with a sore curse, even unto *destruction*" (Jacob 2:33). Though Jacob delivers this warning to the people as the Lord's mouthpiece rather than as a patriarch admonishing his children, the themes of fidelity and captivity are straight from the wisdom tradition of Proverbs 1–9.

In Alma the Younger's patriarchal admonition to Corianton, he chastises him for boasting in his own strength and wisdom and taking up with the harlot Isabel. Like the strange woman of Proverbs, she "*did steal away* the hearts of many," but this is no excuse. Alma teaches that sexual sin is "an abomination in the sight of the Lord," almost as serious as murder or denying the Holy Ghost (Alma 39:3–6). He warns Corianton not "to be *led away* by any *vain* or *foolish* thing; suffer not the devil to *lead away* your heart again after those wicked harlots" (Alma 39:11). The image is comparable to the flattering strange woman or evil man of Proverbs.

But the most striking comparison in the Book of Mormon to the strange woman in Proverbs is Nephi's image of a seductive evil woman. He calls her the "great whore" or the "whore of all the earth." The image appears first in Nephi's tree-of-life vision as the "large and spacious building," which the angel says is "the world and the *wisdom* thereof" (1 Nephi 11:35). As the vision is extended and applied to the history of the world, the image becomes "the great and abominable church," founded by the devil and preoccupied with earthly treasures,

41. Fox, *Proverbs* 1–9, 260n177.

sexual sin, and the praise of the world (1 Nephi 13:4–9). For these idols the church “destroy[s] the saints of God, and bring[s] them down into *captivity*” (1 Nephi 13:9). In 1 Nephi 13:26–27, this church is guilty of “tak[ing] away from the gospel of the Lamb many parts which are plain and most precious; and also many covenants of the Lord” in order to “pervert the right *ways of the Lord*.”

It is in 1 Nephi 14:10 that this evil church is first personified as “the mother of abominations” and “the whore of all the earth.” Nephi tells later of the church’s great fall into the very pit it had “dugged to ensnare the people of the Lord” (1 Nephi 22:13–14). He associates her again with Satan (1 Nephi 22:15) and subtly contrasts her with Isaiah’s image of the grieving mother Zion (1 Nephi 21:14–25; 22:25).

The motif returns for a last time in 2 Nephi 26–28. Nephi describes the Gentiles of the last days as building up many churches that minimize “the power and miracles of God.” Rather, they “preach up unto themselves their own *wisdom* and their own *learning*, that they may get gain and grind upon the face of the poor” (2 Nephi 26:20). Nephi introduces “secret combinations” here, which he says are founded by the devil (2 Nephi 26:22). They bring to mind the gangs of Proverbs 1:8–19, established to kill the innocent in order to acquire their “precious substance” (Proverbs 1:13). Nephi also speaks of “priestcrafts,” which are organized to “get gain and praise of the world” (2 Nephi 26:29). He teaches that those who belong to the great and abominable church must repent or be grasped by the chains of the devil and perish.

Nephi warns of the seductive powers of the devil, who, like the evil man of Proverbs 2:12–15, uses his power of speech to deceive and ensnare. He will stir some up to anger, while pacifying others, lulling them into a feeling of security, flattering them, whispering in their ears “until he grasps them with his awful *chains*” (2 Nephi 28:19–23). Like the strange woman whose paths are “unto the dead” (Proverbs 2:18) and the evil man whose paths are dark and crooked (Proverbs 2:15), the devil “cheateth their souls, and *leadeth them away* carefully down to *hell*” (2 Nephi 28:21).

The wicked of the last days will hearken “unto the precepts of men, and den[y] the power of God, and the gift of the Holy Ghost” (2 Nephi 28:26). They will refuse the word of God, believing that they have enough, and will consequently lose that which they already have (2 Nephi 28:29–30). “Cursed is he that putteth his trust in . . . the precepts of men, save their precepts shall be given by the power of

the Holy Ghost" (2 Nephi 28:31). This is like those in Proverbs who adhere to the teachings of the strange woman, forsaking the "*guide* of [their] youth" — wisdom — and forgetting "the covenant of [their] God" (Proverbs 2:17), in favor of the flattering words of the evil woman. The risk is to "die without instruction," having by a rejection of the knowledge of God become "holden with the *CORDS* of . . . sin" (Proverbs 5:22–23; compare Satan's *CORDS* in 2 Nephi 26:22 and the "*CORDS* of vanity" and *ROPE* of sin in 2 Nephi 15:18, parallel to Isaiah 5:18).

In Proverbs, Wisdom is not sympathetic:

Because I have called, and ye refused; I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded; but ye have set at nought all my counsel, and would none of my reproof: I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh; when your fear cometh as desolation, and your destruction cometh as a whirlwind; when distress and anguish cometh upon you. Then shall they call upon me, but I will not answer; they shall seek me early, but they shall not find me: for that they hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the Lord: they would none of my counsel: they despised all my reproof. Therefore shall they eat of the fruit of their own way, and be filled with their own devices. (Proverbs 1:24–31)

Nephi, however, offers hope even at the very last:

Wo be unto the Gentiles, saith the Lord God of Hosts! For notwithstanding I shall lengthen out mine arm unto them from day to day, they will deny me; nevertheless, I will be merciful unto them, saith the Lord God, if they will repent and come unto me; for mine arm is lengthened out all the day long, saith the Lord God of Hosts. (2 Nephi 28:32)

Paths toward hell and paths toward life

Another particularly significant metaphor in instructional proverbs is the two-paths dichotomy. Wisdom calls men to follow her on the *shining* path of the righteous (Proverbs 2:20; 4:18), while the strange woman leads on the *dark* path of the wicked (e.g., Proverbs 4:14, 19). Fox explains that as "the ground metaphor of Prov 1–9," this image "organizes other perceptions and images and conveys a way of perceiving the world."⁴² He notes that another scholar proposes that the

42. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 128–29.

two-paths metaphor does not stand by itself as the ground metaphor, but is closely coordinated with a second ground metaphor—the two women.⁴³ Fox also shows that while a path metaphor likewise permeates Egyptian wisdom literature, instructions in these sources are about the “way of life” and do not include the notion of an opposing path. According to Fox, “the polarity of the [two paths] is a deliberate development in Proverbs.”⁴⁴

As is apparent from our earlier discussion of the great whore, the two-paths metaphor is also manifested in the Book of Mormon. In fact, Mack C. Stirling has argued that the portrayal of two diverging and opposing paths, one leading toward life and one toward death, is “the fundamental conceptual substrate for the view of reality held by the Book of Mormon prophets.”⁴⁵ Stirling shows that the Book of Mormon presents a unified message that during probation, “men either hearken to the voice of Christ and progressively acquire spiritual life or they hearken to the voice of the devil and progressively descend into spiritual death.”⁴⁶ He explains that “those in the way of life become progressively *sanctified* by the Holy Ghost.”⁴⁷ More recently, Noel B. Reynolds has explored how the two ways doctrine is taught in the Book of Mormon, concluding that it expands on the Biblical usage with distinctly Christ-centered explanations that integrate repentance, covenant, and the life-vs-death path.⁴⁸ It is significant indeed to recognize that both Proverbs 1–9 and the Book of Mormon are internally unified around the same metaphor.

But we have gotten ahead of ourselves and have yet to explore specific examples of the two-paths metaphor in the Book of Mormon—limiting ourselves in this section to examples from Nephi’s books. Leading to the tree of life is a strait and narrow path; one stays on this path, even when darkness moves in, by clinging to the rod of

43. Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, as noted by Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 129n115.

44. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 130.

45. Mack C. Stirling, “The Way of Life and the Way of Death in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6, no. 2 (1997): 153, scholar-sarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol6/iss2/20/. Stirling notes a similar dualism in certain Dead Sea Scroll texts and in the writings of John but does not mention earlier wisdom texts (p. 194). He believes that this dualistic perception of reality was revealed to the prophets by God (p. 193).

46. Stirling, “Way of Life,” 152.

47. Stirling, “Way of Life,” 188, emphasis in original.

48. Noel B. Reynolds, “The Ancient Doctrine of the Two Ways and the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (2017): 49–78, byustudies.byu.edu/article/the-ancient-doctrine-of-the-two-ways-and-the-book-of-mormon

iron, which stands for the word of God (1 Nephi 8:19–25; 11:25; 15:24). “Forbidden paths” and “strange roads” also figure into Lehi’s vision (1 Nephi 8:28, 32), and the angel explains to Nephi that “mists of *darkness* are the temptations of the devil, which . . . leadeth them away into broad roads, that they perish and are lost” (1 Nephi 12:17; see also 2 Nephi 28:21).

Jacob teaches that the Holy One is the “keeper of the gate” of the strait and narrow path (2 Nephi 9:41; compare 2 Nephi 31:17–18). He will not open the gate for the wise, vain, or proud, but only for those who “consider themselves fools before God” (2 Nephi 9:42; note the counterintuitive wisdom reversal of “wise” and “foolish”). Nephi engages in an unusual depiction of the interplay between Christ and the Holy Ghost as guides to and on the righteous path. He says that Jesus’s example leads the children of men to the gate—to repentance and baptism (2 Nephi 31:9, 13)⁴⁹—where they then experience “a remission of . . . sins by fire and by the Holy Ghost” (2 Nephi 31:17). Then, once they have thereby entered “the strait and narrow path which leads to eternal life” (2 Nephi 31:18), the *Holy Ghost* becomes their life-long guide, showing them “all things what [they] should do” (2 Nephi 32:5) by giving them the “words of Christ” (2 Nephi 32:3).

This is similar to the counsel about the guidance of wisdom in Proverbs: “I will pour out my *spirit* unto you. I will make known my *words* unto you” (Proverbs 1:23). “For the Lord giveth wisdom: out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding. . . . When wisdom entereth into thine heart, and knowledge is pleasant unto thy soul; discretion shall preserve thee, understanding shall keep thee: to deliver thee from the way of the evil man” (Proverbs 2:6, 10–12). “Keep sound wisdom and discretion. . . . Then shalt thou walk in thy way safely, and thy foot shall not stumble” (Proverbs 3:21, 23). “My son, keep thy father’s commandment, and forsake not the law of thy mother. . . . When thou goest, it shall lead thee; when thou sleepest, it shall keep thee; and when thou awakest, it shall talk with thee” (Proverbs 6:20, 22). Clearly, whereas in Proverbs the guide that opposes the strange woman is the wisdom figure, for Nephi, the guide on the strait and narrow path that is rejected by the great and abominable church is the Holy Ghost.

49. For a nuanced explanation of the Holy Ghost’s role before baptism, see Dallin H. Oaks, “Always Have His Spirit,” *Ensign*, November 1996, 59–61, especially p. 60, where he says that “manifestations of the Holy Ghost are given to lead sincere seekers to gospel truths that will persuade them to repentance and baptism,” after which they receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.

Nephi closely associates the Holy Ghost with the word of God, just as Wisdom is linked to the law and the commandments in Proverbs 1–9.⁵⁰

Reflections on the Holy Ghost, Wisdom, and the mysteries of God

Nephi explains that “angels speak by the power of the Holy Ghost” and that they speak the “words of Christ” (2 Nephi 32:3). The role of angels in the Old Testament is to serve as messengers from the divine assembly of Yahweh. The English word *angel* is from the Greek *angelos* and means “messenger.” As messengers from the *sod*, their function is to deliver the counsels of Yahweh. They bring “the words of Christ” exactly as that word is decreed in heaven and according to the instructions of the God they serve.⁵¹ By relating the Holy Ghost with angels because the Holy Ghost gives them the power to speak the words of Christ, Nephi establishes that the Holy Ghost gives angels the authority or capability to act as agents of Yahweh.

Moreover, angels and prophets are most effective when they deliver their instructions by the power of the Holy Ghost. Nephi implies this in 2 Nephi 33:1. In fact, he himself as a scribe worries that his words will not carry the power that they do when spoken, “for when a man speaketh by the power of the Holy Ghost the power of the Holy Ghost carrieth it unto the hearts of the children of men” (2 Nephi 33:1).

Much as the Holy Ghost makes angels and prophets capable of teaching with power, the Holy Ghost grants mankind the capability of experiencing the transcendent visionary or auditory experiences of learning from heavenly beings or of standing in the presence of God. It is “upon the wings of his Spirit” that Nephi is carried “upon exceedingly high mountains” to behold things too great to be written (2 Nephi 4:25). It is by the power of the Holy Ghost that Christ “manifesteth himself unto all those who believe in him” (2 Nephi 26:13). “Overcome with the Spirit,” Lehi “was carried away” in vision to the heavenly assembly, where he saw God on his throne surrounded by angels (1 Nephi 1:8). Nephi was so taken with his father’s dreams and teachings which he spoke “by the power of the Holy Ghost,” that he too “was desirous also

50. Wisdom is associated with the word of God in other texts as well. See, for example, Sirach 19:20. In medieval Jewish kabbalistic lore, the feminine presence of God, the Shechinah/Matronit, was also linked with the Torah. She was said to dwell with those who studied the Law. See, for example, Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 145.

51. Peterson, “‘Ye Are Gods,’” 499–504.

that [he] might see, and hear, and know of these things, by the power of the Holy Ghost" (1 Nephi 10:17).

So, to have the companionship of the Holy Ghost is to be privy to the plans of Yahweh's heavenly council—to the mysteries of God—or to receive personal testimony of these mysteries when they are delivered by angels or prophets.

This lends weight to the earlier contention that Proverbs' promise that those who really hear and understand the teachings of Proverbs "shall attain unto wise counsels" (Proverbs 1:5) means learning the mysteries of God as Nephi did. In fact, Nephi's exuberance to learn ("I, Nephi, was desirous also that I might see, and hear, and know of these things" [1 Nephi 10:17]) and his insistence that such learning is accessible to the faithful ("he that diligently seeketh shall find; and the mysteries of God shall be unfolded unto them, by the power of the Holy Ghost" [1 Nephi 10:19]) is an apt demonstration of the persistent searching advocated in Proverbs 1–9. "If thou criest after knowledge, and liftest up thy voice for understanding . . . then shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God" is the promise of Proverbs 2:3. Likewise, the father in Proverbs 4:7 exhorts his children: "Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding."

More Wisdom speech in Nephi's record

Before leaving our exploration of wisdom affinities in the small plates of Nephi, we should draw our attention to several more obvious parallels with Hebrew wisdom.

The first is in connection with the prosperity promise first recorded by Lehi: "Inasmuch as [they] shall keep his commandments, they shall prosper upon the face of this land . . . and they shall dwell *safely* forever" (2 Nephi 1:9). Notably, Lehi precedes this promise with the explanation that "it is *wisdom* that this land should be kept as yet from the knowledge of other nations" (2 Nephi 1:8). When his descendants dwindle in unbelief, having once had great knowledge and power, the Lord will "take away from them the lands of their possessions, and he will cause them to be scattered and smitten" (2 Nephi 1:11). Proverbs includes a very similar promise and warning in Proverbs 1:24–33, concluding with the reassurance that "whoso hearkeneth unto me shall dwell *safely*."

Another parallel is that the classic wisdom motifs of remembering, hearkening, waking, seeing, or hearing are repeated throughout

1 and 2 Nephi and Jacob (and indeed later in the Book of Mormon). In Proverbs, we see it in exhortations such as “*forget not my law; but let thine heart keep my commandments*” (Proverbs 3:1) and “*keep my words, and lay up my commandments with thee. . . . Bind them upon thy fingers, write them upon the table of thine heart*” (Proverbs 7:1, 3). The parents urge their son or children to “*hear*” (e.g., Proverbs 1:5, 8; 4:1), “*hearken*” (Proverbs 1:33), “*receive*” (Proverbs 2:1), “*incline thine ear*” (Proverbs 2:2), “*apply thine heart*” (Proverbs 2:2), “*attend*,” and “*bow thine ear*” (Proverbs 5:1).⁵² They are prodding their children to hear and see in a different way, with new insight. The speaker of interlude C exclaims, “How long wilt thou sleep, O sluggard? when wilt thou *arise* out of thy *sleep*?” (Proverbs 6:9; compare Proverbs 6:4 and 20:12–13).

In the Book of Mormon, Lehi makes frequent use of this call in his testament (2 Nephi 1–4). He begs his sons to “*remember*,” “*hearken* unto [his] words,” and “*awake* from a deep *sleep*, yea, even from the *sleep* of hell” (2 Nephi 1:12–13). Nephi pleads with his own soul to “*awake . . . ! No longer droop in sin*” (2 Nephi 4:28). Jacob renews the call in Jacob 3:11: “O my brethren, *hearken* unto my words; arouse the faculties of your souls; shake yourselves that ye may *awake* from the *slumber* of death.”⁵³ King Benjamin uses similar language in his temple speech, and remembering becomes part of the sacrament prayers. Indeed, Louis Midgley has shown that remembrance is a pervasive theme throughout the Book of Mormon, noting that remembrance in the Book of Mormon is not just the recall of information but “results in action.”⁵⁴

Yet another connection in Nephi’s record to the wisdom tradition is admiration of Isaiah, who is often quoted and interpreted by Nephi and Jacob, and later on by other Book of Mormon figures. Isaiah’s writings are certainly not classified as wisdom texts, but William J. Whedbee

52. These injunctions often occur in the exordia as calls to attention.

53. For a discussion about how Lehi’s admonitions impact the teachings of his son Jacob, including use of the call to awake, see John A. Tvedtnes, “The Influence of Lehi’s Admonitions on the Teachings of His Son Jacob,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3, no. 2 (1994): 34–48, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1063&context=jbms.

54. Louis Midgley, “The Ways of Remembrance,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1991), 169. See also Midgley, “‘To Remember and Keep’: On the Book of Mormon as an Ancient Book,” in *Disciple as Scholar*, 95–137.

has made a persuasive case that Isaiah drew extensively on wisdom forms and vocabulary and adapted them for his own teachings.⁵⁵ He argues that Isaiah's use of parables and proverbs from nature and empirical experience, his woe oracles, and his use of the term *counsel* are evidence of wisdom influence. To be sure, Isaiah seems to denounce the "wise men" of his day, but Whedbee claims that "Isaiah . . . borrowed the vocabulary and traditions of wisdom in order to combat the apostasy engendered in part by the royal wise men." He uses the wisdom tradition to "condemn the ostensibly wise and to defend the true Yahwistic wisdom,"⁵⁶ which is that "Yahweh was a master counsellor, who always executed his plan with the right method for the right time (Isa. 28:23ff.)."⁵⁷ Many of the passages Whedbee refers to in Isaiah to prove his points are also quoted in the Book of Mormon.

Nephi and Jacob follow Isaiah's practice of using wisdom speech to craft a message for their particular problems in their particular setting. It is striking to discover that in connection with his interpretation of Isaiah, Jacob delivers a remarkable wisdom discourse in 2 Nephi 9:28–43, 50–53, which actually helps bolster some of Whedbee's arguments. Jacob teaches explicitly that the so-called wise who "hearken not unto the *counsel* of God, for they set it aside, supposing they know of themselves" are the real fools (2 Nephi 9:28). He teaches clearly that "to be learned is good if they hearken unto the *counsels* of God" (2 Nephi 9:29). It is also worth noting that Whedbee links the terms *counsel* or *plan* used by Isaiah to a very early wisdom tradition regarding the heavenly assembly.⁵⁸

Jacob launches next into a series of woe indictments (2 Nephi 9:27–38). Whedbee points out that "Isaiah has far and away the greatest concentration of woes of any book in the Old Testament."⁵⁹ Though he admits to a "paucity of woe forms in the extant wisdom literature,"⁶⁰ yet he argues that the woe formula originated in the wisdom tradition and stood as a contrast to the bliss formulas or *'ashrê* sayings ("blessed is

55. See generally J. William Whedbee, *Isaiah and Wisdom* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), archive.org/details/isaiahwisdom0000whed.

56. Whedbee, *Isaiah and Wisdom*, 147.

57. Whedbee, *Isaiah and Wisdom*, 145.

58. Whedbee, *Isaiah and Wisdom*, 112–13, citing Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 2, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 162, and others.

59. Whedbee, *Isaiah and Wisdom*, 80.

60. Whedbee, *Isaiah and Wisdom*, 85.

he . . .” or “happy is he . . .”) seen in the Psalms and in Proverbs.⁶¹ We cannot know if Jacob used his woe statements because he was following the practice of Isaiah or the wisdom tradition in general, but it is remarkable that his list of woes includes warnings to the *wise*, the *rich*, the *deaf* that will not *hear*, the *blind* that will not see, the uncircumcised of *heart*, and others who are blatantly *rebellious* — all categories of the *foolish* in the wisdom tradition.⁶² He follows his indictments with a warning that only those who “consider themselves *fools* before God” will be admitted through the gate kept by the Holy One (2 Nephi 9:41–42). In an invitation much like Wisdom’s in Proverbs 9:5, which we will return to later, Jacob says: “Come, my brethren, every one that *thirsteth*, come ye to the *waters*; and he that hath no money, come buy and eat” (2 Nephi 9:50; compare Isaiah 55:1 and 2 Nephi 26:25).

Finally, before leaving our study of wisdom in the small plates, we should highlight some of the wisdom influences in Jacob’s admonition in Jacob 2–6. I have already indicated that his message is structured in the usual three parts of a classic passage of instructional wisdom: *exordium*, lesson, and conclusion. After giving advice about the conditions that make seeking *riches* appropriate and counsel about how to treat the *poor* (Jacob 2:12–22) — wisdom topics, to be sure — Jacob leaves pride and turns to sexual sin, which is another wisdom theme particularly manifest in Proverbs 1–9, as we discussed earlier. Jacob 4 contains elements reminiscent of Job 28:

How unsearchable are the *depths* of the mysteries of him;
and it is impossible that man should find out all his *ways*. And
no man *knoweth* of his *ways* save it be revealed unto him;
wherefore, brethren, despise not the revelations of God.
(Jacob 4:8)

Where shall wisdom be found? and where is the place of
understanding? . . . The *depth* saith, It is not in me: and the
sea saith, It is not with me. . . . *Seeing* it is hid from the eyes
of all living, and kept close from the fowls of the air. . . . God
understandeth the way thereof, and he *knoweth* the place
thereof. (Job 28:12, 14, 21, 23)

61. For example, Psalms 106:3; 41:1; Proverbs 3:13; 8:34. See also Isaiah 3:10–11 and Ecclesiastes 10:16–17. See Whedbee, *Isaiah and Wisdom*, 87–90.

62. John W. Welch has compared Jacob’s ten woes with the Ten Commandments. See Welch, “Counting to Ten,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12, no. 2 (2003): 49, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1325&context=jbms.

The Jews . . . sought for things that they could not understand. Wherefore, because of their *blindness*, which *blindness* came by looking beyond the mark, they must needs fall; for God hath taken away his plainness from them, and delivered unto them many things which they cannot *understand*. (Jacob 4:14)

Finally, Jacob recounts Zenos’s extensive allegory of the tame and wild olive trees. Use of such an allegory from the natural world — especially one with female tree imagery — is a hallmark of the wisdom tradition. Jacob’s last injunction is wisdom language at its simplest: “O be wise; what can I say more?” (Jacob 6:12).

King Benjamin and Temple Wisdom

It should be clear by now that shared motifs and vocabulary between the small plates and Proverbs 1–9 are numerous and significant. As we move on to Mosiah 1–5, the comparison is only intensified. John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks have called this the most eloquent, insightful, and profound speech in sacred literature, aside from the words of Christ himself.⁶³ So genuine similarities between Mosiah 1–5 and Proverbs 1–9 will enrich our understanding of the Book of Mormon, as well as in the other direction, our understanding of Proverbs and its enigmas.

We can begin the comparison by recognizing that King Benjamin’s speech is structured similarly to Proverbs: it is composed of several sections separated by ceremonial breaks or interludes (see table 3).⁶⁴

Table 3. Composition of Mosiah 1–6:3.

Preparation	1:1–2:8	Successor named and new name to be given; people gathered; tower constructed
Instruction I		
Section 1	2:9–28	All are indebted to God
Break A	2:29–30	<i>Coronation announcement</i>

63. John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks, eds., *King Benjamin’s Speech: “That Ye May Learn Wisdom”* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), ix, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/mi/45/.

64. John W. Welch, “Parallelism and Chiasmus in Benjamin’s Speech,” in *King Benjamin’s Speech*, 326–27. Welch thoroughly analyzes the chiasmus that characterizes the composition of the speech. The composition given here is Welch’s, with the exception of the groupings into instructions, which is mine.

Instruction II		
Section 2	3:31–41	Consequences of obedience of disobedience
Break B	2:41–3:1	<i>Exhortation to remember and renewal of call to attention</i>
Instruction III		
Section 3	3:2–10	The angel's testimony of Christ's deeds
Section 4	3:11–27	Sanctification by the Atonement of Christ
Break C	3:27–4:4	<i>The people fall to the ground and request application of atoning blood of Christ; the Spirit of the Lord comes; they receive remission and feel joy and peace</i>
Instruction IV		
Section 5	4:4–12	Benjamin's testimony of God's goodness
Section 6	4:13–30	Righteous behavior of the redeemed
Break D	4:30–5:6	<i>Exhortation to remember: covenant response of the people; Benjamin accepts their covenant</i>
Instruction V		
Section 7	5:6–15	The sons and daughters of God
Final acts	6:1–3	Names recorded of all who accepted the name; Mosiah consecrated; priests appointed; people dismissed

Similar to the prologues of Proverbs and Nephi's record, the preparation section recounts King Benjamin's endeavors to teach his sons the mysteries and commandments of God. In both 1 Nephi 1 and Mosiah 1, emphasis is placed on the importance of records to facilitate instruction.

Welch has argued that the number of sections — seven — is significant and has shown how they relate to each other in a chiasmatic pattern.⁶⁵ However, in comparing King Benjamin's speech to instructional wisdom, it is useful to adjust the groupings of the sections in order to see that the king's speech is made up of five instructions, and like the proverbial instructions, all but the last one are tripartite in structure.

In the preparation section, like in Proverbs, Benjamin explicitly addresses his "sons" (Mosiah 1:3, for example). But in the *exordia* of the following sections, in contrast to Proverbs, King Benjamin addresses his audience not as "sons" but rather as his "brethren" (instructions I, II — Mosiah 2:9, for example), then as his "friends," "brethren," "kindred," and "people" (instruction IV — Mosiah 4:4).⁶⁶ And though the last

65. Welch, "Parallelism and Chiasmus," 373–76.
66. The angel's exordium, instruction III, does not include a direct address, but

section (instruction V) does not include an *exordium*, the very topic under consideration is the name by which the people shall be called:

Ye shall be called the children of Christ, his sons, and his daughters. . . . Whosoever shall not take upon him the name of Christ must be called by some other name; therefore, he findeth himself on the left hand of God. (Mosiah 5:7, 10)

This is one of many clues that we shall find in King Benjamin's speech that helps us understand that the instructions of Proverbs 1–9 may have a ritual significance. The "sons" who are urged repeatedly to seek for wisdom may be understood to be the potential "sons of God," and the father behind the proverbial instructions may be Christ himself or a high priest or king standing in his stead.

Of all the sections of King Benjamin's speech, the two most readily comparable to Proverbs 1–9 are the parallel sections 2 (of instruction II; Mosiah 2:31–41) and 6 (of instruction IV; Mosiah 4:13–30). But throughout his speech, King Benjamin invokes themes familiar from Proverbs. Table 4 samples the similarities.

Table 4. Thematic similarities between King Benjamin's speech and Proverbs 1–9.

Theme	King Benjamin	Proverbs
Hearken/Hear/See	"Hearken unto me, and open your ears that ye may hear, and your hearts that ye may understand, and your minds that the mysteries of God may be unfolded to your view" (Mosiah 2:9)	"Incline thine ear unto wisdom, and apply thine heart to understanding" (Proverbs 2:2)
Remember	"O remember, remember that these things are true" (Mosiah 2:41)	"My son, forget not my law; but let thine heart keep my commandments" (Proverbs 3:1)
Awake	"If the knowledge of the goodness of God at this time has awakened you" (Mosiah 4:5)	"How long wilt thou sleep, O sluggard? When wilt thou arise out of thy sleep?" (Proverbs 6:4, 9–11; compare Proverbs 20:12–13)
Pour out Spirit	"He has poured out his Spirit upon you" (Mosiah 4:20)	"I will pour out my spirit unto you" (Proverbs 1:23)

does include a call to attention ("awake, and hear") and a motivation ("that [thy people] may also be filled with joy"). See Mosiah 3:2–4.

Theme	King Benjamin	Proverbs
Seek not riches/ Gold and silver	I “have not sought gold nor silver nor any manner of riches of you” (Mosiah 2:12)	“Riches and honour are with me. . . . My fruit is better than gold . . . and my revenue than choice silver” (Proverbs 8:13–19)
Prosperity/Safety	“If ye shall keep the commandments . . . of God . . . ye shall prosper in the land” (Mosiah 2:31)	“The upright shall dwell in the land” (Proverbs 2:21)
Evil spirit/ Contention/ Rebellion	If “ye do withdraw yourselves from the Spirit of the Lord . . . the same cometh out in open rebellion against God; therefore he listeth to obey the evil spirit” (Mosiah 2:36–37)	“When wisdom entereth into thine heart . . . to deliver thee from the way of the evil man, from the man that speaketh froward things . . . who rejoice to do evil” (Proverbs 2:10, 12, 14)
Guide on right paths	“That ye do withdraw yourselves from the Spirit of the Lord, that it may have no place in you to guide you in wisdom’s paths” (Mosiah 2:36)	“I have taught thee in the way of wisdom; I have led thee in right paths” (Proverbs 4:11); the strange woman “forsaketh the guide of her youth, and forgetteth the covenant of her God” (Proverbs 2:17)
Happiness/ Blessedness/Joy	“The Spirit of the Lord came upon them, and they were filled with joy, having received a remission of their sins, and having peace of conscience” (Mosiah 4:3)	“Happy is the man that findeth wisdom. . . . Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace” (Proverbs 3:13, 17)
Seek knowledge of God	If ye “humble yourselves . . . calling on the name of the Lord daily. . . . Ye shall grow in the knowledge of the glory of him that created you, or in the knowledge of that which is just and true” (Mosiah 4:11–12)	“If thou criest after knowledge, and liftest up thy voice for understanding . . . then shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God” (Proverbs 2:3, 5)
Impart substance to your neighbor	“Ye ought to impart of the substance that ye have one to another” (Mosiah 4:21)	“Withhold not good from them to whom it is due” (Proverbs 3:27)

The similarities are so marked that it is not unreasonable to explore a new interpretation of the setting for Proverbs 1–9. Much has been written by Latter-day Saint scholars arguing that the context for King Benjamin’s speech was very likely an ancient Israelite festival or

coronation ceremony.⁶⁷ As Benjamin addresses his people from the temple on the occasion of a festival prescribed by Mosaic law, perhaps we may set the exhortations of Proverbs 1–9 at a similarly solemn place and occasion. The father and at times the mother delivering the instructions could be figurative for the Heavenly King and Queen, or at least for the earthly high priest and priestess, or king (and queen?), standing ceremonially in the place of Yahweh.⁶⁸ King Benjamin explicitly teaches that those who have been born of Christ are called his sons and daughters (Mosiah 5:7). When the Lord accepts David's offer to build a temple, the Lord says, "I will be his father, and he shall be my son" (2 Samuel 7:14), another indication that the Lord (or his high priest or priestly king) might address his people as "sons" when speaking to them in or from the temple.⁶⁹ In such a scenario, the father's commandment and the mother's law (Proverbs 6:20) are not just the practical advice of earthly parents but the word of the Lord.

Proverbs 9:1–5 elucidated by King Benjamin's speech

With a ritual context in mind, Proverbs 9:1–5 becomes a particularly fascinating passage. The house of Proverbs 9:1 is the temple: "Wisdom hath builded her house, she hath hewn out her seven pillars." The pillars could be part of the temple structure.⁷⁰ They could also be associated with the altar platforms at the temple from which the law was

67. For example, Terrence L. Szink and John W. Welch, "King Benjamin's Speech in the Context of Ancient Israelite Festivals," in *King Benjamin's Speech*, 147–223; Stephen D. Ricks, "Kingship, Coronation, and Covenant in Mosiah 1–6," in *King Benjamin's Speech*, 233–75; and John A. Tvedtnes, "King Benjamin and the Feast of Tabernacles," in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley on the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday*, 2 vols., ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1990), 2:197–237.

68. Kevin Christensen describes research finding that during certain periods of the monarchy, the king was also the high priest in the temple and as such represented Yahweh himself. See "The Deuteronomist De-Christianizing of the Old Testament," *FARMS Review* 16, no. 2 (2004), 59–90. scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1621&context=msr. On another note, I think it is significant that in modern Latter-day Saint tradition, the wife of the temple president is known as the temple *matron*. In Jewish mysticism (Kabbalah), the feminine counterpart of God, the King, is the *Matronit*. This pair is delegated the task of caring for mankind by their supernal parents (Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 128–30). The *Matronit*, also known as the Shechinah, is surely a memory of the ancient Hebrew Goddess (Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 135–54).

69. For more on divine adoption, see Ricks, "Kingship," 253–54.

70. The two pillars of Solomon's temple had seven meshwork decorations (1

read to the people by the king or another leader on solemn occasions, from which covenants were renewed, and from which dedicatory prayers for the temple were offered (e.g., Exodus 24:4; 1 Kings 8:22; 2 Chronicles 6:13).⁷¹ In all cases, the pillars point to the temple and to ritual. These possibilities are bolstered by what follows in Proverbs 9:2–5:

[Wisdom] hath killed her beasts; she hath mingled her wine; she hath also furnished her table. She hath sent forth her maidens: she crieth upon the highest places of the city, Whoso is simple, let him turn in hither: as for him that wanteth understanding, she saith to him, Come, eat of my bread, and drink of the wine which I have mingled.

The killed beasts refer to cultic sacrifice, and the table, bread, and wine allude to the table of the shewbread and to ritual libations.⁷² These are temple images. Wisdom is depicted here as a high priestess preparing for ritual and enticing⁷³ all who are spiritually hungry and thirsty to participate.⁷⁴ She boldly issues her call from the hills or the natural high grounds of the city, which is of course where the temple was located.⁷⁵ From there she would have given herself great visibility.

Wisdom in Proverbs 9:1–5 is like Moses in Exodus 24:4–12. Moses builds an altar and twelve pillars, offers sacrifice, reads the book of

Kings 7:17). Two pillars found in the temple at Arad may have stood for Yahweh and Asherah. Peterson, “Nephi and His Asherah,” 197.

71. Ricks explains that pillars are associated with the coronation of new kings and served as a place by or from which the king or another leader on solemn occasions would read the law to the people. Ricks, “Kingship,” 244–47; see also Tvedtnes, “King Benjamin and the Feast of Tabernacles,” 205–7. Tvedtnes shows how pillars are often erected as tokens of a covenant in the Old Testament. Tvedtnes, “King Benjamin and the Feast of Tabernacles,” 200, 231n26.

72. Since King Benjamin’s instruction seems to have been associated with the harvest festival, these sacrifices and drink offerings may even be connected with the special sacrifices associated with the feast of the harvest as well. See Numbers 29:12–39.

73. Compare Mosiah 3:19.

74. Perhaps there is some connection to the cakes for the queen of heaven and the drink offerings of Jeremiah 7:18.

75. Jeremiah also delivered his message from the temple court (Jeremiah 7:2). See John W. Welch, “The Trial of Jeremiah: A Legal Legacy from Lehi’s Jerusalem,” in *Glimpses*, 339–41. If Proverbs 1–9 or its textual/rhetorical antecedents are dated from before the exile, as I am suggesting, they may have had influence on Jeremiah, or vice versa. Samuel the Lamanite also spoke from high places—the city walls (Helaman 13:4).

the covenant to the people, sprinkles the blood of the sacrifices on the people as a token of the covenant the Lord has made with them, and then journeys up the mount with the elders of Israel, where they see God and eat and drink. Wisdom's invitation in Proverbs 9:5 has overtones of the Lord's invitation to Moses in Exodus 24:12, "Come up to me in the mount," which precedes the Lord's command to build a sanctuary.

Wisdom has enlisted "her maidens" to help get the message out. The maidens are messengers, like the servants who are sent to the highways to gather all into the marriage feast in the parable of the wedding of the king's son (Matthew 22:2–14), or like the servants in Zenos's vineyard who labor with the Lord to bring forth the most good and precious fruit (Jacob 5:61, 72). More plainly, these messengers are angels and prophets, "the wise" of Proverbs 1:6, sent forth from the heavenly assembly to deliver the words of Christ to all nations.⁷⁶

The Book of Mormon passages that show the strongest similarities to Proverbs 1–9 in terms of form and content (1 and 2 Nephi, Jacob 2–6, Mosiah 1–5, Alma 36–42) all include an account of the author's instruction by an angel. The Book of Mormon formula for a wisdom instruction seems to include a description of the personal mystical experience that led to the author's firm testimony of the material that he is teaching. He never claims himself as the source of knowledge, but always credits his heavenly source.⁷⁷ In other words, Book of Mormon wisdom teachers claim to have acquired wisdom only as a result of being taught by the Spirit or by the Lord through an angel.

In Proverbs 9:1–5, the theme of finding the mysteries is renewed as Wisdom makes a very public invitation to come feast at her table—a table in the temple. John must have remembered her words in recording Revelation 22:17: "And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely."

The Spirit and feasting are also paired in 3 Nephi 12:6 and 3 Nephi 20:8–9.⁷⁸ The tree of life and the bread and waters of life are matched in Alma 5:34: "Yea, [the Lord God] saith: Come unto me and ye shall

76. Also compare 2 Nephi 32:3; Alma 12:29; 13:22–27; 32:23; Moroni 7:2–23; and Moses 5:58. Accordingly, the seven pillars of Proverbs 9:1 could also represent the seven dispensations, signifying Wisdom's invitation to all nations in all dispensations.

77. See, for example, Alma 5:46; 38:6; Helaman 7:29.

78. Also compare Isaiah 55:1, 10–11.

partake of the fruit of the tree of life; yea, ye shall eat and drink of the bread and the waters of life freely.”

So, to sum up, the thematic and literary similarities between Mosiah 1–5 and Proverbs 1–9 lend weight to the possibility that Proverbs 1–9 has ritual significance. The instructions, like King Benjamin’s speech, may have been part of a cultic liturgy that was spoken at an ancient temple ceremony. In this scenario, Wisdom is depicted as a high priestess inviting the spiritually famished to partake of a ritual feast at her temple table—a feast of ordinances, knowledge, and blessings.

Ornament motif

When we understand Wisdom as a holy woman at the temple, it becomes clear that the ornament motif of Proverbs 1–9 may be understood to have ritual significance as well. To explore this possibility, let us first review the proverbial passages that refer to ornamentation:

My son, hear the instruction of thy father, and forsake not the law of thy mother: For they shall be an ornament of grace unto thy head, and chains about thy neck. (Proverbs 1:8–9)

Let not mercy and truth forsake thee: bind them about thy neck; write them upon the table of thine heart: so shalt thou find favour and good understanding in the sight of God and man. (Proverbs 3:3–4)

My son, let not them depart from thine eyes: keep sound wisdom and discretion: so shall they be life unto thy soul, and grace to thy neck. (Proverbs 3:21–22)

[Wisdom] shall give to thine head an ornament of grace: a crown of glory shall she deliver to thee. (Proverbs 4:9)

My son, keep thy father’s commandment, and forsake not the law of thy mother: bind them continually upon thine heart, and tie them about thy neck. (Proverbs 6:20–21)

My son, keep my words, and lay up my commandments with thee. Keep my commandments, and live; and my law as the apple of thine eye. Bind them upon thy fingers, write them upon the table of thine heart. (Proverbs 7:1–3; compare Deuteronomy 6:8 and 11:18 among Moses’s admonitions to Israel.)

Fox points out that “ornaments and amulets in Deuteronomy signify remembering and treasuring God’s law” and that they can signify not

only learning but also its rewards.⁷⁹ The word *ornaments* in Proverbs 1:9 and 4:9 is sometimes translated "garland," *chains* from Proverbs 1:9 can also be "necklace" or "pendant," and the *crown* of Proverbs 4:9 is also "diadem." They are symbols of favor, honor, and nobility.⁸⁰ They can be understood to shield the wearer, to provide protection.⁸¹ Archaeologists have discovered silver foil amulets inscribed with scripture that may have been worn around the neck, a literal fulfillment of these proverbial injunctions.⁸²

But we have yet to explore the cultic significance of these ornaments taking our cue from King Benjamin's speech that Proverbs 1–9 may be set at the temple or derived from liturgic material. In a temple context, the chains about the neck might compare to the wraethen chains that fastened the high priest's breastplate to the ephod. Aaron was commanded to "bear the names of the children of Israel in the breastplate of judgment upon his heart, when he goeth in unto the holy place, for a memorial before the Lord continually" (Exodus 28:29). The head ornament would be the turban or mitre worn by the high priest, which had the name of the Lord inscribed upon a golden plate attached to the front upon the forehead (Exodus 28:36–37).⁸³ Isaiah associates a "crown of glory"—the same Hebrew phrase as in Proverbs 4:9—with the receipt of a "new name." Speaking of the gathering of Israel in the last days, he says:

And the Gentiles shall see thy [Zion's] righteousness, and all kings thy glory: and thou shalt be called by a new name, which the mouth of the Lord shall name. Thou shalt also be a crown of glory in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of thy God. (Isaiah 62:2–3)

In Proverbs 8:15–16, Wisdom declares that "by me kings reign, and princes decree justice. By me princes rule, and nobles, even all the judges of the earth." A plausible interpretation is that earthly potentates can access wisdom and use it to rule justly.⁸⁴ But we are unwinding the riddles of Proverbs and can find hidden meaning here, which is that Wisdom elevates righteous souls to receive temple ordinances,

79. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 84.

80. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 84, 176.

81. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 176.

82. Dana M. Pike, "Israelite Inscriptions from the Time of Jeremiah and Lehi," in *Glimpses*, 213–15.

83. See also Barker, *Great High Priest*, 138–39.

84. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 274.

to stand as *heavenly* kings and judges.⁸⁵ She is an agent of coronation and adoption, bringing righteous souls to stand before God and to be named his sons and daughters, just as King Benjamin did in Mosiah 5:6–12.⁸⁶ Stephen D. Ricks has shown that the conferral of a new name and divine adoption are two elements of ancient coronation ceremonies.⁸⁷ He observes that under King Benjamin, “what was once reserved for kings at coronation has now been extended in Nephite culture to the people generally.”⁸⁸ What is also remarkable is that in Proverbs 1–9, we see long-forgotten evidence *in the Old Testament* of this more democratic extension of the blessings of the higher priesthood.

Ammon’s Wisdom Boast

We move now to a comparison of Proverbs 1–9 with later Book of Mormon passages.

Ammon’s psalmlike rejoicing in Alma 26⁸⁹ employs the wisdom device of an agricultural metaphor: his brothers have been like field workers in delivering converts (sheaves) to the Lord of the Harvest (Alma 26:5–7). Scolded by Aaron for boasting, Ammon defends himself, turning the usual wisdom caution against boasting on its head. “I do not *boast* in my own strength, nor in my own *wisdom*,” he says, but in his God, “for in his strength I can do all things” (Alma 26:11–12). “He has all power, all *wisdom*, and all understanding; he comprehendeth all things, and he is a merciful Being, even unto salvation, to those who will repent and believe on his name” (Alma 26:35).

Ammon describes his and his brothers’ missionary efforts in much the same terms as Wisdom’s. Even as Wisdom cries “in the *streets*,” “in the chief places of concourse,” “in the openings of the gates,”

85. Compare Doctrine and Covenants 76:52–59.

86. Note that King Benjamin urged his people to “retain the name written always in your hearts” (Mosiah 5:12), much like Proverbs 3:3 and 6:21. Compare Jeremiah 31:31–34, “I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah . . . I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts.”

87. The conferral of a new name and divine adoption are still part of modern coronation ceremonies for monarchs and popes.

88. Ricks, “Kingship,” 254.

89. My thanks to S. Kent Brown for drawing my attention to this passage; he treats it in greater detail in S. Kent Brown, *Voices from the Dust: Book of Mormon Insights* (American Fork, UT: Covenant, 2004), 119–20, archive.org/details/voicesfromdustbo0000brow/page/118/mode/2up.

and “upon the *highest places* of the city” (Proverbs 1:20–21; 9:3), so Mosiah’s sons have “taught [the people] in their *streets*,” “upon their *hills*,” and in their house, their temples, and their synagogues (Alma 26:29). Their invitation, like Wisdom’s, has been extended democratically to all:

He that repenteth and exerciseth faith, and bringeth forth good words, and *prayeth* continually without ceasing—unto such it is given to know the *mysteries* of God; yea, unto such it shall be given to reveal things which never have been revealed; yea, and it shall be given unto such to bring thousands of souls to repentance, even as it has been given unto us to bring these our brethren to repentance. (Alma 26:22)

Alma’s Wisdom Blessings and Instructions

Alma 32–33

Alma also draws from the wisdom tradition in his instructions to the poor among the Zoramites. He begins his discourse with a conditional *’ashrê* saying which we saw earlier is a device used in the wisdom literature: “I behold that ye are lowly in heart; and if so, blessed are ye” (Alma 32:8). Because of their *humility* and *poverty* (two wisdom virtues), they “may learn *wisdom*” (v. 12). Much of the rest of Alma’s instruction regards why they and others who humble themselves are thus blessed, and he repeats the *’ashrê* sayings with various modifications (vv. 13–16). His lecture on faith begins in verse 21, where he contrasts faith with “perfect *knowledge*”—a familiar wisdom term. A search for knowledge begins by believing on God’s word, which—of particular importance in light of our earlier discussions—comes from angels: “He imparteth his word by *angels* unto men, yea, not only men but women also. Now this is not all; little children do have words given unto them many times, which confound the *wise* and the *learned*” (Alma 32:23).

One begins to experiment upon the word by *awaking* and *arousing* one’s faculties (v. 27). Then Alma launches into his famous seed analogy. As we have said, use of analogies from nature is a tactic often used in wisdom teachings, and the comparison of the acquisition of knowledge to the ingestion of precious *fruit* from a tree that springs up unto everlasting life is most clearly a reference to the *tree of life* (Alma 32:28–43). Interestingly, shortly afterward, Alma quotes from Zenos,

the source of another of the Book of Mormon's extended tree metaphors in Jacob 5 (Alma 33:3–11).

Alma 36–42

Alma's counsel to his sons is not set at his death, yet this text can surely be classified as a patriarchal admonition. Not surprisingly, it is filled with wisdom elements.

He first directs his instructions to his son Helaman in Alma 36–37.⁹⁰ Alma reiterates the *prosperity promise* that was given originally by Lehi in his testament (2 Nephi 1:9). He asserts that none of his knowledge came by his own faculties, but rather from God as a result of his rebirth. He recounts his own life-changing mystical experience, telling the story of his conversion by the *angel* who began his rebuke with the word *arise* (Alma 36:8). He describes the horror he felt because of his iniquities and the terror of being “encircled” by the “*chains of death*” (Alma 36:11–18), then contrasts this with the *joy* that came to him when he appealed to Jesus for mercy (Alma 36:20–21). His experience culminates in a throne vision much like Lehi's (v. 22).

Alma's account is an *example story*—its retelling offers a vicarious experience of the horrors and joys known personally to Alma and thus a visceral imprint of his testimony. He expresses his gratitude that his people were brought out of Jerusalem and captivity and reiterates the *prosperity promise* before turning over the *records* to Helaman. Alma says that they are sacred and are being preserved for a *wise* purpose (Alma 37:2). He contrasts *foolishness* with *wisdom*, mentions *mysteries* and the *knowledge* of Jesus Christ, invokes the path motif, and enjoins Helaman to *remember* (Alma 37:6–13). “Learn *wisdom* in thy youth,” he says, “yea, learn in thy youth to *keep the commandments* of God” (37:35), reminding us of Wisdom's promise in Proverbs 8:17 that “those that seek me early shall find me.” As Nephi did in his final admonition (“pray always,” 2 Nephi 32:9), Alma exhorts Helaman to “counsel with the Lord in all thy doings” (Alma 37:37).

Then come instructions for Alma's next son, Shiblon, in Alma 38. Alma formulaically reiterates the *prosperity promise* (v. 1) and then makes mention of the *joy* that Shiblon has brought Alma because of his steadiness (vv. 2–4). He recaps the *angel's* visit (vv. 7–8). “See that

90. John W. Welch discovered a beautiful chiasm in Alma 36 that helps emphasize the contrasts of Alma's condition before and after he cries to Jesus for mercy. See John W. Welch, “A Masterpiece: Alma 36,” in *Rediscovering*, 114–31.

ye do not boast in your own *wisdom*," says Alma in 38:11. He then offers typical wisdom advice of a more practical nature: "Use boldness, but not overbearance; and also see that ye bridle all your passions, that ye may be filled with love; see that ye refrain from *idleness*" (Alma 38:12).

Last comes Corianton in Alma 39–42, who has *boasted* of his own *wisdom* (39:2; compare Proverbs 3:5: "Lean not unto thine own understanding"). Alma teaches that denying the Holy Ghost is unpardonable and that it is difficult to be forgiven of murdering "against the light and *knowledge* of God" (Alma 39:6). Corianton has allowed himself to be distracted from the ministry by a prostitute. Like the parent in Proverbs, Alma takes up the wisdom warning against sexual sin. He sternly rebukes his son for allowing "the *devil to lead away [his] heart* after harlots" (39:11; compare Proverbs 7:6–27, especially v. 25: "Let not thine *heart* decline to her *ways*, go not astray in her *paths*"). "Seek not after riches" (Alma 39:14), adds Alma, which we can compare to Proverbs 2:4–5: "If thou *seekest* [knowledge] as silver, and *searchest* for her as for hid treasures; then shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord, and find the *knowledge* of God." Alma gives Corianton further instruction that he received himself from an *angel* (Alma 40:11) about the resurrection and the plan of mercy.

Helaman's Wisdom Exhortation

The patriarchal admonition of Helaman, Alma the Younger's grandson, is recorded in part in Helaman 5:5–13. He exhorts his sons to "remember to keep the commandments," using the word *remember* six times in verse 6 alone. He wants them to "lay up for [them]selves a *treasure* in heaven," even "that precious gift of *eternal life*" (Helaman 5:8). He wants them to remember that there is "no other *way*" besides "the atoning blood of Jesus *Christ*" (Helaman 5:9).

Mormon's Wisdom Lament

Mormon uses wisdom speech in an extended editorial in Helaman 12. The Nephites have sunk into wickedness after a period of prosperity. He laments:

O how *foolish*, and how *vain*, and how *evil*, and how devilish, and how quick to do iniquity, and how slow to do good, are the children of men; yea, how quick to *hearken* unto the words of the *evil one*, and to set their *hearts* upon the *vain* things of the world! Yea, how quick to be lifted up in *pride*;

yea, how quick to *boast*, and do all manner of that which is iniquity; and how slow are they to *remember* the Lord their God, and to give ear unto his *counsels*, yea, how slow to walk in *wisdom's paths*! Behold, they do not desire that the Lord their God, who hath *created* them, should rule and reign over them; notwithstanding his great goodness and his mercy towards them, they do set at naught his *counsels*, and they will not that he should be their *guide*. (Helaman 12: 4–6)

Notice that the personification of wisdom, discussed earlier, is still in use as a device nearly a millennium after Lehi's family left Jerusalem and their immersion in preexilic Hebrew wisdom conventions. This is strong evidence for Reynolds's claim that a scribal education continued in Nephite society until its end.⁹¹

Mormon then dwells on the power of God in the natural world and in judgment, which is strikingly like the wisdom passage in Job 28. He ends with an *'ashrê* saying ("*blessed* are they who will repent and *hearken* unto the voice of the Lord their God; for these are they that shall be saved," Helaman 12:23), contrasting *eternal life* with *everlasting damnation*.

Samuel's Wisdom Rebuke

Samuel the Lamanite draws from the wisdom tradition as well. He appeals to the authority of an *angelic* declaration (Helaman 13:7). Preaching from the high walls of the city, he presents an image of Wisdom herself, rebuking the people from the high places for not remembering the Lord, but rather for remembering their riches with "great *pride*, unto *boasting*" (Helaman 13:22), "walk[ing] after the *pride* of [their] own *hearts*" (Helaman 13:27; compare Proverbs 1:20–33; 9:3). They have chosen to follow "*foolish* and *blind guides*" (Helaman 13:29) rather than true prophets (13:24, 26, 33). Samuel alternates woe invectives with bliss promises (Helaman 13:11–16). The primary curse he delivers is that the wicked who "shall hide up *treasures* in the earth shall find them again no more" (Helaman 13:18). Compare Wisdom's curse that "the turning away of the simple shall slay them, and the prosperity of fools shall destroy them" (Proverbs 1:32).

Samuel preaches of Christ's coming, and his list of natural disasters at the time of Jesus's death once again is reminiscent of Job 28.

91. Reynolds, "Lehi and Nephi."

Though he pronounces a woe upon the people of Nephi (Helaman 14:3), yet the "more part" of the Lamanites are in the "*path of their duty*" and "do observe to *keep his commandments*" (Helaman 15:5). Samuel promises that "in the day of [the Lord's] *wisdom*," the Lamanites "shall again be brought to the true *knowledge*, which is the *knowledge* of their Redeemer, and their great and true shepherd, and be numbered among his sheep" (Helaman 15:16, 13).

The Book of Mormon and the Lost Wisdom Theology

Turning from an analysis of individual passages within the Book of Mormon to a reflection on the Book of Mormon as a whole, it becomes apparent that the record represents a strand of Hebrew religious thought that is underplayed in the Old Testament.

There has been a persistent trend, until recently, to dismiss the biblical wisdom literature (temporarily broadening our discussion from only Proverbs 1–9) as theologically illegitimate. Murphy discusses this trend in detail.⁹² The embarrassment of the wisdom texts for many scholars is that they stand at odds with the more predominate model of faith in the rest of the Old Testament—that is, that God's character and will is revealed through the series of events that is Israel's history and through his interactions with prophets acting as national leaders. The wisdom literature, on the other hand, is concerned with mundane, everyday human experience, such as the correct attitude toward mealtime (Ecclesiastes 2:24), drunkenness and gluttony (Proverbs 23:20–21), and discretion in speech (Proverbs 21:23), just to give a few examples. These scholars see the wisdom literature as, at worst, "secular or profane,"⁹³ or at best, an unusual form of mainstream Israelite belief created in order to "discuss both the multiplicity of trivial, daily occurrences as well as basic theological principles."⁹⁴

Murphy, for his part, points out that the wisdom experience itself was historical, even as it describes Israel encountering her creator in everyday events:

In the smaller concrete details of life one found innumerable situations that called for attitudes, actions, and decisions that ultimately had a profound effect on the individual. This sphere was not felt to be withdrawn from the Lord and

92. Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 121–26.

93. C. Westermann, as quoted in Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 122.

94. Von Rad, as quoted in Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 122.

his activity; God was as much at work here as in the heady experiences of Israel's history and liturgical worship.⁹⁵

The [wisdom] sages penetrated into the divine mystery in a manner that even the prophets never equaled. God drew the people, through their daily experience of themselves and creation, into the mystery of God's dealings with each individual human being.⁹⁶

For Murphy, "wisdom literature provides a biblical model for understanding divine revelation apart from the historical mode (salvation history) in which it is usually cast. . . . [In the wisdom literature], it is the dialogical relationship with God in which a faith response occurs, through God's free and gracious communication."⁹⁷

Democratic dialogic revelation in Hebrew wisdom literature and the Book of Mormon

Such a dialogic relationship of each individual with God concerning all aspects of life—which is, for many, an unnoticed or unwelcome stepchild in the Old Testament canon—is adopted by the Book of Mormon, where it flourishes. Terryl Givens suggested that it "may well be the Book of Mormon's most significant and revolutionary—as well as controversial—contribution to religious thinking."⁹⁸

Givens shows that the Book of Mormon, "through chiasmic form, thematic structure, numerous textual examples, and a final, concluding instance of readerly invitation . . . hammers home the insistent message that revelation is the province of everyman."⁹⁹ The individual's dialogic relationship with God, I would point out, is vastly more explicit—more "plain"—in the Book of Mormon than it is in the wisdom literature. Of particular note for our discussion is Givens's review of 1 Nephi, where Nephi repeatedly seeks knowledge from God "for personal, rather than public, edification," is "commended, not reproved" for doing so, and where he and his family receive knowledge from the voice of the Lord, or the Spirit, or angels, often in a personal appearance.¹⁰⁰ Givens

95. Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 124.

96. Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 125.

97. Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 126.

98. Terryl L. Givens, "The Book of Mormon and Dialogic Revelation," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 10, no. 2 (2001): 21–22, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1284&context=jbms.

99. Givens, "Dialogic Revelation," 21.

100. Givens, "Dialogic Revelation," 23.

says that the Book of Mormon depicts "a kind of egalitarian access to truths that range from the sublime to the mundane, from principles of salvation to advice on prime hunting grounds,"¹⁰¹ not unlike the truths we find cherished in the wisdom literature. In summary, Givens claims that the Book of Mormon's moral "seems to be the indispensability of personal revelation as a key to spiritual survival."¹⁰² While this may not be obvious in all the wisdom literature, it is precisely and explicitly the point of Proverbs 1–9.

I have made the case that Wisdom's very public beckoning is not only to urge individuals to obtain personal revelation, but also to seek the higher priesthood blessings of cosmic coronation or apotheosis. There is no other instance in the Old Testament of such an invitation. On the contrary, searching for knowledge is censured (Deuteronomy 29:29: "The secret things belong unto the Lord our God"), and the priesthood is restricted to Levites. But Wisdom's democratic invitation is entirely consistent with the doctrine of Alma 13, where a call to be ordained a high priest "after the order of his Son" (v. 2) like Melchizedek (v. 14), is extended not on the basis of lineage or social status (or even gender, possibly), but only on terms of faith, repentance, and good works (vv. 3, 10). Qualified initiates are "sanctified by the Holy Ghost," are made "pure," and "[enter] into the rest of the Lord their God" (v. 12).¹⁰³

The lost wisdom tradition in the Book of Mormon

I have shown that scholars such as Whedbee and Murphy see a theology inherent in the wisdom tradition that is every bit as valid as the salvation history apparent in other Old Testament books and that is consistent with it. God is found in the everyday as well as in the epic events of Israel's past. While there may have been tension at times between the wise man and the prophet, the prophet felt at home with

101. Givens, "Dialogic Revelation," 24.

102. Givens, "Dialogic Revelation," 24.

103. For a lengthy discussion of this passage, see John W. Welch, "The Melchizedek Material in Alma 13:13–19," in *By Study and Also by Faith*, 2:238–72. He says, "For Alma, Melchizedek is . . . an example of the fact that all men can receive the same knowledge and authority that made Melchizedek great" (p. 263). See also Daniel Peterson's discussion of New Testament instances of promises of exaltation for the righteous in Peterson, "'Ye Are Gods,'" 516–28. See especially pages 524–25, where Peterson quotes one scholar as saying, "Paul's understanding of salvation involves a rather astounding (at least to modern ears) scheme of 'mass apotheosis.'"

wisdom and was quick to appropriate wisdom speech, borrowing its devices and concepts to reprove the learned from straying from their own tradition.

Margaret Barker makes a different argument about the validity of extant wisdom texts. Reviewing McKane, Whybray, and von Rad, she argues that the apparent secularism of much of the wisdom literature is imposed on it by later redactors. The prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah at times attack the wise men as a secular force opposed to divine rule, yet given what is extant of the wisdom texts, Barker wonders why anyone would want “to fulminate against the purveyors of the harmless platitudes which now form the Book of Proverbs.”¹⁰⁴ Something is missing, and the words of the sages cannot be trusted, nor can the attitude of the prophets toward them be fully understood.¹⁰⁵ Instead, using the pseudepigraphal books of Enoch and careful textual analysis of the Old Testament’s inconsistencies and silences, Barker reconstructs the wisdom theology of the preexilic period.

According to Barker, wisdom was an “all-encompassing knowledge of all things such that they could be controlled, or even created.”¹⁰⁶ Revelation of such knowledge was given in a mystical experience to a chosen person by an angel. The fundamental aspect of the experience was “the vision of God and the heavenly court.”¹⁰⁷ The chosen one was transformed into a divine being and received eternal life and power, even power over creation. Wisdom was closely associated with the temple, the monarchy, and the ancient Melchizedek priesthood. Knowledge itself was never condemned, but only its misuse. The wisdom tradition included an angel mythology of righteous and fallen angels. The Most High God was El, father of the host (the angels), and the greatest angel was Yahweh.¹⁰⁸ There was a divine woman as well, Wisdom, “the archetypal angel high priest.”¹⁰⁹

Barker argues that evidence of this tradition was deliberately suppressed from much of the Old Testament by a group of reformers

104. Margaret Barker, *The Older Testament: The Survival of Themes from the Ancient Royal Cult of Sectarian Judaism and Early Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1987), 90.

105. Barker, *Older Testament*, 81–103.

106. Barker, *Older Testament*, 279.

107. Barker, *Older Testament*, 148.

108. Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel's Second God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 4–7; 71–72.

109. Barker, *Great High Priest*, 238.

known as the Deuteronomists.¹¹⁰ Although they acquired the dominant influence over the canonical texts, the older cult lived on as an extrabiblical tradition and provided a foundation for the emergence of Christianity.

The suppression of the ancient wisdom tradition had its roots in the late seventh century BC during the reform of Josiah.¹¹¹ Lehi lived during part of this reform and in the short period before the exile when it partially unraveled.¹¹² Kevin Christensen has comprehensively reviewed Barker’s reconstruction of the lost wisdom mythos and compared it with Book of Mormon theology. He has found numerous and pervasive correspondences.¹¹³ Indeed, Book of Mormon prophets seem to have been clearly aware of the tension Isaiah and Jeremiah felt toward

110. Barker, *Older Testament*, 142–60. For discussions of the Deuteronomists, see William J. Doorly, *Obsession with Justice: The Story of the Deuteronomists* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), archive.org/details/obsessionwithjus0000door/mode/2up; and Richard Elliott Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (San Francisco: Harper, 1997), archive.org/details/who-wrote-the-bible-2nd-edition-richard-elliott-friedman-1997. For a Latter-day Saint application, see Christensen, “The Deuteronomist De-Christianizing of the Old Testament”; or Kevin Christensen, “The Temple, the Monarchy, and Wisdom: Lehi’s World and the Scholarship of Margaret Barker,” in *Glimpses*, 449–522. Perhaps this de-Christianizing accompanied the seventh-century BCE effort to harmonize Israel’s competing literary streams. Reynolds proposes that Josephite scribes may have resisted aspects of the movement. See Reynolds, “Lehi and Nephi,” 206.

111. Margaret Barker, “What Did King Josiah Reform?” in *Glimpses*, 523–42.

112. Christensen, “The Temple,” 450.

113. See generally Kevin Christensen, “Paradigms Regained: A Survey of Margaret Barker’s Scholarship and Its Significance for Mormon Studies,” *FARMS Occasional Papers* 2 (2001), archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/paradigms-regained-survey-margaret-barkers-scholarship-and-its-significance-mormon-studies; and Christensen, “The Temple.” See also Kevin Christensen, “Twenty Years After ‘Paradigms Regained,’ Part 1: The Ongoing, Plain, and Precious Significance of Margaret Barker’s Scholarship for Latter-day Saint Studies,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 54 (2022): 1–64, journal.interpreterfoundation.org/twenty-years-after-paradigms-regained-part-1-the-ongoing-plain-and-precious-significance-of-margaret-barkers-scholarship-for-latter-day-saint-studies/; and Kevin Christensen, “Twenty Years After ‘Paradigms Regained,’ Part 2: Responding to Margaret Barker’s Critics and Why Her Work Should Matter to Latter-day Saints,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 55 (2023): 31–106, journal.interpreterfoundation.org/twenty-years-after-paradigms-regained-part-2-responding-to-margaret-barkers-critics-and-why-her-work-should-matter-to-latter-day-saints/.

the so-called wise.¹¹⁴ Like the Old Testament prophets, Nephi and Lehi warned that the Lord would take away knowledge if it was rejected. Christensen shows that Jacob, in particular, seems to have known what would be lost, and therefore he testified specifically of these things in his temple admonition.¹¹⁵

Christensen's analyses confirm that the influence of the lost wisdom tradition as reconstructed by Barker on Book of Mormon writers extends far beyond literary similarities. It is evident in fundamental Book of Mormon theology, with its testimonies of angel instruction, throne theophanies, claims of power over creation (for instance, Jacob 4:6: "We truly can command in the name of Jesus and the very trees obey us, or the mountains, or the waves of the sea"), temple themes and practices, prophecies of things to come, and teachings about Christ and the plan of redemption. I urge the reader to review my study alongside Christensen's analyses for the fullest picture of wisdom in the Book of Mormon.

Conclusion

Both the Book of Mormon and Proverbs 1–9 were hidden from the world for centuries — Proverbs 1–9 because of its enigmatic disguise, the world's eyes open to its deciphering only after the discovery of the Book of Mormon from its literal hiding place in the earth and the restoration of the ancient gospel that followed.

The Latter-day Saint temple liturgy, a fundamental aspect of the restoration, represents our journey back into God's presence. To be with him and feel his love, to stand confidently before him with our earthly families, is the greatest joy we could feel and the sweetest fruit of which we could ever partake. In Proverbs, Wisdom begs for us to promptly seek this blessing — to seek the mysteries of God and eternal life. In turn, the authors of the Book of Mormon face our way, telling their stories, adding their witnesses, teaching us wisdom, coaxing us onto the shining path. From the Book of Mormon, Wisdom calls to us in the voices of ancient American prophets.



114. Book of Mormon prophets never speak of a class of wise men, but rather, they speak generally of "those wise in their own eyes" (2 Nephi 15:21, cf. Isaiah 5:21).

115. Christensen, "The Temple," 502–4.

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