

“I AM COMMANDED TO STAND
AND TESTIFY UNTO THIS PEOPLE
THE THINGS WHICH HAVE BEEN
SPOKEN BY OUR FATHERS”:
LEHI’S AND NEPHI’S INFLUENCE
ON ALMA 5

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Yea, he saith, come unto me and ye shall partake of the fruit of the tree of life.

—Alma 5:34

One of the most referenced sermons in the Book of Mormon is Alma’s discourse to the church in Zarahemla in about 83 BC. Alma 5 seems to derive its narrative structure, distinctive language, and symbolic imagery from Lehi’s dream and Nephi’s vision. Alma’s sermon in this chapter twice directly references the “tree of life” (5:32, 62). These references constitute two of the six times the symbol is mentioned by Alma in the Book of Mormon (Alma 32:40; 42:3, 5–6). The only other prophets to use the phrase are Lehi and Nephi. This fact seems significant. Famously, the tree of life is a key symbol in Lehi’s dream and Nephi’s vision. The tree of life is not the only parallel between Alma 5 and these early revelations, though, suggesting that Alma is dependent on these texts in his sermon. Lehi’s influence on Alma 5 has been discussed for over a decade, but no one to my knowledge has described the full extent

of this influence.¹ A thorough study of this influence is thus in order. I demonstrate here that Alma uses Lehi's dream and Nephi's vision to arrange his address.

In 2022, four Book of Mormon scholars published a brief survey of the field of Book of Mormon studies. Their survey identifies seven common methodological approaches to the Book of Mormon, all of which, more or less, have been applied to other forms of sacred literature. The seven approaches include these: (1) textual production, (2) historical origins, (3) literary criticism, (4) intertextuality, (5) theological interpretation, (6) reception history, and finally, (7) ideology critique. Of these, I am most interested in intertextuality (how one text influences another). The authors of the survey explain that although intertextual approaches to sacred literature have been around since at least the 1970s, in the case of the Book of Mormon, intertextuality "has come into use . . . only recently." They caution that commonality between texts may imply "deliberate dependence," but it doesn't necessarily mean more than "suggestive interaction in the mind of a reader."² Here, I will argue for deliberate dependence while not ruling out suggestive interaction.

In addition, neither the elements of Lehi's dream nor Nephi's vision nor, for that matter, much else in the record can perfectly be disentangled from its associated material. This is because one of the qualities of

1. Daniel L. Belnap, "Even as Our Father Lehi Saw': Lehi's Dream as Nephite Cultural Narrative," in *The Things Which My Father Saw: Approaches to Lehi's Dream and Nephi's Vision*, edited by Daniel L. Belnap, Gaye Strathearn, and Stanley A. Johnson (Provo: Brigham Young University, 2011), 214–39; Daniel L. Belnap, "'There Arose a Mist of Darkness': The Narrative of Lehi's Dream in Christ's Theophany," in *Third Nephi: An Incomparable Scripture*, edited by Andrew C. Skinner and Gaye Strathearn (Provo: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2012), 75–106.

2. Daniel Becerra, Amy Easton-Flake, Nicholas J. Frederick, and Joseph M. Spencer, eds., *Book of Mormon Studies: An Introduction and Guide* (Provo: Religious Studies Center at Brigham Young University, 2022), 31–62, here at 46.

great literature, and thus divine scripture, is what may be termed poetic fusion. This literary convoluting of associated parts within a given text is a common aesthetic of not only the most symbolic texts but also, to a lesser degree, prophetic sermons such as Alma 5. That is, although my analysis attempts to neatly divide Alma 5 into three distinct parts, the complexity of it will of necessity challenge that endeavor with overlap and intersection.

Accordingly, to make this intertextual argument, I will do my best to demonstrate the direct and indirect intersection between three aesthetically challenging texts: 1 Nephi 8 (Lehi's dream); 1 Nephi 11–14 (Nephi's vision); and Alma 5 (Alma's sermon to Zarahemla). In the first of these texts, Lehi emerges from a dark wilderness to partake of the fruit of the tree of life. He sees many others also wandering toward and away from the tree. Many in his dream inhabit a great and spacious building. In the second text, Nephi beholds the things that his father saw and more. In a series of juxtaposed episodes, he sees redemptive history unfold from the time of Christ to nearly the end of the world. The third text, Alma's sermon to Zarahemla, contains Alma's remarks to the Nephite church after he has relinquished his role as the chief judge. In his bold sermon, Alma calls many in the church to repent and be born again that they might be prepared for what is to come.

In what follows, (1) I will suggest that Alma 5, somewhat like Lehi's dream, begins with an account of the forefathers (men and women) passing through a wilderness only to find a special tree and its fruit; (2) I will demonstrate the allusive presence of the tree of life in Alma 5 and attempt to get at the language's redemptive implications; and (3) I will demonstrate the allusive presence of the great and spacious building (or its inhabitants) in Alma 5. This particular order is important because it follows the order of events and symbols as we receive them in Nephi's account of his father's dream and in his own vision.³ My primary claim

3. Amy Easton-Flake, "Lehi's Dream as a Template for Understanding Each Act of Nephi's Vision," in *The Things Which My Father Saw*, 179–213.

is that the three-part shape of Lehi's dream, more or less, appears to dictate the shape of Alma's significant sermon.

Lehi's and Nephi's Influence on the First Part of Alma 5

To further get at Lehi's influence on Alma 5, we will first need to turn our attention to Alma's intriguing prologue (Alma 5:3–13). In Lehi's prologue he seems to be spiritually struggling in darkness before happening upon a tree with joy-inducing fruit (1 Nephi 8:4–12). Similarly, Alma emphasizes his forefathers' experiences in temporal captivity and their deliverance from spiritual darkness. He couches this spiritual deliverance in terms of emerging from "darkness" unto "light" (5:7). Alma's "invok[ing] of the fathers" is consistent with the angelic admonition he received at the time of his own conversion and, for reasons that will be forthcoming, seems noteworthy (Mosiah 27:16).⁴ Lehi's own dream experience is emblematic of the more recent historic deliverances described by Alma to those assembled to hear him in Zarahemla. Thus, Lehi's prologue seems to more or less parallel Alma's prologue in at least seven ways.

First, in each account a dark and difficult wilderness serves as the setting for the action involved. Although Nephi's account of Lehi's dream prologue is brief and likely incomplete, the setting of the wilderness is referred to variously as a "dark and dreary wilderness" and as a "dark and dreary waste" (1 Nephi 8:4, 7). The implications of finding himself in this place caused Lehi to "fear exceedingly" (8:4). Nephi only recounts Lehi's dream for his reader after he says that "my father tarried in the wilderness" south of Jerusalem (8:2). Once delivered from

4. Robert A. Rees, "Alma the Younger's Seminal Sermon," in *Bountiful Harvest: Essays in Honor of S. Kent Brown*, edited by Andrew C. Skinner, D. Morgan Davis, and Carl Griffin (Provo: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2011), 329–43, here at 337. Rees points out that in his sermon Alma transitions from the phrase "'my father' and 'your fathers,' to the collective 'our fathers'" (337, referencing Alma 5:21).

his ordeal, Lehi, we are told, stumbles upon a “large and spacious field” (8:9). The vastness implied by this last detail suggests that Lehi experienced the darkness of his wilderness as an oppressive and smothering mist.⁵

Alma's prologue also describes a wilderness. It is directly referred to in Alma 5:3–5 as that wilderness “in the borders of Nephi” (Alma 5:3). It is there that Alma, after fleeing Noah's court, establishes a church “in the wilderness” (5:5). Alma explains that while yet among Noah's people, “they [Alma's followers] were in the midst of darkness” (5:7).⁶ To be more specific, before their conversion, “they were encircled about by the bands of death and the chains of hell, and an everlasting destruction did await them” (5:7). “[N]evertheless,” we are told, “their souls were illuminated by the light of the everlasting word,” and “their souls did expand” (5:7, 9).⁷

Second, in each account the dark and difficult wilderness is traversed by a father (or fathers). Nephi tells of his father's dream as part of a more extensive abridgment of Lehi's prophecies and revelations (see 1 Nephi 1–10). Presumably out of respect for his father, Nephi begins his overall record stating he was “taught somewhat in all the learning of [his] father” and that he makes his record “in the language of [his]

5. Hugh W. Nibley suggests that Lehi's dream wilderness likely borrows from his own reality. Hugh W. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites*, edited by John W. Welch, Darrell L. Matthews, and Stephen R. Callister, vol. 5 in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Desert Book Company, 1988), 43–46.

6. According to Royal Skousen, there is reason to think that “midst of darkness” should be rendered as “mist of darkness,” though he does not adopt the latter phrase in his work *The Earliest Text*. See Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009), 292.

7. Daniel L. Belnap perceives suggestive resonances here between the early Nephite revelations and Alma's imagery. Belnap, “Even as Our Father Lehi Saw,” 224; Belnap, “There Arose a Mist of Darkness,” 93.

father” (1 Nephi 1:1–2). It is no wonder therefore that Lehi’s dream as recounted by Nephi begins with his father’s experience in the wilderness. Indeed, Lehi’s dream begins and ends with his fatherly concerns for his sons, Laman and Lemuel, and by implication, their posterity (1 Nephi 8:4, 36). Lehi appears to discover (while beholding the abyss of his wilderness) that he himself was lost in it (8:7).

Alma begins his sermon with the account of his own father in the wilderness. From the time of his own conversion, as mentioned, the son Alma had been admonished to remember his forefathers’ captivity (Mosiah 27:16). This may be because he and the sons of Mosiah had fought against the authority and teachings of their fathers earlier in their history (27:14–15). Accordingly, Alma asks his own people if they have “sufficiently retained in remembrance the captivity of [their] fathers” (5:6). He is emphatic on this point. Further, early in his sermon Alma describes his father’s own conversion and reminds his people that their fathers also were delivered out of their wilderness and ultimately saved from the “bands of death, and the chains of hell” that did encompass them before they came to a knowledge of the truth (Alma 5:7–9).

Third, in each account a father or fathers are granted the inspired word of an angelic or prophetic guide to help them through the wilderness. In Lehi’s dream, after seeing the “dark and dreary wilderness,” he is joined by “a man” who guides him. The unidentified man is described as “dressed in a white robe” (1 Nephi 8:4–5). The white robe reference is reminiscent of the theophany in 1 Nephi 1:8–13. It certainly is suggestive of the man’s positive guiding presence. In Lehi’s early vision, after God and angels are observed, one descends “out of the midst of heaven” (1:9). His “luster was above that of noon-day” (1:9). Further, “twelve others” followed him; their “brightness did exceed that of the stars” (1:10). The man in the white robe in Lehi’s dream first stands “before [him],” and then bids Lehi to “follow him” (8:6). Thereafter, he is not mentioned anymore. This robed figure seems to be an angel or prophet, one who prepares the way for Lehi to reach the tree and taste the fruit

that “filled [his] soul with exceedingly great joy,” even though he says little in the account (8:12).

Similarly, in Alma's sermon Alma explains that the fathers (his own included) were delivered from their wilderness by following the words spoken by a “holy prophet” (Alma 5:11). Alma asks the members of the church, “did not my father Alma believe in the words which were delivered by the mouth of Abinadi?” (5:11) Alma follows this question up with a statement about the effect of his own father's words upon the fathers of those whom he addresses: “And behold, he [my father] preached the word unto your fathers, and a mighty change was wrought in their hearts” (5:13). The result of Abinadi's and Alma's preaching was that they “humbled themselves” and “their souls did expand, and they did sing redeeming love” (5:9, 13).

Fourth, in each account a father (or fathers) seeks heavenly help and finds deliverance through prayer. Due to the brevity of the account of Lehi's dream, much must be inferred about Lehi's experience in his dark wilderness. What seems clear, though, is that in seeking deliverance from his ordeal he undergoes a transformation. It has been suggested that Lehi, the traveler, is “lost and helpless,” even confused, as if by a “mist of darkness (sultry and thick).”⁸ Only once Lehi begins to follow his guide does he perceive his real situation. After presumably trailing his guide for “many hours in darkness,” Lehi appears to hunger for divine deliverance (1 Nephi 8:8). As a result, he reports: “I began to pray unto the Lord” (8:8). Due to his prayer, Lehi is delivered from his wilderness into a “large and spacious field” (8:4, 9). The fervent prayer offered in despair and darkness (not the guide per se) seems to be the primary means of deliverance.

Alma also alludes to their fathers' deliverance from King Noah and later Amulon (priest of Noah). The account of these deliverances is most fully recorded in Mosiah 23–24. In those chapters we learn that

8. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 43–46.

Alma and his newly converted people had been “delivered out of the hands of King Noah” (Alma 5:4) only to fall victim to Amulon (Mosiah 23:39). While in bondage to Amulon in the wilderness the members of the church were not permitted to pray to God vocally, so they “did pour out their hearts to him” (Mosiah 24:12). Through “their faith and their patience” they were ultimately delivered from their captivity and were able to travel to Zarahemla. Alma’s people sought help and found temporal and spiritual deliverance by means of prayer.

Fifth, in each account a father or fathers is eventually delivered by a merciful act of God. In 1 Nephi 1:20, Nephi promises his reader that he “will show unto [him or her] that the tender mercies of the Lord are over all those whom he has chosen . . . to make them mighty even unto the power of deliverance.” True to his word, Nephi describes Lehi while yet in darkness praying unto the Lord “that he would have mercy on [him], according to the multitude of his tender mercies” (8:8). As indicated, Lehi’s deliverance out of his wilderness follows. Further, Nephi wraps up the account of his father’s dream by returning to the theme of mercy. Lehi’s post-dream hope for his eldest sons, Laman and Lemuel, is recorded as follows: “that perhaps the Lord would be merciful to them, and not cast them off” (8:37).

Mercy also figures in Alma’s sermon. Indeed, Alma says that his fathers were delivered from their wilderness by an act of divine mercy. Speaking of the church’s deliverance from Noah, he writes, “And behold, I say unto you, they were delivered out of the hands of the people of king Noah, by the mercy and power of God” (Alma 5:4). In the next verse, we learn that the earlier merciful deliverance (out of Noah’s hands) and the subsequent deliverance (out of Amulon’s hands) came “by the power of [the Lord’s] word” (5:5). Alma then searchingly asks his audience, “Yea, have you sufficiently retained in remembrance his mercy and long-suffering towards them [fathers]?” (5:6)

Sixth, in each account the fruit of the tree of life is seen and then tasted, the tree being an emblem of renewed spiritual life and the

attendant joyful hope of redemption. Once Lehi enters upon a “large and spacious field” (1 Nephi 8:9), he beholds a tree that is later identified by Nephi as the “tree of life” (11:25). Lehi sees that the tree’s “fruit was desirable to make one happy” (8:10). Once Lehi approaches and partakes of the fruit of the tree, he discovers that it is “most sweet” and “white, to exceed all the whiteness that [he] had ever seen” (8:11). The fruit “filled [Lehi’s] soul with exceedingly great joy” (8:12). Thereafter, Lehi invites his family to the tree to partake of the fruit with him. About this time, he learns that some of his family members are willing to “come unto [him],” but some are not. (Lehi also sees many other symbols in and around the tree, we are told, including a path, a rod, a river, a mist, a building, etc.)

In Alma’s sermon, the tree of life is suggested early on (as early as Alma 5:7) but not explicitly referenced until later. As indicated, Alma invites his audience to the fruit of the tree in these unmistakably allusive words: “Behold, he [Lord] sendeth an invitation to all men, for the arms of mercy are extended towards them, and he saith: Repent and I will receive you. Yea, he saith: Come unto me and ye shall partake of the fruit of the tree of life; yea, ye shall eat and drink of the bread of life freely” (5:33–34). Further, after Alma speaking by way of commandment implores the members of the church to come and partake, he ends his sermon addressing those not of the church who are also present on the occasion in these words: “and unto those who do not belong to the church I speak by way of invitation, saying: Come and be baptized unto repentance, that ye also may be partakers of the fruit of the tree of life” (5:62).

Seventh, in each account the tree of life is emblematic of sweet and pure redeeming love. Redeeming love is implicit in the tree of life’s description and in Lehi’s actions relative to his family members (1 Nephi 8:11–12). This becomes more explicit, however, in Nephi’s vision when the tree is clearly associated with the “love of God” (11:21–22, 25). And, as the account says, Nephi sought to behold the “things which

[his] father saw”; this, at least initially, especially includes the tree his father saw (11:3). Nephi later receives that privilege (1 Nephi 11–14; see also 15:21–22). The tree of life, introduced in Lehi’s dream, is explicitly discussed during Nephi’s vision and thereafter alluded to often. There, it takes on many allusive resonances, as we shall see. Nephi directly references Lehi’s tree early and, at first, often (11:4, 7–9, 21). Thereafter, though, he mostly only suggests it using certain descriptive words and phrases (as did his father) such as “white” and “exceedingly fair and beautiful” (13:15). White, or a white exceeding anything earthly, has described the tree from 1 Nephi 8 (8:11; 11:8). In his vision, Nephi variously associates Lehi’s tree and its fruit with the righteous across time (11:8, 15; 12:10–11; 13:15–16; see also 15:26–36). In Nephi’s revelation, the tree of life is most plainly associated with redeeming love. That is, after Nephi asks his first guide for the “interpretation” of the tree, he is shown the fair, white, and beautiful virgin birth of the Son of God, according to the “love of God,” which is “most desirable” and “most joyous,” even “precious above all” (11:9, 11–23). Lehi similarly describes the fruit of the white tree as “desirable to make one happy”; indeed, when Lehi partook of the tree’s fruit “it filled [his] soul with exceedingly great joy,” and he began to be “desirous” that his family should partake of it also (1 Nephi 8:9–12).

Alma speaks of redeeming love in a similar symbolic context. As we have seen, Alma’s prologue points out that the fathers were delivered from their wilderness when they emerged from darkness and began to experience light and love. Harkening to the words of the prophets, Abinadi and Alma, the fathers’ hearts were changed, Alma says, and “their souls did expand, and they did sing redeeming love” (Alma 5:9, 26). Alma refers to the “mighty change” of heart that fills them with the “song of redeeming love” twice in his sermon (5:14, 26). He does so in context with his discussion about how the fathers obtained mercy and the initial hope of salvation. Redeeming love is what one feels when one has freshly emerged from the wilderness. Once Alma’s prologue

is concluded, then, he points his people to the prospect of salvation through Christ. The imagery at the midpoint of Alma 5 becomes ever more suggestive of the tree of life, the same periodically described or suggested in 1 Nephi 8 and 11–14 (see also 1 Nephi 15:21–22, 36).

To summarize, there are seven ways in which the beginning of Lehi's dream parallels Alma's opening sermon in Alma 5. Each account begins in a difficult wilderness. There, a father (or the fathers) struggles for deliverance. In process of time, he is delivered from his circumstance by the mercy and power of God. In Lehi's case, he follows a man robed in white; in Alma's case, he says the fathers (including his own) obtained salvation by heeding the words of a prophet. Further, we have seen that both accounts allude to the tree of life and God's "redeeming love," as manifest toward those who choose to come unto him and be "saved" (5:9–13). That is, the first part of each account, directly or indirectly, introduces us to the tree of life.

Accordingly, in what follows I will (1) demonstrate how Alma in the middle part of his sermon symbolically suggests Lehi's and Nephi's tree of life more fully using the word clusters referenced earlier and (2) show how in the last part of his sermon Alma suggests the great and spacious building that we are introduced to in Lehi's dream and Nephi's vision. Doing this will conclude my case that Alma has inventively shaped his sermon in Alma 5 on the three-part pattern found most clearly in Lehi's dream.

Lehi's and Nephi's Influence on the Second Part of Alma 5

After Alma's prologue, the theme that dominates Alma 5 (verses 14–36) is that of qualifying for salvation or eternal life through the Lord's atonement. Throughout this middle section of the sermon, we are to equate Alma's earlier discussion of salvation and reference to redemptive love with the tree of life. While delivering his sermon, Alma sees

himself, much as Abinadi and Alma once did, figuratively inviting his wandering people to the tree of life where they can find redeeming love, and ultimately salvation, if they “humble . . . themselves” enough to repent and remain there with the others gathered to the “true and living God” (Alma 5:13, 7:6; Mormon 9:28; Ether 2:8; see also 3 Nephi 30:1; Mormon 5:14).

The following examples demonstrate how Alma directly alludes to and adapts certain distinctive words and phrases we first find in Lehi’s dream and Nephi’s vision, particularly references to the tree of life (but also the building’s inhabitants). Some references are more explicit than others. The less-than-obvious echoes may require explanation, but the direct references should make the less precise references more plausible. Indeed, the explicit references (Alma 5:34, 62) invite the reader to consider the possibility of the more subtle connections. Significantly, the more explicit borrowings allow for the less obvious resonances to be perceived—and, in time, appreciated—as belonging to this further simplified pattern of the entire sermon: (1) the wilderness and father (or fathers) led to the tree, (2) the tree of life itself, and (3) the great building.

Having analyzed the seven prologue/wilderness parallels between Lehi and Alma, we will now examine certain additional tree of life parallels between Lehi’s dream (and Nephi’s vision) and Alma’s sermon.

First, as indicated in each account, the tree of life and its fruit are explicitly and implicitly referenced using similar words. The tree of life and its fruit are explicitly referenced in Lehi’s dream and Nephi’s vision. In 1 Nephi 8, the tree’s fruit is described as “desirable to make one happy”; “most sweet, above all”; and “white, to exceed all whiteness” (8:10–11). The tree’s fruit, we are told, filled Lehi’s soul with “exceedingly great joy” (8:12). Nephi’s first guide (the Spirit of the Lord) also remarks on the tree’s “whiteness” (11:8). Not much later, Nephi compares the tree and its fruit to the “love of God,” which he explains is “most desirable” and “most joyous” (11:22–23, 25). The Spirit employs additional

descriptors when referring to the tree such as “exceeding of all beauty” (later “exceedingly fair” and “most beautiful”) and “precious above all” (11:8–9, 13–15). In Nephi’s vision, the tree and its fruit are associated with the Lamb of God and his life (11:21, 34–36). The Lamb is equated there with the Good Shepherd (13:41). The righteous are also associated with the tree and its fruit, including groups such as the Jewish twelve apostles (11:29–36), the Nephite twelve disciples (12:6, 10–12), and the latter-day Gentiles (13:15–16).

Though the tree of life is directly described by Nephi and Lehi, many of the above references to it are only allusive. Nevertheless, they are identifiable by tracing distinct word clusters. For instance, in 1 Nephi 12:10–12 the tree of life is suggested by phrases such as “they [the Nephite twelve] are righteous forever” and “their garments are made white in his [Lamb’s] blood” (12:10–12). (Alma will rely more on the Good Shepherd identifier for the divine figure in his sermon.) This reading of 1 Nephi 12:10–12 is reasonable for three reasons: (1) The twelve apostles have recently been associated with the Lamb of God (after crucifying him, the world fought against them from the “great and spacious building,” 11:36). (2) Speaking of chapter 12 specifically, this special imagery has been invoked *after* allusions to “a mist of darkness” (12:4–5) and *before* references to the “river” and the “large and spacious building,” so one suspects that other symbols from Lehi’s dream such as the tree of life are likely implicitly present (12:16–18). (3) Phrases such as “made white” and “were white” are repeated three times in 12:10–11. This concentrated repetition of these phrases so soon after the tree’s description in 1 Nephi 11:7–9 and so proximate to the other recycled symbols obliges the reader to scrutinize the cluster of words and to follow them forward with Lehi’s dreamscape in mind.⁹

A careful perusal of the words associated with the tree of life and its fruit first introduced in Lehi’s dream and/or Nephi’s vision along

9. Easton-Flake, “Lehi’s Dream as a Template,” 179–213.

with those new terms accumulating through 1 Nephi 11–14 (and even 1 Nephi 15) yields interesting results. As indicated, Alma directly refers to the “tree of life” on three separate occasions: he directly uses the phrase “tree of life” twice while preaching to the church in Zarahemla (Alma 5:34, 62); he employs the phrase one time while preaching among the poor Zoramites (Alma 32:40); and he deploys the phrase three more times while teaching his wayward son Corianton (42:3, 5–6). However, most of Alma’s allusive references in Alma 5 that echo Lehi’s dream and Nephi’s vision are less obvious, and thus require attending to contextual clues, as well as being willing to compare Alma 5 with other passages ascribed to Alma. As this is an important point, I will return to Alma’s choice of characteristic words after I establish their salvific context in Alma 5. For now, it should be noted that certain words that directly refer to and/or suggest the tree of life and its fruit are shared by Lehi, Nephi, and Alma. These are the only prophets in the Book of Mormon who use the phrase “tree of life.”

Second, in each account the theme of final judgment and salvation provides the backdrop for the direct reference to the tree of life. It is plain from Nephi’s abridgment of his father’s dream that Lehi understands what he has seen in reference to the tree of life and the great and spacious building to represent the possible cutting off of his sons (if not their posterity) from the blessings of ultimate salvation in the kingdom of God. According to Nephi, Lehi prefaces his dream by speaking of the salvation of his sons in these words: “And behold, because of the thing which I [Lehi] have seen, I have reason to rejoice in the Lord because of Nephi and also of Sam; for I have reason to suppose that they, and also many of their seed, will be saved” (1 Nephi 8:3). However, this reference to ultimate salvation is immediately followed by Lehi’s concern for his older sons: “But behold, Laman and Lemuel, I fear exceedingly because of you” (8:4). His fear for these sons is not made known until the dream has been recorded. Nephi records Lehi’s delayed conclusion in these words: “because of the things which he saw in a vision, he exceedingly

feared for Laman and Lemuel; yea, he feared lest they should be cast off from the presence of the Lord” (8:36).

Given the immediate dream context for this statement, it must be understood that to be cut off from the tree of life and its fruit is to be “cut off from the presence of the Lord” and, if we include the next verse in the equation, from his redemptive mercy (8:37). Nephi reports that after Lehi imparted his dream to them, he preached to them, exhorting them to keep the commandments of God. It appears, though we do not have the sermon, that Lehi’s dream was the basis for a sermon he delivered to his sons, one in which with some urgency he exhorted them and prophesied. (This is essentially what Alma does in Zarahemla. He appears to use Lehi’s dream to construct a three-part prophecy that his people might return to the Lord and partake of the goodness and mercy of God as made available through his infinite atonement.) Lehi understands his dream to suggest the ultimate salvation of Nephi and Sam and the final fate of his other sons if they do not turn their course and partake of the redemptive blessings extended to them.

Alma also situates his direct and indirect references to the tree of life and its fruit within the context of final judgment and ultimate salvation. Like Lehi, he perceives that his people will not be saved unless they repent and come unto Christ through his (Alma’s) words to partake of what elsewhere is called the goodness of God. Judgment and salvation are major themes running through the early and middle portions of Alma’s sermon. While yet discussing their fathers’ experiences in the wilderness, he asks his people, “on what conditions are they saved? Yea, what grounds had they to hope for salvation?” (Alma 5:10) Later, after asking his people to look forward to the day of their final judgment, he asks, “can ye think of being saved when you have yielded yourselves to become subjects to the devil?” (5:20) He immediately answers his own question: “I say unto you, ye will know at that day ye cannot be saved; for there can no man be saved except his garments are washed white” (5:21). No one can gain salvation “or sit

down in the kingdom of God” unless they repent and come to the tree of life (5:24).

Third, in each account a significant person invites others to come and partake of the fruit of the tree of life. In Lehi’s dream, a figure in authority invites others to come to where he stands to partake of the fruit of the tree of life, which represents Christ and the redemptive blessings he extends to the repentant who are washed clean and pure through him. In Lehi’s dream, he as husband and father to the family invites his wife and sons in sequence to come to the tree by which he stands to partake of its most sweet and exceedingly white fruit: “And it came to pass that I beckoned unto them; and I also did say unto them with a loud voice that they should come unto me, and partake of the fruit, which was desirable above all other fruit” (1 Nephi 8:15). As we have seen, some in the family heed Lehi’s invitation while others do not. In consequence, some are cut off from the presence of the Lord. Lehi’s dream, being prophetic in nature, truly predicted what later actually occurred. His older sons (and others who followed them) were “cut off from the presence of the Lord” around the time of his death (see 2 Nephi 5:20–21). Nephi saw in his vision the troubles among his people and his brothers’ seed and was distraught at the prospect (see 1 Nephi 15:4–5). He also saw that the Lord would in a latter day invite all to come unto him by means of bringing forth “other books” (13:39–41). This divine person who invites “all men . . . to come unto him” in the account is referred to as the “Lamb” and “Shepherd” (13:41).

Alma implores his people to come unto the Lord and partake of the blessings of his redemption through repentance and baptism. He stands before his people and extends to them the Lord’s “invitation” (an invitation extended to all within his hearing and beyond). The invitation: “Repent, and I will receive you” (Alma 5:33). Alma continues speaking for the Lord: “Yea, he [the Lord] saith: Come unto me and ye shall partake of the fruit of the tree of life; yea, ye shall eat and drink of the bread and the waters of life freely. Yea, come unto me and bring

forth works of righteousness” (5:34–35). A similar invitation to those not of the church is repeated in the final moments of Alma’s sermon. He declares: “Come and be baptized unto repentance, that ye also may be partakers of the fruit of the tree of life” (5:62).

In Alma’s role as high priest over the church of God, he stands before the church in Zarahemla commanding and/or inviting the people present to come unto him and partake of the salvation and goodness of God. In Lehi’s dream, Lehi “stood” (the word is repeated at least four times in 1 Nephi 8:13–21) to issue his invitation to his family members to come unto him and partake of the fruit. It appears that Alma, who stands before the church in Zarahemla, sees himself as doing what Lehi did. Both Lehi and Alma invite the others to come and partake of the tree of life.

Alma relinquished his role as the chief judge to dedicate more time to the preaching of the word according to his “order” (Alma 5:43–44, 49). Thus, he declares this to those present in the “energy of [his] soul”: “I am commanded to stand and testify unto this people the things which have been spoken by my fathers” (5:44). Alma’s figurative invitation unto his people is not to come to the tree of life so much as it is an invitation to come unto Christ through his doctrine. As indicated, Alma suggests that the act of partaking of the tree of life’s fruit means to repent and be baptized and to bring forth righteous works.

Fourth, in each account the editor/abridger uses uncommon atonement imagery to describe the blessings associated with the tree of life and its fruit. Before wrapping up these observations, it may be useful to state again that certain representative passages contain word clusters allusive of the atonement. These uncommon word clusters suggest that the characteristics of the tree of life and its cleansing effects are used in a salvific context. In Nephi’s vision, the tree of life and its fruit acquire manifold symbolic meanings. Nephi is the first to employ the word clusters spoken of here. He uses them for one purpose: to refer to the righteous (those made white through the blood of Christ) who, by implication, partake of the fruit of the tree of life in their generation.

For instance, Nephi refers in these exclusive terms to Mary (1 Nephi 11:13–15), the twelve Nephite ministers (12:10–11; see also 2 Nephi 5:21), and the Gentiles (1 Nephi 13:15).

After mentioning the tree of life to his brothers who dispute his father’s teachings, Nephi suggests that the “righteous”—those he calls the “saints of God”—are separated from the filthy (those not made pure through the blood of Christ) (1 Nephi 15:28, 36). The filthy, he says, inherit a “place of filthiness,” while the righteous inherit the “kingdom of God” (15:34). He concludes this part of his account with another reference to the symbolic imagery of his father’s dream: “Wherefore, the wicked [filthy] are rejected from the righteous [the purified or white] and also from that tree of life, whose fruit is most precious and most desirable above all other fruits; yea, and it is the greatest of all the gifts of God” (15:36). In Alma 5, Alma, drawing on Lehi and Nephi again, directly exhorts the righteous to separate from the filthy in explicit context with the tree of life and its fruit that produced, as Nephi understood, the redemptive love of God and eternal life (see 5:57).

In Alma 5, we learn that Alma conjures up in similar words the whole image of the tree of life as suggested by his predecessors using more or less the same imagery that is found in the revelations and writings of his fathers, Lehi and Nephi. Alma especially adapts a phrase that is perhaps best associated with 1 Nephi 12:10–11.¹⁰ There Nephi recounts the history of Lehi’s seed, including the sacred history concerning the twelve Nephite disciples and those righteous generations after them who were visited by the Lord as recounted in 3 Nephi. Here is the relevant language and imagery referencing the tree of life from 1 Nephi 12:

And these twelve ministers whom thou [Nephi] beholdest shall judge thy seed [in that final day of judgment] . . . for because of their faith in the Lamb of God their *garments are made white in his blood*.

10. The whiteness of the tree is first introduced in 1 Nephi 8:11 and runs well beyond 1 Nephi 14, as Belnap has demonstrated. Belnap, “Even as Our Father Lehi Saw,” 214–39.

And the angel said unto me: Look! And I looked, and beheld three generations pass away in *righteousness*, and their *garments were white* even like unto the Lamb of God. And the angel said unto me: These are *made white* in the *blood* of the Lamb, because of their faith in him. (1 Nephi 12:10–11)

Like Nephi, in Alma 5, Alma creatively adapts this distinctive language cluster and tree of life/atonement imagery from Lehi's dream and Nephi's vision (1 Nephi 8:11; 12:10–11; see also 15:21–36). He uses certain suggestive words in a concentrated way such as "garments," "white," "purified," "cleansed," and "blood" in context with the final judgment and salvation of his people (Alma 5:21).

Further, Alma teaches his people that on the day of judgment they will stand before the Lord and receive according to their works. The combination of select terms is added to in ways reminiscent of Lehi's and Nephi's revelations. To familiar terminology, Alma adds "filthiness," "kingdom of God [or kingdom of heaven]," "spotless, pure and white," and even "redeeming love" (5:22, 24, 26). These words remind us of Nephi's relevant teachings. In 1 Nephi 15, while explaining his father's dream symbols, Nephi repeats the word "filthiness" (or a variation of it) nearly ten times in context with the bright "justice of God," the final judgment, and the unclean being "cast off [or cast out]" from the "righteous" (1 Nephi 15:30, 33, 35).

In Nephi's explanation of Lehi's symbols (including the tree of life, rod of iron, and river of water), the phrase "kingdom of God," or its variant, "kingdom of heaven," is repeated five times in the course of only three verses (1 Nephi 15:33–25). Indeed, the symbol of the filthy river that Lehi saw is described as if the tree of life itself. After explaining that the river "separated the wicked from the tree of life, and also from the saints of God," Nephi says to his brothers, "our father also saw that the justice of God did divide the wicked from the righteous; and the *brightness thereof was like unto the brightness of a flaming fire*" (15:30, 35; emphasis added). As did Alma when adopting this imagery, Nephi then speaks about the final judgment and the "kingdom of God"

and its opposite, “a place of filthiness” (15:34). Nephi’s explanation concludes as it began: with a clear reference to the tree of life (15:21–23, 36).

This invitation to repent from “all manner of filthiness” and be baptized suggests that Alma views partaking of the fruit of the tree of life as symbolically equivalent to partaking of the blessings of the Lord’s atonement (5:22). For Nephi, until one repents and is baptized, he or she may not access forgiveness and the exceeding joy of redemption. “Happiness” is the “end of the atonement” (2 Nephi 2:10). For Alma, through the “blood of him of whom it has been spoken by our fathers,” the repentant and baptized person may be “washed white; yea, purified until cleansed from all stain” and find life in Christ (5:21). In this way, the repentant may find access to the blessings of the Holy Ghost, including sanctification. Alma understands that it is by the blood of the Lord that one’s “garments are cleansed,” enabling them to find “redeeming love” (5:24, 26). Thus, Alma refers on occasion to the blessings of the Lord’s blood atonement without directly mentioning the fruit of the tree of life. The effects of the Lord’s blood atonement, including becoming “spotless, pure, and white,” implicitly refer to partaking of the tree’s fruit and the result of experiencing redeeming love (5:24). The tree of life and its fruit are suggested by words that remind Alma’s reader of the blessings of salvation from sin and its consequences. It also represents the blessings of sanctification and ultimate salvation in the “kingdom of God” (5:24–25).

Accordingly, as demonstrated, this concentrated language and atonement imagery is situated by Nephi and Alma in a context connected with final judgment and salvation in the kingdom of God. Alma asks his own rebellious brethren, “can ye think of being saved” in your current “state of . . . unbelief?” (Alma 5:20; 7:6) Without a verbal signal, his response to those in this circumstance takes the form of an allusive warning (italicized are words and phrases that appear to be borrowed from Nephi):

I say unto you, ye will know at that day that ye cannot be saved; for there can no man be saved except his *garments* are *washed white*, yea,

his *garments* must be *purified* until they are cleansed from all stain, through the *blood* of him of whom it has been *spoken by our fathers*, who should come to redeem his people from their sins.

And now I ask of you, my brethren, how will any of you feel, if ye shall stand before the bar of God, having your *garments* stained with *blood* and all manner of *filthiness*? Behold, what will these things testify against you?

Behold, my brethren, do ye suppose that such an one can have place to sit down in the *kingdom of God*, with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob, and also all the holy prophets, whose *garments* are *cleansed* and are *spotless, pure, and white*?

I say unto you, Nay . . . (Alma 5:21–25)

When we compare 1 Nephi 12:10–11 and 15:21–36 with Alma 5:21–25, we see that Alma evokes the imagery we associate with Lehi's dream and Nephi's vision as it regards the tree of life and its redemptive fruit. Alma pulls together many of these early Nephite terms throughout his teachings (see Alma 7:14, 25; 13:11–12; 34:36), including a reference to faith on the "Lamb of God" (Alma 7:14; see 1 Nephi 12:10–11). The cluster of atonement words that first appear in Nephi's vision (i.e., "garments," "white," and "blood") when he recounts the angel's efforts to describe the humble righteous assembled under the tree of life and partaking of its fruit are almost exclusively found in Alma's teachings in the Book of Mormon. However, they are especially concentrated in Alma 5.

Lehi's and Nephi's Influence on the Third Part of Alma 5

Alma seems to have in mind Lehi's and Nephi's revelations and teachings when he invites his people to "Come [and] partake of the fruit of the tree of life" (Alma 5:34; see also 5:62). This tree of life imagery reflective of the Lord's cleansing atonement follows Alma's discussion of his fathers' sojourn in the dark and dreary wilderness. The parallels suggest that he loosely shapes his sermon on the three-part pattern laid out by Nephi in 1 Nephi 8, where Lehi's dream is first recounted in abridged form. If so, one should expect the third part of Alma's sermon

to echo what Nephi called the “great and spacious building,” or at least the specific flaws and characteristics of its proud inhabitants. These proud persons are presumably not gathered at the tree of life and thus not washed white in the blood of Christ, remaining ever separate from and in opposition to him and his people who “humble themselves and do walk after the holy order of God” (Alma 5:54).

As early as Lehi’s dream, we learn of the proud inhabitants who occupied the “great and spacious building . . . high above the earth” (1 Nephi 8:26–28, 31–33). In Nephi’s vision this “strange building” is again plainly referred to as the “large and spacious building” inhabited by those who “fight against the twelve apostles of the Lamb of God” (1 Nephi 11:34–36). The building is again directly mentioned in 1 Nephi 12:18 and beyond. After chapter 12, it appears that the building transforms into the “great church,” a “church most abominable above all other churches” (13:4–9, 26, 28, 32, 34). The “great and abominable church” also appears in 1 Nephi 14, again in opposition to the “church of the Lamb of God” (14:3, 10, 12). There it is referred to as the “whore of all the earth” and as the “great mother of abomination” (14:11, 13). In Lehi’s and Nephi’s accounts, it is a universal church.

If Alma’s sermon tracks Lehi’s dream and Nephi’s vision as I have claimed, it may be suggested that the “great and spacious building” (or its proud and scoffing inhabitants) may also find its way into the sermon’s imagery. This specific imagery presumably would come in the latter part of the sermon as it does in Lehi’s dream and Nephi’s vision. It would come after the wilderness and tree have been invoked. Indeed, that is what happens. Near the second half of Alma’s sermon, we see Alma employ the general imagery of the large building that serves as opposition to the tree of life and those who partake of its fruit.¹¹

11. We see Mormon signal this early and often in the framing of Alma 5 where he describes the most arrogant members of the church as variously “lifted up” or as “lifting themselves up,” or conversely, as needing to be “pulled down” (Alma 4:6, 8, 12; Alma 6:3). Alma himself uses the term “puffed up” (Alma

Near the middle of his sermon, Alma stacks three of his people's sins on top of each other in patterned language that suggests that they are of a piece. These sins—pride, envy, and mocking of others—seem to be representative of those who once inhabited the great and spacious building seen by Lehi; or, we might say, the symbol of the building was indicative of those who were proud, envious, and disposed to mock others. As indicated, this has been the case since the strange building was first introduced to Nephi's reader in 1 Nephi 8:26–33 and 11:35–36. After invoking the clustered imagery of the tree of life and its redeeming power, Alma asks his audience these penetrating questions:

Behold, are ye stripped of *pride*? I say unto you, if ye are not ye are not prepared to meet God. Behold ye must prepare quickly: for the kingdom of heaven is soon at hand, *and such an one hath not eternal life.*

Behold, I say, is there one among you who is not stripped of *envy*? I say unto you that such an one is not prepared; and I would that he should prepare quickly, and he knoweth not when the time shall come; for such an one is not found guiltless.

And again I say unto you, is there one among you *that doth make a mock of his brother, or that heapeth upon him persecutions?*

Wo unto such an one, for he is not prepared, and the time is at hand that he must repent *or he cannot be saved* [tree of life]. (Alma 5:28–32)

This three-level rhetorical pattern (three similar questions in succession accompanied by the phrase, “I say unto you . . .”) alludes to the proud and contentious members of the church who were among the “old and young, both bond and free . . . the aged, and also the middle aged, and the rising generation” (Alma 5:49).

This series of coordinated phrases in part matches with what Nephi said his father saw. The proud in the large building, according to him, were “old and young, both male and female; and their manner of dress

5:53), which like the other terms is suggestive of the inhabitants of the building reaching back to Nephi and his teachings (see 1 Nephi 22:13–15, 22–23). Moroni also uses these types of “up-terms” to suggest the building in his teachings in Mormon 8–9 (see Mormon 8:28, 32–33, 36, 40).

was exceedingly fine; and they were in the attitude of mocking and pointing their fingers towards those who had come at and were partaking of the fruit” (1 Nephi 8:27). Accordingly, Alma cries to all within the sound of his voice that they must repent and be born again or they cannot gain salvation or partake of the “tree of life” (Alma 5:34, 62; see also 1 Nephi 15:36).

Further, we learn in Alma 5 that the unrepentant who were “puffed up in the vain things of the world” were fully separated from the righteous (Alma 5:37). The proud had persecuted the humble and poor among them (5:53–55). These church members insisted on “wearing costly apparel and setting their hearts on the vain things of the world, upon [their] riches” (5:53). Nephi explained that the worldly inhabitants of the building had an inordinate interest in fine apparel and indulged in “vain imaginations of the children of men” (1 Nephi 8:27; 12:18; 13:7–8). In Lehi’s dream and Nephi’s vision, the worldly and proud despised the humble followers of God; similarly, Alma admonishes the proud among his people to cease to persecute the humble (Alma 5:53–54). Alma, after this manner, interrogates the worldly and proud of the church:

Yea, will ye persist in supposing that ye are better one than another; yea, will ye persist in the persecution of your brethren, who humble themselves and do walk after the holy order of God, wherewith they have been brought into this church, having been sanctified by the Holy Spirit, and they do bring forth works which are meet for repentance—

Yea, and will you persist in turning your backs upon the poor, and the needy, and in withholding your substance from them? (Alma 5:54–55)

After these questions addressed to the proud, we learn that Alma calls for the humble to separate (Alma 5:57–60). Alma exhorts those who will hear the Shepherd’s voice to “come . . . out from the wicked, and be ye separate and touch not their unclean things” (5:57). Those who do not hear Alma’s invitation will be cut off from the church: “the wicked shall not be numbered among . . . the righteous,” Alma declares (5:57).

This language is reminiscent of Nephi's vision where we learn that the Gentiles who hear his word and come unto the Shepherd "shall be numbered among the seed [of Lehi]" (1 Nephi 14:2). Both Nephi and Alma suggest that hearkening to the Good Shepherd's voice leads to salvation, whereas not hearkening to his voice is grounds for separation. As already indicated, this full separation between the proud and humble (the wicked and the righteous) is discussed extensively in 1 Nephi 15, where symbols of the early revelations are explained in context with the tree of life and its fruit.

Finally, it would appear that Alma borrows from Lehi's and Nephi's symbol of a large and spacious building occupied by the proud and well-dressed when he confronts the pride and materialism rampant in the church in Zarahemla. Most of the evidence for this claim appears in the second half of Alma's sermon, especially in the latter third of it. As before in the earlier revelations, again in Alma 5 the tree of life and its redemptive fruit stand in opposition to the building and its inhabitants. These early Nephite symbols (tree and building) appear to have been suggested to the audience in Alma 5 shortly after Alma recites the history of their fathers emerging from their wilderness to become "illuminated by the light of the everlasting word" (Alma 5:7). Alma's discussion of concepts such as pride, apparel, and persecution in this distinctive three-part arrangement alludes to Lehi's and Nephi's great and spacious building or its inhabitants.

Conclusion

Alma appears to structure his first great sermon to the church in Zarahemla using Lehi's dream and Nephi's vision as a guide. Alma seems to imagine himself standing at the tree of life extending to his people an invitation to come unto the Lord and partake of his salvation and goodness. In his three-part sermon, Alma attempts to persuade the most proud and combative among his people to repent of their sins

against the humble members of the church. He warns them to repent and become clean and pure through the blood of Christ's atonement. This prophetic invitation to repent and be born again is equated to partaking of the redeeming love of Christ.

Specifically, I have attempted to demonstrate that Alma's allusive three-part arrangement (a loose arrangement with overlapping aspects) echoes Lehi's dream and Nephi's vision as follows: (1) using an intertextual method, we have seen that as Nephi represents his father's deliverance by the mercy of God from a wilderness, so Alma represents his fathers' deliverance from their historical and spiritual wildernesses; (2) observing relatively rare verbal clusters, we have seen that as Lehi invited his family to partake of the fruit of tree of life that they might find salvation, so we have seen that Alma invited his people to partake of the fruit that they might sit down in the kingdom of God; and (3) we have seen that the proud and mocking inhabitants of the great and spacious building from Lehi's dream and Nephi's vision were alluded to in the way Alma spoke to his audience. In short, Alma shapes his great sermon using early Nephite revelations and language. Truly, there remains much in the Book of Mormon to be done on this and related subjects, as we are only beginning to emerge from the wilderness of assumptions we have made about the landscape of the Nephite record.

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