

COMPARISON OF 1 NEPHI AND PSALM 2

“And I beheld a rod of iron, and it extended along the bank of the river, and led to the tree by which I stood.” (1 Nephi 32:37)

“Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.” (Psalm 2:9)

Comments

The shared phrase between the two passages above is “a rod of iron.” Outside of these two passages (and others mentioning it in 1 Nephi), this phrase is only found in the book of Revelation, where it appears in 2:27, 12:5, and 19:15. These verses in the book of Revelation, especially 2:27 (“And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers”), borrow more fully from the entire verse.

Several verses from 1 Nephi parallel Psalm 2:

1 Nephi 8:27–28, 33: mocking, scoffing, scorn

Psalm 2:4: laughs, scoffs (King James Version: “shall have them in derision”)

1 Nephi 12:18: vain imaginations

Psalm 2:1: “imagine a vain thing”

1 Nephi 11:18–33: Son of God

Psalm 2:7: “Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee”

1 Nephi 11:32–36: nations gather to fight against Lamb (and twelve apostles)

Psalm 2:1–3: nations gather to rebel against the Lord and his Anointed

1 Nephi 11:36: destruction of nations that fight against the twelve apostles of the Lamb
Psalm 2:9: “Thou shalt break them [the heathen nations] with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel”

1 Nephi 11:35: “the world and the wisdom thereof”
Psalm 2:10, 12: “Be wise now therefore, O ye kings. . . . Kiss the Son, lest he be angry”

1 Nephi 14:15–17: the wrath of God
Psalm 2:5, 12: his wrath

Psalm 2 is a royal psalm concerning the coronation of the Israelite king and the covenant with God making the king God’s son. It asserts that God will protect the king and help him defeat his enemies. Finally, God will give the king the nations of the earth as an inheritance. This psalm has long been interpreted as messianic; the promises in it are prophetic and were fulfilled in the person of the Messiah—the Lord’s “anointed” (verse 2).

Although not specifically mentioned in 1 Nephi 8, some traditions associated with the tree of life in ancient Judaism and Christianity suggest that the tree of life in Eden was located at the top of a hill or mountain.¹ The fact that the head of the river in Lehi’s dream was “a little way off” may indicate that Lehi and his tree of life were on a mountain (1 Nephi 8:14). This is similar to the idea that “a river went out of Eden,” likely flowing downhill, and that Eden was equivalent to “the holy mountain of God.”² It may be instructive to add that Nephi indicated that he saw the tree of life while on top of “an exceedingly high mountain” (1 Nephi 11:1). Nephi also saw that the tree of life was equivalent to, or symbolic of, the Son of God.³ Ancient Near Eastern traditions similarly equated the king with the tree of life.⁴ These ideas parallel the depiction of God placing His anointed king on Mount Zion in Psalm 2:6.

Psalm 2 presents the heathen nations gathering to rebel and plot against the Lord and His anointed (verses 1–2).⁵ The King James Version declares that “the people imagine a vain thing,” or in other words,

1 See, for example, Shepherd of Hermas, Parable 8 1(67):1; 1 Enoch 24:4; Samuel Zinner, “‘Zion’ and ‘Jerusalem’ as Lady Wisdom in Moses 7 and Nephi’s Tree of Life Vision,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 12 (2014): 312–315; Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, “The Tree of Knowledge as the Veil of the Sanctuary,” in *Ascending the Mountain of the Lord: Temple, Praise, and Worship in the Old Testament*, ed. David R. Seely, Jeffrey R. Chadwick, and Matthew J. Grey (Provo UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2013), 53.

2 Genesis 2:10; Ezekiel 28:11–16. For more on this and a broader comparison between Lehi’s dream and the Garden of Eden, see David M. Calabro, “Lehi’s Dream and the Garden of Eden,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 26 (2017): 269–296.

3 Compare Shepherd of Hermas, Parable 8 3(69):2.

4 See, for example, Geo Widengren, *The King and the Tree of Life in Ancient Eastern Religion* (Uppsala, SE: Lundequistska bokhandeln, 1951).

5 Mitchell Dahood translated the first verse: “Why do the nations foregather, and the peoples number their troops?” This translation is more like the idea of the gathering of the prideful nations mentioned in 1 Nephi 8, 11. See Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms I: 1–50* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978), 6.

they devised useless plots (verse 1). They desired to break the bands and cords (verse 3) placed upon them by God and His earthly king, perhaps a reference to the wicked nations' refusal to accept the rule of God and His laws. Verse 4 declares that God will mock and scoff at those who attempt to fight against Him and His messiah. His wrath will be brought down upon them. He has promised the earth to His anointed one as an inheritance (verse 8) and will give him power to break, or destroy, the nations that fight against him.

Similar elements appear in 1 Nephi 8, but perhaps more so in Nephi's interpretation of his father's dream in 1 Nephi 11–14. In 1 Nephi 8:26–27, we see a great and spacious building containing many people of all kinds (“great was the multitude” [verses 31, 33]). In Nephi's vision, after he was shown the judgment and Crucifixion of the Son of God, he saw “the multitudes of the earth . . . gathered together to fight against the apostles of the Lamb” (verses 34–35). These were the people in the building that his father had seen, and Nephi foresaw that the building would fall, representing “the destruction of all nations . . . that shall fight against the twelve apostles of the Lamb” (verse 36). These images parallel what Psalm 2 declares regarding the heathen nations who rebel against God and His messiah (verses 3–5). First Nephi 12:18 again mentions “the large and spacious building” and notes that this building “is [the] vain imaginations and the pride of the children of men.” This parallels Psalm 2:1, in which the heathen nations “imagine a vain thing”—they are so proud that they think they can overthrow God and His king.

The people of the building (the wicked nations) in Lehi's dream were “mocking and pointing their fingers” (“the finger of scorn” [1 Nephi 8:33]) at those eating the fruit of the tree of life. Nephi didn't seem to pick up on this same detail in his vision, but he did note that “the multitudes . . . cast [the Son of God] out from among them” (1 Nephi 11:28) and later judged and crucified Him (verses 32–33). In Psalm 2, it was the Lord Himself who was doing the mocking and ridiculing (Psalm 2:4). He did so from His throne in the heavens, which may have been understood as a sort of “great and spacious” but holy building—that is, the Jerusalem temple. If Lehi and Nephi were indeed alluding to Psalm 2, they perhaps did not want to attribute these actions to deity, or maybe they saw this element of the psalm more as how the wicked people would treat Christ and His followers. This type of role reversal is not uncommon in ancient scriptural exegesis, including in the Book of Mormon.⁶

Psalm 2:5 states that God would speak to the rebellious nations in His wrath. This idea is paralleled in 1 Nephi 12:18, which describes how “the word of the justice of the Eternal God, and the Messiah who is the Lamb of God” separates the wicked from the righteous. The notion in that same verse of the “terrible gulf [that] divideth them” may be drawing on an understanding of the Hebrew word *dabar*; as it is used in

6 For example, compare the role of the Lord/Messiah in Isaiah 28:2 and Zechariah 9:14 to the similar role of Satan in Helaman 5:12. See Book of Mormon Central, “Why Did Helaman Compare Christ to a Rock (Helaman 5:12),” *KnowWhy* 176 (August 30, 2016), online at <https://knowwhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/knowwhy/why-did-helaman-compare-christ-to-a-rock>.

Psalm 2:5, it can have the meaning of “to drive away.”⁷ If so, perhaps the idea is that the prideful multitude has been driven away (by the word of God?) across the great gulf that separates them from the tree of life (the temple, Mount Zion). It is interesting to note that the great gulf is also equivalent to the “river of filthy water,” which represents hell.⁸ There may also be a parallel to both here with Eden again, with the idea that the first human couple were “driven out” from the garden of righteousness because of their disobedience (2 Nephi 2:26).

Psalm 2:9 declares that the messianic king would rule with a rod of iron and that with it, he would “break” the heathen nations and “dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.” It appears that the rod of iron is used differently in Psalm 2:9 than in 1 Nephi. However, the Septuagint and several other versions of this verse have, instead of “thou shalt break them,” “thou shalt rule/shepherd them” with the rod of iron. This comes from a reading of the Hebrew word *ra’a* (“to harm, break”) as *ra’ah* (“to pasture, feed, shepherd”). In the context of Psalm 2:9, it is difficult to know which meaning was intended. The Septuagint interpretation fits with passages such as Leviticus 27:32, in which the rod is understood to be a shepherd’s crook. This understanding is carried over into the quotation of Psalm 2:9 in the Greek of Revelation 2:27, where *ra’ah* is rendered as Greek *poimanei* (“to shepherd, pastor, feed, rule”). This is apparently the understanding of the rod of iron that we see in Lehi’s dream: that it is meant for guiding, like a shepherd’s crook, and leading people to the tree of life (to feed them). Biblical scholar Margaret Barker has addressed this topic, concluding that “Lehi’s vision has the iron rod *guiding* people to the great tree—the older and probably the original understanding of the word.”⁹

7 Based on the Akkadian *dubburu*. See Dahood, *Psalms I*, 9.

8 1 Nephi 12:16; 15:27, 29. Corbin Volluz suggested that Nephi’s statement that “the justice of God did also divide the wicked from the righteous” (1 Nephi 15:30) is connected with the presence of the “cherubim and a flaming sword” placed at the entrance to the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:24; Alma 12:21; 42:2–3). If this is the case, this supports the notion that the wicked are being impeded from accessing the tree of life. Corbin Volluz, “Lehi’s Dream of the Tree of Life: Springboard to Prophecy,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 2 (1993): 34–37, quoted in Calabro, “Lehi’s Dream and the Garden of Eden,” 269–296.

9 Barker further commented: “Consider as well the mysterious rod of iron in this Book of Mormon vision (1 Nephi 8:20; 11:25). In the Bible, the rod of iron is mentioned four times as the rod of the Messiah. Each mention in the King James Version says the Messiah uses the rod to ‘break’ the nations (Psalm 2:9) or to ‘rule’ them (Revelation 2:27; 12:5; 19:15). The ancient Greek translation (the Septuagint) is significantly different; it understood the Hebrew word in Psalm 2:9 to mean ‘shepherd’ and it reads, ‘He will shepherd them with a rod of iron.’ The two Hebrew verbs for ‘break’ and ‘shepherd, pasture, tend, lead’ look very similar and in some forms are identical. The Greek text of the Book of Revelation actually uses the word ‘shepherd,’ *poimanei*, of the Messiah and his iron rod, so the English versions here are not accurate. The holy child who was taken up to heaven (Revelation 12:5) was to ‘shepherd the nations with a rod of iron.’ The King James Version of Micah 7:14 translates this same word as ‘Feed thy people with thy rod,’ where ‘guide’ would be a better translation. Psalm 78:72 has, ‘He *fed* them . . . and guided them,’ where the parallelism of Hebrew poetry would expect the two verbs to have a similar meaning: ‘He *led* them . . . he guided them.’ Lehi’s vision has the iron rod *guiding* people to the great tree—the older and probably the original understanding of the word.” Margaret Barker, “Joseph Smith and Preexilic Israelite Religion,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (2005): 76–77.

Conclusions

It seems clear that there are significant connections between the tree of life visions recorded in 1 Nephi and Psalm 2. The most significant parallels are not found in 1 Nephi 8 but in Nephi's vision in 1 Nephi 11–14. The evidence for intertextuality between these texts should also be considered in light of studies such as David Calabro's, which suggests that there are connections between the tree of life visions and the Eden story. Psalm 2 is often understood to be connected to Psalm 1, and reading the two together would likely yield even more intertextual connections with the visions 1 Nephi records of the tree of life. For example, Psalm 1 speaks of a happy man who is like a tree planted by rivers of water. When linked to Psalm 2, one can see this happy man as the king who is set on Mount Zion. Although this royal figure is often understood to be the Israelite king, or the coming Messiah, he can also be interpreted as Adam, the first "king" to be set on the mount of Eden. This idea can be seen more clearly in the snippet of the Eden story found in Ezekiel 28, in which the Lord speaks of the king as "the anointed cherub" in "Eden the garden of God" (verses 13–14). The Lord "set" the king there, "upon the holy mountain of God" (verse 14). These verses from Ezekiel demonstrate that Israelite theology connected the coronation of the king on Mount Zion and the placement of Adam in the Garden of Eden. Scholars have noted the many parallels between Book I of the Psalms (Psalms 1–41) and the book of Genesis.¹⁰ Thus, there appears to be a link between the tree of life visions, Psalm 2 (or Psalms 1 and 2), and the Eden story. This is a subject that deserves more attention in the future.

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¹⁰ See, for example, David C. Mitchell, *The Message of the Psalter: An Eschatological Programme in the Book of Psalms* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 301.