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SERPENTS OF FIRE AND BRASS: A CONTEXTUAL STUDY OF THE BRAZEN SERPENT TRADITION IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

Neal Rappleye

Abstract: *The story of the Israelites getting bitten in the wilderness by “fiery serpents” and then being miraculously healed by the “serpent of brass” (Numbers 21:4–9) is one of the most frequently told stories in scripture — with many of the retellings occurring in the Book of Mormon. Nephi is the first to refer to the story, doing so on two different occasions (1 Nephi 17:41; 2 Nephi 25:20). In each instance, Nephi utilizes the story for different purposes which dictated how he told the story and what he emphasized. These two retellings of the brazen serpent narrative combined to establish a standard interpretation of that story among the Nephites, utilized (and to some extent developed) by later Nephite prophets. In this study, each of the two occasions Nephi made use of this story are contextualized within the iconography and symbolism of pre-exilic Israel and its influences from surrounding cultures. Then, the (minimal) development evident in how this story was interpreted by Nephites across time is considered, comparing it to the way ancient Jewish and early Christian interpretation of the brazen serpent was adapted over time to address specific needs. Based on this analysis, it seems that not only do Nephi’s initial interpretations fit within the context of pre-exilic Israel, but the Book of Mormon’s use of the brazen serpent symbol is not stagnant; rather, it shows indications of having been a real, living tradition that developed along a trajectory comparable to that of authentic ancient traditions.*

The story of the Israelites getting bitten in the wilderness by “fiery serpents” then healed by looking upon the “serpent of brass” set on a pole (Numbers 21:4–9) is, according to one writer, “one of the most widely attested miracles in holy writ.”¹ Perhaps no other book of scripture refers to the story as frequently as the Book of Mormon, which not only has several explicit references to the story (1 Nephi 17:41; 2 Nephi 25:20;

Alma 33:18–22; Helaman 8:13–15), but also makes various typological echoes and allusions to it as part of a larger pattern of Exodus typology occurring throughout the text.²

Naturally, Nephi is the first writer to use this episode, citing it on two separate occasions and within different contexts (1 Nephi 17:41; 2 Nephi 25:20). In each instance, Nephi utilized the story for different purposes which dictated *how* he told the story and *what* he emphasized. Despite their different emphases and contexts, these two retellings of the brazen serpent narrative combined to establish a standard interpretation among the Nephites. Later Book of Mormon prophets used the story essentially in the same ways Nephi son of Lehi did, with only minor, albeit somewhat significant, adjustments in the interpretation (see Alma 33:18–22; 37:45; Helaman 8:13–15). Thus, the origins of Nephite interpretations of the brazen serpent episode seem to have emerged from Nephi’s world.

Therefore, to better understand the Book of Mormon’s use of the brazen serpent narrative, I will first examine each of the two occasions Nephi made use of that story, contextualizing them within the iconography and symbolism of pre-exilic Israel and its influences from surrounding cultures. In doing this, I will occasionally tie in the later Book of Mormon references to this story, as appropriate. Then, I will consider the (minimal) development evident in how this story was interpreted by Nephites across time, comparing it to the way ancient Jewish and early Christian interpretation of the brazen serpent was adapted over time to address specific needs and consider the circumstances that drove Nephite adaptations as well. Overall, this contextual approach yields a variety of insights into the Book of Mormon’s use of this symbol and suggests it was based on an authentic strain of ancient Israelite tradition.

“Flying Fiery Serpents”

Nephi’s first time relating the story of the brazen serpent occurred while the family was in Bountiful, as part of an extended argument with his brothers. Nephi used this story to illustrate the stubbornness of the children of Israel — and by analogy, of Laman and Lemuel themselves — and so his focus is less on the brazen serpent and its meaning and more on the serpents that were sent as a means of chastisement, as well as the people’s reaction to this punishment. As he tells it here, there are some key differences in the story in contrast to the account given in the Hebrew Bible. In order to create a context in which to interpret how Nephi tells the story and the differences in his account, I will draw on the iconography of ancient Judah, origins of serpent symbolism in

Israelite religion, the geographic setting of both the original story and Nephi's retelling, and the contested role of the serpent in proper worship of Yahweh (Jehovah) during the 8th–7th centuries BC.

Winged Seraph-Serpents in Texts and Iconography

As Nephi related the story on this occasion, the Israelites had not merely been bitten by “fiery serpents” but “*flying* fiery serpents” (1 Nephi 17:41).³ In the biblical text, “fiery serpents” is always a translation of *šrp*, Anglicized as *seraph* (pl. *seraphim*), which, as a verb, typically refers to “burning.”⁴ Sometimes it is paired with the word *nḥš*, “snake, serpent,” other times *šrp* itself (without *nḥš*) refers to a venomous serpent.⁵ Thus, when the children of Israel complained about their hardships in the wilderness, “the Lord sent fiery serpents [*h-nḥšym h-šrpym*] among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died” (Numbers 21:6). In Deuteronomy 8:15, *nḥš šrp* are also paired together in reference to the “fiery serpent” in the wilderness,⁶ likely alluding to this same event. In response, the Israelites went to Moses, confessed to their sins and implored him “pray unto the Lord, that he take away the serpents [*h-nḥš*] from us” (Numbers 21:7). The Lord then instructed Moses, “Make thee a fiery serpent [*šrp*], and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live” (Numbers 21:8). Moses then made a *nḥš nḥšt*, “serpent of brass,” mounted it on a “pole” (*ns*), and those who looked upon it, lived (Numbers 21:8–9). Subsequently, the brazen serpent was installed in the Jerusalem temple until the reign of Hezekiah, when he had it removed and broken to pieces as part of his religious reforms (2 Kings 18:4).⁷

Although the seraphim (*šrpym*) in this story are not described as being able to fly, Isaiah mentioned *šrp m'pp*, “fiery flying serpents” that lived in the Negev (Isaiah 30:6; cf. 14:29), generally the same geographical region where the brazen serpent narrative takes place.⁸ Furthermore, *seraphim* is the same term Isaiah used to describe the fiery, angelic beings with six wings that he saw as part of his throne-theophany (Isaiah 6:1–7). The image of a royal or divine symbol flanked on both sides by serpents acting as guardians is common in the ancient Near East, including Israel.⁹ In light of this iconography, plus the typical usage of *šrp* to refer to a type of serpent, many scholars believe that the angelic seraphim of Isaiah's vision were most likely winged serpent-like beings who acted as guardians of the heavenly throne.¹⁰

In addition, the “source of much of the imagery for Isaiah's vision appears to have come from physical realities that Isaiah regularly saw in

the temple.¹¹ As such, the seraphim would represent the brazen serpent — the seraph (*šrp*) the Lord commanded Moses to create (Numbers 21:8) — which was mounted on a pole inside the temple precinct at that time.¹² In fact, the discovery of two Israelite bronze bowls depicting winged serpents mounted on poles suggests to some scholars that the brazen serpent itself had wings.¹³ As with the royal seals, the scenes depicted on these bronze bowls show a pair of winged serpents guarding a sacred or royal symbol, which could be an indication that in Isaiah’s day, there were actually *two* bronze seraphim in the temple, one on each side of the ark of the covenant, paralleling the cherubim.¹⁴

Additional Hebrew seals and other artifacts further depict winged serpents, variously with two wings or four wings.¹⁵ Scholars generally equate this winged serpent imagery with the biblical seraph (*šrp*).¹⁶ Ironically, much of this iconography is attested during the reign of Hezekiah, the king who reportedly destroyed the brazen serpent.¹⁷ For the most part, seraph-serpent iconography did disappear after the time of Hezekiah, perhaps as a result of his efforts to reform Judah and eliminate anything that could be perceived as idol worship.¹⁸ Yet it did not completely vanish. A seal discovered in 2012 — found in a 7th century BC home in the part of Jerusalem believed to be Lehi’s area of residence — depicts a four-winged seraph-serpent, illustrating that the symbol persisted into Lehi’s day.¹⁹

This evidence strongly suggests that, whatever the actual nature of the serpents which pestered the children of Israel in the wilderness, in the 8th–7th centuries BC, seraphim (*šrpym*) were understood to be flying, winged serpents. In fact, renowned Hebrew scholar Moshe Weinfield even translated *nhš šrp* as “flying serpents.”²⁰ James Charlesworth similarly interpreted the term *šrpym* as “winged-serpents” or “fiery winged-serpents.”²¹ Thus, Nephi’s reference to “flying fiery serpents” reflects the common Israelite understanding of seraph-serpents at that time.²²

Origins of the Seraph-Serpent Tradition

Visually, the winged serpents depicted on artifacts from Israel and Judah are clearly inspired by Egyptian iconography.²³ “Winged snakes are depicted in Egyptian art and are found frequently in religious texts,” according to Nicole B. Hansen.²⁴ For example, Manfred Lurker noted, “The Book of the Dead crawls with serpent demons, sometimes winged, rearing up or standing on legs, spitting fire or armed with a knife.”²⁵ More specifically, the Israelite seals and other artifacts reflect the imagery of the Egyptian *uraeus* — the upraised cobra, depicted variously with

and without wings, closely associated with the power and protection of the Pharaoh.²⁶ The *uraeus* was also the symbol of the goddess Wadjet, who “was sometimes depicted as a winged snake.”²⁷ Egyptian imagery was in vogue throughout the Syro-Palestinian region, including Israel and Judah, in the 9th–7th centuries BC, so the Egyptian influence on depictions of the seraph-serpents comes as no surprise.²⁸ Most scholars conclude from this that the meaning and symbolism of the seraph-serpents has an Egyptian *origin*, and that the seraph (like the *uraeus*) was a type of cobra.²⁹ Certainly, the Egyptian connection to the seraph-serpents is noteworthy in light of Nephi and Lehi’s evident knowledge of Egyptian scribal culture (1 Nephi 1:2).

In recent years, however, another theory has emerged that has even more intriguing implications for the Book of Mormon’s use of this symbol. Nissim Amzallag, professor of Bible, Archaeology, and the Ancient Near East at Ben Gurion University of the Negev,³⁰ has argued that while the *imagery* used to represent the seraph-serpent was influenced by Egyptian iconography, the symbol itself was *not* an Egyptian import, but rather was native to the southern Levant.³¹ More specifically, Amzallag argues that the seraph was the saw-scaled viper common to the desert region south of Judah and that this snake was adopted as a religious symbol by a community of Yahweh-worshipping metallurgists connected to the copper mines in that same region.³² Eventually, through trade and migration, members of this community became integrated into the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, infusing a metallurgical dimension into the imagery and symbolism of ancient Israel’s theology.³³ Many of the key elements of this theory — the geography, the seraph-serpents, the metallurgical component, and of course the worship of Yahweh — come together in the story of the brazen serpent.³⁴

In light of this model, it is noteworthy that Lehi is said to be from the tribe of Joseph (1 Nephi 5:14, 16; Alma 10:3), while the onomastics of Lehi’s family — especially the name *Lehi* itself — share an affinity with names attested in the region around the Gulf of Aqaba, where a tribal kingdom called *Lihyan* (LHYN) emerged in the mid-first millennium BC.³⁵ The names Lehi (LHY),³⁶ Laman (LMN),³⁷ and Nephi (NFY),³⁸ are all attested in inscriptions from that area, while Lemuel appears as an Arabian name in the Old Testament (see Proverbs 31:1, 4), and Sam is “the normal Arabic form of Shem,” according to Hugh Nibley.³⁹ Furthermore, based on several clues in the text, it appears Lehi was a metalworker, and scholars have even hypothesized that he regularly traveled to the mines near the Gulf of Aqaba to obtain copper supplies.⁴⁰ Thus, if Amzallag’s

theory is correct, Lehi's personal background converges with that of the community for whom the seraph-serpent was an important religious symbol. As such, it is plausible that Lehi had ties to that community, and thus the brazen serpent narrative would have held particular theological import to him and his family.

Serpent Symbolism in Ritual Metallurgy

The very last act Nephi performed before he was confronted by his brothers at Bountiful was to “make tools of the ore which [he] did molten out of the rock” (1 Nephi 17:16). Nephi had been guided to that ore by the Lord (vv. 9–10), after which he constructed “bellows” for blowing the fire, and then ignited the flames to molten the ore (v. 11). In the modern, developed world, all of this strikes the reader as an entirely mundane event. In antiquity, however, these metallurgical processes would have held religious and ritualistic meaning.⁴¹ According to Amzallag, there was a “ritual dimension of metallurgy ... [that] became an esoteric and hidden fundament of the religions in the Southern Levant and more generally in the ancient Near East.”⁴² Due to its esoteric and mysterious nature, some regarded metalworking as one of the “angelic arts,” a piece of divine “wisdom” taught to mankind by beings from the heavenly realm. “To possess this wisdom made one as wise as an angel,” explained Margaret Barker.⁴³ The essence of this wisdom was “a body of knowledge and practices which gave power over creation when used in conjunction with supernatural forces.”⁴⁴ This is exactly what some believed the ancient metalworker could do — since the earth and firmament were perceived as being made from metal, ancient metallurgists were believed to wield the very powers of creation.⁴⁵

The language used to refer to theophanies in biblical texts can be interpreted as describing the celestial domain as a giant furnace,⁴⁶ with the Lord blowing through bellows and tuyère to stoke the flames,⁴⁷ a pillar of smoke and fire emanating out the top,⁴⁸ and the “glory” (*kbd*) of the Lord symbolized by the radiant glow of the molten ore.⁴⁹ Thus, at least symbolically, “YHWH revealed himself to the smith at his work.”⁵⁰ For Nephi, the opportunity to *finally* light a fire — after being unable to for at least a portion of their journey (1 Nephi 17:12–13) — and practice his metallurgical craft was an opportunity to receive divine instruction, see the glory of the Lord, and feel the Lord working through him.⁵¹

For our purposes, of particular significance is the way the metallurgical process of taking a copper rod or scepter (*mḥ*), remelting it into molten/liquified copper (*nhšt*) and then refashioning it into a new

rod or other object imitates the miraculous sign the Lord gave to Moses of turning his staff or rod (*mṯh*) into a serpent (*nḥš*) and then back into a staff (Exodus 4:1–5; 7:8–13).⁵² In addition to the similarity between the Hebrew terms for “serpent” (*nḥš*) and “copper” (*nḥšt*), molten or liquified copper would resemble a serpent — an especially *fiery* serpent — as it “winds on the ground before solidification.”⁵³ This resemblance would naturally be evident to an ancient metalworker in the story of Moses forging a “fiery serpent” (*nḥš šrp*) out of “copper” (*nḥšt*) as well (Numbers 21:8–9).⁵⁴ In Exodus, the transformation of Moses’s rod into a serpent is meant as a sign to Israel that Moses was sent by the Lord (Exodus 4:5). “In other words,” in the eyes of an ancient smith or smelter, at least, “the wonder becomes a demonstration of Moses’s metallurgical skill,” with the implication that by demonstrating such skill, Moses established his “status [as] emissary of YHWH in the eyes of the Israelites.”⁵⁵

In the context of 1 Nephi 17, Nephi had just engaged in the process of bringing ore to its molten state and reshaping it — and did so with direct assistance from the Lord — thereby demonstrating his own status as one commissioned by the Lord to perform his task.⁵⁶ Then his brothers enter the scene, “murmur” and deride him, calling him a “fool,” and denying that he was “instructed of the Lord” (1 Nephi 17:17–18). When Nephi mentions the “flying fiery serpents” in his response (v. 41), it seems deliberately crafted to evoke the symbolism of the rod-to-serpent transformation, which was related to the metallurgical process, as described above. After the Lord brought the children of Israel out of Egypt, Nephi says:

And he did straiten them in the wilderness with his *rod*,
for they hardened their hearts even as ye have.

And the Lord straitened them because of their iniquity.

He sent *flying fiery serpents* among them. (1 Nephi 17:41)

The parallelism of the verse seems to suggest that the Lord’s method of “straitening” the Israelites “with his rod” is equated with the seraph-serpents biting the Israelites — a natural association in light of the pervasive use of the rod or staff as a serpentine symbol in the ancient Near East, including the Exodus narratives.⁵⁷ In the immediate context of Nephi’s narrative, however, he seems to have alluded specifically to the rod-to-serpent transformation performed by Moses and Aaron, and symbolized by taking solid copper (in the form a rod) and bringing it into a molten state reminiscent of a “fiery serpent.” The fact that Nephi himself had just performed a similar act of metallurgy signified that he, like Moses, had encountered the Lord’s glory and been sent as his emissary, directly countering his brothers’ claims.⁵⁸ It further illustrated

that — also contrary to his brothers' claims — Nephi was no fool: he possessed the wisdom of angels, bestowed by divine instruction.

Seraph-Serpents Along Lehi's Trail

As elaborated in the previous section, there is a convergence in Nephi's text of ritual metallurgy, worship of the Lord, and his reference to "flying fiery serpents." There is also a geographical component to the winged serpent traditions that intersects with the primary setting of 1 Nephi. Biblical, Assyrian, and Greek sources from the 8th–5th centuries BC all consistently identify Sinai and the desert region south of Judah as the place of the flying serpents.⁵⁹ Isaiah identifies the "fiery flying serpent" (*šrp m'pp*) as one of the fearsome beasts of the Negev wilderness (Isaiah 30:6). Esarhaddon, an Assyrian king, reported seeing "yellow snakes spreading wings" while marching his army through this same region in 671 BC.⁶⁰

Herodotus, a 5th century BC Greek historian, went to "a place in Arabia somewhat near the city of Bouto in order to learn about the winged serpents" (*Histories* 2.75).⁶¹ Bouto was a city in the Nile Delta, in Egypt;⁶² thus the location Herodotus is referring to would be somewhere around the Egyptian-Sinai border or the northwest Arabian desert. According to legends at that time, "when spring arrives, winged serpents fly from Arabia toward Egypt," but were stopped at the Egyptian-Sinai border by the ibis bird (*Histories* 2.75). In that area, Herodotus said that he encountered "the bones and spines of serpents" laying in "heaps" large and small (*Histories* 2.75). "The snake has a form like that of the water snake and bears wing-like membranes that lack feathers, quite similar to the wings of a bat" (*Histories* 2.76).

The encounter narrated in Numbers 21:4–9, specifically, is set in the region near the Gulf of Aqaba (also known as the Gulf of Eilat).⁶³ In this region, archaeologists have uncovered a copper serpent in a tent-shrine near the Timna copper mines, dated to the Late Bronze/Early Iron Age.⁶⁴ This site bears no direct relationship with the Exodus, but for our purposes it is noteworthy that the worshippers there were almost certainly metalworkers, and Amzallag argues it was among the earliest sanctuaries dedicated to Yahweh.⁶⁵

Upon his initial departure (1 Nephi 2:1–5), Lehi went directly into this same "winged serpent"-infested region described in all these sources. The exact route followed out of Jerusalem cannot be known with certainty, but Warren Aston most recently proposed a route that would lead southwest out of Jerusalem, down toward Be'er Sheva, through the Negev, past Timna, and to the Gulf of Aqaba.⁶⁶ This course would have taken them through Makhtesh Ramon, where numerous fossils of extinct amphibian species

are visible that, Karen Radner argues, could be interpreted as the bones of winged snakes. Radner thus proposes that this was the place of winged snakes referred to in the accounts of both Herodotus and Esarhaddon.⁶⁷

After traveling through this region, Lehi's family established their first long-term encampment in the Valley of Lemuel (1 Nephi 2:6–8), a location that would have been only a few days away from the Timna copper mines — a place scholars believe Lehi was familiar with due to his profession as a metalworker.⁶⁸ Nephi and his brothers traveled back and forth between here and Jerusalem at least two additional times (1 Nephi 3–4; 7). It is not until 1 Nephi 16:11–12 that Nephi reports the family's departure from this area. Thus, the bulk of the narrative in 1 Nephi takes place in this region between Jerusalem and the Red Sea, in the midst of the traditional habitat associated with the winged seraph-serpents.

Despite this contact and proximity to the region most closely associated with winged serpents, Nephi did not appeal to the episode in Numbers 21 and the “flying fiery serpents” during this time. While staying in this region, however, the Lehites obtained two artifacts made of brass (*nḥšt*): the “plates of brass” (1 Nephi 5) and the ball of fine brass, later identified as the “Liahona” (1 Nephi 16:10; cf. Alma 37:38). Scholars have suggested that each of these are framed symbolically as the “serpent of brass” (*nḥš nḥšt*) in Nephi's Exodus typology.⁶⁹ The Liahona in particular is noteworthy as a type for the brazen serpent because not only was it made of “brass,” but it was used to “look upon” in order to gain knowledge from the Lord (1 Nephi 16:26), a process known anciently as “divination.”⁷⁰ Both serpents and metallurgy were symbolically associated with divination, and the Hebrew root for “divination, enchantment” (*nḥš*) was closely related to the terms used for *serpent* and *copper* (or brass/bronze).⁷¹ Furthermore, in some cultures, metalworkers used “copper paraphernalia” in their divination rituals.⁷² Thus, the term *nḥš nḥšt*, “serpent of brass,” may have also evoked — to Nephi, at least — the notion of “diviner of brass,” e.g., a copper/bronze object used in divination, such as the Liahona.⁷³

Nephi's direct citation of the brazen serpent narrative occurred when the family had arrived in Bountiful (1 Nephi 17:41), which lay on the southern shores of Arabia, in the frankincense-producing region of Dhofar.⁷⁴ The South Arabian cultures that occupied Yemen and controlled the trade in frankincense certainly had their own serpent-based iconography, symbolism, and traditions.⁷⁵ For example, a cast bronze snake was found near al-Ḥadā', with the name of the god Wadd (*wdm*) inscribed on it — the deity associated with snakes in the

South Arabian pantheon.⁷⁶ In southeastern Arabia (northern Oman), archaeologists have uncovered one of the most extensive sites of serpent worship in all of the ancient Near East.⁷⁷ As with the serpent iconography of the southern Levant, the worship of snakes in Oman appears to be connected to copper mining and metallurgy.⁷⁸

Perhaps most relevant, Herodotus not only talked about “winged serpents” near the border of Egypt and Arabia, as already mentioned, but he also reported that in the region “where frankincense grows ... great numbers of winged serpents which are small and have variegated markings ... carefully guard each [frankincense] tree” (*Histories* 3.107). The stories and claims Herodotus makes about these winged serpents are quite fanciful, leaving scholars puzzled as to what he could possibly be referring to.⁷⁹ While the details are likely garbled and exaggerated, laborers gathering incense surely encountered venomous snakes during their work. Other classical sources more realistically refer to snakes that “leap” or “jump” out at their prey. For instance, Strabo (writing in the 1st centuries BC/AD) described “snakes a *spitame* long and red in color that can jump as far as a hare and make an incurable bite” living in the territory of the Sabeans (*Geography* 16.4.19).⁸⁰

Both the Egyptian cobra and the saw-scaled viper — the main candidates for the biblical seraph-serpents — are also known in Yemen and Dhofar, where frankincense grows.⁸¹ The saw-scaled viper is an especially good candidate for the frankincense tree-guarding “winged serpents”: it is known to get into bushes and small trees to prey on birds, and often has a reddish color consistent with Strabo’s description.⁸²

Thus, while traveling through South Arabia and staying in the Dhofar region, Lehi and his family would have encountered the same snake species found in the desert south of Judah and identified with the seraph-serpents from biblical traditions. At least by the time of Herodotus, who wrote about 100 years after Lehi’s journey, local South Arabian legends apparently referred to these snakes as being “winged” and able to fly. This means that between both the Valley of Lemuel and Bountiful — the two locations where most of Nephi’s narrative takes place — the Lehite group had spent a large portion of their time near or within the habitat of the seraph-serpents.⁸³ As such, when Nephi reminded his brothers of the “flying fiery serpents” sent by the Lord to chastise the children of Israel for their murmuring (1 Nephi 17:41), it would have held a relevance that is often lost on readers today: they, too, were traveling and camping in regions believed to be infested by

flying serpents, and if they were not faithful, the Lord could just as easily punish them by unleashing those dangerous snakes.⁸⁴

Suppression of the Seraph-Serpent

As mentioned previously, in ancient Israel the seraph-serpent iconography largely proliferated in the 9th–8th centuries BC after which it faded out and disappeared.⁸⁵ The reason for this is likely connected to Hezekiah’s removal of the brazen serpent from the temple (see 2 Kings 18:4).⁸⁶ Prior to that time, the brazen serpent evidently played some kind of role in Israelite worship, but its exact function is not known for certain. It is possible it was more strongly associated with the traditions and worship practices of northern Israelites, which may be why the biblical authors give it such scant attention.⁸⁷ Most likely, given the story in Numbers 21, it was used in some kind of ritual wherein worshippers would seek to invoke the Lord’s healing power.⁸⁸ Victor Hurowitz has even argued that the text of Numbers 21:4–9 was a kind of invocation or prayer that the worshipper would ritually recite while burning incense and looking upon the mounted serpent of bronze.⁸⁹ This means that the Lord’s promise, “that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it [the brazen serpent], shall live” (Number 21:8), was believed to be *active and ongoing* for generations of Israelite worshippers prior to the reign of Hezekiah.⁹⁰ Furthermore, based on multilingual wordplays involving the Hebrew terms for “live” (*hyh*, *hyy*, *hwh*) and “snake” (*nhš*) with the Aramaic term for “snake” (*hwy*) and the Akkadian terms for “live, life” (*na’āšu*, *nīšu*), Hurowitz argues that the passage would invite worshippers “to use a [brazen serpent] not only to treat snake bites ... but to give life” more generally.⁹¹ For centuries then, humble Israelites with a variety of ailments evidently sought the Lord’s healing power by approaching the brazen serpent, believing the promise given to Moses still applied in their own day: “that every one that ... looketh upon it, shall live.”

All of that changed, however, when Hezekiah had the object destroyed (2 Kings 18:4), reportedly in connection with extensive reforms of Israelite religion. There is ongoing debate among biblical scholars as to the historical reality of — and if real, the nature, extent, and purpose of — Hezekiah’s reforms,⁹² but most scholars agree that the destruction of the brazen serpent is a historically authentic detail.⁹³ Whatever the exact nature and purpose of its removal, it is clear that the account of this event as recorded in the Deuteronomistic History (2 Kings 18:4) shows disdain for this object and the worship practices connected to it. Richard Lederman, a professor of Bible and Religion at Georgetown University, argues that this account is

a “Deuteronomic polemic against forbidden forms of worship,” patterned after Deuteronomy 12:3 (cf. 7:5), thus characterizing the brazen serpent as the idolatrous image of a foreign god, inauthentic to true Israelite religion — despite its reputed Mosaic origins.⁹⁴ The declaration of it as “Nehushtan” (*nḥštn*) is probably not a proper name as typically translated but rather a pejorative dismissal of the object as just a “piece of bronze/copper” unworthy of worship.⁹⁵ According to Leslie S. Wilson, “during or just after the period of King Josiah and the Deuteronomist reporter(s),” the “serpentine (*nḥš*) traditions became the symbol of all things evil and abhorrent to YHWH.”⁹⁶

In contrast, ancient metallurgists such as Lehi and Nephi — especially given their ties to the northern kingdom of Israel — likely viewed the brazen serpent as a legitimate Yahwistic symbol and an authentic and integral part of Israelite worship.⁹⁷ Both serpent symbolism and the metallurgical arts were traits of the ancient “wisdom” tradition — a tradition that the Deuteronomists disapproved of and sought to change.⁹⁸ This controversy over the origin and legitimacy of the brazen serpent may very well be lurking in the background of Nephi’s expansion and commentary on the brazen serpent narrative.

As certain Book of Mormon scholars have previously argued, it appears Lehi and Nephi embraced at least parts of the ancient wisdom traditions that the Deuteronomistic school of thought vehemently opposed.⁹⁹ In contrast, Laman and Lemuel were apparently ideologically aligned with the Deuteronomist movement, as is most evident in their criticism of Nephi just before he gave his speech mentioning the brazen serpent narrative (1 Nephi 17:22).¹⁰⁰ As already discussed, Nephi’s metallurgical activity just before he was confronted by his brothers established his *bona fides* — based on pre-Deuteronomistic traditions — as one sent like Moses (cf. Deuteronomy 18:15–18).¹⁰¹ Thus, the conflict between Nephi and his brothers in 1 Nephi 17 is a microcosm of the larger debate over the proper form of Israelite religion that was going on at the time.

With that in mind, consider a key difference between the account in Numbers 21:4–9 and Nephi’s version of the same story. In Nephi’s version, there is a group of people unmentioned in the biblical account who *refused to look upon the brazen serpent*.

And after they were bitten,
 he prepared a way that they might be healed.
 And the labor which they had to perform were to look.
 And because of the simpleness of the way or the easiness of it,
 there were many which perished.
 And they did harden their hearts from time to time,

and they did revile against Moses and also against God.

(1 Nephi 17:41–42)

Alma, too, mentioned this additional detail, indicating that it continued to play a part in the Nephites' brazen serpent tradition:

But few understood the meaning of those things —
and this because of the hardness of their hearts.

But there were many which were so hardened that they
would not look;
therefore they perished.

Now the reason that they would not look
is because they did not believe that it would heal them.

(Alma 33:20–21)

A similar tradition implying that some did not look and thus perished is found in later Jewish sources.¹⁰² If generations of Israelites had continued to look upon the brazen serpent seeking the Lord's healing power, then the tradition of those who would not look because they did not believe it to be efficacious may have developed *after* Hezekiah destroyed it, as a polemical response to the desecration and denunciation of the serpent symbol in Deuteronomistic ideology. To those who still believed and followed a pre-reform version of Yahweh-worship, it was the Deuteronomistic elite in Jerusalem who rejected the simple and easy way prepared by the Lord; who failed to understand "the meaning of those things" — that is, the meaning of the serpent and the worship practices involving it. For that, they were doomed to perish, as Lehi had prophesied and as was fulfilled when the Babylonians destroyed the city (1 Nephi 1:13; 2 Kings 25). By aligning themselves with the Deuteronomists, Laman and Lemuel were joining the ranks of those who "did harden their hearts." Although they claimed to revere Moses and worship Yahweh according to the law, by rejecting a Yahwistic symbol attributed to Moses, they were actually reviling against them both.

The Serpent "Raised Up" in the Wilderness

When Nephi was speaking to his brothers in Bountiful, he did not provide an interpretation of the brazen serpent itself. Later, when Nephi appealed to this story again while commenting on the prophecies of Isaiah (2 Nephi 25:1), the context and setting was different. His conflicts with his brothers were largely behind him, and he had shifted his attention to "proving unto my people the truth of the coming of Christ" (2 Nephi 11:4), an event he had seen in vision (1 Nephi 11). He appealed

to Isaiah as an eyewitness who had also seen the Redeemer in vision (2 Nephi 11:2). Thus, his focus shifted away from the Israelites' reaction to the punishing "poisonous serpents," and onto "the serpent which [Moses] did raise up" — that is, the brazen serpent itself (2 Nephi 25:20). Nephi used the serpent that Moses "did raise up" as an illustration of the Lord's power to deliver and save — which he then implicitly connected to the Messiah he had seen "lifted up upon the cross" (1 Nephi 11:33):

For according to the words of the prophets,
the Messiah cometh ... [and]
his name should be Jesus Christ the Son of God.

...

And as the Lord God liveth that brought Israel up out of the
land of Egypt
and gave unto Moses power that he should heal the nations
after that they had been bitten by the poisonous serpents,
if they would cast their eyes unto the serpent which he did
raise up before them,

...

yea, behold I say unto you that as these things are true
and as the Lord God liveth,
there is none other name given under heaven
save it be this Jesus Christ of which I have spoken
whereby man can be saved. (2 Nephi 25:19–20)

According to the Gospel of John, Jesus himself made a similar association:

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so
must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth
in him should not perish, but have eternal life. (John 3:14–15)

Douglas W. Ullmann reasoned that this passage "captures the main thought of Numbers 21:4–9 and applies it to Jesus Christ's death,"¹⁰³ explaining:

the Lord provided only one means of salvation (from the snake bites): the bronze serpent. If anyone refused to look at the uplifted serpent, he was not healed. In a similar way the Jewish leaders of Jesus's day disbelieved that Jesus was the Messiah (John 3:11), thereby rejecting God's means of providing them with eternal life. Yet God had provided Jesus

Christ as the only means of salvation. If anyone refused to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, he was not saved.¹⁰⁴

The story is used “as an illustration of God’s plan for salvation through Jesus Christ,” but the Gospel of John “does not . . . suggest that the bronze serpent is a type of Christ.”¹⁰⁵ Ullmann concludes that, as used in the Gospel of John, “the [bronze] serpent was not intended to be a prediction of any of the details of Jesus’s vicarious death, [but] several points of similarity between the lifting up of the serpent and the lifting up of Jesus Christ made the bronze serpent an appropriate symbol.”¹⁰⁶

Brant A. Gardner has similarly argued that “Nephi is not using the [the brazen serpent] incident typologically but rather as evidence of Yahweh’s power as manifest through a prophet.”¹⁰⁷ It is true that Nephi, like Jesus himself in John 3:14–15, did not *explicitly* say that the serpent was a type for Christ, and nothing Nephi said suggests that the serpent was a prophecy of His crucifixion.¹⁰⁸ Yet, Nephi did *implicitly* compare Jesus Christ and the brazen serpent as an illustration that there is no other means of salvation but Christ — precisely as used in John 3:14–15, according to Ullmann. As S. Kent Brown explained:

Nephi highlighted the brazen serpent incident, along with the Lord’s guidance of the Israelites and his gift of water from a rock, as indisputable evidences of Jehovah’s power to save temporally as well as spiritually. Nephi swore an oath “that as these things are true, and as the Lord God liveth, there is none other name given under heaven save it be this Jesus Christ . . . whereby man can be saved” (2 Nephi 25:20). Hereby, Nephi drew attention to the link between Moses’s actions and Jesus’s atonement.¹⁰⁹

Of course, Nephi predates the Gospel of John by several centuries, so it is significant that James Charlesworth argues that this “image[ry] and symbolism . . . are reflected in Jewish thought long before the composition of the Fourth Gospel.”¹¹⁰ As previously noted, it is difficult to completely recover the role and meaning of the seraph-serpent in the pre-reform Israelite religion which may have influenced Nephi’s thinking. Furthermore, its meaning was probably somewhat fluid rather than fixed.¹¹¹ As Jacqueline Tabick observed: “it is obvious that the interpretations of a symbol can be made from many possible view points, and . . . it should also be obvious that the interpretation is bound to be a subjective one, influenced by the cultural background and personal experience of the interpreter.”¹¹² Thus, Nephi’s interpretation needn’t be assumed to represent a *universally* applied interpretation of the brazen

serpent among ancient Israelites; but it should make sense in light of his “cultural background and personal experience.”

Nephi himself had just stressed the importance of understanding the cultural background of scripture — the “manner of the Jews” — in order to be able to interpret it (2 Nephi 25:1–6). Furthermore, although Nephi was clearly commenting on the narrative in Numbers 21:4–9, he was not interpreting it in a vacuum; rather, it was part of his larger commentary on Isaiah 2–14, which was just quoted (2 Nephi 12–24). This block of text includes two other key passages that refer to seraph-serpents — Isaiah 6 / 2 Nephi 16 and Isaiah 14:28–32 / 2 Nephi 24:28–32 — and three passages referring to standards which are “lifted up” — Isaiah 5:26 / 2 Nephi 15:26; Isaiah 11:10, 12 / 2 Nephi 21:10, 12; and Isaiah 13:2 / 2 Nephi 23:2.

Thus, to understand Nephi’s commentary here on the narrative in Numbers 21:4–9, I will consider that narrative together with these Isaiah passages, as well as the cultural background of serpent symbolism and iconography in ancient Israel and the ancient Near East more generally. I will specifically discuss the use of serpents as symbols of healing, life, immortality, resurrection, salvation, purification and atonement; as representations of the Messiah (and kingship more generally), divine messengers and dispensers of justice, and members of the heavenly hosts; as well as the use of serpents on deified battle-standards — all of which are roles, functions, and attributes that at least *some* ancient Israelites close to Nephi’s time likely connected to the seraph-serpent.¹¹³ When discussing each of the qualities of serpent symbolism, I will also consider Book of Mormon commentary on the brazen serpent story against this cultural background and Nephi’s personal experiences (especially his visions), illustrating that such commentary makes logical sense as an interpretation of a pre-exilic symbol.

Healing

As previously mentioned, the primary association of the seraph symbol in Israelite religion was likely one of healing, especially healing from snake bites, with Numbers 21:4–9 possibly functioning as ritual text recited by the worshipper as they looked upon the brazen serpent.¹¹⁴ Healing was one of the most widespread and common meanings of the serpent in ancient Near Eastern symbolism.¹¹⁵ According to Charlesworth, the serpent was “the quintessential symbol of healing, health, and rejuvenation in the ancient Near East, including Palestine, from circa 1850 BCE to at least 135 CE.”¹¹⁶ Maciej Münnich similarly notes

that “throughout the entire Near East the snake was considered a symbol of health and even immortality.”¹¹⁷ Nephi understood that the brazen serpent represented the “power ... [to] heal the nations” (2 Nephi 25:20) and Alma, likewise, emphasized the healing function of the serpent (Alma 33:21–22).¹¹⁸ Just before telling the story of Moses raising the brazen serpent, Nephi explained that Jesus Christ would “rise from the dead with healing in his wings” (2 Nephi 25:13).¹¹⁹

Life, Immortality, and Resurrection

Closely related to its healing function, serpents were also often associated with life.¹²⁰ As already pointed out, Hurowitz argues that multilingual wordplays with terms for “snake” and “life” in Numbers 21:4–9 suggest that the brazen serpent not only healed but gave life.¹²¹ Amy Birkan also argues that this narrative puts emphasis on the serpent as more than *merely* a means of healing but as “the chief emblem of new life.”¹²² In many ancient Near Eastern myths, it is paradoxically “the slaying of the dragon, or serpent, [that] provides life.”¹²³ As Münnich mentioned (above), the lifegiving powers of the serpent were not limited to *mortal* life but included the power to give immortality, and thus it was often associated with resurrection, life after death, and eternity.¹²⁴ As Münnich further explains, “This was usually connected with snakes shedding their skins, which made a semblance of rebirth into eternity.”¹²⁵ Likewise, in Egypt, according to Lurker, “the snake, because it sloughs its skin, became a symbol of survival after death.”¹²⁶

After talking about how the “type was raised up in the wilderness, that whosoever would look upon it might live” (Alma 33:19), Alma encouraged his Zoramite audience to “cast about your eyes and begin to believe in the Son of God ... that he shall rise again from the dead, which shall bring to pass the resurrection” (Alma 33:22). In a more cryptic allusion to the story, discussed in some detail later, Alma said “if we will look, we may live forever” (Alma 37:46). As noted above, Nephi son of Lehi spoke of Jesus Christ “ris[ing] from the dead with healing in his wings” (2 Nephi 25:13) shortly before he related how the Israelites “would cast their eyes unto the serpent” to be healed; soon thereafter, he stressed that the purpose of his teaching was so his posterity would “look forward unto that life which is in Christ” (2 Nephi 25:20, 27). Later, Nephi son of Helaman most strongly associated the symbol with Christ’s life-giving powers:

Yea, did [Moses] not bear record that the Son of God should come?
And as he lifted up the brazen serpent in the wilderness,
even so should he be lifted up which should come.

And as many as should look upon that serpent should live,
 even so as many as should look upon the Son of God with faith,
 having a contrite spirit, might live,
 even unto that life which is eternal. (Helaman 8:14–15)

Salvation

Given these healing and life-giving associations, it was only natural that the serpent would also become a symbol of salvation, “since healing and salvation are cognitively synonymous” according to Charlesworth.¹²⁷ Andrew Skinner observes, “As a bringer of salvation and giver of everlasting life, the snake became a divine reptile” in ancient Near Eastern conceptions.¹²⁸ A prime example of this comes from the Apocryphal *Wisdom of Solomon*, a pre-Christian Jewish text.¹²⁹ Retelling the story of when the Israelites “perished with the stings of crooked serpents,” the author refers to the brazen serpent as “a sign of salvation, to put them in remembrance of the commandment of thy law” (*Wisdom of Solomon* 16:5, 6).¹³⁰ “Under God’s command,” explained Emerson B. Powery, “Moses created a bronze serpent to symbolize God’s salvation.”¹³¹ When Nephi compared Christ to the serpent, he stressed that it is by Jesus Christ “whereby man can be saved” (2 Nephi 25:20), and Alma mentioned that “he will come to redeem his people” (Alma 33:22).

Purification and Atonement

The role of the seraphim in Isaiah’s vision both overlaps with and extends the symbolic meaning of the seraph-serpents in Numbers 21. When Isaiah begins to fear because he, “a man of unclean lips,” had seen the Lord of Hosts (Isaiah 6:5), it is a seraph who comes to purify him with “a live coal,” declaring “thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged” (v. 6–7). As such, this purifying function is an extension of the healing connotations of serpents generally, one that particularly makes sense when speaking of “fiery” or “burning” (*šrp*) serpents.¹³² LeGrande Davies argues the verb *šrp*, “to burn,” is primarily used to refer to the “cleansing, purifying or refining of ritual objects, people, cities, etc.,” and that this was the purpose of the seraph-serpents in the wilderness as well as the function of the seraphim in Isaiah 6: “The seraphim acted as the agents of the ‘cleansing fire’ to Isaiah, as the ‘cleansing’ or ‘fiery serpents’ of the wilderness acted on the Israelites.”¹³³

The connections to purification are further strengthened by the use of the roots *šrp*, “to burn” and the homophonic *šrp*, “to refine” earlier in Isaiah (Isaiah 1:7, 25), and the use of *ršph* for the burning coal in Isaiah 6:6, forming

wordplays with *seraphim*.¹³⁴ “The prophet and the people are unclean and sinful,” observed Peter D. Miscall. “Cleanness and innocence are achieved by burning and refining both the prophet and the people; in the process, the guilt, the dross, is removed.”¹³⁵ Thus, Udo Rütterswörden called this “an atonement act,”¹³⁶ and Karen Randolph Joines noted that to Isaiah these “winged serpents are agents of divine redemption and healing.”¹³⁷

Nephi most likely interpreted Isaiah’s vision in context with Lehi’s own throne-theophany (1 Nephi 1:6–14), in which case he probably identified the seraph who purged Isaiah’s sins with the “One descending out of the midst of heaven” in Lehi’s vision — a figure usually interpreted to be Jesus Christ (1 Nephi 1:9).¹³⁸ Since, as one biblical scholar puts it, “the seraph that cleanses Isaiah ... may function as a symbolic allusion to the seraph in Numbers 21:8 that heals the children of Israel,”¹³⁹ it is significant that Nephi talked about looking upon the brazen serpent in the context of teaching his posterity “to what source they may look for a remission of their sins” (2 Nephi 25:26) — the very function of the seraph in Isaiah 6:7. Likewise, when comparing Christ to the seraph Moses “raised up in the wilderness,” Alma said He would “come to redeem his people” and “atone for their sins” (Alma 33:19, 22), both roles scholars have associated with the actions of the seraph in Isaiah 6.

Messiah (Kingship)

Snakes also acted as guardians throughout the ancient world.¹⁴⁰ As mentioned previously, this was a common function of the seraph-serpent in Judean iconography in the 8th century BC, and the role is also evident in Isaiah 6, where the seraphim are acting as guardians or gate-keepers of the heavenly throne and the divine council.¹⁴¹ In both Egyptian and Judean iconography, the protective function of the seraph (in Judah) and uraeus (in Egypt) is prominently linked to the king and royal symbolism.¹⁴² Nicole B. Hansen explained, “The *uraeus* was the image of the Egyptian cobra (*Naha haje*), worn in the front of the king’s headdress. ... Thus the *uraeus* came to be considered a protector of kingship.”¹⁴³

Eventually, such prominent displays of the protective uraeus led to its adoption as not only a protector or guardian, but also as a direct symbol of royalty, authority, and kingship itself.¹⁴⁴ As Charlesworth explains, “the uraeus ... was placed in royal palaces and on the heads of pharaohs to symbolize their godly and kingly powers.”¹⁴⁵ This same conflation appears to have taken place in Judean iconography. While, as mentioned earlier in this article, the winged serpent was typically depicted as the

guardian(s) of a royal symbol, in some instances “the winged seraph alone seems to symbolize Judean kingship.”¹⁴⁶

Isaiah evidently drew upon this royal imagery when he warned Philistia, “Rejoice not . . . because the rod of him that smote thee is broken: for out of the serpent’s root shall come forth a viper, and his fruit shall be a fiery flying serpent” (Isaiah 14:29).¹⁴⁷ In this passage, the serpent, viper, and a flying seraph-serpent are presented as the root, trunk, and fruit of a tree — and thus represent succeeding generations of rulers. According to Shawn Zelig Aster, “The root represents previous generations, the trunk represents the present, and the fruit represents the future. Each of the types of serpents mentioned is more rare and more dangerous than the previous one.”¹⁴⁸ Thus, the flying seraph-serpent is a future royal figure who will subjugate the Philistines and protect Zion (Isaiah 14:29–32).¹⁴⁹

Given its use of Judean royal iconography (a flying seraph-serpent) combined with imagery used elsewhere in Isaiah (11:1) to refer to a future Davidic king or “new David,”¹⁵⁰ this passage naturally lends itself to messianic interpretations.¹⁵¹ As John N. Oswalt pointed out, if this is interpreted as “a reference to the Jewish nation or the Davidic monarchy,” then “the Messiah is the flying serpent.”¹⁵² Indeed, at least by the early centuries AD, that is precisely how Jewish interpreters were reading the passage, as illustrated by the Targumic rendering: “Rejoice not, all you Philistines, because the ruler who was subjugating you is broken, for from the sons of the sons of Jesse the Messiah will come forth, and his deeds will be among you as a wounding serpent” (Tg. Isaiah 14:29).¹⁵³ At least one modern scholar similarly argued, “The broader meaning [of Isaiah 14:28–32] seems to be that from the root of Judah, ‘the serpent’s root, the deliverer shall come to save Israel.’ This one is symbolized as ‘a flying serpent.’”¹⁵⁴ In light of the interpretation in the Targums, Bruce Chilton suggests “it may *just* be that the connection between serpent imagery and messianic thinking was something of a conventional one.”¹⁵⁵

In the Book of Mormon, both Nephi son of Lehi and Nephi son of Helaman used the title “Messiah” for Jesus Christ when making the comparison with the brazen serpent (2 Nephi 25:19; Helaman 8:13). Furthermore, just as ancient Jewish interpreters reasoned that the Israelites had to look upon the brazen serpent with “a long and insistent gaze” to be healed of a snake bite,¹⁵⁶ so Nephi taught that if his people “look forward with steadfastness unto Christ [i.e., the Messiah]”¹⁵⁷ they would be “made alive” (2 Nephi 25:24–25).

Divine Messenger and Dispenser of Justice

Isaiah 14:29 also clearly reflects “the use of the serpent and the pit viper to symbolize God’s messenger.”¹⁵⁸ As discussed earlier, the transformation of the rod or staff (*mṯh*) into a serpent (*nḥš*) was used as a sign that Moses had truly been sent as Yahweh’s messenger to deliver the Israelites from Egypt (Exodus 4:1–5).¹⁵⁹ Similar imagery is at play in Isaiah 14:29, where the broken “rod” or “scepter” (*šbt*) becomes the “serpent’s root” (*mšrš nḥš*) from whence God’s emissary emerges as a “fiery flying serpent” (*šrp m’pp*). Likewise, according to Izaak J. de Hulster, “the seraphs of Isaiah 6 might be understood as carrying out an intermediary role as a type of divine messenger.”¹⁶⁰ Other biblical passages likewise identify serpents being commissioned or sent by God to accomplish a specific task (e.g., Genesis 49:17; Amos 9:3).¹⁶¹ In these passages, as Amzallag explained, the serpent is “YHWH’s faithful emissary, involved in protecting the people of Israel and even individuals among this collective.”¹⁶²

As God’s messenger, the serpent was frequently associated with judgment.¹⁶³ Charlesworth noticed, “Often biblical authors choose the serpent to symbolize the agent of God’s judgment, usually punishment.”¹⁶⁴ For example, Trevor Cochell argues that the flying seraph in Isaiah 14:28–31, “behaves much as the uraeus in an Egyptian royal context,” bringing “fiery destruction upon the enemies of the true King, Yahweh, and his people. . . . [T]he mythical fiery serpent (seraph/uraeus) is the symbol of Yahweh’s judgment.”¹⁶⁵ This meaning is evident in the brazen serpent narrative, where the seraph-serpents were sent (or released) by the Lord to punish the Israelites for their murmuring (Numbers 21:6).¹⁶⁶ In Egypt, the serpent mounted on a pole or standard was often used to represent Pharaoh’s judgment against his enemies — a symbol that Numbers 21 seems to invert by using the same iconography (a serpent mounted on a pole) as a means of sparing the Israelites of a negative judgment.¹⁶⁷

Serpents did not exclusively convey the negative aspect of judgment. Charlesworth proclaims, “the serpent . . . symbolizes God’s messenger who brings justice, judgment, and goodness.”¹⁶⁸ As Davies puts it, “The subtlety of the serpent . . . exemplifies the justice of God, which knows no bounds and can seek out the righteous or wicked anywhere to bring forth justice.”¹⁶⁹ In Greco-Roman culture, according to Skinner, it was perceived that “the serpent could give life or take it, let another creature live or cause it to die by invoking, as it were, a kind of ‘instant judgment’ in deciding to strike or not.”¹⁷⁰ Thus, it could naturally symbolize God’s judgments to both reward the righteous and punish the wicked. Once again, this very dualism is at play in Numbers 21, “where the Snake is seen as the messenger

of both life and death,” as Tabick points out.¹⁷¹ When Alma compared Christ to the brazen serpent, he mentioned “that all men shall stand before him to be judged at the last and judgment day according to their works” (Alma 33:22). Nephi likewise emphasized the coming judgment “at the last day” when he mentioned the raised up serpent (2 Nephi 25:18, 20).

One of the Heavenly Hosts/Sons of God

In most ancient Near Eastern cultures, snakes typically symbolized a specific god or goddess of healing, life, or other properties commonly associated with serpents. Some scholars believe it was the same in Israel, with the brazen serpent representing one of the heavenly hosts — divine beings variously referred to as “gods,” “sons of God/the Most High,” “holy ones,” and “angels,” among other titles.¹⁷² “It has long been recognized,” according to Lowell K. Handy, “that this object stood for a deity” which was “clearly part of the Judean pantheon and almost certainly a deity of healing.”¹⁷³ Charlesworth likewise argues that before Hezekiah’s reforms, “citizens of Judah . . . most likely perceived the [brazen] serpent as a celestial being,” from within “Yahweh’s heavenly court.”¹⁷⁴ Similarly, Tallay Ornan reasoned that the four-winged seraph on a 7th century BC Israelite seal represented a “member in the [heavenly] entourage of Yahweh.”¹⁷⁵ Indeed, as discussed earlier, Isaiah — possibly inspired by the brazen serpent(s) in the temple — envisioned members of the of the divine council as *seraphim*, or winged fiery serpents (Isaiah 6).¹⁷⁶

Typically, scholars trying to identify the specific deity represented by the brazen serpent link it to Canaanite healing gods or serpent deities.¹⁷⁷ Based on Isaiah’s vision, however, the seraph form was not necessarily limited to a specific individual within the heavenly hosts; furthermore, as discussed in this paper, the seraph-serpent clearly conveyed a wide-range of meanings — well beyond just healing — all *within* the context of Israelite worship of Yahweh.¹⁷⁸ Thus, in seeking to identify a deity which ancient Israelites might have associated with the brazen serpent, it makes sense to look for one that embodies *all* of the attributes of the seraph-serpent discussed above.

In this light, it is noteworthy that, according to some scholars, early Israelite religion featured a “second god”: a divine redeemer-figure who was one of the “sons of God,” a heavenly guardian, God’s primary agent or emissary (*ml’k*, “angel”), and was manifest on earth as the Messiah (the Davidic king).¹⁷⁹ The role and identity of this divine son figure was obscured by the Deuteronomistic reformers, but the earliest Christians drew upon surviving traditions about this “Son of God” in their understandings of

Jesus.¹⁸⁰ Given the overlap between the roles of this particular member of the heavenly hosts and the meanings and functions associated with the seraph-serpent discussed in this paper — both are connected to redemption, messengers, judgment, guardianship, and the Messiah, among other things — it seems plausible that at least *some* ancient Israelites would have associated the brazen serpent with this same “Son of God.”

This divine emissary evidently played a role in the theology of ancient metallurgists,¹⁸¹ and Latter-day Saint scholars have likewise argued that Lehi and Nephi’s revelations about Jesus Christ make sense against the backdrop of these pre-reform beliefs.¹⁸² It thus comes as no surprise that Nephi and later Book of Mormon writers would specifically use the title “Son of God” when identifying Christ with the brazen serpent (2 Nephi 25:19; Alma 33:18, 22; Helaman 8:14–15).

The Deified Battle Standards and the Brazen Serpent

The identification of the brazen serpent as symbolizing a deity or divine being is further implied by Moses’s placing it on a “pole” (Numbers 21:9), which is a translation of *ns*, which typically means “standard, banner, ensign,” etc.¹⁸³ Ancient Near Eastern armies often used standards as a means of advancing and rallying their armies, but they often had religious and ideological symbolism as well.¹⁸⁴ As Heinz-Josef Fabry explained, “In the ancient Near East, standards symbolize concretely the gods advancing into battle.”¹⁸⁵ Specifically, in Egypt, “The principal purpose of the standards was to serve as a physical repository of the power of the gods. . . . In reality, the gods were thought to be embodied in the standards,” and as such, “Egyptian texts . . . often use the words *standards* and *gods* interchangeably.”¹⁸⁶ Similarly, Mordecai Cogan explained that the Assyrian battle-standard known as the “weapon of Ashur,” was “topped by the symbolic representation of Ashur,” the supreme god of the Assyrian Empire.¹⁸⁷ Such “deified standards,” as one scholar described them,¹⁸⁸ would have surely shaped Israelite perceptions of the brazen serpent on a “pole” or “standard” (*ns*), contributing to the notion that it symbolized a divine being, as discussed above.

Inherent in the act of placing something on a standard is “raising” or “lifting” it up, so that it can be seen from all around. This is reflected in the etymology of *ns*, “standard, ensign, banner,” which is likely derived from the rarely used verbal root *nss*, which means “to lift something up for the purpose of displaying it.”¹⁸⁹ In Zechariah 9:16, *nss* is translated “lifted up as an ensign.”¹⁹⁰ Setting up a standard is frequently described using the verbal root *ns’*, a common term in the Hebrew Bible with the primary meaning

being “to raise” or “lift up.”¹⁹¹ This can be seen in several of the Isaiah passages that Nephi quoted just before retelling the brazen serpent story:

And he will lift up [*w-ns'*] an ensign [*ns*] to the nations
from far and will hiss unto them from the end of the earth.
(2 Nephi 15:26; Isaiah 5:26)

And he shall set up [*w-ns'*] an ensign [*ns*] for the nations
and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel and gather together
the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.
(2 Nephi 21:12; Isaiah 11:12)

Lift ye up [*s'w*] a banner [*ns*] upon the high mountain, exalt
the voice unto them, shake the hand that they may go into the
gates of the nobles. (2 Nephi 23:2; Isaiah 13:2)

Significantly, the grand army envisioned in Isaiah 5:25–30 (2 Nephi 15:25–30), raising its ensign to rally the nations to war against the wicked, was likely inspired by the Assyrians — the most powerful military force known during the time of Isaiah.¹⁹² Based on wall relief carvings in the palace of Sennacherib (ca. 705–681 BC), it seems that at least some Assyrian battle-standards contemporary to Isaiah (and within a hundred years of Nephi’s time) were actually serpents mounted on spears.¹⁹³ In Isaiah 11:10, 12 (2 Nephi 21:10, 12), the raising an ensign motif is reapplied, this time to the Davidic king in the messianic-age.¹⁹⁴ As already discussed, the Davidic monarchy was also associated with serpent symbolism in Isaiah’s day (something likely still known to some in Lehi’s time), and Isaiah 14:29 applies this messianic imagery to a flying seraph. Consequently, Nephi may very well have understood Isaiah’s raised up ensign to be serpentine in nature, and thus fused them with the brazen serpent on a “pole” in his interpretation of Numbers 21.¹⁹⁵

This would explain why Nephi spoke of “the serpent which [Moses] did *raise up* before them” (2 Nephi 25:20), even though the expression *ns'* does not appear in Numbers 21. Likewise, Alma also talked about “a type ... *raised up* in the wilderness” (Alma 33:19), and Nephi son of Helaman says Moses “*lifted up* the brazen serpent in the wilderness” (Helaman 8:14). All of this would have made it quite natural for the original Nephi to interpret the deified serpent-standard as “the everlasting God” that he saw “*lifted up* upon the cross and slain for the sins of the world” (1 Nephi 11:33; cf. 19:10; 3 Nephi 27:14–15, 22). It was Nephi son of Helaman, however, who would directly connect the lifting up of both serpent and Savior: “And as he *lifted up* the brazen serpent in the wilderness, even so should he be *lifted up* which should come” (Helaman 8:14).

In Hebrew, *ns'* is a theologically potent term, with a broad semantic range. Not only could it mean “to be lifted or raised up,” and by extension, “exalted,” but it could also mean “to carry, bear, endure,” and even “to suffer.”¹⁹⁶ It could specifically be used in the phrase *ns' 'wn* to express bearing guilt, sin, or iniquity — including taking on the guilt, sins, or iniquities of others — and carried connotations related to forgiveness, reconciliation, and atonement.¹⁹⁷ Of course, Nephi knew — as surely as his brother Jacob did — that by being “lifted up” onto the cross, Christ would “*suffer* his cross and *bear the shame* of the world” (Jacob 1:8; cf. 1 Nephi 19:9–10). After mentioning the “raised up” serpent, Nephi also explained that they wrote their record so that their posterity would “be *reconciled* to God” and know where to “look for a *remission* of their sins” (2 Nephi 25:23, 26). Alma said that the “raised up” serpent was a type for the Son of God who “shall *suffer* and die to *atone* for their sins” (Alma 33:22).¹⁹⁸

The Brazen Serpent in the Nephite Interpretive Tradition

As illustrated by the various references made throughout this paper, when later Nephite writers mentioned the brazen serpent narrative, in each instance, they generally interpret it along the same lines Nephi did, specifically using same name-titles (Messiah, Son of God) and talking about qualities and attributes of Christ (atonement, eternal life, rising from the dead, resurrection, judgment) that relate to ancient Near Eastern serpent symbolism. In many cases, these are features that are specifically associated with the seraph-serpent in pre-exilic Israelite texts (i.e., Numbers 21:4–9; Isaiah 6; 14:28) and iconography. Thus, with his two retellings of the brazen serpent narrative, Nephi evidently established a standard interpretation of the story that other Nephite writers adopted with minimal change.

It should be noted, however, that there are some key developments in how the story is used and interpreted within the text. They are modest, even subtle, developments that make sense as natural outgrowths of how Nephi used the story. Similar innovations of interpretation show up in the ancient Judeo-Christian tradition, and do so in response to similar circumstances and pressures. Thus, the Book of Mormon authentically reflects a living interpretative tradition.

Brazen Serpent Typology, Prophecy, and Apologetics in Nephite and Christian Sources

As noted earlier, both Nephi (2 Nephi 25:20) and the Gospel of John (3:14–15) use the “raised up” or “lifted up” serpent as a means of illustrating the

Lord's saving power through Jesus Christ. In neither instance, however, was the brazen serpent taken to be a literal typological prediction — a prophecy in action — of the coming of Jesus Christ. This would quickly change in early Christian interpretations. In the *Epistle of Barnabas*, dated to between AD 70 and 135, it explicitly states that “Moses maketh a type of Jesus, how that He must suffer, and that He Himself . . . shall make alive in an emblem when Israel was falling” (*Epistle of Barnabas* 12:5).¹⁹⁹ That type was the brazen serpent, and in *Barnabas*, Moses explains the symbol in a way that clearly alludes to the future crucifixion:

Whensoever, said he, one of you shall be bitten, let him come to the serpent which is placed on the tree, and let him believe and hope that the serpent being himself dead can make alive; and forthwith he shall be saved. . . . Here again thou hast in these things also the glory of Jesus, how that in Him and unto Him are all things. (*Epistle of Barnabas* 12:7)²⁰⁰

Justin Martyr, another 2nd century Christian writer, also argued:

the type and sign erected to counteract the effects of the serpents that bit Israel was clearly intended for the salvation of those who believe that this sign was to show that through the Crucified One death was to come to the serpent, but salvation to those who had been bitten by the serpent and had sought protection of Him who sent His Son into the world to be crucified (*Dialogue with Trypho* 91.4).²⁰¹

In these post-New Testament texts, the typology is *explicitly* stated, and it is assumed that the action of raising the serpent in the wilderness was *intended* as a prophetic prediction of Christ's coming. According to Ullmann, who surveyed more than seventy references to the bronze serpent story in early and medieval Christian texts, this becomes the dominant interpretation of the story among Christian exegetes in antiquity, and it was adopted specifically “as an apologetic against the Jews for their disbelief in Christ as the Messiah.”²⁰²

This is *exactly* what happens among Nephite exegetes as well. As S. Kent Brown noted, “This brass serpent was interpreted by later Book of Mormon prophets to typify the Savior.”²⁰³ When Alma the Younger first referenced the brazen serpent, he combined elements from Nephi's two interpretations, using it both to teach of the coming Messiah and also mentioning those who would not look to the serpent and thus perished (Alma 33:18–22). Alma was appealing to the story while preaching amongst the Zoramites, who explicitly denied the

coming of Christ (Alma 31:16), and he thus included it as part of a larger argument to persuade them to believe in the Son of God (Alma 33:14–23). In this apologetic setting, Alma went beyond Nephi’s use of the brazen serpent simply as an appropriate symbol of the Lord’s healing and salvific power. For Alma, it was “a *type* raised up in the wilderness,” which illustrated that the Son of God “was spoken of by Moses” (Alma 33:18–19).²⁰⁴ In other words, Alma interprets it as a prophetic type, *intended* to represent and therefore predict the future coming of the Son of God.

Similarly, Nephi son of Helaman appealed to the story when preaching to a people who had rejected the Messiah (Helaman 6:34),²⁰⁵ and used it as part of a larger argument meant to persuade them to believe in the coming of Christ (Helaman 8:13–20). Nephi declared that Moses “hath spoken concerning the coming of the Messiah” and rhetorically asked, “did he not bear record that the Son of God should come?” He then cited Moses “lift[ing] up the brazen serpent in the wilderness” as evidence to support his claims (Helaman 8:13–15). Thus, as Nephite prophets engaged apologetically with those who rejected the Messiah, they came to appeal to the brazen serpent as a literal, prophetic prediction of Christ’s coming — a “prophetic metaphor for Jesus’s crucifixion,” as Brown puts it.²⁰⁶

This subtle development from Nephi son of Lehi’s original use and interpretation of the brazen serpent is consistent with how interpretation of this symbol developed in early Christian sources, where in post-New Testament times it quickly came to be viewed as a literal prophetic type for Jesus, intended as a prediction of his death, and used in apologetic arguments with Jews to prove that Jesus was the Messiah. The allusions to Moses having “spoken” of Christ in connection with the raising up of the brazen serpent (Alma 33:19; Helaman 8:13) even hint at the possibility that, like in the *Epistle of Barnabas*, the Nephites had come to believe that Moses gave a speech prophesying of Christ when he first showed them the raised up serpent.

Later Christian and even Jewish interpreters would eventually develop ever more elaborate allegorical and metaphorical interpretations, which become increasingly more difficult to justify as having any meaningful grounding in the biblical account.²⁰⁷ Such novelties are lacking in the Book of Mormon. Consequently, the minimal interpretive developments that do occur among the Nephites are consistent with the more exegetically sound developments in the interpretation of Numbers 21:4–9 found in ancient Christian sources — and they are developments that emerge in response to the same kind of outside pressures. As such, not only are the foundational features of the Nephite

interpretation grounded in the pre-exilic setting from which Nephi established it, but it is also *not* stagnant, having a pattern of realistic (albeit, conservative) historical development.²⁰⁸

Looking to the Serpent and Beholding God in Jewish and Nephite Tradition

Ancient Jewish commentators developed another interpretation, which seems to have its seeds, at least, in the pre-exilic religion. In rationalizing why the brazen serpent episode did not constitute idol worship, Rabbinic interpreters reasoned that by looking upward to the serpent, the people were actually looking *to God*. Thus, one writer explained, “whenever Israel *looked on high* and subjected their heart to their Father in heaven were they healed” (*M. Rosh Hashanah* 3:8).²⁰⁹ Commenting on this tradition, Nili S. Fox notes, “it was the glance of the afflicted *to their Father in heaven* (which is why the *seraph* was placed on a standard), rather than the snake itself, which effected the cure.”²¹⁰ Philo of Alexandria, writing in the 1st century AD, more explicitly reasoned that those who looked upon the serpent actually *saw God*. He claimed, “[When a person beholds] the serpent of Moses, and through beholding this, *beholds God Himself*, he shall live” (*Legum Allegoria* 2:81).²¹¹

Philo’s expression that a person looking at the serpent “beholds God Himself,” but “shall live” is striking in light of Old Testament statements that that man *cannot see God and live* (Exodus 33:20; Leviticus 16:2, 13). This was a common belief in ancient Israel, and often those who see God or even angels are relieved to discover that they are still alive after the encounter (see Genesis 16:13; 32:30; Deuteronomy 5:22–27; Judges 6:22–23; 13:22–23).²¹² This fear is expressed in Isaiah’s vision of the Lord on his throne, and it was through the actions of one of the seraphim — winged, serpentine beings likely represented by the brazen serpent(s), as discussed above — that he was enabled to stand in the presence of the Lord and survive (see Isaiah 6:1–7).

What Isaiah’s vision suggests — which later Jewish sources appear to distantly echo — is that the brazen serpent’s healing and life-giving function aided not only those seeking to recover from some sort of ailment, but also those who were seeking to enter the presence of God and survive. As Nicolas Wyatt explained, in Isaiah’s vision the seraphim are “acting as intermediaries between the prophet and Yahweh,”²¹³ enabling him to stand in the Lord’s presence unharmed. According to Lowell K. Handy, the brazen serpent was an “intermediary between God and the people,”²¹⁴ a common role of snakes in ancient thought.²¹⁵ At least

as understood by Isaiah and later Jewish exegetes (as discussed above), the brazen serpent was specifically seen as mediating an individual's ability look to and even see God and ultimately live through the experience.²¹⁶

The Book of Mormon seems to allude to the concept of using the brazen serpent as a means by which one can *see God and live*. When counseling his son Helaman, Alma spoke of the "easiness of the way" prepared for their fathers, that "if they would look, they might live" (Alma 37:46). In the immediate context, Alma was referring to the Liahona, but Alma's language clearly alludes back to the story in Numbers 21:4–9 as well.²¹⁷ Alma thus identified both the Liahona and brazen serpent as means by which "ye [can] look to God and live" (Alma 37:47).²¹⁸

This interpretation is arguably more innovative than the first one offered by Alma when preaching to the Zoramites, as it is not clearly derivative of Nephi's explicit references to the story in 1 Nephi 17:41 and 2 Nephi 25:20. Yet Alma's interpretation here still seems to be a natural outgrowth of the interpretive seeds Nephi planted. As noted previously, Nephi casts the Liahona as a type for the brazen serpent. Nephi also linked the Liahona to seeing God in several subtle ways. First, when describing the discovery of the Liahona at the "tent door" (1 Nephi 16:10), Nephi echoed divine encounters of Abraham and Moses, wherein they saw the Lord (Genesis 18:1; Exodus 33:7–10).²¹⁹ Second, Don Bradley argues that when Nephi built a temple in the New World (2 Nephi 5:16), the Liahona was one of the sacred relics placed inside, and that it "function[ed] as a physical embodiment of God's presence."²²⁰ If Bradley is correct, then Nephi was symbolically equating "look[ing] upon the ball" (1 Nephi 16:26) with beholding God's presence. Lastly, Lehi or Nephi evidently coined the name "Liahona,"²²¹ which arguably means "Look to the Lord!"²²² Therefore, the notion of seeing God may have been embedded into the very name of this brass divining instrument.

All of this suggests that while Nephi never explicitly equated looking upon the brazen serpent with being able to *see God and live*, he provides the foundation for such an interpretation to emerge by making the typological association between the brazen serpent and the Liahona—an object Nephi linked with seeing God in several ways. Alma's interpretation thus naturally emerges out of Nephi's earlier typology, just as the similar interpretations by later Jewish commentators are the natural outgrowth of the pre-exilic understanding of the brazen serpent as a life-preserving intermediary between God and man, as reflected by the actions of the seraph in Isaiah 6 — a text that Alma also had access to in the very records

he was bestowing upon his son Helaman when he compared looking to the Liahona/brazen serpent with looking to God (Alma 37:1–5).

Conclusion

As the analysis above illustrates, the Book of Mormon's commentary on the brazen serpent narrative resonates with serpent symbolism and iconography from the ancient Near East, and especially that of the seraph-serpent in pre-exilic Israel. While some of the observations made above rest on firmer ground, and others are more exploratory, all of them come together to make a persuasive case that the Book of Mormon's use and interpretation of this symbol is an authentic strain of ancient Israelite tradition, one that shows realistic signs of historical development along lines that make sense given the context and circumstances upon which the tradition was expounded.

Contextualizing the Book of Mormon's references to the brazen serpent narrative within ancient Near Eastern serpent symbolism also adds additional meaning and explanatory power. For instance, it makes sense that the brazen serpent story is alluded to more often in the Book of Mormon than any other book of scripture, since Lehi's personal background dovetails remarkably well with the community which most strongly associated with the seraph-serpent as a symbol for Yahweh. The typological use of the brass ball (Liahona) as a substitute for the brazen serpent in Nephi's Exodus typology is illuminated by knowledge of the homophony between "serpent" and "diviner" (both *nḥš*) and the common association between serpents, divination, and copper/bronze in antiquity. Similarly, details from the immediate narrative context of 1 Nephi 17, like Nephi's making tools from ore, take on new significance when the ancient connections between metallurgy and serpent symbolism are known and the religious and ritual dimension of metalworking are recognized. Subtle differences in the story — such as the added reference to Israel being straightened with a rod and the serpents being *flying* seraphs — are explained by iconography and symbolism in pre-exilic Israel. Finally, awareness of the overlap between the geographic setting of 1 Nephi and the habitat of the seraph-serpent helps Nephi's use of this story hit home in a way modern readers may not always appreciate.

Perhaps most impressive, however, is the way Nephi's reference to the story in 1 Nephi 17:41 is effectively framed as a microcosm of the larger controversies of his time, which involved the legitimacy of the brazen serpent as a part of proper worship of the Lord. This framing brings together several of the other details just mentioned: Nephi's metallurgy

in 1 Nephi 17:9–16 signals his status as one who has been in the presence of the Lord, received divine knowledge, and is commissioned as his messenger. The symbolism of Nephi’s actions was probably not lost on his brothers, and thus their accusations that follow (1 Nephi 17:17–18) make sense as a reaction to the symbolic implications of his forging tools from ore.²²³ The differences in how Nephi recounts the story also take on new meaning in this framing. The added reference to a “rod” that is paralleled with the “flying fiery serpents” evokes the imagery of the rod-to-serpent transformation given as a sign to the Israelites that Moses was commissioned by the Lord (Exodus 4:1–5, 30), and “flying fiery serpents” more strongly connects with the winged seraph iconography associated with the Davidic monarchy and often borne on the seals of officials commissioned by the king before being suppressed by the Deuteronomistic reformers. Combined with the added detail that some of the people would not look to the serpent for healing, and therefore perished, these differences seem to be reinforcing a singular message: the seraph-serpent is a legitimate symbol of the Lord and his emissaries, and thus rejecting it, as some had in Nephi’s day, was tantamount to rejecting the Lord; those who did so would perish from the bite of the seraph-serpent — a symbolic point, to be sure, but one made all the more real given that such could indeed be the fate of anyone in Lehi’s party during their time in the wilderness, including at Bountiful.

Nephi’s later use of the brazen serpent in 2 Nephi 25:20 as an illustration of the Lord’s power to deliver and save through the atoning Messiah — Jesus Christ — and subsequent Nephite writers’ adoption of the serpent of brass as a literal type of Christ is also illuminated through ancient Near Eastern serpent symbolism. This association with Christ needn’t be seen as a post-Christian anachronism. In the ancient Near East, the serpent symbolized healing, life, resurrection, salvation, atonement, and judgment; it was often used to symbolize divine beings, and even had messianic connotations. These are, of course, also attributes of Christ, each of which gets mentioned by Book of Mormon authors in close reference to the brazen serpent. Importantly, all of these symbolic associations are evident in Judaism in pre-Christian times, and in many cases are present in the seraph-serpent symbolism of pre-exilic Israel. Thus, it is not hard to see why Book of Mormon authors saw fit to connect this symbol with the Messiah, the preeminent Son of God, which they had seen and learned about through visions and revelations.

Since Nephi’s reference to the brazen serpent in 2 Nephi 25:20 comes as part of his prophetic commentary on Isaiah 2–14 (2 Nephi 12–24), it is

particularly noteworthy that many of the important associations between the seraph-serpent and Christ are manifest in Isaiah 6 and 14:28–32 / 2 Nephi 16; 24:28–32, though the connections would not be evident without knowing the meaning of *seraphim* in Hebrew and being able to recognize motifs in these passages that are illuminated by a broader knowledge of ancient Near Eastern serpent symbolism. More impressive still is how a knowledge of Hebrew and ancient Near Eastern culture creates a context in which Nephi could conceptually link the serpent on a “pole” with the “ensign” (both *ns*) that was “lifted up” to gather the nations (Isaiah 5:26; 11:12; 13:2 / 2 Nephi 15:26; 21:12; 23:2) — a symbol that would have been understood as representing a divine being, and based on Assyrian and Egyptian examples, may have been conceptualized as having serpentine form. Thus, in Nephite parlance, the brazen serpent was “raised up” or “lifted up” to “heal the nations” (2 Nephi 25:20; cf. Alma 33:18; Helaman 8:14), and very naturally linked to the “everlasting God” Nephi witnessed being “lifted up upon the cross and slain for the sins of the world” (1 Nephi 11:33). Significantly, the Hebrew expression for “lifted up” also has connotations of carrying, bearing, enduring, and suffering — including bearing the guilt, sin, or iniquity of others — and as such is an appropriate expression for Christ’s atoning act on the cross. Thus, Nephi’s interpretation of the brazen serpent narrative makes sense as a midrash of sorts, combining the story in Numbers 21:4–9 with key passages in Isaiah, read through the lens of Nephi’s own visions.²²⁴

Finally, a careful reading of Alma 33:18–22 and Helaman 8:13–15 shows that Nephi’s two interpretations of the brazen serpent account developed into a standard interpretation of that event among the Nephites; however, their interpretive tradition did not remain stagnant. Later Book of Mormon prophets echoed the same themes found in 1 Nephi 17:41 and especially 2 Nephi 25:20 but developed them within the context of their own, ongoing polemics with those who contested the reality and existence of the future Messiah. To counter such claims, Nephite prophets appealed to the brazen serpent as a literal type of Christ, raised up in deliberate, prophetic anticipation of Jesus Christ, accompanied by prophetic words about the Son of God, spoken by Moses (see Alma 33:18–22; Helaman 8:13–15). A similar development is documented in ancient Christian writings, which used the brazen serpent as a prophetic type for Jesus as evidence that the Messiah had come in apologetic arguments with Jewish commentators. Furthermore, Alma also pushes Nephi’s typological links between the brazen serpent and the Liahona further, and conceptually links both to the act of looking to God

(Alma 37:38–47), an interpretation that is consistent with how post-exilic Jewish commentators came to understand the brazen serpent narrative.

Thus, the contextual background of the ancient world, while explored from a variety of different angles and sources, offers more than a disparate series of parallels that yields a random insight or two. Many of the various component parts unite together to create a cohesive context for understanding the Nephite interpretation of the brazen serpent as whole, both its origins and its (subtle) developments over the centuries. Taken as a whole, this cohesive context suggests that the Book of Mormon’s use of the brazen serpent narrative is *not* a literary fiction, but an authentic strain of ancient Israelite tradition.

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Endnotes

1. Alonzo L. Gaskill, *Miracles of the Book of Mormon: A Guide to the Symbolic Messages* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2015), 108.
2. See Scott Stenson, “Wherefore, for This Cause: The Book of Mormon as Anti-type of the Brass Serpent,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 43 (2021): 291–318, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/wherefore-for-this-cause-the-book-of-mormon-as-anti-type-of-the-brass-serpent/>. On the broader use of Exodus typology, see George S. Tate, “The Typology of the Exodus Pattern in the Book of Mormon,” in *Literature of Belief: Sacred Scripture and Religious Experience*, ed. Neal E. Lambert (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1981), 245–62; S. Kent Brown, “The Exodus Pattern of the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 30, no. 3 (1990): 111–26; Terrence L. Szink, “Nephi and the Exodus,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon: Insights You May Have Missed*

Before, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1991), 38–51; Bruce J. Boehm, “Wanderers in the Promised Land: A Study of the Exodus Motif in the Book of Mormon and Holy Bible,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3, no. 1 (1994): 187–203; Mark J. Johnson, “The Exodus of Lehi Revisited,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3, no. 2 (1994): 123–26; Don Bradley, “A Passover Setting for Lehi’s Exodus,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 34 (2020): 119–42, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/a-passover-setting-for-lehis-exodus/>.

3. Throughout this article, unless otherwise indicated, all emphasis (italics) in quotations of scripture and other ancient writings is mine. Also note that all Book of Mormon quotations will follow Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009). In this instance, this creates a subtle difference that may, nonetheless, be significant: Skousen, based on the earliest manuscripts, uses the word order “*flying fiery serpents*,” rather than the order used in the standard text today, “fiery *flying* serpents.” The original word order is likely more faithful to the possible underlying Hebrew. For discussion, see Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*, 2nd ed. (Provo, UT: FARMS and BYU Studies, 2017), 1:380–81.
4. David J. A. Clines, ed., *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, 8 vols. (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 1993–2011), 8:194–97; U. Rüterwörden, “*śārap*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 15 vols., ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, Heinz-Josef Fabry, trans. Douglas W. Stott (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974–2006), 14:219. See also Karen Randolph Joines, *Serpent Symbolism in the Old Testament: A Linguistic, Archaeological, and Literary Study* (Haddonfield, NJ: Haddonfield House, 1974), 7–8. Some have suggested that as a reference to snakes or mythological creatures (e.g., Isaiah 6), *seraph* derives not from the Semitic verb “to burn” (*šrp*) but rather the Egyptian *sfr* or *srrf*, which some scholars have interpreted as a reference to serpents (even winged serpents) or dragons. See Marvin A. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39, with an Introduction to the Prophetic Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 139 (cf. Joines, *Serpent Symbolism*, 44). The Egyptian term, however, is more likely in reference to the sphinx or griffin, which would be more like the Hebrew *krwb*,

- “cherub” (pl. cherubim). See Nicolas Wyatt, “Grasping the Griffin: Identifying and Characterizing the Griffin in Egyptian and West Semitic Tradition,” *Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections* 1, no. 1 (2009): 31 (cf. Joines, *Serpent Symbolism*, 55n15).
5. Clines, *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* 8:197. Cf. “poisonous serpents” in 2 Nephi 25:20, which is also an acceptable translation of either *nhšym śrpym* or *śrpym* on its own (see, e.g., popular translations like the NRSV or NIV of Numbers 21:6, 8 and Deuteronomy 8:15).
 6. Most translations treat *śrp* as an adjective modifying *nhš* here, but Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 21–36: A New Translation and Commentary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 87, indicates that in Deuteronomy 8:15 *śrp* is being “listed alongside” *nhš* (along with *qrb*, “scorpion”) as separate dangers the wandering Israelites encountered in the wilderness. Richard Lederman likewise treats them as separate nouns, explaining that the Masoretic annotations of the Hebrew “indicate that the two words list different creatures.” “What Is the Biblical Flying Serpent?,” The Torah.com, January 1, 2015, n5 (updated February 2, 2022), <https://www.thetorah.com/article/what-is-the-biblical-flying-serpent>.
 7. For the cultural context and background on bronze/copper serpents as part of religious worship in Canaan/Israel during the late 2nd and early 1st millennium BC, see Karen Randolph Joines, “The Bronze Serpent in the Israelite Cult,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 87, no. 3 (1968): 245–56; Joines, *Serpent Symbolism*, 61–84; LeGrande Davies, “Serpent Imagery in Ancient Israel: The Relationship between the Literature and the Physical Remains” (PhD diss.; University of Utah, 1986), 149–209, 224–43; Sejin Koh, “An Archaeological Investigation of the Snake Cult in the Southern Levant: The Chalcolithic Period Through the Iron Age” (PhD diss.; University of Chicago, 1994), 69–107; Maciej Münnich, “The Cult of Bronze Serpents in Ancient Canaan and Israel,” *Iggud: Selected Essays in Jewish Studies* 1 (2005): 39*–56*. See also James H. Charlesworth, *The Good and Evil Serpent: How a Universal Symbol Became Christianized* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 58–124 for a broader discussion of serpent iconography throughout the ancient Near East and Mediterranean.
 8. For the geographical setting of Numbers 21, see John D. Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker

- Books, 1997), 143–44; K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 193–95.
9. See Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 29, 30 illus. 14a and 15b, 111, 112 illus. 130e, 251–52, 253 illus. 246, 269–70; Joel M. LeMon, *Yahweh’s Winged Form in the Psalms: Exploring Congruent Iconography and Texts* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht; Fribourg: Academic Press, 2010), 44 fig. 2.15. See also Nahman Avigad, rev. Benjamin Sass, *Corpus of West Semitic Stamp Seals* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities; Israel Exploration Society; Institute of Archaeology, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1997), no. 5, cf. no. 1124; Benjamin Sass, “The Pre-Exilic Seals: Iconism vs. Aniconism,” in *Studies in the Iconography of Northwest Semitic Inscribed Seals*, ed. Benjamin Sass and Christoph Uehlinger (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht; Fribourg: University Press; 1991) 211 figs. 72–73. Cf. the three bronze bowls, referenced below (n. 13).
 10. See Karen Randolph Joines, “Winged Serpents in Isaiah’s Inaugural Vision,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86, no. 4 (1967): 410–15; Joines, *Serpent Symbolism*, 42–60; T. N. D. Mettinger, “Seraphim,” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, 2nd ed., ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst (Leiden: Brill; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 742–44; J. J. M. Roberts, “The Visual Elements in Isaiah’s Vision in Light of Judaeon and Near Eastern Sources,” in *From Babel to Babylon: Essays on Biblical History and Literature in Honour of Brian Peckham*, ed. J. R. Wood, J. E. Harvey, and M. Leuchter (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 204–10; J. J. M. Roberts, *First Isaiah, a Commentary*, ed. Peter Machinist (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, an imprint of Augsburg Fortress, 2015), 95–98. Although Rütterswörden, “*šārap*,” 223–28, grants that this view “has become the consensus” (p. 224), he nonetheless pushes back, arguing that the possibility that they are in human form and constitute “the heavenly hosts” is at least “worthy of consideration” (p. 227). I personally do not see any tension in granting that the seraphim of Isaiah’s vision are in serpentine form *and* are members of the heavenly hosts (see n. 176) — indeed, this will prove important to my argument later in this paper. Davies, “Serpent Imagery,” 105–15 attempts to bridge these two points of view by arguing that the

seraphim are principally in anthropomorphic form (except in that they have wings) but “the symbol of the essence of the seraphim may have been serpents” (p. 113).

11. Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 98; cf. Roberts, “Visual Elements,” 197–212. See also H. G. M. Williamson, “Temple and Worship in Isaiah 6,” in *Temple and Worship in Biblical Israel*, ed. John Day (New York: T & T Clark, 2005), 123–44; P. P. Jenson, “Temple,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets*, ed. Mark J. Boda and J. Gordon McConville (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2012), 768–69. Aspects of Isaiah’s vision may have also been inspired by the imagery of the Assyrian throne room, with adaptations consistent with Israelite iconography and adjustments intended to send the political message that Yahweh — not the Assyrian king or their god Ashur — was the all-powerful divine king. See Shawn Zelig Aster, “Images of the Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Calah in the Throne-Room Vision of Isaiah 6,” in *Marbeh Hokmah: Studies in the Bible and the Ancient Near East in Loving Memory of Victor Avigdor Hurowitz*, eds. Shamir Yona et al. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 13–42; Shawn Zelig Aster, *Reflections of Empire in Isaiah 1–39: Responses to Assyrian Ideology* (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2017), 41–80. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39*, 136–40 discusses parallels to Assyrian and Egyptian throne room scenes alongside motifs stemming from the Jerusalem temple.
12. Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 96, 98; Roberts, “Visual Elements,” 205; Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 225. Aster, “Images of the Palace,” 20–22, 25–29, 37–42 (cf. Aster, *Reflections of Empire*, 52–64) argues that the seraphim of Isaiah’s vision represent the *apkallu* on the reliefs of the Assyrian throne room. Like the seraphim, the *apkallu* were multi-winged, part-animal, part-human creatures standing as guardians of the royal throne, and they performed a purifying function. However, the *apkallu* are not typically portrayed as serpents. The only winged serpent Aster identifies is depicted on the wall reliefs of Esarhaddon (p. 38 fig. 6). Aster is probably influenced by his Esarhaddon expedition to Palestine and Egypt (see n. 60), which occurred *after* Isaiah’s time. Furthermore, Esarhaddon’s winged serpent lacks all the details Aster considers distinctively Assyrian about seraphim of Isaiah 6: there is only one (not two), it has a single pair of wings

(instead of four), and it does not have a purifying function. Contra Aster, there are Judahite depictions of serpents flanking both sides of a royal symbol (see nn. 9, 14) and images of serpents with multiple pairs of wings (see n. 15). Perhaps these local innovations on the typically Egyptian iconography were Assyrian influenced, as Aster suggests for Isaiah 6 (cf. Williamson, “Temple and Worship,” 131n17), but the fact remains that Isaiah’s choice to represent the winged guardians as *serpents*—seraphim—is not likely inspired by Assyrian art; rather, that seems to be based on local iconography, including that found in the Jerusalem temple precincts.

13. See Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003), 174n8; Menahem Haran and S. David Sperling, “Nehushtan,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., ed. Fred Skolink and Michael Berenbaum (Jerusalem: Keter, 2007), 15:64; Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpent*, 332; Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 96; Roberts, “Visual Elements,” 205. Williamson, “Temple and Worship,” 131, argues against this point, but ignores the bronze bowls cited by Milgrom, Charlesworth, and Roberts. For images of these bronze bowls, see R. D. Barnett, “Layard’s Nimrud Bronzes and their Inscriptions,” *Eretz-Israel: Archaeological, Historical, and Geographical Studies* 8 (1967): 3* fig. 2; J. J. M. Roberts, “The Rod that Smote Philistia: Isaiah 14:28–32,” in *Literature as Politics, Politics as Literature: Essays on the Ancient Near East in Honor of Peter Machinist*, ed. David S. Vanderhooft and Abraham Winitzer (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 393 fig. 1b. A third bowl, nearly identical to the first but from Ida Cave in Crete, can be seen (along with seals depicting the winged serpent mounted on the top of a pole or stem for display) in Robert Rollinger, “Herodot (II 75f, III 107–109), Asarhaddon, Jesaja und die fliegenden Schlangen Arabiens,” in *Ad Fontes! Festschrift für Gerhard Dobesch zum fünfundsechzigsten Geburtstag am 15. September 2004*, ed. Herbert Heftner and Kurt Tomaschitz (Vienna: Vienna Humanistic Society, 2004), 946 fig. 2. Aster, *Reflections of Empire*, 54n47 alternatively suggests that the iconography on these bowls was meant to imitate an Assyrian battle standard. This standard is elsewhere known as the “weapon of Ashur” depicted as two serpents impaled on spears. For the image referred to by Aster, see Austen Henry Layard, *Nineveh and Its Remains*, vol. 2 (London: John Murray, Albemarle Street,

1849), 2:469. For a more complete discussion of the “weapon of Ashur,” see Shawn Zelig Aster, “Transmission of Neo-Assyrian Claims of Empire to Judah in the Late Eighth Century B.C.E.,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 78 (2007): 26–29, esp. 27n86. Contra Aster, comparing the imagery on the bronze bowls with that of the Assyrian relief reveals little to suggest Assyrian influence. Furthermore, although the relief from Sennachrib’s palace in Layard clearly shows that *some* Assyrian battle-standards were indeed serpents, Morton Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion: Assyria, Judah, and Israel in the Eighth and Seventh Centuries B.C.E.* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, University of Montana, 1974), 53–55, 62 fig. 1, 63 fig. 2 proposes a different — and what seems to me a more likely — battle-standard as the “weapon of Ashur,” and it lacks any serpent iconography.

14. Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 98; Roberts, “Visual Elements,” 208. Williamson, “Temple and Worship,” 131–32 argues against this view, and instead suggests Isaiah is conflating the single, unwinged (see n. 13) brazen serpent with the pair of winged cherubim. Similarly, Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39*, 139 argues that the seraphim actually take the place of the cherubim in Isaiah’s vision. Cf. Wyatt, “Grasping the Griffin,” 31–32, who states that “the distinction normally assumed to exist between cherubim and seraphim was not as firm as we would like to think” (p. 31). Wyatt goes on to argue that the seraphim in Isaiah’s vision were actually griffins/sphinxes (Egyptian *srf* or *sfr*) which would essentially make them identical to the cherubim (see n. 4). Wyatt’s argument depends on his speculative assumption that the term used for *śrp* in Isaiah 6 is actually a different word altogether than that used in other biblical passages, an assumption that I do not think is well founded. His other argument, that the “literary description precludes” a serpentine form (p. 32) is refuted in most treatments of seraphim as serpents (see, e.g., Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpents*, 426). Rütterswörden, “*śārap*,” 224 correctly notes, “Although the griffin designated by *sfr/srf* is indeed attested as a winged desert animal portrayed with great variety, any identity with the cobra or Uraeus serpent back to which Keel traces the seraphim is excluded.” The suggestion by E. Lacheman, “The Seraphim of Isaiah 6,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 59, no. 1 (1968): 71–72 that the seraphim are the cherubim with the sun glinting on them, causing them to appear “fiery,” strikes me as entirely unpersuasive.

15. Avigad and Sass, *Corpus of West Semitic Stamp Seals*, nos. 11, 82, 104, 127, 194, 206, 284, 381, 385, 689. See also Sass, “Pre-Exilic Seals,” 211 figs. 75–76, 215 figs. 77–81 (see pp. 212–13 for discussion of the symbolism); Keel and Uehlinger, *Images of God*, 253 illus. 245–47b, 275 illus. 274a–274d; Rollinger, “Herodot,” 945–46 figs. 1 and 2; LeMon, *Yahweh’s Winged Form*, 43 fig. 2.14a–b; William A. Ward, “The Four-Winged Serpent on Hebrew Seals,” *Rivista degli studi orientali* 43, no. 2 (1968): 137 fig. 1. In addition to seals, Joines, “Winged Serpents,” 413–14 also mentions winged serpents carved in ivories found in the 9th century BC palace in Samaria, the capital of the northern Kingdom (cf. Keel and Uehlinger, *Images of God*, 251–52).
16. See Keel and Uehlinger, *Images of God*, 273–74; Lederman, “What Is the Biblical Flying Serpent?” See also Izaak J. de Hulster, “Of Angels and Iconography: Isaiah 6 and the Biblical Concept of Seraphs and Cherubs,” in *Iconographic Exegesis of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: An Introduction to Its Theory, Method, and Practice*, ed. Izaak J. de Hulster, Brent A. Strawn, and Ryan P. Bonfiglio (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 147–55; John Gee, “Cherubim and Seraphim: Iconography in the First Jerusalem Temple,” in *The Temple: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and Jeffrey M. Bradshaw (Orem, UT: The Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2021), 97–100, 105.
17. According to Rollinger, “Herodot,” 936, 943, these seals and other artifacts generally date to the 9th–8th centuries BC. Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 97 generally dates these seals to a slightly later period, “the eighth and very early seventh century BCE.” For two examples of winged serpent seals used as part of the administrative apparatus during Hezekiah’s reign, see Robert Deutsch, “Six Hebrew Fiscal Bullae from the Time of Hezekiah,” in *New Inscriptions and Seals Relating to the Biblical World*, ed. Meir Lubetski and Edith Lubetski (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2012), 64 fig. 4, 65 fig. 5.
18. Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 97. Cf. Gee, “Cherubim and Seraphim,” 100: “Hezekiah lived at the end of the eighth century BC, and it may be more than coincidence that after the destruction of the bronze serpent, the winged serpent ceased to be an object adorning Israelite seals.” Koh, “Archaeological Investigation,” 107 reveals no Iron Age serpent artifacts later than the 8th century BC. According

- to Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpent*, 345–46, no serpent imagery in Palestine post-dates the 7th century BC and pre-dates Roman times. Davies, “Serpent Imagery,” 34 argued that this was true of literary uses (in the biblical text) of the serpent symbol as well. Keel and Uehlinger, *Images of God*, 369, note that not only winged serpents, but all the various kinds of “winged, hybrid creatures, no longer play a significant role” in the iconography of the 7th century BC. For more on Hezekiah’s reforms, see n. 92.
19. Shlomit Weksler-Bdolah, Alexander Onn, Shua Kisilevitz, and Brigitte Ouahnouna, “Layers of Ancient Jerusalem,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 38, no. 1 (January/February 2012): 40; Tallay Ornan, “Member in the Entourage of Yahweh: A Uraeus Seal from the Western Wall Plaza Excavations, Jerusalem,” *Atiqot: Journal of the Israel Department of Antiquities* 72 (2012): 15–20. Note, however, that Ornan (p. 15) expresses some uncertainty about whether the seal belongs to the dating and context in which it was found. Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpent*, 229 mentions another 7th century BC seal with a four-winged serpent. For the likely location of Lehi’s home, see Jeffrey R. Chadwick, “Lehi’s House at Jerusalem and the Land of his Inheritance,” in *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 87–99, 118–24.
 20. See Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 385, 387, 395.
 21. Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpent*, 444–45, 602n187. Charlesworth opts for “winged-serpents” in order to distinguish it from the expression *šrp m’pp*, which indicates an actively flying seraph.
 22. Ward, “Four-Winged Serpent,” 143, noted: “The chronological synchronism between the seals and Isaiah is especially significant. In the whole of western Asiatic art, the four-winged uraeus appears only on Hebrew seals of the ninth to seventh centuries [BC]; the only Hebrew reference to ‘flying serpents’ appears in the eighth century [BC] book of Isaiah.” Nephi falls around the outer edge of this same “chronological synchronism,” thus reinforcing the correlation between Nephi’s reference to “flying fiery serpents” and the winged serpents depicted on the seals.

23. See Joines, “Winged Serpents,” 411–14; Joines, *Serpent Symbolism*, 45–49; Ward, “Four-Winged Serpent,” 138; LeMon, *Yahweh’s Winged Form*, 42–44; Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 96–97; De Hulster, “Angels and Iconography,” 150, 154; Gee, “Cherubim and Seraphim,” 99.
24. Nicole B. Hansen, “Snakes,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, ed. Donald B. Redford (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 3:298.
25. Manfred Lurker, *An Illustrated Dictionary of the Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1980), 108.
26. On the Egyptian *uraeus*, see Hansen, “Snakes,” 298; Lurker, *Illustrated Dictionary*, 125. Scholars (see, e.g., the sources in nn. 23, 28) typically refer to the Israelite and Judahite winged serpents as *uraei* (plural of *uraeus*) because the iconography is so clearly derived from this Egyptian symbol. For examples of winged *uraei* in Egyptian iconography, see Wendy Rebecca Jennifer Golding, “Perceptions of the Serpent in the Ancient Near East: Its Bronze Age Role in Apotropaic Magic, Healing and Protection” (MA thesis; University of South Africa, 2013), 208–209 figs. 55–58; Aster, “Images of the Palace,” 39 fig. 7, 41 figs. 8a–b; De Hulster, “Angels and Iconography,” 152–53 figs. 7.5, 7.8, 7.14. See also “Scarab with Winged Uraeus (Wadjet) on Gold Hieroglyph, ca. 1070–525 BC,” Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/553355>.
27. Hansen, “Snakes,” 298. On Wadjet, see also Lurker, *Illustrated Dictionary*, 127.
28. Keel and Uehlinger, *Images of God*, 177–281 provides a thorough discussion and inventory of Egyptian iconography used in Israel and Judah; see esp. 251–53, 273–74 for the winged *uraeus*.
29. On the presumed Egyptian origin of the seraph symbolism, see the sources cited in nn. 23, 28. On equating the zoological identification of the seraph with a cobra, see Philippe Provençal, “Regarding the Noun שרף in the Hebrew Bible,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 29, no. 3 (2005): 371–79. See also Lederman, “What Is the Biblical Flying Serpent?”
30. For a little more than a decade, Amzallag has been remarkably prolific in promoting ancient copper metallurgy as a whole new paradigm for understanding the religion of ancient Israel in

a variety of peer-reviewed venues, including some of the most respected journals in the fields of biblical studies, Semitic languages, and ancient Near Eastern studies (for a sampling of such, see the papers cited in nn. 32–33, 41, 47–49, 51–53, 65, 180). According to Ariel David, “Jewish God Yahweh Originated in Canaanite Vulcan, Says New Theory,” *Haaretz*, April 11, 2018, <https://www.haaretz.com/archaeology/.premium.MAGAZINE-jewish-god-yahweh-originated-in-canaanite-vulcan-says-new-theory-1.5992072>, Amzallag’s theory “is not exactly widely accepted, but has recently been gaining traction,” citing one scholar (Erez Ben-Yosef) who supports the theory and another (Thomas Römer) who is skeptical. Several other scholars have engaged with his work to some degree or another, both positively and negatively, as will occasionally be discussed in later footnotes. Personally, I am persuaded that there is some legitimate metallurgical imagery and symbolism in biblical texts which merits further exploration, even though I find some of Amzallag’s arguments to be overstated. In contrast to Amzallag’s insistence that this imagery be taken *literally*, I see it as more symbolic and metaphorical (cf. Morrison in n. 44, who discusses the metalworking and craftsmen metaphors in the Bible). In some cases, I see his explanations only as a plausible interpretation that Israelites *with a metallurgical background* may have held—a possibility that even one of Amzallag’s critics seems to grant (see n. 52). My reason for drawing on Amzallag’s work, therefore, is precisely because I see Lehi and his family as *exactly* the kind of Israelites who would have held the views and interpretations that Amzallag has advanced (see the main body of the text for this argument).

31. Cf. Koh, “Archaeological Investigation,” 120, who likewise argues that that while serpentine imagery is heavily influenced by Egyptian motifs in the Late Bronze Age and early Iron Age, this “does not imply that the Canaanite snake cult was brought from Egypt,” but rather that Egyptian iconography simply had an impact on the expression of a religious symbol native to the southern Levant.
32. See Nissim Amzallag, “The Origin and Evolution of the Saraph Symbol,” *Antiguo Oriente* 13 (2015): 99–126; Nissim Amzallag, “The Serpent as a Symbol of Primeval Yahwism,” *Semitica* 58 (2016): 207–36. Ronald P. Millett and John P. Pratt, “What Fiery Flying Serpent Symbolized Christ?,” *Meridian Magazine* (November

- 5, 2008), <https://latterdaysaintmag.com/article-1-5390/>, also identified the “fiery flying serpent” as the saw-scaled viper from a Latter-day Saint perspective.
33. See Nissim Amzallag, “Yahweh, the Canaanite God of Metallurgy?,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 33, no. 4 (2009): 387–404; Nissim Amzallag, “Copper Metallurgy: A Hidden Fundament of the Theology of Ancient Israel?,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 27, no. 2 (2013): 151–69; Nissim Amzallag, “A Metallurgical Perspective on the Birth of Ancient Israel,” *Entangled Religions* 12, no. 2 (2021). While the particulars vary somewhat between scholars, others have also argued that Yahweh-worshipping metalworkers from north Arabia were incorporated into Israel or Judah and influenced their religion. See Robert D. Miller II, *Yahweh: Origin of a Desert God* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2021), 180–92; Juan Manuel Tebes, “The Archaeology of Cult of Ancient Israel’s Southern Neighbors and the Midianite-Kenite Hypothesis,” *Entangled Religions* 12, no. 2 (2021): 63; Juan Manuel Tebes, “The Southern Home of YHWH and Pre-Priestly Patriarchal/Exodus Traditions from a Southern Perspective,” *Biblica* 98, no. 1 (2017): 173–74; Nathan H. Scherrer, “Yahweh of the Southlands” (MA thesis; Denver Seminary, 2017), 110; Jacob Edward Dunn, “‘A Land Whose Stones are Iron and From Whose Hills You May Mine Copper’: Metallurgy, Pottery, and the Midianite-Qenite Hypothesis” (MA thesis; University of Georgia, 2015), 91. Dunn initially proposed the origins of Israelite religion be understood in light of volcanism rather than metallurgy, but became skeptical of this interpretation (see p. 91n329). As Amzallag has argued, however, volcanic imagery was also closely associated with metallurgy in antiquity. See Nissim Amzallag, “Some Implications of the Volcanic Theophany of YHWH on His Primeval Identity,” *Antiguo Oriente* 12 (2014): 11–38. For Dunn’s original argument about volcanism, see Jacob E. Dunn, “A God of Volcanoes: Did Yahwism Take Root in Volcanic Ashes?,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 38, no. 4 (2014): 387–424.
34. See Amzallag, “Origin and Evolution,” 99–126; Amzallag, “Canaanite God of Metallurgy,” 398–400; Amzallag, “Serpent as a Symbol,” 214–16.
35. Hugh Nibley pointed out the affinity between Book of Mormon names (and especially those in Lehi’s family) and Arabian

inscriptions several decades ago. See Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1988), 290–91. See also Lynn M. Hilton and Hope A. Hilton, *Discovering Lehi: New Evidence of Lehi and Nephi in Arabia* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 1996), 85–89; Robert F. Smith, “Book of Mormon Event Structure: The Ancient Near East,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5, no. 2 (1996): 147. On the *Lihyanites*, see Abdul-Rahman T. al-Ansary, “The State of Lihyan: A New Perspective,” *Topoi* 9, no. 1 (1999): 191–95; Jérôme Rohmer and Guillaume Charloux, “From Lihyān to the Nabataeans: Dating the End of the Iron Age in North-west Arabia,” *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 45 (2015): 297–319; Jérémie Schiettecatte and Mounir Arbach, “The Political Map of Arabia and the Middle East in the Third Century AD Revealed by a Sabaeen Inscription,” *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 27 (2016): 183–84. Al-Ansary even suggests that the Gulf of Aqaba was known as the Gulf of Lihyan during this tribe’s period of prominence (p. 195). Note, however, that according to Miller, *Yahweh*, 128, the Lihyanite kingdom is too late to be connected to, and is religiously and culturally discontinuous from, the earlier Yahweh-worshipping metallurgists in this same region.

36. See Online Corpus of the Inscriptions of Ancient North Arabia (OCIANA): AbaN 327, 397, 398, 448, 525.1, 659, 711, 853, 1028, ASFF 215, CEDS 280, CSNS 29, 33, 34, 63, 275, 724, 737, 894, GSSH 2, HNSD 131, Is.M 12, JaS 186, KhBG 19, 24, KRS 2977, KWQ 121, MKJS 93, SIJ 953, TaLNS 13, ThSaf 2, WH 456, 517.1, 1215, 1515.1, 2585, 2705, 3512, 3652, 3653, JSLih 259, Nasif 1988: 96, SHI 36, <https://krc.web.ox.ac.uk/article/ociana>. Alternatively, Jeffrey R. Chadwick, “Lehi in the Samaria Papyri and on an Ostrakon from the Shore of the Red Sea,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 19, no. 1 (2010): 14–21 argues that the name *Lehi* is Hebrew, but both of the examples he cites are more typically assumed to be Arabian names, as he admits.
37. See OCIANA: ISB 156, JSLih 119, <https://krc.web.ox.ac.uk/article/ociana>.
38. See OCIANA: LP 1025, AAEK 384, AH 067, U 003, Müller 1889: 83–84, <https://krc.web.ox.ac.uk/article/ociana>. In recent years, most scholars and researchers (myself included) have accepted an Egyptian etymology, first proposed by John Gee, for *Nephi*, based

- on apparent wordplay with the Egyptian word meaning “good” in 1 Nephi 1:1 and elsewhere in the text. See John Gee, “A Note on the Name Nephi,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1, no. 1 (1992): 189–91; Matthew L. Bowen, “Nephi’s Good Inclusio,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 17 (2016): 181–95, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/nephis-good-inclusio/>. I find the proposed wordplay persuasive, but since ancient Near Eastern wordplays could be bilingual, this does not necessarily rule out the possibility that Nephi’s name is of Arabian origin.
39. Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Deseret/The World of the Jaredites/There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1988), 42.
 40. See John A. Tvedtnes, *The Most Correct Book: Insights from a Book of Mormon Scholar* (Springville, UT: Horizon, a division of Cedar Fort, 2003), 78–97; Chadwick, “Lehi’s House,” 113–17; Neal Rappleye, “Lehi the Smelter: New Light on Lehi’s Profession,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 14 (2015): 223–25, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/lehi-the-smelter-new-light-on-lehis-profession/>. Cf. the various remarks of different scholars in S. Kent Brown and Peter Johnson, eds., *Journey of Faith: From Jerusalem to the Promised Land* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2006), 61–67.
 41. Nissim Amzallag, “The Religious Dimension of Copper Metallurgy in the Southern Levant,” in *Isaac Went Out ... To the Field (Genesis 24:63): Studies in Archaeology and Ancient Cultures in Honor of Isaac Gilead*, ed. Haim Goldfus et al. (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2019), 1–13. See also Miller II, *Yahweh*, 159–80; Jeremy D. Smoak, “‘You Have Refined Us Like Silver is Refined’ (Ps 66:10): Yahweh’s Metallurgical Powers in Ancient Judah,” *Advances in Ancient Biblical and Near Eastern Research* 1, no. 3 (2021): 81–115. In particular, the religious and ritual language surrounding “purity” primarily echoes metallurgical processes. See Yitzhaq Feder, “The Semantics of Purity in the Ancient Near East: Lexical Meaning as a Projection of Embodied Experience,” *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 14 (2014): 87–113.
 42. Amzallag, “Religious Dimension,” 2. Cf. Dunn, “A Land Whose Stones are Iron,” 42: “scholarly investigations into metallurgical guilds have shown that metal-smiths are often considered priests or magicians and that ore derived from the earth holds sacred

value for the ancient metallurgist.” Miller II, *Yahweh*, 165–67: “The technical expertise of the metalworker is considered to border on magic, rendering the smith a sort of wizard, a person of great power ... the crafters of magical substances,” but also “ritual specialist[s] ... [who could] perform sacrifices, for themselves, in service to others, and regularly on behalf of the chief and community” and “can even be intermediaries for you to God.”

43. Margaret Barker, *The Older Testament: The Survival of Themes from the Ancient Royal Cult in Sectarian Judaism and Early Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1987; reprint Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005), 94–95; cf. pp. 22, 35.
44. Barker, *Older Testament*, 82. On artisans, including metalworkers, as possessors of wisdom, see Jeremy S. Morrison, “Renovating a Deity: The Formation of Biblical Craftsmanship Metaphors and the Artisanal God-Talk of Deutero-Isaiah” (PhD diss.; Brandeis University, 2017), 110–15 (cf. pp. 150–55 for the work of creation compared to the work of artisans/craftsmen).
45. Amzallag, “Copper Metallurgy,” 162–64; Amzallag, “Canaanite God of Metallurgy,” 393; Amzallag, “Religious Dimension,” 7. Cf. Morrison, “Renovating a Deity,” 164–67.
46. Amzallag, “Copper Metallurgy,” 164–66; Amzallag, “Religious Dimension,” 7; Amzallag, “Metallurgical Perspective,” 27–28.
47. Nissim Amzallag and Shamir Yona, “The Meaning of *’Ôpan* in Proverbs 20.26,” *The Bible Translator* 67, no. 3 (2016): 292–302; Nissim Amzallag, “What Are the ‘Long Nostrils’ of YHWH?,” *Religions* 8, no. 9 (2017): 190; Nissim Amzallag, “Beyond *Nose* and *Anger*: A Reinterpretation of *’ap* in YHWH’s Context,” *Revue Biblique* 125, no. 1 (2018): 5–28.
48. Nissim Amzallag, “Moses’s Tent of Meeting: A Theological Interface between Qenite Yahwism and the Israelite Religion,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 33, no. 2 (2019): 309; Amzallag, “Some Implications,” 15, 19; Dunn, “A Land Whose Stones are Iron,” 91.
49. Nissim Amzallag, “The Material Nature of the Radiance of YHWH and its Theological Implications,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 29, no. 1 (2015): 80–96; Amzallag, “Religious Dimension,” 8; Amzallag, “Metallurgical Perspective,” 25. Amzallag specifically focuses on molten *copper*, which was

the only kind of ore that could be brought to a molten state in antiquity. Nephi never specified the kind of ore he used, but there is an “absence of evidence ... of suitable [copper] ore deposits in the region” of Bountiful, based on “available survey results,” according to Michele Degli Esposti and Alexia Pavan, “Some Reflections on the Ancient Metallurgy of Sumhuram (Sultanate of Oman),” *Annali, Sezione Orientale* 80 (2020): 191. Lynne S. Newton and Juris Zarins, *Dhofar Through the Ages: An Ecological, Archaeological and Historical Landscape* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2019), 22 similarly report, “Copper ore sources are largely lacking in Dhofar.” So Book of Mormon scholars have focused on the discovery of iron ore sources near Khor Kharfot and Khor Rori. See Wm. Revell Phillips, “Metals of the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9, no. 2 (2000): 37–38; Brown and Johnson, *Journey of Faith*, 63–64. Yet, as noted by Warren P. Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia: The Old World Setting of the Book of Mormon* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2015), 141–42, the description in the text, especially the mention of having brought the ore to a molten state, better fits the description of ancient copper smelting. The expression “molten out of the rock” is particularly interesting in this regard since, according to Amzallag, “Some Implications,” 18, smelting copper ore was perceived as “stone melting.” In Nissim Amzallag, “Beyond Prestige and Magnificence: The Theological Significance of Gold in the Israelite Tabernacle,” *Harvard Theological Review* 112, no. 3 (2019): 309, he further elaborates: “Copper was produced in the southern Levant by smelting a green sandstone (malachite) in which no ostensible traces of metal are visible.” Cf. ‘Uzi Avner, “The Desert’s Role in the Formation of Early Israel and the Origin of Yhwh,” *Entangled Religions* 12, no. 2 (2021): 47: “The smith appeared as a magician, turning rocks into metal and ‘creating’ a new substance.” Similarly, Matti Friedman, “An Archaeological Dig Reignites the Debate Over the Old Testament’s Historical Accuracy,” *Smithsonian*, December 2021, “copper smelters ... transformed rock into precious metal using a technique that may have seemed like a kind of magic.” <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/archaeological-dig-reignites-debate-old-testament-historical-accuracy-180979011/>. Thus, “molten out of the rock” is a particularly apt description of copper production from an ancient perspective. Phillips, “Metals,” 37, does say “minor traces of copper minerals have been reported

in the Dhofar” and acknowledges that copper cannot be ruled out as a possibility for Nephi’s smelting activities in Bountiful (pp. 42–43). On the other hand, the geologists who have surveyed the iron ore deserts in Dhofar have noted that certain impurities mixed into the ore would have a lower melting point, resulting in “a fluid molten slag” when working the iron bloom. Philips, “Metals,” 38, 41; cf. the comments by Jeffrey Keith and Ron Harris in Brown and Johnson, *Journey of Faith*, 64. This may have been the “molten” Nephi referred to, and he may have emphasized this detail, making it seem more like copper smelting, for theological reasons.

50. Amzallag, “Copper Metallurgy,” 156.
51. According to Amzallag, “Copper Metallurgy,” 156, based on Isaiah 54:16, “YHWH was considered as directly involved ... in all the stages of metal production and work.” For his most detailed treatment of this passage, see Nissim Amzallag and Shamir Yona, “The Significance of the Rhetorical Ambiguity in Isaiah 54:16,” *Old Testament Essays* 31, no. 2 (2018): 323–38. For a more comprehensive review of biblical texts portraying God as being involved in metalwork, see Morrison, “Renovating a Deity,” 155–67.
52. Amzallag, “Canaanite God of Metallurgy,” 395–96; Amzallag, “Copper Metallurgy,” 154–55; Amzallag, “Metallurgical Perspective,” 14. See also Nissim Amzallag, “Furnace Remelting as the Expression of YHWH’s Holiness: Evidence from the Meaning of *qanna’* (קנן) in the Divine Context,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 134, no. 2 (2015): 244. Note, however, the critique of Amzallag’s argument in Matthew Richard Schlimm, “Jealousy or Furnace Remelting?: A Response to Nissim Amzallag,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 136, no. 3 (2017): 526–27. Cf. Miller II, *Yahweh*, 104–105n113, who says Amzallag “veers in tendentious directions” when arguing that “copper is a symbol of Yahweh.” I actually agree with Schlimm that, contra Amzallag, the “wonder” of Moses’s staff transforming into a serpent was not *literally* a simple act of metallurgy; however, I do think Amzallag’s interpretation plausibly elucidates the symbolism that an ancient metallurgist would have seen in this narrative. Even Schlimm grants that Amzallag’s metallurgical interpretations of Hebrew words may have “played some role with some users ... at some points in time”

- (p. 528); the most likely to use such connotations obviously would be ancient metallurgists, such as Lehi and his family.
53. Amzallag, “Canaanite God of Metallurgy,” 399–400. Cf. Amzallag, “Furnace Remelting,” 244, referring to copper in its “serpentine/liquid phase.” Elsewhere, Amzallag points out, “In Phoenicia, the ‘good serpent’ was considered self-regenerating through death by fire, exactly as metal is regenerated by furnace re-melting.” Nissim Amzallag, “The Forgotten Meaning of *‘āpār* in Biblical Hebrew,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 137, no. 4 (2017): 780. Amzallag appears to be referring to the account given by Philo of Byblos, quoted in Leslie S. Wilson, “Nachash and Asherah: Serpent Symbolism and Death, Life, and Healing in the Ancient Near East” (PhD diss.; Yale University, 1999), 64–66.
 54. Amzallag, “Canaanite God of Metallurgy,” 398–400. In fact, according to Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003), 1:748–49n658, at least one later Jewish commentator (R. Nathan) believed the brazen “serpent was nothing else but Moses’s rod which was turned into a serpent,” thus equating the process by which the serpents were created on both occasions.
 55. Amzallag, “Metallurgical Perspective,” 14. Cf. Amzallag, “Copper Metallurgy,” 155: “This means that Moses and Aaron had to account for their metallurgical skill in order to convince the Israelites that they spoke in the name of YHWH.”
 56. For more on metalworkers as messengers of the Lord, see Amzallag, “Copper Metallurgy,” 156; Amzallag, “Metallurgical Perspective,” 11–18.
 57. For discussion of this symbolism specifically in the Exodus narratives, see Amzallag, “Serpent as a Symbol,” 217–23; Joines, *Serpent Symbolism*, 85. See also Golding, “Perceptions of the Serpent,” 168–71, 246–48. Cf. Isaiah 14:29, where the broken “rod” is equated with the “serpent’s root” from which a flying seraph would emerge to punish the Philistines, as discussed later in this paper.
 58. This connection should be viewed in context with the broader use of Moses typology in reference to both Nephi and Lehi. See Noel B. Reynolds, “Nephite Kingship Reconsidered,” in *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World: Studies in Honor of John L.*

- Sorenson, ed. Davis Bitton (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 171–78; Noel B. Reynolds, “Lehi as Moses,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9, no. 2 (2000): 26–35, 81–82; Noel B. Reynolds, “The Israelite Background of Moses Typology in the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 44, no. 2 (2005): 5–23.
59. See Joines, *Serpent Symbolism*, 44; Rollinger, “Herodot,” 927–44; Amzallag, “Origin and Evolution,” 99–126.
 60. Translation in Karen Radner, “Esarhaddon’s Expedition from Palestine to Egypt in 671 BCE: A Trek through Negev and Sinai,” in *Fundstellen: Gesammelte Schriften zur Archäologie und Geschichte Altvorderasiens ad honorem Hartmut Kühne*, ed. Dominik Bonatz, Rainer M. Czichon and F. Janoscha Kreppner (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2008), 307, rev. lines 5–7.
 61. All quotations of Herodotus follow Robert B. Strassler, ed., *The Landmark Herodotus: The Histories*, trans. Andrea L. Purvis (New York: Anchor Books, 2007).
 62. See Strassler, *Landmark Herodotus*, 148 map 2.67.
 63. Milgrom, *Numbers*, 173; Levine, *Numbers 21–36*, 86; Amzallag, “Origin and Evolution,” 114–16. Also consult the sources cited in n. 8.
 64. See Davies, “Serpent Imagery,” 193–94; Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpent*, 71–72 for convenient summaries of the findings.
 65. See Nissim Amzallag, “Who was the Deity Worshipped at the Tent-Sanctuary of Timna?,” in *Mining for Ancient Copper: Essays in Memory of Beno Rothenberg*, ed. Erez Ben-Yosef (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2018), 127–36. See also Amzallag, “Moses’s Tent of Meeting,” 311–13.
 66. Warren P. Aston, “Into Arabia: Lehi and Sariah’s Escape from Jerusalem,” *BYU Studies* 58, no. 4 (2019): 101–10. S. Kent Brown, “Jerusalem Connections to Arabia,” in *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, 626–29 describes some of the other possible routes, without favoring any one in particular. Both D. Kelly Ogden, “Answering the Lord’s Call (1 Nephi 1–7),” in *Studies in Scripture, Volume Seven: 1 Nephi to Alma 29*, ed. Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 21–23 and Jeffrey R. Chadwick, “The Wrong Place for Lehi’s Trail and the Valley of Lemuel,” *FARMS Review* 17, no. 2 (2005): 201–206 favor a route to the east of that proposed by Aston, following near the southwestern shore of the

Dead Sea and then through the Arabah Valley. This area, too, is part of the traditional region associated with the seraph-serpents, but it would mean bypassing Makhtesh Ramon. Only George Potter and Richard Wellington, *Lehi in the Wilderness: 81 New Documented Evidences That the Book of Mormon is a True History* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2003), 19–28 propose a route that falls outside the “seraph-serpent zone,” arguing that Lehi went east across the Jordan and then southward to the Red Sea, a proposal I personally find unlikely (see Chadwick for a critique).

67. Karen Radner, “The Winged Snakes of Arabia and the Fossil Site of Makhtesh Ramon in the Negev,” in *Festschrift für Hermann Hunger zum 65: Geburtstag gewidmet von seinen Freunden, Kollegen und Schülern*, ed. Markus Köhbach, et al. (Vienna: Institut für Orientalistik, 2007), 353–65. Adrienne Mayor, *The First Fossil Hunters: Paleontology in Greek and Roman Times* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 135–36 also suggests that Herodotus was talking about fossilized remains, but suggests it was those from spinosaurs (or perhaps pterosaurs). Radner and Braun (see n. 79) have both critiqued this proposal, noting that these dinosaurs would be too large to fit with Herodotus’ description.
68. Most scholars identify the Valley of Lemuel with Wadi Tayyib al-Ism, which is about 85 miles (as the crow flies) from Timna. See Aston, “Into Arabia,” 110–26; George D. Potter, “A New Candidate in Arabia for the Valley of Lemuel,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8, no. 1 (1999): 54–63; Potter and Wellington, *Lehi in the Wilderness*, 31–51; S. Kent Brown, “The Hunt for the Valley of Lemuel,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 16, no. 1 (2007): 64–73. Only Chadwick rejects this view (see “Wrong Place,” 209–15), but his alternative — the wadis around Bir Marsha — would be even closer to Timna. Given the constraint of a three-day journey from their point of arrival at the Red Sea (1 Nephi 2:6), wherever the Valley of Lemuel is, it could not be more than about 4 days from Timna. On Lehi’s familiarity with the Timna copper mines, see the sources in n. 40.
69. See Stenson, “Wherefore, for This Cause,” 296–99; Don Bradley, *The Lost 116 Pages: Reconstructing the Book of Mormon’s Missing Stories* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2019), 151–53. Also see the sources in n. 217.

70. Krystal V. L. Pierce, “Divination versus Revelation: Divine Communication under Mosaic Law,” unpublished paper presented at the 2017 Sidney B. Sperry Symposium (copy in my possession), defines divination as a method “of consulting a god or supernatural force in order to obtain hidden knowledge about the present or future” (p. 1). Cf. Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 87: “Divination refers to communication with the supernatural world. A diviner in the ancient world was one who foretold omens or gave out divine information (oracles).” Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1988), 251–63 compares the Liahona specifically to arrow-divination as practiced by the Arabs as a means of determining which direction to travel.
71. See Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpent*, 244–45; Davies, “Serpent Imagery,” 60–73. On metallurgy and divination, see Amzallag, “Religious Dimension,” 2–4; Miller II, *Yahweh*, 166, 168. As a noun in Northwest Semitic inscriptions, the *nhš* root could mean “serpent,” “diviner,” or “bronze smith.” See J. Hoftijzer and K. Jongeling, *Dictionary of the North-West Semitic Inscriptions*, (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 2:726. Wilson, “Nachash and Asherah,” 70–74 argues that *nhš* more specifically refers to libations/drink offerings, rather than divination more generically, but grants that it may have had a more generalized meaning by the 7th century BC. Wilson also argues that the brazen serpent narrative provides a *locus classicus* for all three meanings — serpent, bronze, and divination — of the *nhš* root (see pp. 78–79). Heiser, *Unseen Realm*, 87–88 likewise argues that in Genesis 3, *nhš* is a “triple entendre” alluding the meanings of serpent, diviner, and shiny copper/bronze.
72. Miller II, *Yahweh*, 166.
73. To be clear, I am not intending to suggest that the expression *nhš nhšt* could be literally translated as “diviner of brass,” or anything along those lines, but rather, like Michael Heiser, in his interpretation of Genesis 3 (see *Unseen Realm*, 87–88), I am suggesting that “to literate readers of the Hebrew Bible [as Nephi surely was], the lemma *nachash* would have (intentionally so) brought to mind other elements of the cognitive framework of the original readers” (p. 88n2). In this light, the suggestion in Bradley,

Lost 116 Pages, 151 that “the brass snake in Solomon’s temple was possibly employed (in some way) as an instrument for divining the will of God” is particularly interesting.

74. There are two main inlets proposed as the possible location of the Lehiite camp and shipbuilding activities at Bountiful, both within the Dhofar region. For Khor Kharfot, see Warren P. Aston, “The Arabian Bountiful Discovered? Evidence for Nephi’s Bountiful,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7, no. 1 (1998): 4–11, 70; Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia*, 94–213. For Khor Rori, see Richard Wellington and George Potter, “Lehi’s Trail: From the Valley of Lemuel to Nephi’s Harbor,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15, no. 2 (2006): 35–43; Potter and Wellington, *Lehi in the Wilderness*, 121–62. On the distribution of the Frankincense tree in Dhofar, see M. Raffaelli, S. Mosti, and M. Tardelli, “The Frankincense Tree (*Boswellia sacra* Flueck., Burseraceae) in Dhofar, Southern Oman: Field Investigations on the Natural Populations,” *Webbia* 58, no. 1 (2003): 135 fig. 1.
75. See Tracey Cian, “Snake Cults in Iron Age Southeastern Arabia: A Consideration on Autochthonous Developments and Possible Connections with Middle Eastern Traditions” (MA thesis; University College London Qatar, 2015), 46–51.
76. See Alessia Prioletta, *Inscriptions from the Southern Highlands of Yemen* (Rome: L’erma di Bretschneider, 2013), 303–304. See also DhM 352 in the online CSAI database, <http://dasi.cnr.it/index.php?http://dasi.cnr.it/index.php?id=42&prjId=1&corId=0&colId=0id=42&prjId=1&corId=0&colId=0>. For the association between Wadd and serpents, see Sabina Antonini, “Images: Gods, Humans, and Animals,” in *Caravan Kingdoms: Yemen and the Ancient Incense Trade*, ed. Ann C. Gunter (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 2005), 99. According to Wilson, “Nachash and Asherah,” 18, 53–54, 63–64, 186–87, Wadd was somehow linked or identified with a deity named Naḥaṣṭab (*nḥsʿṭb*), which means either “good serpent” or “good fortune.” The CSAI database does not include any texts with a deity by that name, but Naḥaṣṭab does occur as a Minaic personal name in M 335, M 370, and M 350A. In each of these texts, Wadd is identified as the patron god of an individual named Naḥaṣṭab, suggesting there may indeed be a connection.

77. See Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Snake*, 123. See also D. T. Potts, "Revisiting the Snake Burials of the Late Dilmun Building Complex on Bahrain," *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 18, no. 1 (2007): 55–74. For additional information on the snake-cult of eastern Arabia, see Anne Benoist, "An Iron Age II Snake Cult in the Oman Peninsula: Evidence from Bithnah (Emirate of Fujairah)," *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 18, no. 1 (2007): 34–54; Cian, "Snake Cults in Iron Age Southeastern Arabia," 52–87.
78. Anne Benoist et al., "Snake, Copper and Water in South-eastern Arabian Religion During the Iron Age: The Bithnah and Masāfi Evidence," in *Pre-Islamic South Arabia and its Neighbours: New Developments of Research*, ed. Mounir Arbach and Jérémie Schiettecatte (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2015), 21–36. Julie Goy, Michele Degli Eposti, Cécile Le Carlier de Veslud, and Anne Benoist, "Archaeometallurgical Research on Iron Age (1250–300 BCE) Copper Production in the Northern al-Hajjar Mountains (Oman Peninsula)," in *Mining for Ancient Copper*, 368, note that "metallurgy ... had among its main symbols the snake" and identifies several bronze snake figurines (p. 369 fig. 26.2). Science Daily.com, "First Non-Utilitarian Weapons Found in the Arabian Peninsula," March 10, 2016, <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2016/03/160310080816.htm> also mentions "small bronze snakes" found in Oman, dated to ca. 900–600 BC.
79. Thomas Braun, "Spines of Winged Snakes," in *The World of Herodotus: Proceedings of an International Conference held at the Foundation Anastasios G. Leventis*, ed. Vassos Karageorghis and Ioannis Taifacos (Nicosia: Foundation Anastasios G. Leventis, 2004), 265–85 provides a good summary and critique of the various theories. For other relatively recent treatments of the subject, see Rollinger, "Herodot," 927–44; Radner, "Winged Snakes of Arabia," 353–65. R. W. Hutchinson, "The Flying Snakes of Arabia," *Classical Quarterly* 8, no. 1/2 (1958): 100–101 provides an early theory proposing they were actually locusts, which Braun, Rollinger, and Radner all rightly reject.
80. Following the translation of *The Geography of Strabo: An English Translation with Introduction and Notes*, trans. Duane W. Roller, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014). For additional discussion and citation of other classical writers who give similar descriptions, see Nigel Groom, *Frankincense and Myrrh: A Study*

of the Arabian Frankincense Trade (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1981), 59–60, 66, 70, 242n9. See also Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpent*, 137, 169–70.

81. See Provençal, “Regarding the Noun שָׂרָף,” 374; Amzallag, “Origin and Evolution,” 107.
82. See Amzallag, “Origin and Evolution,” 108, 112, 124 fig. 2. The reddish-brown snake that Harold Ingrams, “From Cana (Husn Ghorab) to Sabbatha (Shabwa): The South Arabian Incense Road,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1945, no. 2 (October 1945): 178–79 refers to, which Groom, *Frankincense and Myrrh*, 241n8 called a “red viper,” may very well be the saw-scaled viper. According to Ingrams’ local guide, this snake would “jump” out at its target and its “bite caused instant death,” which reminded Ingrams of the accounts from Herodotus, Strabo, and other classical writers.
83. The saw-scaled viper can be found in areas throughout western Arabia. See Gergely Babocsay, “A New Species of Saw-Scaled Viper of the *Echis coloratus* Complex (Ophidia: Viperidae) from Oman, Eastern Arabia,” *Systematics and Biodiversity* 1, no. 4 (2004): 510 fig. 4. This is also true of the Egyptian cobra (see Provençal, “Regarding the Noun שָׂרָף,” 374), so even as they traveled from the Valley of Lemuel to Bountiful, Lehi’s family would have passed through the habitat of the seraph-serpent.
84. According to Amy Birkan, “The Bronze Serpent, a Perplexing Remedy: An Analysis of Numbers 21:4–9 in the Light of Near Eastern Serpent Emblems, Archaeology and Inner Biblical Exegesis” (MA thesis; McGill University, 2005), 65–67, the fiery serpents in Numbers were technically *released* by the Lord, rather than *sent*, with the implication of this being that the Lord was holding the serpents back throughout the rest of the Exodus journey. Thus, Lehi’s family likely attributed their avoidance of such dangers to the Lord’s protective power. Note, however, that Douglas W. Ullmann, “Moses’s Bronze Serpent (Numbers 21:4–9) in Early Jewish and Christian Exegesis” (PhD diss.; Dallas Theological Seminary, 1995), 29–30 argues against the “released” or “let go” interpretation.
85. See nn. 17–18 for sources. As noted, it does not seem to *completely* disappear in the 7th century BC, as there are at least two examples

that date to that era (see n. 19), but it is significantly diminished around that time.

86. Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpent*, 77, 346, suggests that the report about the destruction of the brazen serpent was meant to be symbolic or representative of Hezekiah's more wide-scale elimination of a serpent-cult and attendant serpent images in Jerusalem. Likewise, Koh, "Archaeological Investigation," 12, 142 reasons that there was a snake cult element at shrines and temples throughout Judah and that Hezekiah purged them all. Davies, "Serpent Imagery," 197–204, 216 argues that Hezekiah was responsible for the destruction cultic artifacts with serpent iconography in Be'er Sheva.
87. See Jan Christian Gertz, "Hezekiah, Moses, and the Nehushtan: A Case Study for a Correlation between the History of Religion in the Monarchic Period and the History of the Formation of the Hebrew Bible," in *The Formation of the Pentateuch*, ed. Jan C. Gertz et al. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 758–60. The implication of Gertz's argument is that the brazen serpent — and indeed, the whole of the Mosaic and exodus tradition — was exclusive to the northern kingdom of Israel until refugees from that kingdom arrived in Jerusalem during Hezekiah's reign; thus, the serpent's status in the Jerusalem temple was short lived. While I do not completely buy this argument — and indeed, suspect that the brazen serpent tradition actually has its roots in the region to the south of Jerusalem (as previously discussed) within the geographic setting of Numbers 21:4–9 — there may, nonetheless, have been a stronger connection to the tradition in the northern kingdom, where (as noted previously) southern metallurgists had integrated themselves and diffused some of their traditions into Israel's theology.
88. R. S. Hendel, "Nehushtan," in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons*, 615–16: "The bronze snake probably belonged to the traditional repertoire of Yahwistic symbols, this emblem signifying Yahweh's power to heal (so Numbers 21)."
89. Victor Avigdor Hurowitz, "Healing and Hissing Snakes: Listening to Numbers 21:4–9," *Scriptura* 87 (2004): 278–87.
90. Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpent*, 345: "There is every reason to assume that this metal serpent had been revered in the Temple for centuries before the time of Hezekiah. There is no evidence that

it had appeared recently; in fact, the text assumes that it antedates the dedication of the Temple by Solomon—that is, it dates back to the time of Moses.” Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 2:1053n90, indicates that later Jewish traditions taught that the brazen serpent continued to be used as a source of healing by the sick of Jerusalem long after the Exodus: “The ‘hissing of the brazen serpent’ used to heal all sick people of Jerusalem, and the cure was so certain that in case of illness they never prayed to God. Hezekiah therefore broke the brazen serpent in pieces.”

91. Hurowitz, “Healing and Hissing Snakes,” 284. According to Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 1:748, later Jewish commentators believed, “Looking upon the serpent of brass brought healing not only to those who had been bitten by serpents, but also to those who had been bitten by dogs or other animals.” For the sources and background of these traditions, see Ullmann, “Moses’s Bronze Serpent,” 53–55, 62. Cf. the reference above (n. 90) noting that “all sick people of Jerusalem” — not just victims of animal bites — consulted the brazen serpent for healing, according to ancient and medieval Jewish sources.
92. For a sampling of various perspectives, see Jonathan Rosenbaum, “Hezekiah’s Reform and the Deuteronomistic Tradition,” *Harvard Theological Review* 72, no. 1/2 (1979): 23–43; R. H. Lowery, *The Reforming Kings: Cults and Society in First Temple Judah* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 142–68; Nadav Na’aman, “The Debated Historicity of Hezekiah’s Reform in the Light of Historical and Archaeological Research,” *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 107 (1995): 179–95; Jacob Milgrom, “Does H Advocate the Centralization of Worship?,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 25, no. 88 (2000): 59–76; Ze’ev Herzog, “The Date of the Temple at Arad: Reassessment of the Stratigraphy and the Implications for the History of Religion in Judah,” in *Studies in the Archaeology of Iron Age in Israel and Jordan*, ed. Amihai Mazar (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 156–78; Lisbeth S. Fried, “The High Places (*Bāmōt*) and the Reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah: An Archaeological Investigation,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 122, no. 3 (2002): 437–65; Nadav Na’aman, “The Abandonment of Cult Places in the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah as Acts of Cult Reform,” *Ugarit-Forschungen* 34 (2002): 585–602; Kristin A. Swanson, “A Reassessment of Hezekiah’s Reform in Light of Jar Handles and Iconographic Evidence,” *Catholic Biblical*

- Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (2002): 460–69; Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, “Temple and Dynasty: Hezekiah, the Remaking of Judah and the Rise of the Pan-Israelite Ideology,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 30, no. 3 (2006): 259–85; Diana Edelman, “Hezekiah’s Alleged Cultic Centralization,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 32, no. 4 (2008): 395–434; Ze’ev Herzog, “Perspectives on Southern Israel’s Cult Centralization: Arad and Beer-sheba,” in *One God—One Cult—One Nation: Archaeological and Biblical Perspectives*, ed. Reinhard G. Kratz and Hermann Spieckermann (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), 169–99; Robb Andrew Young, *Hezekiah in History and Tradition* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2012), 91–121.
93. See Rosenbaum, “Hezekiah’s Reform,” 36; Lowery, *Reforming Kings*, 147–48; Young, *Hezekiah*, 102; Gertz, “Hezekiah, Moses, and the Nehushtan,” 752–53. See also Hershel Shanks, “The Mystery Nehushtan,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 33, no. 2 (2007): 58, 60–63. Cf. Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpents*, 342: “There seems no reason to doubt that there was a metal serpent in the Temple, that sacrifices were being made to (or through) it by Israelites, and that King Hezekiah had it smashed.”
94. Richard Lederman, “Nehushtan, the Copper Serpent: Its Origins and Fate,” *The Torah.com*, June 28, 2017 (updated June 23, 2021), <https://www.thetorah.com/article/nehushtan-the-copper-serpent-its-origins-and-fate>. Cf. Na’aman, “Debated Historicity,” 181–83; Gertz, “Hezekiah, Moses, and the Nehushtan,” 751–52. See also Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 217. Cf. Levine, *Numbers 21–36*, 90: “the notation in 2 Kings 18:4 was polemical in tone, expressing the attitude of zealous monotheists of that period to the effect that any iconic symbol is susceptible to degeneration.” Also, Hendel, “Nehushtan,” 616: “The statement in 2 Kings 18:4 that the Israelites had burned incense to the statue suggests that the Israelites worshiped it as a god, but the polemical thrust of this remark may be a revisionist gloss on ordinary Yahwistic cultic piety.” Note the absence of any mention of the brazen serpent in connection with the Lord guiding the Israelites through the wilderness beset with “fiery serpents” and other dangers in Deuteronomistic account (Deuteronomy 8:15).

95. Joines, “Bronze Serpent,” 245n1; Joines, *Serpent Symbolism*, 62; Hendel, “Nehushtan,” 615; W. Creighton Marlowe, “Nehushtan,” in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 958. According to Ziony Zevit, “2 Kings: Introduction and Annotations,” in *The Jewish Study Bible*, 2nd ed., eds. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 743, note on 18.4, this pejorative interpretation goes back to the medieval Rabbinic Jewish interpreter Rashi.
96. Wilson, “Nachash and Asherah,” 222, Hebrew script silently omitted.
97. Amzallag, “Copper Metallurgy,” 156–57; Amzallag, “Serpent as a Symbol,” 208–10, 235–36. Cf. Koh, “Archaeological Investigation,” 142, who notes that “practitioners of the snake cult ... most likely thought of themselves as Yahwists until Yahwism was reformed to exclude the snake imagery.” On the likely association with the northern kingdom of Israel, see n. 87.
98. For the serpent as a symbol of wisdom, see Joines, *Serpent Symbolism*, 21–26; Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpents*, 246–47; Lowell K. Handy, “Serpent (Religious Symbol),” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:1115; H.-J. Fabry, “*nāḥāš*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the O.T.*, 9:368–69; Golding, “Perceptions of the Serpent,” 2, 3, 96, 97, 103, 128–29, 131n137, 164, 174–75. According to Charlesworth, “In Aztec religion, the ‘feathered serpent,’ named Quetzalcoatl, was saluted as the source of wisdom” (p. 247), indicating that this symbolic association was found in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica as well (cf. n. 123 on Quetzalcoatl). For the connection between metallurgy and wisdom, see Barker, *Older Testament*, 22, 35, 95; Amzallag, “Forgotten Meaning,” 767, 775–77, 781; Morrison, “Renovating a Deity,” 110–15. On the relationship between wisdom and the Deuteronomistic reforms, see Barker, *Older Testament*, 81–103. See also Margaret Barker, “What Did King Josiah Reform?” in *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, 523–42.
99. See Kevin Christensen, “Paradigms Regained: A Survey of Margaret Barker’s Scholarship and Its Significance for Mormon Studies,” *FARMS Occasional Papers* 2 (2001); Kevin Christensen, “The Temple, the Monarchy, and Wisdom: Lehi’s World and the Scholarship of Margaret Barker,” in *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, 449–

522; Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 1:31–41; Brant A. Gardner, *Traditions of the Fathers: The Book of Mormon as History* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2015), 71–74; Val Larsen, “First Visions and Last Sermons: Affirming Divine Sociality, Rejecting the Greater Apostasy,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 36 (2020): 37–84, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/first-visions-and-last-sermons-affirming-divine-sociality-rejecting-the-greater-apostasy/>; Val Larsen, “Josiah to Zoram to Sherem to Jarom and the Big Little Book of Omni,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 44 (2021): 217–64, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/josiah-to-zoram-to-sherem-to-jarom-and-the-big-little-book-of-omni/>. Cf. Margaret Barker, “Joseph Smith and Preexilic Israelite Religion,” in *The Worlds of Joseph Smith: A Bicentennial Conference at the Library of Congress*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2006), 69–82; Margaret Barker and Kevin Christensen, “Seeking the Face of the Lord: Joseph Smith and the First Temple Tradition,” in *Joseph Smith Jr.: Reappraisals after Two Centuries*, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Terryl L. Givens (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 143–72. Not all Latter-day Saint scholars have adopted this paradigm. For critiques, see William J. Hamblin, “Vindicating Josiah,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 4 (2013): 165–76, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/vindicating-josiah/>; Eric A. Eliason, “Is the Bible Reliable? A Case Study: Were King Josiah’s Reforms a Restoration from Apostasy or a Suppression of Plain and Precious Truths? (And What about Margaret Barker?),” in *Yet to Be Revealed: Open Questions in Latter-day Saint Theology*, ed. Eric A. Eliason and Terryl L. Givens (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2021), 159–81, <https://byustudies.byu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/60-3Final-1.pdf>. Kevin Christensen, “Prophets and Kings in Lehi’s Jerusalem and Margaret Barker’s Temple Theology,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 4 (2013): 177–93, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/prophets-and-kings-in-lehis-jerusalem-and-margaret-barkers-temple-theology/> responds to Hamblin. Taylor Halverson, “Reading 1 Nephi with Wisdom,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 22 (2016): 279–93, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/reading-1->

nephi-with-wisdom/ agrees that Nephi and Lehi are part of the wisdom tradition, but *not* in opposition to the Deuteronomists.

100. Neal Rappleye, “The Deuteronomist Reforms and Lehi’s Family Dynamics: A Social Context for the Rebellions of Laman and Lemuel,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 16 (2015): 87–99, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-deuteronomist-reforms-and-lehis-family-dynamics-a-social-context-for-the-rebellions-of-laman-and-lemuel/>, see esp. 95–96 on how 1 Nephi 17:22 is representative of Deuteronomistic sensibilities. See also Gardner, *Traditions of the Fathers*, 74–75; Larsen, “Josiah to Zoram,” 235–38.
101. For sources discussing the Moses typology in Nephi’s record, see n. 58. As argued in Rappleye, “Deuteronomist Reforms,” 96–98, I believe Nephi employed Moses typology derivative of Deuteronomy in part to be persuasive to those (namely Laman and Lemuel) who had Deuteronomistic leanings. I wish, however, to nuance this point somewhat. In the ancient world, as competing traditions were in dialogue, it was not uncommon for writers to appropriate and adapt parts of the traditions they were ultimately seeking to replace. The Deuteronomistic authors themselves do this with parts of the older traditions they were supplanting, as discussed in Barker, *Older Testament*, 142–60. In fact, Barker argues that the Deuteronomic portrayal of Moses is actually based on the older royal typology it was attempting to supplant (pp. 145, 150–51), which may partially explain why Nephite kingship typology is similar to Moses typology, as Reynolds argues (see n. 58). The purpose of doing so was to establish a continuity between the new movement and older traditions, thus hoping to placate and persuade those who knew and believed the earlier sources. As such, I would argue that by incorporating Deuteronomistic typology into his record, Nephi was likewise seeking to reappropriate and adapt that typology toward the form of Israelite religion *he* believed was most authentic, and hoped that by doing so he could persuade Laman and Lemuel to embrace that theology.
102. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 1:748, “whenever those who had been bitten by the serpents raised their eyes upward and subordinated their hearts to the will of the heavenly Father, they were healed; if they gave no thought to God, they perished,” closely paraphrasing *M. Rosh Hashanah* 3:8: “whenever Israel looked on high and

subjected their heart to their Father in heaven were they healed, but if not, they perished,” as cited in Ullmann, “Moses’s Bronze Serpent,” 52. Milgrom, *Numbers*, 174 (cf. p. 460): “[God] resorted to this means in order to test Israel’s obedience; only those who heeded His command to look at the snake would recover.” Milgrom notes, “This is precisely how Targum Jonathan understands it.” Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpent*, 331–32 offers a similar interpretation, contrasting the connections to obedience and life in Numbers 21 with Genesis 3, where the serpent is connected to disobedience and death.

103. Ullmann, “Moses’s Bronze Serpent,” 258.
104. Ullmann, “Moses’s Bronze Serpent,” 93, cf. p. 35.
105. Ullmann, “Moses’s Bronze Serpent,” 259.
106. Ullmann, “Moses’s Bronze Serpent,” 94.
107. Gardner, *Second Witness* 2:340. Gardner goes on to say, “Even though Nephi is bearing testimony with the purpose of declaring the Messiah, he does not use the incident of the serpent to develop or advance that argument” (p. 341). While I agree that the story is not used typologically, *per se*, but rather cited as an example of the Lord’s power, I think Gardner goes too far in suggesting it is not cited as part of Nephi’s argument for the coming Messiah; the very purpose in illustrating the Lord’s power here is to drive home the point that it is only through his power —as the coming Messiah — that salvation can be obtained.
108. This is contrary to how most other Latter-day Saint commentators have interpreted the story, as they typically take the brazen serpent as a literal prophetic type for Christ. For examples, see Robert L. Millet, “Lessons in the Wilderness,” in *Studies in Scripture, Volume 3: Genesis to 2 Samuel*, ed. Kent P. Jackson and Robert L. Millet (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 197–200; Gaskill, *Miracles of the Book of Mormon*, 107–14; Alonzo L. Gaskill, *Miracles of the Old Testament: A Guide to the Symbolic Messages* (Springville, UT: CFI an imprint of Cedar Fort, 2017), 155–62.
109. S. Kent Brown, “Brazen Serpent,” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 172.
110. Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpent*, 338. Also see p. 397: “It is likely, as many scholars have concluded ... that John 3:14 develops

- from an old Jewish tradition that has been expanded by the Fourth Evangelist.”
111. Ullmann, “Moses’s Bronze Serpent,” 76: “there seems to have been some flexibility in Jewish thinking as to what the bronze serpent symbolized.” Granted, Ullmann is discussing the Rabbinic period, but it seems likely that such was true of earlier periods as well.
 112. Jacqueline Tabick, “The Snake in the Grass: The Problems of Interpreting a Symbol in the Hebrew Bible and Rabbinic Writings,” *Religion* 16 (1986): 155.
 113. For helpful summaries of serpent symbolism in the ancient Near East and discussion of both biblical and Book of Mormon passages in light of such symbolism, see Andrew C. Skinner, “Savior, Satan, and Serpent: The Duality of a Symbol in the Scriptures,” 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), 359–84; Andrew C. Skinner, “Serpent Symbols and Salvation in the Ancient Near East and the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 10, no. 2 (2001): 42–55, 70–71.
 114. See nn. 88–89. On the function of looking or gazing at the serpent as part of the healing ritual, see Levine, *Numbers 21–36*, 89. In later Jewish lore, persons could be healed from various ailments with just “a casual glance” at the brazen serpent, but healing from snake bites required “a long and insistent gaze.” See Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 1:748.
 115. See Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpent*, 254–56. Birkan, “Bronze Serpent,” 23–29 and Golding, “Perceptions of the Serpent,” 88–184 review the common practice of portraying healing deities as serpents in Greek, Phoenician, and Mesopotamian religion.
 116. Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpent*, 336.
 117. Münnich, “Cult of Bronze Serpents,” 44*.
 118. See Gardner, *Second Witness* 4:472–73.
 119. The language of the translation here is clearly influenced by Malachi 4:2: “shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings.” This passage itself is drawing on the winged sun-disk iconography that, in the 8th century BC, was part of the same royal iconography that included winged serpents, and in fact

sun disks and serpents (both sometimes winged and unwinged) often appear together on seals from this time period. See Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 226; Sass, “Pre-Exilic Seals,” 239, 241 figs. 150–52. According to Trevor D. Cochell, “An Interpretation of Isaiah 6:1–5 in Response to the Art and Ideology of the Achaemenid Empire” (PhD diss.; Baylor University, 2008), 115–73, the seraph/uraeus was commonly associated with solar symbolism and solar deities, including winged-sun disks, and even took on solar characteristics itself and was perhaps even conflated with the sun-disk in the minds of some ancient readers. It is interesting that, unlike the passage in Malachi, Nephi does not refer to the sun, and thus the healing wings to which he refers may instead be alluding to the wings of the seraph-serpent. I appreciate Matthew Roper discussing this insight with me. Cf. 1 Nephi 11:31; Mosiah 14:5; Alma 15:8; 3 Nephi 9:13 for other references to Christ as a spiritual healer.

120. Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpent*, 250–51.
121. Hurowitz, “Healing and Hissing Snakes,” 284. Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpent*, 250 also notes the interplay of terms for “snake” and “life” in Arabic, Syriac, and Persian. Cf. Wilson, “Nachash and Asherah,” 52–53.
122. Birkan, “Bronze Serpent,” 73 (cf. pp. 18n53, 23, 69n198).
123. Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpent*, 250. Charlesworth even notes that this life-giving (sometimes through self-sacrifice) symbolism is present in pre-Columbian American cultures, making special mention of the “Aztec feathered serpent, Quetzalcoatl” (p. 251). Many Latter-day Saints have, of course, seen a connection between Quetzalcoatl and Christ, and Wallace E. Hunt Jr., “Moses’s Brazen Serpent as It Relates to Serpent Worship in Mesoamerica,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 2 (1993): 121–31 specifically explores similarities in the Mesoamerican concept of a “feathered” or “flying” serpent (Quetzalcoatl) and the narrative of the brazen serpent as related in the Book of Mormon. Note, however, the caution of Gardner, *Second Witness*, 1:306: “A *flying* serpent is particularly interesting in a Mesoamerican context, but I do not find any connection between the Mesoamerican flying serpent and the Book of Mormon” (Cf. Gardner, *Second Witness*, 5:353–95 for a more detailed critique). See also Brant Gardner, “The Christianization of Quetzalcoatl: A History of the

- Metamorphosis,” *Sunstone* 10, no. 11 (1986): 6–10. For background on Quetzalcoatl, see David Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire: Myths and Prophecies in the Aztec Tradition*, rev. ed. (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2000). I personally doubt that the imagery of Quetzalcoatl as a feathered serpent is derivative of Nephite teachings about the brazen serpent (as Hunt argues), but it is not impossible that the Nephites adopted and used the feathered serpent iconography in their representations of the “flying fiery serpent” and its symbolic association with Christ (just as the Israelites adopted the winged uraeus from the Egyptians for their depictions of the seraph-serpent). Mesoamerican “vision serpent” iconography may also be relevant to the Nephite conceptions of positive serpent symbolism (see n. 218). Exploration of such possibilities, however, are beyond the scope of this paper.
124. Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpent*, 259–61, 350. Cf. Golding, “Perceptions of the Serpent,” 2, 3 for the snake as a symbol of “eternity.”
125. Münnich, “Cult of Bronze Serpents,” 44*.
126. Lurker, *Illustrated Dictionary*, 108. Cf. Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpent*, 259: “Because the snake sheds its skin and apparently obtains new life . . . it became the quintessential symbol of immortality and reincarnation.” See also Birkan, “Bronze Serpent,” 18. Similar symbolism is known from Mesoamerica; see Mary Miller and Karl Taube, *An Illustrated Dictionary of the Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1993), 149–50.
127. Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpent*, 256.
128. Skinner, “Serpent Symbols and Salvation,” 48.
129. Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpent*, 256, 337 dates the Wisdom of Solomon to the 2nd century BC. Others tend to date it to the 1st centuries BC/AD. See Ullmann, “Moses’s Bronze Serpent,” 37, 39; David Winston, *Wisdom of Solomon: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979), 20–25; A. Peter Hayman, “The Wisdom of Solomon,” in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, ed. James D. G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 763; Lester L. Grabbe, “Wisdom of Solomon,” in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, fully rev. 4th ed., ed. Michael D. Coogan (New

York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1427; Walter T. Wilson, “Wisdom of Solomon,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: One Volume Commentary*, ed. Beverly Roberts Gavanta and David Petersen (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2010), 558; Peter Enns, “Wisdom of Solomon,” in *Outside the Bible: Ancient Jewish Writings Related to Scripture*, ed. Louis H. Feldman, James L. Kugel, and Lawrence H. Schiffman (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2013), 3: 2155–56; Emerson B. Powery, “Wisdom of Solomon,” in *The Old Testament and Apocrypha: Fortress Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Gale A. Yee, Hugh R. Page Jr., Matthew J. M. Coomber (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2014), 980.

130. Consistent with my use of the King James Bible throughout this paper (since it is the Bible translation Latter-day Saints are most familiar with), I have also used the KJV translation here. See King James Bible Online, “Wisdom of Solomon Chapter 16,” <https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Wisdom-of-Solomon-Chapter-16>.
131. Powery, “Wisdom of Solomon,” 994, parenthetical citation of Numbers 21:8–9 silently omitted. Cf. Davies, “Serpent Imagery,” 10: “The bronze or copper serpent upon the pole was a symbol of the ‘saving power’ of the God of Israel,” and 33: “the bronze serpent was a symbol or token of the saving powers of the God of Israel.”
132. Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpent*, 257–58, 336. Milgrom, *Numbers*, 460: “It is important to note that a *seraph* becomes an agent of healing and purification for Isaiah (Isa. 6:5–7), thereby providing a link between this snake-*seraph* of Isaiah and the therapeutic snake-*seraph* of Moses.”
133. Davies, “Serpent Imagery,” 82–105, quotes on 83 and 108. Cf. Cochell, “Interpretation of Isaiah 6:1–5,” 145–47:

In Isaiah’s vision the burning is not limited to destruction, but also has the purpose of purification and redemption. The prophet in Isaiah 6 appears before Yahweh as a representative and a representation of the people of Israel. Just as Israel, the prophet is impure and must experience a fiery purification. The fiery ones represent that purification in their form and bring that purification to the prophet with the burning coal just as Yahweh will bring purification through judgment. (p. 146) ...

In the vision of Isaiah 6, the fiery ones surrounding Yahweh and purifying the impure one who encounters Yahweh capture in a single scene the theme in Isaiah of the judgment and purification through fire of Israel, the nations, and creation. (p. 147)

134. See Peter D. Miscall, *Isaiah*, 2nd ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006), 45–46; Cochell, “Interpretation of Isaiah 6:1–5,” 145–47. Cf. De Hulster, “Angels and Iconography,” 154:

Furthermore, one of the seraphs in Isaiah 6 uses tongs to take a burning coal from the altar. This imagery picks up on the association of the Hebrew root *šrp* with burning or fire. It is striking, though, that these fiery creatures use (or perhaps even need) tongs to pick up a burning coal. Perhaps this detail underscores the efficacy of the coals as instruments of cleansing and judgment, both of which play a role in Isaiah’s commission.

135. Miscall, *Isaiah*, 46; also note that this evokes metallurgical imagery. Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpent*, 257, similarly suggests that the seraph-serpents of Numbers 21 performed a communal purification function.
136. Rütterswörden, “*šārap*,” 227. Cf. John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1–39*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 184: “incense taken from the altar which stood just in front of the holy of holies could also have an atoning and purifying effect.”
137. Joines, *Serpent Symbolism*, 53. Cf. Joines, “Winged Serpents,” 415: Isaiah “makes one of the seraphim an agent of divine redemption and healing.”
138. See David E. Bokovoy, “On Christ and Covenants: An LDS Reading of Isaiah’s Prophetic Call,” *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 3 (2011): 36–46.
139. Bokovoy, “On Christ and Covenants,” 45.
140. Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpent*, 229–31; Davies, “Serpent Imagery,” 16–24; Golding, “Perceptions of the Serpent,” 185–261.
- 141 . See nn. 9–10 and accompanying discussion in the body of the text. Cf. Amzallag, “Serpent as a Symbol,” 210–12.

142. See discussions in Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 96–97, 226; Joines, *Serpent Symbolism*, 45–54.
143. Hansen, “Snakes,” 298.
144. See Joines, *Serpent Symbolism*, 45–49; Joines, “Winged Serpents,” 411–14; Birkan, “Bronze Serpent,” 12–17. Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpents*, 238–39 discusses serpents as a symbol of kingship more broadly throughout the ancient Near East. In Mesoamerica, the “feathered serpent” was also a symbol of royal and political power. See H. B. Nicholson, “Feathered Serpent,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures*, ed. David Carrasco (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1:398.
145. Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpents*, 238.
146. Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 226. Cf. Joines, “Winged Serpents,” 414: “Israel was acquainted with the symbol of the winged serpent and, apparently incorporated it into its royal symbolism” (emphasis in original). See also Davies, “Serpent Imagery,” 113–14.
147. I have silently modified the KJV here, substituting “viper” (used more commonly in modern translations) for the KJV “cockatrice.” I’ve done this for clarity, since most people today are not familiar with the mythological cockatrice — a serpent-like creature with a rooster’s head—and recognizing both the snake/serpentine nature of each of the animals mentioned, and the progressively more threatening nature of each is relevant to my argument. Thus, it is important to realize most translators regard the *šp*’ not as a mythological serpent, but an ordinary venomous snake, usually the adder/viper.
148. Aster, *Reflections of Empire*, 144. Oswalt, *Book of Isaiah 1–39*, 332n18, however, thinks that “as a figure of speech” this imagery “need not apply so literally.” Thus, he reasons that the “statement is only an expanded synonym” and not necessarily a three-tiered reference to the past, present, and future.
149. There is some debate as to whether the ruler in question is a Judean or an Assyrian monarch. Oswalt, *Book of Isaiah 1–39*, 331–32 argues it simply refers to the Assyrian empire (but not necessarily a specific Assyrian ruler), while Aster, *Reflections of Empire*, 137–50 and Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 292–93 argue for specific Assyrian rulers, with part of the rationale (for Blenkinsopp, at least) being that “it is unlikely that the author would refer to Judean rulers

- as snakes, adders, and flying serpents” (p. 292). Aster meanwhile argues that the snake imagery is “a reference to an Assyrian imperial symbol” (see n. 13 for background on this argument). As discussed by Roberts, “Rod that Smote Philistia,” 392–94 (cf. Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 226), the flying serpent is actually a very common symbol for the Judean monarchy during Isaiah’s period, and Roberts argues that Hezekiah is the intended reference (see pp. 381–95 for Roberts’ full argument). Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39*, 234, 238 attempts to resolve the conflict by pointing out that under Ahaz (Isaiah 14:28), the Judean monarchy was a loyal vassal to Assyria, and thus both polities may be alluded to. Sweeney ultimately sees Isaiah 14:28–32 as looking forward to king Josiah’s reign (p. 217). Davies, “Serpent Imagery,” 30–32 argues that it refers to Hezekiah, noting that he “smote the Philistines” according to 2 Kings 18:8.
150. On Isaiah 11 as a prophecy of a “new David,” see Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 179. Miscall, *Isaiah*, 65–66 and Oswalt, *Book of Isaiah 1–39*, 329n2, note the similarity of Isaiah 14:29 to Isaiah 11. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39*, 116–18, 203–205 argues that Isaiah 11:1–12:6 predicts the rise of a new Davidic monarchy, and believes both 11:1–12:6 and 14:28–32 refers to Josiah, thereby linking the two prophecies to the same individual.
151. According to John F. A. Sawyer, “Messiah,” in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 514, “messianic” texts are those where “royal language and imagery came to be applied primarily to a hoped-for future king, whose reign would be characterized by everlasting justice, security, and peace,” citing Isaiah 11:1–5 as one of the prime examples of a messianic text. If Isaiah 14:28–32 refers to a Judean king — as both the imagery and language would suggest (but see n. 149)— then this text certainly meets the criteria. Even if the original intent was to refer to an Assyrian monarch, however, the clear use of Judean royal motifs would still nonetheless lend itself to messianic interpretations, as we indeed find amongst later Jewish commentators (see the body of the text).
152. Oswalt, *Book of Isaiah 1–39*, 331. Note, however, that Oswalt does not personally favor this interpretation (see n. 149), even though he grants, “The most obvious interpretation of the *broken staff*

- would be that it refers to Ahaz,” and from this it would follow that the rest of the passage is referring to the Judean monarchy (p. 331).
153. Following the translation of Bruce D. Chilton, *The Isaiah Targum: Introduction, Translation, Apparatus and Notes*, The Aramaic Bible, vol. 11 (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1987) 33. Cf. the slightly different translation for the second part of the verse in Bruce D. Chilton, *The Glory of Israel: The Theology and Provenience of the Isaiah Targum* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1982), 89: “For from the sons of the sons of Jesse the messiah will come forth and his deeds among you will be as a harmful serpent.”
 154. Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpents*, 248.
 155. Chilton, *Isaiah Targum*, 33, note on 14:22–32. Chilton also mentions the similarity to Isaiah 11 and cites John 3:14 as further evidence of the Messiah-serpent connection. See Chilton, *Glory of Israel*, 86–96 for a discussion of the overall portrait of the Messiah figure in the Isaiah targum, which Chilton argues generally dates to an AD 70–135 context, although there are later interpolations.
 156. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 1:748.
 157. Note that Christ is the Anglicized version of the Greek title *Christos*, a translation of the Hebrew title *Mšyḥ*, which is rendered “Messiah” in English.
 158. Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpents*, 248.
 159. In addition to the discussion earlier in this paper, see also Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpents*, 392; Davies, “Serpent Imagery,” 6–9.
 160. De Hulster, “Angels and Iconography,” 155.
 161. See Amzallag, “Serpent as a Symbol,” 213, 217. See Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpent*, 247–50 for discussion of additional biblical passages, later Jewish sources, and some additional ancient Near Eastern context.
 162. Amzallag, “Serpent as a Symbol,” 228.
 163. See Davies, “Serpent Imagery,” 25–32.
 164. Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpent*, 247.
 165. Cochell, “Interpretation of Isaiah 6:1–5,” 150–51.

166. Amzallag, “Serpent as a Symbol,” 214: “Numbers 21,6–9 reports the mysterious episode of an attack on the Israelites by ‘burning serpents.’ That these creatures were sent by YHWH (v. 6) again confirms their closeness with the deity.” Also Davies, “Serpent Imagery,” 9: “these serpents [in Numbers 21] appear to symbolize the judgments of Jehovah against the spiritual evil of ‘the people.’” On the distinction between the serpents being sent or released, see n. 84.
167. See Birkan, “Bronze Serpent,” 13–15, 20–22, 72. Recall also the suggestion of Aster that Assyrians similarly used a mounted serpent as a battle-standard (see n. 13). Currid, *Ancient Egypt*, 152–55 likewise interprets the brazen serpent in light of Egyptian battle-standards (especially those with serpents on them), but rather than seeing the inversion of the meaning (as I have suggested), argues that it is entirely consistent with the Egyptian symbolism. Currid notes that while these standards “were viewed as the means of judgment against enemies” (p. 152), “Egyptians believed the standards to be edifying for Egypt,” as “agents of divine protection” (p. 154). Likewise, the brazen serpent was a standard created “in order to protect and heal the Israelites,” but “also served as an agent of judgment against the enemies of Yahweh, especially against Egypt and those who wanted to return there” (p. 154). Currid’s point about the positive connotations of the standard to Egyptians — as the ones *protected* by its judgments against Pharaoh’s enemies — is noteworthy, but there is little in the narrative of Numbers 21:4–9 to suggest the brazen serpent *also* served as a sign of judgment. It was the serpents *themselves* that did that, and the very “enemies” who wanted to return to Egypt are the ones who received the protective benefits of the serpent-standard; thus, as I noted, it is actually inverting the Egyptian symbolism.
168. Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpent*, 248.
169. Davies, “Serpent Imagery,” 27.
170. Skinner, “Serpent Symbols and Salvation,” 47.
171. Tabick, “Snake in the Grass,” 158. Skinner, “Serpent Symbols and Salvation,” 49, also noted this duality: “The agent of both harm and healing, death and life, is, in this instance, the serpent.” Likewise, commenting on this narrative, the Wisdom of Solomon 16:13 says, “For thou hast power of life and death: thou leadest to the gates of

- hell, and bringest up again,” likely an allusion to 1 Samuel 2:6 (also see Deuteronomy 32:39).
172. On the heavenly hosts, see E. Theodore Mullen Jr., “Divine Assembly,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 2:214–17; Paul B. Sumner, “Visions of the Divine Council in the Hebrew Bible” (MA thesis; Pepperdine University, 1991, updated 2010); Michael S. Heiser, “The Divine Council in Late Canonical and Non-canonical Second Temple Jewish Literature” (PhD diss.; University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2004); Min Suc Kee, “The Heavenly Council and its Type-scene,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 31, no. 3 (2007): 259–73. For an analysis of this motif in both biblical and Restoration scripture, see Stephen O. Smoot, “The Divine Council in the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Mormon,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 27 (2017): 155–80, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-divine-council-in-the-hebrew-bible-and-the-book-of-mormon/>. See also William J. Hamblin, “The Sôd of YHWH and the Endowment,” in *Ancient Temple Worship: Proceedings of The Expound Symposium 14 May 2011*, eds. Matthew B. Brown, et al. (Orem, UT: The Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2014), 189–94. For the various titles of the heavenly hosts, see Smoot, “Divine Council,” 162.
173. Lowell K. Handy, “Serpent, Bronze,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 5:1117.
174. Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpent*, 350. In the full quote, Charlesworth says they “most likely perceived the serpent as a celestial being *either* within God Yahweh’s heavenly court *or* a god other than Yahweh” (p. 350). Koh, “Archaeological Investigation,” 26, 38, 97, 131–33, 142 reasons from both archaeological and textual evidence (including the Old Testament) that snake deities (and their cults) are nearly always subservient to the main deity in the pantheon. As such, any deity ancient Judahites might have associated with the brazen serpent *would* have been perceived — by those participating in that form of worship, at the very least — as subservient to Yahweh, most likely as part of the heavenly court, or as Handy put it, “part of the Judean pantheon.” Thus, I have omitted the language that implies the possibility of a deity *outside* of that pantheon.
175. Ornan, “Member in the Entourage,” 18.

176. On the seraphim as members of the divine council, see Richard Lederman, “The Seraphim,” *TheTorah.com*, January 22, 2019 (updated December 28, 2021), <https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-seraphim>; Sumner, “Visions of the Divine Council,” 69–71, both of whom present the seraphim as both serpentine and as members of the divine council. See also Davies, “Serpent Imagery,” 108–109, who argues that the seraphim were members of the divine council but *not* serpentine in appearance, but rather that their essence was symbolized by the serpent (see n. 10). Similarly, De Hulster, “Angels and Iconography,” 149n1 proposes that “a conservative point of view” might reason that “angels were an accepted part of YHWH’s entourage in Isaiah’s day, [and] that Isaiah describes *angels in the disguise of seraphs*,” but ultimately rejects this view and accepts that the seraphim are indeed serpentine in nature *and* part of the heavenly hosts/entourage (pp. 154, 155).
177. Handy, “Serpent, Bronze,” briefly summarizes such efforts. Cf. Münnich, “Cult of Bronze Serpents,” 39*–56*, who argues that it was “a symbol of the divine Ruler of the Serpents, who heals” (p. 44*), and while acknowledging that this could be Yahweh or at least “one of YHWH’s attributes” (p. 45*), ultimately favors an identification with the Canaanite god Horon (p. 46*–49*).
178. See Amzallag, “Origin and Evolution,” 99–126; Amzallag, “Serpent as a Symbol,” 207–36.
179. See Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel’s Second God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992); Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (New York: The New Press, 2012); David J. Larsen, “Psalm 24 and the Two YHWHs at the Gate of the Temple,” in *The Temple, Ancient and Restored: Proceedings of the Interpreter Matthew B. Brown Memorial Conference, 25 October 2014*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and Donald W. Parry (Orem, UT: The Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2016), 211–34. For the post-exilic perpetuation of this belief in “two powers” even within mainstream Judaism, see Peter Schäfer, *Two Gods in Heaven: Jewish Concepts of God in Antiquity*, trans. Allison Brown (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020). Cf. the earlier work by Alan F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1977).

180. See Barker, *Great Angel* and Boyarin, *Jewish Gospels*. Benjamin D. Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009) provides a somewhat different view of the situation, arguing *not* that there were actually two divinities, but rather that in the ancient Israelite view, God could be manifest or present within multiple “bodies,” including inanimate objects and even within other persons who are semi-independent of, but nonetheless manifestations of, Yahweh. In this regard there could, in a sense, be “two Yahwehs” but both figures were ultimately believed to be the same God. Sommer still proposes that the Deuteronomists (and Priestly) school was opposed to this conception of God and that early Christian belief in Jesus as God incarnate (while God the Father remained in the heavens) is a later manifestation of this earlier understanding. Thus, under Sommer’s model, I might modify some details, i.e., consider the brazen serpent not as the “second god,” one of the heavenly hosts, but as a “manifestation” or “body” of Yahweh — but the basic thesis would remain the same, that is, this interpretation of the brazen serpent would still be opposed by the Deuteronomists while still being consonant with early Christian beliefs about Jesus.
181. See Nissim Amzallag, “The Identity of the Emissary of YHWH,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 26, no. 1 (2012): 123–44.
182. See Christensen, “Paradigms Regained,” 51–75; Gardner, *Second Witness* 1:214–22. See also Kevin Christensen, “The Deuteronomist De-Christianizing of the Old Testament,” *FARMS Review* 16, no. 2 (2004): 59–90.
183. Clines, *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, 5:697.
184. See Rick W. Byargeon, “Banner,” in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, 147.
185. H.-J. Fabry, “*nēs*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the O.T.*, 9:440.
186. Currid, *Ancient Egypt*, 151.
187. Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion*, 53.
188. Currid, *Ancient Egypt*, 151.
189. Ullmann, “Moses’s Bronze Serpent,” 20. Ullmann’s full discussion of *ns* in Numbers 21, on pp. 20–21, is helpful. Alternatively, Clines, *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, 5:701 defines *nss* as “rally to the banner.”

190. Cf. Isaiah 59:19, where the similar verbal root *nws* is translated “shall lift up a standard.” Currid, *Ancient Egypt*, 149 suggests this root as an alternative possibility for the etymology of *ns*, “standard.” The root *nws* usually refers to fleeing, escaping, swinging, trembling, etc. (Clines, *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, 5:642–44). The root *nss* can similarly refer to swaying, waving, etc. (Clines, *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, 5:701). Daniel Vainstub, “Engraved Inscriptions,” in *Salvage Excavations at Tel Moza: The Bronze and Iron Age Settlements and Later Occupations*, ed. Zvi Greenhut and Alon de Groot (Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority, 2009), 140 noted Arabic (*nws*) and Akkadian (*našāšu*) congenates, suggesting that *nws* and *nss* are ultimately etymologically related, and the connection to *ns*, “standard, banner, etc.” may be more related to the way a flag or pole might wave, sway, swing, or tremble, etc. in the wind.
191. See Clines, *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, 5:758–70. Cf. the potentially related root *nsh*, “lift,” on p. 698.
192. See Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 220–22; Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 163; Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39*, 113, 117, 127, 129. See also John Goldingay, “Isaiah,” in *New Interpreter’s Bible*, 393; Margaret Barker, “Isaiah,” in *Eerdmans Commentary*, 508.
193. See Layard, *Nineveh and Its Remains*, 2:469. See also Aster, *Reflections of Empire*, 54n47, 143–45. See n. 13 for additional discussion of this Assyrian battle-standard.
194. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 265–68; Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 182, 186; Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39*, 113, 117, 198, 201, 203–205; Goldingay, “Isaiah,” 395–96; Barker, “Isaiah,” 509.
195. Stenson, “Wherefore, for This Cause,” 303–15 also makes this point, but with different application. This connection may have been reinforced by the fact that, per Hurowitz, “Healing and Hissing Snakes,” 278–87, the Hebrew of Numbers 21:4–9 has a high cluster of different /h/ and /s/ sounds, and thus when read aloud the words of the passage quite literally “hiss forth” like the standard of Isaiah 5:26 (cf. 2 Nephi 29:2–3). As Stenson noted, however, the Hebrew term translated as “hiss” (*šrq*) is not known to be used for the hissing of a snake, but Stenson argues that a similar, hissing-like onomatopoeia as suggested by Hurowitz in Numbers 21 may also be evident in the underlying Hebrew of 2 Nephi 29:2 (see pp. 311–15). Matthew L. Bowen, “We are a Remnant of the

- Seed of Joseph’: Moroni’s Interpretive Use of Joseph’s Coat and the Martial *nēs*-Imagery of Isaiah 11:11–12,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scripture* 41 (2020): 183–84, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/we-are-a-remnant-of-the-seed-of-joseph-moronis-interpretive-use-of-josephs-coat-and-the-martial-nes-imagery-of-isaiah-1111-12>, also argues that Nephi connected the brazen serpent to Isaiah’s ensign/banner imagery.
196. Clines, *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, 5:758–70.
197. For a full discussion of the term’s semantic range, see D.N. Freedman, et al., “*nāšā*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the O.T.*, 10:24–40.
198. Alma’s reference to the Son of God who would be “raised up” to *suffer* should be contrasted with Alma’s characterization of the Zoramites as a people who were “lifted up” in pride (Alma 31:25), an expression that more likely reflects the Hebrew term *rwm*, which is somewhat synonymous with *ns’* in its basic meaning, “be high, lofty, raised up, lifted up, exalted, etc.,” but whose semantic range did not include taking up suffering or bearing burdens, but rather haughtiness and arrogance (Clines, *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, 7:441–49). Matthew L. Bowen, “See That Ye Are Not Lifted Up’: The Name Zoram and Its Paronomastic Pejoration,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 19 (2016): 109–43, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/see-that-ye-are-not-lifted-up-the-name-zoram-and-its-paronomastic-pejoration/>, argues that the *rwm* root is used in various ways throughout Alma 31–35, 38–39 as a pun off of the name *Zoram*, which he argues means “he who is lifted up.” Thus, for Alma, those who would not look upon the brazen serpent (Alma 33:20–21) are no longer Nephi’s recalcitrant brothers or the reformers in Jerusalem, but the Zoramite elites, who rather than looking to and believing in the raised up Son of God, instead lift *themselves* up as holy and chosen.
199. On the dating of the text, see Bart D. Ehrman, ed. and trans., *The Apostolic Fathers, vol. 2* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 6–7.
200. Quotations of the *Epistle of Barnabas* from the J. B. Lightfoot translation, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/barnabas-lightfoot.html>.

201. Cited in Ullmann, “Moses’s Bronze Serpent,” 107–108. I have slightly modified the translation and punctuation of the text; namely, I’ve omitted some commas and the Greek text that appears in brackets, and used “type” rather than “figure” for the Greek term *typos*.
202. Ullmann, “Moses’s Bronze Serpent,” 165 (cf. pp. 2, 7–8, 98–99, 129–31, 185, 207–208, 261–62).
203. S. Kent Brown, “Fiery Flying Serpents,” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, 270.
204. Compare, also, Alma’s avoidance of explicitly referring to the serpent itself, simply calling it “a type” to Justin Martyr’s tendency to refer to it as the “sign,” “type,” or “figure” while generally avoiding any description of the *form* of the object (or completely obscuring it, by saying it was a cross). A similar tendency is seen in other early Christian sources. See Ullmann, “Moses’s Bronze Serpent,” 105–13.
205. Although this passage does not explicitly say that the people were rejecting or denying the coming of Christ/the Messiah, in stating that they began “to dwindle in unbelief” it employs a common idiom in the Book of Mormon used to refer to the *opposite* of believing in Christ. See Stenson, “Wherefore, for This Cause,” 310.
206. Brown, “Brazen Serpent,” 172.
207. See Ullmann, “Moses’s Bronze Serpent.”
208. It may be worth considering the possibility that this conservatism is due to Mormon’s editorial hand. In selecting which materials to include (and exclude), Mormon was likely motivated by his sense of orthodoxy and a desire to present those teachings that had been fairly stable and consistent over the course of Nephite history. As such, if there were any sources providing a more elaborate or allegorical interpretation of this or other scriptural narratives, he likely would have sifted them out or edited them in such a way so as to emphasize their points of consistency with other Nephite interpreters. Since we do not have access to the rest of the Nephite archive, however, such can only be speculated; based on the records as we have them, the Nephite tradition was conservative in its interpretation of this scriptural narrative.
209. As cited in Ullmann, “Moses’s Bronze Serpent,” 52; cf. pp. 55–56, 84 for other sources using similar language to express this

- same concept. Ullmann notes that this is the most common and consistent view expressed by Jewish interpreters when responding to the charge of idol worship.
210. Nili S. Fox, “Numbers: Introduction and Annotations,” in *Jewish Study Bible*, 310 note on 21.9, italicization of *seraph* in the original, all other emphasis added.
 211. As cited in Ullmann, “Moses’s Bronze Serpent,” 48, emphasis mine. Philo was allegorizing the serpent as “the beauty of self-mastery,” but nonetheless I think it remains relevant that he equated beholding the serpent with beholding God.
 212. See George W. Savran, *Encountering the Divine: Theophany in Biblical Narrative* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 190–203.
 213. Wyatt, “Grasping the Griffin,” 32.
 214. Handy, “Serpent, Bronze,” 5:1117.
 215. Tabick, “Snake in the Grass,” 156 says it was not uncommon to regard “the snake as a mediator between man and God” in antiquity. Cf. Handy, “Serpent, Religious Symbol,” 5:1115, “The Fom of Africa perceive snakes to be intermediaries of the ritual experts and the gods.”
 216. According to Barker, “What Did King Josiah Reform?” 528–29, visions of God were part of the older tradition that the Deuteronomists opposed. Thus, if looking upon the brazen serpent was somehow seen as enabling one to see God, this would have contributed to the Deuteronomistic perception that it had become some kind of idol (2 Kings 18:4).
 217. See Kristian S. Heal, “Look to God and Live,” *Insights*, 26, no. 2 (2006): 2–3, 6; Szink, “Nephi and the Exodus,” 43–44. See also Stan Spencer, “Reflections of *Urim*: Hebrew Poetry Sheds Light on the Directors-Interpreters Mystery,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 14 (2015): 205, esp. n.27, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/reflections-of-urim-hebrew-poetry-sheds-light-on-the-directors-interpreters-mystery/>; Loren Blake Spendlove, “And the One Pointed the Way: Issues of Interpretation and Translation Involving the Liahona,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scripture* 45 (2021): 23–25, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/and-the-one-pointed-the-way-issues-of-interpretation-and-translation-involving-the-liahona/>.

218. The “vision serpent” played a similar role in pre-Columbian Mesoamerican iconography, often functioning as the conduit between the earthly and heavenly realms. In many cases, divine beings are shown in vision emerging from the serpent’s jaws (see, e.g., Yaxchilan 25), thereby facilitating the means of looking upon a deity. See Miller and Taube, *Illustrated Dictionary*, 181–82 (on serpent symbolism in Mesoamerica more generally, see pp. 148–51). Discussions of the serpent symbolism in the Book of Mormon from a Mesoamerican background have generally focused on the “feathered serpent” (see n. 123; cf. pp. 141–42 in Miller and Taube), but possible connections to other serpent iconography (including vision serpents) deserves greater attention. According to Miller and Taube, vision serpents “rarely appear on the ground, and they sometimes have feather crests,” and it “closely resembles the Postclassic Central Mexican Xiuhcoatl, or fire serpent” and thus “may appear in clouds, embodying lightning and fire” (p. 142). Vision serpents, then, link conceptually to both the “flying” and “fiery” aspects of the serpents referenced in 1 Nephi 17:41. Note that John Day, “Echoes of Baal’s Seven Thunders and Lightnings in Psalm XXIX and Habakkuk III 9 and the Identity of the Seraphim in Isaiah VI,” *Vetus Testamentum* 29, no. 2 (1979): 149–51, argues that, in addition to being serpent-like, the seraphim of Isaiah 6 are also personifications of lightening, just like the Mesoamerican vision serpent.
219. See Bradley, *Lost 116 Pages*, 154.
220. Bradley, *Lost 116 Pages*, 204.
221. The name was given by the “fathers” (Alma 37:38), most likely meaning Lehi and Nephi, and as Bradley, *Lost 116 Pages*, 148 explains it was probably in Mormon’s abridgment of Nephi’s large plates.
222. Matthew L. Bowen, “Look to the Lord! The Meaning of *Liahona* and the Doctrine of Christ in Alma 37–38,” in *Give Ear to My Words: Text and Context of Alma 36–42*, ed. Kerry M. Hull, Nicholas J. Frederick, and Hank R. Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2019), 277–79 suggests that “*Liahona*” literally means “Look to the Lord!” Spendlove, “And the One Pointed the Way,” 25–28 proposes a different etymology with similar meaning.

I appreciate Bowen helping me think through parts of this paper during a conversation at the 2021 FAIR Conference.

223. Cf. Alan Goff, “A Hermeneutic of Sacred Texts: Historicism, Revisionism, Positivism, and the Bible and Book of Mormon” (MA thesis; Brigham Young University, 1989), 92–99, who similarly argues that Laman and Lemuel’s accusation that Nephi was trying to usurp authority at Nahom (1 Nephi 16:37) was in reaction to his having made himself a bow, which they recognized as a symbol of kingship.
224. On Nephi reading Isaiah through the lens of his visions, see John W. Welch, “Getting through Isaiah with the Help of the Nephite Prophetic View,” in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 19–45; Joseph M. Spencer, *The Vision of All: Twenty-Five Lectures on Isaiah in Nephi’s Record* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2016), 1–15.

