



Type: Journal Article

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Author(s): Matthew L. Bowen

Source: *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*,
Volume 59 (2023)

Published by: The Interpreter Foundation

Page(s): 109–134

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INTERPRETER



A JOURNAL OF LATTER-DAY SAINT
FAITH AND SCHOLARSHIP

Volume 59 · 2023 · Pages 109 - 134

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Offprint Series

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ISSN 2372-1227 (print)
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

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“ENCIRCLED ABOUT ETERNALLY IN THE ARMS OF HIS LOVE”: THE DIVINE EMBRACE AS A THEMATIC SYMBOL OF JESUS CHRIST AND HIS ATONEMENT IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

Matthew L. Bowen

Abstract: *This study builds upon Hugh Nibley’s insightful observation that several Book of Mormon passages reflect “the ritual embrace that consummates the final escape from death in the Egyptian funerary texts and reliefs” as expressing the meaning of Christ’s Atonement. This study further extends Nibley’s observations on Jacob’s “wrestle” as a divine “embrace” to show that Lehi’s, Nephi’s, and their successors’ understanding of the divine embrace is informed by their ancestor’s “wrestle” with a “man” (Genesis 32:24–30) and reconciliation with his brother (Genesis 33:4–10). Examples of the divine embrace language and imagery throughout the Book of Mormon go well beyond what Nibley noted, evoking the Psalms’ depictions of Jehovah whose “wings” offered protection in the ritual place of atonement. Book of Mormon “divine embrace” texts have much to teach us about Jesus Christ, his love, the nature of his Atonement, and the temple.*

Nephi testified that pure love motivates everything Jesus Christ does, including his wholly voluntary atoning work: “He doeth not anything save it be for the benefit of the world; for he loveth the world, even that he layeth down his own life that he may draw all men unto him” (2 Nephi 26:24).¹ As recorded in Ether 12:33–34, Moroni said to the Lord,

1. The Savior himself explains the voluntary nature of his Atonement: “Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my

And again, I remember that thou hast said that thou hast loved the world, even unto the laying down of thy life for the world, that thou mightest take it again to prepare a place for the children of men. And now I know that this love which thou hast had for the children of men is charity; wherefore, except men shall have charity they cannot inherit that place which thou hast prepared in the mansions of thy Father.

The Savior's words to Nicodemus as recorded in John 3:16 ("For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son") and to Orson Pratt on November 4, 1830, in D&C 34:3 ("who so loved the world that he gave his own life") confirm that the Atonement of Jesus Christ is the supreme expression of the love of the Father and the Son for humankind.

As David Seely has noted, William Tyndale, the first translator of the Bible into English from texts in the original Hebrew and Greek languages, appropriated the non-religious English expressions *atone* and *atonement* as fitting theological descriptions² of the effect of Christ's redemptive act. Regarding the Hebrew verb most often translated as *atone* (*kpr*), Mary Douglas writes,

According to the illustrative cases from Leviticus, to atone means to cover, or recover, cover again, to repair a hole, cure a sickness, mend a rift, make good a torn or broken covering. As a noun, what is translated as atonement, expiation or purgation means integument made good; conversely, the examples in the book indicate that defilement means integument torn. Atonement does not mean covering a sin so as to hide it from the sight of God; it means making good an outer layer which has rotted or been pierced.³

Tyndale recognized that Christ's act and the Mosaic rites that prefigured it, *at-one-ed*, made *at-one*, covered again, or mended the damage in the relationship between God and humankind, as further evidenced by his description of Jesus as the "atonemaker."⁴ The English

Father" (John 10:17–18). In other words, the Savior was not "killed," nor could he be. His atoning sacrifice was completely his to make.

2. David Rolph Seely, "William Tyndale and the Language of At-one-ment," in *The King James Bible and the Restoration*, ed. Kent P. Jackson (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2011), 25–42.

3. Mary Douglas, "Atonement in Leviticus," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (1993/94): 117–18.

4. Commenting on Greek *mesitēs* in 1 Timothy 2 in 1536, Tyndale wrote, "And that 'there is but one mediator, Christ,' as saith Paul (1 Tim. ii.). And by

translation of the Book of Mormon appropriately uses these terms, especially when the underlying sense of *kpr* is understood. Similar to Tyndale's use of functionally descriptive language, Book of Mormon prophets and writers, beginning with Lehi and Nephi, used the concrete, vivid image of the Lord reaching with outstretched arms to embrace humankind as a description of the mended and restored relationship with humankind sought by God and made possible by the Atonement of Jesus Christ. As a metaphorical, ritual, and eschatological⁵ gestural expression of Christ's love-motivated Atonement, the divine embrace reflects the character of Jesus Christ whose "life was given lovingly by the will of both the Father and the Son for the redemption of all the rest of us who are not perfect."⁶

The divine embrace also emphasizes that Christ's love is personal and relational. Truman Madsen has observed,

In some patterns of worship, it is thought that the way to convey proper relationships to God is to cultivate darkness, magnify distance, use only the kinds of music, or words, or ceremonial procedure which invoke awe and even irrational fear. The testimony of the restored temple is that God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ yearn not to widen that gap, but to close it. In the house of the Lord we may come to him in light, in intimacy, and in holy embrace. And he will ... [in the words of the Prophet Joseph Smith] "manifest himself in mercy in his house." That is love.⁷

Years ago, Hugh Nibley insightfully suggested that several Book of Mormon passages reflect "the ritual embrace that consummates the final escape from death in the Egyptian funerary texts and reliefs"⁸

that word understand an atonemaker, a peacemaker, and bringer into grace and favour, having full power so to do." William Tyndale, *An Answer to Thomas More's Dialogue [...]* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1850), 274–275.

5. I.e., at the last day, when one enters "the rest" of the Lord (cf. Psalm 95:11; Alma 12:34–37; 13:12–13, 16, and especially 29) or "the fulness of his glory" (D&C 84:23–24), which can also be done ritually and is what such ritual entry points to.

6. Jeffrey R. Holland, "Lord, I Believe," *Ensign* (May 2013): 95, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2013/05/sunday-afternoon-session/lord-i-believe?lang=eng>.

7. Truman G. Madsen, "The Temple and the Atonement," *Meridian Magazine*, July 28, 2003, <https://latterdaysaintmag.com/article-1-881/>.

8. Hugh Nibley, *Approaching Zion* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1989), 559.

as encompassing the meaning of the atonement of Jesus Christ. He particularly cited 2 Nephi 1:15 (“I am encircled about eternally in the arms of his love”), 4:33 (“O Lord, wilt thou encircle me around in the robe of thy righteousness!”), and Alma 5:33 (“the arms of mercy are extended towards them, and he saith: Repent, and I will receive you”) as illustrative examples of this concept.⁹ Seely, in a subsequent study of the hand and arm of God in the Book of Mormon, also touched on some of these passages.¹⁰ Exegetical examination of these passages and many others in which the divine embrace occurs reveals an even closer relationship to the Jerusalem temple, its hymnic liturgy (i.e., the Psalms), and its system of anticipatory types and symbols.

The biblical Psalms are replete with depictions of Jehovah whose “wings” (*kěnāpîm*) offered refuge and protection in the ritual place of atonement (see Psalms 17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 61:4; 63:7; 91:4). Ritual imagery and language from these temple hymns¹¹ inevitably influenced the Nephite conception of the Atonement of Jesus Christ. Nibley rightly noted that the “wrestle” in Genesis 32 also represents a divine embrace scene; I will endeavor to show that Lehi’s, Nephi’s, and their successors’ understanding of the divine embrace is informed by earlier scriptural accounts, such as Jacob’s “wrestle” with a “man” (Genesis 32:24–30) and his subsequent reconciliation to and “embrace” of his brother Esau (Genesis 33:4–10). I will further undertake exegetical examinations of 2 Nephi 1:15; 4:33; Jacob 6:5; Enos 1:2, 27; Mosiah 16:12; Alma 5:33; 34:16; 3 Nephi 9:14; 10:4–6; Mormon 5:11; and 6:17. I will examine how they relate to relevant Old Testament “divine embrace” texts in their ancient Near Eastern context and ancient Israelite context. The inclusion of “divine embrace” language and imagery by Lehi, Nephi, Jacob, and their prophetic successors has much to teach us about Jesus Christ, his love, the nature of his Atonement, and the temple.

9. Nibley, *Approaching Zion*, 559.

10. David Rolph Seely, “The Image of the Hand of God in the Book of Mormon and the Old Testament,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon: Insights That You May Have Missed Before*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1991), 140–50. Seely has a long history of scriptural research in hand and arm metonymy. See, e.g., David Rolph Seely, “‘With Strong Hand and with Outstretched Arm’ (Deuteronomy 4:34); ‘With Outstretched Hand and with Strong Arm’ (Jeremiah 21:5): Chiasmus in Deuteronomy and Jeremiah,” *BYU Studies* 59, no. 5 (2020): 129–150. David Rolph Seely, “The Image of the Hand of God in the Exodus Tradition” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1990).

11. Margaret Barker, *The Gate of Heaven: The History and Symbolism of the Temple in Jerusalem* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008), 45.

**“I Am Encircled About Eternally in the Arms of His Love”:
Lehi and the Love of Christ**

Nibley further observed that “one retained his identity after the ritual embrace, yet that embrace was nothing less than a *Wesensverschmelzung*, a fusing of identities, of mortal with immortal, of father with son.”¹² In other words, the divine embrace or ritual embrace is closely connected with the concept of *theosis*, *deification*, or *divinization* — i.e., the concept that humankind can become divine. As Val Larsen and Newell D. Wright have recently shown, the doctrine of *theosis* is suggested throughout the Book of Mormon in connection with many of its principal figures.¹³ The examples of the divine embrace described in this study should be considered with that doctrinal concept in view.

One of the prominent examples of the divine embrace in the Book of Mormon cited by Nibley is Lehi’s declaration to his sons just prior to his death: “But behold, the Lord hath redeemed my soul from hell; I have beheld his glory, and I am encircled about eternally in the arms of his love” (2 Nephi 1:15). To better understand what Lehi intended to convey by using this imagery and what his sons would have understood when they heard it, it is necessary to examine Lehi’s language in its biblical and ancient Near Eastern context.

As John Hilton III has demonstrated, the Psalms and language from the Psalms are used abundantly by Book of Mormon prophets and writers.¹⁴ Thus, we can reasonably infer that some form of a Psalter existed on the plates of brass or, minimally, that Lehi and Nephi were thoroughly familiar with its language from worship in the Jerusalem temple.¹⁵ Lehi draws on the liturgical language of these Jerusalem temple

12. Hugh Nibley, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 2005), 434.

13. Val Larsen and Newell D. Wright, “Theosis in the Book of Mormon: The Work and Glory of the Father, Mother and Son, and Holy Ghost,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 56 (2023): 275–326, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/theosis-in-the-book-of-mormon-the-work-and-glory-of-the-father-mother-and-son-and-holy-ghost/>.

14. John Hilton III, “Old Testament Psalms in the Book of Mormon,” in *Ascending the Mountain of the Lord: Temple, Praise, and Worship in the Old Testament*, ed. David Rolph Seely, Jeffrey R. Chadwick, and Matthew J. Grey (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013), 291–311.

15. *Ibid.*, 292. Hilton writes, “Even if the Psalmic material did not appear in written form on the brass plates, early Book of Mormon authors such as Nephi could have been familiar with some Psalms based on their experience with temple

hymns: “But God will redeem my soul from the power of [*miyyad*, literally from the hand of] the grave [Hebrew *šə’ôl*, Sheol or “hell”]: for he shall receive me [*yiqqāhēnî*]” (Psalm 49:15). What the Psalmist expresses as eschatological hope, Lehi declares to be realized blessings: “The Lord hath redeemed my soul from hell.” Lehi conveys the divine assurance that Sheol, the “world of spirits”¹⁶ and common destination of all humans at death, would ultimately have no power over him because of the resurrection — reunification of body and spirit enabled by the Atonement and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Lehi pointedly describes his having been received by the Lord as being “encircled about eternally in the arms of his love.” Lehi’s description of the Lord’s arms encircling him in this protective gesture recalls the protective imagery of Jehovah’s “wings” in the temple as depicted in Psalms 17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 61:4; 63:7; and 91:4 (see further below). An ivory plaque, shown in Figure 1, was discovered at Arslan Tash in Northern Syria (near Aleppo) in 1929 by François Thureau-Dangin and usually is dated between the ninth and eighth centuries BCE. It depicts a divine being usually identified as Horus, in a divine sanctuary, encircled about lovingly and protectively in the arms and wings of two divine beings comparable to biblical cherubim. This artifact gives us some idea of how ancient Israelites like Lehi and the Psalmists might have conceived of the Lord’s protective “arms” or “wings.”

The Lord’s “arms” in 2 Nephi 1:15 and his “wings” in the Psalms both stand as a symbol of his protective love for his people, which I will now discuss.

worship in Jerusalem.” Given the nature of the use of the language of the Psalms as it occurs throughout the Book of Mormon, I favor the notion that at the brass plates contained at least some of the Psalms in written form.

16. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught, “Hades the Greek, or Shaole the Hebrew. These two significations mean a world of Spirits. Hades, Shaole, Paradise, Spirits in prison, are all one, it is a world of Spirits. The righteous and the wicked all go to the same world of Spirits until the resurrection. I do not think so says one. If you will go to my house anytime I will take my Lexicon and prove it to you.” “History, 1838–1856, volume D-1 [1 August 1842–1 July 1843],” p. 1574, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-d-1-1-august-1842-1-july-1843/219>.



Figure 1. Ivory Plaque-AO 11465, now in the Louvre.¹⁷

“O Lord, Wilt Thou Encircle Me Around in the Robe of Thy Righteousness”: Nephi’s Plea for a Divine Embrace and *At-one-ment*

Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible and in ancient Near Eastern iconography more broadly, beings from the heavenly realm are often depicted as having wings (see, e.g., the Seraphim of Isaiah 6 and the cherubim in Exodus 25:20; 37:9; 1 Kings 6:27; 8:6–7; 1 Chronicles 28:18; 2 Chronicles 3:11, 13; 5:8). This is consistent with the iconographic picture on ancient Hebrew seals.¹⁸

The Psalms, as the hymns of the Jerusalem temple, symbolically picture Yahweh as a heavenly being with “wings” like the seraphim and cherubim. Joseph Smith explained that the “wings” of heavenly beings

17. Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Birth_of_Horus-AO_11465-IMG_4018-gradient.jpg.

18. 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: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2021), 97–108.

in celestial visions “are a representation of power, to move, to act, etc.” (Doctrine and Covenants 77:4). In the Psalms, they are also a concrete symbol of divine protection:

- “Hide me under the shadow of **thy wings** [*kěnāpēkā*]” (Psalm 17:8);
- “How excellent is thy lovingkindness, O God! therefore the children of men put their trust [**take refuge**, *yehšēyûn*] under the shadow of thy wings [*kěnāpēkā*]” (Psalm 36:7 [MT 8]);
- “Be merciful unto me, O God, be merciful unto me: for my soul trusteth [**taketh refuge**, *hāsāyâ*] in thee: yea, in the shadow of **thy wings** [*kěnāpēkā*] **will I make my refuge** [*’ehseh*], until these calamities be overpast” (Psalm 57:1 [MT 2]);
- “I will abide [sojourn, *’āgûrâ*] in thy tabernacle for ever: I will trust [**take refuge**, *’ehseh*] in the covert of **thy wings** [*kěnāpēkā*]” (Psalm 61:4);
- “Because thou hast been my help, therefore in the shadow of **thy wings** [*kěnāpēkā*] will I rejoice. My soul followeth hard after [**cleaveth unto**, *dābēqâ*] thee: **thy right hand** [*yěmînekâ*] upholdeth [grasps, *tāmēkâ*] me” (Psalm 63:7–8 [MT 8–9]);
- “He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under **his wings** [*kěnāpâw*] shalt thou trust [**shalt thou take refuge**, *tehseh*]” (Psalm 91:4).

When Latter-day Saints consider the promises offered in modern temples and the companionship of the Holy Ghost that the righteous are entitled to, this ancient temple imagery can bring great comfort today, just as it did to men and women anciently.

Othmar Keel writes, “In Ps 61:4, ‘wings’ stand parallel to ‘tent.’ ... [O]ne might think of the wings which characterize the roof of the temple or *naos* as heaven.”¹⁹ The image certainly constitutes a temple image. However, the Ruth-Boaz narrative sheds additional light on a related way of understanding God’s “wings.” Boaz commends Ruth’s faithfulness to Naomi, mother of her deceased husband, and to Naomi’s God in language that echoes the foregoing passages in the Psalms: “The Lord recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings [*kěnāpâw*] thou art come to trust [to take refuge]” (Ruth 2:12). Boaz’s language foreshadows Ruth’s request

19. Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms*, tr. Timothy J. Hallett (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 190.

to Boaz that he fulfill the role of kinsman-redeemer (*gō'ēl*). At Naomi's instruction, Ruth lays down at the feet of Boaz where he is sleeping on the threshing-floor (see Ruth 3:1–8). Not recognizing Ruth at first, Boaz is startled: “And he said, Who art thou? And she answered, I am Ruth thine handmaid: spread therefore thy skirt [*kěnāpēkā*, literally ‘thy wings,’ i.e., ‘the hem of thy robe’] over thine handmaid; for thou art a near kinsman” (Ruth 3:9). Ruth seeks refuge in Boaz's “wings” as if in the Lord's “wings.”

Regarding this incident, Karel van der Toorn has observed, “In the story of Ruth and Boaz, the heroine asks her future husband to ‘spread’ his ‘hem’ over her, for he is *gō'ēl* ... [Ruth 3:9]. In its literary context, Ruth's request allows more than one interpretation. While it alludes to the words of Boaz in 2:12 (‘... Yahweh under whose wings [*kěnāpâw*] you have come to seek shelter’), it might be construed as a general plea for protection.”²⁰ In his own psalm, Nephi uses very similar kinsman-redeemer and clothing language to make a similar request:

O Lord, wilt thou redeem my soul? Wilt thou deliver me out of the hands of mine enemies? Wilt thou make me that I may shake at the appearance of sin?

May the gates of hell be shut continually before me, because that my heart is broken and my spirit is contrite! O Lord, wilt thou not shut the gates of thy righteousness before me, that I may walk in the path of the low valley, that I may be strict in the plain road!

O Lord, wilt thou **encircle me around in the robe of thy righteousness!** O Lord, wilt thou make a way for mine escape before mine enemies! Wilt thou make my path straight before me! Wilt thou not place a stumbling block in my way — but that thou wouldst clear my way before me, and hedge not up my way, but the ways of mine enemy. (2 Nephi 4:31–33)

Nephi, in words similar to Ruth 2:12; 3:9 and echoing the words of his father and Psalm 49, petitions the Lord to redeem his soul from the power or “gates” of Sheol. Whether the book of Ruth was actually on the plates of brass and available for Nephi's use is not clear. The book narrates events “in the days when the judges ruled” (Ruth 1:1), but like the book of Judges itself, it was written at a later date using earlier sources. Since the

20. Karel van der Toorn, *God in Context: Selected Essays on Society and Religion in the Early Middle East* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebek, 2018), 106.

book ultimately explains how a non-Israelite, Moabite woman became an Israelite and an ancestress of king David (his great-grandmother, see especially Ruth 4:16–22) and the whole Davidic dynasty, it seems likely that the book would have been composed no later than the late pre-exilic period (perhaps during the time of Josiah), when the explanation and justification of non-Israelite, non-Judahite elements in David’s (and the Davidids’) ancestry would have still been needful or relevant in the kingdom of Judah. If the book of Ruth was composed during Josiah’s time or in the late monarchic period in the years prior to Lehi’s departure, it could have been on the brass plates that the family took with them. In any case, there is a strong consonance between the language of Ruth 2:12 and 3:9 — particularly in Ruth’s plea — and Nephi’s plea for redemption and protective encircling in the Lord’s “robe.”

Nephi’s immediate “enemies” in the context of 2 Nephi 4, of course, are Laman and his followers who join the great enemies Mot and Sheol (or Death and Hell) in seeking Nephi’s life. Like Lehi and the Psalmist, Nephi petitions the Lord to receive him. Where Lehi had been “encircled about in the arms of [God’s] love,” Nephi pleads to be encircled around in the robe of the Lord’s righteousness. Like Ruth, he implores the kinsman-Redeemer to cover him with (the hem of) his robe. On one hand, Nephi’s plea might seem to be a request to be “clothed ... with the garments of salvation” and “covered with the robe of righteousness” (Isaiah 61:10) — i.e., invested in a priestly robe as sacred protective clothing (temple clothing). On the other hand, Nephi might also be asking to be enfolded in the Lord’s own robe — that is, drawn into his protective embrace.

“Cleave unto God as He Cleaveth unto You ... While His Arm of Mercy Is Extended Towards You”: Jacob’s Invitation to Receive the Divine Embrace

Jacob’s life as a temple priest appears to have been marked out early for him. Lehi, his father, blessed him that “thy days shall be spent in the service of thy God” (2 Nephi 2:3) This “service” (Heb. *ʾăbōdâ*) appears to have been the service of the Nephite temple cult.²¹ Accordingly, Nephi states that he “did consecrate Jacob and Joseph, that they should be priests and teachers over the land of my people” (2 Nephi 5:26; see also Jacob 1:18). Jacob gives us some indication that his activities were

21. On “service” as a reference to temple service and as a major focus of King Benjamin’s sermon in Mosiah 2–5, see Donald W. Parry, “Service and Temple in King Benjamin’s Speech,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 16, no. 2 (2007): 42–47, 95–97.

centered in and around the temple in several passages. He prefaces the temple sermon that follows in Jacob 2 with these words: "Wherefore I, Jacob, gave unto them these words as I taught them in the temple, having first obtained mine errand from the Lord" (Jacob 1:17). Early on in that temple sermon, with probable reference to priestly temple vestments, he declares, "Now, my beloved brethren, I, Jacob, according to the responsibility which I am under to God, to magnify mine office with soberness, and that I might rid my garments of your sins, I come up into the temple this day that I might declare unto you the word of God" (Jacob 2:2; cf. Jacob 1:19). Later in the sermon, he recalls the Lord's explicit instructions to address the people in the temple: "For behold, as I inquired of the Lord, thus came the word unto me, saying: Jacob, get thou up into the temple on the morrow, and declare the word which I shall give thee unto this people" (Jacob 2:17).

Given Jacob's role as a priest, whose duties required him to be often in the temple, it should come as no surprise that the language of ancient Israel's temple hymns threads through Jacob's writings. For example, Jacob quotes or alludes to Psalm 95:8 ("Harden not your heart, as in the provocation, and as in the day of temptation in the wilderness") and 11 ("Unto whom I swear in my wrath that they should not enter into my rest") in Jacob 1:7: "Wherefore we labored diligently among our people, that we might persuade them to come unto Christ, and partake of the goodness of God, that they might enter into his rest, lest by any means he should swear in his wrath they should not enter in, as in the provocation in the days of temptation while the children of Israel were in the wilderness." There are echoes of Psalm 116:3 ("The sorrows of death compassed me, and the pains of hell gat hold upon me") in Jacob 3:11: "shake yourselves that ye may awake from the slumber of death; and loose yourselves from the pains of hell." The language of Psalm 145:9 ("The Lord is good to all: and his tender mercies are over all his works") possibly occurs in Jacob 4:10: "He counseleth in wisdom, and in justice, and in great mercy, over all his works." Jacob unquestionably quotes Psalm 95:7 ("To day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your heart") in Jacob 6:6: "Yea, today, if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts; for why will ye die?".²² This language becomes particularly significant in Jacob 6 (see below).

As an epilogue to his quotation of Zenos's allegory of the olive tree (Jacob 5), Jacob reflects, "And how merciful is our God unto us, for he remembereth the house of Israel, both roots and branches; and

22. Hilton, "Old Testament Psalms," 300–303.

he stretches forth his hands unto them all the day long; and they are a stiffnecked and a gainsaying people; but as many as will not harden their hearts shall be saved in the kingdom of God” (Jacob 6:4). Jacob echoes the words of Zenos from the allegory: “But what could I have done more in my vineyard? Have I slackened mine hand, that I have not nourished it? Nay, I have nourished it, and I have digged about it, and I have pruned it, and I have dunged it; and I have stretched forth mine hand almost all the day long, and the end draweth nigh” (Jacob 5:47). These words are consonant with the Lord’s complaint in Isaiah 65:2: “I have spread out my hands all the day unto a rebellious people.” Jacob uses the image in these texts of the Lord reaching out in a divine embrace to emphasize Christ’s patient and longsuffering love for his covenant people. In many cases in the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Mormon, the outstretched hand²³ indicates divine judgment or punishment (compare Isaiah’s refrain, “For all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still”).²⁴ However, in this case, the “stretched forth” or “outspread” hands betoken the Lord’s loving “exertions”²⁵ on behalf of his people and his desire for his people’s return. Jacob’s words further recall Nephi’s “woe”-oracle in 2 Nephi 28:32 where Nephi uses “arm” rather than “hand”: “Wo be unto the Gentiles, saith the Lord God of Hosts! For notwithstanding I shall lengthen out mine arm unto them from day to day, they will deny me; nevertheless, I will be merciful unto them, saith the Lord God, if they will repent and come unto me; for mine arm is lengthened out all the day long, saith the Lord God of Hosts.” Nephi’s next words include a quotation from Isaiah 11:11, which describes the Lord “set[ting]” or exerting his “hand again” in mercy to gather Israel (2 Nephi 29:1).

After recalling the image of the Lord’s outspread hands in Jacob 6:4, Jacob goes even further in the next verse: “Wherefore, my beloved brethren, I beseech of you in words of soberness that ye would repent, and come with full purpose of heart, and cleave unto God as he cleaveth unto you. And while his arm of mercy is extended towards you in the light of the day, harden not your hearts. Yea, today, if ye will hear his

23. On the image of the hand of God in the Book of Mormon, see Seely, “Image of the Hand,” 140–50.

24. The refrain occurs in Isaiah 5:25; 9:12, 17, 21; 10:4 (2 Nephi 15:25; 19:12, 17, 21; 20:4). A similar image occurs in Isaiah 14:26–27 (2 Nephi 24:26–27). See John Gee, “A Different Way of Seeing the Hand of the Lord,” *Religious Educator* 16, no. 2 (2015): 112–27. See also John Gee, “His Hand is Stretched Out Still,” *Forn Spoll Fira: The Ancient Tale of Man* (blog), April 19, 2013, <http://fornspollfira.blogspot.com/2013/04/his-hand-is-stretched-out-still.html>.

25. Gee, “Seeing the Hand,” 120.

voice, harden not your hearts; for why will ye die?” (Jacob 6:5). Jacob alludes to a biblical psalm, albeit less plainly to us because of the KJV translators’ rendering of the Hebrew verb *dābaq*: “Because thou hast been my help, therefore in the shadow of thy wings [*kĕnāpĕkā*] will I rejoice. My soul followeth hard after [cleaveth unto, *dābĕqâ*] thee: thy right hand [*yĕmînekā*] upholdeth me [*tāmĕkâ*]” (Psalm 63:7–8 [MT 8–9]). Compare the New American Standard Bible’s (NASB’s) lucid rendering of this passage: “For You have been my help, and in the shadow of Your wings I sing for joy. My soul clings to You; Your right hand takes hold of me.”

The verb *dābaq* is the same one found in the Genesis 2 etiological declaration on divine marriage: “Therefore, shall a man leave his father and his mother, **and shall cleave** [*wĕdābaq*] unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). It describes the closeness of a relationship characterized by an embrace. Describing the cherubim on the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies of the temple — the place of atonement — the Chronicler depicts their “wings” as “cleaving” or “joining” together as if in an embrace: “And one wing of the other cherub was five cubits, reaching to the wall of the house: and the other wing [*wĕhakkānāp*] was five cubits also, **joining [cleaving, *dĕbĕqâ*]** to the wing [*liknap*] of the other cherub” (2 Chronicles 3:12). Here again, the NASB renders this passage even more lucidly: “The wing of the other cherub, of five cubits, touched the wall of the house; and its other wing, of five cubits, was attached to the wing of the first cherub.”

The concept of “cleaving” to God is found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Deuteronomy records Moses saying to the Israelites who were about to enter the land of Promise, “But ye that did cleave [*haddĕbĕqîm*] unto the Lord your God are alive every one of you this day” (Deuteronomy 4:4). In one of his final speeches to ancient Israel, Joshua exhorted the people, “But cleave [*tidbāqû*] unto the Lord your God, as ye have done unto this day” (Joshua 23:8). Jacob adds the image of the Lord’s “arm of mercy” being “extended towards” his readers, ensuring that they understand the invitation to “cleave” to the Lord as more than an invitation to remain loyal to his covenant. In other words, the Lord’s act of extending his arms is not simply a theological symbol of divine love, but an actual demonstration of divine affection. The picture is one of God (Jehovah) inviting his people to hold fast to him in an embrace. It is vividly relational and personal.

In stating “while his arm of mercy is extended towards you in the light of the day, harden not your hearts,” Jacobs return to the language of Psalm 95, the royal enthronement psalm he used early on in his personal

record (compare Psalm 95:7–11 and Jacob 1:7–8).²⁶ This constitutes part of his stated purpose in writing: “We labored diligently among our people, that we might persuade them to come unto Christ and partake of the goodness of God, that they might enter into his rest, lest by any means he should swear in his wrath they should not enter in, as in the provocation in the days of temptation while . . . in the wilderness.” Jacob’s use of Psalm 63:7–8 and Psalm 95:7–11 envisions the divine embrace at the threshold of the most holy part of the temple, the place of the Lord’s “rest” (“my rest” = *měnûhātî*, Psalm 95:11) — of which the land of promise also constituted a congruent symbol.

Enos’s “Wrestle” and Reconciliation to Christ

Enos, the son of Jacob, describes a “wrestle” before God that prepared him to eventually be received into the Lord’s “rest” (see Enos 1:2, 27). Enos writes, “And I will tell you of **the wrestle** which I had **before God**, before I received a remission of my sins” (Enos 1:2). Enos, whose name denotes “man,” draws heavily on the Genesis 32–33 account²⁷ of (the patriarch) Jacob’s wrestle with a divine “man” at a place he names Peniel (“the face of God”): “And Jacob was left alone; **and there wrestled** [*wayyē`ābēq*] a man with him until the breaking of the day. And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob’s thigh was out of joint, **as he wrestled with him** [*běhē`ābēqô*]” (Genesis 32:24–25).

The Hebrew verbs *’-b-q* (“wrestle”) and *h-b-q* (“embrace”), both used in Genesis 32–33, may be related to Akkadian *epēqu(m)*, “to embrace; grow over, round.”²⁸ Hugh Nibley saw a direct connection between the “wrestle” and the divine embrace:

One of the most puzzling episodes in the Bible has always been the story of Jacob’s wrestling with the Lord. When one considers that the word conventionally translated as

26. On Jacob’s use of Psalm 95:7–11, see Hilton, “Old Testament Psalms,” 300–303.

27. John A. Tvedtnes and Matthew Roper, “Jacob and Enos: Wrestling before God,” *Insights: A Window on the Ancient World* 21, no. 5 (2001): 2; Matthew L. Bowen, “‘And There Wrestled a Man with Him’ (Genesis 32:24): Enos’s Adaptations of the Onomastic Wordplay of Genesis,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 10 (2014): 151–159, https://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/sites/default/files/archive-files/pdf/bowen/2015-12-21/bowen_and_there_wrestled_2014.pdf.

28. See *A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian*, ed. Jeremy Black, Andrew George, and Nicolas Postgate (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2000), 74.

“wrestled (*yē’āvēq*)” can just as well mean “embrace” and that it was in this ritual embrace that Jacob received a new name and the bestowal of priestly and kingly power at sunrise (Genesis 32:24–30), the parallel to the Egyptian coronation embrace becomes at once apparent.²⁹

In Genesis 33, following Jacob’s transformative “wrestle” at Peniel (face-of-God), Jacob and Esau “embrace”: “And Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him [*wayḥabbēqēhū*], and fell on his neck, and kissed him: and they wept” (Genesis 33:4). Jacob describes the experience in theophanic terms: “I have seen thy face, as though I had seen the face of God, and thou wast pleased with me.” Jacob had earlier declared his intention to “atone” the face of his brother Esau: “I will appease him [*ākappērâ pānâw*, literally, “I will cover (atone) his face”] with the present that goeth before me [*lēpānāy*], and afterward I will see his face [*er’eh panâw*]; peradventure he will accept of me [*yiśśā’ pānāy*, he will lift up my face]” (Genesis 32:20).

Enos sought reconciliation and at-one-ment with his Lamanite brothers and sisters and received promises regarding their restoration in the future. In the nearer term, he receives reconciliation and atonement with his divine brother and kinsman redeemer in language that recalls Jacob’s and Esau’s embrace: “And I soon go to the place of my rest, which is with my Redeemer; for I know that in him I shall rest. And I rejoice in the day when my mortal shall put on immortality, and shall stand before him; then shall I see his face with pleasure, and he will say unto me: Come unto me, ye blessed, there is a place prepared for you in the mansions of my Father. Amen” (Enos 1:27).

“For the Arms of Mercy Were Extended Towards Them, and They Would Not”: Unwillingness to Reciprocate the Love of God and Christ

The setting for Abinadi’s incisive interpretation of Isaiah (Mosiah 14–16) was king Noah’s court before the king and his corrupt priests, and the starting point for his speech was one of those priests asking for the meaning of Isaiah 52:7–10 (see Mosiah 12:20–24). Abinadi answers the priest’s question about the identity of the messenger proclaiming good tidings, peace, and salvation and “the Lord [making] bare his holy arm in the eyes of all the nations” with “all the ends of the earth [seeing] the salvation of our God” by quoting Isaiah 53. Abinadi begins his quotation

29. Nibley, *Joseph Smith Papyri*, 434.

and exegesis of Isaiah 53 with an allusion to the Lord’s saving arm: “Yea, even doth not Isaiah say: Who hath believed our report, and **to whom** [*‘al-mî*] is the arm of the Lord **revealed?**” (Mosiah 14:1; Isaiah 53:1). The words translated “to whom” literally mean “upon whom” — thus, “upon whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?”³⁰ Thus, “Who hath given credence to that which we heard? And the arm of Jehovah, On whom hath it been revealed?” (Young’s Literal Translation [YLT]).

As a divine embrace image, Abinadi’s use of Isaiah 53:1 may explain why he later returns to the image of the Lord’s “arm[s]” as an image of divine love, favor, and mercy, as he continued to condemn the unrepentant king and his mostly unrepentant priests: “Having gone according to their own carnal wills and desires; having never called upon the Lord while the arms of mercy were extended towards them; for the arms of mercy were extended towards them, and they would not; they being warned of their iniquities and yet they would not depart from them; and they were commanded to repent and yet they would not repent” (Mosiah 16:12). Of Noah’s priests, only Alma repented, as far as we know. Although the Lord’s arms of mercy were extended to all of them, only *upon Alma* was “the arm of the Lord revealed.” Decades later, his son records a similar experience.

“The Arms of Mercy Are Extended Towards Them”: Christ’s Receiving Alma and Us

Alma the Younger became the high priest over the church that his father Alma the Elder had established and built up, but not before he had “go[ne] about secretly with the sons of Mosiah seeking to destroy the church” (Mosiah 27:10). Alma and the sons of Mosiah became instruments in the hands of God in the conversion and reconversion of many people, including Lamanites: “And behold, when I see many of my brethren truly penitent, and coming to the Lord their God, then is my soul filled with joy; then do I remember what the Lord has done for me, yea, even that he hath heard my prayer; yea, **then do I remember his merciful arm which he extended towards me**” (Alma 29:10). Alma the Younger, like his father, had “repent[ed] nigh unto death.”³¹ He had been “encircled

30. On the significance of this image, see Aaron P. Schade and Matthew L. Bowen, ““To Whom is the Arm of the Lord Revealed?”” *Religious Educator* 16, no. 2 (2015): 91–111.

31. Compare Alma the Elder’s “sore repentance” with Alma the Younger’s “repenting nigh unto death” in Mosiah 27:28. In both of these instances, “repent” reflects the Hebrew concept of *nĥm* (“sorrow,” “regret”) rather than *šûb* (“turn”).

about by the everlasting chains of death" (Alma 36:18) but then had been received in the divine embrace: he had experienced Christ's supernal, atoning love and mercy. Seely remarks that "instead of an embrace of love, Satan waits to 'encircle you about with his chains, that he might chain you down to everlasting destruction' (Alma 12:6; see also Alma 5:7, 9)."³² Alma thus knew how to minister and administer to a remorseful Zeezrom who, under the consciousness of his own guilt, "began to be encircled about by the pains of hell" (Alma 14:6). Alma's response to the divine embrace in mortality determined his eternal destiny ("he has ... received Alma in the spirit, unto himself," Alma 45:19). Similarly, our response to this gesture will determine our final reward.

Mormon describes the lesson of the conversion of the Lamanites, to which Alma also alludes in Alma 29:10, thusly: "We see that his arm is extended to all people who will repent and believe on his name" (Alma 19:36). The converted Lamanites repented and commenced living the doctrine of Christ and were thus received in the divine embrace: "They were encircled about with everlasting darkness and destruction; but behold, he has brought them into his everlasting light, yea, into everlasting salvation; and they are encircled about with the matchless bounty of his love; yea, and we have been instruments in his hands of doing this great and marvelous work" (Alma 26:15; cf. 2 Nephi 2:15; 4:33). If we do

See Matthew L. Bowen, "'This Son Shall Comfort Us': An Onomastic Tale of Two Noahs," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 23 (2017): 290–91, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/this-son-shall-comfort-us-an-onomastic-tale-of-two-noahs/>. Regarding Alma the Younger's experience, Kevin Christensen writes, "Notice how Alma describes a longing for annihilation while he felt 'racked with eternal torment,' being 'encircled about by the everlasting chains of death' (Alma 36:12, 18)." Kevin Christensen, "'Nigh unto Death': NDE Research and the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 1 (1993): 6, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol2/iss1/2/>. Christensen then quotes Stanislav Grof and Christina Grof on the "ordeal of hell": "The feeling that suffering is eternal is an essential experimental attribute of hell. The endlessness of this state does not consist in an extreme extension of linear time, but in its transcendence. The individual undergoes tortures beyond any imagining which at that point are the only available reality; since the sense of the linear flow of time is lost, there appears to be no way out. It is only when this situation is fully accepted that one has experienced hell, and the journey can continue." Stanislav Grof and Christina Grof, *Beyond Death* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), 77. Christensen (p. 7) then concludes, "In Alma's account of his torment, the terms 'everlasting' and 'eternal' do not refer to duration, but to quality. Alma reports that his 'eternal torment' lasted for three days (cf. D&C 19:1–21)."

32. Seely, "Image of the Hand," 149.

not receive the divine embrace like Alma, Ammon, and the Lamanites, “it will be,” as Nephi stated, “because ye ask not, neither do ye knock; wherefore, ye are not brought into the light, but must perish in the dark.” Like Lamoni and the brother of Jared,³³ we must come unto the Father and the Son at the veil and knock so that the “dark veil of unbelief” between us and them can be parted (see Alma 19:6; cf. 2 Nephi 9:41–42; Ether 3:1–24; 12:19–21). The veil itself, in a temple context, can also be seen as a positive (Christological) symbol rather than a negative one, as we see in Hebrews 10:20, where the writer describes “a new and living way, which he [Jesus] hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh.” It is particularly worthwhile to ponder the divine embrace and its meaning in this context.

After his conversion and in the early years of Alma’s tenure as high priest and chief judge, he faced crisis after crisis. When he found the church in Zarahemla at a crossroads or “dilemma” (Alma 7:3, 18), he resorted to his own experience with Christ’s redeeming love to teach them about their need for his Atonement: “Behold, he sendeth an invitation unto all men, for the arms of mercy are extended towards them, and he saith: Repent, and I will receive you” (Alma 5:33). Here again we hear the echoes of the Psalms: “But God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave [Sheol or hell]: for he shall receive me [*yiqqāhēnî*]” (Psalm 49:15); “Nevertheless I am continually with thee: thou hast holden me by my right hand [or, thou hast grasped me by my right hand, *’āhaztā bēyad yēmînî*]. Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me [*tiqqāhēnî*] to glory [*kābôd*]” (Psalm 73:23–24).

Regarding the use of the idiom “receive me to glory” in this passage, Moshe Weinfeld notes that “most exegetes agree that the verse refers to a future life . . . Others see a specific parallel to the assumption of Enoch.”³⁴ The biblical version of the assumption of Enoch occurs in Genesis 5:24: “And Enoch walked with God: and he was not; for God took him [or, God received him, *lāqah ’ōtô*].” This verse stands behind this statement in Hebrews: “By faith Enoch was translated [Greek *metethēken*] that he should not see death; and was not found” (Hebrews 11:5). In Moses 7 (the Vision of Enoch), the language of divine reception and translation

33. M. Catherine Thomas, “The Brother of Jared at the Veil,” in *Temples of the Ancient World: Ritual and Symbolism*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1994), 388–98.

34. Moshe Weinfeld, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. H. Ringgren, C. Botterweck, and H.-J. Fabry, 17 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974–97), s.v. “כבוד, *kābôd*,” 7:33.

distinctly conveys the image of a divine embrace (see Moses 7:24, 30–31, 47, 63, 69). As he did to Enoch and Moses, the Lord “received Alma in the spirit, to himself” (Alma 45:19) demonstrating how completely Christ’s Atonement can rehabilitate us and ultimately exalt us.

**“Thus Mercy ... Encircles Them in the Arms of Safety”:
Amulek’s Description of the Atonement of Jesus Christ
as a Divine Embrace**

One of the clearest and best examples of the divine embrace occurs in Mormon’s account of the mission of Alma, Amulek, and their associates to reclaim the Zoramites. In Alma 34, Mormon recounts that after Alma had taught the poorer Zoramites his matchless sermon on faith in Jesus Christ, including planting the word as a seed and prophetic witnesses of the Son of God (Alma 32–33), Amulek “arose” (Heb. *qûm*) as a second witness in fulfillment of the Deuteronomic law of witnesses (“at the mouth of two witnesses, or at the mouth of three witnesses, shall the matter be established [*yāqûm*]”; Deuteronomy 19:5; see also Deuteronomy 17:6). Amulek certified that everything in the law of Moses testified of Jesus Christ and his infinite and eternal sacrifice:

And behold, this is the whole meaning of the law, every whit pointing to that great and last sacrifice; and that great and last sacrifice will be the Son of God, yea, infinite and eternal.

And thus he shall bring salvation to all those who shall believe on his name; this being the intent of this last sacrifice, to bring about the bowels of mercy, which overpowereth justice, and bringeth about means unto men that they may have faith unto repentance.

And thus mercy can satisfy the demands of justice, **and encircles them in the arms of safety**, while he that exercises no faith unto repentance is exposed to the whole law of the demands of justice; therefore only unto him that has faith unto repentance is brought about the great and eternal plan of redemption. (Alma 34:15–17)

Mercy and justice are sometimes personified in scripture as actual beings surrounding the Lord’s throne: “Justice [*šedeq*] and judgment [*ûmišpaṭ*] are the habitation of thy throne: mercy [*hesed*] and truth [*we’emet*] shall go before thy face” (Psalm 89:14); “and naught but peace, justice, and truth is the habitation of thy throne; and mercy shall go

before thy face and have no end” (Moses 7:31; cf. also D&C 109:79). Psalm 85:10–11, a text that is sometimes interpreted in terms of the Restoration and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, describes these entities as becoming at one: “Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other. Truth shall spring out of the earth; and righteousness shall look down from heaven.” Jesus Christ is the perfect embodiment of justice, mercy, truth, and peace. Thus mercy’s “arms of safety” that “encircle” those who have faith unto repentance are his arms. His atoning love can make us safe from sin and will ultimately make us safe from death.

Elder Jay E. Jensen cited Amulek’s unique phraseology as an example of “teaching intangibles” (e.g., the Atonement of Jesus Christ) “with tangibles”:

To better understand “arms of safety” it is important to remember that the Savior used tangible things, such as coins, seeds, sheep, loaves, fishes, and body parts to teach gospel principles. Arms are tangible, and we use them to express affection and love. When I come home from the office, I am encircled in the tangible arms of my wife. I have experienced arms of love and safety throughout my service in Latin America by means of the common greeting, *un abrazo*, or hug.³⁵

Elder Jensen further ties the “arms of safety” to the doctrine of Christ, noting that “when we were baptized and received the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands, we received two ordinances that introduce us to the arms of safety.”³⁶ He adds that “[b]y coming humbly and fully repentant to sacrament meeting and worthily partaking of the sacrament, we may feel those arms again and again.”³⁷

“Mine Arm of Mercy Is Extended Towards You and Whomsoever Will Come ... Will I Receive”: The Fifth Principle of the Gospel and the Divine Embrace

After the Lord explained the destruction of numerous cities following his death (“because of their wickedness and abominations,” 3 Nephi 9:12), he extended several invitations: “O all ye that are spared because ye were more righteous than they, will ye not now return unto me, and repent of

35. Jay E. Jensen, “Arms of Safety,” *Ensign* 38, no. 11 (November 2008), 47–48.

36. Jensen, “Arms of Safety,” 48.

37. Jensen, “Arms of Safety,” 48.

your sins, and be converted, that I may heal you? Yea, verily I say unto you, if ye will **come unto me** ye shall have eternal life. Behold, **mine arm of mercy is extended towards you**, and whosoever will come, him will I **receive**; and blessed are those who come unto me” (3 Nephi 9:13–14; compare also Matthew 5:23–24 and 3 Nephi 12:24–25).

Noel B. Reynolds has demonstrated that the invitation to “come unto” Christ, replete throughout the Book of Mormon, is tantamount to an invitation to endure to the end in faith, hope, and charity (cf. 2 Nephi 31:20), the fifth principle in what Nephi described as the Doctrine of Christ.³⁸ In other words, it constitutes an invitation to those who have already entered into a covenant relationship with the Lord to continue in the covenant path until coming to the final “gate” mentioned in 2 Nephi 9:41, where one “knock[s]” to enter the presence of the Lord (2 Nephi 9:42) and where he receives us. As he did to ancient Israel, including the Lamanites and Nephites, Jesus invites us into his protective embrace and into eternal life. His arms of love, safety, and mercy, like the rod of iron *from* the tree of life, remain extended toward the repentant. This is temple imagery that should grow in the Latter-day Saints’ awareness and appreciation.

“As a Hen Gathereth ... Under Her Wings”: Christ’s Gathering and Protective “Wings”

Othmar Keel believes that “[i]n the final analysis, the image [of the wings of God] is drawn from the bird [that] protectively spreads its wings over its young (Mt 23:37).”³⁹ The gospel writers record that in the last week of his mortal life, Jesus lamented that Jerusalem’s inhabitants refused to be spiritually “gathered” to him. Jesus resorted to the maternal image of a hen who uses her wings to gather into an embrace: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!” (Matthew 23:37; cf. Luke 13:34). Recently, Jonathan Rowlands has drawn renewed attention to the idea that this imagery has its source in the Hebrew Bible, which uses the image of a mother bird to describe

38. Noel B. Reynolds, “‘Come unto Me’ as a Technical Gospel Term,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 31 (2019): 1–24, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/come-unto-me-as-a-technical-gospel-term/>.

39. Keel, *Symbolism of the Biblical World*, 191–92.

Yahweh.⁴⁰ For example, regarding the event of the exodus and bringing Israel to the mountain-temple at Sinai, the Lord averred: “I bare you on eagles’ wings, and brought you unto myself” (Exodus 19:4). The elements of “wings” and reception-language (“[I] brought you unto myself”) are both present (see also Deuteronomy 32:11; Psalm 17:8).

Additional words spoken by the voice of Christ in 3 Nephi 10 should be reconsidered in light of the Hebrew Bible passages and especially temple texts that allude to Jehovah’s wings:

O ye people of these great cities which have fallen, who are descendants of Jacob, yea, who are of the house of Israel, how oft have I gathered you as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and have nourished you.

And again, how oft would I have gathered you as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, yea, O ye people of the house of Israel, who have fallen; ... ye that dwell at Jerusalem, as ye that have fallen; yea, how oft would I have gathered you as a hen gathereth her chickens, and ye would not.

O ye house of Israel whom I have spared, how oft will I gather you as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, if ye will repent and return unto me with full purpose of heart. (3 Nephi 10:4–6).

In view of Keel’s and Rowland’s observations, many of those who heard the voice of Christ would have heard the rich temple imagery of Yahweh’s “wings” in his refrains. The people’s unwillingness — “ye would not” — to be gathered, seemingly reflects an unwillingness to fully partake of the temple and covenant blessings available to them. Many had become so degraded spiritually that they shed the blood of the prophets and the saints (see 3 Nephi 9:7–11). Those who “had not shed the blood of the saints” (3 Nephi 10:12) would witness the reality of the fulfillment of Nephi’s prophecy with its winged sundisk imagery: “Behold, they will crucify him; and after he is laid in a sepulchre for the space of three days he shall rise from the dead, with healing in his wings; and all those who shall believe on his name shall be saved in the kingdom of God” (2 Nephi 25:13). They would personally participate in the fulfillment of Malachi’s similarly worded winged-sundisk prophecy: “But unto you that fear my

40. Jonathan Rowlands, “Jesus and the Wings of YHWH: Bird Imagery in the Lament over Jerusalem (Matt 23:37–39; Luke 13:34–35),” *Novum Testamentum* 61, no. 2 (2019): 115–36.

name, shall the S[u]n of Righteousness arise with healing in his wings; and ye shall go forth and grow up as calves in the stall” (3 Nephi 25:2, quoting Malachi 4:2; see especially 3 Nephi 17:9–10).

**“They Might Have Been Clasped in the Arms of Jesus”:
Rejecting the Divine Embrace**

Mormon states that when he was fifteen years old, he “was visited of the Lord, and tasted and knew of the goodness of Jesus” (Mormon 1:15). This suggests that Mormon not only experienced a theophany (i.e., the Lord appeared to him), but that he experienced the Lord in a manner similar to what the Lamanites and Nephites experienced in 3 Nephi 17. When giving the account of the destruction of the Nephite people and their rejection of the Lord, Mormon dwells on the image of the divine embrace as an expression of Christ’s atoning love that the Nephites had declined to receive: “And now behold, this I speak unto their seed [i.e., unto the descendants of the Nephite dissenters who became Lamanites⁴¹], and also to the Gentiles who have care for the house of Israel, that realize and know from whence their blessings come. For I know that such will sorrow for the calamity of the house of Israel; yea, they will sorrow for the destruction of this people; they will sorrow that this people had not **repented that they might have been clasped in the arms of Jesus**” (Mormon 5:10–11). Samuel the Lamanite had prophesied that the Nephites would one day lament: “Behold, we are **surrounded by demons, yea, we are encircled about by the angels of him who hath sought to destroy our souls**. Behold, our iniquities are great. O Lord, canst thou not turn away thine anger from us?” (Helaman 13:37). Mormon recognized that this prophecy had been fulfilled during his time (see Mormon 1:18–19).

Mormon’s lament at the destruction of his people as he overlooked the slain on the battlefield is even more emotive: “O ye fair ones, how could ye have departed from the ways of the Lord! O ye fair ones, how could ye have rejected that Jesus, who stood with open arms to receive you!” (Mormon 6:17). Rejection of Jesus and refusal of his divine embrace was a full rejection of the blessings of the gospel and especially his Atonement. The consequences for the Nephites was that they began to “delight in everything save that which is good” to their eventual ruin as a people. But it did not have to be so. Christ’s “open arms” bespeak his ever-accessible love. Jesus testified that as we come to him and the

41. See especially Moroni 9:24; see also Mormon 6:15; Moroni 1:2.

Father, the Father himself runs to us even when we are “yet a great way off.” That same divine Father will “f[a]ll on [our] neck, and kiss [us]” (Luke 15:20). But we really do have to come to them. Jesus was so named because he will *save* and redeem us *from* our sins, but he cannot save us *in* them.⁴²

Conclusion

Lehi and Nephi, both Jerusalemites who lived somewhere in the vicinity of Solomon’s temple, appear to have understood the Psalms’ symbolic descriptions of taking refuge in Jehovah’s “wings” and the language of redemption in terms of a divine embrace expressing Jesus Christ’s love for his people and at-one-ment with them. Their successors — Jacob, Alma, Mormon, etc. — inherited this same paradigm. The Savior, too, resorted to this language when he invited the Lamanites and Nephites who survived the cataclysm described in 3 Nephi to “come unto” him and be gathered to him, as under a hen’s wings. These arms and wings symbolize Christ seeking and calling after us in mortality, and we in turn should call to and seek him. The Lord’s outstretched arms represent an invitation with a potential embrace. Being “encircled” or “clasped” in those arms and “gathered” under those wings constitutes a fully realized blessing reserved for the righteous who strive to keep his covenant (however imperfectly).

One of the key terms associated with the divine embrace is “receive,” an image also drawn from the Psalms and a term used to describe Enoch’s assumption into heaven. The passages examined here elucidate the divine embrace as a key atonement concept in Book of Mormon Christology. Thus, the proliferation of this theme throughout the Book of Mormon would seem to stand with other well-described literary phenomena as evidence of the antiquity and veracity of the Book of Mormon. Moreover, its recognizable proliferation further illustrates D. John Butler’s observation that “we’re collectively on the brink of realizing that the Book of Mormon is a temple book. . . . [T]he Book of Mormon was written by temple worshippers for temple worshippers, in the imagery of the temple, and teaching temple doctrines. Without seeing the temple in it, we can’t fully understand the Book of Mormon.”⁴³

Latter-day Saints today can envision for themselves how the divine embrace concept relates in practice to modern temple worship. We can

42. Matthew 1:21; Alma 11:34, 36–37; Helaman 5:10–11.

43. D. John Butler, *The Goodness and the Mysteries: On the Path of the Book of Mormon’s Visionary Men* (self-pub., 2012), 1.

picture ourselves with Jesus's disciples at the last supper and believe the Savior's promise to them: "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also" (John 14:3).

[**Author's Note:** *I would like to thank Suzy Bowen, Godfrey Ellis, Allen Wyatt, Jeff Lindsay, Victor Worth, and Alan Sikes for their help in the publication of this paper.*]

Matthew L. Bowen was raised in Orem, Utah, and graduated from Brigham Young University. He holds a PhD in Biblical Studies from the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, and is currently an associate professor in religious education at Brigham Young University-Hawaii. He is also the author of *Name as Key-Word: Collected Essays on Onomastic Wordplay and the Temple in Mormon Scripture* (Salt Lake City: Interpreter Foundation and Eborn Books, 2018) and, more recently, *Ancient Names in the Book of Mormon: Toward a Deeper Understanding of a Witness of Christ* (Salt Lake City: Interpreter Foundation and Eborn Books, 2023). With Aaron P. Schade, he is the coauthor of *The Book of Moses: From the Ancient of Days to the Latter Days* (Provo, UT; Salt Lake City: Religious Studies Center and Deseret Book, 2021). He and his wife (the former Suzanne Blattberg) are the parents of three children: Zachariah, Nathan, and Adele.

