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# HEAVENLY ASCENT IN JACOB'S WRITINGS IN SECOND NEPHI: ADDRESSING THE QUESTION OF WHAT THE PLAN OF SALVATION IS IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

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Skyler Smith

**Abstract:** *Heavenly ascent describes the process of an individual (or community) returning to the presence of God. Though various elements exist within heavenly ascent literature, general patterns can be discerned. This project uses one such pattern as a hermeneutical tool to examine what can be learned about how Book of Mormon prophets may have understood the plan of salvation. Specifically, Jacob's understanding of the plan of salvation will be analyzed by examining his writings in 2 Nephi 9–10. The evidence from this study suggests that some Book of Mormon prophets (at least Jacob and Nephi) viewed the plan of salvation through the lens of heavenly ascent.*

In the text of the Book of Mormon, the various iterations of the term “plan of salvation” appear thirty times.<sup>1</sup> This study asserts that a consistent paradigm was used by Book of Mormon authors to understand one element of the plan of salvation, namely heavenly ascent motifs. To investigate this thesis, a summary of key elements in heavenly ascent literature will briefly be examined. These elements will be organized into a model or lens that will be used as an interpretive tool throughout this paper. This overview of heavenly ascent will be followed by a synopsis of scholarly work that demonstrates similar heavenly ascent motifs in the Book of Mormon, providing plausible evidence that Book of Mormon authors were aware of this concept and used it in their writings and

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1. The word “plan” appears 42 times in the actual text of the Book of Mormon, 18 in the footnotes, and 6 in the chapter headings. Out of these 66 occurrences, 52 are referring to God's plan for his children and 14 are referring to either the plans of man or the devil.

teachings. Jacob’s sermon in 2 Nephi 9–10 will then be examined using the concepts of heavenly ascent as a hermeneutical lens. Once accomplished, this analysis will be used to consider whether Jacob understood the plan of salvation through the lens of heavenly ascent.

### Heavenly Ascent

Heavenly ascent, or celestial ascent, “is one of the most widespread and long-lasting religious concepts in history.”<sup>2</sup> Examples of this phenomenon are widespread in the Jewish and Christian writings,<sup>3</sup> as well as in other cultures and religions.<sup>4</sup> This concept refers to the idea of a fallen mortal ascending back into the presence of God. This ascension can occur either in mortality or after death, as in the Final Judgement (2 Nephi 11:2–3, 28:23).<sup>5</sup>

Heavenly ascent as an umbrella concept incorporates several other experiences, such as theophanies, *sôd* experiences, Second Comforter experiences, and temple experiences. These distinctions will not be the focus of this paper. Instead, all these concepts will be broadly examined to understand the elements common to heavenly ascent in general.

Ritual ascent and heavenly ascent are closely related but are two different ideas. Hugh Nibley explained that “Heavenly ascent is the realization of ritual ascent.”<sup>6</sup> One is the teaching or training to ascend (such as what occurs in temples) and the second is the actual act of

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2. William J. Hamblin, “Temple Motifs in Jewish Mysticism,” in *Temple of the Ancient World*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 441.

3. Martha Himmelfarb, “Heavenly Ascent and the Relationship of the Apocalypses and the ‘Hekhalot’ Literature.” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 59 (1988): 73–100; Hamblin, “Temple Motifs,” 444, 446; William J. Hamblin and David Rolph Seely, *Solomon’s Temple: Myth and History* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2007), 81–84; and Stephen Pfann, “Abducted by God? The Process of Heavenly Ascent in Jewish Tradition, From Enoch to Paul, From Paul to Akiva,” *Henoch* 33, no. 1 (January 2011): 113–28.

4. Hamblin, “Temple Motifs,” 465. For heavenly ascent literature in Islam, consider Muhammad’s night journey; see Daniel C. Peterson, *Muhammad: Prophet of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007). For heavenly ascent in Manichaeism, see Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, *In God’s Image and Likeness 1: Creation, Fall, and the Story of Adam and Eve* (Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2014), 884.

5. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, *Temple Themes in the Book of Moses* (Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2014), 26–28.

6. Hugh Nibley, *Temple and Cosmos: Beyond This Ignorant Present* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 312. See also Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, David J. Larsen, and Stephen T. Whitlock, “Moses 1 and the *Apocalypse of Abraham*: Twin Sons of Different Mothers?” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint*

ascension. While recognizing this technical difference between the two concepts, since the focus of this paper is on general motifs of ascension literature, both heavenly and ritual ascent will be considered in this study.

Heavenly ascent literature includes many elements, but general patterns may be detected in the literature.<sup>7</sup> The specific pattern this paper will utilize is six-fold:

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*Faith and Scholarship* 38 (2020): 190, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/moses-1-and-the-apocalypse-of-abraham-twin-sons-of-different-mothers/>.

7. For example, Tabor has suggested a pattern that is connected to but different than the one this paper will utilize. See James Tabor, *Things Unutterable: Paul's Ascent to Paradise in its Greco-Roman, Judaic, and Early Christian Contexts* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986), 87. See also Hamblin's summation of Tabor's pattern in "Temple Motifs," 442–43. Examples of these common elements could include "anointing" (Hamblin, "Temple Motifs," 453); "sacred clothing" (Bradshaw, *In God's Image and Likeness 1*, 516); "ascending to heaven and there 'receiving a holy book'" (Bradshaw, *Book of Moses*, 27); discerning of "true messenger[s]" (Bradshaw, *Book of Moses*, 27; Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, "What did Joseph Smith Know about Modern Temple Ordinances by 1836?" in *The Temple: Ancient and Restored. Proceedings of the 2014 Temple on Mount Zion Symposium*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and Donald W. Parry, *Temple on Mount Zion* 3 [Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation, 2016], 34–36); "the ascension mysteries are reserved for the elect" (Hamblin, "Temple Motifs," 448; Hamblin and Seely, *Solomon's Temple*, 81); "multiple heavens" (Hamblin, "Temple Motifs," 450–51; Himmelfarb, "Heavenly Ascent," 78, 83); "tests for knowledge" (Bradshaw, *In God's Image and Likeness 1*, 516; Hamblin, "Temple Motifs," 452); "the secret name of God" (Hamblin, "Temple Motifs," 454–55; Hamblin and Seely, *Solomon's Temple*, 83); being "led by the right hand" (Hamblin, "Temple Motifs," 456; Himmelfarb, "Heavenly Ascent," 97); "handclasps" (Bradshaw, "What did Joseph Smith Know," 16–24; Alonzo Gaskill, *Sacred Symbols: Finding Meaning in Rites, Rituals, & Ordinances* [Springville, UT: Bonneville Books, 2011], 237–38); "names/key words" (Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, *The First Days & The Last Days: A Verse-By-Verse Commentary on the Book of Moses And JS-Matthew in Light of the Temple* [Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2021], 58, 82); "ritual embraces" (Bradshaw, "What did Joseph Smith Know," 21–26); "the veil" (Hamblin, "Temple Motifs," 455–56); "the throne of God" (Hamblin, "Temple Motifs," 456; Scott Mackie, "Ancient Jewish Mystical Motifs in Hebrews' Theology of Access and Entry Exhortations," *New Testament Studies* 58 [2011]: 90–92; Margaret Barker, *Temple Mysticism: An Introduction* [London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2011], 97–132); "having certain blessings conferred upon them that are 'made sure' by the voice of God Himself" (2 Peter 1:10; Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, "Now That We Have the Words of Joseph Smith, How Shall We Begin to Understand Them? Illustrations of Selected Challenges within the 21 May 1843 Discourse on 2 Peter 1," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 20 [2016]: 47–15, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/now-that-we-have-the-words-of-joseph-smith-how-shall-we-begin-to-understand-them/>; Jeffrey Bradshaw, *Temple Themes*

1. The two-part structure
2. Receiving light, knowledge, and mysteries
3. Cleansing processes
4. Prayer
5. Angels or heavenly messengers
6. The presence of God.

### **The Two-Part Structure: The Down-Road and the Up-Road**

The first element is the overall structure of the accounts. Jeffrey Bradshaw explained, “Accounts of heavenly ascent and temple ritual are not uncommonly structured into two main parts: a ‘down-road’ followed by an ‘up-road.’”<sup>8</sup> Bradshaw has shown how “consistent with this pattern, Moses 1 takes the prophet from a vision of his first home in the spirit world, then downward to the telestial world of the mortal earth, and, finally, upward in a step-by-step return to God. Moses’s experience culminates within the ‘heavenly temple,’ where he is shown a vision of the Creation, the Fall, and the essential role of the Atonement, as described in Moses chapters 2–5” (see Figure 1).<sup>9</sup> These three terms — the creation, the fall, and the atonement — are referred to by Elder Bruce R. McConkie as “the three pillars of eternity” and are often used inside heavenly ascent literature to frame this two-part structure.<sup>10</sup> For example, Baker and Ricks have explained that ritual ascent dramas once performed in Solomon’s Temple contained didactic elements that focused on these three pillars.<sup>11</sup> In this two part-structure, the down-

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*in the Oath and Covenant of the Priesthood* [Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2014], 59–65); “enthronement” (Bradshaw, *Book of Moses*, 190; Muhlestein, *Darkness, Light, and the Lord*, 252; John T. Strong, “Grounding Ezekiel’s Heavenly Ascent: A Defense of Ezek 40–48 as a Program for Restoration,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 26, no. 2 [2012]: 192–211); and “divinization” (Hamblin, “Temple Motifs,” 447, 459–60).

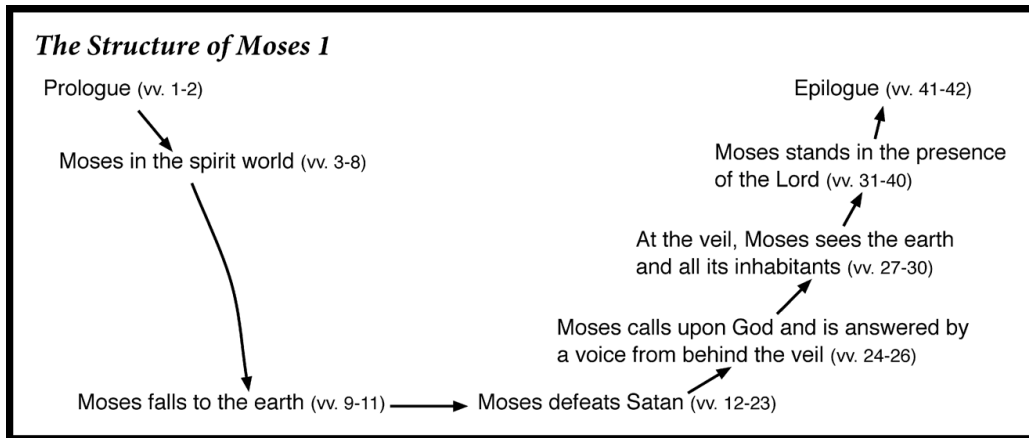
8. Bradshaw, Larsen, and Whitlock, “Moses 1 and the *Apocalypse of Abraham*,” 191; see also Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, “The LDS book of Enoch as the culminating story of a temple text,” *BYU Studies* 53, no. 1 (2014): 44–47.

9. Bradshaw, Larsen, and Whitlock, “Moses 1 and the *Apocalypse of Abraham*,” 191.

10. Bruce R. McConkie, “The Three Pillars of Eternity,” *BYU Speeches*, February 17, 1981, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/bruce-r-mcconkie/three-pillars-eternity/>.

11. Baker and Ricks, *Who Shall Ascend*, 22, 217–38. Another example is the Day of Atonement. See Donald Parry, “Garden of Eden: Prototype Sanctuary,” in *Temples of the Ancient World*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 133–37, for further explanation, including helpful images.

road consists of the creation and the fall while the up-road consists of the atonement.



**Figure 1.** The two-part structure in Moses 1.<sup>12</sup>

## Receiving Light, Knowledge, and Mysteries

The second part of the six-part pattern is often connected to the two-part structure discussed above where “an upward physical movement often paralleled a ritual heavenly ascent from darkness to increasingly greater light.”<sup>13</sup> This concept of light, which is pervasive in biblical and extrabiblical heavenly ascent literature, seems to be present in both the process and the culmination.<sup>14</sup> For example, in Manichaean scripture and ritual, “The ‘descent of the First Man from the land of light,’ his redemption, and his return to the kingdom was a ‘favorite theme,’ and was ‘in a very real sense the story of each soul.’”<sup>15</sup> As individuals progressed upward through different stages, they learned “mysteries”

12. Bradshaw, *Book of Moses*, 29.

13. The author of this quote also explains that this ascent, which is connected to “illumination,” is also tied to “unification” with God. See Bradshaw, *In God’s Image and Likeness 1*, 663–64. See also Muhlestein, *Darkness, Light, and the Lord*, 248; Himmelfarb, “Heavenly Ascent,” 82; and Margaret Barker, *Temple Theology: An Introduction* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 57, 92.

14. See, for example, Exodus 13:21–22, 14:19–20, 19:16–18, 24:15–17, 40:38; Deuteronomy 5:22–23; 2 Samuel 22:9–10; Psalm 97:2–5; 1 Kings 8:10–12; Isaiah 6:1–7; Ezekiel 1:26–28, 10:1–4, 43:1–5; Amos 9:1; see also Mackie, “Ancient Jewish Mystical Motifs,” 95–98.

15. Iain Gardner, “The Kephalaia of the Teacher: The Edited Coptic Manichaean Texts in Translation with Commentary,” *Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies* 37, ed. James M. Robinson and H. J. Klimkeit (Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1995), 42, as quoted in Bradshaw, *In God’s Image and Likeness 1*, 884.



that allowed them to return to the “land of light” and receive a crown of glory (glory being associated with light in much of Jewish literature).<sup>16</sup>

Another example of light being connected to ascension is found in Enoch’s various ascents recorded in *1 Enoch* and *2 Enoch* where Enoch was “‘led forth into all secrets’ and shown ‘all secrets of righteousness.’”<sup>17</sup> One such instance depicts when “Enoch the high priest figure has ascended through the heavens to stand before the throne” of God.<sup>18</sup> During this experience, Enoch is dressed in “garments of glory” and anointed with “a fragrant myrrh oil,” which appearance was “greater than the greatest light.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, a gradual process seems to generally occur in which a participant progresses upward through receiving light, knowledge, and mysteries until they are eventually brought back into the presence of God. This light and knowledge were reserved for the elect and could include things like God’s secret name.<sup>20</sup>

### Cleansing Processes

The third part of the six-part pattern is some type of cleansing process that purifies an individual. “Candidates ... were often required to further prepare for their ascent through fasting and ritual purifications” or risk being “dismissed from before the [celestial] throne [of God].”<sup>21</sup> For instance, when Isaiah experienced his heavenly ascent, he worried about his unclean state before the presence of God (Isaiah 6:5).<sup>22</sup> After the

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16. Bradshaw, *In God’s Image and Likeness 1*, 884–85; Hamblin, “Temple Motifs,” 442–43; and Muhlestein, *Darkness, Light, and the Lord*, 240. See also Nathaniel Deutsch, *Guardians of the Gate: Angelic Vice Regency in Late Antiquity* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1998), 19, 39, 85, 90, 95; Ithamar Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, 2nd revised ed. (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2014), 49–61; and Barker, *Temple Mysticism*, 23, 37, 53–62, 72–81.

17. Margaret Barker, *The Hidden Tradition of the Kingdom of God* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2007), 39; see also pages 20–21.

18. Barker, *Temple Theology*, 57.

19. *Ibid.*, 57.

20. Hamblin, “Temple Motifs,” 448, 454–55; Hamblin and Seely, *Solomon’s Temple*, 81–83; Deutsch, *Guardians of the Gate*, 58; Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, 140, 142, 239; Himmelfarb, “Heavenly Ascent,” 81, 95; Barker, *The Hidden Tradition*, 25–28, 39.

21. Hamblin, “Temple Motifs,” 448; Hamblin suggests readers see the following sources: 1 Enoch 41:10–11; Testament of Levi 3:6; Revelation 1:5–6; 4:8–11; 8:2–5; 15:1–8 (Hamblin, “Temple Motifs,” 468). See also George W.E. Nickelsburg, “The Temple According to 1 Enoch,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (2014): 17, 23.

22. Referring to Isaiah’s heavenly ascent in Isaiah 6, the Jewish Study Bible explains, “Isaiah fears that he will die, because he is not worthy to see God. The

seraphim purged Isaiah's lips with the coal from the altar, the prophet felt worthy to stand in the presence of God (Isaiah 6:6–7).<sup>23</sup>

Cleansing processes often included covenant-making motifs such as in Jacob's vision of the ladder.<sup>24</sup>

Jacob saw a ladder on the earth, which reached to heaven. Ascending and descending on the ladder were the angels of God, sentinels to the portals of heaven. Above the ladder was the Lord Himself, whom Jacob heard and with whom he would make the very same covenant that his grandfather Abraham had made — the same covenant his father, Isaac, had prepared him to receive.<sup>25</sup>

In the pericope referred to in this quotation, it is implicit that making a covenant and being obedient to its conditions is a prerequisite for ascending to God's presence (Genesis 28:13–15). At times, these covenants are entered into through the initiate's participation in ordinances. For instance, in the Book of Moses, the narrative often “stops the historic portions of the story and weaves into the narrative framework ritual acts such as sacrifice, . . . ordinances such as baptism, washings, and the

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belief was widespread in ancient Israel that a human who saw God would die (see, e.g., Exodus 33:20). Isaiah is informed that he is an exception to this general rule when a seraph or angelic being purifies him and reassures him that he is safe” (Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds. *The Jewish Study Bible*, 2nd ed. [New York: Oxford University Press, 1999], 779). The Expositor Commentary supports this thought in different words (Tremper Longman and David E. Garland, eds., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, rev ed. [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2008], 508).

23. See also Bokovoy's comments where he suggests the angel might have been Christ himself. If true, this proposition could emphasize the cleansing nature of this experience (Bokovoy, “On Christ and Covenants,” 45). Also see Longman and Garland, *Expositor*, 508, for similar commentary about God himself cleansing the prophet.

24. For example, see Barker, *Temple Theology*, 33–51, and Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and Matthew L. Bowen, “‘By the Blood Ye Are Sanctified’: The Symbolic, Salvific, Interrelated, Additive, Retrospective, and Anticipatory Nature of the Ordinances of Spiritual Rebirth in John 3 and Moses 6,” in *Sacred Time, Sacred Space, and Sacred Meaning (Proceedings of the Third Interpreter Foundation Matthew B. Brown Memorial Conference, 5 November 2016)*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and Jeffrey M. Bradshaw (Orem, UT: The Interpreter Foundation, 2020), 187.

25. Andrew C. Skinner, “Jacob in the Presence of God,” in *Sperry Symposium Classics: The Old Testament*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 2005). To read further about this heavenly ascent episode, see Baker and Ricks, *Who Shall Ascend*, 696–721.

gift of the Holy Ghost; and oaths and covenants, such as obedience to marital obligations and oaths of property consecration.”<sup>26</sup> Consistent faithfulness to covenants entered into through these ordinances cleansed an individual and was a part of the process of becoming adequate to see the face of the Lord.<sup>27</sup>

## Prayer

The fourth part of the six-part pattern is prayer. After a person experiences the “down-road,” there is a separation between God and man. This separation is often attributed to the veil, which is a “a kind of ‘visionary screen’” that conceals the presence of God.<sup>28</sup> In order to ascend back to God’s presence, this separation must be bridged through some method. One general pattern is that of an individual calling upon God through prayer, rending the veil, and standing in the presence of God.<sup>29</sup>

For instance, Bradshaw argued Job experienced an ascent in the Bible which included the use of “prayer circles” as a tool that helped “the hero meet the requirement to prove himself worthy of a continued journey toward divine light and knowledge.”<sup>30</sup> This principle might also

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26. Bradshaw, “The LDS book of Enoch,” 54.

27. Regarding heavenly ascent, Bradshaw explained that “after a lifetime of faithfulness to the covenants they have received and through the strengthening power of the Atonement, they begin to approach the ‘measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ’” (Bradshaw and Bowen, “By the Blood Ye are Sanctified,” 78).

28. Bradshaw, Larsen, and Whitlock, “Moses 1 and the *Apocalypse of Abraham*,” 214. Nibley has commented on this veil when he wrote, “A commonplace of apocalyptic literature is that God Himself is necessarily screened from sight by a veil, as by the cloud on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:34). . . . The purpose of numerous curtains or veils is to apportion to each world the light it is ready to receive” (Hugh Nibley, *Enoch the Prophet. Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986], 244–45). For further commentary on this see Bradshaw, *The First Days & The Last Days*, 20. For more on this topic’s analog in the temple, see Mackie, “Ancient Jewish Mystical Motifs,” 93–95, and Barker, *Temple Theology*, 27–32.

29. Bradshaw, *In God’s Image and Likeness 1*, 37; Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, “The Ezekiel Mural at Dura Europos: A tangible witness of Philo’s Jewish mysteries?” *BYU Studies* 49, no. 1 (2010): 43; and Bradshaw, “What did Joseph Smith Know,” 16–17. See also Ostler, “The Throne-Theophany and Prophetic Commission in 1 Nephi,” 75; Deutsch, *Guardians of the Gate*, 90; and Himmelfarb, “Heavenly Ascent,” 94–95.

30. Bradshaw, *In God’s Image and Likeness 1*, 516. Nibley suggested early Christians also used prayer circles to connect with God. See Hugh Nibley, *Mormonism and Early Christianity (Collected Works of Hugh Nibley)* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 70.

be observed in Isaiah's ascension when, as pointed out earlier, he was worthy to be in God's presence only after "one of the seraphs presses to his lips ... 'a live coal' (Isaiah 6:6; 2 Nephi 16:6), presumably taken from the altar of incense (the only burning altar within the temple building and significantly symbolic of a kind of truer order of perpetual prayer offered up constantly before the temple's veil)."<sup>31</sup> Thus, it seems likely that prayer played an important role in the purging of Isaiah's sins necessary for his ascent (Isaiah 6:7; 2 Nephi 16:7).<sup>32</sup>

### Angels or Heavenly Messengers

The previous themes of cleansing processes, light/knowledge, and prayer/veil are often associated with the fifth part of the six-part pattern, which is the presence of angels or heavenly messengers.<sup>33</sup> Angels are present several times in the Patriarch Jacob's heavenly ascent experiences starting with his previously discussed vision of the heavenly ladder. In this revelation, Jacob saw "angels ascending and descending thereon and ... realized that the covenants he made with the Lord there were the rungs on the ladder that he himself would have to climb in order to obtain the promised blessings — blessings that would entitle him to enter heaven and associate with the Lord;" however, these "great promises and blessings ... were conditional rather than absolute."<sup>34</sup> The realization of these blessings would not occur until years later when Jacob was dealing with some intense struggles and praying for "greater light, knowledge, and power" (Genesis 32:9–13, 24–30).<sup>35</sup> This needed endowment of power came to Jacob through another heavenly messenger who appeared to Jacob and wrestled with him throughout the night.<sup>36</sup> The result of this battle was the "burst[ing] of the veil," exposing an "ultimate theophany"

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31. Joseph M. Spencer, *An Other Testament: On Typology* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2016), 55.

32. Welch noted this same element of prayer when discussing Israelites mimicking this heavenly ascent ritually in the temple. See John W. Welch, "Seeing Third Nephi as the Holy of Holies of the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 19, no. 1 (2010): 43–44.

33. Hamblin, "Temple Motifs," 447–48; Mackie, "Ancient Jewish Mystical Motifs," 99–103.

34. Skinner, "Jacob in the Presence of God."

35. *Ibid.*

36. See Skinner for the intriguing suggestion that this endowment of power was received in two parts and included heavenly ascent motifs like new names, ritual embraces, and seeing God. *Ibid.*

in which Jacob was “privileged to enjoy the literal presence of God and to have every promise of past years sealed and confirmed upon him.”<sup>37</sup>

In addition to this function, it seems that angels play a role even after an individual enters the presence of God.<sup>38</sup> Angels are often depicted surrounding the throne of God (see 1 Kings 22:19–23).<sup>39</sup> This gathering is often referred to as a divine council and includes “the divine beings who compose God’s heavenly court.”<sup>40</sup> When a person is introduced to this divine council, they “hear and see”<sup>41</sup> a “theophany of Yahweh on his

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37. Ibid. For similar experience of angels helping individuals ascend, see Nibley, *Temple and Cosmos*, 302; Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, “Faith, Hope, and Charity: The ‘Three Principal Rounds’ of the Ladder of Heavenly Ascent,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 39 (2020): 251–52, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/faith-hope-and-charity-the-three-principal-rounds-of-the-ladder-of-heavenly-ascent/>; Bradshaw, *The First Days & The Last Days*, 116; and Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews, eds., *Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 2004), 136. See also Genesis 32:1.

38. Himmelfarb, “Heavenly Ascent,” 83–84, 87–88; Barker, *Temple Mysticism*, 63–71; Barker, *The Hidden Tradition*, 38–39; and Michael S. Heiser, *Angels: What the Bible Really Says About God’s Heavenly Host* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), 173–74.

39. Stephen O. Smoot, “The Divine Council in the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Mormon,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 27 (2017): 165, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-divine-council-in-the-hebrew-bible-and-the-book-of-mormon/>; and Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, 174.

40. David M. Carr, “Genesis,” in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, ed. Michael D. Coogan, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 12. For examples of these councils, see 1 Kings 22:19–23; Job 1:7–12, 2:2–8; Psalms 89:5–7; Genesis 1:26; Ezekiel 1:1–3:21; or Amos 3:7, about which Smoot explains, “More than merely a ‘secret’ as implied by the KJV’s rendering, the *sôd* in this passage is not just confidential instruction delivered by God but also the manifestation of God’s heavenly court,” Smoot (“The Divine Council,” 165). Neal Rappleye observed that recently scholars have recognized the Israelite religion to be “not strictly monotheistic . . . but rather the supreme divine being, ruling over a council of other divinities” (Neal Rappleye, “‘With the Tongue of Angels’: Angelic Speech as a Form of Deification,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 21 [2016]: 309, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/with-the-tongue-of-angels-angelic-speech-as-a-form-of-deification/>). See also Michael S. Heiser, *Demon: What the Bible Really Says About the Powers of Darkness* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020), 24, 63–64, 68–70, 156, 190, 219, 241; Heiser, *Angels*, 10–17, 32–46, 83, 104, 136, 139–40; and Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: A Question & Answer Companion* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 23–72.

41. “This veiled reference, ‘saw and heard,’ becomes a credential for being a spokesman or messenger of the council of Jehovah. The implication of the phrase

throne ... and [are] subsequently ... made aware of confidential heavenly secrets.”<sup>42</sup> This experience is named after the divine governing council and is referred to as a *sôd* experience.<sup>43</sup> These experiences generally also include elements such as being tested, praising God, singing, learning of mysteries, and a charge to teach others upon returning from the council.<sup>44</sup> In some cases, accounts of *sôd* experiences include the participant speaking with the tongue of angels, joining the divine council, and even experiencing some type of deified status.<sup>45</sup>

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is that one has seen the divine council and heard the decrees thereof. A person who claims to have ‘seen and heard’ can be identified as a legitimate representative of Jehovah without going into detail concerning the sacred nature of his experience. The concept of a prophet justifying his claim to divine authority is reduced to what he has ‘seen and heard’ (Tolley, “To ‘See and Hear,’” 142–43). See also Bokovoy, “The Bible vs. the Book of Mormon,” 8.

42. Smoot, “The Divine Council,” 165. See also Bradshaw, *In God’s Image and Likeness 1*, 884; Hamblin, “Temple Motifs,” 444, 446; Bokovoy, “On Christ and Covenants,” 41; Himmelfarb, “Heavenly Ascent,” 79; and Barker, *The Hidden Tradition*, 31, 39.

43. Rappleye, “Tongue of Angels,” 305–306, and 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): 45–46, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/first-visions-and-last-sermons-affirming-divine-sociality-rejecting-the-greater-apostasy/>. See also Baker and Ricks, *Who Shall Ascend*, 139–40, and Heiser, *Angels*, 13–14.

44. For examples, see Ostler, “The Throne-Theophany and Prophetic Commission in 1 Nephi,” 82; David J. Larsen, “Angels among Us: The Use of Old Testament Passages as Inspiration for Temple Themes in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 5 (2013); Bradshaw, Larsen, and Whitlock, “Moses 1 and the *Apocalypse of Abraham*,” 190; Smoot, “The Divine Council,” 155; Hamblin and Seely, *Solomon’s Temple*, 83; Deutsch, *Guardians of the Gate*, 1, 11, 15, 162; Nickelsburg, “The Temple According to 1 Enoch,” 9, 13, 18, 20, 22–24; Himmelfarb, “Heavenly Ascent,” 85, 88, 91–96; Barker, *Temple Mysticism*, 81–96; Barker, *Temple Theology*, 57; and Heiser, *Angels*, 13–17, 55–56.

45. For example, Val Larsen explained, “These and other participants in the court were part of the סֹד, *Sôd*, the governing council, who shared to one degree or another the divinity of El and the governance of El’s kingdom” (Larsen, “First Visions and Last Sermons,” 46). Additionally, Bokovoy explained that Isaiah received a “special divine or quasi-divine status” during his heavenly ascent experience (Bokovoy, “On Christ and Covenants,” 35, and Spencer, *An Other Testament*, 24, 46, 49, 52, 56). For additional examples of heavenly ascent participants receiving some type of divine status, see Margaret Barker, *Great High Priest: The Temple Roots of Christian Liturgy* (London: T&T Clark, 2003); Larsen, “Angels Among Us,” 92; Himmelfarb, “Heavenly Ascent,” 86; Barker, *The Hidden Tradition*, 23–24, 41, 43, 45; Barker, *Temple Mysticism*, 38, 40; and Heiser, *Angels*, 175–76.

## Presence of God

The sixth and final part of the six-part pattern is the actual entering into the presence of God. This constituted a sort of reversal from the fall of Adam when mankind lost the presence of God.<sup>46</sup> At times associated with some type of judgment motif, it is during this event that the divine and mortal are brought “face to face” and often share some form of conversation (see Genesis 32:30; Exodus 33:11; Abraham 3:11).<sup>47</sup> In some heavenly ascent literature, God declares the ascended person’s salvation to be “made sure”<sup>48</sup> during this conversation, and might even include some type of ordinance.<sup>49</sup> Either way, this moment is the culmination of a process in which a person (or community) successfully climbed the “up-ward” road back to their original heavenly height.<sup>50</sup>

### Heavenly Ascent Motifs in the Book of Mormon

The presence of heavenly ascent literature in the Book of Mormon should not be surprising considering that “the Book of Mormon is yet in many

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46. Terryl L. Givens, *2nd Nephi: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2020), 74.

47. David Bokovoy, “‘Thou Knowest That I Believe’: Invoking the Spirit of the Lord as Council Witness in 1 Nephi 11,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 1 (2012): 13, 18–19, 22, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/thou-knowest-that-i-believe/>; Hamblin, “Temple Motifs,” 452–53; Hamblin and Seely, *Solomon’s Temple*, 82; Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, 89, 230; Himmelfarb, “Heavenly Ascent,” 81; Barker, *The Hidden Tradition*, 98–100; Barker, *Temple Theology*, 65–70; and Heiser, *Angels*, 36–37, 44–45, 52–55, 67, 111, 157.

48. Bradshaw, *Book of Moses*, 26.

49. The outcome of this ordinance is the individual becoming a “son of God.” See Bradshaw, *Oath and Covenant*, 59–65; Bradshaw, *The First Days & The Last Days*, 196; and Bradshaw and Bowen, “By the Blood Ye are Sanctified,” 165. It is important to note that this usage of “son” does not exclude women from becoming “daughters” of God. For instance, consider that the Hebrew *bên*, while principally meaning “son,” is also standardly used to mean “children” (both male and female). See Bradshaw, *Oath and Covenant*, 221–22 for an explanation of how women were involved in these types of ascents.

50. Mackie, “Ancient Jewish Mystical Motifs,” 88–90, 103–104. Of course, the ultimate goal of mankind is not to simply attain their previous “height” but to reach even higher and become like God (Moses 1:39). Therefore, the fall is really a “fortunate fall” that allows us to surpass our previous potential. See Daniel K Judd, “The Fortunate Fall of Adam and Eve,” in *No Weapon Shall Prosper: New Light on Sensitive Issues*, ed. Robert L. Millet (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2011), 297–328.

regards a book rooted in the ancient Near East.”<sup>51</sup> As such, like the Bible and other Near Eastern texts, “the Book of Mormon provides a depiction of the divine council and narrates several instances where prophets were introduced into this assembly, made privy to heavenly secrets, and commissioned to preach their newfound knowledge to others.”<sup>52</sup>

Baker and Ricks have suggested that heavenly ascent motifs can be identified within individual works of the Book of Mormon such as in the teachings of King Benjamin,<sup>53</sup> Abinadi,<sup>54</sup> Alma,<sup>55</sup> and Moroni.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, Mormon organized the “entire Book of Mormon ... [with a] carefully structured pattern” designed to teach readers about their ascent into the presence of God.<sup>57</sup> He states, “I, Mormon, make a record of the things which I have both *seen and heard*, and call it the Book of Mormon” (Mormon 1:1). This phrase suggests that Mormon had entered into the divine council, enjoyed the presence of God, and was now commissioned to teach others about how to come unto the presence

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51. This analysis is not meant to be a comprehensive treatment of heavenly ascent literature in the Book of Mormon; rather, it is meant to be representative of how heavenly ascent motifs permeate the Book of Mormon. Other examples not mentioned in the following analysis could include 3 Nephi 19, Helaman 5, Mormon 9, Moroni 7, Mosiah 22 (as suggested in Smoot, “The Divine Council,” 178), or 3 Nephi 11 (as Welch suggests in John W. Welch, “Seeing Third Nephi as the Holy of Holies of the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 19, no. 1 [2010]).

52. Smoot, “The Divine Council,” 156–57. At the same time, “Before we begin our investigation, it must be acknowledged that the Book of Mormon’s depiction of the divine council is neither as frequent nor explicit as the depiction in the Hebrew Bible.” See Smoot, “The Divine Council,” 170–71, for possible reasons for this fact.

53. LeGrand L. Baker and Stephen D. Ricks, *Who Shall Ascend Into the Hill of the Lord: The Psalms in Israel’s Temple Worship in the Old Testament and in the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2009), 475–88. See also Bokovoy, “Thou Knowest That I Believe,” 14–15, 17–18, and John Welch, *King Benjamin’s Speech: That Ye May Learn Wisdom* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999).

54. Baker and Ricks, *Who Shall Ascend*, 489–519.

55. *Ibid.*, 520–606.

56. *Ibid.*, 696–724; Welch also claims that “Benjamin’s speech in Mosiah 1–6, Alma’s words in Alma 12–13, and Jesus’ teachings in 3 Nephi 11–18” are what he terms “temple texts.” See John W. Welch, “The Temple in the Book of Mormon: The Temples at the Cities of Nephi, Zarahemla, and Bountiful,” in *Temples of the Ancient World*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1994), 300–301, 364–67, 369–75.

57. Baker and Ricks, *Who Shall Ascend*, 472.



of God.<sup>58</sup> This proposed mission for Mormon is congruent with one of Moroni's closing exhortations that suggests that the agenda behind writing the Book of Mormon was to help readers accept the Savior's invitation to "rend that veil of unbelief" and to see God "face to face" as Moroni and others in the book had done (Ether 4:14–15; 12:39, 41).<sup>59</sup>

In addition to the closing comments in the Book of Mormon, its opening comments regarding Lehi's prophetic call could also be understood in heavenly ascent terms (1 Nephi 1:4–19).<sup>60</sup> The account opens with Lehi praying to the Lord and a pillar of fire, or light, descending upon him (1 Nephi 1:5–6).<sup>61</sup> During this experience, the scriptures record that Lehi "saw and heard much" (1 Nephi 1:6). After returning home, Lehi is "overcome with the Spirit [and] carried away in a vision" (1 Nephi 1:7–8).<sup>62</sup> In the vision, Lehi sees "God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God," a description clearly connected to

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58. Kevin L. Tolley, "To 'See and Hear,'" *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 18 (2016): 142–43, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/to-see-and-hear/>. This author is not arguing that every appearance of the phrase "seen and heard" in the Book of Mormon is indicative of heavenly ascent. Accounts such as 3 Nephi 2:1 may or may not be referring to different types of experiences. It is important to consider how this phrase is used and how this understanding might be applied to help correctly interpret certain verses (such as Mormon 1:1 referenced above).

59. Note that Ether 12 includes what Moroni thought were his concluding comments in the Book of Mormon. However, having not yet been murdered by his enemies, he adds more to what he already concluded (see Moroni 1:1).

60. When prophets receive their "call" from the Lord, it often includes a theophany. It is notable that Lehi's "call" and theophany in this chapter are strikingly like other prophetic calls. To compare general patterns of this type of call, see Blake Ostler, "The Throne-Theophany and Prophetic Commission in 1 Nephi: A Form-Critical Analysis." *BYU Studies Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (1987): 78. See also Stephen Ricks, who compares the prophet's call narrative of Lehi to those of Isaiah and the Revelation of John in "Heavenly Visions and Prophetic Calls in Isaiah 6 (2 Nephi 16), the Book of Mormon, and the Revelation of John," in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 171–90.

61. It is interesting to consider that Joseph Smith saw a pillar of fire/light in his heavenly ascent experience known as the First Vision. See Joseph's 1835 account of the vision at "Journal, 1835–1836," p. 24, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-1835-1836/25>.

62. The phrase "caught up" is also used in the New Testament to describe ascent experiences. See Bokovoy, "Thou Knowest That I Believe," 2–3.

divine council scenes in heavenly ascent literature (1 Nephi 1:8).<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, scholars have suggested additional connections to heavenly ascent in this narrative include the moments when Lehi joins the heavenly host in praise and song (vv. 14–15),<sup>64</sup> sees Jesus Christ with his twelve apostles and compares them to celestial lights (vv. 9–10),<sup>65</sup> and receives a book from the divine messenger.<sup>66</sup> Considering this, it is likely Lehi received a *sôd* experience during his multipart manifestation of the divine in which he became “a messenger sent to represent the assembly that had convened in order to pass judgment upon Jerusalem for a violation of God’s holy covenants.”<sup>67</sup> Lehi would eventually fulfill this divine mandate in verse eighteen, which includes another occurrence of the phrase “seen and heard.”

Heavenly ascent motifs appear between Lehi and Moroni’s words as well. Helaman 10 may be just such a case.<sup>68</sup> In this account, God addresses Nephi, the son of Helaman, in “the presence of mine angels,” suggesting the traditional divine council scene (Helaman 10:6). This heavenly court location seems to be confirmed by realizing that verse eight suggests Nephi has been transported to a new location, a temple. Furthermore,

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63. Ostler explains, “Such a scene has an extensive ancient Near Eastern background” (Ostler, “The Throne-Theophany and Prophetic Commission in 1 Nephi,” 70). Bokovoy supports this claim and has written, “The Book of Mormon account of Lehi’s prophetic commission has much in common with Isaiah 6” (Bokovoy, “On Christ and Covenants,” 36). Welch explains that “[Lehi’s] call as a prophet in 1 Nephi 1 gives a foundation of divine authority, revelation, and guidance for everything that follows father Lehi’s posterity throughout the Book of Mormon” (John W. Welch, “The Calling of Lehi as a Prophet in the World of Jerusalem,” in *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely [Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004], 437–38). Thus, future prophets may be shaping their experiences using heavenly ascent motifs following Lehi’s lead. Smoot, “The Divine Council,” 174–75, suggests one possible example of this is Alma 36:22 when Alma the younger identically repeats Lehi’s words from 1 Nephi 1:8.

64. Bokovoy, “On Christ and Covenants,” 38–39; Rappleye, “Tongue of Angels,” 316; and Spencer, *An Other Testament*, 51.

65. Bokovoy, “On Christ and Covenants,” 40; Ostler, “The Throne-Theophany and Prophetic Commission in 1 Nephi,” 79; Nickelsburg, “The Temple According to 1 Enoch,” 8, 18; Himmelfarb, “Heavenly Ascent,” 77; Barker, *The Hidden Tradition*, 39; Heiser, *Angels*, 8–10.

66. Rappleye, “Tongue of Angels,” 316.

67. David Bokovoy, “On Christ and Covenants: An LDS Reading of Isaiah’s Prophetic Call,” *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity*: vol. 3 (2011): 37.

68. Smoot, “The Divine Council,” 178–79. The author continues to explain, “This is a classic setup for a divine council narrative, where controversy arises that will eventually need settling by prophetic intervention.”

“this temple” in verse eight might be connected to “this mountain” in verse nine, further suggesting a much more divine geography because “exceedingly high mountain[s]” can be synonymous with the “heavenly temple, the traditional meeting place of God’s divine assembly.”<sup>69</sup> During this experience, Nephi also receives a call to preach about what he saw and heard, which he accomplishes when he “did return unto the multitudes ... and began to declare unto them the word of the Lord’ straightway after his theophany (Helaman 10:12).”<sup>70</sup>

### The Brother of Jared’s Experience

The brother of Jared’s experience, recorded in Ether 3, is yet another example of heavenly ascent motifs. The Jaredite account begins with the people being removed from the presence of God with the rise of the Tower of Babel. The brother of Jared and his companions quickly start their trek back into the presence of God through separating themselves from wickedness (Ether 2:1) and offering frequent prayer to God (Ether 1:34, 36, 38; 3:1).<sup>71</sup> Eventually, the brother of Jared’s spiritual ascent is matched with his physical ascent into a mountain, where, after the prophet recognizes his unworthiness as Isaiah did, the Lord asks him certain questions, gives him light, extends his hand/finger through the veil, and receives the brother of Jared into his full presence (Ether 3:2, 6).<sup>72</sup>

The Lord accomplishes this by first showing his hand to the brother of Jared and then by beginning a line of questioning aimed at testing the prophet of which Moroni “could not make a full account of” (Ether 3:17, 21–22). After passing this test, the brother of Jared receives information: “these words” in verse thirteen that the Lord said he “shall speak” in verse eleven, which included some type of incredible knowledge that fully opened the veil for the prophet. The description of this knowledge

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69. Bokovoy, “Thou Knowest That I Believe,” 3. See also Carla Sulzbach, “The Function of the Sacred Geography in the Book of Jubilees,” *Journal for Semitics* 14 (2005): 290; Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 224–28; and Andrew C. Skinner, “Nephi’s Ultimate Encounter with Deity: Some Thoughts on Helaman 10,” in *The Book of Mormon: Helaman Through 3 Nephi 8, According to Thy Word*, ed. Monte S. Nyman (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 1992) for further thoughts on how Helaman 10 is connected to heavenly ascent motifs.

70. Smoot, “The Divine Council,” 178–79.

71. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 241–43.

72. For the Isaiah connection, see Thomas, M. Catherine Thomas, “The Brother of Jared at the Veil,” in *Temples in the Ancient World: Ritual and Symbolism*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 392.

remains absent in the text (Ether 3:17–20). This fact is additional evidence of this being a heavenly ascent because the knowledge given by God in these types of accounts should remain an esoteric mystery to the uninitiated reader until they themselves ascend to God's presence.

While this account lacks any direct acknowledgment of a divine messenger (other than Christ himself) or divine council, it does not necessarily preclude the possibility that those elements are present but unmentioned. Furthermore, the signal phrase of “seen and heard” appears twice in verse 21 describing the brother of Jared's experience. Therefore, considering this evidence and the presence of other important heavenly ascent motifs in this account, this account remains an excellent example of heavenly ascent literature in the Book of Mormon.

### **Nephi, son of Lehi, and Heavenly Ascent**

Any discussion of heavenly ascent motifs in the Book of Mormon would be incomplete without considering the work of Nephi, son of Lehi. Because of the excellent example of heavenly ascent motifs it contains and its importance to the remainder of this paper, a synopsis about this work has been saved until now.

Nephi “begins [his record] with a colophon, introducing himself and his reasons for making his record.”<sup>73</sup> In this colophon, “Nephi says he ‘had a great knowledge ... of the mysteries of God.’ The very next statement from Nephi is ‘therefore, I make a record of my proceedings in my days’ (1 Nephi 1:1), meaning that his knowledge of the mysteries is Nephi's justification for making a record.”<sup>74</sup> Rappleye explains, “The term mystery comes from the Greek μυστήριον (*mystērion*). ... ‘The connection of the prophets with mysteries dates back to the role of the prophet as witness in the heavenly *sōd* where he heard the secret counsels of God and conveyed them to men.’”<sup>75</sup> Thus, Nephi is essentially claiming that he is a “true prophet”<sup>76</sup> who has ascended to God's presence and is now writing a record to teach readers how to receive their own *sōd* experience.<sup>77</sup> This understanding significantly colors certain statements

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73. Rappleye, “Tongue of Angels,” 305–306, referring to Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert/The World of the Jaredites/There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 17–18.

74. Rappleye, “Tongue of Angels,” 305.

75. *Ibid.*, 305–306; see also Baker and Ricks, *Who Shall Ascend*, 139–40.

76. Baker and Ricks, *Who Shall Ascend*, 463.

77. Spencer, *An Other Testament*, 46. See Hugh Nibley, *Teachings of the Book of Mormon: Transcripts of Lectures Presented to an Honors Book of Mormon Class at Brigham Young University, 1988–1990*, 4 vols. (American Fork, UT: Covenant

made by Nephi with heavenly ascent undertones as when he wrote, “For the fulness of mine intent is that I may persuade men to come unto the God of Abraham” (1 Nephi 6:4). In this light, “to come unto God” means to literally enter the Lord’s presence.

Nephi’s claim to know the mysteries previously discussed is arguably derived from events that occur in 1 Nephi 11 when Nephi, after “hear[ing] all the words of my father ... was desirous also that I might *see, and hear, and know of these things*” (1 Nephi 10:17; see also 1 Nephi 9:1).<sup>78</sup> The vision begins with Nephi being “caught away in the Spirit of the Lord, yea, into an exceedingly high mountain” (1 Nephi 11:1). This description “shares much in common with traditional Near Eastern imagery concerning the divine assembly and invocation of heavenly beings as council witnesses.”<sup>79</sup> On the mountain, Nephi was interviewed by the Spirit of God (1 Nephi 11:4). Judgement scenes like this are common in heavenly ascent literature. In this example, Bokovoy explains that by taking on this role of inquisitor, “the Spirit of the Lord ... assumed the traditional role of temple priest/guardian, [and] Nephi was able to receive the greater light and knowledge he desired on the mountain of

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Communications, 1993), 1:2, for an explanation of the ancient practice of creating records after *sôd* experiences. Both Spencer, *An Other Testament*, 47, and Rappleye, “Tongue of Angels,” 305, observe it is interesting that Nephi creates his record in connection to the building of a temple in 2 Nephi 5:16, 30–33. It should also be noted that Spencer believes Nephi uses a heavenly ascent pattern (comprised of the creation, the fall, the atonement, and the veil) found in his opening verse to structure the rest of his work in 1st and 2nd Nephi. See Spencer, *An Other Testament*, 43, 33–34, for a breakdown of this structure and pages 34–57 for greater detail on how Spencer comes to this conclusion; Baker and Ricks have similar commentary regarding Nephi’s agenda and his *sôd* experience (Baker and Ricks, *Who Shall Ascend*, 463–71).

78. David Bokovoy, “The Bible vs. the Book of Mormon: Still Losing the Battle,” *FARMS Review* 18, no. 1 (2006): 8; Tolley, “To ‘See and Hear,’” 147.

79. Bokovoy, “Thou Knowest That I Believe,” 22; Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 224–28.

God.”<sup>80</sup> After this interaction, Nephi was then inducted into similar, possibly even identical, mysteries as his father (1 Nephi 11:1).<sup>81</sup>

Nephi likely used this knowledge to structure his final thoughts in 2 Nephi 31–32. In these two chapters Nephi teaches readers how to return to the presence of God themselves by following a pattern of exercising faith; repenting; being baptized; receiving the Holy Spirit, light, and knowledge; praying; hearkening to the voice of angels; and then entering the presence of God.<sup>82</sup> Spencer refers to this process as “angelicization” and argues that Nephi is modeling this process after Lehi’s ascent to the divine council.<sup>83</sup> In essence then, Nephi is promising “that the obedient can, as Lehi had done, join the angelic council”<sup>84</sup> and become saved in God’s presence.<sup>85</sup>

Rappleye suggests that Nephi’s closing remarks are also connected to this heavenly ascent agenda. When Nephi bids farewell to his readers by declaring his words to be the word of God and promising that he will be present at their judgement day, he is essentially claiming to be a part of the divine council (2 Nephi 33:10–11; see also 2 Nephi 32:3).<sup>86</sup>

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80. Bokovoy, “Thou Knowest That I Believe,” 14 (see also his commentary on p. 3, 13, 18–19, 22). For commentary on angels helping prophets ascend to heaven in the Book of Mormon see Spencer, *An Other Testament*, 49; Jared T. Parker, “The Doctrine of Christ in 2 Nephi 31–32 as an Approach to the Vision of the Tree of Life,” in *The Things Which My Father Saw: Approaches to Lehi’s Dream and Nephi’s Vision* (2011 Sperry Symposium), ed. Daniel L. Belnap, Gaye Strathearn, and Stanley A. Johnson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 170–71; and Heiser, *Angels*, 32–46.

81. Smoot, “The Divine Council,” 175–77.

82. Hopkin shows how this pattern lines up strikingly well with Day of Atonement imagery (another form of heavenly ascent literature). See Shon Hopkin, “Representing the Divine Ascent: The Day of Atonement in Christian and Nephite Scripture and Practice,” in *The Temple Ancient & Restored (Proceedings of the Second Interpreter Matthew B. Brown Memorial Conference, 25 October 2014)*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and Donald W. Parry (Orem, UT: The Interpreter Foundation, 2016), 337–60.

83. Spencer, *An Other Testament*, 51.

84. *Ibid.*, 51–52. See also Rappleye, “Tongue of Angels,” 304 for similar conclusion.

85. “The progressive structure of 2 Nephi 31:14 (the words of the Son) would suggest that enduring to the end is continuing the ascent until you reach the pinnacle, and being saved is arriving at that culminating point. Hence, speaking with the tongue of angels is in some sense represents being saved” (Rappleye, “Tongue of Angels,” 317).

86. Rappleye, “Tongue of Angels,” 322. For support of this notion, see Bokovoy, “Thou Knowest That I Believe,” 7.

Thus, Nephi concludes by confirming his *sôd* experience and testifying that “the scriptures” that he “write[s]” and “delighteth in,” are simply the record of “the things which I have seen and heard” in his heavenly ascent (2 Nephi 4:15–16). If readers want to be saved in the presence of God, as he and his father were, Nephi witnesses that they must follow his heavenly ascent pattern presented in 2 Nephi 31–32.

### **Examining 2 Nephi 9–10 through the Hermeneutical Lens of Heavenly Ascent**

The manifestation of God in heavenly ascent results in what Nephi and other Book of Mormon prophets understood as salvation, or in other words, redemption from the fall of Adam back into the presence of God (2 Nephi 31:15–16, 21; see also 1 Nephi 15:14; 2 Nephi 1:15, 2:2–10, 26; Alma 58:41; Helaman 14:14–18; Ether 3:13–14).<sup>87</sup> Thus, if heavenly ascent is synonymous with redemption, then the plan of redemption in the Book of Mormon is synonymous with the motifs of heavenly ascent.<sup>88</sup> Though certain scholars have touched on this connection, there has been no study to date that has rigorously examined Book of Mormon sermons to verify this statement.<sup>89</sup>

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87. As Spencer put it, “Redemption for Nephi is a question of receiving angelic messengers who, coming from the divine council and therefore knowing the unfolding history of the covenant, are sent to initiate the faithful into the angelic mysteries that will give them to know that same covenantal history, as well as to know the God — the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob — who guides that history” (Spencer, *An Other Testament*, 56–57). See also Baker and Ricks, *Who Shall Ascend*, 512.

88. To this point, Baker and Ricks have asserted, “The entire message of the Book of Mormon revolves around a single concept. It is the same as the pivotal doctrine of the festival temple drama—the basic human need to return to the Garden and to the presence of God. ... It is what Alma called ‘the plan of redemption’ (Alma 12). ... If the whole plan of salvation were reduced to a single sentence, the first part of that sentence would be about the Savior’s Atonement, and the last part might read: ‘that one might return and remain in the presence of God’” (Baker and Ricks, *Who Shall Ascend*, 510, 518).

89. For example, Spencer has noted that “Nephi’s fourfold structure effectively reproduces what the Book of Mormon elsewhere calls the ‘plan of redemption’” (Spencer, *An Other Testament*, 42). Baker and Ricks seem to have presented the most thorough analysis to date, but while their work is aimed at demonstrated heavenly ascent motifs in the Book of Mormon, the section that connects this concept directly to the plan of redemption is merely nine pages in approximate length (Baker and Ricks, *Who Shall Ascend*, 510–19). This analysis consists of the examination of about thirteen short pericopes (ranging in length from one to six verses) and five biblical pericopes (ranging in length from one to five verses).

This paper fills this gap in the research by offering a hermeneutical approach of how to examine sermons in the Book of Mormon to identify if its prophets shared a common heavenly ascent paradigm when discussing the plan of salvation. This will serve as a model for other sermons to be likewise examined in future studies. For now, this section will analyze portions of Jacob's writings in Second Nephi to discover if he might have used heavenly ascent motifs to understand the plan of salvation. After this analysis of Jacob's sermon, a discussion of the data collected using this interpretive technique will be completed with suggestions for further research.

## 2 Nephi 9–10 Overview

Jacob's words in 2 Nephi 9–10 are part of a larger two-day discourse. Although the setting for this event is unknown, it is likely that it occurred in connection with the Nephites' recent exodus fleeing the Lamanites.<sup>90</sup> Additionally, certain scholars suggest this sermon was given in relation to "a covenant-renewal ceremony during the Feast of the Tabernacles (Sukkot)."<sup>91</sup> This is significant because other scholars claim that an "operetta-like play" containing extensive heavenly ascent motifs was anciently associated with this festival.<sup>92</sup> If Jacob was speaking during

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Although very insightful, there stands a need for a much more systematic and comprehensive study of this claim.

90. Monte S. Nyman, *Book of Mormon Commentary: These Records are True*, vol. 2 (Orem, UT: Granite Publishing, 2003), 447. Welch suggests that the setting for the sermon is the coronation of Nephi, since the exodus had left them needing to quickly create a structure of government to flourish (Welch, "The Temple in the Book of Mormon," 326–28). If so, the coronation would fit nicely within the themes of the Feast of Tabernacle that will be discussed later in this paper. "Another possibility is that they assembled in a church conference, comparable to today's stake conference or general conference" (Nyman, *These Records are True*, 447).

91. John S. Thompson, "Isaiah 50–51, the Israelite Autumn Festivals, and the Covenant Speech of Jacob in 2 Nephi 6–10," in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 124–25. In the same article, Thomas suggests that one indication of this fact is the presence of an ancient Near Eastern covenant/treaty pattern in Jacob's sermon (along with other motifs that are arguably present in both Jacob's writings and Israelite New Year festivals). See also Brant Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, vol. 2 (Sandy, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 158, 180.

92. Terence Szink and John W. Welch, "King Benjamin's Speech in the Context of Ancient Israelite Festivals," *King Benjamin's Speech: "That Ye May Learn Wisdom"* ed. John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, UT: FARMS 1998),



the Feast of the Tabernacles, the possibility of his sermon containing heavenly ascent themes might comfortably situate it within an ancient Israelite context.

While not all of Jacob's words are recorded (2 Nephi 11:1), Jacob appears to be addressing the Nephites' mentality that they have been removed from the promises of God.<sup>93</sup> In this two-day discourse, Jacob quotes from passages of Isaiah (Jacob 6–8) and then provides his personal commentary on those pericopes (2 Nephi 9–10).<sup>94</sup> He teaches the people about death and hell and about how the Atonement of Jesus Christ overcomes these barriers. He wants the Nephites to know that “the promises made to the general Israelite community still apply to them as well.”<sup>95</sup> Though they have been driven out of past lands of inheritance, the land they currently live on will be *their* land of inheritance (2 Nephi 10:10, 19–20). Thus, the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant still apply to them (2 Nephi 9:20–22).<sup>96</sup>

### Heavenly Ascent Motifs in 2 Nephi 9–10

2 Nephi 9–10 will now be examined through the hermeneutical lens of the six-part heavenly ascent pattern discussed earlier. In the beginning of his remarks, Jacob explains that he has chosen to quote Isaiah so that the audience might “know concerning the covenants of the Lord that he has covenanted with all the house of Israel” (2 Nephi 9:1). These covenants

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147–223; Baker and Ricks, *Who Shall Ascend*, 22–75, 129–457. From these scholars, it seems evident that the centralization of temple worship under Josiah and the Babylonian exile both played a large role in the discontinuation of this drama in the Law of Moses ordinances; see Baker and Ricks, *Who Shall Ascend*, 23, 34, 53, and Barker, *The Hidden Tradition*, 33. Considering this temple drama, it is interesting to realize that John W. Welch places the location of Jacob's sermon at the temple in the city of Nephi and refers to the sermon as a temple text (Welch, “The Temple in the Book of Mormon,” 328, 300–301).

93. Daniel Belnap, “I Will Contend with Them That Contendeth with Thee’: The Divine Warrior in Jacob’s Speech of 2 Nephi 6–10,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 17, nos. 1–2 (2008): 21, 25–26.

94. *Ibid.*, 22.

95. *Ibid.*, 27.

96. “These verses should be read as a unified passage. Jacob had reminded his listeners that they were on “an isle” but uses here “isles,” thus saying that his people are part of a typical pattern, not an unusual one. There are other isles—therefore other locations to which Yahweh has led other Israelites. His listeners should understand that they are part of a great plan, inheritors of blessings and promises in a pattern Yahweh has established to benefit many of his children” (Gardner, *Second Nephi through Jacob*, 190).

Jacob is speaking about refer to the Abrahamic Covenant, which was promised to Abraham and to his posterity (2 Nephi 8:2; Abraham 2:9–11). These covenants were renewed with the entire community of Israel at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:5–7, 24:7–8).<sup>97</sup> In his speech, Jacob explains the purpose of these covenants were to restore the people to “lands of inheritance” and to “the true church and fold of God” (2 Nephi 9:2).<sup>98</sup>

It is likely these covenants and the two purposes outlined by Jacob carried with them the understanding of promises of heavenly ascent given that Abraham was experiencing a theophany during the making of this covenant (Genesis 15:1, 17:1; Abraham 2:6).<sup>99</sup> When the same covenant is made with Abraham’s grandson, Jacob, it is likely he also receives a theophany (Genesis 28:12–20, 24–30).<sup>100</sup> Additionally, the renewal of this covenant with the community of Israel at Mount Sinai is also connected to a theophany for Moses (Exodus 19).<sup>101</sup> Jacob’s opening

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97. Berlin and Brettler, *Jewish Study Bible*, 136; Heiser, *Angels*, 38–39.

98. In addition to being the setting in which covenants were discussed, this event possibly also included making or renewing covenants. See Thompson, “Isaiah 50–51,” 123–27.

99. This assumes that Jacob and the Nephites have, either from their previous stay in Jerusalem or because of the brass plates, similar knowledge of these accounts as is currently found in the Old Testament as the text has come down to modern readers. Note that “source critics identify ch 17 as the P(riestly) version of the covenant with Abraham (of which J version appears in ch 15)” (Berlin and Brettler, *Jewish Study Bible*, 34).

100. This account is riddled with heavenly ascent motifs, among which are a narrative with a two-part ascent pattern (starting in Jacob’s flight from his homeland and ending with his reunion with God, his brother, and his land of inheritance; see Genesis 27–33), angelic ministrations (Genesis 28:12, 32:24), receiving a new name (Genesis 32:28), and receiving mysteries (Genesis 32:29–30). See also Marion G. Romney, “Temples — The Gates to Heaven,” *Ensign* (March 1971), 16.

101. Significantly when thinking about heavenly ascent motifs, in this experience Moses “saw” and “heard” the Lord (Exodus 19:11, 9). Furthermore, motifs like a cleansing process, judgment, light, and the presence of God are also present (Exodus 18:12, 14, 16, 18) (see Berlin and Brettler, *Jewish Study Bible*, 136–38). Considering this, it is interesting that Barker noted, “Scholars have also long suspected that the account of Moses receiving the Law on Sinai had been merged with memories of Solomon’s temple, and that a temple ritual had been the original framework of the story” (Barker, *The Hidden Tradition*, 38). It should be noted that in restoration scripture, it is explained that the community was also invited to participate in this ascent; however, because they “hardened their heart,” they lost this opportunity (Doctrine and Covenants 84:23–25). Regardless on their acceptance of this opportunity, the fact Israel was also offered a chance to receive a theophany further connects these covenants with heavenly ascent motifs. Also worth considering

remarks might have been crafted to signal to the attentive listener to expect heavenly ascent motifs in his following remarks. If correct, this significantly affects how one should understand Jacob's teaching that, "nevertheless, in our bodies we shall see God" (2 Nephi 9:4). Rather than only referring to a post-death manifestation of the Master, Jacob might also be referring to a visitation from God while in mortality—like Abraham, Jacob, and Moses experienced.

Following his opening remarks, Jacob immediately describes the two-part structure found in heavenly ascent literature. He first references Jesus Christ as "the great Creator," then repeats this title in the next verse and explains that this Creator has a plan for mankind (2 Nephi 9:5–6). In connection to verse five, verse six and seven summarize this plan as including the creation, the fall of mankind, and then the infinite atonement. This model, then, portrays a person's descent through the creation and fall pattern and then a person's ascent through the atonement, which brings mankind back into "the presence of Lord" from which they were "cut off from" due to the fall (2 Nephi 9:6–7).<sup>102</sup> Hence, Jacob seems to be introducing the plan of salvation in heavenly ascent terminology.

Jacob then begins to outline two directions a person might take at the low point in the two-part structure. The first, rather than a heavenly ascent pattern, could be termed a "hellish descent" pattern because of a person's further descent away from God when following this path (2 Nephi 9:9–10). Because of its antithetical nature, this negative pattern will be discussed later in this paper. Jacob's second direction follows

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is Thompson's comment that "the Feast of Tabernacles was a time of renewing covenants, specifically the Sinai covenant" (Thompson, "Isaiah 50–51," 135; Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 163–70).

102. Thompson explains that it is of "interest to note that the word atonement appears only nine times in the small plates of Nephi. Four of the nine are spoken in this sermon" (Thompson, "Isaiah 50–51," 148). He also comments, "How fitting that Jacob would speak so much concerning the sacrifice and atonement of Christ (2 Nephi 9:4–22) if his speech was given during the autumn festivals that included the Day of Atonement" (Thompson, "Isaiah 50–51," 133). It is important to note that there are a variety of atonement theories that are arguably present in the Book of Mormon. However, an approach of simply recognizing the concept of atonement in the text, rather than delineating the concept's nuances, will be sufficient for the purposes of this paper. The basis of this assertion is that an overarching model can allow for different perspectives on one of its specific components. For a further conversation on atonement theories see Blake Oster, "The Compassion Theory of Atonement," in *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Problem with Theism and the Love of God*, vol.2 (Sandy, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2006), 235–84.

a heavenly ascent pattern. This path “prepareth a way for our escape” from the first pattern and is the great “plan of God” and “the way of deliverance of our God” (2 Nephi 9:10–11, 13).<sup>103</sup>

The succeeding verses continue Jacob’s discussion about the resurrection, and its role in bringing mankind back into the presence of God (2 Nephi 9:11–24).<sup>104</sup> One can find several heavenly ascent motifs in this section. For instance, when a person is resurrected and in the presence of God, the participant receives special “knowledge” or “perfect knowledge” (2 Nephi 9:13–14). This type of knowledge could also be similar to the phrase Jacob uses in the next chapter—true knowledge (2 Nephi 10:2). In that instance, this special knowledge refers to a “knowledge of their redeemer,” argued later in this paper to mean a physical experience with the Lord’s presence.<sup>105</sup> Thus, the knowledge in 2 Nephi 9:13–14 might very well be associated with the mysteries received in *sôd* experiences or, in the very least, consciously designed to be redolent of it.

This resurrection scene describes another motif that is common in heavenly ascent literature: judgment scenes. An example of this is Nephi’s cross-examination in 1 Nephi 11:4. Such judgement scenes in heavenly ascent literature provided a method for the initiate to prove worthiness.<sup>106</sup> Judgment is an important motif in Jacob’s sermon

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103. Another way of describing these two paths— ascent or descent—is the Doctrine of the Two Ways. See “the Doctrine of the Two Ways,” Noel Reynolds, “The Ancient Doctrine of the Two Ways in the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (2017): 49, for more understanding on this term. In this same article, Reynolds interprets Jacob’s words in 2 Nephi 9 through the lens of the Doctrine of Two Ways from pages 68–72.

104. A topic that first appears in verse 6. It is very intriguing to note that according to Barker, “Resurrection was transformation into the angelic state. There are accounts of how Enoch was transformed into an angel, resurrected, *and then sent back to earth*. The most detailed of these accounts described how he was anointed with oil as he stood before the throne and saw himself becoming an angel. In temple theology, *resurrection was not a post mortem experience*. It was *theosis*, the transformation of a human being to a divine being — which came with the gift of Wisdom — and *theosis*, described in various ways, was at the heart of temple tradition, together with the belief in a resurrected anointed one, a resurrected Messiah” (Barker, *Temple Theology*, 23, 57 [emphasis in original]).

105. See Helaman 15:13 where this phrase is used similarly.

106. Bokovoy, “Thou Knowest That I Believe,” 13, 18–19, 22.

(appearing multiple times) and is also tied to people being worthy of the presence of God (2 Nephi 9:7, 15, 22, 44, 46).<sup>107</sup>

In connection to the idea of proving worthiness, Jacob's resurrection/judgement scene also correlates with another heavenly ascent motif: a cleansing process. The special knowledge Jacob mentions in relation to the judgement makes the resurrected being aware of their guilt or righteousness before God (2 Nephi 9:13–14). This is resonant of the biblical scene when Isaiah suddenly recognizes his state of uncleanness during his heavenly ascent (Isaiah 6:5). Like Isaiah's "live coal" that cleanses his lips (Isaiah 6:6), Jacob explains that to be "clothed with purity" one must "repent, and be baptized in his name, having perfect faith in the Holy One of Israel" (2 Nephi 9:14, 23–24). Once cleansed in this manner, a person is not only worthy of entering the presence of God but also of "inherit[ing] the kingdom of God" (2 Nephi 9:18). These verses, therefore, contain Jacob's warning of the reality of a heavenly ascent and the dangers of entering God's presence without previously cleansing oneself appropriately.<sup>108</sup>

### **Death, Hell, and the Temple-Oriented New Year Feast**

The outcome of this cleansing pattern is to destroy two enemies: death and hell. First referenced in verse ten, this duet is a major theme of Jacob's sermon. In fact, 2 Nephi 9 "contains more references to hell than any other chapter in all scripture."<sup>109</sup> One reason this is significant is because of the connection of this duet to a pre-exilic, "temple-oriented New Year festival."<sup>110</sup> The theory of this pre-exilic, temple-oriented festival

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107. Thompson argues that judgment was also "one of the principal themes surrounding the New Year in postexilic Jewish tradition, as well as in the preexilic ancient Near East" (Thompson, "Isaiah 50–51," 128). This fact is important because of this paper's next section, which connects these New Year traditions, at least in their preexilic form, to heavenly ascent motifs. Also notice that the confession that occurs during v. 46's judgment might also indicate Day of Atonement motifs (and therefore heavenly ascent). See Welch, "The Temple in the Book of Mormon," 355, and Thompson, "Isaiah 50–51," 134–35.

108. JST Exodus 33:20, 23; D&C 67:11–13. Remember the previously cited commentary from the Jewish Study Bible that "Isaiah fears that he will die, because he is not worthy to see God. The belief was widespread in ancient Israel that a human who saw God would die (see, e.g., Exodus 33:20). Isaiah is informed that he is an exception to this general rule when a seraph or angelic being purifies him and reassures him that he is safe." Berlin and Brettler, *The Jewish Study Bible*, 779.

109. John Hilton III, "Jacob's Textual Legacy," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 2 (2013): 55.

110. Baker and Ricks, *Who Shall Ascend*, 40.

has been present in scholarship since the late nineteenth century.<sup>111</sup> Hugh Nibley was the first Latter-day Saint scholar to employ this idea.<sup>112</sup> Basically, this argument claims that associated with the temple there was a ritual drama that consisted of a “dramatic representation of the full eternal sweep of the powers of the Savior’s Atonement,” and that it “was originally the focal point of the Law of Moses.”<sup>113</sup> The Israelites would “ritually reenact the story of their origins and purposes with a drama that included a remaking of their earlier ordinances and covenants.”<sup>114</sup> This ritual ascent mirrored the heavenly ascent ending with a person’s reconciliation with God and becoming a king and priest.<sup>115</sup>

To assure the participants of their ability to accomplish this divine odyssey, the drama promised “that Jehovah himself [would] avert the king’s difficulties—even to defeating the ultimate enemies, death and hell—to save the king and his people.”<sup>116</sup> This was a major theme of

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111. “Hermann Gunkel, a professor of Old Testament in Berlin, was among the first who argued that the pre-exilic Israelites may also have celebrated a temple-oriented New Year festival.” Baker and Ricks explain that Professor Gunkel published several works on this topic from 1888–1928 (Baker and Ricks, *Who Shall Ascend*, 40). Baker and Ricks also explain, “There is a cycle in almost every academic discipline, where ideas are challenged rethought, challenged again, then again reconsidered.” They explain that this occurred for this theory in the “second half of the 20th century” but has since seen a resurgence of interest in scholars like Margaret Barker (Baker and Ricks, *Who Shall Ascend*, 48–49).

112. See Hugh Nibley, “Old World Ritual in the New World,” in *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 295–310. See also Baker and Rick, *Who Shall Ascend*, 47, for a list of many scholars since Nibley who have been interested in how this theory applies to the people of the Book of Mormon.

113. Baker and Ricks, *Who Shall Ascend*, 41, 71, 73; To this claim the authors gives examples in Psalm 32 and 49. They also offer Book of Mormon examples like 1 Nephi 22:20–21; 2 Nephi 11:4, 25:24, 30; Jacob 4:5; Mosiah 16:14; Alma 30:3, 34:13; Helaman 8:14–16; 3 Nephi 9:15–20, 15:2–8, 20:23. See also Welch’s commentary about the Nephite’s “Strict Observance of the Law of Moses” in Welch, “The Temple in the Book of Mormon,” 302–19.

114. Baker and Ricks, *Who Shall Ascend*, 68.

115. Baker and Ricks, *Who Shall Ascend*, 7–8. “The ancient temple drama was a kind of generic version of that *sode* experience. ... To say that the [drama] contained a *sode* experience may not be technically true, but to say the [drama] taught a *sode* experience is correct ... the drama lasted eight days and was divided into three major segments, like three acts of a play with multiple scenes. The three acts were the premortal experience, this world, and promises of the world to come” (Baker and Ricks, *Who Shall Ascend*, 148–49).

116. *Ibid.*, 75.

the ritual and allowed the initiate to ascend to “the cosmic temple.”<sup>117</sup> In fact, as the festival ritual came to a conclusion, there “was a celebration of Jehovah’s ultimate triumph over evil, and of his creation of a new and wonderful world of peace and harmony.”<sup>118</sup> This imagery juxtaposes the evil of death and hell with the creation story.<sup>119</sup> Interestingly, “Throughout the ancient Near East, a common variation on this narrative was to personify the precosmic ocean, characterizing it as a serpent or monster, transforming the creation process into a battle between God, the Creator, and chaos, the monster.”<sup>120</sup> Thus, Jehovah was often seen by the Israelites as a divine warrior who battled this monster of death and hell.<sup>121</sup>

It is plausible that Jacob could be consciously using the motifs of this drama in his sermon because the ritual was being celebrated at the same time as the delivery of 2 Nephi 9. Thus, when Jacob refers to the Savior’s victory over death and hell, it is probably not a coincidence that this motif is identical to heavenly ascent narrative of the pre-exilic drama. Even Jacob’s use of the term monster in describing death and hell ties perfectly well within the festival drama (2 Nephi 9:10, 19, 26). This monster parallels the drama’s concept of chaos, described by Jacob as “experiencing ... death without the mediation of the atonement.”<sup>122</sup> Jacob adds that, when Christ overcomes this monster, mankind inherits a new world—the kingdom of God (2 Nephi 9:18). This is strikingly like

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117. Ibid., 45.

118. Ibid., 43.

119. E. O. James also argues that the creation account was used in connection with preexilic New Year temple traditions (E. O. James, *Creation and Cosmology: A Historical and Comparative Inquiry* [Leiden, NDL: E. J. Brill, 1969], 29).

120. Belnap, “I Will Contend with Them,” 23.

121. Ibid., 23–24, suggests the following scriptural examples: Exodus 15:1–21; Deuteronomy 7:19–23, 28:7, 32:41–43; Isaiah 51:9–10; Psalm 44:23–24, 26, 74:12–13, 20, 22; Jeremiah 20:11; Habakkuk 3:12–14. See also Gardner, *Second Nephi through Jacob*, 163–64 for ancient Near Eastern context of monster. This connection might also explain some of the significance of the laver in the Israelite temple. Levenson explains, “It would make sense for the Temple, which bears witness to both enthronement and creation, to have featured a metallic representation of the vanquished adversary [the tamed waters of chaos; see Isaiah 51:9–10; 2 Nephi 8:9–10], now reduced to no more than an item of decoration in the precincts of his victor’s royal palace” (Jon E. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988], 153).

122. Belnap, “I Will Contend with Them,” 31, 23.

the end of the temple drama when Christ triumphs over evil and creates “a new and wonderful world of peace and harmony.”<sup>123</sup>

### **Day of Atonement and Nephi's Sermon in 2 Nephi 31–32**

There are more heavenly ascent motifs contained in 2 Nephi 9, but to appreciate their significance a basic review of the Day of Atonement, of Nephi's sermon in 2 Nephi 31–32, and of the heavenly ascent agendas of these two things must be discussed.<sup>124</sup> The Day of Atonement, or Yom Kippur in Hebrew, is a ritual ascent festival celebrated in Judaism on the tenth day of the seventh month of the Jewish calendar.<sup>125</sup> It is considered by Jews to be the holiest day in their calendar because it offers them atonement, meaning “the end of estrangement and the return to perfect unity” (Leviticus 16:16).<sup>126</sup>

The need for a Day of Atonement “begins in the garden of Eden, where God seems to reside, as he is seen walking and relating intimately to Adam and Eve. Disobedience and sin cause them to be driven from

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123. Baker and Ricks, *Who Shall Ascend*, 43.

124. See also Barker, *Temple Theology*, 60–65; Barker, *Temple Mysticism*, 143–52; Heiser, *Demon*, 24–27, 90, 214–15.

125. Berlin, and Brettler, *The Jewish Study Bible*, 231; Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, Dana M. Pike, and David Rolph Seely, *Jehovah and the World of the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2009), 119. In the Bible, this festival is discussed in Leviticus 16, Leviticus 23:27–32, Leviticus 25:9–10, Exodus 30:10, and Numbers 29:7–11. However, the earliest non-biblical accounts can be found in “Josephus (first century AD), Philo (first century AD), *Jubilees* (second century BC), and the Dead Sea Scrolls (first century BC to first century AD)” (Hopkin, “Representing the Divine Ascent,” 338). The late dating of these extrabiblical accounts along with theories that place the Pentateuch written after the Jews' Babylonian exile have led many scholars to “assume that the Day of Atonement ritual was instituted in the postexilic period. This assumption has been contested in recent years. ... While one would expect more explicit indication of this than is present, the argument from silence that is the primary basis for the judgment about a postexilic origin is not a strong one” (Patrick D. Miller, *The Religion of Ancient Israel (Library of Ancient Israel)* [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000], 115). Subsequently, scholars today still debate the origins of this ritual. However, for those who believe in the historicity of the Book of Mormon, this scholarly debate can be informed by Nephi's claim to have access to the Pentateuch prior to the Jewish exile (1 Nephi 5:11, 15). Therefore, considering this evidence and the lack of scholarly consensus on this matter, this paper will assume the Day of Atonement has a pre-exilic origin.

126. Robert L. Hubbard Jr., and J. Andrew Dearman, *Introducing the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 79–80.



the garden and the presence of God (Genesis 1–11)” (see Figure 2).<sup>127</sup> However, the covenantal relationship of the people of Israel, along with the liturgy of the tabernacle, made it possible for God’s presence to once again be available to the people.<sup>128</sup>

This was the point of the Day of Atonement:

Once a year on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, Adam’s eastward expulsion from the Garden is reversed when the high priest travels west past the consuming fire of the sacrifice and the purifying water of the laver, through the veil woven with images of cherubim. Thus, he returns to the original point of creation, where he pours out the atoning blood of the sacrifice, reestablishing the covenant relationship with God.<sup>129</sup>

Thus, this ritual ascent “was the acme of all temple rituals” because it was a day of purification that ritually reconnected the Israelites with God and brought them back into his presence.<sup>130</sup> A simplified illustration of this ascent is depicted in Figure 2.

As discussed previously, Nephi is likely utilizing this festival in his sermon contained in 2 Nephi 31–32.<sup>131</sup> Hopkin argues there is a connection between Nephi’s description of the doctrine of Christ and the high priest’s ascent through the temple during the Day of Atonement by pointing out direct parallels between the two ideas.<sup>132</sup> Nephi was rhetorically “provid[ing] [his audience] with a familiar context by describing them in terms provided by the Temple of Solomon.”<sup>133</sup> Thus,

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127. J. Daniel Hays, *The Temple and the Tabernacle: A Study of God’s Dwelling Places from Genesis to Revelations* (Ada, MI: Baker Books, 2016), 13.

128. Ibid.

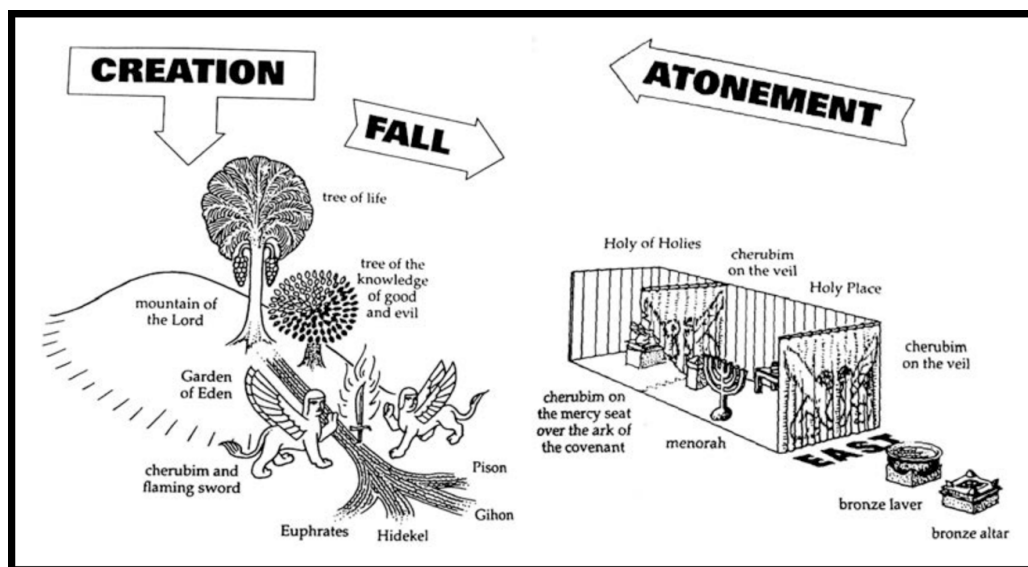
129. Parry, “Garden of Eden,” 135. See also Hopkin, “Representing the Divine Ascent,” 341, and Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (Westmont, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 100.

130. Daniel Stokl Ben Ezra, *The Impact of Yom Kippur on Early Christianity: The Day of Atonement from Second Temple Judaism to the Fifth Century* (Tubingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 28. Note that Baker and Ricks explain the Day of Atonement preceded the Feast of Tabernacles and its drama for this very reason (Baker and Ricks, *Who Shall Ascend*, 32. See also Thompson, “Isaiah 50–51,” 128).

131. Hopkin, “Representing the Divine Ascent,” 337–60. For a discussion about how the Nephites might have adapted the Day of Atonement and the tabernacle, see Don Bradley, *The Lost 116 Pages* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2019), 193–208.

132. Jared Parker also saw the connection between these two things. See Parker, “The Doctrine of Christ,” 172.

133. Hopkin, “Representing the Divine Ascent,” 347.



**Figure 2.** Concepts of the creation, fall, and atonement help demonstrate the purpose of the Tabernacle to bring participants back into the presence of God.<sup>134</sup>

Nephi's doctrine of Christ parallels the high priest's ritual ascent in the Day of the Atonement (see Figure 3). By "moving by faith or real intent to and then past the altar of sacrifice, which Jesus states is the sacrifice of a repentant, 'broken heart and contrite spirit' (3 Nephi 9:20)"<sup>135</sup> a person begins the process of entering the presence of God. After faith and repentance, a person is baptized which is associated here with the laver of water.<sup>136</sup> This leads a person to "the gate by which (they) should enter" (2 Nephi 31:17) which in this paradigm is the entrance to the Holy Place of the tabernacle.

Once inside the Holy Place, there are certain objects that might correspond to what Nephi wants his readers to do "after ye have gotten into this strait and narrow path" (2 Nephi 31:19). The Menorah, with its blazing light, relates well to receiving "the baptism of fire and see[ing] by the light of the Holy Ghost."<sup>137</sup> Another connection can be found in

134. Images from Parry, "Garden of Eden," 134–35.

135. Hopkin, "Representing the Divine Ascent," 349.

136. Gardner discusses how the Christian concept of baptism during the time of John the Baptist could have been a natural development of the laver's ritual cleanings (Gardner, *Second Nephi through Jacob*, 436).

137. Hopkin, "Representing the Divine Ascent," 349. It is important to consider that the concept of baptism by fire has been connected to heavenly ascent motifs by Rappleye when he wrote, "Baptism by water is the gate (2 Nephi 31:17), while the Holy Ghost is the *gatekeeper*. Nephi's direct experience teaches that 'the Spirit of the Lord' proves ones' worthiness to enter into the presence of the Lord and converse with angels (1 Nephi 11:1–6). Thus, Nephi asks, 'how could ye speak with

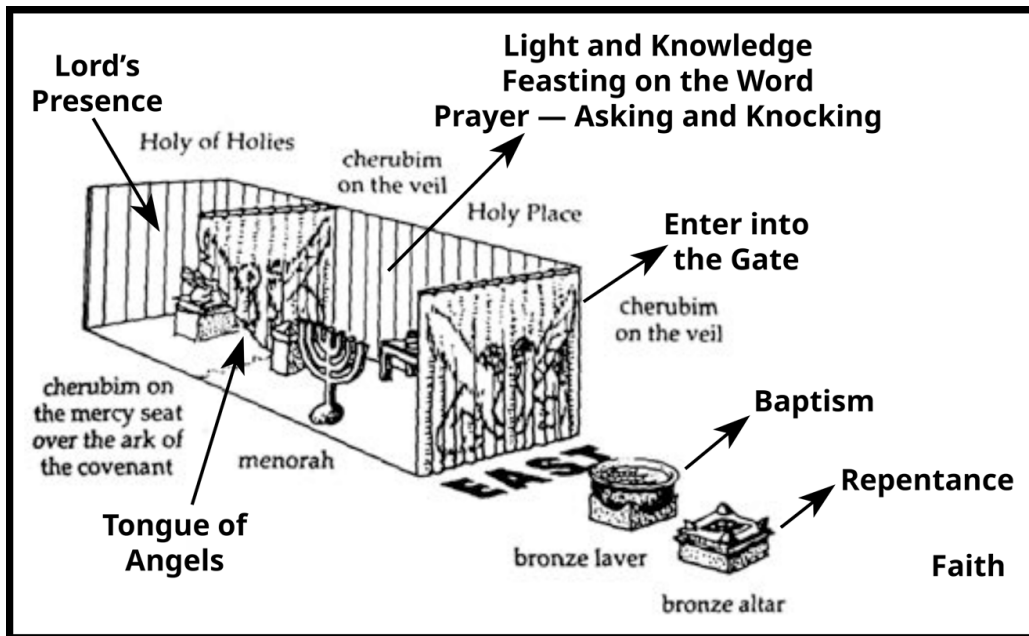


Figure 3. Demonstrating how the doctrine of Christ overlaps with the structure of the Tabernacle.<sup>138</sup>

the table of shewbread and its bread and wine. “This bread and wine provide a communal feast with God, symbolizing the strengthening power of the word of God ... to move forward in the name and power of Christ.”<sup>139</sup> This is directly connected to Nephi’s concept of feasting on the word of God and enduring to the end (2 Nephi 31:20).<sup>140</sup> The second to last symbol is the altar of incense, which symbolizes “the prayers of all God’s people” (Revelation 8:3; see also Luke 1:10). The altar of incense

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the tongue of angels save it were by the Holy Ghost?” (2 Nephi 32:2). Significantly, Nephi repeatedly associates the Holy Ghost with *fire* (2 Nephi 31:13, 14, 17), and for Nephi it is the baptism of *fire*, rather than water, that cleanses sin (2 Nephi 31:17). This calls to mind the vision of Isaiah, which Nephi recorded, where a seraph — in Hebrew, שָׂרָפָה (*sārāp*), literally meaning ‘fiery one’ — purges Isaiah of his sins by placing a hot coal to his mouth (2 Nephi 16:6–7; Isaiah 6:6–7)” (Rappleye, “Tongue of Angels,” 320).

138. Image from Parry, “Garden of Eden,” 135. Arrows and doctrine of Christ labeling added.

139. Hopkin, “Representing the Divine Ascent,” 351.

140. Rappleye explained an additional connection between feasting on the words of God and heavenly ascent literature. He notes that Ezekiel and Lehi both are given a book they each eat in their heavenly ascent experiences. Thus, these two prophets had to feast upon the words of God to continue their ascent. Additionally, because angels “speak the words of Christ” (2 Nephi 32:3), feasting on the word could also be connected to speaking with the tongue of angels. Rappleye, “Tongue of Angels,” 320.

connects to Nephi's instruction that praying, asking, and knocking leads a person to the veil of God. Embroidered on this veil were two cherubim, suggesting that a person must interact with angels (i.e., speak with the tongue of angels) to come into the presence of God, which was symbolized by the Holy of Holies.<sup>141</sup>

In Nephi's sermon, the worshipper is left before the veil in the Holy Place "seeking to speak the tongue of angels by a reliance on the word of God and the gift of the Holy Ghost."<sup>142</sup> This is noteworthy because the phrase "tongue of angels" is Nephi's way of inviting readers to ascend to a *sôd* experience and, as the angels do, sing and praise the name of the Lord.<sup>143</sup> Thus, what Nephi is doing is using the ritual ascent of the Day of Atonement to promise readers "if the worshipper will endure appropriately, it is possible to pass through the veil, enter into [the divine council], seeing [God] in the flesh, face to face" (2 Nephi 32:6).<sup>144</sup>

### **Continuing the Approach Towards the Presence of God in 2 Nephi 9**

The model Nephi uses in 2 Nephi 31–32 can help readers identify the heavenly ascent motifs inside Jacob's work in 2 Nephi 9. The fact that chapter nine comes first could lead a reader to conclude that the latter chapters might be referring to the first. However, there are several problems with this simple analysis. First, it is unclear chronologically when either of these sections were created in relation to the other.

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141. Exodus 25:22 clearly connects the Holy of Holies (with its ark of the covenant) to the presence of God when the Lord declares to Moses, "I will meet with thee, and I will commune with thee" above the mercy seat (a divine promise that was at least partially fulfilled when the Lord spoke to Moses face to face in Exodus 33:7–11). Thus, future generations of Israelites explicitly understood the mercy seat to be representative of the presence of God (for examples, see Exodus 29:42–43, 45–46; 30:6, 36; 33:7–11; Leviticus 26:11–12; 1 Samuel 4:4). See also Spencer, *An Other Testament*, 46. It should be noted that "this 'democratization,' we might call it, of the *sôd* experience would have been radical by the standards of Nephi's pre-exilic Israelite religious culture, given that the *sôd* was reserved for prophets, but by his own generous standard (cf. 2 Nephi 26:23–33) as well as the standard of what would eventually become idealist Nephite egalitarianism, this is understandable" (Smoot, "The Divine Council," 177). For intriguing commentary on "tongues of angels," see also Heiser, *Angels*, 158–62.

142. Hopkin, "Representing the Divine Ascent," 351.

143. Spencer, *An Other Testament*, 51–52. See also Rappleye, "Tongue of Angels," 304, and Smoot, "The Divine Council," 177.

144. Hopkin, "Representing the Divine Ascent," 351. See also Rappleye, "Tongue of Angels," 317, and Parker, "The Doctrine of Christ," 175.

Nephi's teachings in 2 Nephi 31–32 could have previously been given to the Nephites. Jacob could be quoting his brother's thoughts and Nephi simply re-recorded or included them later while writing his book. Because of this ambiguity, this paper examines the intertextuality without a stance on which author is building off the work of the other.

Jacob's cleansing process—faith, repentance, baptism, receiving the Holy Ghost, and enduring to the end (2 Nephi 9:23–24) — is identical to the one Nephi describes in 2 Nephi 31–32. Jacob is using the identical pattern to help listeners accomplish the same heavenly ascent agenda Nephi describes. Note, also, the emphasis on heeding Jacob's "words" which are also the "words of your maker" and the "words of truth" (2 Nephi 9:40). Three times, Jacob stresses the importance of remembering these words (2 Nephi 9:44, 51–52). Significantly, "remembering the word" is associated with the concept of feasting on things which "perisheth not, neither can be corrupted" (2 Nephi 9:51).<sup>145</sup> In this sermon, Jacob associates perishing (2 Nephi 9:28, 30–32) and corruption (2 Nephi 9:7, 13) with the presence of the monster and the devil. He is unfolding the process that leads to the presence of the Lord. Thus, Nephi's heavenly ascent design in 2 Nephi 31–32 finds an echo in Jacob's association of feasting and heeding the word of the maker to come unto God.

The intertextuality of 2 Nephi 9:50–51 supports this conclusion. Following Jacob's previous precedent, this pericope is a quotation from Isaiah 55:1–2.<sup>146</sup> These verses introduce a chapter that is "an invitation to redemption," focused on covenant making and "seek[ing] ye the Lord" (Isaiah 55:3, 5)—themes clearly connected to the Day of Atonement

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145. Of interest, Thompson connects the idea of feasting to fasting and uses this thought to associate Jacob's sermon with the Feast of Tabernacle (Thompson, "Isaiah 50–51," 133–34).

146. For discussion of the complexity of Isaiah in the Book of Mormon, see John W. Welch, "Authorship of the Book of Isaiah In Light of the Book of Mormon," in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 423–38; Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 135–37; Kent Jackson, "Isaiah in the Book of Mormon," in *A Reason for Faith: Navigating LDS Doctrine and Church History*, ed. Laura Hales (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2016) 69–78; David Bokovoy, "The Truthfulness of Deutero-Isaiah: A Response to Kent Jackson (Part 1) — Rational Faiths: Mormon Blog," *Rational Faiths* (blog), May 18, 2016, <https://rationalfaiths.com/truthfulness-deutero-isaiah-response-kent-jackson/>; and David Bokovoy, "The Truthfulness of Deutero-Isaiah: A Response to Kent Jackson (Part 2) — Rational Faiths: Mormon Blog," *Rational Faiths* (blog), May 18, 2016, <https://rationalfaiths.com/truthfulness-deutero-isaiah-response-kent-jackson-part-2/>.

imagery.<sup>147</sup> This Old Testament chapter contains the admonition to “come” seven times, with the overt purpose of “com[ing] unto me” (i.e., the Lord) (Isaiah 55:1, 3, 10, 13). Isaiah’s message noticeably parallels Jacob’s, which is the invitation to “come unto the Lord, the Holy One” and to “come unto that God who is the rock of your salvation” (2 Nephi 9:41, 45; see also v. 51).

This thought becomes more significant when connected with Baker’s and Ricks’ claim about the Feast of the Tabernacle drama that, “The ‘power of his redemption’ is the power to bring us back to him. In much of the Book of Mormon the realization of the drama’s crescendo—to become a son and heir of God, and return to his presence—is encapsulated in the single word ‘redeem.’”<sup>148</sup> The idea of redemption and its heavenly ascent undertone connects both the plan of salvation and Isaiah/Jacob’s invitation to come unto Christ: “If to be redeemed means to be brought into the presence of God, then the phrase ‘plan of redemption’ means the plan whereby one can be brought back into God’s presence and has the same connotation as the frequently repeated invitation to come unto Christ.”<sup>149</sup> Interpreting 2 Nephi 9:50–51 with this in mind, Jacob could be using Isaiah’s words to invite his listeners to enter a covenantal and redemptive relationship by feasting on the word of God, which would result in ascending into the presence of the Lord.<sup>150</sup>

This thought mirrors both of Nephi’s previously discussed writings with *sôd* experiences in general. Given that Nephi’s invitation to “come unto the God of Abraham” has heavenly ascent undertones (1 Nephi 6:4), consider how in 2 Nephi 31–32 Nephi connects “feasting upon the word of Christ” as part of the process that leads to God’s presence. The intertextuality between these two phrases and the text in 2 Nephi 9 was likely not lost on Jacob if Nephi’s work preceded his own (2 Nephi 31:20, 32:3). For instance, when comparing Jacob 9:50–51 with Isaiah 55:1–2, the most significant redaction Jacob makes is his replacement of Isaiah’s phrase “and eat ye that which is good” with a phrase very reminiscent of Nephi’s two phrases just discussed: “and come unto the Holy One of Israel, and feast upon that which perisheth not, neither can be corrupted.”

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147. Berlin and Brettler, *Jewish Study Bible*, 876; Baker and Ricks, *Who Shall Ascend*, 510–19.

148. Baker and Ricks, *Who Shall Ascend*, 512.

149. *Ibid.*, 515.

150. In this vein, it is interesting to note that the phrase “every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters” in 2 Nephi 9:50 and Isaiah 55:1 could also allude to heavenly ascent motifs. For more on this, see Barker, *Temple Mysticism*, 32–33.

Jacob might be stressing the heavenly ascent nature of this invitation by using more overt terminology that Nephi also uses to describe heavenly ascent motifs. Furthermore, this overt terminology could also be seen as describing the bowl of manna kept inside the ark of covenant in the Holy of Holies (Hebrews 9:4). Unlike the daily manna, this manna did not perish or become corrupted (Exodus 16:15, 20–21, 32–35). If this connection was intentional, Jacob could have been tying Nephi’s concept of feasting with the bowl of manna and to the Holy of Holies, which represented God’s presence and the climax of the ritual ascent in the tabernacle.<sup>151</sup>

Nephi says feasting on the word will “tell you all things what ye should do,” a phrase that implies acting on the invitation to feast on the word and come unto Christ will introduce a person to knowledge not previously known. Nephi also connects this process to angels and their instructions (2 Nephi 32:3). By using the term “feast,” Jacob is carefully inviting readers to seek out additional light and knowledge with the goal of literally seeing God, just like Nephi and other authors of heavenly ascent literature invited their readers to do.

Nephi’s admonition to “ask” and “knock” in search of more light is echoed in Jacob’s words that “whoso knocketh, to him will he open” and the things “hid from them forever” will be revealed unto them (2 Nephi 32:4, 9:42, 43). This is also reminiscent of the heavenly ascent motif of special or hidden knowledge that is revealed to those who are involved in *sôd* experiences. In addition to this, engaging in this process himself has led Jacob to “praise the holy name of my God,” a phrase strikingly suggestive of *sôd* experiences in which the initiate joins the heavenly council by singing and praising the Lord.

Even the idea of God’s holy name suggests Jacob might be speaking in heavenly ascent terminology where participants often seek after and learn “the secret name of God.”<sup>152</sup> In Jacob’s sermon one of the reasons he explains for giving his sermon is so “that ye may *learn* and glorify [i.e., praise] the name of your God” (2 Nephi 6:4). Note first the concept of learning the secret name of God and second the concept of praising it. Jacob’s frequent use of the idea of God’s name might be Jacob’s

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151. This insight about the bowl of manna was provided by anonymous reviewer of this paper.

152. Hamblin, “Temple Motifs,” 454–55; Welch, “The Temple in the Book of Mormon,” 357–58. “According to the Babylonian Talmud, speaking the sacred name of God was allowed only on the Day of Atonement and even then only by the high priest in the Holy of Holies” (Thompson, “Isaiah 50–51,” 132).

way of declaring his special knowledge received from a divine council experience (2 Nephi 9:23–24, 41, 49, 52).

If Jacob has joined the divine council, then Jacob's sermon along with his covenantal action<sup>153</sup> to shake his garments as a witness to "the God of my salvation" fulfills his mission to declare unto the people what he had "seen and heard" as a commissioned member of God's court.<sup>154</sup> Additionally, the very act of drawing attention to his garment might allude to heavenly ascent motifs. The Day of Atonement immediately precedes the Feast of the Tabernacles, during which Jacob is apparently speaking.

According to the Lord's instruction in Leviticus concerning the Day of Atonement, the high priest was to "wash his flesh in water" and then to "put on the holy linen coat," "linen breeches," "a linen girdle," and a "linen mitre" (Leviticus 16:4). While wearing these garments, the high priest was to make atonement for himself, the temple, and the people by sacrifice (see Leviticus 16:33). During the ceremony, the high priest and priests were instructed on numerous occasions to remove their garments, wash themselves, and wash their clothes (see Leviticus 16:23–24, 26, 28).

Such emphasis on garments being kept clean (for example, from the blood of the sacrifices) in connection with the temple and the Day of Atonement may have inspired Jacob to take off his garments and display them before the Nephites. . . . This theme is further supported Jacob's reference to "being clothed with purity, yea, even with the robe of righteousness" (2 Nephi 9:14) and by Isaiah passage Jacob quotes: "Awake, awake, put on thy strength, O Zion; put on thy beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city; for henceforth there shall no more come into thee the uncircumcised and the unclean" (2 Nephi 8:24, parallel to Isaiah 52:1).<sup>155</sup>

This assertion not only ties Jacob's words to the New Year festivals, but also associates Jacob's message with heavenly ascent motifs. Consider the garment as a representation of the high priest's ritual ascent into the Lord's presence. By Jacob connecting his garment with the high priest's, he could have been alluding to his own heavenly ascent experience. Just

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153. Gardner, *Second Nephi through Jacob*, 175–77.

154. Bokovoy, "On Christ and Covenants," 37, 42.

155. Thompson, "Isaiah 50–51," 131–32. Welch also connects Jacob's garment and actions in these verses to the imagery and doctrine of the Day of Atonement. See Welch, "The Temple in the Book of Mormon," 336–37.



as the high priest had to cleanse his garments for his ascent, so Jacob could be leaning on the imagery to claim that he had cleansed his own garments by the process described in verses twenty-three and twenty-four (the doctrine of Christ). Thus, Jacob's garment could have been a symbol of his heavenly ascent.

One final way Nephi's sermon might help us understand the heavenly ascent nature of Jacob's discourse is to pay attention to how both authors choose to make their closing remarks. Just as prayer—represented by the altar of incense—is the last symbol in the tabernacle before approaching the veil and prayer is the last idea Nephi discusses in chapter thirty-two, prayer is one of the last topics mentioned by Jacob in his closing remarks for his sermon in chapter nine. He invites all listeners to “pray unto [God] continually by day, and give thanks unto his holy name by night” (2 Nephi 9:52). Nephi does not use the word “continually” as Jacob does, but the elder brother does instruct his readers to do something of an equivalent nature, to “pray always” (2 Nephi 32:9). This act of supplication to the Lord fits perfectly within heavenly ascent motifs where prayer is used to help an individual part the veil and enter into the presence of God. It is fitting, then, that Jacob ends the day by reminding all who listened to him about the covenants and condescension of the Lord, two phrases that echo Nephi's writings describing his own *sôd* experience and that are perhaps used by Jacob to suggest the possibility to anyone listening of having a similar ascent experience (1 Nephi 11:16; 13:23, 26, 30; 14:5, 8, 14, 17; 15:14, 18; see chapter 11–15).<sup>156</sup>

### **Hellish Descent Opposed to Heavenly Ascent**

Instead of ascending into God's presence after the low point of the two-part structure, a person can make a “hellish descent” into the presence of the devil. The themes of heavenly ascent become reversed so a list of them would include concepts like disbelief, sin, darkness/knowledge being hidden, demons/angels of the devil, and the presence of the devil/hell.<sup>157</sup> The presence of both patterns suggests the author is consciously using a heavenly ascent paradigm to describe the path a person can choose in his or her life.

In Jacob's writing in 2 Nephi 9, these two choices first appear in verses four through six when “see[ing] God” is juxtaposed with being “cut off from the presence of the Lord” because of subjection to the

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156. Bokovoy, “Thou Knowest That I Believe,” 1–23.

157. Reference again figure three above of the tabernacle and the doctrine of Christ.

devil. The outcome of this subjection, or hellish descent, is “corruption,” “misery,” and “darkness” (2 Nephi 7, 9) instead of “mercy,” “joy,” and “life eternal” (2 Nephi 9:53, 18, 39). Jacob explains that the devil himself experienced this hellish descent, falling from the presence of the Lord and becoming the devil (2 Nephi 9:8). According to Jacob, this is the outcome for anyone who chooses a similar path. In contrast to heavenly ascent, hellish descent seeks after “secret works of darkness” rather than hidden truths of light and is rewarded with “secret combinations” instead of heavenly mysteries (2 Nephi 9:9). An additional comparison can be found in the observation that, like God, the devil employs “angels” to entice individuals along their paths. However, the devil’s angels lead a person down a path that aims to “shut out [people] from the presence of our God” whereas God’s angels bring people to the presence of God (2 Nephi 9:9, 16).

Jacob also includes a process for hellish descent that contrasts with the cleansing process of heavenly ascent. Rather than faith in God’s word and repentance when one falls short, hellish descent encourages “hearken[ing] not unto the counsel of God” and acting on sinful desires (2 Nephi 9:27–28). The “wo” verses in 2 Nephi 9:30–39 contain a sample of actions that one may take to continue being cut off from God’s presence rather than entering it through a cleansing process. Welch has argued that the ten woes reflect the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20.<sup>158</sup> If true, the woes stand in direct opposition to the Sinai covenant, discussed previously as heavenly ascent literature. Either way, Jacob is clear: if his audience act on this list of woes rather than the cleansing process contained in verses twenty-three and twenty-four, “they must be damned” (2 Nephi 9:24; see also verses 46–48).<sup>159</sup> Instead of the people entering a covenantal relationship (the token of which is circumcision according to Genesis 17:11), the people become “uncircumcised of heart” and lose their standing with God (2 Nephi 9:33).<sup>160</sup> By frequently

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158. John W. Welch, “Jacob’s Ten Commandments,” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 69–72.

159. Welch suggested to be “cut off,” a term used in 2 Nephi 9:6 that seems synonymous with damned in v. 24, might allude to Day of Atonement imagery when the scapegoat is cut off from the community. Welch, “The Temple in the Book of Mormon,” 355.

160. See also Deuteronomy 30:6 and Jeremiah 4:4. Note that in Thompson’s previously quoted thought, he ties Jacob’s quotation of Isaiah 52:1 with the idea of what would happen if the Nephites did not hearken to Jacob’s message. With this in mind, and also considering the argument of this paper that Jacob would consider a person’s disregard for his message as part of the process of hellish descent, the term

returning to the opposing outcomes of each path, Jacob is using hellish descent to emphasize the superiority of the heavenly ascent pattern and to motivate listeners to experience an ascent to God's presence for themselves.

### Jacob's Sermon on Day Two

In 2 Nephi 10, "Jacob reprises the salvation theme of the prior day's sermon," but now focuses the salvation more on physical or geographic terms than spiritual terms.<sup>161</sup> Jacob appears to have planned on the previous day's discussion about obtaining a spiritual or heavenly land of inheritance (i.e., eternal life in God's presence) to have built confidence in his listeners about the promises of a physical land of inheritance. In other words, if Jacob could convince his listeners that the first was possible, maybe the second topic would seem more attainable.

In addition to this, in 2 Nephi 10 there seems to be other aspects of the relationship between the spiritual and physical promises of the covenant that Jacob is attempting to address. One hint of this is in the realization that the objective of the geographical side of "the promises" mentioned in 2 Nephi 10:2 is to "give [the Nephites] the true knowledge of the Savior" (a very spiritual outcome). Thus, just as the spiritual promises might have positively affected Jacob's listeners to trust in the geographical promises, the geographical promises might have positively affected the spiritual promises by providing a means that they might be accomplished.

Nevertheless, the purpose for the sermon on the second day was to teach the Nephites how God has "covenanted with their fathers that they shall be restored in the flesh, upon the earth, unto the lands of their inheritance" (2 Nephi 10:7).<sup>162</sup> This promise includes those who are "dispersed" on "the isles of the sea," which Jacob emphasizes includes the Nephites by repeating four times "this land" in his speech and then finally declaring "we are upon an isle of the sea" (2 Nephi 10:10–12, 19, 20). Thus, though the Nephites feel "put ... away" and "cast ... off forever" (2 Nephi 7:1), Jacob assures them that God "still watched over them, and that therefore the covenant promises would still

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"uncircumcised" in 2 Nephi 9:33 and 8:24 could have heavenly ascent undertones (specifically hellish descent undertones).

161. Gardner, *Second Nephi through Jacob*, 192.

162. Givens, *2nd Nephi: A Brief Theological Introduction*, 34–36.

be met.”<sup>163</sup> This assurance “would have provided the community [with] the faith necessary to establish a new home in this wilderness.”<sup>164</sup>

Yet, even while focusing on the promised blessings of a physical land of inheritance, Jacob still couches his message within heavenly ascent motifs. Following his previous day's sermon in which he discussed angels enticing people down a hellish descent (and, by implication, heavenly angels helping people experience heavenly ascent), Jacob begins this sermon with the words from an angel of God (2 Nephi 10:3). One implication of this could be that though the message might directly focus on the physical scattering and gathering of the people from and to the land of inheritance, the purpose of the message is much more spiritual and divine in its objectives.

Another example of this couching in heavenly ascent motifs is how the Nephites' physical scattering due to being “driven out of the land of our inheritance” (vv. 6, 20) is associated in this chapter with the people's sins (sins being an obvious influencer of a person's spiritual status in their heavenly ascent journey) (2 Nephi 9:20). For the physical gathering to succeed, “secret works of darkness” “must needs [be] destroy[ed]” and repentance must occur (2 Nephi 10:15, 4). These, of course, were two themes shown previously in chapter nine to have heavenly ascent implications.

That the physical blessings were couched in spiritual terms can also be seen in Jacob's usage of the term “great knowledge.” In 2 Nephi 10:20, he uses it to describe the physical gathering, but this phrase is used by Nephi in 2 Nephi 32:7 and 1 Nephi 1:1 to refer to *sôd*-type mysteries. Depending on one's view of the direction of intertextuality between Nephi and Jacob's works, it is possible that Jacob is aware of how his brother consistently uses this term and that Jacob is purposely coupling these two ideas (physical gathering and *sôd* experiences) with the phrase “great knowledge.”

As the listeners' faith increases in the one, their faith increases in the other. Considering this, the content in 2 Nephi 10:22 could be referring to either notion: “For behold, the Lord God has led away from time to time from the house of Israel, according to his will and pleasure. And now behold, the Lord remembereth all them who have been broken off, wherefore he remembereth us also.” At first glance, this reads as if it was referring only to a physical land of inheritance. Note, though, that

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163. Belnap, “I Will Contend with Them,” 26; Givens, *2nd Nephi: A Brief Theological Introduction*, 42–43.

164. Belnap, “I Will Contend with Them,” 26.

2 Nephi 10:23 begins with the word “therefore,” directly tying its content to that of the previous verse. However, verse twenty-three then goes on to describe content that sounds more like heavenly ascent themes than it does geographical gathering:

Therefore, cheer up your hearts, and remember that ye are free to act for yourselves — to choose the way of everlasting death or the way of eternal life. Wherefore, my beloved brethren, reconcile yourselves to the will of God, and not to the will of the devil and the flesh; and remember, after ye are reconciled unto God, that it is only in and through the grace of God that ye are saved. Wherefore, may God raise you from death by the power of the resurrection, and also from everlasting death by the power of the atonement, that ye may be received into the eternal kingdom of God, that ye may praise him through grace divine. Amen. (2 Nephi 10:23–25)

Motifs like spiritual paths, eternal life, and praising God sound like heavenly ascent concepts, but, if so, then what is the connection between them and the geographical gathering in the previous verse? The answer might lie with Jacob’s carefully crafted agenda. That agenda may be to assuage his listeners’ concerns about their exile while at the same time instructing them on a greater topic: their spiritual exile and their return to God’s face through heavenly ascent.

Nephi’s comments as a redactor in the next chapter (2 Nephi 11) might further inform this question. First, remember that Nephi not only asked Jacob to speak but also assigned a topic to his brother (2 Nephi 6:4). Second, notice that Nephi points out that he purposely included only a portion of Jacob’s sermon, meaning that, as carefully crafted as Jacob’s message was, it received more sculpting by Nephi (2 Nephi 11:1). Third, pay attention to Nephi’s explanation as to why he chose to add Jacob’s words (and those of Isaiah) into his book. Nephi explained he did this “for” or because “[they] verily saw my Redeemer, even as I have seen him” (2 Nephi 11:2–3). In other words, the reason why Nephi assigned Jacob to speak on those specific chapters of Isaiah was because of Isaiah’s experience of literally seeing the face of God, which is one of the major themes in those chapters. Furthermore, what qualified Jacob to speak about the words of these chapters was that he (like Nephi and Isaiah) had literally entered the presence of God, as well.

Why is this important? It is because Nephi’s writings, as argued previously, are designed to explain his own heavenly ascent experience

and to invite others to have their own.<sup>165</sup> Therefore, it makes sense that if Nephi were to add other peoples' writings to his book, he would choose witnesses who had had a similar heavenly ascent agenda as his. Understanding this, it is clear why Nephi chose Jacob and Isaiah as co-contributors to his book because they were witnesses of the validity and possibility of Nephi's heavenly ascent invitation.<sup>166</sup> Thus, Nephi was attempting to use Jacob's and Isaiah's additional witnesses "to prove unto them [i.e., the readers] that my words are true" (2 Nephi 11:3). This reasoning strongly suggests the principles that governed how Nephi selected Jacob's topic and then redacted his sermon included the desire to create content that was primarily heavenly ascent centric.<sup>167</sup>

Therefore, assuming this is a correct interpretation of Nephi's commentary in 2 Nephi 11, the content in 2 Nephi 9–10 is specifically designed to help readers understand and undertake a heavenly ascent

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165. Considering this, Nephi's comments "of the coming of Christ" (2 Nephi 11:4) can be understood as an earthly visit from the Master as in 3 Nephi 11, or it can be understood as a personal visitation/divine council experience. This latter interpretation seems to be supported with another phrase in 2 Nephi 11:4, "for this end hath the law of Moses been given," as long as you consider Baker's and Ricks' comment, "The promise that the prophecies of the Law of Moses would be fulfilled by the Savior, meant that he would do, in reality, all of the things that the performances and ordinances of the Law symbolically predicted he would do — that promise included the actualization of all of the events symbolically represented in the Feast of Tabernacles temple drama" (Baker and Ricks, *Who Shall Ascend*, 73). Thus, if Baker and Ricks are correct, then Nephi is arguably referring to the coming of the Lord as a personal visitation and this visitation is "the great and eternal plan of deliverance from death" he refers to in 2 Nephi 11:5.

166. This theory attributes a large amount of prescience or planning on Nephi's part while writing his book, but, as previously cited scholars have argued, this is likely the case. See, for example, Joseph M. Spencer, *The Vision of All: Twenty-five Lectures on Isaiah in Nephi's Record* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2016) and Grant Hardy, ed., *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ, Maxwell Institute Study Edition* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2018), 1–88. For more about three witnesses, see Jeffrey R. Holland, *Christ and the New Covenant* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 34–35, and Givens, *2nd Nephi: A Brief Theological Introduction*, 53–54.

167. Of interest, notice that the chapters Nephi assigns Jacob are from a section of Isaiah that has been argued to contain "a prophetic imitation of *Sukkot* [i.e., the Feast of Tabernacles] liturgy" (Thompson, "Isaiah 50–51," 138). Therefore, if Nephi was aware of the connection between the Isaiah chapters and the Feast of Tabernacles and also of the connection between the Feast of Tabernacles and heavenly ascent motifs, it makes perfect sense why Nephi would choose these chapters considering his book's overarching agenda.

experience. Reading this knowledge back onto the text greatly supports the analysis in this paper regarding the intent and content of those verses. For example, knowing that Nephi chose certain selections of Jacob's words to add another testimony of ascending to God's literal presence, Jacob's phrase "true knowledge of their Redeemer" (2 Nephi 10:2) has clear heavenly ascent undertones. Likewise, as argued for previously, Jacob's use of "perfect knowledge" while being judged in the presence of God has similar undertones (2 Nephi 9:13–14).

Considering all of this, the question might arise about how much influence Nephi had in the text of 2 Nephi 9–10 as it stands today. While including portions of Jacob's sermon in his book, did Nephi add any of his own thoughts (as Mormon does through his redaction)? Would this explain some of the strong intertextualities between 2 Nephi 9 and Nephi's sermon in 2 Nephi 31–32? How much discussion did Nephi and Jacob have about Jacob's two-day sermon before he delivered it, or for that matter, how much discussion did Nephi have with Jacob about his redaction of Jacob's content for his book in 2 Nephi? Though some of these questions might not be answerable today, it seems clear that the text as it has come down to us has purposeful heavenly ascent motifs dispersed throughout its pages.

### **In Relation to the Plan of Salvation**

Considering 2 Nephi 9–10 compositely, it is clear the sermon contains many phrases and concepts that may reflect heavenly ascent motifs. These heavenly ascent motifs are less likely a series of coincidences and more likely the product of a careful and purposeful design on the part of Jacob and his brother, Nephi. Not only did Nephi assign the content for Jacob's speech, he also then edited that speech with the overt purpose of proving his book's agenda, which was arguably determined by his divine council experience. Therefore, the heavenly ascent motifs in Jacob's sermon were most likely a part of a conscious design that was selected by both the speaker and his brother, who edited his words.

Considering the likelihood of this design in connection with the purpose of Jacob's sermon, the thesis of this paper can now be directly addressed. First, notice that an overarching theme of this sermon is the "plan of the great Creator" (2 Nephi 9:6). In fact, referring to the sermon's main problem and solution, Jacob exclaims, "O how great plan of our God" (2 Nephi 9:13). From this phrase and the overall context of this verse, it can be gathered that the purpose of Jacob's sermon is to teach his listeners about God's plan to "save all men" (2 Nephi 9:21), or, in other

words, the plan that ends with mankind being “saved in the kingdom of God” (2 Nephi 9:23). This plan is the plan of salvation that this paper is attempting to address and is also the overarching theme of Jacob’s sermon. Even 2 Nephi 10, which arguably is more focused on geographical salvation than eternal salvation, still contains a similar message of God’s plan to save mankind, an idea described as being “received into the eternal kingdom of God, that ye may praise him through grace divine” (2 Nephi 10:24–25). Likewise, when Nephi describes the covenantal content of Jacob’s sermon, he refers to the material as “the great and eternal plan of deliverance from death” (2 Nephi 11:5).

With the understanding that this sermon is clearly teaching about the plan of salvation, consider the implications that this sermon is simultaneously packed with heavenly ascent motifs. When Jacob (or, for that matter, Nephi) refers to the plan of salvation, they do so in heavenly ascent terminology. Rather than beginning a description of the plan of salvation with the pre-earth life, these chapters start the discussion with the creation of the world. Unlike some popular models of the plan of salvation used today, which terminate in a description of several degrees of heaven, Jacob’s understanding of the plan of salvation simply culminates in a person being admitted to the presence of God, with no further description of a qualifying degree of glory.<sup>168</sup> As the previous examination of the text demonstrates, the choice is not between levels of heaven but rather between ascension to God or descension towards the devil. Furthermore, instead of references to the spirit world, heavenly ascent motifs such as cleansing processes, secret knowledge, feasting on the word of God, prayer, and angels are found in this model between the creation of the world and an individual’s ascension into the Lord’s presence. This evidence seems to be a strong indicator that Book of Mormon prophets (at least Jacob and Nephi) viewed the plan of salvation within a heavenly ascent model. In other words, whether the ascension occurs in mortality (2 Nephi 11:2–3) or after death at the Final Judgment (2 Nephi 28:23), salvation in the Book of Mormon should likely be interpreted as redemption from the fall by entering back into the presence of God.

In addition to the above conclusion, these results also suggest the profitability of continuing this research with the other occurrences of the word “plan” in the Book of Mormon. Since 2 Nephi 9–10 supports

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168. See, for example, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Book of Mormon Seminary Teacher Manual* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2017), 17.



this thesis, it is plausible that further research into other sermons about the plan of salvation may also support the thesis of this paper. As additional sermons are shown to have similar conclusions to those regarding 2 Nephi 9–10, and as additional authors are shown to view the plan of salvation in similar terms as to Jacob and Nephi, the hypothesis that Book of Mormon prophets viewed the plan of salvation in terms of a heavenly ascent paradigm will be further confirmed.

In summary, there exists a strong argument that Jacob's sermon in 2 Nephi 9–10 is filled with heavenly ascent motifs that reflect Nephi's use of heavenly ascent themes as well as the patterns in biblical and extrabiblical heavenly ascent writings. At the same time, one of the overarching themes of Jacob's sermon is God's plan of salvation for mankind. Considering these two conclusions together offers evidence that strongly indicates that Jacob viewed the plan of salvation in terms of a heavenly ascent model. Further research utilizing the hermeneutical approach used in this paper with other sermons in the Book of Mormon that are about the plan of salvation could continue to solidify this conclusion.

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