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### Rod as a Symbol of Power

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## Chapter 6

# ROD AS A SYMBOL OF POWER

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*And it came to pass as they smote us with a rod, behold an angel of the Lord came and stood before them, and he spake unto them, saying: "Why do ye smite your younger brother with a rod? (1 Nephi 3:29)*

The rod was seen as a symbol of political authority in the ancient Near East. Anciently, shepherds used rods or staffs as a tool to care for their flocks. In the Bible, a connection appears between Israel's rulers and shepherds in passages such as Ezekiel 34:2, 23, and Jeremiah 2:8. In addition, the Egyptian Pharaohs were frequently depicted with a flail in one hand and a small shepherd's crook in the other.

The famous stela of Hammurabi depicts the Babylonian king receiving a rod from the sun god Shamesh as a sign that Hammurabi was "the shepherd selected by the god Enlil" to establish a righteous government over his people.<sup>1</sup> This same symbol also appears throughout the Hebrew Bible. "The Lord shall send the rod of thy strength out of Zion," declares the Psalmist, "rule thou in the midst of thine enemies" (Psalm 110:2). In a similar passage the prophet Ezekiel declared, "and she had strong rods for the scepters of them that bare rule, and her stature was exalted among the thick branches, and she appeared in her height with the multitude of her branches" (Ezekiel 19:11). These

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<sup>1</sup> Martha T. Roth, *Law Collections From Mesopotamia and Asia Minor* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 77.

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examples demonstrate that the rod once served as an important symbol of political authority.

Recognizing the symbolic value associated with the rod in antiquity, it seems significant that Laman and Lemuel chose to beat both he and Sam with a rod.<sup>2</sup>

And it came to pass as they smote us with a *rod*, behold an angel of the Lord came and stood before them, and he spake unto them, saying: why do ye smite your younger brother with a *rod*? Know ye not that the Lord hath chosen him to be a *ruler* over you? (1 Nephi 3:29)

The connection between rod and authority seems to have been recognized by the angel of God who chastened Laman and Lemuel for their crime. No doubt the words spoken by the messenger held considerable meaning to Laman and Lemuel, who would have recognized the symbolic value of the weapon they used to beat their younger brothers. As such, the angel's words seem to have been laced with a degree of poignant irony.

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<sup>2</sup> See John A. Tvedtnes, "Rod and Sword as the Word of God," *The Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5/2 (1996): 148–55.