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## Reading on Multiple Levels

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**Abstract:** The fact that the Tree of Life and the Scriptures seem to be closely connected in Nephi's mind is itself a powerful inducement to approach the Book of Mormon rabbinically. The Talmudic and post-Talmudic rabbis often wax poetic in their descriptions of the Torah. They liken it to a wife, because one must remember to devote a significant portion of one's time to it; to wine, because imbibing it, according to them, strengthens one's resolve and fortifies one's convictions; to a double-edged sword, because it gives life in this world and the world to come; and to medicine, because it cures evil thoughts. However, the most compelling and most long-lasting metaphor they use is that of the Tree of Life.

## Chapter Two

# Reading on Multiple Levels

*And the angel said unto me: . . . Knowest thou the meaning of the tree which thy father saw? And I answered him, saying: Yea, it is the love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men; wherefore, it is the most desirable above all things. And he spake unto me, saying: Yea, and the most joyous to the soul. (1 Ne. 11:21–23)*

The fact that the Tree of Life and the Scriptures seem to be closely connected in Nephi’s mind is itself a powerful inducement to approach the Book of Mormon rabbinically. The Talmudic and post-Talmudic rabbis often wax poetic in their descriptions of the Torah. They liken it to a wife, because one must remember to devote a significant portion of one’s time to it (Ecclesiastes Rabbah, 24a); to wine, because imbibing it, according to them, strengthens one’s resolve and fortifies one’s convictions; to a double-edged sword, because it gives life in this world and the world to come; (Pesiktaḥ Kahana, 102a–102b); and to medicine, because it cures evil thoughts (Pesiktaḥ Rabbah, 32b). However, the most compelling and most long-lasting metaphor they use is that of the Tree of Life. Clearly it is prominent in the liturgy of the Torah,<sup>1</sup> but it is also conspicuous in the rabbinic literature as well. The rabbis in Leviticus Rabbah, for instance, explicitly link the Torah to the Tree of Life mentioned in Proverbs 3:18 and implicitly commend all to “lay hold of her” and be happy (Leviticus Rabbah 25:1).<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Hanin similarly connects the Torah to this proverbial tree (BT Berakoth 32b), as does Rabbi Meir in Pirke Avot, who there explains that as such the Torah “gives life to those who practice it, both in this world and in the world to come” (Pirke Avot 6:7). And this connection is entirely appropriate. After all, to these rabbis the Torah was an inexhaustible source of life-sustaining wisdom, a continuously flowing

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1. David L. Lieber, ed., *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary*, xxiv.

2. Jacob Neusner, *Judaism and Scripture: The Evidence of Leviticus Rabbah*, 439–43.

fountain of truth that can make happy and prosperous “every one that retaineth her” (Prov. 3:18).

Much like a tree, Torah knowledge, as the Talmudic and post-Talmudic rabbis saw it, grows steadily, over time, enfolding each new approach as the Torah’s potential for divine communication becomes more apparent and its wisdom better understood. However, Torah knowledge also requires deep roots in order to stabilize it, and the way to it is not easy. It is guarded, not by sword-wielding cherubim as in Genesis (Gen. 3:24) but by other challenges that make reading Torah treacherous. The Tosefta contains an intriguing account of four sages—Rabbi ben Azzai, Rabbi ben Zoma, Elisha ben Abuya, and Rabbi Akiva—who are taken up, much as Lehi is, into an Eden-like orchard, presumably containing the Tree of Life (TO Hagigah 2:3). There, all four sages witness the beauty and power of the place, but only Rabbi Akiva is able to enjoy it without suffering personal harm or difficulty. Rabbi ben Azzai immediately dies, Rabbi ben Zoma is smitten with a disease, and Elisha ben Abuya goes mad and apostatizes. The key to Akiva’s survival, according to later medieval mystics, was his efforts to cling so tightly to the words of the Torah—holding them close, mastering their every nuance, scrutinizing their every detail—that he was prepared, step-by-step, to enjoy this mystical place without being overwhelmed or put off by it.

In an effort to emulate Rabbi Akiva, these mystics built upon earlier interpretive traditions to formulate a progressive approach to the Torah and divided this approach into four stages of scriptural exegesis, which, like the four rivers that “went out of Eden” (Gen. 2:10) give life to those who study the Torah diligently.<sup>3</sup> The names of these four stages, appropriately enough, were said to form the acronym *PaRDeS*, a word historically connected with esoteric studies, meaning “orchard” but with possible linguistic connections to the Greek word *paradeisos* or “paradise.”<sup>4</sup> This acronym and the approach it represented were subsequently adopted by later non-mystical rabbis and adapted to their less hierarchical, less stratified approach to scripture. To them, the four levels affirmed the four most prominent ways rabbis have historically interpreted the Torah, and they therefore presented each approach as equally valid and worthwhile. Since this time, *pardes* has been an extremely popular and effective way of encouraging rabbinic Jews to approach the Scriptures from several ways at

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3. Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, 57–58.

4. Amy Grossblat Pessah, Kenneth J. Meyers, and Christopher M. Leighton, “How Do Jews and Christians Read the Bible?” 62; Norman J. Cohen, *The Way Into Torah*, 80.

the same time.<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Wylen, for instance, very much recommends it to his congregants and describes the four levels as follows:

- ***Peshat***: the literal level of meaning, the simple level, what the scriptural text actually says.
- ***Remez***: the allegorical level, what the text represents—ideas, scientific principles, philosophic truths, historical trends, and so forth.
- ***Derash***: the sermonic level, what the text means to people in terms of bettering their daily lives and spiritual situation.
- ***Sod***: the mystical level, what the text signifies to mystics and how it reveals God to them.<sup>6</sup>

These levels are inclusive, and therefore it is not uncommon to hear modern rabbis, even within the same sermon, cite Rashi (a champion of plain meaning), refer to Philo (an adept of allegory), retell a midrashic story, and add an interesting scriptural explanation based on mystical numerology. All of these approaches are part of modern rabbinic Judaism and are used seamlessly in rabbinic teachings—the only criterion being the force and power of the citation as well as its clear connection to the text.

While none of these Hebrew terms appears in the Book of Mormon by name, the Book of Mormon seems to encourage a *pardes*-like approach to itself through the words its authors use to describe scripture study as well as by the way the text of the Book of Mormon responds to it.

### *Peshat*

*Peshat*, the simple or plain sense of the text, corresponds closely with what Nephi refers to as “plainness,” an approach to scripture that he both delights in and sees as essential (2 Ne. 25:4). As Rabbi Avigdor Bonchek writes, *peshat* is a concentration on “what the text says” and constitutes “the starting point for all interpretation”;<sup>7</sup> *peshat* is therefore fundamental to all of the other approaches, and although *simple*, it is not simplistic. Indeed *peshat* is the foundation upon which all the other levels are built. Cohen writes,

The *peshat* can be considered the original meaning of the text. It focuses the reader on the words of the text themselves without any interpretation. The

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5. A. Van der Heide, “PARDES: Methodological Reflections on the Theory of the Four Senses,” 148.

6. Stephen M. Wylen, *Settings of Silver: An Introduction to Judaism*, 17.

7. Avigdor Bonchek, *Studying the Torah: A Guide to In-Depth Interpretation*, 8.

words are all that is important and are to be taken seriously at the outset of study. The rabbis constantly emphasize the importance of understanding the *peshat*, the original meaning of any particular text, as shaped by its context. They underscore this in the famous dictum “No verse can be deprived of its *peshat*” [BT Shabbat 63a]. This is a warning against the tendency to creative interpretation of the text of Torah without holding onto the *peshat*.<sup>8</sup>

Understanding *peshat* is not easy. It is much more than a cursory scanning of a text to get its general sense. *Peshat* involves the meticulous scrutiny of the particulars of each passage, and therefore, as Rabbi George Robinson writes, it “draws on the context of the passage, its grammar, philology, historical content.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, *peshat* is both rigorous and wide-ranging, requiring almost microscopic attention to detail as well as a macroscopic view of the text as a whole. *Peshat* also requires a well-developed sensitivity to the nuances and quirks of biblical expression as well as a willingness to question previous assumptions and a reverence for actual words of the Hebrew Scriptures. All in all, despite the attractions of the other levels of interpretation, *peshat* is what rabbinic scholars have historically spent most of their time studying. It is, in a very real sense, the root of all of the other modes of interpretation, providing not only stability but intellectual and spiritual nourishment.

Again, the Book of Mormon does not use the word *peshat*. However, the way Jacob condemns the pre-exilic Jews for despising the “the words of plainness,” for seeking “things that they could not understand,” and for “looking beyond the mark” very much suggests that he is advocating a *peshat*-like approach to the Scriptures—as does Nephi’s delighting and glorying “in plainness” (Jacob 4:14; 2 Ne. 31:3; 33:6). For Nephi, this “plainness” is never linked to simplicity—as in “plain and simple,” a phrase he never uses. For him, the phrase is always “plain and precious,” and he predicts serious problems once the “plain and precious” have been removed from the biblical text, both physically and through interpretation (1 Ne. 13:26, 28–29, 32). As Nephi sees it, God uses plainness to speak “unto men according to their language, unto their understanding” (2 Ne. 31:3), and therefore removing this quality from scriptural interpretation effectively thwarts God’s efforts to communicate with humanity. It can “blind the eyes and harden the hearts of the children of men” and cause an exceedingly great many to “stumble” and allow Satan to have “great

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8. Norman J. Cohen, *The Way Into Torah*, 81.

9. George Robinson, *Essential Judaism: A Complete Guide to Beliefs, Rituals, and Customs*, 303.

power” over them (1 Ne. 13:27, 29). It is for this reason, perhaps, that Nephi poetically prays that he “may walk in the path of the low valley, that [he] may be strict in the *plain* road!” (2 Ne. 4:32). Without the plain sense of Scripture, there is no spiritual progress.

This emphasis on what the Scriptures actually say is further reinforced by the way Nephi, Jacob, and other Book of Mormon writers include in their writings entire chapters from Malachi and Isaiah, chapters nearly identical to those found in the King James Version of the Bible. In this way, they ground their ideas solidly on the actual words of the Bible and invite—almost demand—that their readers reread these chapters and judge for themselves the accuracy of the ideas these writers derive from them. Here the plain sense of the Scriptures remains the standard. No creative editing or changing of the words is allowed.

This inclusion of biblical chapters in their entirety also helps preserve the larger context of the text and ensures that the simple meaning, the *peshat*, is not obscured—something Nephi, for one, seems to see as vital for understanding Isaiah. He writes that many things that Isaiah wrote were not “plain” to the people living around him at the time and “were hard for many of [his] people to understand.” This is because, according to Nephi, “they know not concerning the manner of prophesying among the Jews,” the geographical and political context (“the regions round about”), or the historical and spiritual context (“the judgments of God, which hath come to pass among the Jews”) (2 Ne. 25:1, 6). However, with a *peshat*-based understanding of its context and “the spirit of prophecy,” Nephi is confident that Isaiah, and by implication all the Hebrew Scriptures, will be “plain” to his other, future readers (2 Ne. 25:4). In other words, if his readers concentrate on the plain meaning of the Scriptures, the Scriptures will be plain to them.

In addition to stressing the importance of *peshat* in understanding the Hebrew Scriptures, the Book of Mormon also asserts the superiority of living a life consistent with the plain sense of the Scriptures. Toward the end of his book, Jacob wonders how the Jews of his time “after having rejected the sure foundation, can ever build upon it” (Jacob 4:17). He states that the Jews at the time his family left Jerusalem (around 600 B.C.E.) were “a stiffnecked people; and they despised the words of plainness, and killed the prophets, and sought for things that they could not understand” (v. 14). In rabbinic terms, this seems to imply that these Jews rejected, among other things, *peshat*, “the words of plainness,” and therefore attempted to find ideas in the Scriptures that were not based on the simple meaning of

the text. They instead attempted to use other methods of scriptural interpretation, and, since all valid scriptural interpretation is based on *peshat*, it is not surprising that “they could not understand.” Because of this error, these pre-exilic Jews became spiritually blind, “which blindness came by looking beyond the mark”—missing the *peshat*.

In reaction, God consequently removed “his plainness from them, and delivered unto them many things which they [could not] understand, because they desired it.” In other words, because these ancient Jews wanted to see more complex or more mysterious or more fashionable things in the Scriptures, they found them. However, because they did not understand *peshat*, they could not appreciate the Scriptures or interpret them correctly, and therefore they stumbled and fell. Thus, *peshat* is the “safe foundation” of scripture study, “upon which they might build” valid interpretations (Jacob 4:14–15).

Given Jacob’s position on *peshat*, it is significant that when he interprets the allegory found in “the words of the [nonbiblical] prophet Zenos” (Jacob 5:1; possibly one of the things that the Lord delivered to Israel that they could not understand), he bases his interpretation solidly on its *peshat*. After reading the entire allegory to his people, Jacob says,

And now, behold, my brethren, as I said unto you that I would prophesy, behold, this is my prophecy—that the things which this prophet Zenos spake, concerning the house of Israel, in the which he likened them unto a tame olive-tree, must surely come to pass. And the day that he shall set his hand again the second time to recover his people, is the day, yea, even the last time, that the servants of the Lord shall go forth in his power, to nourish and prune his vineyard; and after that the end soon cometh.

And how blessed are they who have labored diligently in his vineyard; and how cursed are they who shall be cast out into their own place! And the world shall be burned with fire. And how merciful is our God unto us, for he remembereth the house of Israel, both roots and branches; and he stretches forth his hands unto them all the day long; and they are a stiffnecked and a gainsaying people; but as many as will not harden their hearts shall be saved in the kingdom of God. Wherefore, my beloved brethren, I beseech of you in words of soberness that ye would repent, and come with full purpose of heart, and cleave unto God as he cleaveth unto you. And while his arm of mercy is extended towards you in the light of the day, harden not your hearts. (Jacob 6:1–5)

Although Jacob is clearly prophesying, he is careful to quote pertinent terms and phrases from the allegory itself—not just general words such as “vineyard,” “nourish,” “prune,” “branches,” and “roots,” but significant

phrases such as “last time,” “the end soon cometh,” “servants of the Lord,” “labored diligently,” “cast out into their own place,” and “be burned with fire” (Jacob 5:71, 75, 77). In essence, after explaining how the pre-exilic Jews rejected *peshat* and therefore missed the meaning of the revelations God gave them, Jacob takes one of those revelations and shows his people its meaning—using *peshat*. In this way, Jacob shows his later as well as contemporary readers the value of this most fundamental of all Jewish hermeneutical approaches.

In addition to stressing the importance and primacy of *peshat*, the Book of Mormon also emphasizes the effort involved in this approach. Again, although the *peshat* or the “plain” meaning of the Scriptures is almost by definition accessible to all readers, it is not an easy or superficial task to access it. Therefore, Nephi and other Book of Mormon authors continually encourage their readers to *search* the Scriptures, a word implying rigor and devotion. Lehi searches the plates of brass “from the beginning” as soon as he receives them (1 Ne. 5:10). Nephi laments that people generally “will not search knowledge, nor understand great knowledge, when it is given unto them in plainness, even as plain as word can be” (2 Ne. 32:7). Jacob praises his people because they did “search the prophets” so much so that their “faith becometh unshaken” (Jacob 4:6). Moroni pleads with his future readers to “*search* the prophecies of Isaiah” and grieves that he “cannot write them” (Morm. 8:23). Even Jesus himself is quoted as commanding his listeners to “*search* these things diligently; for great are the words of Isaiah” (3 Ne. 23:1).

Finally, it is the “*words* of Isaiah” that these authors rehearse, read, and delight in (1 Ne. 15:20; 2 Ne. 6:4, 11:2)—not the “writings” or the “sayings” or the “prophecies.” This in itself suggests in a very *peshat* way the value they place in attending to scriptural details, another fundamental concept of *peshat*. By calling attention to his *words*, these authors seem to advocate a very close scrutiny of Isaiah as well as other prophets, revealing how much the Book of Mormon authors value close reading.

### *Remez*

According to Cohen, the second level of rabbinic interpretation, *remez*, means “hint” or “allusion”—a way of interpreting the biblical text that preserves the “surface meaning” while adding to it significantly.<sup>10</sup> As Robinson

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10. Cohen, *The Way Into Torah*, 82.



explains, *remez* “seeks the allegorical meaning of the text, focusing on the philosophical implications contained therein.”<sup>11</sup> The classic biblical example of this approach, the one cited most often, is the Song of Songs, also known as Canticles or the Song of Solomon. Although seemingly simply a series of erotic love poems, the Song of Songs is traditionally interpreted allegorically, describing instead “the relationship between the people Israel and Adonai.”<sup>12</sup> As Elsie Stern, in her introduction to the Song of Songs in the *Jewish Study Bible*, writes: “In rabbinic tradition, the Song narrates the words which God and Israel spoke to each other at the Red Sea, at Sinai, or in the Tent of Meeting. The descriptions of the male lover are understood as allegorical descriptions of God while the descriptions of the female lover are understood as divine praise of Israel. The statements of desire and love are read as expressions of love and intimacy between God and Israel.”<sup>13</sup>

Once again, although the Book of Mormon does not make use of the word *remez* any more than it did *peshat*, it endorses this approach by including an elaborate example of an allegory in the book of Jacob. Toward the end of that book, Jacob reads to his people “the words of the prophet Zenos” in which he likens the house of Israel “unto a tame olive tree, which a man took and nourished in his vineyard; and it grew, and waxed old, and began to decay” (Jacob 5:1, 3). Clearly referring to the kingdoms of Israel and Judah immediately before their respective captivities—kingdoms that Jacob’s family had fled and he himself previously stated “must needs fall”—this allegory portrays the “master of the vineyard” as pruning, digging about, and nourishing a tree to little avail (v. 4). Some “little, young and tender branches” appear but “the main top” nevertheless begins to perish (v. 6). Almost as an act of desperation, the master then hacks off “those main branches which are beginning to wither away” and casts them into the fire “that they may be burned” (v. 7)—just as God allows Assyria and Babylon to capture the kingdoms of Israel and Judah respectively, killing many of Israelites, and sending the remainder into exile.

In an effort to save the roots, the master then grafts in branches from a healthy wild olive tree into the tame olive tree, an action consonant with the way non-Jews were joined into Israel in various ways during the exile. At the same time, he also takes a few “young and tender” branches from the tame olive tree and plants them in the “nethermost parts” of his vineyard. This last action is a reference to Lehi and his family as well as

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11. Robinson, *Essential Judaism*, 305.

12. *Ibid.*, 5.

13. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible*, 1565.

to other members of “lost” tribes who were led out of the land of Israel. Two of the transported branches bring forth “much fruit,” despite being planted in the “poorest spot in all the land” and a “spot of ground [that] was poorer than the first” (vv. 20–21, 23). The last, the one representing the Lamanites and the Nephites, is planted in a “good spot of ground” but brings forth “wild fruit” as well as “tame fruit” (v. 25).

Zenos continues prophetically with his allegory showing that the entire vineyard eventually becomes completely corrupted, with both the transplanted branches as well as the original tree producing nothing but wild fruit. At this point, the master decides to destroy the vineyard. However, one of the master’s servants intervenes and convinces him to instead try to salvage the tree by regrafting the transplanted tame branches back into the original tree and by lopping off the grafted wild branches that have become “corrupt.” Given the connections to Israel and its scattering that have been consistently developed throughout this allegory, it seems clear that this last action refers to the final gathering of Israel—when the messianic era will be established and all Israel, like the tame olive tree will “became like unto one body.” At this time, the Israelites will be “equal,” “the Lord of the vineyard [will have] preserved unto himself the natural fruit, which was most precious unto him from the beginning” and the “bad will [be] cast away into its own place” (vv. 74, 77).

Zenos’s allegory is quite involved and proceeds for seventy-seven verses. It includes descriptions of the quality of the ground in which the branches grew as well as other significant details that reward close reading and supply additional information in a concentrated way: the fact that the initial problem with the tame olive tree was limited to its main top area, the idea that the master “hid” the transplanted branches in the vineyard (v. 14), the suggestion that despite the wildness of its fruit the root of the tame olive tree retained “much strength” from which the wild branches drew strength (v. 18), the notion that there were “all kinds of bad fruit” on the trees not just one (v. 32), the claim that the “loftiness” of the branches was a main problem, the assertion that the servants did “not clear away the bad [branches] thereof all at once” (v. 65), and so forth.

The richness of Zenos’s allegory by itself goes far in encouraging a *re-mez* approach. However, there are other allegories in the Book of Mormon that similarly promote this approach. As he did in the New Testament, Jesus likens those who hear his sayings and follow them unto “a wise man, who built his house upon a rock—and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not, for

it was founded upon a rock” (3 Ne. 14:24–25). Alma makes clear that the Lehites’ journey to a “land of promise” (1 Ne. 2:20) is emblematic of humanity’s path to God, a trek that requires divine intervention and guidance. Pointing to the Liahona, a mystical compass that showed Lehi and his family where to travel, he says, “For just as surely as this director did bring our fathers, by following its course, to the Promised Land, shall the words of Christ, if we follow their course, carry us beyond this vale of sorrow into a far better land of promise” (Alma 37:45). Lehi’s dream, which has already been described, is saturated with allegorical meanings and hints. It is a dream like Joseph’s in Genesis 37 and Nebuchadnezzar’s in Daniel 2. It has some realistic elements, but it is presented in a suggestive, surreal manner, the details of which an angel later explains to Nephi in allegorical terms. According to him, the rod of iron is “the word of God,” the tree is “a representation of the love of God,” “the great and spacious building was the pride of the world,” and the water, which was filthy, represents “an awful gulf, which separated the wicked from the tree of life, and also from the saints of God” (1 Ne. 11:25, 36; 15:28).

Lehi’s vision not only encourages a *remez* approach to itself, but it shows how *remez* is dependent upon *peshat*. In this dream, many of the literal elements of Lehi’s flight from Jerusalem are allegorized into a spiritual journey. Before he leaves his home, Lehi preaches to the people and is mocked just as those on the right path in his dream were mocked by the inhabitants of the great and spacious building (1 Ne. 8:26–27). After he and his family leave Jerusalem, Lehi actually wanders in a “wilderness” (2:4) just as he did in his dream (8:4). In that real wilderness, Lehi pitches his tent “by the side of a river of water” (2:6) in a fertile place, where there is “all manner of seeds of every kind, both of grain . . . and also of the seeds of fruit” (8:1)—again, just as a river flowed beside trees and fruit in his dream. Similarly, Laman and Lemuel actually refuse to heed their father and murmur against him (2:12), in a sense wandering off the right path, while Nephi and Sam and Sariah remain on the strait and narrow. And the pattern continues. When Nephi and his brothers fail to obtain the plates of brass for the second time, Laman and Lemuel “smite [Nephi and Sam] even with a rod” (3:28), a real angel appears to them and directs them just as a man “dressed in a white robe” showed Lehi the way in his dream (8:5). After the visit from the angel, Nephi enters Jerusalem “by night” (4:5), spiritually feeling his way through the darkness, “not knowing beforehand the things which [he] should do,” just as the masses in Lehi’s dream “did press forward through the mist of darkness, clinging to

the rod of iron, even until they did come forth and partake of the fruit of the tree” (8:24).

All of these elements—the mocking, the wilderness, the river, the fruit, and so forth—appear in Lehi’s dream much as they did in reality, but they are reconstituted into an allegory that synthesizes spiritually the point of his journey and the events that he and his family have experienced. In this way, Lehi’s actual experience forms a symbiotic relationship with his dream—by placing it firmly in reality, concretizing its abstractions, and reinforcing its points with actual details—just as *peshat* does with *remez*.

### *Derash*

According to Cohen, *derash*, the third level of rabbinic interpretation, means “to seek” or “to search out,” in the sense of actively discovering a “contemporary meaning from the close study of the Bible.”<sup>14</sup> It is the sermonic level, the level most often used in homilies and similar “lessons for our time.” Ancient stories based on *derash* are called *midrashim* (sing. *midrash*), a word formed from the same root as *derash*, and they were compiled into a collection known as The Midrash. These stories, according to Rabbi Strassfeld, “enlarge upon the biblical narrative and draw lessons from the text,” and although many of them were produced during the medieval period, *midrash*, according to Strassfeld, remains a living art form and continues to generate contemporary *midrashim* today.<sup>15</sup>

And this is only appropriate. After all, *derash* is more timely than timeless. As Rabbi Jacob Neusner writes, its basic thrust involves “transforming the genres of Scripture into patterns that apply to the acutely contemporary world as much as to times past.”<sup>16</sup> Each of these universal patterns, what Neusner also calls scripture’s “enduring truths,”<sup>17</sup> transcends time but applies to the present;<sup>18</sup> the traditional goal of *derash* in every era is for readers of that current era “to read Scripture as a letter posted that very morning from God to them.”<sup>19</sup>

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14. Cohen, *The Way Into Torah*, 15.

15. Michael Strassfeld, *A Book of Life: Embracing Judaism as a Spiritual Practice*, 146.

16. Jacob Neusner, *Judaism and the Interpretation of Scripture: Introduction to the Rabbinic Midrash*, 3.

17. *Ibid.*, 1.

18. *Ibid.*, 5.

19. *Ibid.*, ix.

Although based on the *peshat* of the scriptural text, *derash* goes beyond it, finding in the text a meaning outside its original setting. Robinson says that this approach exposes the text's "latent meaning, as opposed to its 'plain' meaning."<sup>20</sup> According to Cohen, *derash* attempts to interpret the text's

structural and thematic elements in creative ways. It can at times juxtapose different biblical verses based on key theme words in order to convey meaning. Also, the words of the text can illumine the reader's life experience, while the reader, in bringing his or her life to bear on a text, can penetrate the human issues implicit in it. *Derash* essentially involves the 'reading in' of a meaning different from the text's *peshat*.<sup>21</sup>

The Book of Mormon encourages this kind of "reading in" by admonishing its readers on several occasions to "liken the scriptures unto themselves" as well as by providing several examples of this approach and ample opportunity to use it. Before Nephi includes his first block of Isaiah chapters, he explains that he is doing this to "fully persuade [his people] to believe in the Lord their Redeemer"—his point being that the Lord redeems *them*, his readers, not just their distant ancestors or theoretical descendants. To accomplish this very personal purpose, Nephi reads to his people the "books of Moses" as well as Isaiah and does "liken all scriptures unto [them], that it might be for [their] profit and learning" (1 Ne. 19:23). He then reminds them that they, as "a remnant of the house of Israel, a branch who have been broken off," may find hope in Isaiah's words. He consequently admonishes them to "liken [his words] unto yourselves" (v. 24). Nephi, again, returns to this theme before including his second, much larger block of chapters from Isaiah into his own record: "And now I write some of the words of Isaiah, that whoso of my people shall see these words may lift up their hearts and rejoice for all men. Now these are the words, and ye may liken them unto you and unto all men" (2 Ne. 11:8).

In addition to these admonitions, Nephi includes in his writings at least one specific example of likening. After he and his brothers twice fail to procure the brass plates from Laban, Laman and Lemuel are discouraged and begin to take their frustrations out on Nephi and Sam, beating them with a rod. An angel appears to the four brothers and instructs them to "go up to Jerusalem again, and the Lord will deliver Laban into your hands" (1 Ne. 3:29). Although Laman and Lemuel stop beating Sam and Nephi, they are not totally convinced that things will go as the angel

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20. Robinson, *Essential Judaism*, 304.

21. Cohen, *The Way Into Torah*, 83–84.

said. They ask, “How is it possible that the Lord will deliver Laban into our hands? Behold, he is a mighty man, and he can command fifty, yea, even he can slay fifty; then why not us?” (v. 31). Possibly recognizing the similarity between their questions and Moses’s when the Lord first commissions him to “deliver [Israel] out of the hand of the Egyptians” (Ex. 3:8), Nephi responds to Laman and Lemuel by likening Moses’s eventual response to what theirs should be:

Let us go up again unto Jerusalem, and let us be faithful in keeping the commandments of the Lord; for behold he is mightier than all the earth, then why not mightier than Laban and his fifty, yea, or even than his tens of thousands? Therefore let us go up; *let us be strong like unto Moses*; for he truly spake unto the waters of the Red Sea and they divided hither and thither, and our fathers came through, out of captivity, on dry ground, and the armies of Pharaoh did follow and were drowned in the waters of the Red Sea. Now behold ye know that this is true; and ye also know that an angel hath spoken unto you; wherefore can ye doubt? Let us go up; the Lord is able to deliver us, even as our fathers, and to destroy Laban, even as the Egyptians. (1 Ne. 4:1–3)

This short sermon of Nephi’s is not a classical *midrash*. *Midrashim* tend to be more imaginative, conveying their meaning in story form, much like a legend or even a fairy tale, in order to better make their point more memorable. Nonetheless, Nephi’s words attempt to draw an “enduring truth” from Moses’s experience and apply it to his “acutely contemporary world.” By likening himself and his brothers as they face Laban’s soldiers in Jerusalem to Moses and the children of Israel just before they were delivered by the Lord from the Egyptian army, Nephi provides a vivid example of finding a relevant “latent meaning” of a passage in the Hebrew Scriptures. Although Nephi again likens himself and his brothers to Moses and the children of Israel when he is commanded to build a ship, and his brothers, again, murmur against him (1 Ne. 17:23–51), *derashic* interpretations of events that occur in the Hebrew Scriptures are not common in the Book of Mormon. However, such interpretations of events that occur in the Book of Mormon are common. When Alma, for instance, speaks to his son Helaman, he advises him to “counsel with the Lord in all thy doings” and then interprets Lehi’s experience with the Liahona *derashically*. He explains how “it was prepared [by the Lord] to show unto [their] fathers the course which they should travel in the wilderness,” how it “did work [mighty miracles] for them according to their faith in God,” and how because it “worked by small means” Lehi and his

family were sometimes “slothful, and forgot to exercise their faith and diligence and then those marvelous works ceased, and they did not progress in their journey” (Alma 37:37, 39–41).

Alma then asks rhetorically, “Is there not a type in this thing?” This is clearly a *remez*-like question, pointing out the allegorical significance of their experience with the Liahona. However, Alma pushes this point *derashically*, finding within it a contemporary application:

For just as surely as this director did bring our fathers, by following its course, to the Promised Land, shall the words of Christ, if we follow their course, carry us beyond this vale of sorrow into a far better land of promise. O my son, do not let us be slothful because of the easiness of the way; for so was it with our fathers; for so was it prepared for them, that if they would look they might live; even so it is with us. The way is prepared, and if we will look we may live forever. And now, my son, see that ye take care of these sacred things, yea, see that ye look to God and live. (Alma 37:45–47)

Once again, these interpretive levels build upon one another. Just as Alma formed a *derashic* interpretation (“look to God and live”) from a *remez* understanding (the Liahona represents the words of Christ) of a *peshat* experience (Lehi and family being guided to the Promised Land by the Liahona), so Nephi interprets Lehi’s dream sermonically. After Lehi has told his family of his dream and after Nephi has experienced his own version of the same, his brothers ask Nephi to explain the meaning of several elements of their father’s dream. Nephi responds by explaining the allegorical meaning of the main elements of Lehi’s dream. For instance, he tells them that the rod of iron represents the “word of God,” which will protect those who “would hold fast unto it” (1 Ne. 15:24). However, he also gives them the *derashic* meaning of holding fast to the rod: “I, Nephi, did exhort them to give heed unto the word of the Lord; yea, I did exhort them with all the energies of my soul, and with all the faculty which I possessed, that they would give heed to the word of God and remember to keep his commandments always in all things” (v. 25). In this way, Nephi too forms a *derashic* interpretation from a *remez* understanding of a *peshat* experience.

In addition to these “likenings,” there are all sorts of principles put forth in *derashic* terms as lessons in the text of the Book of Mormon itself. Many of these lessons include the phrase “and thus we see” to include readers implicitly in the lesson and to indicate that readers should apply the principle in their lives. For example, Nephi finds meaning in the Liahona much as Alma did:

And there was also written upon them a new writing, which was plain to be read, which did give us understanding concerning the ways of the Lord; and it was written and changed from time to time, according to the faith and diligence which we gave unto it. And thus we see that by small means the Lord can bring about great things. (1 Ne. 16:29)

Nephi also finds other similar lessons in the journey he and his family make in the wilderness. There the women in his family are said to “give plenty of suck for their children,” and despite a divine prohibition against making fires to cook with, “were strong, yea, even like unto the men” (1 Ne. 17:2). This leads Nephi to conclude that “if it so be that the children of men keep the commandments of God, he doth nourish them, and strengthen them, and provide means whereby they can accomplish the thing which he has commanded them” (v. 3).

Mormon too uses this pattern. In Alma 30, he relates the story of Korihor—a man who claimed that there was no God because people “cannot know of things which [they] do not see” and who advocated a philosophy by which “every man prospered according to his genius, and that every man conquered according to his strength; and whatsoever a man did was no crime” (Alma 30:15, 17). Korihor debates with Alma and was eventually “struck dumb . . . according to the words of Alma” when he demanded a sign (v. 50). Immediately afterwards, Mormon relates the following moral: “And thus we see the end of him who perverteth the ways of the Lord; and thus we see that the devil will not support his children at the last day, but doth speedily drag them down to hell” (v. 60).

Mormon similarly sees a pattern in the way, after a period of prosperity, the Nephites of his time “began again to forget the Lord their God” and “began to wax strong in iniquity” (Hel. 11:36). He says: “And thus we see that except the Lord doth chasten his people with many afflictions, yea, except he doth visit them with death and with terror, and with famine and with all manner of pestilence, they will not remember him” (12:3). This pattern is part of what has been called the “pride cycle” in the Book of Mormon—a larger, universal pattern where pride follows prosperity and precedes divine chastisement and humility. This pride cycle forms one of the major themes of the Book of Mormon and helps show how the entire Book of Mormon invites a *derash*-based interpretation. In other words the entire Book of Mormon serves as a story that reveals eternal principles, which readers are invited to apply to themselves and their situation.

As Moroni writes in the book of Ether, addressing his modern readers, whose “doing” has been shown to him in vision (Morm. 8:35), the Book of



Mormon comes to them “that ye may know the decrees of God—that ye may repent, and not continue in your iniquities until the fulness come, that ye may not bring down the fulness of the wrath of God upon you as the inhabitants of the land have hitherto done” (Ether 2:11). These lessons—often shown negatively as the people in the Book of Mormon do *not* follow them and therefore suffer the consequences—are then meant for modern readers to see and apply to themselves. In the end, readers are not so much to condemn the Nephites for their follies to “give thanks unto God that he hath made manifest unto [them, his people’s,] imperfections, that [they] may learn to be more wise than [his people] have been” (Morm. 9:31).

### *Sod*

*Sod* (pronounced *sōd*), or “mystery,” is the fourth level of traditional rabbinic interpretation. According to George Robinson, it is “the method of biblical interpretation that search[es] for mystical significance.”<sup>22</sup> In a sense, *sod* is the ultimate expression of the belief that God is the author of the Torah and has imbued everything about it with divinity. At the heart of this approach is the idea that the letters of the Torah themselves contain divine significance that extends beyond the words they form and therefore constitute keys to the mystery of God. As Gershom Scholem writes: “The acceptance of the Torah, in the strictest and most precise understanding of the concept of the word of God, in other words . . . Torah from heaven . . . [is the] basic assumption upon which all traditional Jewish mysticism in Kabbalah and Hasidism is based.”<sup>23</sup>

*Sod* is the special province of Kabbalists and other mystics. They tend to view the stories in the Torah as its “mantle” or “outer garments” and not as its essence. They seek what lies under this mantle,<sup>24</sup> and therefore, according to Robinson, “read the Bible as a sort of codebook, a dictionary of symbols to be deciphered by methods such as *gematria* and *notarikon*.”<sup>25</sup> *Gematria* focuses on the numerical value of words and phrases, and it attempts to find meaning or significance in these numbers. This approach is possible because each Hebrew letter also has a numerical value. Therefore, a group of letters can be read as both as a number as well as a word. The

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22. Robinson, *Essential Judaism*, 305.

23. Gershom Scholem, *On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in Our Time*, 14.

24. Michael Berg, ed. and comp., *The Zohar: by Rav Shimon bar Yochai: from the book of Avraham: with Sulam commentary by Rav Ashlag*, 17:415.

25. Robinson, *Essential Judaism*, 305.

Hebrew letters ך ן, for instance, can mean both the Hebrew word *chai* (or “life”) as well as 18, since this grouping consists of the eighth and tenth letters in the Hebrew alphabet. *Notarikon*, in contrast, still views the Hebrew letters as forming words, but these words can also be acronyms or multiple words, each hiding a secret or mystical meaning. As one mystical text puts it, “Many lights shine forth from each word and each letter.”<sup>26</sup>

Because the Book of Mormon was neither written in Hebrew nor originally translated into Hebrew, any interpretation using *sod* in this way is naturally limited. Nonetheless, the Book of Mormon not only commends seeking after mysteries, but it also provides at least one mystical experience consistent with Jewish tradition. For instance, Nephi seems very interested in mysteries. In his introduction, he claims that he has had “a great knowledge of the goodness and the mysteries of God” (1 Ne. 1:1). Later he mentions that he had “great desires to know of the mysteries of God” as a youth and this is what motivated him to “cry unto the Lord” regarding his father’s initial prophecies. Given his experience where “the Lord did visit [him],” Nephi commends seeking such mysteries for all, saying, “For he that diligently seeketh shall find; and the mysteries of God shall be unfolded unto them, by the power of the Holy Ghost, as well in these times as in times of old” (2:16; 10:19).

Jacob too praises the mysteries of God, especially their limitlessness, calling them “unsearchable” because of their depth and claiming that “it is impossible that man should find out all [God’s] ways. And no man knoweth of his ways save it be revealed unto him; wherefore, brethren, despise not the revelations of God” (Jacob 4:8). King Benjamin further teaches that the plates of brass, his version of the Hebrew Scriptures, contain the “mysteries of God” and serve an irreplaceable function in allowing people to “read and understand of [God’s] mysteries” (Mosiah 1:3, 5). King Limhi extends this function to the Book of Mormon by saying that “Doubtless a great mystery is contained within these plates [from which the book of Ether came], and these interpreters were doubtless prepared for the purpose of unfolding all such mysteries to the children of men” (Mosiah 8:19).

Knowing the mysteries of God, especially those contained in the Scriptures, seems vital to these and other writers of the Book of Mormon. In addition, the Book of Mormon recounts a protracted mystical experience that demonstrates how these mysteries of God can be revealed. As Robinson points out, in traditional Judaism “mystical truth is derived

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26. Ibid.

from an esoteric symbol system embedded in the sacred text, but mystical truth can also come from dreams, visions, and revelations vouchsafed to a fortunate few”—prophets such as Ezekiel who saw God on his Chariot Throne or others who attempted to “re-create Ezekiel’s experience and ascend in the Chariot to explore the heavens.”<sup>27</sup> It is from the latter that Nephi learns mystical truth. Soon after he learns of his father’s vision of the tree of life (mentioned earlier as an example of *remez*) but before he explains that vision to his brothers (an example of *derash*), Nephi desires a similar vision for himself. As Nephi writes: “For it came to pass after I had desired to know the things that my father had seen, and believing that the Lord was able to make them known unto me, as I sat pondering in mine heart I was caught away in the Spirit of the Lord, yea, into an exceedingly high mountain, which I never had before seen, and upon which I never had before set my foot” (1 Ne. 11:1).

The fact that Nephi is “caught away” into this mountain connects closely with the prototypical mystical experience of Ezekiel’s, which, although, according to Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, “remained central to Jewish mysticism through history,” has detractors.<sup>28</sup> According to Robinson, the later kabbalistic mystics shunned the Ezekiel tradition and attempted more “to understand the sacred texts, to see meaning *behind* the words, to explore the nature of God rather than to pay a house call.”<sup>29</sup> Nephi’s vision, in a sense, does both. Not only does he ascend to a temple-like mountain, but there he asks questions concerning his father’s words and receives explanations. Similar to the way *gematria* and *notarikon* extend the significance of the Torah’s words far beyond their usual meaning, these answers that Nephi receives go far beyond the actual words of Lehi’s dream. In the true mystical spirit, Nephi hears much that is behind or beyond mere words.

When Nephi asks for an interpretation of the tree that his father saw, he is given an extended vision of the birth and life of the Lamb of God. When he sees the rod of iron, the vision continues showing how the Lamb performed miracles—how many were “healed by the power of the Lamb of God; and the devils and the unclean spirits were cast out” (1 Ne. 11:31). When he sees the “large and spacious building,” he is told that it is the “the pride of the world.” However, he also experiences an extended vision that includes the rise, fall, and eventual dispersion of his people, the

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27. *Ibid.*, 364–65.

28. Lawrence Kushner, *The Way Into Jewish Mystical Tradition*, 91.

29. Robinson, *Essential Judaism*, 370.

formation of a great and abominable church, the rise and problems of the Gentiles, as well as the final destruction of the earth.

In addition to retelling this significant mystical experience, the Book of Mormon encourages its readers to seek similar experiences. After his dream, Nephi returns “to the tent of [his] father” and there finds his brothers “disputing one with another concerning the things which [their] father had spoken unto them” (1 Ne. 15:2). Rather than beginning with his own explanations, recently received, Nephi pleads with them to seek the same experience he had, asking them “Have ye inquired of the Lord?” (v. 8). He then recites to them, as well as to his future readers, God’s own words, saying: “If ye will not harden your hearts, and ask me in faith, believing that ye shall receive, with diligence in keeping my commandments, surely these things shall be made known unto you” (v. 11). In context, Nephi’s “these things” means much more than the answer to their questions; it means Nephi’s full vision.

In many ways, this statement of Nephi’s is a foretaste of what he explains more expansively later on. In 2 Nephi 31, Nephi discourses at length on “the tongue of angels.” By this he does not seem to mean glossolalia or the speaking in an unknown language but rather a way of conversing with the divine—both asking questions and receiving answers. He continues:

Do ye not remember that I said unto you that after ye had received the Holy Ghost ye could speak with the tongue of angels? And now, how could ye speak with the tongue of angels save it were by the Holy Ghost?

Angels speak by the power of the Holy Ghost; wherefore, they speak the words of Christ. Wherefore, I said unto you, feast upon the words of Christ; for behold, the words of Christ will tell you all things what ye should do. (2 Ne. 32:2–3)

Nephi never totally explains what this tongue of angels is. Like all mystical experiences, it seems beyond words. He instead attributes any lack of understanding on the part of his readers to the fact that they “ask not, neither do [they] knock” (2 Ne. 32:4). Moroni also takes up this theme at the end of the Book of Mormon when he encourages his readers to have mystical experience with God by engaging the scriptural text:

Behold, I would exhort you that when ye shall read these things, if it be wisdom in God that ye should read them, that ye would remember how merciful the Lord hath been unto the children of men, from the creation of Adam even down unto the time that ye shall receive these things, and ponder it in your hearts. And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these

things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost. And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things. (Moro. 10:3–5)

In this way, both Nephi and Moroni encourage their readers to have a *sod* experience with the text of the Book of Mormon as well as understand its plain sense, its allegorical meaning, and its sermonic significance. *Peshat*, *remez*, *derash*, and *sod* function together in the Book of Mormon much as they do in the Torah—by connecting its text with God, a never-ending source of enlightenment.