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THE WORD OF THE LORD AS A METONYM FOR CHRIST

Loren Spendlove

Abstract: The word of the Lord *and* the word of God are common expressions in the Bible. Frequently, these phrases refer to the written or spoken covenantal words of God to his people as given through the prophets. However, exegetical study of these expressions has revealed that they also serve as metonyms, or substitutions for the name of God himself. In this paper I explore these metonymous usages of the Word of the Lord and the Word of God as stand-ins for Christ in the Bible and in the Book of Mormon.

The word of the Lord and the word of God are important terms in the Old and New Testaments. In the New Testament the apostle John introduces us to the idea that the *Word of God* is metonymous¹ with Jesus Christ. In the opening chapter of the gospel of John we read:

In the beginning was *the Word* [ὁ λόγος, *o logos*], and *the Word* was with *God* [θεόν, *Theou*], and *the Word* was *God*. ... And *the Word* was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of *the only begotten of the Father*), full of grace and truth.” (John 1:1, 14 KJV, emphasis added)

In 1 John 5:7 we are told, “For there are three that bear record in heaven, *the Father* [ὁ πατήρ, *ho pater*], *the Word* [ὁ λόγος, *ho logos*], and

1. *Metonymy* has been defined as, “In *rhetoric*, a trope in which one word is put for another; a change of names which have some relation to each other; as when we say, ‘a man keeps a good *table*,’ instead of good *provisions*. ‘We read *Virgil*,’ that is, his *poems* or *writings*. ‘They have *Moses* and the *prophets*,’ that is, their *books* or *writings*. A man has a clear *head*, that is, *understanding*, *intellect*; a warm *heart*, that is, *affections*” [emphasis in original]. *American Dictionary of the English Language*, Noah Webster 1828, *Original Facsimile Edition* (San Francisco: Foundation for American Christian Education, 2010), s.v. “metonymy.”

the Holy Ghost [τὸ Ἅγιον Πνεῦμα, *to Hagion Pneuma*]: and these three are one” (KJV, emphasis added).² Also, in the introductory verses of the book of Revelation we are given:

The Revelation of *Jesus Christ*, which God gave to him, to show to his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and he sent and signified it by his *angel* [ἄγγελος, *angelos*] to his servant John: Who *bore testimony of the word of God* [τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ, *ton logon tou Theou*], and of *the testimony of Jesus Christ*,³ and of all things that he saw. (Revelation 1:1–2 WEB,⁴ emphasis added)

Again, in the book of Revelation, John recorded a vision that he beheld of Christ, the Faithful and True, riding on a white horse:

I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called *Faithful* and *True*. With justice he judges and wages war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and *his name is the word of God* [ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ, *ho logos tou Theou*]. (Revelation 19:11–13 NIV, emphasis added)

In this passage, not only does John identify the *Word of God* with Christ, but he also declares the *Word of God* to be Christ’s name. The apostle Peter appears to echo John’s view: “For you have been born again, not of perishable *seed*, but of *imperishable*, through *the living and enduring word* [λόγου, *logou*] of *God* [θεοῦ, *Theou*]” (1 Peter 1:23 NIV, emphasis added). The only other location in the New Testament where we encounter this idea of being *born again* is in the third chapter

2. Many Bible scholars believe that there is a textual problem with 1 John 5:7. It is only in eight late Greek manuscripts that most of the verse appears; earlier Greek manuscripts of 1 John record a much-shortened text. As such, modern translations typically present the verse as only reading, “For there are three that testify” (NIV). See Daniel D. Wallace, “The Textual Problem in 1 John 5:7–8,” Bible.org, June 25, 2004, <https://bible.org/article/textual-problem-1-john-57-8>.

3. This passage can be displayed as a parallelism, helping us identify the Word of God with Jesus Christ:

A	Who bore testimony
B	of the word of God,
A'	and of the testimony
B'	of Jesus Christ,

4. The World English Bible (WEB) is an update of the American Standard Version (ASV) Bible.

of John as Jesus taught Nicodemus. Jesus taught that being *born again* is to be “born of the Spirit” (John 3:8, KJV). Alma, the son of Alma, added that to be *born again* is to be “born of God, changed from [our] carnal and fallen state, to a state of righteousness, being redeemed of God, becoming his sons and daughters” (Mosiah 27:25). Combining Peter’s and Alma’s words we learn that those who are born again accomplish this “through the living and enduring Word of God” [words of Peter], even Jesus Christ, “becoming his sons and daughters” [words of Alma].

How did John and Peter come to identify Jesus Christ with the Word of God? Was this a novel concept that developed during 1st century Christianity, or does it have its roots in ancient Israelite theology? In this paper I discuss the origin, uses, and potential meaning of this phrase in the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the Book of Mormon.

Abraham’s Vision of the Word

The initial appearance in the Bible of the English phrase “the Word of [God⁵]” occurs in the story of Abraham⁶ in Genesis 15:1:

After *these things* [הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה, *ha’devarim ha’ele*, literally “these words”] *the word of the Lord* [דְּבַר־יְהוָה, *devar-Yahweh*] *came* [הָיָה, *hayah*, literally “was”] unto Abram *in a vision* [בַּמַּחְזָה, *bammachazeh*], saying, Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward.” (KJV, emphasis added)

We find closely associated wording three verses later: “And, behold, *the word of the Lord* [דְּבַר־יְהוָה, *devar-Yahweh*] *came* [the verb is only inferred here] unto him, saying, . . . ” (Genesis 15:4 KJV, emphasis added). Regarding these initial verses from Genesis 15, Charles Gieschen⁷ wrote:

There is a very early precedent for *YHWH’s visible form* in a *theophany* being identified as “the Word of YHWH”:

[Genesis 15.1] After these things the Word of YHWH came to Abram in a vision, “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” [2] But Abram said, “O Lord

5. Including the various names and titles of God: יהוה (*Yahweh*), אלהים (*Elohim*), יהוה אלהים (*Yahweh Elohim*), etc.

6. Even though his name has not yet been changed from Abram (אַבְרָם) to Abraham (אַבְרָהָם) in Genesis 15, unless I am citing scripture or another author’s work, I consistently refer to the patriarch as Abraham in this paper.

7. Charles Gieschen is the academic dean and professor of Exegetical Theology at Concordia Theological Seminary.

Elohim, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” [3] And Abram said, “Behold, you have given me no offspring; and a slave born in my house will be my heir.” [4] And behold, the Word of YHWH came to him, “This man shall not be your heir; your own son will be your heir.”

The phenomenon described seems to begin with a *vision* (15.1), then progresses to a *manifestation* that comes to Abram in order to speak and lead him outside to see the stars ... There is good reason to compare this *theophany* to those involving the *Angel of YHWH* in subsequent portions of the OT. Thus, *the Word of YHWH* could be considered to be an *angelomorphic figure*,⁸ especially by later interpreters in the first century CE.⁹

Gieschen described the phrase “the word of the Lord came” (היה דבר-יהוה, *hayah devar-Yahweh*) as the appearance of an “angelomorphic figure” to Abraham, which he also identified as “YHWH’s visible form.” Adding support to Gieschen’s interpretation, Richard Lammert wrote:

Gieschen notes that the word of YHWH not only speaks to Abram but also takes him outside. *The word of YHWH here is obviously more than a title for a verbal event; it is a title for a personal appearance of YHWH.* Abram accepts the statement made by the word of YHWH as if it were YHWH’s own word: *Abram believed YHWH.* Then *the word of YHWH identifies himself as YHWH.* At the conclusion of the pericope, YHWH makes a covenant with Abram that same day. Since the only figure — other than Abram — who has been introduced

8. Bogdan Bucur wrote: “As for angelomorphic, this term, coined by Jean Daniélou, is now widely used by scholars writing on the emergence of christology. I follow Crispin Fletcher-Louis’s definition and use it ‘wherever there are signs that an individual or community possesses specifically *angelic characteristics* [emphasis in original] or *status* [emphasis added], though for whom *identity cannot be reduced to that of an angel.*’ The virtue of this definition is that it signals the use of *angelic characteristics* [emphasis in original] in descriptions of *God or humans* [emphasis added], while not necessarily implying that the latter are angels *stricto sensu* [emphasis in original].” Bogdan G. Bucur, “Hierarchy, Prophecy, and the Angelomorphic Spirit: A Contribution to the Study of the Book of Revelation’s Wirkungsgeschichte,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127, no. 1 (2008): 175.

9. Charles A. Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology: Antecedents and Early Evidence* (Leiden, NDL: Brill, 1998), 103–104, italics added; underline in original.

in the text so far is the word of YHWH, *it is reasonable to conclude that the word of YHWH is the same YHWH who made a covenant with Abram.*¹⁰

It is interesting to note that during this theophanic experience, Yahweh, as the word of Yahweh, covenanted with Abraham that he would multiply his seed, and Abraham assented to this covenantal promise by verbally expressing his *amen*.¹¹ Moshe Anbar¹² wrote that rather than merely describing an auditory experience, these verses in Genesis 15 most likely depict a visual theophany¹³ to Abraham:

hāyâ dēbar YHWH ‘el ‘abrām ... lē’mōr “the word of the Lord came unto Abraham ... saying.” This opening formula is typical of the delivery of the word of God to the prophets. We possess an example which may indicate that this prophetic formula could refer to a revelation which was originally visual.¹⁴

Terence Fretheim¹⁵ wrote that personal encounters with the Word of God, as in Genesis 15, describe more than just a spoken revelation; they reveal the embodied and visible Word of God:

In view of the importance of the theophany in any understanding of the word of God, one can say that the word of God so given is an embodied word. God assumes human form in order to speak a word in personal encounter. The word spoken is the focus for the appearance, but the fact that

10. Richard A. Lammert, “The Word of YHWH as Theophany,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (2009): 200, emphasis added.

11. See Loren Spendlove, “Abraham’s Amen and Believing in Christ: Possible Applications in the Book of Mormon Text,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 49 (2021): 37–62.

12. Moshe Anbar is Professor Emeritus in Bible at Tel Aviv University.

13. Theophanies may involve the appearance of God in physical, human form, but they are not limited to this mode of revelation. In the Bible, God is often depicted as revealing himself by way of natural phenomena: “The most common natural form of divine appearance in Israelite literature is the thunderstorm, with its dark storm cloud representing the divine chariot or throne (Habakkuk 3:8; Ezekiel 1), its thunder representing God’s voice (Exodus 19:16, 19; Psalm 18:13), and its fiery lightning bolts God’s weapons (Habakkuk 3:11; Psalm 18:14).” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), s.v. “Theophany in the OT.”

14. Moshe Anbar, “Genesis 15: A Conflation of Two Deuteronomical Narratives,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 101, no. 1 (March 1982): 41, emphasis in original.

15. Terence Fretheim was a Professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary.

the word is commonly conveyed in personal encounter is of considerable significance. “Visible words” have a kind of import that merely spoken words do not.¹⁶

Samuel and the Word of the Lord

As with Abraham, Gieschen believes that the revelation to the young Samuel, who “ministered before the LORD under Eli” (1 Samuel 3:1 NIV), was also a visible theophany:

The visual aspect of the Word of YHWH as a theophany is also prominent in the Samuel call narrative. Consider these select portions:

[1 Samuel 3.1] Now the boy Samuel was ministering to YHWH under Eli. And the Word of YHWH was rare in those days; there was not frequent vision. [3.6] And YHWH called again, “Samuel!” And Samuel arose and went to Eli, and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” But he said, “I did not call, my son; lie down again.” [3.7] Now Samuel did not yet know YHWH, and the Word of YHWH had not yet been revealed to him. [3.10] YHWH came and stood forth, calling as at other times, “Samuel! Samuel!” [3.21] And YHWH appeared again at Shiloh, for YHWH revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the Word of YHWH.

Although the angelomorphic appearance of God to a prophet, such as those to Moses in Exodus 3 and 33, is less prominent in prophetic literature, this earlier theophanic model appears to be the basis of the expression “the Word of YHWH came to the prophet.”¹⁷

Given Gieschen’s observations of 1 Samuel 3, specific passages from that chapter deserve further emphasis:

- The Word of Yahweh [דבר־יהוה] was rare [היה יקר], literally, was precious] in those days (verse 1).
- There was not frequent vision [אין הזון נפרץ], there was no vision breaking forth] (verse 1).
- Yahweh called [יקרא יהוה] (verse 4).
- Samuel did not yet know Yahweh [ושמואל טרם ידע את־יהוה] (verse 7).

16. *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6, s.v. “Word of God.”

17. Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology*, 104, underline original.

- The Word of Yahweh had not yet been revealed to him [וטרם יגלה אליו דברי־יהוה] (verse 7).¹⁸
- Yahweh came and stood forth [ויבא יהוה ויטיצב, literally, and came Yahweh and stood] (verse 10).
- Yahweh appeared again at Shiloh [ויסף יהוה להראה בשילה] (verse 21).
- Yahweh revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the Word of Yahweh [כִּי־נִגְלָה יְהוָה אֶל־שְׁמוּאֵל בְּשֵׁלּוֹ בְּדָבָר יְהוָה] (verse 21).

Taken together, these passages seem to confirm that Yahweh not only spoke to but also physically showed himself to Samuel. As such, it was reasonable for Gieschen to arrive at the conclusion that Yahweh, as the Word of Yahweh, showed himself to the prophet Samuel. Lammert agrees with this assessment:

A theophany of God as the word of YHWH is primarily associated with the prophets of Israel. 1 Samuel 3:1 supports this conclusion: “The boy Samuel ministered before YHWH under Eli. In those days the word of YHWH was rare [ודברי־יהוה]; there were not many visions [ואין חזון נפרץ];” Because the author of the text probably wrote in a later period when there were more frequent theophanies of God, he could say that in “those days” (as compared to the writer’s day) the word of YHWH “was rare.” The explicit connection between the word of YHWH and “visions” appears to underscore that the word of YHWH is not simply a spoken or written word of God but a manifestation of God that appears in a vision. ... If one understands the word of YHWH as a theophany, one would more readily say that the word of YHWH *himself* appears in the vision, announcing the word of prophecy. This can be demonstrated from the text. The following text of Samuel makes no sharp distinction between the word of YHWH and YHWH (to use Grether’s terminology, the two

18. Verse 7 is likely structured as a parallelism, helping us identify Yahweh with the Word of Yahweh:

	<u>Hebrew</u>	<u>Literal Translation</u>
A	ושמואל טרם ידע	And Samuel not yet knew
B	את־יהוה	Yahweh
A'	וטרם יגלה אליו	And not yet was revealed to him
B'	דברי־יהוה	the Word of Yahweh.

terms are used “promiscuously”). Thus, the impression is underscored that the two are the same.¹⁹

Lammert, quoting Gieschen, added that “if there is no distinction between the word of YHWH and YHWH, then the two are metonymous, and the word of YHWH is a theophany.”²⁰ If we accept these conclusions, then it would be more appropriate to express the phrase *the Word of Yahweh* in English with a capital *W*, since it represents a proper name. Lammert is also careful to clarify that although the Word of Yahweh can be identified as being metonymous with Yahweh, not all occurrences of the phrase in the Bible can carry that meaning:

This analysis of selected passages regarding the word of YHWH shows that they readily support the understanding of the Word as a theophany, a visible manifestation of YHWH. YHWH himself appears to the patriarchs and prophets, making known his revelatory word to them. *This does not mean that all passages with the word of YHWH can be so understood.* Some indisputably relate to the covenantal word of God in the commandments, or to other words. But this analysis allows us to conclude that several occurrences of the word of YHWH in biblical texts should be considered theophanies *if the text indicates that the word of YHWH came and spoke with an individual or group.*²¹

In the above passage Lammert makes a distinction between *the Word of Yahweh* as the “visible manifestation of YHWH,” and *the word of Yahweh* as “the covenantal word of God in the commandments.” In 1 Samuel 3:7, we are told that “Samuel did not yet *know* [ידע, *yada*] *the Lord* [יהוה, *Yahweh*], neither was *the word of the Lord* [דבר-יהוה, *devar-Yahweh*] yet *revealed* [גילה, *yiggaleh*] unto him” (KJV, emphasis added). Later, in verse 21 we read, “And *the Lord* [יהוה, *Yahweh*] appeared [להראה, *leheraoh*²²] again in Shiloh: for *the Lord* [יהוה, *Yahweh*] *revealed* [נגלה, *niglah*] himself to Samuel in Shiloh by *the word of the Lord* [דבר-יהוה, *devar-Yahweh*]” (KJV, emphasis added). The verbs יגלה (*yiggaleh*) in verse 7 and נגלה (*niglah*) in verse 21, both translated as *revealed* in the KJV, are derived from the root ג-ל-ה (*g-l-h*), and carry the meaning of “let[ting]

19. Lammert, “The Word of YHWH,” 203–204, emphasis in original.

20. *Ibid.*, 201.

21. *Ibid.*, 204, emphasis added.

22. The root of להראה (*leheraoh*) is ר-א-ה (*r-a-h*), meaning *to see*.

oneself be seen, to become visible, to reveal oneself.”²³ In verse 7, we are told that prior to Samuel’s nighttime experience, *the Word of the Lord* had not yet been *revealed* to him. Another way of phrasing this could be that *the Word of the Lord* had not yet *let himself be seen* by Samuel. However, in verse 21 we find that things have changed; *the Lord* did *reveal* himself, or *let himself be seen*, by Samuel “by the Word of the Lord.” These two verses help establish that *the Word of Yahweh* is metonymous with *Yahweh*, at least in these passages.

In addition, it is possible that the author of 1 Samuel inserted wordplay into the story of Samuel to visually and audibly demonstrate that things were about to change with his call as a prophet. No longer would the word of the Lord be rare; Yahweh was about to turn the current state of affairs on its head. In 1 Samuel 3:1, we are told that the word of the Lord “was rare.” In Hebrew, this phrase is expressed as יהיה יקר (*hayah yaqar*). Signaling a change in the status quo, in verse four, we read that “the Lord called Samuel.” The Hebrew for “the Lord called” is יקרא יהוה (*yaqar yahweh*). יהיה יקר (*hayah yaqar*) and יקרא יהוה (*yaqar yahweh*) are closely related visual and auditory matches, but with inverted word order. It has long been held that the name Yahweh (יהוה YHWH) is derived from the verb “to be,” of which יהיה (*hayah*, “was”) represents the third person, masculine, singular, perfect tense.²⁴ So in this passage, יהיה (*hayah*) could be seen as metonymous with יהוה (YHWH). And although divergent in meaning, יקר (*yaqar*) and יקרא (*yaqar*) are nearly identical to each other, both visually and audibly. So, when the author of 1 Samuel inverted the word order of the two phrases, it could have been a visual and audible representation of the reversal that was about to occur with Samuel’s call. Visions of the Word of the Lord would no longer be rare; rather, they would become frequent after Yahweh called Samuel!

23. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden, NDL: Brill, 2000), s.v. “גלה.”

24. Saul Leeman wrote, “The Rashbam identifies the name ‘Ehyeh’ [I will be] with the Tetragrammaton (henceforth ‘Hashem’). To do so, he must explain how the initial ‘aleph’ changes to the ‘yod’ and how the third letter, *yod*, changes to a ‘vav.’ The *aleph-yod* exchange he explains quite simply; that when God refers to Himself he would say *Ehyeh*, while we speaking in third person would say ‘*Yihyeh* [He will be].’ Likewise, the *yod-vav* exchange is equally understandable, as the two letters are frequently exchangeable. For example, in Ecclesiastes 2:22 we find the word ‘*hoveh*’ where we would expect ‘*hayah* [to happen].” Saul Leeman, “The Names of God,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (2004): 1 emphasis original, https://jbnqnew.jewishbible.org/assets/Uploads/322/322_Namesgo2.pdf.

The Word of the Lord Came to Jonah

As with the story of Abraham in Genesis 15, the book of Jonah begins with a possible theophany: “*The word of the Lord* [דבר־יהוה, *devar-Yahweh*] *came* [היה, *hayah*] to Jonah the son of Amittai” (Jonah 1:1 NASB, emphasis added). Regarding this passage, Phillip Cary²⁵ wrote:

Jonah, like father Abraham and all Israel, is chosen by God for the blessing of all the families of the earth (Genesis 12:3; 22:18; 28:14; cf. Acts 3:25), but he is a chosen one who flees his election and the mission that comes with it, as chosen ones are wont to do in the Bible. The only absolute exception is the chosen one whose mission, it turns out, is to identify with Jonah. Jesus Christ, the chosen one who never for a moment turns in the opposite direction from where God sends him, has the mission of identifying with Jonah, the chosen one who flees his mission, and thereby redeeming all those who flee and exile themselves from the presence of God. To be the uniquely obedient chosen one, Jesus must stand in the place of the prophet Jonah, the disobedient fool, the elect one who tries his best to refuse the task of the elect but ultimately fails. One must suspect that Jonah ultimately fails to escape his election because *the word of the LORD that comes to him is none other than the word that ultimately takes his place*, taking upon himself the sin of Jonah, his flight and disobedience, and his three days in the abyss.²⁶

Following Jonah’s initial disobedience, which led to the “three days and three nights in the whale’s belly,” we are told that “*the word of the Lord* [דבר־יהוה, *devar-Yahweh*] came to Jonah the second time” (Jonah 3:1 NASB, emphasis added) after he was “vomited ... onto the dry land (Jonah 2:10 NASB). The ever-patient Word of the Lord instructed him again to “Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee” (Jonah 3:2, KJV). This time Jonah was obedient and he “arose, and went unto Nineveh, according to *the word of the Lord* [דבר־יהוה, *devar-Yahweh*]” (Jonah 3:3 KJV, emphasis added). Twice in this short story we are told that the Word of the Lord came and instructed Jonah.

25. Phillip Cary is a professor of Philosophy at Eastern University.

26. Phillip Cary, *Jonah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 44, emphasis added.

The Word of the Lord Came to Jeremiah

The book of Jeremiah opens with these words: “The *words of Jeremiah* [דברי ירמיהו, *divrei Yermiyahu*] the son of Hilkiah, of the priests that were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin: To whom *the word of the Lord* [דבר־יהוה, *devar-Yahweh*] *came*” (Jeremiah 1:1–2 KJV, emphasis added). As with Abraham, Samuel, and Jonah, this opening line most likely represents both an audible and visual encounter with Yahweh. Referencing these opening verses from Jeremiah 1, Gieschen observed:

Here “the Word of YHWH” came to Jeremiah and spoke in the first person as YHWH (1.4, 11, 13; cf. 2.1). After Jeremiah’s objection (1.6) and YHWH’s verbal reassurance (1.7–8), Jeremiah relates that “then YHWH put forth his hand and touched my mouth” (1.9). What was the appearance of this “Word of YHWH” who was “YHWH” (1.7, 9a, 9b, 12; cf. 1.8, 15, 19) if he could be described as putting forth his hand to touch Jeremiah’s mouth (1.9)? Is this not more than anthropomorphism? Here “word of YHWH” is most likely a figure in continuity with angelomorphic traditions that depict God appearing in the form of a man to a human.²⁷

Again, Lammert agrees with Gieschen’s conclusion: “We can conclude that Jeremiah has recorded a theophany; the word of YHWH that came to him was a visible manifestation of YHWH that he could see and still live.”²⁸ It is interesting to note that the Word of the Lord spoke to Jeremiah personally, in the first person: “Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations” (Jeremiah 1:5, KJV). Throughout the entire first chapter of Jeremiah, the author alternates between using *the word of the Lord* (דבר־יהוה, *devar-Yahweh*) and *the Lord* (יהוה, *Yahweh*) as if the two terms were altogether interchangeable (see Table 1).

Table 1. Verses and phrases from Jeremiah 1.

Verse	Phrase
2	The word of the Lord (דבר־יהוה, <i>devar-Yahweh</i>)
4	The word of the Lord (דבר־יהוה, <i>devar-Yahweh</i>)
6	Lord God (אדני יהוה, <i>adonai Yahweh</i>)
7	The Lord (יהוה, <i>Yahweh</i>)

27. Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology*, 105.

28. Lammert, “The Word of YHWH,” 201.

Verse	Phrase
8	The Lord (יהוה, <i>Yahweh</i>)
9	The Lord (יהוה, <i>Yahweh</i>)
11	The word of the Lord (דבר־יהוה, <i>devar-Yahweh</i>)
12	The Lord (יהוה, <i>Yahweh</i>)
13	The word of the Lord (דבר־יהוה, <i>devar-Yahweh</i>)
14	The Lord (יהוה, <i>Yahweh</i>)
15	The Lord (יהוה, <i>Yahweh</i>)
19	The Lord (יהוה, <i>Yahweh</i>)

Fretheim adds a valuable contribution to the idea of the embodied Word of God that appeared to Jeremiah. Prophets, like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, experienced a physical encounter with *the Word of God* (Christ) where he placed *the word of God* in them. The prophets, in turn, became the embodied *word of God* who preached *the word* (prophecy) and *the Word* (Messiah) to God's people:

The idea of the embodied word becomes particularly apparent in Jeremiah and Ezekiel. In Jeremiah 1:9 (cf. 15:16; Deuteronomy 18:18) the word of God is placed by God's hand directly into Jeremiah's mouth; the word is conveyed into his very being without having been spoken. This is graphically portrayed in Ezekiel 3:1–3; the prophet ingests the word of God. The word of God is thereby enfleshed in the very person of the prophet. It is not only what the prophet speaks but who he is that now constitute the word of God. The prophet conveys the word in a way that no simple speaking or writing can. The people now not only hear the word of God from the prophet, they see the word enfleshed in their midst. *The word of God is not a disembodied word; it is a personal word spoken in personal encounter.*²⁹

As Fretheim explained, whether the word of God is delivered by the Word of God himself to his prophet, or by the prophet to the people, the word that is delivered is almost always embodied.³⁰ John McKenzie³¹ wrote of a subtle difference between the phrases “the word of Yahweh came to ...” and “Yahweh said to ...”

29. *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, s.v. “Word of God,” emphasis added.

30. An exception to this general rule can be found in 3 Nephi 9 where it appears that a disembodied voice was “heard among all the inhabitants of the earth, upon all the face of this land” (3 Nephi 9:1).

31. John McKenzie was a Catholic biblical scholar and theologian.

The most frequent phrase to describe the prophetic experience is “the word of Yahweh came to X.” This is somewhat nuanced from what appears to be the synonymous expression, “Yahweh said to X.” *When the word of Yahweh comes, the background of the word as a dynamic entity with its own distinct reality comes into view* [emphasis added]. The word is a *something* [italics in original] which the prophet receives. *As a something it is an expansion of a living personality, who in this case is Yahweh Himself* [emphasis added]; and it has the power which only that uniquely powerful personality can give it. Its first effect is upon the prophet himself. When Yahweh puts His hand to the mouth of Jeremiah, He puts His word in the mouth of the prophet (Jeremiah 1:9). It is the conscious possession of the word which distinguishes the true prophet from the false, and revelation from human invention.³²

McKenzie connected the phrase “the word of Yahweh came to X” with “*something* which the prophet receives. As a *something* it is an expansion of a living personality, who in this case is Yahweh Himself.” This *something* that comes to the prophets, as McKenzie describes it, in the form of “the Word of the Lord” often engages many or all of the prophets’ physical senses, as we learn from Jeremiah’s theophany.

The Word of the Lord came to Ezekiel

Ezekiel also had a sensory encounter with the Word of Yahweh similar to Jeremiah’s. As in the story of the prophet Samuel, the book of Ezekiel begins with the account of a priest, Ezekiel, who saw visions (אֲרָאָה מֵרְאוֹת, *ere marot*) of God. As with Samuel, Jonah, and Jeremiah, the Word of the Lord [דְּבַר־יְהוָה, *devar-Yahweh*] came [הָיָה, *hayah*] to Ezekiel and delivered words to him that he was instructed to pass along to the people:

In my thirtieth year, in the fourth month *on the fifth day*, while I was among the exiles by the Kebar River, the heavens were opened *and I saw visions of God* [אֲרָאָה מֵרְאוֹת אֱלֹהִים, *va’ere marot elohim*]. *On the fifth of the month,*³³ ... *the word*

32. John L. McKenzie, “The Word of God in the Old Testament,” *Theological Studies* 21, no. 2 (1960): 192, <http://cdn.theologicalstudies.net/21/21.2/21.2.1.pdf>.

33. The repetition used in these verses seems to reinforce that Ezekiel’s “visions of God” were metonymous with “the Word of Yahweh” that came to him:

	<u>Hebrew</u>	<u>Literal Translation</u>
A	בַּחֲמִשָּׁה לַחֹדֶשׁ	on the fifth of the month (verse 1)
B	וְאֲרָאָה מֵרְאוֹת אֱלֹהִים	And I saw visions of Elohim (verse 1)

of the LORD [דבר־יהוה, *devar-Yahweh*] came [היה, *hayah*] to Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, by the Kebar River in the land of the Babylonians. There *the hand of the LORD* [יד־יהוה, *yad-Yahweh*] was on him. ... Then he said to me, “Son of man, eat this scroll I am giving you and fill your stomach with it.” So I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth. He then said to me: “Son of man, go now to the people of Israel and speak my words to them.” (Ezekiel 1:1, 3; 3:3–4 NIV, emphasis added)

Ezekiel, having been visited in vision by *the Word of God* (Yahweh), was given *the word of God* (the word of prophecy) in the form of a scroll to eat until his stomach was full. Having eaten, Ezekiel became the embodied word of God, a personal messenger of the Lord (מלאך יהוה, *mal'akh Yahweh*,³⁴ cf. Genesis 16:7) who was then charged to preach *the word* to the people of Israel.

Summary

In the opening paragraphs of this paper I asked how John and Peter had come to understand and teach that Jesus was metonymous with the

A' בחמשה לחדש	on the fifth of the month (verse 2)
B' היה דבר־יהוה אלי־יחזקאל	was [came] the word of Yahweh to Ezekiel (verse 3)

34. Gieschen wrote, “It is a well documented and ancient tradition of the OT that in several of the narratives where God communicates with humans, the form from which God speaks is identified as מלאך [*mal'akh*]. The Hebrew term מלאך [*mal'akh*] is the nominal construct form from לאך [*lakh*], which means ‘to send’ or possibly ‘to send on a comission’ [sic]. The basic meaning of the nominal, ‘one who is sent’, has led to the common definition: ‘messenger’. Well-defined messenger activity was prominent in the ancient Near East. The OT uses מלאך [*mal'akh*] for both human messengers (e.g., 1 Sam 11.4) and supernatural messengers (e.g., Psalms 103.20). The Greek term ἄγγελος [*angelos*] also signifies ‘a messenger’. The use of מלאך [*mal'akh*] or ἄγγελος [*angelos*] as a designation for supernatural messengers caused these terms to carry more ontological significance and to become associated with more functions than message delivery, especially in the Second Temple Period. Therefore, by the first century CE, among Jews and Christians, both מלאך [*mal'akh*] and ἄγγελος [*angelos*] usually signified the broader technical meaning of ‘a spirit who mediates in various ways between the human and divine realms’. This description retains the basic idea of ‘one sent (with a commission)’, but the role of messenger becomes less dominant. Furthermore, this technical meaning has led to the frequent English translation of both מלאך [*mal'akh*] and ἄγγελος [*angelos*] in biblical and related literature as ‘angel’ when the referent is supernatural, and ‘messenger’ when the referent is human.” Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology*, 51.

Word of God. I questioned whether this was a newly-minted first-century Christian concept or if it had its roots in ancient Israelite theology. Following our study of the theophanies experienced by Abraham, Samuel, Jonah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, Lammert provides an excellent answer to these introductory questions:

When one grasps the word of YHWH as a theophanic expression, it is not surprising to find the Word as an hypostasis or theophany in the literature of the Second Temple period (such as the Wisdom of Solomon 18:15) or in the New Testament (passages in which *the Word* is a reference to Jesus Christ such as John 1:1,14). When one views the word of YHWH as a theophany in the Old Testament, its explicit use as such in the Second Temple period and in the New Testament is understood not as a *development* of its use in the Hebrew Scriptures, but as a *continuation*. There is no lack of continuity of theology and language between the Old Testament and the New Testament.³⁵

The Word of the Lord in the Book of Mormon

There are several recorded theophanies in the Book of Mormon, among which are visions experienced by Lehi, Nephi, Alma the son of Alma, the sons of Mosiah, and the brother of Jared, to name only a few. In addition to these theophanic experiences there other less obvious occurrences of divine appearances in the Book of Mormon that follow the pattern that we have identified in the Bible involving the metonymous phrases³⁶ *the Word of the Lord* or *the Word of God*.

The Word of God Came to Jacob

After the death of Nephi, Jacob felt constrained to preach repentance to the Nephite people. Following the pattern outlined with the biblical prophets, the Word of God [דבר האלהים, *devar ha'Elohim*³⁷] came to Jacob and delivered a message that he was instructed to declare to the people:

35. Lammert, "The Word of YHWH," 204–205, emphasis in original.

36. For additional examples of metonymy in the Book of Mormon see Gordon C. Thomasson, "What's in a Name? Book of Mormon Language, Names, and [Metonymic] Naming," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3, no. 1 (1994), <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol3/iss1/2>.

37. "But *the word of God* [דבר האלהים, *devar ha'Elohim*] came unto Shemaiah the man of God, saying" (1 Kings 12:22 KJV, emphasis added). Since we do not possess an original Hebrew text of the Book of Mormon, all back translations into

Wherefore, I must tell you the truth according to the *plainness of the word of God*. For behold, as *I inquired of the Lord*, thus came the word unto me, saying: Jacob, get thou up into the temple on the morrow, and declare the word which I shall give thee unto this people. (Jacob 2:11, emphasis added)

Several factors in this passage mediate in favor of interpreting *the word of God* in this passage as a metonym for Christ. First, Jacob's "*plainness of the word of God*" parallels Nephi's earlier teaching about "*the plainness which is in the Lamb of God*" (1 Nephi 13:29, emphasis added). If we connect these two ideas, then Jacob's *word of God* can be considered metonymous with Nephi's *Lamb of God*. Second, after Jacob's mention of "*the word of God* [דבר האלהים, *devar ha'Elohim*]" he tells us that he "*inquired of the Lord* [יהוה, *Yahweh*]" and that "*the word* [הדבר, *ha'davar*³⁸]" came to him. By context it seems apparent that "*the word*" in this passage is shorthand for "*the word of God*." As demonstrated earlier, the phrase "*the word of the Lord/the word of God came to X*" can be understood as metonymous with an embodied manifestation of God. Jacob continued:

But *the word of God* [דבר האלהים, *devar ha'Elohim*] burdens me because of your grosser crimes. For behold, thus saith *the Lord* [יהוה, *Yahweh*]: "This people begin to wax in iniquity; they understand not the scriptures, for they seek to excuse themselves in committing whoredoms, because of the things which were written concerning David, and Solomon his son. Behold, David and Solomon truly had many wives and concubines, which thing was abominable before me, saith *the Lord* [יהוה, *Yahweh*]. Wherefore, thus saith *the Lord* [יהוה, *Yahweh*], I have led this people forth out of the land of Jerusalem, by the power of *mine arm* [זרועי, *zeroi*]³⁹ that I might raise up unto me a righteous branch from the fruit of the loins of Joseph. Wherefore, I *the Lord God* [יהוה אלהים, *Yahweh Elohim*] will not suffer that this people shall do like unto them of old. Wherefore, my brethren, *hear me*, and *hearken to the word of the Lord* [דבר יהוה, *devar-Yahweh*]: For

Hebrew are speculative but well-supported by comparable phrases in the Hebrew Bible.

38. Deuteronomy 30:14: "But the word [הדבר, *ha'davar*] is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it" (KJV).

39. Psalm 89:21: "With whom my hand [ידי, *yadi*] shall be established: mine arm [זרועי, *zeroi*] also shall strengthen him" (KJV, emphasis added).

there shall not any man among you have save it be one wife; and concubines he shall have none; For I, *the Lord God* [יהוה אלהים, *Yahweh Elohim*],⁴⁰ delight in the chastity of women. And whoredoms are an abomination before me; thus saith *the Lord of Hosts* [יהוה צבאות, *Yahweh tsevaot*].⁴¹” (Jacob 2:23–28, emphasis added)

Taken together with the earlier passage from Jacob, several elements in this section also argue in favor of “the word of the Lord” as a metonym for Christ. First, the above passage begins with a simple alternate parallelism that appears to equate *the word of God* with *the Lord*:

- A But *the word of God* [דבר האלהים, *devar ha'Elohim*]
burdens me
- B because of your grosser crimes.
- A' For behold, *thus saith the Lord* [יהוה, *Yahweh*]:
- B' “This people begin to *wax in iniquity*,”

Second, Jacob employs multiple biblical appellations for God in this passage: *the Lord* (4x), *the Lord God* (2x), *mine arm* (1x), *the word of God* (1x), *the word of the Lord* (1x), and *the Lord of Hosts* (1x). Each appellation can be replaced with the word *Christ* without changing the meaning of the passage. This repetition of the various names of God helps establish Jacob’s authority when speaking to the people and shows that the words that Jacob is speaking did not originate with him; they are a commandment from the Lord. By contrast, in an earlier verse from the same chapter, Jacob used the phrase “the word of the Lord” as a clear reference to the *words* of the Lord: “For behold, as yet, ye have been obedient unto *the word of the Lord, which I have given unto you*” (Jacob 2:4, emphasis added).

The Word of the Lord Came to Alma

In Alma 43 we are told that the Nephites met the armies of the Lamanites in the borders of Jershon. However, the Nephites were better prepared for the battle, so the Lamanites disengaged and fled into the wilderness. Not knowing where the Lamanites were headed, Moroni sent spies to

40. “These are the generations of the heavens and of the earth when they were created, in the day that *the LORD God* [יהוה אלהים, *Yahweh Elohim*] made the earth and the heavens” (Genesis 2:4 KJV, emphasis added).

41. “And Elijah said, As *the LORD of hosts* [יהוה צבאות, *Yahweh tsevaot*] liveth, before whom I stand, I will surely shew myself unto him to day” (1 Kings 18:15 KJV, emphasis added).

follow them, and he “knowing of *the prophecies of Alma*, sent certain men unto him, desiring him that he should inquire of *the Lord* [יהוה, *Yahweh*] whither the armies of the Nephites should go to defend themselves against the Lamanites” (Alma 43: 23, emphasis added). Following the pattern that we have already observed, “*the word of the Lord* [דבר־יהוה, *devar-Yahweh*] came unto Alma, and Alma informed the messengers of Moroni, ... and those messengers went and delivered the message unto Moroni” (Alma 43:24, emphasis added). As we have seen with the examples in the Bible, “the Word of the Lord” first came to Alma and delivered the information that he desired. As the embodied mortal “word of the Lord,” Alma then “informed the messengers,” and they “delivered the message unto Moroni.”

The Word of the Lord Came to Ether

The following passage from the Book of Ether also conforms to the pattern outlined in the Bible. The Word of the Lord came to Ether, and Ether was told to prophesy to Coriantumr that the Lord would spare his people if they would repent:

And in the second year *the word of the Lord* [דבר־יהוה, *devar-Yahweh*] came to Ether, that he should go and prophesy unto Coriantumr that, if he would repent, and all his household, *the Lord* [יהוה, *Yahweh*] would give unto him his kingdom and spare the people. (Ether 13:20, emphasis added)

As with the other examples from the Bible and the Book of Mormon, “the word of the Lord came to Ether” possibly represents a visible appearance of the Lord to the prophet.

The Word of the Lord Came to Mormon

Upon learning that there were disputations among the members of the church concerning the baptism of children, Mormon wrote a letter to Moroni to settle this doctrinal matter:

For immediately after I had learned *these things* of you I inquired of *the Lord* [יהוה, *Yahweh*] concerning the matter. And *the word of the Lord* [דבר־יהוה, *devar-Yahweh*] came to me by the power of the Holy Ghost, saying: *Listen to the words of Christ* [דברי המשיח, *divre ha'mashiach*],⁴² your Redeemer

42. The Hebrew word משיח (*mashiach*, messiah) and the Greek word Χριστός (*christos*, Christ) both mean *anointed*.

[גאלכם, *goalechem*],⁴³ *your Lord* [אדניכם, *adonechem*]⁴⁴, and *your God* [אלהיכם, *Elohechem*].⁴⁵ Behold, I came into the world not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance; the whole need no physician, but they that are sick; wherefore, little children are whole, for they are not capable of committing sin; wherefore the curse of Adam is taken from them in me, that it hath no power over them; and the law of circumcision is done away in me. *And after this manner did the Holy Ghost manifest*⁴⁶ *the word of God* [דבר האלהים, *devar ha'Elohim*] unto me; wherefore, my beloved son, I know that it is solemn mockery before *God* [אלהים, *Elohim*], that ye should baptize little children. (Moroni 8:7–9, emphasis added)

Similar to the passage in Jacob, Mormon used multiple biblical names for God to help establish his authority: the Lord (1x), the word of the Lord (1x), Christ (1x), your Redeemer (1x), your Lord (1x), your God (1x), the word of God (1x), and God (1x). Two other factors also merit mention in these verses. First, Mormon told us that after he had “inquired of the Lord” that “*the word of the Lord came to me by the power of the Holy Ghost,*” and that “*after this manner did the Holy Ghost manifest the word of God unto me.*” In both cases, Mormon is clear to point out that the revelatory experience was facilitated by the Holy Ghost, whose work is to bare record of Christ (cf. 1 Nephi 12:18, 3 Nephi 28:11). In addition, the phrases “came to me” and “did ... manifest ... unto me” both seem to indicate a visual appearance of *the Word* to Mormon.

Second, *the Word of the Lord spoke* to Mormon, and said: “Listen to the *words* of Christ.” It is important to point out that the “Word [singular] of the Lord” spoke to Mormon and instructed him to “listen to the words [plural] of Christ.” The same “Word of the Lord” continued by saying: “*I came into the world not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance;*

43. Isaiah 43:14: “Thus saith *the Lord* [יהוה, *Yahweh*], *your redeemer* [גאלכם, *goalechem*], *the Holy One of Israel* [קדוש ישראל, *qedosh Israel*]” (KJV, emphasis added).

44. See 1 Kings 1:33.

45. Isaiah 40:1: “Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith *your God* [אלהיכם, *Elohechem*]” (KJV, emphasis added).

46. “To reveal; to make to appear; to show plainly; to make public; to disclose to the eye or to the understanding.” *Noah Webster’s First Edition of An American Dictionary of the English Language*, (San Francisco: Foundation for American Christian Education, 2010), s.v. “manifest.” “In a far-off land *the Lord* [יהוה, *Yahweh*] will manifest [נראה, *nirah*] himself to them” (Jeremiah 31:3 NET, emphasis added). The verb נראה (*nirah*) in this verse is derived from the root ר-א-ה meaning to see.

... wherefore the curse of Adam is taken from them *in me*, that it hath no power over them; and the law of circumcision is done away *in me*.” *The Word of the Lord* spoke the words of Christ to Mormon in the first person, as if he were Christ. Taken together, these points can lead us to understand that Mormon’s experience was much like those of Abraham, Samuel, Jonah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel — the Lord, the embodied *Word of the Lord*, appeared to Mormon and spoke the words of Christ to him.

Lehi was Obedient to the Word of the Lord

In addition to the phrase “the word of the Lord came to X,” there are other ways in which the expressions *the word of the Lord* and *the word of God* can be understood as being metonymous with Christ. In the opening chapters of the Book of Mormon we learn that Lehi had been instructed to take his family and depart out of the land of Jerusalem:

For behold, it came to pass that *the Lord spake unto my father*, yea, even *in a dream*, and *said unto him*: Blessed art thou Lehi, because of the things which thou hast done; and because thou hast been faithful and declared unto this people *the things* [הדברים, *ha’devarim*, literally “the words”]⁴⁷ which I commanded thee, behold, they seek to take away thy life. And it came to pass that *the Lord commanded my father*, even *in a dream*, that he should take his family and depart into the wilderness. And it came to pass that *he was obedient unto the word of the Lord* [דבר־יהוה, *devar-Yahweh*], wherefore *he did as the Lord* [יהוה, *Yahweh*] *commanded him*. (1 Nephi 2:1–3, emphasis added)

Nephi tells us that the Lord (יהוה, *Yahweh*) *spoke* to Lehi and *commanded him in a dream* that his family was to “depart into the wilderness.” The final line of this passage is presented as a simple alternate parallelism, allowing us to observe that *the Word of the Lord* is most likely metonymous with *the Lord* in these verses:

A And it came to pass that *he was obedient*
 B unto *the word of the Lord*,
 A’ wherefore *he did*
 B’ as *the Lord* commanded him.

Lammert commented:

47. “And I commanded you at that time all *the things* [הדברים, *ha’devarim*] which ye should do” (Deuteronomy 1:18 KJV, emphasis added).

Since “the Word ... plays a much more independent role in ancient times than we can feel,” then we should be open — as faithful interpreters — to the possibility that *word of YHWH* [the word of the Lord] is a title for *YHWH’s visible appearance or form*. We must take into account that it is more difficult for us moderns than for the ancient Israelites to see a given account as a theophany.⁴⁸

The Word of God and the Rod of Iron

Following Nephi’s vision of the tree of life, he attempted to explain the meaning of the symbols that he saw in vision to his brothers. One of those symbols was the rod of iron:

And I said unto them that *it* [the rod of iron] was *the word of God* [דבר האלהים, *devar ha’Elohim*]; and whoso would *hearken* [from ש-מ-ע, *sh-m-a*]⁴⁹ unto *the word of God* [דבר האלהים, *devar ha’Elohim*], and would *hold fast* [from ח-ז-ק, *ch-z-q*]⁵⁰ unto it, they would never perish; neither could the temptations and the fiery darts of the adversary overpower them unto blindness, to lead them away to destruction. Wherefore, I, Nephi, did exhort them to *give heed* [from ש-ב-ק, *q-sh-v*]⁵¹ unto *the word of the Lord* [דבר יהוה, *devar-Yahweh*]; 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* [דבר האלהים, *devar ha’Elohim*] and *remember to keep his commandments* always in all things. (1 Nephi 15:24–25, emphasis added)

Although the phrase “the word of God” in this passage is traditionally interpreted as the written or spoken word which emanates from God, it

48. Lammert, “The Word of YHWH,” 197, emphasis added.

49. The biblical Hebrew word for *hearken* is derived from the root ש-מ-ע (sh-m-a). This root principally means *to hear*, but also carries the connotation of *obedience*. 2 Samuel 22:45 reads, “Foreigners pretend obedience to me; as soon as *they hear* [לשמע אזן, *lishmoa ozen*, literally *hear (by the) ear*], *they obey* [ישמעו, *yishshamu*] me” (NASB, emphasis added). The verbs *hear* and *obey* are both derived the root ש-מ-ע (sh-m-a). So, in this passage from 2 Samuel, *to hearken* means both to hear and obey.

50. *Hold fast* in biblical Hebrew is from the root ח-ז-ק (ch-z-q) meaning *to strengthen* or *be strong* (see Job 27:6).

51. To *give heed* is represented by the root ש-ב-ק (q-sh-v) in biblical Hebrew, meaning *to listen* or *to pay attention* (see Jeremiah 18:19).

is also possible that Nephi intended this as a reference to Christ himself. Understood this way, we are to hearken unto Christ (hear and obey him), hold fast to him (be strong in him), give heed to him (listen and pay attention to him), and “remember to keep *his* commandments always in all things.”

The Word of God and the Words of the Book

Isaiah prophesied of the blindness and spiritual illiteracy of Jerusalem, or “Ariel, the city where David dwelt”:

For the LORD has poured over you a spirit of deep sleep, he has shut your eyes, the prophets; and He has covered your heads, the seers. The entire vision will be to you like the words of a sealed book, which when they give it to the one who is literate, saying, “Please read this,” he will say, “I cannot, for it is sealed.” (Isaiah 29:10–11 NASB)

Nephi specifically chose to base his own prophecy on this chapter of Isaiah (see 2 Nephi 25:4). In his prophecy that encompasses 2 Nephi 25–27, Nephi expertly incorporated his own ideas into the prophecy of Isaiah to create a midrashic interpretation of the prophet’s words.⁵² A portion of Nephi’s prophecy included the following:

Wherefore, *the Lord God* [יהוה אלהים, *Yahweh Elohim*] will proceed to *bring forth the words of the book* [דברי הספר, *divrei ha’sofer*]; and in the mouth of as many witnesses as seemeth him good will he *establish his word* [דברו, *devaru*]; and wo be unto him that rejecteth *the word of God* [דבר האלהים, *devar ha’Elohim*]! (2 Nephi 27:14, emphasis added)

Below I have displayed this passage as a simple chiasm, outlining only the key elements of the verse:

A *the Lord God*
 B *bring forth the words of the book*
 B’ *establish his word*
 A’ *the word of God*

As shown in the chiasm, *the Lord God* can be seen as parallel with *the word of God*. Based on this, it is possible that Nephi was prophesying that the Lord God, or the Word of God, would “bring forth” and

52. See Joseph M. Spencer and Jenny Webb, *Reading Nephi Reading Isaiah: 2 Nephi 26–27* (Provo, UT: Maxwell Institute Publications, 2016), <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/mi/64>.

“establish” his word, the words of the book, in the last days. Nephi also added a caution: “Wo be unto him that rejecteth *the word of God*.” Nephi used the word *reject* on multiple occasions (see Table 2). From the table, it is clear that rejection of “the word of God” could be a reference to the rejection of the spoken or written word of God, or to Christ himself:

Table 2. Nephi’s usage of “reject.”

Verse	Who or What is Rejected?
1 Nephi 3:18	the words of the prophets
1 Nephi 7:14	the prophets
1 Nephi 15:17	the Lord
1 Nephi 15:36	the wicked
1 Nephi 17:35	every word of God
1 Nephi 19:13	signs and wonders, and the power and glory of the God of Israel
2 Nephi 25:12	the Only Begotten of the Father, yea, even the Father of heaven and of earth
2 Nephi 25:18	the true Messiah
2 Nephi 27:5	the prophets
2 Nephi 27:14	the word of God
2 Nephi 27:20	the words of the book

The Sons of Mosiah and the Word of God

The section heading that introduces chapters 17 to 26 of the Book of Alma explains why the sons of Mosiah were willing to reject their rights to the governance of the Nephite kingdom:

An account of the sons of Mosiah, who rejected their rights to the kingdom for *the word of God* [דבר האלהים, *devar ha'Elohim*], and went up to the land of Nephi to preach to the Lamanites; their sufferings and deliverance — according to the record of Alma.

I find it much easier to believe that the sons of Mosiah had rejected their rights to the kingdom if we interpret *the word of God* in this heading as a metonym for *Christ* rather than as the decrees of God or His divine pronouncements. Rejecting power, wealth, and the trappings of the world for Christ is a powerfully compelling reason to abandon their rights to govern the people. Like Lamoni’s father, what motivated the sons of Mosiah to forsake their rights to the kingdom must have been something truly significant:

And it came to pass that after Aaron had expounded these things unto him, the king said: What shall I do that I may have this eternal life of which thou hast spoken? Yea, what shall I do that I may be born of God, having this wicked spirit rooted out of my breast, and receive his Spirit, that I may be filled with joy, that I may not be cast off at the last day? Behold, said he, I will give up all that I possess, yea, I will forsake my kingdom, that I may receive this great joy. (Alma 22:15)

Following these words, Lamoni's father, the king of all the Lamanites, "did prostrate himself upon the earth" before the Lord, "and cried mightily," saying:

O God, Aaron hath told me that there is a God; and if there is a God, and if thou art God, wilt thou make thyself known unto me, and I will give away all my sins to know thee, and that I may be raised from the dead, and be saved at the last day. (Alma 22:18)

The old king's desire to know God is an overwhelmingly powerful reason to be willing to forsake his kingdom. Likewise, I find it much more believable that the sons of Mosiah gave up their kingdom for Christ — *the Word of God* — than for an abstract belief in religious doctrines, principles, or prophecies — *the word of God* — no matter how important this *word* might have been to them. Nephi explained that the principle reason for preaching, prophesying, and writing *the word of God* was to lead souls to Christ, *the Word of God*:

And we talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ, and we write according to our prophecies, that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins. (2 Nephi 25:26)

In other words, a primary role of the written and spoken *word of God* is to lead us to Christ, the living *Word of God*. Correspondingly, Mormon wrote that the sons of Mosiah "had searched the scriptures diligently, *that they might know the word of God*" (Alma 17:2). While this could be a reference to the doctrines and principles of the gospel, it is more compelling to believe that the reason why the sons of Mosiah "had searched the scriptures diligently" was to know Christ, *the Word of God*. Alma taught his son Shiblon that *the word of God* helps teach us "that there is no other way or means whereby man can be saved, only in and

through *Christ*” who is “*the word of truth* [דבר־אמת, *devar-emet*⁵³] and *righteousness* [יצדקה, *utsedaqah*]” (Alma 38:9, emphasis added).

We Will Compare the Word unto a Seed

In his preaching to the Zoramites, Alma delivered a powerful allegorical sermon that involved *the word of God, a seed, and the tree of life*:

Therefore, blessed are they who humble themselves without being compelled to be humble; or rather, in other words, blessed is he that *believeth in the word of God*, and is baptized without stubbornness of heart, yea, without being brought to *know the word*, or even compelled to *know, before they will believe*. ... And now, behold, I say unto you, and I would that ye should remember, that God is merciful unto all who *believe on his name*; therefore he desireth, in the first place, that *ye should believe, yea, even on his word*. ... Now, as I said concerning faith — that it was not a perfect knowledge — even so it is with *my words*. Ye cannot know of *their surety* at first, unto perfection, any more than faith is a perfect knowledge. But behold, if ye will awake and arouse your faculties, even to an experiment upon *my words*, and exercise a particle of faith, yea, even if ye can no more than desire to believe, let this desire work in you, even until ye believe in a manner that ye can give place for a portion of *my words*. Now, we will compare *the word* unto a seed. ... And now, behold, is your knowledge perfect? Yea, your knowledge is perfect in that thing, and your faith is dormant; and this because you know, for ye know that *the word* hath swelled your souls, and ye also know that it hath sprouted up, that your understanding doth begin to be enlightened, and your mind doth begin to expand. ... And thus, if ye will not nourish *the word*, looking forward with an eye of faith to the fruit thereof, ye can never pluck of the fruit of *the tree of life*. But if ye will nourish *the word*, yea, nourish *the tree* as it beginneth to grow, by your faith with great diligence, and with patience, looking forward to the fruit thereof, it shall take root; and behold it shall be *a tree springing up unto everlasting life*. And because of your diligence and your faith and your patience with *the word* in nourishing it, that it may *take root in you*, behold, by and by

53. See Psalm 119:43.

ye shall pluck the fruit thereof, which is most precious, which is sweet above all that is sweet, and which is white above all that is white, yea, and pure above all that is pure; and ye shall feast upon this fruit even until ye are filled, that ye hunger not, neither shall ye thirst. ... Now after Alma had spoken these words, they sent forth unto him desiring to know whether they should believe in one God, that they might obtain this fruit of which he had spoken, or how they should plant the seed, or the word of which he had spoken, which he said must be planted in their hearts; or in what manner they should begin to exercise their faith. (Alma 32:16, 22, 26–28, 34, 40–42, 33:1, emphasis added)

In this allegory, Alma taught that we must believe in *the word of God*, believe on *his name*, and believe on *his word*, all references or possible references to Christ. In addition, Alma compared *the word of God* to a seed that we are instructed to plant in our hearts. If we nourish the seed, or the word, we are told that it will take root and grow to become “a tree springing up unto everlasting life” from which we may “pluck the fruit thereof, which is most precious, which is sweet above all that is sweet, and which is white above all that is white, yea, and pure above all that is pure,” a clear allusion to Lehi’s vision of the tree of life. Alma added that those who plant this seed and nourish it “shall feast upon this fruit even until ye are filled, that ye hunger not, neither shall ye thirst.” In a parallel teaching, Jesus instructed, “He that eateth this bread eateth of my body to his soul; and he that drinketh of this wine drinketh of my blood to his soul; and his soul shall never hunger nor thirst, but shall be filled” (3 Nephi 20:8, emphasis added). In other words, eating the fruit of the tree of life is analogous to partaking of the sacramental emblems of Christ’s body and blood. This fruit, including the tree that bears it — which grows from the seed, or word, that we plant in our hearts — can be understood as allegorical representations of Christ.⁵⁴ Throughout Christian history theologians have connected Christ not only with the fruit but with the tree of life itself.⁵⁵ So, in Alma’s allegory, the seed can be understood as representing the spoken or written *word of God*, but it

54. John Bunyan wrote that “the tree of Life” is “the Christ and Saviour.” George Offor, Esq., *The Whole Works of John Bunyan, Accurately Reprinted from the Author’s Own Editions. With Editorial Prefaces, Notes, and Life of Bunyan* (Glasgow: Blackie and Son, 1862), 456.

55. See Jeanette W. Miller, “The Tree of Life, a Personification of Christ,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 1 (1993): 93–106.

perhaps more properly represents the living *Word of God* that we must plant in our hearts.

The Power of the Word of God

Mormon informs us that nearly two hundred years following the visitation of Christ to the Nephites, after apostasy had firmly set in among them, false churches persecuted the disciples of Jesus:

Therefore they did exercise power and authority over the disciples of Jesus who did tarry with them, and they did cast them into prison; but by *the power of the word of God* [דבר האלהים, *devar ha'Elohim*], which was in them, the prisons were rent in twain, and they went forth doing mighty miracles among them. (4 Nephi 1:30, emphasis added)

Mormon recounted a similar story about Nephi, the son of Helaman: “But behold, the power of God was with him, and *they could not take him to cast him into prison*, for he was taken by the Spirit and conveyed away out of the midst of them” (Helaman 10:16, emphasis added). The disciples of Jesus were freed from their prisons “by *the power of the word of God*, which was in them,” while Nephi’s enemies were unable to cast him into prison because “*the power of God* was with him.” These two stories appear to equate *the Word of God* with *God* himself. Just as the *power* of the word of God was in the disciples, that same power — the power of God — was with Nephi.

Similarly, after their escape from the “the hands of king Noah and his people,” Alma wanted his flock of believers to know that it was God who had delivered them: “And now as ye have been delivered by *the power of God* out of these bonds” (Mosiah 23:13, emphasis added). Later, preaching to the Nephites in the land of Zarahemla, Alma the son of Alma taught that after they “were delivered out of the hands of the people of king Noah,” Alma’s flock again came into bondage:

And behold, after that, they were brought into bondage by the hands of the Lamanites in the wilderness; yea, I say unto you, they were in captivity, and again *the Lord* [יהוה, *Yahweh*] *did deliver them* out of bondage *by the power of his word* [דברו, *devaro*]; and we were brought into this land, and here we began to establish the church of God throughout this land also. (Alma 5:5, emphasis added)

This second period of captivity ended when “*the Lord* did deliver them out of bondage *by the power of his word*.” Again, as with the account

of the disciples of Christ and Nephi, this dual usage of “the power of God” and “the power of *his word*” lend credence to the idea that *the Word of God* is none other than *Christ*.

Conclusion

The Word of the Lord (דבר־יהוה, *devar-Yahweh*) and the Word of God (דבר האלהים, *devar ha'Elohim*) are two biblical Hebrew phrases that have been shown to be stand-ins for God himself, and specifically as metonymic substitutions for Christ.⁵⁶ These phrases are often used when the Bible recounts theophanic experiences of prophets. Lammert wrote:

Most interpreters of the New Testament affirm that there are at least a few texts where “the Word” (ὁ λόγος) is a personal being, the Son of God (John 1:1, 14; Hebrews 4:12; Revelation 19:13). The most widely recognized of these texts, the prologue of John, identifies the eternal Son as “the Word” who created all things (1:1–3) and “became flesh” (1:14) as Jesus, the incarnate Son. Many interpreters of the Old Testament, however, understand a very similar expression in the Old Testament, “the word of YHWH” (דבר יהוה), as signifying merely a verbal word, spoken by God and heard by the prophet to whom “the word of YHWH came.” The evident linguistic connection between the two terms is not readily extended to a theological connection. A close exegetical consideration shows, however, that the connection between the two is also theological: the word of YHWH is a theophany in several Old Testament texts.⁵⁷

Likewise, in the Book of Mormon we encounter several events and stories in which *the Word of the Lord* or *the Word of God* can be profitably interpreted as direct references to Christ. Understanding these phrases as metonyms for the Son of God — the word of truth and righteousness

56. “In Genesis 15:4, consider the phrase ‘the word of the Lord.’ God spoke to Abram. This phrase in context resonates with all the earlier speeches of God to man in Genesis. Ever since the fall, God’s speech needs to be mediated to avoid death of the recipient. The mediator is the Son, the Word. Because of the necessity of mediation, we can confidently infer the presence of Christ and his work when God speaks to Abram. Christ’s role in Genesis 15:4 anticipates his incarnation and verbal ministry on earth.” Vern S. Poythress, “Christocentric Preaching,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 22, no. 3 (2018): 61.

57. Lammert, “The Word of YHWH,” 195.

— helps us more fully comprehend and accept that the Book of Mormon is truly *Another Testament of Christ*.

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