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Insights

A WINDOW ON THE ANCIENT WORLD VOLUME 26 | 2006

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Symposium Explores Widespread Tree of Life Motif

Scholars from various disciplines and institutions gathered in Brigham Young University's Varsity Theater on 28 and 29 September 2006 to explore the pervasive and powerful tree of life motif as found in civilizations spanning the Far and Middle East to Mesoamerica and as expressed in Latter-day Saint scripture and art. The following report highlights the two presentations by visiting non-Latter-day Saint scholars and briefly summarizes the others.

Symbolizing the Tree of Life: The Lotus Flower

After introductory remarks by symposium organizer S. Kent Brown (Maxwell Institute), the Thursday evening session opened with a botanist's view of the tree of life. J. Andrew McDonald (Biology, University of Texas–Pan American) presented images from ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia to illustrate his personal view that the lotus flower, rather than the date palm or any other tree, was the preeminent symbol of the tree of life.

McDonald noted that the preponderance of the bud/blossom motif in ancient temple art could signify a lotus, and he associated the serpent/sun-rising motif with the shoots that the lotus sends out from the water where its berries mature. In this way the flower perpetuates itself, signifying eternal life. The bud/blossom motif endured in Egypt until about AD 200 and was used in Solomon's temple, where, in common with Egyptian temple treasure, drinking vessels bore the lotus motif. McDonald believes that the lotus was seen as a link between heaven and earth and that further investigation is warranted to learn if the plant contains a euphoria-producing substance that might have been used with the temple's drinking vessels. He concluded that the tree of life is not a tree but a very sacred herb—the lotus—and

that the sacral tree imagery found for 3,000 years in the Middle East is identified with a substance believed to make people into gods.

The Tree of Life as Facilitator of Aztec Conversion

On Friday morning Jaime R. Lara (Religion and Arts, Yale Divinity School) discussed how the tree of life figured in the Catholic conversion of the Aztecs. He began with the observation that Catholics consider the imagination to be a God-given faculty of the soul that enables one to appreciate what the physical senses cannot register—such as the metaphorical nature of reality and the immanence of God.

Lara went on to note that, since the second century, the Bible has been read four ways: historically (literally), allegorically (christologically), morally (tropologically), and anagogically (spiritually or mystically). For example, following that order, Jerusalem can be seen as the Holy Land, the church, the soul, and the heavenly Jerusalem; and Eden can be seen in terms of botanical plants, the graced soul, the victorious cross, and future life in heavenly Jerusalem. Thus the tree of life in Catholic iconography can carry different significations, such as that of a prophet prophesying of future events (an interpretation depicted in ceiling art in Venice's Basilica San Marco). Lara also noted the antiquity and ubiquity of the eschatological cross (or "living tree" cross) and explained that Catholics view the cross not as a "gallows cross" but as "Christ's trophy"—that is, as symbolic of his victory over death. This powerful symbolism flowered with the discovery of New Spain/Mesoamerica, which was seen as an eschatological event, Lara said.

Although shocked by the Aztec practices of human sacrifice and cannibalism, the Catholic friars saw points of common belief—for example, the tree of life and the Garden of Eden—that could be

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Firstlings, Sacrifices, and Burnt Offerings

In abridging the account of the Nephite gathering under King Benjamin, Mormon stated, “And they also took of the firstlings of their flocks, that they might offer sacrifice and burnt offerings according to the law of Moses” (Mosiah 2:3). Under Mosaic law, firstlings, or firstborn animals, were dedicated to the Lord, meaning they were given to the priests, who were to sacrifice them and consume the flesh (see Exodus 13:12–15; Numbers 18:17). The exception to this rule was the firstborn lambs used for the Passover meal, which all Israel was to eat (see Exodus 12:5–7).

Mormon’s statement is curious because the Nephites at that time were strict observers of the law of Moses (see 2 Nephi 5:10), yet there is no suggestion in the biblical text that firstlings were used for burnt offerings (the only sacrifice in which the entire animal was burned on the altar rather than cooked and eaten). There are, however, several possible explanations for what Mormon may have meant.¹

First, because the Nephites were not descendants of Aaron, there would have been no Aaronic priests to whom the firstlings could be given, in which case the Nephites would have been in a situation comparable to that of Abel. In Genesis we read that Abel, who lived

long before Aaron and consequently could not deliver his sacrificial animals to the priests of that line, “brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof” and offered sacrifice to the Lord (Genesis 4:4). In the case of the Nephites, because there probably were no Aaronic priests to whom the firstlings could be given, the offerings may have been made directly to the Lord as burnt offerings, as had been done in earlier generations.

Another possible explanation lies in later rabbinical teachings. According to these traditions, there were exceptions to the usual practice of offering firstlings as outlined in the Bible. The Mishnah, written in the second century AD by Rabbi Judah the Prince and citing rabbis who lived while the temple still operated in Jerusalem, provides additional perspectives on Israelite sacrifices of that time. According to the Mishnah *Zebahim* 5:8 and 10:3 and *Temurah* 1:1, only the priests ate the firstlings, but *Temurah* 5 identifies several ways in which one can “evade” the law regarding firstlings. For example, *Temurah* 5:2 notes that in the case of twin animals, one of them becomes a burnt offering (if both are males) or a peace offering (if both are females) or need not be offered if the sexes are mixed. Thus,

according to rabbinical understanding, even firstlings could on occasion be used as burnt offerings.

A third possible explanation is that the wording of Mosiah 2:3 may simply mean that, in accordance with Mosaic law, the Nephites (1) brought of the firstlings of the flock to be offered in the sacrificial peace offering, and (2) they also brought other animal victims for the burnt offering. Several factors contribute to this explanation. Deuteronomy 12:5–6 indicates that the Israelites were to bring the firstlings of their flocks and herds to the temple along with other unspecified animals to fill various sacrificial and dedicatory purposes. It is noteworthy that although these verses enumerate several forms of sacrifice associated with Israelite temple worship (burnt offerings, heave offerings, freewill offerings, etc.), the only animals mentioned are firstlings, even though these could not have been used as burnt offerings. In this case, the mere reference to “burnt offerings” probably implies animals other than firstlings, even if no other animal victims are explicitly named.

Research on the Israelite sacrificial system sheds light on this interpretation. In Exodus 10:25, Moses tells Pharaoh, “Thou must give us also sacrifices and burnt offerings that we may sacrifice unto the Lord our

God” (Exodus 10:25). Baruch Levine, a leading authority on Israelite sacrifice, notes that this passage refers to the burnt offering (*olah-zebah*) and to the peace offering (*olah-shelamim*). Levine also suggests that frequent references in the Old Testament to these two sacrifices should be interpreted as “a merism for the entire sacrificial system” known to ancient Israel.² (Merismus is a literary device sometimes used in Hebrew in which an entire subject is represented by mentioning only some of its parts).³ In other words, the phrase “sacrifices

and burnt offerings” (Exodus 10:25) is simply an idiom that encompasses all the various sacrificial offerings made under the law of Moses without mentioning each specifically. In light of Levine’s interpretation of such biblical passages, it is reasonable to interpret Mormon’s use of the phrase “sacrifices and burnt offerings” in his abridgment in a similar way. 

By Matthew Roper

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Notes

1. For additional insights, see John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks, eds., *King Benjamin’s Speech: “That Ye May Learn Wisdom”* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 507 (s.v. “[Mosiah] 2.3”).
2. Baruch Levine, *In the Presence of the Lord: A Study of Cult and Some Cultic Terms in Ancient Israel* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 21–22.
3. See A. M. Honeyman, “Merismus in Biblical Hebrew,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 71 (1952): 15.

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exploited in art and architecture as they sought to Christianize the Aztecs. Lara concluded that cultural convergences such as the Aztec anthropomorphic tree facilitated the 16th-century conquest of Mesoamerica.

Other Presentations

In addition to McDonald, the Thursday evening session hosted two other scholars. Charles Swift (Ancient Scripture, BYU) explored archetypal elements in Lehi’s vision of the tree of life, noting dialectal patterns of opposites (such as darkness and light). He then interpreted the white-robed man as an archetype of the ideal world, the spacious field as a space offering freedom from restraint, and the rod of iron as a symbol of protection and security. Richard Oman (Museum of Church History and Art) presented a cross-cultural survey of Mormon folk art depicting Lehi’s vision; shared stories of contemporary Latter-day Saint artists; and showed slides of artwork from Scandinavia, Asia, Europe, India, and the Americas that demonstrated a diversity of cultural responses to Lehi’s vision.

Donald W. Parry (Asian and Near Eastern Languages, BYU) began Friday’s session with an analysis of the Hebrew roots associated with six

phrases in Genesis 3:24 that relate to protecting the path leading to the tree of life. He described this path in terms of sacred space and “architectural boundaries” and identified the “gestures of approach” necessary for one to pass the guardians along the way, all with a view to likening ancient temple ritual to a return to Eden. Sharing his personal views on the spiritual significance of the tree and its fruit, C. Wilfred Griggs (Ancient Scripture, BYU) pointed out that Christ’s role as the nourishing vine essentially equates him with the tree of life. Griggs reviewed many scriptural texts related to eternal fruit and noted that those who partake of that fruit must do so with love, a word that appears 30 times in the account of Christ’s teachings in the upper room (see John 13–17) before his crucifixion.

John W. Welch (Law School, BYU) presented early Christian artwork depicting the tree of life and identified many allusions to the tree in the New Testament (in which explicit references are few). He discussed Christ as the tree, the cross as the tree, people as trees who bring forth fruit, what it means to partake of the tree’s fruit, and the cosmic world tree. He concluded that the beautiful, multifaceted images of the tree in Christian art represent stages in the unfolding plan of salvation. Allen J. Christenson (Humanities, BYU) discussed in great detail

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the Maya view of the tree of life and its identity with the ceiba tree in Maya iconography, which he interpreted with admirable facility. Daniel C. Peterson (Maxwell Institute) demonstrated how Islamic use of the tree of life motif was built on the Judeo-Christian tradition. Andrew C. Skinner (Maxwell Institute) spoke on the olive tree's position as the preeminent tree of life in Jewish tradition, concluding that many impressive connections help establish the core idea that the tree of life is the most desirable of all things.

John A. Tvedtnes (Maxwell Institute) discussed the tree of life's medicinal qualities as set forth in early Jewish texts, such as those specifying the healing properties of olive oil. He noted parallels in Revelation 2:7 (the tree of life heals) and Ezekiel 47:1–12 (water heals too) that are of added interest because both are embodied by Christ, who spoke of living water. John M. Lundquist (New York Public Library) concluded the day's events by showing images of the tree of life from Hindu, Buddhist, and other Oriental traditions (such as the sacred banyan and bodi trees). Those images figure in temple ideology and are shown to have much in common when examined closely.

Moderating the Thursday evening session and Friday's morning and afternoon segments were, respectively, S. Kent Brown (Maxwell Institute), M. Gerald Bradford (Maxwell Institute), and Gaye Strathearn (Ancient Scripture, BYU).

Sponsored by the Maxwell Institute, the symposium was made possible by a generous grant from Kenneth M. and Athelia T. Woolley. The Institute will publish the conference proceedings once the contributing scholars have finalized their papers. The resulting volume will include a much-anticipated study by Margaret Barker, a respected Old Testament scholar from England who was scheduled to speak at the symposium but was unable to attend. ❏

PUBLICATIONS

Journey of Faith: From Jerusalem to the Promised Land

(Maxwell Institute, 2006), the popular DVD featuring scholarly insights on Lehi and Sariah's journey across Arabia, is now available in both Spanish and Portuguese with English closed-captioning. This DVD also includes the documentary *A Filmmaking Odyssey: The Making of Journey of Faith*.

Oliver Cowdery: Scribe, Elder, Witness, edited by John W.

Welch and Larry Morris (Maxwell Institute, 2006), compiles 30 years' worth of scholarly writings about the Second Elder of the Church in commemoration of the 200th anniversary of his birth on 3 October 1806.

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