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## Since Cumorah: New Voices from the Dust, The Olive Tree

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**Abstract:** This series argues that the changing attitudes of biblical scholars toward basic questions about scripture allow room for claims made by the Book of Mormon. It discusses external evidences, the primitive church, Lehi, Zenos, the olive tree, and the Dead Sea Scrolls. The thirteenth part discusses the allegory of the olive tree and the book of Zenos.

# SINCE CUMORAH

NEW VOICES FROM THE DUST

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## *The Olive Tree*

●It is Jacob, whose parents had spent most of their days in Jerusalem, and who thought of himself simply as an exile from that place (Jacob 7:26), who quotes the long Parable of the Olive Tree at length from the writings of Zenos: "Behold, my brethren, do ye not remember to have read the words of the prophet Zenos. . ." (*Ibid.*, 5:1.) We might notice here that apart from all literary considerations Jacob's (or rather Zenos's) treatise of ancient olive culture is accurate in every detail: Olive trees do have to be pruned and cultivated diligently; the top branches are indeed the first to wither, and the new shoots do come right out of the trunk; the olive is indeed the most plastic of trees, surpassing even the willow in its power to survive the most drastic whacking and burning; the trees were commonly planted in vineyard areas, and the word "carmel" can mean either an olive orchard or a vineyard; a good olive tree is greatly cherished, and no end of pains are taken to preserve it even through many centuries, for really superior fruit is very rare and

difficult to obtain and perpetuate; the ancient way of strengthening the old trees (especially in Greece) was to graft in the shoots of the oleaster or wild olive; also, shoots from valuable old trees were transplanted to keep the stock alive after the parent tree should perish; to a surprising degree the olive prefers poor and rocky ground, whereas rich soil produces inferior fruit; too much grafting produces a nondescript and cluttered yield of fruit; the top branches if allowed to grow as in Spain and France, while producing a good shade tree, will indeed sap the strength of the tree and give a poor crop; fertilizing with dung is very important, in spite of the preference for rocky ground, and has been practised since ancient times; the thing to be most guarded against is bitterness in the fruit.<sup>76</sup> All these points, taken from a treatise on ancient olive culture, are duly, though quite casually, noted in Zenos's Parable of the Olive Tree. Let the reader peruse this long account in Jacob chapters 5 and 6, and then consider *Hymn 10* (also called *Hymn 0*) of the

*Thanksgiving Hymns* from Qumran:

"I thank thee, O Lord, that thou hast placed me as [or in] a fountain of running water in a desert place . . . irrigating a garden [or orchard] in the desert, where . . . stand planted for thy glory alone, the trees that never die . . . putting forth branches that never wither, taking root before they blossom, reaching out their roots to the stream . . . of living waters." (viii, 1-8.)

So far the general image of the well-watered trees represents the righteous in the desert of the world. Then, more specifically, God's law is described as a special tree, an abused and battered stump, against which the other trees vaunt their superiority, "for they spread far and wide in the vineyard, though their roots do not seek the waters of the stream [i.e., the water of life], while the tree which was planted in truth and is destined to bring to flower branches of holiness keeps its secret hidden and sealed, unesteemed and unnoticed." (viii, 9-11.) What better figure for Israel among the nations than that of the tree destined to bear fruit, but for the present a damaged stump among the proud but fruitless "fir, the pine, and the cypress"? (viii, 5, 11-13.)

God has kept the fruit of the tree, we are told next, in secret reserve as long as Israel "did not believe in the Wellspring of life," though the tree remained alive. The image is familiar from some of the earliest Christian writings,<sup>77</sup> and Zenos, who significantly gives *no* explana-

*An ancient olive tree  
on the slopes  
of the Mount of Olives.*



tion of his parable any more than our hymn writer does, has the Lord say:

“. . . behold, for a long time will I lay up of the fruit of my vineyard unto mine own self against the season, which speedily cometh. . . .” (Jacob 5:76.)

On the other hand, says the hymn, “the trees of the wicked shall be felled [or hewn down] . . . and fire shall go forth, and they shall wither.” (viii, 19-20.) Compare this with Jacob:

“. . . and the bad [shall] be hewn down and cast into the fire. . . .” (Jacob 5:66.)

It is not only the main tree that survives, however, for in the end, as in Zenos’s story, “. . . the orchard which I have planted shall bloom fair for ever, . . . its trees planted in line of the sun. . . .”<sup>78</sup> Note the proper technical concern as well as the happy ending. The Lord

tells how, “if I relax my hand, it [the tree] becomes like a thing in the desert, its branches like weeds, like briars and brambles. . . . its leaves fade before the heat; it is not exposed to water. It suffers mishap and disease and becomes a (target) for all manner of blight.” (viii, 24-26.) Just so, in Zenos’s account, dire consequences followed an interval of inactivity, representing, of course, the time of Israel’s distress:

“And it came to pass that a long time had passed away, and the Lord of the vineyard said . . . Come, let us . . . labor again in the vineyard . . . and behold all sorts of fruit did cumber the tree. . . .

“. . . and there [was] none of it which [was] good . . . it profiteth me nothing. . . .” (Jacob 5:29-32.)

To restore the tree the Lord of the garden must work with a will: “When I apply my hand to dig

the furrows thereof,” says the *Thanksgiving Hymns*, “its roots strike even on granite, its stocks are firm-grounded in the earth. . . .” (viii, 22-23.)

Through Zenos the Lord commands: “. . . dig about the trees, both old and young, first and the last. . . .

“. . . prepare the way for them, that they may grow.” (Jacob 5: 63 f.)

And when this is done, “. . . the natural branches began to grow and thrive exceedingly; . . . and they did keep the root . . . thereof equal, according to the strength thereof.” (V. 73.)

Special care was taken to “pluck from the tree those branches whose fruit is most bitter. . . .”<sup>79</sup> (See vs. 52, 57, 65, 79.) In our hymn the poet complains that what he has planted has turned to bitterness, and in another of (*Continued on page 916*)





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## *This I Believe* (Continued from page 907)

reason for their existence or their destination when they leave this earth, Latter-day Saints have the answers to these questions. Through the Prophet Joseph Smith and his successors has come the revelation that we are here to be tested by God. After we die, if we are worthy, we attain eternal life with God. God has revealed through his prophets the plan of salvation and has given certain commandments which we are to follow. The priesthood, or the authority and power to act in the name of God, has been restored to the earth. God has given us much. However, as in the French saying, *noblesse oblige*, we must realize that where much is given, much is expected.

During the remainder of my life, I will make several important decisions. Among these are included my occupational pursuit, my selection of a wife, and, above all, the choice of which plan I will follow—that of Satan or that of God. I pray that through constant prayer and study, my testimony of the gospel will grow. It will become stronger if I will accept the challenge of being different. This I believe.

## *Since Cumorah* (Continued from page 877)

the *Thanksgiving Hymns*, it is the tree of the wicked that bears bitter fruit: "In their every thought is a root which blossoms to wormwood and gall."<sup>80</sup> The tree referred to here can only be an olive.

The reader can amuse himself by working out the parallels at great length and detail. Here we have two men who write exactly the same sort of poetry including a hymn of praise in the same peculiar way, an autobiographical sketch in which they suffer the identical vicissitudes under identical conditions, and the same two men develop an elaborate parable having to do with a tree and an

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orchard or garden which they leave to others to explain. If they are the same person, the discrepancies between their accounts can be readily explained by the time gap between the Book of Mormon version and the much later Qumran version. We must remember that the Dead Sea Scrolls are full of old writings, centuries older than the manuscripts containing them, even though these are the oldest known.

The Zadok after whom the community name themselves has been traced back as far as the Jebusite Zadok of the time of David; that shows how old their traditions are. We have even suggested elsewhere that the Zenock of the Book of Mormon may have been Zadok, for not only could the "n" and the "d" have been easily confused by a scribe, but the common Arabic designation for the sectarians of the desert as "Zandokites" shows that the two could be used together.

All of this, of course, is simply speculation.

(To be continued)

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>76</sup>"Olive," *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (9th ed.).

<sup>77</sup>It is the concept of the "Wintertime of the Just," according to which until the return of the Lord all trees, good and bad, alive and dead, look alike, since none of them has leaves; it is only in the last days that the living trees will blossom; *Pastor of Hermas*, Similitude iii.

<sup>78</sup>viii, 20-22; the translation is Gaster's, *op. cit.*, pp. 166-167.

<sup>79</sup>Gaster, *op. cit.*, p. 167, renders this, "For that which I had planted was turned into wormwood." Dupont-Sommer, however, has the poet compare himself to an abandoned tree: "... there was no fountain for me. . . . I was without strength; my punishment bore fruit in bitterness . . . and I could not preserve my strength." In *Semítica*, 7 (1957), pp. 67f.

<sup>80</sup>iv, 14; Gaster, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

<sup>81</sup>C. E. Haner, "Who Was Zadok?" *Jnl. Bibl. Lit.*, 82 (1963), 89-94.

Joy is an elation of spirit—of a spirit which trusts in the goodness and truth of its own possessions.—Seneca



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