

Review of
The Allegory of the Olive Tree:
The Olive, the Bible, and Jacob 5
edited by Stephen D. Ricks
and John W. Welch

STEPHEN D. RICKS and JOHN W. WELCH, eds. *The Allegory of the Olive Tree: The Olive, the Bible, and Jacob 5*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: F.A.R.M.S., 1994. xiv; 624 pp. Illustrations, appendix, 2 indexes. \$28.95.

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The olive, that most useful and symbolic of trees, is treated to an unprecedented degree of scholarly and literary attention in this massive conference volume. The original 1992 F.A.R.M.S. conference presentations have been amply expanded and assembled in a volume that seems to include everything relevant to the olive and its symbolism in the Book of Mormon and the Bible. As with most conference volumes, the contributions overlap considerably, but since each approaches the topic from an individual angle—from history to theology, from botany to philology—the overlap rarely seems tedious. I cannot recall reading a volume of similar length on a unified theme that sustains the interest of the reader as well as this work.

The Meaning of Zenos's Allegory of the Olive Tree

The book is divided into five parts. Part one, "The Meaning of Zenos's Allegory of the Olive Tree," contains five introductory pieces interpreting the allegory from the historical perspectives of Palestine, the Nephites, nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints, and modern Mormons. The contributions in this section are more elegiac than analytic, more theological than theoretical. Truman Madsen's "The Olive Press: A Symbol of Christ" is a revision of a previous publication that effectively introduces many of the themes developed in depth elsewhere in the book. Catherine Thomas takes a rhetorical approach to yield inspirational conclusions, discovering in Jacob's allegory "The Mystery of Christ." Noel Reynolds concludes that Nephite prophets, chiefly Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob, borrowed language and imagery from Zenos to express and verify their own revelations, and such prophets viewed Isaiah as having done the same thing. Grant Underwood asserts that "nineteenth-century [Latter-day Saint] discussion of the

parable can be divided into two broad categories—historical and homiletical,” with the latter view predominant.

Part one concludes with Paul Hoskisson’s piece, “The Allegory of the Olive Tree in Jacob.” Hoskisson declares that the allegory “is the most beautiful prose expression of God’s aspirations for the house of Israel” (70). He regards an allegory as one way of explicating actual events; hence, he seeks to locate the events of Jacob’s allegory in time and space. His historical periodization, based on an earlier publication, is reasonable and convincing.¹

Textual Analysis of Zenos’s Allegory of the Olive Tree

Part two, “Textual Analysis of Zenos’s Allegory of the Olive Tree,” partakes of a more philological and rhetorical bent. Royal Skousen presents his collated version of Jacob 4–6 with textual notes. However, the editors tacitly acknowledge the difficulty in relying on a formidable critical text bristling with an embedded apparatus when they opted to append the familiar, unaggregated text of Jacob 5 to the end of the volume.

More meaning is derived from the rhetorical analysis of Arthur Henry King’s “Language Themes in Jacob 5” than from minute attention to textual variants. Unlike Hoskisson, King does not approach the allegory historically: “Like the dream, too, it is not a parable of exact allegorical equivalencies, but symbolic equivalencies” (140). Rhetorical truth, not logical truth, is his goal, which he reveals through close attention to the niceties of narrative technique—phraseology, repetition, distribution of elements, and the like. King concludes that Zenos’s “rhetorical buildup is complex and rich. There is no passage like this in the Bible” (170). There is also no other contribution like this in this volume, with its combination of inimitable style and persuasive insight.

John Welch uses a more mechanical approach to rhetoric in “Words and Phrases in Jacob 5,” which tabulates vocabulary distribution in the allegory. But mechanical operation does not necessarily yield trivial results, for several conclusions are of interest. First, much of the allegory’s vocabulary is distinctive, making scriptural allusions to the allegory possible with just a phrase or two. Second, few vocabulary items are shared with the New

Testament. Third, Zenos and the writers of the Old Testament use many of the same vocabulary words in similar significant contexts. Finally, based on diction, a tentative date for the composition of the allegory can be hazarded: “early in the Israelite monarchy, perhaps in the latter half of David’s kingship” (181).

Ancient Historical and Religious Backgrounds to the Symbolism of the Olive

Part three, “Ancient Historical and Religious Backgrounds to the Symbolism of the Olive,” expands our understanding of the economic and religious importance of the olive in the ancient world. John Gee and Daniel Peterson in “Graft and Corruption: On Olives and Olive Culture in the Pre-Modern Mediterranean,”² initially treat lexicography,³ but the thrust of this lengthy contribution is historical, not linguistic. Gee and Peterson present a well-researched, wide-ranging survey of the olive and olive cultivation, exhausting the historical and economic background of the olive in the premodern Mediterranean world. The authors plumb sources from the classical to the Semitic world and cite secondary authorities in abundance. As with every entry in part three, this contribution could be submitted with confidence for publication in an academic journal, so solidly grounded is its research.

Two by-products of Gee and Peterson’s piece are noteworthy. First, since wild olives grow only in northern Israel, the fact that Zenos is familiar with the science of grafting lends credence to the supposition that this enigmatic prophet hailed from the north: “This may help to explain why Lehi, with his background in the northern kingdom, appears to have had access to a parable of olive growing and why our modern Bible, with its background in Judea, lacks the parable of Zenos” (201).⁴ Second, the article creates a reasoned response to Arthur Henry King’s easily misconstrued conclusion that “to experience language is more than to abstract messages from it. Rhetoric is not an added decoration; it is the thing itself” (172–73). The authors posit instead that “parable is the medium and olive culture is merely the particular idiom. A knowledge of the idiom enhances understanding and appreciation of the nuances of the message, but it is not itself the message” (225).

Among many insights from John Hall's "The Olive in Greco-Roman Religion" is the Athenians' reverence toward the olive tree, the symbol of the life and vitality of their race, "a striking real life parallel to the scriptural allegories of the olive tree" (256). Neither Hall nor any other author addresses the admittedly tangential issue of the Roman introduction of olive cultivation in Spain, "the greatest producer of olive products in the modern era" (249). This topic is nevertheless worthy of further treatment, for the historical and intellectual contribution of this region in many areas has been profound. To take an example from the realm of philosophy, both Seneca the Younger, the leading intellect of Nero's reign, and Maimonides, the foremost mind of medieval Judaism, were born and educated in Cordoba, Spain, a city based on olive cultivation.

Next, Donald Parry and David Seely each explore the olive in the Old Testament, but from different perspectives. Parry studies the ritual anointing of both inanimate objects, such as vessels and temple implements, and important personages, like priests, prophets, and kings, with olive oil; both practices presage the anointing of the Messiah. Parry summarizes with admirable economy many scriptural citations and describes the various rites and rituals, all supported by references to important scholarly studies.

Seely concentrates on the nature of the figurative language in Jacob 5 as both allegory and parable: an allegory of Israelite history and a parable of God's love (a position supported by James Faulconer later on in the volume⁵). Seely's attention to parables throughout the cultural world of the Mediterranean region, including ancient Greece, is a laudable approach and, of course, could have been made at greater length⁶ but only by destroying the restrained symmetry of his compact study. At any rate, his musing that Zenos may have been drawing on an ancient tradition is indebted to a new approach developed in biblical studies of paying attention to possible Greek influences on the writing of Hebrew prophets.⁷ Seely hints at a new direction for future research when he concludes that "while Jacob 5 is unique in its sophistication, there is evidence in the ancient Near East that Zenos's allegory of the olive tree does not come out of a vacuum" (301).

The Olive in Early Jewish and Christian Texts

From the general literary milieu of the ancient Near East, part four moves us to “The Olive in Early Jewish and Christian Texts.” John Welch focuses on a specific text, the *Pseudo-Philo*, with his article comparing the last words of Cenez with Jacob 5. This effort is representative of all of the unabashedly philological contributions of part four. Called *Pseudo-Philo* because of its provenance among the works of Philo of Alexandria, this text possibly contains materials far antedating its Christian-era redaction. Welch concludes that while its protagonist, the prophet-hero Cenez, was probably not the historical-but-unknown prophet Zenos, striking affinities exist between the allegory of the vineyard in *Pseudo-Philo* and Zenos’s allegory of the olive tree.

Seely and Welch then combine forces as they align and analyze the main Old Testament texts relevant to olive trees and conclude that olive trees symbolized both blessing and cursing, prosperity and judgment. They further posit that “Zenos was a relatively early prophet who stood near the head of this persistent and powerful Israelite literary theme” (322). The texts exploring this theme include Exodus 15, Psalm 52, Psalm 80, Hosea 14, Isaiah 5, and Jeremiah 11.

James Faulconer also draws on some of these same texts as he compares Zenos with Paul’s words in Romans 11. His reasonable reading of these texts confirms a “common rhetorical tradition” based in part on the Old Testament passages cited above rather than a direct relationship to account for the similarities shared between Zenos and Paul. However, Faulconer does hypothesize the existence of an unidentified text with features similar to Zenos’s parable that Paul could have accessed for his epistle; both Zenos and Paul therefore are similar, if not on a textual level, then on the “anagogical level, the level of spiritual significance” (358).

Part four, unfortunately, falters midway with a curious inclusion: a bibliography of commentaries on Romans 11:17–24 compiled by Gary Gillum. Not only is the text of secondary interest to Jacob 5, but the entries are mostly limited to English. No French or Italian commentaries are listed, and the only study in German, arguably the most important modern language for New Testament

scholarship, appears in a *festschrift* published at Oxford. At most this piece merits no more independent existence than as an appendix to Faulconer's piece.

John Tvedtnes, in the first of three appearances, again treats Romans 11. His expansive coverage of Luke and Isaiah justifies the separate inclusion of this sprawling, but comprehensive, study, which is energetically detailed and enthusiastically documented. Particularly noteworthy are his citations of Christian fathers. In light of the earlier coverage in this volume, some sections on anointing and the Messiah in his next entry, "Olive Oil: Symbol of the Holy Ghost," should have been reworked or deleted to avoid tedious overlap. Still, the remainder of this study, especially the central section on the Holy Ghost, is well done and worthy of careful consideration.

A refreshingly short entry concludes part four. Stephen Ricks's "Olive Culture in the Second Temple Era and Early Rabbinic Period" reads like an ideal conference paper: short, well-researched and presented, based on primary sources, with an original contribution. The commonalities in the horticultural details of Jacob 5 and Judaic literature of late antiquity—as seen in the apocrypha, the pseudepigrapha, the Mishna, and Talmud—support the symbol of the olive as a sign of kingship, authority, and the tree of life. Although the article overlaps somewhat with Tvedtnes's first paper, Ricks has a more narrow temporal focus and garners extensive support from secondary authorities. Like Seely, he is sensitive to the cosmopolitan cultural climate of the age (for example, "the wearing of an olive wreath as a sign of victory was a Greek not a Jewish symbol, and probably an indication of Hellenistic influence on Jewish practice" [461–62]). My only complaint is that Ricks never identifies the second temple period and only hints at it on page 465 when it is paired with the early centuries of Christianity.

The Botany and Horticulture of Olives

Part five, "The Botany and Horticulture of Olives," closes the volume. Tvedtnes offers a short study concluding that the term *vineyard* is used appropriately and is not an error in the Zenos account in Jacob 5. This piece, too, reads like an ideal conference

paper. But it is misplaced in its section, for the horticultural question is resolved with a philological answer. Only the concluding entry in this volume truly deals with horticulture.

Wilford Hess, Daniel Fairbanks, John Welch, and Jonathan Driggs's "Botanical Aspects of Olive Culture Relevant to Jacob 5" covers almost eighty pages of very interesting and pointed commentary on many technical aspects of the olive that escape the nonspecialist. The article is divided into two sections: a short introductory narrative and a lengthy catechism based on the text of Jacob 5. Half of the introduction is redundant, since, after some 450 pages, we know enough of the etymology of the term *olive* and the various views of its domestication. But the other half offers a bracing baptism into the scientific world of the olive: botany and cultivation; fruit and oil; pathogens, pests, and nutrition; and botanical anomalies and unusual circumstances mentioned in Jacob 5 that indicate the expertise of Zenos in olive cultivation. This last part is a sensitive reading of the rhetoric of Jacob 5 played against the horticultural restraints of olive cultivation and is in itself a worthy capstone to this volume. But there is more. A catechism of questions and answers continues the insightful textual analysis and fully validates the authors' assertion that "there are many detailed horticultural practices and procedures that were not likely known by an untrained person, and may not have been fully appreciated by professional botanists or horticulturists at the time the Book of Mormon was translated. Even today, outside of olive-growing areas, professional horticulturists may not fully appreciate some of the unique aspects of olive culture" (552).

After the appended text of Jacob 5 come two indices: the first, a very useful index of passages cited in the book from the scriptures, apocrypha, pseudepigrapha, Dead Sea Scrolls, Mishna and other Jewish literature, various Christian sources, and the classics; the second, a subject index.

Despite the bulk of this volume, two aspects deserve deeper coverage if the book is to truly serve as "the most comprehensive collection of materials ever published about the olive in the world of the Bible and the Book of Mormon" (ix). First, since the target text is the allegory of Zenos, one might expect the nature of allegory to be developed more than it was. For instance, could the three

levels of allegory isolated by the Neoplatonists, namely, the literal, the ethical, and the metaphysical, be applied with profit to Zenos?⁸

More importantly, the medical aspects of the olive are touched on but not treated. Yet the olive is one of the most universal and potent of herbs and forms the base of most salves and ointments. In early Latter-day Saint history, its medicinal value was recognized on a wide scale. For instance, olive oil was taken internally much like the cod liver oil of my childhood:

At one time in Mormonism, it used to be quite the thing to take consecrated olive oil internally, as part of the general good medicine suggested by God. Saints thought no more of consuming it internally as [*sic*] they did of drinking herbal teas, and felt that it was as proper and right in its place to take as botanic medicine was.⁹

In fact, the ordinance of anointing the afflicted with olive oil was regarded as much as a medicinal application as a religious rite. Joseph E. Smith is quoted in one early journal as thinking it “absurd for men to pour a little drop of oil on the top of the head and pray that it might permeate the whole being. We should anoint the sick all over and give them oil inwardly.”¹⁰ Some exploration, therefore, of the standard handbooks such as Grieve’s *A Modern Herbal* or Culbreth’s *A Manual of Materia Medica and Pharmacology* to elucidate this important function of the olive would have been welcome.

But overall, most aspects of the olive and its cultivation, history, economy, and symbolism are amply treated in this volume, usually from multiple angles. No serious student of the Bible or Book of Mormon can afford to neglect the factual information, insights, and inspiration to be gleaned from this book. And for those who, like the present reviewer, do not enjoy the taste of actual olives, the allegorical approach is all the more appreciated.

NOTES

¹See Paul T. Hoskisson, “Explicating the Mystery of the Rejected Foundation Stone: The Allegory of the Olive Tree,” *BYU Studies* 30 (summer 1990): 77–87.

²The table of contents errs in placing this article in part two.

³The authors stumble on p. 187 and p. 227 n. 12, forgivably, when they state that the name for olive in Chinese is *ci-tun*. This name, hardly recognizable

in Berthold Laufer's idiosyncratic orthography, is more commonly spelled *tz'u-t'ung* in Wade-Giles romanization (*zitong* in pinyin), is pronounced something like **tsiedong* in the Middle Ages, and is nothing more than the Chinese attempt to spell the Persian loan word for olive, *zeitun*, a product first introduced to the Chinese by Persian merchants.

⁴The possibility of a northern extraction of Zenos is again suggested by Stephen Ricks on p. 467, with documentation.

⁵"It may be more accurate to call Jacob 5 a parable rather than an allegory, but the terminology is sufficiently loose that it isn't important to insist on one term or the other" (363 n. 2). Faulconer chooses to use the term parable in his study.

⁶Among other examples, I have in mind Hesiod's "The Battle of the Frogs and Mice."

⁷On the genetic relationship between Hebrew and Greek historiography, consult John Van Seters, "Early Greek Historiography," *In Search of History: Historiography in the Ancient World and the Origins of Biblical History* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1983), 8–52; Giovanni Garbini, *History and Ideology in Ancient Israel*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 82–86; Robert G. Boling, *Judges*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1975), 19–23; and the studies cited by Robert Morgan and John Barton, *Biblical Interpretation*, Oxford Bible Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 216.

⁸For these three levels, consult Robert Lamberton, *Homer the Theologian: Neoplatonist Allegorical Reading and the Growth of the Epic Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 47.

⁹John Heinerman, *Joseph Smith and Herbal Medicine* (Monrovia: Majority of One Press, n.d.), 68.

¹⁰Ruth May Fox, Diary, June 3, 1900, cited by John Heinerman, "And They Shall Be Healed! Herbal Medicine and Faith Healing on the Early Frontier," unpublished manuscript, kindly furnished to me by Dean Morris.