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## Excursus: Structuralist Analysis

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**Abstract:** Non-LDS scholar Seth D. Kunin of the Department of Divinity and Religious Studies, University of Aberdeen, examined the allegory of the olive tree in the Book of Mormon from the viewpoint of structuralist theory as used in anthropology. Classic structuralist theory began with Claude Lévi-Strauss's attempt to understand mythology in ways that go deeper than the text of the myth. As Kunin describes it, structuralism "is ultimately concerned with establishing the underlying, unconscious patterns of the brain that shape the way we categorise the world and thus ultimately how we think and act."

## Excursus: Structuralist Analysis

Non-LDS scholar Seth D. Kunin of the Department of Divinity and Religious Studies, University of Aberdeen, examined the allegory of the olive tree in the Book of Mormon from the viewpoint of structuralist theory as used in anthropology. Classic structuralist theory began with Claude Lévi-Strauss's attempt to understand mythology in ways that go deeper than the text of the myth. As Kunin describes it, structuralism "is ultimately concerned with establishing the underlying, unconscious patterns of the brain that shape the way we categorise the world and thus ultimately how we think and act."<sup>1</sup>

Kunin is not interested in explaining the various details of the allegory, but rather in understand the relationships of the elements to each other and the kind of underlying structure they represent. He does not present any conclusion about the "truth" of the Zenos narrative nor of the Book of Mormon. He reads the allegory for the structural information encoded within it. He concludes that while most structural studies emphasize dyadic relationships, the Zenos allegory (and other aspects of the Book of Mormon) demonstrates a triadic structure.<sup>2</sup>

Kunin poses two mutually opposed categories; the tame and wild branches, or Israel and the Gentiles. This would be the typical dyadic relationship. The third category is a transformational state whereby the wild may become tame.<sup>3</sup> This transformative state is a necessary intermediary through which the "wild" Gentiles may become "tame" Israel. Gentiles do not become Israel directly, but only through the intermediate state. In LDS terms, this would be the mediation of the church and gospel that allows for the non-Israelite Gentiles (all who are not of direct descent from Israel) to become participants in the church and hence be adopted into Israel.

Kunin sees a similar triadic pattern in LDS temple work for the dead, where the opposed categories of living and dead are transformed through vicarious work. The dead/not-Israel can become exalted/Israel through the median state provided by vicarious temple ordinances. The transformation cannot happen for the dead without the efforts of the living. Kunin sees this triadic pattern as a fundamental concept underlying LDS theology.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Seth D. Kunin, "The Allegory of the Olive Tree: A Case Study for (Neo) Structuralist Analysis," in *Religion* 33 (2003): 108.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 105.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 120.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 121.

One of the interesting comparisons Kunin makes is to the olive tree allegory in Romans 11. He finds that the New Testament allegory manifests the more common dyadic form and does not have the triadic form that he sees throughout the Book of Mormon.<sup>5</sup> He also examines the use of tree and branch imagery in the Hebrew Bible and literature from the intertestamental texts:

One of the primary areas of similarity is that of the removal of branches, or the uprooting of plants. The usage in the Hebrew Bible literally expresses a relationship with the land, often as an expression of exile, and also as expressions of rejecting the covenant (see Ex. 15:17; 2 Sam. 7:10; Ps. 1:3, 44:2, 80:8–15). Mark Elliot suggests that similar usages are also found in the Inter-Testamental period. Other texts also speak of the removal of branches or shoots to be planted in separate from the original tree or as growing into a tree. Elliot suggests that these may have messianic or communal associations. Both of these elements are similar to those found in the Book of Mormon and to some extent to those found in the New Testament.”<sup>6</sup>

The Book of Mormon participates in authentic elements of the imagery and uses them in appropriate ways. The difference lies not in the specifics, but in the underlying conceptual structure. What might explain the difference between the dyadic structures of the biblical examples and the triadic structure of the Book of Mormon?

Kunin’s discussion of the difference between the dyadic and triadic structures presents an interesting and perhaps important distinction that opens a new insight not only into the Book of Mormon, but also into LDS theology. The dyadic relationship of Israel/not-Israel is clearly the normative model for the Hebrew relationship to God. As the chosen people, they have an exclusive connection to their God which is available only when one is part of the covenant. There is no liminal category in which one may be something other than the extremes of Israel or not-Israel.

The literature in the biblical tradition comes from those who were (or at least saw themselves) inside the covenant tradition. For the Old Testament, we have the record of those who considered themselves Israel. Even though the biblical tradition is threaded through the Babylonian exile, those in exile continued to consider themselves Israel-in-blood if not Israel-in-land. When they returned, it was as a people to a land, not a lost part of Israel to the main body.

The New Testament writers saw themselves as inside a new relationship to God, having redefined the dyad to Christian/not-Christian rather than Israel/not-Israel. Nevertheless, they were inside the covenant rather than outsiders in either belief or location. Both the Old Testament and New Testament are received from those who were firmly inside one part (the conceptually preferred part) of the dyadic relationship.

The Book of Mormon, on the other hand, is literature from a liminal people who understood that they were in a special category. They were spiritual-Israel, but

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 122.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 122–23.

very selfconsciously were not land-Israel. They were not the main body of Israel, but self-defined “broken-off”-Israel. Similarly, LDS theology sees a transformational category between Israel and not-Israel. By becoming part of the church we are in a position where humankind can move from the not-Israel category into the full-Israel-by-adoption covenant. We do not become Jewish, but we become an inheritor who remains separate from the Jewish people. We become Israel without becoming Jewish-Israel.

The Zenos analogy comes from the Old Testament inside-the-covenant-Israel, but with a particular focus on the liminal. The reason for this is that Zenos is a prophet (as was Isaiah) of the Assyrian conquest. The result of that conquest was a separation and loss of ten of Israel’s tribes. Their separation from the main body of Israel creates the third liminal category in Zeno’s recounting of redemption. As a prophet of the loss of the ten tribes, he provides a story that discusses their return and redemption into Israel, a theme that the Nephites certainly appreciated from their much more recent physical separation from the land of Israel.

Kunin’s assertion that the triadic structure underlies much of LDS thought raises the interesting possibility that the conceptual structure established by the Book of Mormon influenced the development of LDS theology in ways that were totally unconscious. Of course, it could be argued that this structural pattern originated with Joseph Smith rather than the Book of Mormon text, but there is no clear way to explain the structural triads on the basis of Joseph Smith’s socio-cultural milieu in the same way that the liminal nature of the text provides the reason for the addition of the transformative category between the opposed dyads.