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Since Cumorah (Since Qumran), Part XXV

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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 twenty-fifth part discusses external evidences of Lehi's dream and the Tree of Life.

This unusual tree-vine of life, representing the love of God, was discovered on the walls of an ancient synagogue and depicts Jacob surrounded by the tribes of Israel, Joseph blessing Ephraim and Manasseh, and the pagan Orpheus playing to a lion and a lamb, depicting harmony in Israel throughout the world. At top is God with heavenly hosts. (Photograph taken from Jewish Symbols, Vol. 2, p. 93, by E. R. Goodenough.)



SINCE CUMORAH (SINCE QUMRAN)

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The remarkable vision of the tree of life found in the Book of Mormon has apparently been revealed to non-Book of Mormon prophets also, according to modern findings. The author reports on the 1932 discovery of a Syrian synagogue upon whose walls are painted murals depicting Israel's history, the sacrament, and much of the tree-of-life vision recorded in 1 Nephi.

News from Dura Europos.

● Isaiah transported to heaven as he lay on the king's bed reminds us of Lehi "carried away in a vision"

on his own bed, especially since the visions were partly the same. Lehi, it will be recalled, "saw the heavens open, and he thought he

saw God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels. . . ." (1 Ne. 1:8.) This vision, as we have noted elsewhere, is a standard theme in the apocryphal "testaments" of various patriarchs and prophets.⁵⁹ It seems to have held a central position in early Jewish imagery, enjoying a prominence that was entirely lost later on. That prominence is attested on the walls of the ancient synagogue at Dura Europos, discovered just a hundred years after the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.

"Before the discovery of the Dura synagogue in 1932," writes Professor E. R. Goodenough, "anyone would have been thought mad who suggested that Jews could have made such a place of worship. Its discovery has maddened us all, but we do not return to sanity when we force the synagogue to conform a priori to Jewish literary traditions which through the centuries had never suggested to anyone that such a building could have existed."⁶⁰

Here, then, we have something truly new and revolutionary turning up "since Cumorah" to tell us how the early Jews really thought about things—splendid murals from a synagogue that has been buried in the dust since the third century A.D. showing us things so different from the conventional and accepted concepts of ancient Judaism as to appear to be nothing less than madness to the experts. In these impressive murals we see such unexpected things as the bread and wine of the Messianic meal, reminding us of the sacrament; we see the wandering of Israel in the desert with the waters of life flowing in twelve miraculous streams, with "the head thereof a little way off" (1 Ne. 8:14) to each of the tribal tents.

But the most important representation of all is the central composition that crowns the Torah

shrine, the ritual center of the synagogue. Directly above the shrine, as if springing directly from the Law itself, is depicted a splendid tree beneath whose sinuous and spreading boughs the twelve sons of Israel stand around their father Jacob; while sheltered by the branches on the other side Joseph is seen conferring his blessing upon Ephraim and Manasseh. A remarkable thing about this tree of life (for none fail to recognize it as such) is that it is both a tree and a *vine*. Here Professor Goodenough helps us out: "In an atmosphere where identification rather than distinctions, mingling rather than separation, ruled the thoughts of men . . . the tree-vine seems to express this sense of identification of tree with vine to the point that we have called it the tree-vine. Out of the Torah shrine . . . grew the tree of life and salvation which led to the supernal throne."⁶¹

Now, for whatever it is worth, the olive tree that stands for Israel in the Book of Mormon imagery is also a vine; it grows in a vineyard, is planted, cultivated, and owned "by the lord of the vineyard," and is in the charge of the workers in the vineyard. We suggested a possible explanation for this queer state of things by the close association of the olive and the vine in Mediterranean lands,⁶² but we may have here a better explanation. There was nothing repugnant to "the thoughts of men" in Lehi's day in having one and the same object both a tree and a vine and in having it represent half a dozen different things at the same time, with no sense of contradiction or confusion whatever.

We get the same free-and-easy identifications in the art of Dura as in the Book of Mormon. At Dura we see high in the branches of the tree the familiar figure of Orpheus as he sits playing his lyre

to a lion and a lamb. The earliest Christian art is fond of the figure of Orpheus, one of the two pagan figures admitted freely to Christian imagery; instead of playing to all the animals as he usually does, the Christian Orpheus usually sings to a lion and a lamb, as in the Dura synagogue—which of course suggests that it was Isaiah 14 that paved the way for the acceptance of Orpheus into the Christian community.⁶³

Goodenough suggests that the Dura Orpheus "was probably called David," through whose "heavenly, saving music Israel could be glorified."⁶⁴ Certainly he represents the harmony of Israel throughout the world as well as the harmony of all nature; the listening animals show that. In this picture, to follow Professor Goodenough again, "the artist is trying to show the glorification of Israel through the mystic tree-vine, whose power could *also* be represented as a *divine love* which the soul purifying music of an Orpheus figure best symbolized."⁶⁴ What Orpheus does, then, is to show that the tree represents divine love.

Again we turn to the Book of Mormon: there the spreading tree-vine is clearly and often stated to represent Israel but also has another significance. When the angel asked Nephi about the tree of his vision, "Knowest thou the meaning of the tree which thy father saw?" the young man "answered him saying: Yea, it is the love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men; wherefore, it is the most desirable above all things." (1 Ne. 11:21-22.)

What at a later date could better express "the meaning of the tree" as that universal love for which all creatures yearn than to add the classic picture of Orpheus to it? That the Jews at Dura had by centuries of exposure to them become quite hospitable to certain

standard Greek and Persian images appears also in the Iranian character of the heavenly court that appears above the tree.

Above "the tree of life and salvation which led to the supernal throne" was depicted the throne itself, in a scene in which God is shown enthroned in heaven, Persian fashion, surrounded by his heavenly hosts. Goodenough finds the idea both surprising and compelling: "The enthroned king surrounded by the tribes in such a place reminds us much more of the Christ enthroned with the Saints in heaven . . . than any other figure in the history of art. Let me repeat, that before the discovery of the synagogue all sane scholars would have agreed that 'of course' no such synagogue paintings as these could have existed at all."⁶⁵ As this is the high point in the Dura murals, so was it also in Lehi's vision.

It is interesting how these visions seem to get around, and the Book of Mormon casts some light on that problem too when it reports that after Lehi had described his vision to his family, his son Nephi was granted the identical revelation, only with a fuller explanation, including points that Lehi had overlooked. Thus we see how the same vision, far from being reserved to one man, might be shared by others with the intent that through the preaching of those thus favored the vision might become the common property and tradition of all the people. (Moro. 7:29-32.)

(To be continued)

FOOTNOTES

⁶⁰We have listed them in *Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 20 (1966), p. 12.

⁶¹E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* (New York: Pantheon, 1964), Vol. 10, Pt. 2, p. 197.

⁶²*Ibid.*, p. 200. Reproductions of all the murals may be found in Vol. 11 of the series.

⁶³*The Improvement Era*, Vol. 68 (October 1965), p. 876.

⁶⁴See the discussion and reproductions in H. Leclercq's article on Orpheus in Cabrol & Leclercq, *Dictionnaire d'archéologie et de liturgie chrétiennes*, Vol. 12, pp. 2736ff.

⁶⁵Goodenough, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

⁶⁶*Loc. cit.*