



Type: Book Chapter

A Divine Mother in the Book of Mormon?

Author(s): Daniel C. Peterson

Source: *Mormonism and the Temple: Examining an Ancient Religious Tradition*

Editor(s): Gary N. Anderson

Published: Logan, UT; Academy for Temple Studies, 2013

Page(s): 109-125

Abstract: No abstract available.



BYU Studies is collaborating with Book of Mormon Central to preserve and extend access to BYU Studies and to scholarly research on The Book of Mormon. Archived by permission of BYU Studies.

<http://byustudies.byu.edu/>

A Divine Mother in the Book of Mormon?

Daniel C. Peterson

Nephi's vision of the tree of life, among the best-known passages in the Book of Mormon, expands upon the vision received earlier by his father, Lehi.

And it came to pass that the Spirit said unto me: Look! And I looked and beheld a tree; and it was like unto the tree which my father had seen; and the beauty thereof was far beyond, yea, exceeding of all beauty; and the whiteness thereof did exceed the whiteness of the driven snow.

And it came to pass after I had seen the tree, I said unto the Spirit: I behold thou hast shown unto me the tree which is precious above all.

And he said unto me: What desirest thou?

And I said unto him: To know the interpretation thereof. . . . (1 Nephi 11:8–11)

Since Nephi wanted to know the meaning of the tree that his father had seen and that he himself now saw, we would expect "the Spirit" to answer Nephi's question. But the response to Nephi's question is surprising:

And it came to pass that he said unto me: Look! And I looked as if to look upon him, and I saw him not; for he had gone from before my presence.

And it came to pass that I looked and beheld the great city of Jerusalem, and also other cities. And I beheld the city of Nazareth; and in the city of Nazareth I beheld a virgin, and she was exceedingly fair and white.

And it came to pass that I saw the heavens open; and an angel came down and stood before me; and he said unto me: Nephi, what beholdest thou?

And I said unto him: A virgin, most beautiful and fair above all other virgins.

And he said unto me: Knowest thou the condescension of God?

And I said unto him: I know that he loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things.

And he said unto me: Behold, the virgin whom thou seest is the mother of the Son of God, after the manner of the flesh.

And it came to pass that I beheld that she was carried away in the Spirit; and after she had been carried away in the Spirit for the space of a time the angel spake unto me, saying: Look!

And I looked and beheld the virgin again, bearing a child in her arms.

And the angel said unto me: Behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son of the Eternal Father! (1 Nephi 11:12–21)

Then "the Spirit" asks Nephi the question that Nephi himself had posed only a few verses before: "Knowest thou the meaning of the tree which thy father saw? (1 Nephi 11:21)."

Strikingly, though the vision of Mary seems irrelevant to Nephi's original question about the significance of the tree—for the tree is nowhere mentioned in the angelic guide's response—Nephi himself now replies that, yes, he knows the answer to his question. "And I 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. And he spake unto me, saying: Yea, and the most joyous to the soul" (1 Nephi 11:22–23).

This is an updated and expanded version of Daniel C. Peterson, "Nephi and His Asherah," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9, no. 2 (2000): 16–25, which was, itself, a shortened version of Daniel C. Peterson, "Nephi and His Asherah: A Note on 1 Nephi 11:8–23," in *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World: Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson*, ed. Davis Bitton (Provo UT: FARMS, 1998), 191–243.

How has Nephi come to this understanding? Clearly, the answer to his question about the meaning of the tree lies in the virgin mother with her child. It seems, in fact, that the virgin *is* the tree in some sense. Even the language used to describe her echoes that used for the tree. Just as she was “exceedingly fair and white,” “most beautiful and fair above all other virgins,” so was the tree’s beauty “far beyond, yea, exceeding of all beauty; and the whiteness thereof did exceed the whiteness of the driven snow.” Significantly, though, it was only when she appeared with a baby and was identified as “the mother of the Son of God” that Nephi grasped the tree’s meaning.

Why would Nephi see a connection between a tree and the virginal mother of a divine child?

Many years ago, I happened to be re-reading 1 Nephi 11 at the same time I was reading a then relatively new book by Mark S. Smith provocatively entitled *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*. In it, Professor Smith discusses ancient Israelite belief in a goddess, the consort of El, the Most High God. Suddenly, for me, a light came on.

I believe that Nephi’s vision reflects a meaning of the “sacred tree” that is unique to the ancient Near East, and that, indeed, can only be fully appreciated when the ancient Canaanite and Israelite associations of that tree are borne in mind.

Asherah, Consort of El

The cultural and religious distance between Canaanites and Israelites was considerably smaller than Bible scholars once thought. (Michael D. Coogan says it clearly: “Israelite religion [was] a subset of Canaanite religion.”¹) In their attempts to better understand the beliefs of the ancient Israelites, modern scholars have been greatly helped by extra-biblical documents and artifacts that have been recovered from the soil of the Near East. For many

1. Michael D. Coogan, “Canaanite Origins and Lineage: Reflections on the Religion of Ancient Israel,” in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*, ed. Patrick D. Miller Jr., Paul D. Hanson, and S. Dean McBride (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 115. Compare William G. Dever, *Recent Archaeological Discoveries and Biblical Research* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990), 121, 128, 166.

years, there had been little beyond the Bible itself for them to study. The situation changed dramatically beginning in 1929 with the discovery of the Ugaritic texts at Ras Shamra, in Syria. They revolutionized our understanding of Canaanite religion in general, and of early Hebrew religion in particular.

The god El was the patriarch of the Canaanite pantheon. One of his titles was *’el ’olam*. Frank Moore Cross Jr. noted, “We must understand it . . . as meaning originally ‘’EL, lord of Eternity,’ or perhaps more properly, ‘’EL, the Ancient One.’ The myths recorded on the tablets at Ugarit portray ’El as a “greybeard, father of the gods and father of man.”² However, observed Professor Cross, “no later than the fourteenth century BC in north Syria, the cult of ’El was declining, making room for the virile young god Ba’l-Haddu,”³ the Baal of the Old Testament. El was probably also the original god of Israel. In the earliest Israelite conception, father El had a divine son named Jehovah or Yahweh.⁴ Gradually, however, the Israelite conception of Yahweh absorbed the functions of El and, by the 10th century BCE, King Solomon’s day, had come to be identified with him.⁵

Asherah was the chief goddess of the Canaanites.⁶ She was El’s wife and the mother and wet nurse of the other gods. Thus, the gods of Ugarit could be

2. Frank Moore Cross Jr., “Yahweh and the God of the Patriarchs,” *Harvard Theological Review* 55 (1962): 240.

3. Cross, “Yahweh and the God of the Patriarchs,” 234, 241–42.

4. See Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 7; and Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel’s Second God* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

5. See Smith, *The Early History of God*, xxiii, xxvii, 8–11, 15, 21, 22, 23, 163; Raphael Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 3rd ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 133; Cross, “Yahweh and the God of the Patriarchs,” 253–57; Otto Eissfeldt, “El and Yahweh,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 1 (1956): 25–37.

6. See John Day, “Asherah in the Hebrew Bible and Northwest Semitic Literature,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105, no. 3 (1986): 385–87, 398; Steve A. Wiggins, “The Myth of Asherah: Lion Lady and Serpent Goddess,” *Ugarit-Forschungen: Internationales Jahrbuch für die Altertumskunde Syrien-Palästinas* 23 (1991): 384; and Steve A. Wiggins, *A Reassessment of “Asherah”: A Study according to the Textual Sources of the First Two Millennia BCE* (Kevelaer, Germany: Butzon und Bercker, 1993), 192.

called “the family of [or ‘the sons of’] El,” or the “sons of Asherah.”⁷ Moreover, Asherah was connected with the birth of Canaanite rulers and could be metaphorically considered to be their mother as well.⁸

She was strongly linked with the Canaanite coastal city of Sidon, at least in the period following Lehi and Nephi’s departure from the Old World, and probably before.⁹ This is interesting because Lehi, whose family origins appear to lie in the north of Palestine and who may have had a trading background, “seems to have had particularly close ties with Sidon (for the name appears repeatedly in the Book of Mormon, both in its Hebrew and Egyptian forms), which at that time was one of the two harbors through which the Israelites carried on an extremely active trade with Egypt and the West.”¹⁰

Moreover, Asherah seems to have been known and venerated among the Hebrews as well. At least some Israelites worshipped her over a period extending from the conquest of Canaan in the second millennium before Christ to the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE—the time of Lehi’s departure with his family from the Old World.¹¹ Ancient Israelite women, for instance, were sometimes buried in “Asherah wigs,” and she may also be reflected in Israelite temple architecture. Additionally, thousands of mass-produced goddess figurines have been found at Israelite sites. Summarizing the evidence, William Dever writes of the figurines that

“most show the female form nude, with exaggerated breasts; occasionally she is depicted pregnant or nursing a child.” But there is one significant difference between the figurines from Israelite sites and those recovered from pagan Canaanite locations: The lower body of the Israelite figurines lacks the explicit detail characteristic of the Canaanite objects; indeed, the area below the waist of the Israelite figurines is typically a simple plain column. Whereas the pagan Canaanite objects depict a highly sexualized goddess of both childbearing and erotic love, in the Israelite figurines the aspect of the *dea nutrix*, the nourishing or nurturing goddess, comes to the fore. As Professor Dever writes, “The more blatantly sexual motifs give way to the nursing mother.”¹²

Asherah seems to have been popular among all segments of Israelite society over many years.¹³ She was worshipped in Israel in the time of the Judges.¹⁴ She was especially venerated in the countryside,¹⁵ but she was important in later Hebrew cities as well.¹⁶ Although 1 Kings 3:3 says that he “loved the Lord,” King Solomon brought Asherah into Jerusalem sometime after 1000 BCE. And a large-scale center of Asherah worship may have functioned at Tacanach, under at least the indirect patronage of the court of Solomon.¹⁷

After the separation of the states of Israel and Judah, King Ahab and his Phoenician-born queen, Jezebel, daughter of “Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians,” installed Asherah in Samaria, where

7. See J. C. de Moor, “’asherah,” in G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1974), 1:439. On Asherah as divine wet nurse, see Wiggins, *Reassessment of “Asherah,”* 26–27, 71, 76, 89, 190; on her maternal aspect, see pp. 37, 71, 89.

8. Wiggins, *Reassessment of “Asherah,”* 27, 71, 108–10, 131, 190.

9. See John Wilson Betlyon, “The Cult of ’Ašerah/’Elat at Sidon,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 44/1 (1985): 53–56; compare de Moor, “’asherah,” 1:440; and Day, “Asherah in the Hebrew Bible,” 387–88.

10. Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3d ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 47.

11. See Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 34; Manfred Dietrich and Oswald Loretz, “Jahwe und seine Aschera”: *Anthropomorphes Kultbild in Mesopotamien, Ugarit und Israel: Das biblische Bilderverbot* (Münster: UGARIT-Verlag, 1992), 120; Wiggins, *Reassessment of “Asherah,”* 149.

12. See Dever, *Recent Archaeological Discoveries*, 157–59.

13. See Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 39; and Thomas L. Thompson, “The Intellectual Matrix of Early Biblical Narrative: Inclusive Monotheism in Persian Period Palestine,” in *The Triumph of Elohim: From Yahwisms to Judaisms*, ed. Diana Vikander Edelman (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996), 119 n. 13.

14. See Smith, *Early History of God*, 6, 145.

15. See Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 47, 52.

16. See J. Glen Taylor, *Yahweh and the Sun: Biblical and Archaeological Evidence for Sun Worship in Ancient Israel* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 58–59; and Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Yahweh—The Patriarch: Ancient Images of God and Feminist Theology*, trans. Frederick J. Gaiser (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 66.

17. J. Glen Taylor, “The Two Earliest Known Representations of Yahweh,” in *Ascribe to the Lord: Biblical and Other Studies in Memory of Peter C. Craigie*, ed. Lyle Eslinger and Glen Taylor, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series* 67 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988), 566.

“around 800 BCE the official cult of Yahweh included the worship of his consort Asherah.”¹⁸ She seems to have been worshipped there until the fall of Israel to the Assyrians in 721 BCE.

But the veneration of Asherah was hardly restricted to the often-denigrated northern kingdom.¹⁹ In the south, in Judah, Solomon’s son, Rehoboam, introduced her into the temple at Jerusalem—meaning, presumably, that he erected some sort of sacred symbol (sometimes referred to in the lowercase as “an *asherah*” or “the *asherah*”) that represented her. Kings Asa and Jehoshaphat removed Asherah from the temple, but Joash restored her. The great reforming king Hezekiah removed her again, along with the so-called Nehushtan, which 2 Kings 18:4 describes as “the brasen serpent that Moses had made.” Subsequently, although he failed to restore the Nehushtan, King Manasseh reinstated Asherah in the Jerusalem temple, where she remained until the reforms of King Josiah, who reigned from roughly 639 to 609 BCE.

In the period leading up to those reforms, something changed, and changed dramatically. “The datable biblical literature of the eighth century,” says Jacob Milgrom, “accuses Israel of idolatry 15 times; that of the following century 166 times.”²⁰ Commenting on those statistics, Margaret Barker observes:

Leaving aside the thorny question of “dating” biblical literature, this simple test suggests either that there was a catastrophic apostasy during the seventh century, expressed in the condemnations found in Deuteronomy (36 times), Jeremiah (46 times) and Ezekiel (82 times); or that the definition of idolatry had changed.²¹

18. David Noel Freedman, “Yahweh of Samaria and His Asherah,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 50/4 (December 1987): 248; see Herbert Niehr, “The Rise of YHWH in Judahite and Israelite Religion,” in Edelman, *Triumph of Elohim*, ed. Edelman, 57, 59.

19. See Edelman, “Introduction,” in *Triumph of Elohim*, 19; and Lowell K. Handy, “The Appearance of Pantheon in Judah,” in *Triumph of Elohim*, ed. Edelman, 27–43.

20. J. Milgrom, “The Nature and Extent of Idolatry in Eighth-Seventh Century Judah,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 69 (1998), 1. See the entire article, on pp. 1–13.

21. Barker, *The Mother of the Lord*, ms. 100; compare ms. 101.

Here is a description of what Josiah did to the asherah in the temple:

And the king commanded Hilkiah the high priest, and the priests of the second order, and the keepers of the door, to bring forth out of the temple of the Lord all the vessels that were made for Baal, and for the grove, and for all the host of heaven: and he burned them without Jerusalem in the fields of Kidron, and carried the ashes of them unto Bethel. . . .

And he brought out the grove from the house of the Lord, without Jerusalem, unto the brook Kidron, and burned it at the brook Kidron, and stamped it small to powder, and cast the powder thereof upon the graves of the children of the people. (2 Kgs. 23:4, 6; cf. 1 Kings 15:13)

So visible was Asherah still in this period just prior to the Babylonian captivity that Lehi’s contemporary, the prophet Jeremiah, felt obliged—at least in standard, pre-Margaret Barker, readings of him—to denounce her worship.²² Consider, for example, this exchange between Jeremiah and a group of exiled Jews living in Egypt after the destruction of Jerusalem:

Then all the men which knew that their wives had burned incense unto other gods, and all the women that stood by, a great multitude, even all the people that dwelt in the land of Egypt, in Pathros, answered Jeremiah, saying,

As for the word that thou hast spoken unto us in the name of the Lord, we will not hearken unto thee.

But we will certainly do whatsoever thing goeth forth out of our own mouth, to burn incense unto the queen of heaven, and to pour out drink offerings unto her, as we have done, we, and our fathers, our kings, and our princes, in the cities of Judah, and in the streets of Jerusalem: for then had we plenty of victuals, and were well, and saw no evil.

But since we left off to burn incense to the queen of heaven, and to pour out drink offerings unto her, we have wanted all things, and have been consumed by the sword and by the famine.

22. Switching the roles of mother and father, Jeremiah 2:27 mocks the veneration of Asherah. See Saul M. Olyan, “The Cultic Confessions of Jer 2,27a,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 99 (1987): 254–59.

And when we burned incense to the queen of heaven, and poured out drink offerings unto her, did we make her cakes to worship her, and pour out drink offerings unto her, without our men?

Then Jeremiah said unto all the people, to the men, and to the women, and to all the people which had given him that answer, saying,

The incense that ye burned in the cities of Judah, and in the streets of Jerusalem, ye, and your fathers, your kings, and your princes, and the people of the land, did not the Lord remember them, and came it not into his mind?

So that the Lord could no longer bear, because of the evil of your doings, and because of the abominations which ye have committed; therefore is your land a desolation, and an astonishment, and a curse, without an inhabitant, as at this day.

Because ye have burned incense, and because ye have sinned against the Lord, and have not obeyed the voice of the Lord, nor walked in his law, nor in his statutes, nor in his testimonies; therefore this evil is happened unto you, as at this day. (Jeremiah 44:15–23)

The exiled prophet-priest Ezekiel may also have been dismayed at the expulsion of Asherah (or Ashratah) from the temple. He recounts a vision: “Then the glory of the Lord departed from off the threshold of the house, and stood over the cherubims. . . . And the glory of the Lord went up from the midst of the city, and stood upon the mountain which is on the east side of the city.” Ezekiel 10:18, 11:23).

What we can infer from this is that an image or symbol of Asherah stood in Solomon’s temple at Jerusalem for nearly two-thirds of its existence, certainly extending into the lifetime of Lehi and perhaps even into the lifetime of his son Nephi.²³ In fact, her title *Elat* (“goddess”) persists to this day in the name of a major Israeli coastal resort and in the Israeli name for the Gulf of Aqaba (which Israelis today refer to as the Gulf of Elat). Lehi and his party very likely passed through or by Elat on their journey southward from Jerusalem.

23. See Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 39, 41–42, 45–52; Wiggins, *Reassessment of “Asherah,”* 125; Smith, *Early History of God*, 80, 94; Saul M. Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh in Israel* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 19, 70–72; and many other sources.

By the time of Israel’s Babylonian exile and subsequent restoration under Ezra, however, opposition to Asherah was almost—though not quite—universal in Judaism, at least as we know it from its approved texts. Indeed, the developing Israelite conception of Yahweh seems, to a certain extent, to have absorbed her functions and epithets much as it had earlier absorbed those of Yahweh’s father, El.²⁴ Thus, Asherah was basically eliminated from the history of Israel and subsequent Judaism. In the text of the Bible as we now read it, filtered and reshaped as it appears to have been by the reforming Deuteronomist priests in the decades prior to 600 BCE, hints of the goddess remain, but little survives that gives us a detailed understanding of her character or nature.²⁵

So what are we to make of Asherah? Does the opposition to her veneration expressed and enforced by the Deuteronomists and the reforming Israelite kings indicate that she was a foreign pollution of legitimate Hebrew religion coming from abroad? It does not look that way. Recall that Hezekiah removed both the *asherah* and the Nehushtan from the temple at Jerusalem. The Nehushtan was not a pagan intrusion, but was “the brasen serpent that Moses had made,” which had been carefully preserved by the Israelites for nearly a millennium until Hezekiah, offended by the idolatrous worship of “the children of Israel [who] did burn incense to it” (2 Kings 18:4), removed it and destroyed it. In other words, the Nehushtan had an illustrious pedigree entirely within the religious world of Israel, and there is no reason to believe that the *asherah* was any different in this respect.

What is striking in the long story of Israel’s Asherah is the identity of those who did not oppose her. No prophet appears to have denounced Asherah before the eighth century BCE. The great Yahwist prophets Amos and Hosea, vociferous in their denunciations of Baal, seem not to have denounced Asherah. The Elijah-Elisha school of Yahwist reformers do not appear to have opposed her. Although 400 prophets of Asherah ate with Jezebel along with

24. Smith, *Early History of God*, 98, 161–63; compare Gerstenberger, *Yahweh—The Patriarch*, 92, 136.

25. Wiggins, *Reassessment of “Asherah,”* 130.

the 450 prophets of Baal, Elijah's famous contest with the priests of Baal, while dramatically fatal to them, left the votaries of Asherah unmentioned and, evidently, untouched. "What happened to Asherah and her prophets?" asks David Noel Freedman. "Nothing."²⁶ In subsequent years the ruthless campaign against Baal inspired by Elijah and Elisha and led by Israel's Jehu left the *asherah* of Samaria standing. Baal was wholly eliminated, while the veneration of the goddess actually outlived the northern kingdom.²⁷

Belief in Asherah seems, in fact, to have been a conservative position in ancient Israel; criticism of it was innovative. Saul Olyan, noting that "before the reforming kings in Judah, the *asherah* seems to have been entirely legitimate,"²⁸ argues that ancient Hebrew opposition to Asherah emanated entirely from the so-called Deuteronomistic reform party, or from those heavily influenced by them. Other factions in earliest Israel, Olyan says, probably thought that worshipping her was not wrong and may well have worshipped her themselves.²⁹ (The book of Deuteronomy is considered by most scholars to have been associated with the reforms of the Judaite king Josiah in the seventh century BCE, and a number of students of the history of Judah believe that it may actually have been written during that period.) Writing about the common goddess figurines to which we have already referred, Professor Dever remarks, "As for the notion that these figurines, whatever they signified, were uncommon in orthodox circles, the late Dame Kathleen Kenyon found a seventh-century-BCE 'cult-cache' with more than three hundred fifty of them in a cave in Jerusalem, not a hundred yards from the Temple

Mount."³⁰ (It should be kept in mind that this date for these figurines makes them at least near contemporaries of Lehi.)

What was Asherah's role in early Israelite religious belief? Given what we have already said about the history of Canaanite and Israelite religion, "Asherah may have been the consort of El, but not [of] Yahweh, at some early point in Israelite religion."³¹ Over the generations, however, the Israelites' concept of Yahweh absorbed the attributes of Yahweh's father, El, and the people's imagination seems also to have granted to Yahweh the wife and consort of his father. "It is well-known," remarks André Lemaire,

that in Israelite religion Yahweh replaced the great god El as Israel's God. If Yahweh replaced El, it would seem logical to suppose that under Canaanite influence *asherah* [i.e., material tokens representing the goddess] replaced Athirat [the goddess Asherah], and that, at least in the popular religion of ancient Israel if not in the purer form of that religion reflected in the Bible, *asherah* functioned as the consort or wife of Yahweh.³²

The view that Asherah was considered the divine wife of Yahweh seems to be gaining ground among students of ancient Israelite religion.³³ "That some in Judah saw his consort as Asherah is hardly any longer debatable," declares Thomas Thompson.³⁴ "Asherah was a goddess paired with El, and this pairing was bequeathed to Israelite religion by virtue of the Yahweh-El identification,"³⁵ according to Smith, while Olyan says that Asherah seems to have been regarded as Yahweh's consort in both state and public religion, in both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah.³⁶

26. Freedman, "Yahweh of Samaria and His Asherah," 248. See 1 Kings 18:1–46.

27. See 2 Kings 10:18–28; 13:6; see also Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 4; Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 43–46; and Smith, *Early History of God*, 80.

28. Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 73.

29. See Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 3–4, 9, 13–14, 22, 33, 43, 73–74; Smith, *Early History of God*, 150; Olyan, "The Cultic Confessions of Jer 2,27a," 257; and Baruch Halpern, "Brisker Pipes Than Poetry": The Development of Israelite Monotheism," in *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel*, ed. Jacob Neusner, Baruch A. Levine, and Ernest S. Frerichs (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 83.

30. Dever, *Recent Archaeological Discoveries*, 159.

31. Smith, *Early History of God*, 89.

32. André Lemaire, "Who or What Was Yahweh's Asherah?" *Biblical Archaeology Review* 10/6 (1984): 46.

33. See Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, xiv, 74; and William Dever, "Is the Bible Right After All?" interview by Hershel Shanks, *Biblical Archaeology Review* 22/5 (Sept./Oct. 1996): 37.

34. Thompson, "The Intellectual Matrix of Early Biblical Narrative," 119 n. 10.

35. Smith, *Early History of God*, 19; compare 89, 92–93; and Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, xiv.

36. Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 29, 33–34, 38, 74.

Important support for this contention has come from two recent and very controversial archaeological finds in Palestine. The first is Khirbet al-Qom, a site about eight miles west of Hebron and six and a half miles east-southeast of Lachish in the territory of ancient Judah. The palaeo-Hebrew inscriptions at Khirbet al-Qom can be dated to between 700 and 800 BCE.³⁷ Scholars agree that they show us at least a portion of the popular religion of their time.³⁸ The second is Kuntillet 'Ajrud, perhaps the southernmost outpost of the kingdom of Judah. This place served as either a fortress or a stopover point for caravans (or both). It is situated on the border between the southern Negev and the Sinai peninsula, not far from the road that linked Gaza and Elat. The archaeological ruins at this location reflect influences from the northern kingdom of Israel and date to the late ninth or early eighth century BCE, which would place them in the reign of Jehoahaz, king of Israel, the son and successor to the militant anti-Baalist Jehu.³⁹

An inscription discovered at Kuntillet 'Ajrud was written in red ink on the shoulder of a large clay vessel. It seems to refer to "Yahweh of Samaria and his Asherah." On the other side of the vessel is a drawing of a tree of life.⁴⁰ The tomb inscription at Khirbet al-Qom also appears to mention "Yahweh and his *asherah*" (where some sort of cultic object is intended) or, less likely, "Yahweh and his Asherah" (where the reference may be directly to a goddess-consort). With these finds explicitly in

mind, archaeologist William Dever has contended that "recent archeological discoveries provide both texts and pictorial representations that for the first time clearly identify 'Asherah' as the consort of Yahweh, at least in some circles in ancient Israel."⁴¹ Raphael Patai declares that they indicate that "the worship of Asherah as the consort of Yahweh ('his Asherah!') was an integral element of religious life in ancient Israel prior to the reforms introduced by King Josiah [Josiah] in 621 BCE."⁴² David Noel Freedman concurs, saying, "Our investigation suggests that the worship of a goddess, consort of Yahweh, was deeply rooted in both Israel and Judah in preexilic times."⁴³

As among the Canaanites, furthermore, Asherah was also associated with earthly human fertility and human childbirth.⁴⁴ A Hebrew incantation text found in Arslan Tash in upper Syria, dating from the seventh century BCE (i.e., to the period just

37. See Lemaire, "Who or What Was Yahweh's Asherah?" 42, 44; André Lemaire, "Les inscriptions de Khirbet el-Qum et l'asherah de YHWH," *Revue biblique* 84 (1977): 602–03 (cf. pp. 596, 597); Ziony Zevit, "The Khirbet el-Qum Inscription Mentioning a Goddess," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 255 (1984): 39; Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 23; and Day, "Asherah in the Hebrew Bible," 394.

38. See Lemaire, "Les inscriptions de Khirbet el-Qum et l'asherah de YHWH," 608; Lemaire, "Who or What Was Yahweh's Asherah?" 44, 51; and Freedman, "Yahweh of Samaria and His Asherah," 246–49.

39. Freedman, "Yahweh of Samaria and His Asherah," 248.

40. See Ze'ev Meshel, "Did Yahweh Have a Consort?" *Biblical Archaeology Review* 5/2 (1979): 31; William G. Dever, "Asherah, Consort of Yahweh? New Evidence from Kuntillet 'Ajrud," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 255 (1984): 26–27; Dever, *Recent Archaeological Discoveries*, 140–49, which discusses the find at Kuntillet 'Ajrud.

41. Dever, "Asherah, Consort of Yahweh?" 21; compare p. 30. See also Olyan, "Cultic Confessions of Jer 2,27a," 257, 259; Dever, "Is the Bible Right After All?" 37; Brian B. Schmidt, "The Aniconic Tradition: On Reading Images and Viewing Texts," in *Triumph of Elohim*, ed. Edelman, 75–105; and Gerstenberger, *Yahweh—The Patriarch*, 33–34.

42. Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 52–53; compare Gerstenberger, *Yahweh—The Patriarch*, 33–34.

43. Freedman, "Yahweh of Samaria and His Asherah," 249; compare Day, "Asherah in the Hebrew Bible," 392; and Niehr, "Rise of YHWH in Judahite and Israelite Religion," 54–55, 59. See Proverbs 8:22–34. This image that is emerging from very recent scholarship—an enthroned God who sits with his consort in the midst of a divine council composed of his children, who are linked with the sun and moon and stars—sheds fascinating light on Lehi's vision as it is recorded in 1 Nephi 1:9–11. That account describes "One descending out of the midst of heaven," whose "luster was above that of the sun at noon-day" and who was followed by twelve others whose "brightness did exceed that of the stars in the firmament" and who then, together, "came down and went forth upon the face of the earth." Clearly, this refers to the Savior, Jesus Christ, and his twelve apostles. (Taylor, throughout his book *Yahweh and the Sun*, argues for an ancient link between Yahweh or Jehovah [whom Latter-day Saints identify as the premortal Jesus Christ] and the sun.) Read in light of recent biblical scholarship, however, the account of Lehi's vision also appears to imply notions of the premortal existence and the literally divine lineage of humanity that are often presumed to have arisen only in the later doctrinal development of Mormonism.

44. See Dever, "Is the Bible Right After All?" 36; and Patai, *Early History of God*, 52.

prior to Nephi's vision), appears to invoke the help of the goddess Asherah for a woman in delivery.⁴⁵

Let us now focus more precisely on the nature of the veneration that was paid to the divine consort among the Israelites. What was the "asherah" that stood in the temple at Jerusalem and in Samaria? Asherah was associated with trees.⁴⁶ A 10th-century cultic stand from Ta'anach, near Megiddo, features two representations of Asherah, first in human form and then as a sacred tree. She *is* the tree.⁴⁷ Perhaps we should think again, here, of the Israelite goddess figurines: It will be recalled that their upper bodies are unmistakably anthropomorphic and female, but their lower bodies, in contrast to those of their pagan Canaanite counterparts, are simple columns. William Dever suggests that these columnar lower bodies represent tree trunks.⁴⁸ And why not? Asherah "is a tree goddess, and as such is associated with the oak, the tamarisk, the date palm, the sycamore, and many other species. This association led to her identification with sacred trees or the tree of life."⁴⁹ The rabbinic authors of the Jewish Mishna (second-third century CE) explain the *asherah* as a tree that was worshipped.⁵⁰

The lowercase "asherah" was most commonly a carved wooden image, perhaps some kind of pole. Unfortunately, since it was wooden, direct archaeological evidence for it has not survived.⁵¹ But we know from the biblical evidence that the object could be planted (Deuteronomy 16:21) so that it stood up (2 Kings 13:6), but that it could also be

pulled down (Micah 5:13), cut (Exodus 34:13), and burned (Deuteronomy 12:3). Very probably it was of wood and symbolized a tree. It may itself have been a stylized tree.⁵² It was not uncommon in the ancient Near East for a god or goddess to be essentially equated with his or her symbol, and Asherah seems to have been no exception: Asherah was both goddess *and* cult symbol. She *was* the "tree."⁵³

The menorah, the seven-branched candelabrum that stood for centuries in the temple of Jerusalem, supplies an interesting parallel to all of this: Leon Yarden maintains that the menorah represents a stylized almond tree. He points to the notably radiant whiteness of the almond tree at certain points in its life cycle. Yarden also argues that the archaic Greek name of the almond (*amygdale*, reflected in its contemporary botanical designation as *Amygdalis communis*), almost certainly not a native Greek word, is most likely derived from the Hebrew *em gedolah*, meaning "Great Mother."⁵⁴

"The Late Bronze Age iconography of the asherah would suggest," writes Mark Smith, "that it represented maternal and nurturing dimensions of the deity."⁵⁵ Raphael Patai has called attention to the parallels between Jewish devotion to various female deities and quasi-deities over the centuries, commencing with Asherah, and popular Catholic veneration of Mary, the mother of Jesus.⁵⁶ Interestingly, it appears that Asherah, "the mother goddess par excellence," may also, paradoxically, have been considered a

45. Cited in Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 39.

46. See Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 49; and Day, "Asherah in the Hebrew Bible," 397.

47. See Taylor, "The Two Earliest Known Representations of Yahweh," 558–60, 565 n. 19; Taylor, *Yahweh and the Sun*, 29; Dever, "Asherah, Consort of Yahweh?" 27; and de Moor, "'asherah," 1:441–43. Wiggins, *Reassessment of "Asherah,"* 13, thinks ancient Hebrews would have seen Asherah in the Garden of Eden's tree of life.

48. William G. Dever, lecture at Brigham Young University, 14 February 1997.

49. Steve A. Wiggins, "The Myth of Asherah: Lion Lady and Serpent Goddess," *Ugarit-Forschungen: Internationales Jahrbuch für die Alttertumskunde Syrien-Palästinas* 23 (1991): 383, with references.

50. See Day, "Asherah in the Hebrew Bible," 397–98; 401–4, with references.

51. See Wiggins, *Reassessment of "Asherah,"* 92.

52. See Wiggins, *Reassessment of "Asherah,"* 94–95, 101, 109, 129 (with rabbinic references); Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 38–39, 42, 45, 48; Smith, *The Early History of God*, 81–85; and Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 1–3.

53. See Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 26, 28, 31–32; W. L. Reed, "Asherah," in George Arthur Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962–), 1:250–52; de Moor, "'asherah," 1:441; Day, "Asherah in the Hebrew Bible," 408; and Dietrich and Loretz, "*Jahwe und seine Aschera*," 82–85, 99.

54. Leon Yarden, *The Tree of Light: A Study of the Menorah, the Seven-Branched Lampstand* (Uppsala, Sweden: Skriv Service AB, 1972), 44–47, 103–6.

55. Smith, *The Early History of God*, 84; compare Wiggins, *Reassessment of "Asherah,"* 37, 71, 89; and Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*, trans. Ralph Mannheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 48–50, 52, 241–43.

56. Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 20, 116, 139–40, 151–52, 199, 265, 280.

virgin.⁵⁷ The Punic western goddess Tannit, whom Saul Olyan has identified with Israelite-Canaanite Asherah, the consort of El, the mother and wet nurse to the gods, was depicted as a virgin and symbolized by a tree.⁵⁸

It should be apparent by now why Nephi, an Israelite living at the end of the seventh century and during the early sixth century before Christ, would have recognized an answer to his question about a marvelous tree in the otherwise unexplained image of a virginal mother and her divine child. Not that what he saw and how he interpreted those things were perfectly obvious. What he “read” from the symbolic vision was culturally colored. The Coptic version of the record called the *Apocalypse of Paul* shows how cultural interpretation shapes meaning. This document, which probably originated in Egypt in the mid-third century of the Christian era, relates a vision of the great apostle that, in this detail at least, strikingly resembles the vision of Nephi: “And he [the angel] showed me the Tree of Life,” Paul is reported to have said, “and by it was a revolving red-hot sword. And a Virgin appeared by the tree, and three angels who hymned her, and the angel told me that she was Mary, the Mother of Christ.”⁵⁹ But Nephi’s vision goes even further, *identifying* Mary with the tree. This additional element seems to derive from precisely the preexilic Palestinian culture into which, the Book of Mormon tells us, Nephi had been born.

Of course, Mary, the virgin girl of Nazareth seen by Nephi, was not literally Asherah. She was, as Nephi’s guide carefully stressed, simply “the mother of the Son of God, *after the manner of the flesh*” (1 Nephi 11:18; emphasis added). But she was the perfect mortal typification of the mother of the Son of God.

Asherah and the Biblical Wisdom Writings

Asherah is connected with the Bible in an entirely different manner as well. We will examine a Bible

passage that seems to deal with her while also yielding several interesting parallels to the visions of Lehi and Nephi.

Biblical scholars recognize a genre of writing, found both in the standard, canonical scriptures (e.g., Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Solomon) and outside the canon, that they term “wisdom literature.” Among the characteristics of this type of writing, not surprisingly, is frequent use of the term *wisdom*. But also common to such literature, and very striking in texts from a Hebrew cultural background, is the absence of typical Israelite or Jewish themes. We read nothing there about the promises to the patriarchs, the story of Moses and the Exodus, the covenant at Sinai, or the divine promise of kingship to David. There is, instead, a strong emphasis on the teachings of parents, and especially on instruction by fathers.⁶⁰ Careful readers will note that all of these characteristics are present in the accounts of the visions of Lehi and Nephi as they are treated in the Book of Mormon.

The Bible identifies two chief earthly sources of wisdom. It is said to come from “the East,” which is almost certainly to be understood as the Syro-Arabian desert, and from Egypt.⁶¹ (The book of Job, for example, is set in “the East” and lacks much if any trace of peculiarly Israelite or Hebrew lore as we have traditionally conceived of it.)⁶² This is reminiscent of the twin extra-Israelite influences—Egypt and the desert—that the Book of Mormon and Latter-day Saint scholarship have identified for the family of Lehi and Nephi.⁶³ It may be significant that a section of the book of Proverbs (31:1–9) claims to represent “the words of Lemuel”—using a name that not only occurs among the sons of Lehi but also is at home in the Arabian desert.

Certain other motifs common to wisdom literature are also typical of the Book of Mormon as a

57. Quoting Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 57 n. 82; compare Olyan, “Cultic Confessions of Jer 2,27a,” 259.

58. Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 56–61, 65–67.

59. See Ernest A. Wallis Budge, *Egyptian Tales and Romances: Pagan, Christian and Muslim* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1935), 280.

60. See Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996), 1–4, 103.

61. See, for example, 1 Kings 4:29–34; Job 1:3; compare Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 23–25, 175, 195.

62. See Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 33.

63. See 1 Nephi 1:2; and Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 34–42.

whole. For example, both the canonical and extra-canonical wisdom books are much concerned with the proper or improper use of speech.⁶⁴ The book of Proverbs warns against the dangerous enticements of “the strange woman, even . . . the stranger which flattereth with her words,” and advises us to “meddle not with him that flattereth with his lips” (Proverbs 2:16 (compare 6:24; 7:5, 21–23); 20:19 (compare 12:6; 26:28; 29:5); see also Psalms 5:9; 12:2; 78:36). “Flattering” and “cunning words,” generally used for evil purposes and with an implication of deceit, are also a recurring concern of the Nephite record.⁶⁵ Another consistent theme in both the Book of Mormon and Near Eastern wisdom literature is the notion that wisdom or justice or righteousness brings prosperity, while folly or wickedness leads to suffering and destruction.⁶⁶ The vocabulary of Proverbs 1–6, which stresses learning, understanding, righteousness, discernment, and knowledge, is obviously related to important messages of the Book of Mormon in general, and of the visions of Lehi and Nephi in particular. Similarly, Proverbs 3:1–12 focuses on our need to “hear” inspired wisdom, as well as on the promise of “life” and our duty to trust in the Lord rather than being wise in our own eyes (compare Proverbs 26:12). Each of these admonitions can also be documented abundantly throughout the text of the Book of Mormon—notably Nephi’s repeated invitation to us to put our trust in the Lord rather than in “the arm of flesh” (2 Nephi 4:34; 28:31). In Nephi’s vision of the tree of life, the “great and spacious building” symbolizes the wisdom and pride of the world, which shall fall (see 1 Nephi 11:35–36).

But among the interesting correspondences between ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature and the Book of Mormon, one is of special interest

for the present article. Wisdom itself is represented in Proverbs 1–9 as a female person.⁶⁷ Indeed, here and elsewhere in ancient Hebrew and Jewish literature, Wisdom appears as the wife of God, which can hardly fail to remind us of ancient Asherah.⁶⁸ She may even have played a role in the creation: “The Lord by wisdom hath founded the earth,” says Proverbs 3:19. “Like the symbol of the asherah, Wisdom is a female figure, providing life and nurturing.”⁶⁹ In fact, as Steve A. Wiggins observes of Asherah herself, “She is Wisdom, the first creature of God.”⁷⁰ The classical text on this subject is found in Proverbs 8:22–34.

The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old.

I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was.

When there were no depths, I was brought forth; when there were no fountains abounding with water.

Before the mountains were settled, before the hills was I brought forth:

While as yet he had not made the earth, nor the fields, nor the highest part of the dust of the world.

When he prepared the heavens, I was there: when he set a compass upon the face of the depth:

When he established the clouds above: when he strengthened the fountains of the deep:

When he gave to the sea his decree, that the waters should not pass his commandment: when he appointed the foundations of the earth:

Then I was by him, as one brought up with him: and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him;

Rejoicing in the habitable part of his earth; and my delights were with the sons of men.

Now therefore hearken unto me, O ye children: for blessed [*ashre*] are they that keep my ways.

64. See Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 22.

65. See, for example, 2 Nephi 28:22; Jacob 7:2, 4; Mosiah 7:21; 9:10; 10:18; 11:7; 26:6; 27:8; Alma 20:13; 30:47; 46:5, 7, 10; 50:35; 52:19; 61:4; Helaman 1:7; 2:4–5; 13:28; 3 Nephi 1:29; 7:12; Ether 8:2. Daniel 11:21 nicely summarizes a frequent effect of flattery in the Book of Mormon.

66. See Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 15, for this theme in the ancient Near East.

67. See Proverbs 1:20–21; 4:5–9, 13; 7:4; 8:1–3, 22–36; 9:1–3. The Hebrew term translated as “wisdom,” *hokmah*, is, of course, a feminine noun. Murphy, in *Tree of Life*, 133–49 and throughout, offers a useful discussion of “Lady Wisdom.”

68. Patai supplies references that I do not have space here to discuss (see his *Hebrew Goddess*, 97–98). Proverbs 7:14 advises its audience to take Wisdom as a sister or kinswoman.

69. Smith, *Early History of God*, 95.

70. Wiggins, “Myth of Asherah,” 383.

Hear instruction, and be wise, and refuse it not.
Blessed [*ashre*] is the man that heareth me.

The use of the Hebrew word *ashre* in this connection—from the same root (*’shr*) that underlies the word *asherah*—is probably significant.⁷¹ “Happy [*ashre*] is the man that findeth wisdom” (Proverbs 3:13). (A similar wordplay may be going on behind the word *happy* in 1 Nephi 8:10, 12, and perhaps even behind *joy* and *joyous* in 1 Nephi 8:12 and 11:23.)⁷² Another noteworthy fact is that “the ‘tree of life,’ which recalls the *asherah*, appears in Israelite tradition as a metaphorical expression for wisdom.” Indeed, Mark Smith sees Proverbs 3:13–18 as “a conspicuous chiasm” in which the essentially equivalent “inside terms” are *hokmah* (wisdom) and *’es-hayim* (a tree of life).⁷³ The apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus, which is also known as Wisdom of Ben Sira, uses various trees to symbolize Wisdom (24:12–19). “Wisdom is rooted in the fear of the Lord,” says Ecclesiasticus 1:20 (New English Bible), “and long life grows on her branches.” “She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her: and happy [*me’ushshar*]⁷⁴ is every one that retaineth her” (Proverbs 3:18).

Several parallels between the language of Proverbs 1–9 and the language of the visions in 1 Nephi will be apparent to careful readers. Note, for example, in Proverbs 3:18, quoted above, the image of “taking hold,” which recalls the iron rod of Lehi and Nephi’s visions (compare Proverbs 4:13 and 1 Nephi 8:24, 30; 15:24). The New English Bible translation of Proverbs 3:18 speaks of “grasp[ing] her” and “hold[ing] her fast”—in very much the same way that Lehi and Nephi’s visions speak of “catching hold of” and “holding fast to” the rod of iron. Proverbs 4:13 advises us to “take fast hold of instruction; let her not go: keep her; for she is thy life.” Apocryphal Baruch 4:1 declares that “all who hold fast to [Wisdom] shall live, but those who forsake her shall

die.” Both the advice of Proverbs and the images of Lehi’s dream, furthermore, are expressly directed to youths, to sons specifically or to children (compare Proverbs 1:4, 8, 10, 15; 3:1, 11, 21; 4:1, 3, 10, 20; 5:1, 7–8, 20; 6:1, 3, 20; 7:1, 7; 1 Nephi 8:12–18). (“O, remember, my son,” says Alma 37:35, echoing this theme, “and learn wisdom in thy youth; yea, learn in thy youth to keep the commandments of God.”) Both Proverbs and 1 Nephi constantly use the imagery of “ways,” “paths,” and “walking” and warn against “going astray,” “wandering off,” and “wandering in strange roads.”⁷⁵ Proverbs 3:17 declares that “her [Wisdom’s] ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace.” In subsequent Nephite tradition, King Benjamin speaks of “the Spirit of the Lord” that “guide[s] . . . in wisdom’s paths” (Mosiah 2:36), and Mormon laments “how slow” people are “to walk in wisdom’s paths” (Helaman 12:5).

Proverbs represents Wisdom’s words as “plain,” an attribute that is lauded repeatedly throughout 1 Nephi, notably in the narrative of Nephi’s vision, and throughout 2 Nephi (see Proverbs 8:6–9; compare 1 Nephi 13:26–29, 32, 34–40; 14:23; 2 Nephi 4:32; 9:47; 25:4; 26:33; 33:5–6). The phrase *plain and precious*, recurrent in Nephi’s account of his experience with the angelic guide (see 1 Nephi 13:26, 28, 29, 32, 34, 35, 40), could serve as an excellent description of biblical “Wisdom.” Even more apt is the phrase *plain and pure, and most precious* in 1 Nephi 14:23. In Proverbs 8:19 Wisdom declares, “My fruit is better than gold, yea, than fine gold” (compare Proverbs 3:14; 8:11, 19; also 2:4; Job 28:12–28; Wisdom of Solomon 7:8; 8:5). “She is more precious than rubies,” says Proverbs 3:15, “and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her.” “Wisdom,” declares Ecclesiasticus 4:11, “raises her sons to greatness.” Similarly, Lehi and Nephi’s tree was “precious above all” (1 Nephi 11:9)—“a tree, whose fruit was desirable to make one happy” (1 Nephi

71. See Smith, *Early History of God*, 95.

72. If so, the language of the plates must be Hebrew, or something like it. Compare Genesis 30:13.

73. See Smith, *Early History of God*, 95; compare Proverbs 11:30; 15:4.

74. Again, from the root *’shr*.

75. See Proverbs 1:15, 19, 20; 2:1, 8, 9, 12, 13, 15, 18–20; 3:6, 12, 17, 23; 4:11, 12, 14, 18–19, 26–27; 5:5, 6, 8, 21, 23; 6:12, 23; 7:8, 12, 25, 27; 8:2, 13, 20, 32; 9:6. Compare the “paths” (1 Nephi 8:20–23, 28) and “ways” (1 Nephi 8:23, 30–31) and “roads” (1 Nephi 8:32) of Lehi’s vision. Compare also Psalm 1:1–6, quoted earlier.

8:10), “desirable above all other fruit” (1 Nephi 8:12, 15; compare 11:22). Accordingly, no price is too high to pay, if it will bring us to attain wisdom. “I say unto you,” Alma the Younger remarked to the poor among the Zoramites in the context of a discussion centering on a seed and on the tree of life that could be nourished out of it, “it is well that ye are cast out of your synagogues, that ye may be humble, and that ye may learn wisdom” (Alma 32:12). Confident in the quality of what she has to offer, Wisdom, according to Proverbs, invites others to partake:

Wisdom crieth without; she uttereth her voice in the streets: She crieth in the chief place of concourse, in the opening of the gates: in the city she uttereth her words. (Prov. 1:20–21)

Doth not wisdom cry? and understanding put forth her voice? She standeth in the top of high places, by the way in the places of the paths. She crieth at the gates, at the entry of the city, at the coming in at the doors. (Prov. 8:1–3)

She hath sent forth her maidens: she crieth upon the highest places of the city. (Prov. 9:3)

Yet, for all her exalted status, Wisdom must face “scorners,” which must surely remind the reader of 1 Nephi of those in “the large and spacious building” who point the finger of scorn at the saints coming forward to partake of the tree of life (as in Proverbs 1:22; 3:34; compare 9:6–8, 12; 1 Nephi 8:26–27, 33; 11:35). This building seems to represent a human alternative to the true wisdom, the divine wisdom of God: Nephi records that it symbolizes “the world and the wisdom thereof” (1 Nephi 11:35).

Wisdom represents life, while the lack of wisdom leads to death.⁷⁶ (Perhaps the juxtaposition of a living and nourishing tree in 1 Nephi with the inanimate structure from which the worldly lean out to express their disdain is intended to make this point.) “For the upright shall dwell in the land, and the perfect shall remain in it. But the wicked shall be cut off from the earth, and the transgressors shall be rooted out of it” (Proverbs 2:21–22). “For whoso findeth

me findeth life,” Wisdom says in Proverbs 8:35–36, “and shall obtain favor of the Lord. But he that sinneth against me wrongeth his own soul: all they that hate me love death.” The sinner, in fact, falls into the clutches of the “whorish woman,” the rival to Lady Wisdom: “For her house inclineth unto death, and her paths unto the dead. None that go unto her return again, neither take they hold of the paths of life” (Proverbs 2:18–19). Ammon in the Book of Mormon closely echoes the warning of Proverbs: “O how marvelous are the works of the Lord, and how long doth he suffer with his people; yea, and how blind and impenetrable are the understandings of the children of men; for they will not seek wisdom, neither do they desire that she should rule over them!” (Mosiah 8:20). Ecclesiasticus 4:19 says of Wisdom and of the individual who “strays from her” that “she will desert him and abandon him to his fate.” In Lehi’s vision, those who rejected the fruit of the tree “fell away into forbidden paths and were lost” (1 Nephi 8:28) or “were drowned in the depths of “the fountain” (1 Nephi 8:32). “Many were lost from his view, wandering in strange roads” (1 Nephi 8:32). It was for fear of this possible outcome that, after partaking of the fruit of the tree, Lehi was “desirous that [his] family should partake of it also” (1 Nephi 8:12). In a parallel vein, Ecclesiasticus 4:15–16 tells us that Wisdom’s “dutiful servant . . . will possess her and bequeath her to his descendants.”

In 1 Nephi 8:13–14, Lehi’s tree is associated with a river and spring of water. “The symbols of fountain and tree of life are frequent” in wisdom literature too.⁷⁷ Nephi himself, in 1 Nephi 11:25, actually equates the “tree of life” with “the fountain of living waters,” “which waters,” he relates, “are a representation of the love of God.” “And I also beheld,” he continues, “that the tree of life was a representation of the love of God.”

The inclusion in 1 Nephi of two authentically preexilic religious symbols (Asherah and Wisdom) that could scarcely have been derived by the New York farm boy Joseph Smith from the Bible strongly

⁷⁶ On wisdom equated with life, see Proverbs 3:2, 18, 22; 4:4, 10, 13, 22; 6:23–35; 8:35–36; 9:6–11. On unwisdom as the way to death, see Proverbs 2:18; 5:5; 7:22–23, 26–27; 9:18.

⁷⁷ Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 29 (with references). See Widengren, *The King and the Tree of Life*. Proverbs 5:15–18 also mentions waters and rivers.

suggests (to me, anyway) that the Book of Mormon is, indeed, an ancient historical record in the Semitic tradition.

I would now like to extend my reflections on this topic with a few items inspired by, and pretty much slavishly derived from a too-hasty but fascinated reading of the manuscript of the first volume (“The Mother of the Lord”) of Margaret Barker’s forthcoming work, *The Lady of the Temple*. The many insights afforded by her complex work are going to require many years, I think, to evaluate and appreciate. I can’t begin to do her writing justice today.

“The real religions of ancient Judah,” William Dever observed in his book *Did God Have a Wife? Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel*, “consisted largely of everything that the biblical writers condemned.”⁷⁸

Among the elements of the real, older, Hebrew religion—the religion of the patriarchs and prophets—summarized by Margaret Barker are “shrines and holy places throughout the land,” asherahs, astronomical interests (as in the Book of Abraham), symbolic stones, great trees in sanctuaries, and strikingly anthropomorphic appearances of the divine. These were, she argues, suppressed by the Deuteronomists.⁷⁹

“Many scholars,” writes Francesca Stavropoulou, “have sought to ‘manage’ biblical and archaeological indications of religious diversities in ancient Israel and Judah by assuming a firm distinction between ‘popular’ religion and ‘official’ religion. But this distinction is often drawn relatively uncritically on theological grounds—which risks misrepresenting or distorting the likely religious realities of ancient Israel and Judah.”⁸⁰

“The ‘theological grounds’ assumed here are Protestant,” observes Margaret Barker, “which have indeed often shaped the way the Old Testament is studied, but the older churches [and she has in mind here the Catholic, Orthodox, and other Eastern traditions] would recognize much of what is now called

‘diversity’ in ancient Israel, insofar as it honoured the Lady. They have always found the Lady in their liturgical use of the Old Testament texts.”⁸¹

I’ll take an example relevant to my equation of tree and Lady:

“In Egypt,” Barker writes,

the great goddess Isis “was” the throne. The hieroglyph of her name was a throne, and she was often depicted with the throne symbol on her head. To sit on the throne was to sit on the lap of Isis. Something similar happened in Jerusalem: the Chronicler reveals that when Solomon sat on the throne of the Lord, the people “worshipped the Lord, the king” (1 Chron. 29.20, translating literally). The moment of enthronement was *theosis*, when the human king became the divine son, an image that was known to the early Christians. . . . Mary was typically shown with her Son on her lap—the ancient throne image.⁸²

Now, think of that equation of tree with divine mother:

If the animal in the topmost panel of the Taanach stand is a calf, then the final stage of the process depicted is a calf between two branches of the tree of life, remarkably similar to a picture in the synagogue of Dura Europos over one thousand years later. The synagogue wall painting shows a figure enthroned in the branches of a tree. Lower in the tree is a lion, and standing under the tree is the table bearing the characteristically-shaped shewbreads. The tree, the lion and the shewbreads are all associated with the Lady, and in this painting they are the context for the Messiah. In the mid-3rd century CE, then, when this synagogue was completed, the Jewish community in Dura Europos still thought of the Messiah in this way.⁸³

The Syrian Christian Jacob of Serug, who died in 521 CE, composed a homily entitled “On the Chariot that Ezekiel the prophet saw” in which he maintained that the chariot-throne was an imagine of the Virgin Mother.⁸⁴ Likewise, the near-contemporary Byzantine Akathist Hymn describes Mary as

78. Dever, *Did God Have a Wife?*, 291.

79. Barker, *The Mother of the Lord*, ms. 65-66.

80. Francesca Stavropoulou, in F. Stavropoulou and J. Barton, eds., *Religious Diversity in Ancient Israel and Judah* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 37.

81. Barker, *The Mother of the Lord*, ms. 100.

82. Barker, *The Mother of the Lord*, ms. 137.

83. Barker, *The Mother of the Lord*, ms. 138.

84. Barker, *The Mother of the Lord*, ms. 197.

the chariot-throne: “Thou art the throne of the King . . . O Lady, fiery chariot of the Word . . . all-holy chariot of Him Who sitteth upon the cherubim.”⁸⁵ “In the early Church,” Barker summarizes, “it seems that the chariot throne was a well known image of the Lady, but this is an unlikely choice unless it had been drawn from the first-temple traditions that became Christianity.”⁸⁶

Throne and tree and Lady are linked:

St. Justin Martyr, in his second-century debate with Trypho the Jew, quoted a longer version of Psalm 96 that included the line “The Lord reigns from the tree”—citing it, incidentally, as an example of something that had been removed from the Bible by Jewish scribes so as not to give aid and comfort to Christians.⁸⁷ There is no Hebrew evidence to support Justin’s quotation, but the Old Latin text of the psalm, as preserved in the Verona psalter, contains it, and St. Augustine uses it around 400 CE in his commentary on the Psalms.⁸⁸

Let’s return now, for a moment, to “the strange woman . . . the stranger *which* flattereth with her words,” as she’s called in Proverbs 2:16 (compare Zechariah 5:5–11). She is a foreigner. She doesn’t belong. Margaret Barker sees her as the antithesis of Lady Wisdom, and argues that Isaiah 57, though now garbled, is talking about her.⁸⁹ “How is the faithful city become an harlot!” says Isaiah 1:21. “It was full of judgment; righteousness lodged in it; but now murderers.” Barker sees the harlot of Revelation 17 as an echo of the same foreign woman:

And there came one of the seven angels which had the seven vials, and talked with me, saying unto me, Come hither; I will shew unto thee the judgment of the great whore that sitteth upon many waters:

With whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and the inhabitants of the earth have been made drunk with the wine of her fornication.

So he carried me away in the spirit into the wilderness: and I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns.

And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication:

And upon her forehead was a name written, Mystery, Babylon The Great, The Mother Of Harlots And Abominations Of The Earth.

And I saw the woman drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus: and when I saw her, I wondered with great admiration. (Revelation 17:1–6)⁹⁰

It’s striking, though, that, even if the description of this woman draws on the “foreign woman” who replaced Lady Wisdom or Asherah in Jerusalem, John seems to see her as still future to his time. The process wasn’t complete, it seems, with Josiah and the Deuteronomists.

Likewise, a reader of the Book of Mormon can’t possibly fail to see in such texts parallels to the part of Nephi’s vision that follows his seeing of the virginal mother of the Son of God:

And it came to pass that the angel spake unto me, saying: Look! And I looked and beheld many nations and kingdoms.

And the angel said unto me: What beholdest thou? And I said: I behold many nations and kingdoms.

And he said unto me: These are the nations and kingdoms of the Gentiles.

And it came to pass that I saw among the nations of the Gentiles the formation of a great church.

And the angel said unto me: Behold the formation of a church which is most abominable above all other churches, which slayeth the saints of God, yea, and tortureth them and bindeth them down, and yoketh them with a yoke of iron, and bringeth them down into captivity.

85. Barker, *The Mother of the Lord*, ms. 197.

86. Barker, *The Mother of the Lord*, ms. 197.

87. Trypho, 71.

88. Barker, *The Mother of the Lord*, ms. 139.

89. Barker, *The Mother of the Lord*, ms. 166–168.

90. See Barker, *The Mother of the Lord*, ms. 166–168, 272, 274.

And it came to pass that I beheld this great and abominable church; and I saw the devil that he was the founder of it.

And I also saw gold, and silver, and silks, and scarlets, and fine-twined linen, and all manner of precious clothing; and I saw many harlots.

And the angel spake unto me, saying: Behold the gold, and the silver, and the silks, and the scarlets, and the fine-twined linen, and the precious clothing, and the harlots, are the desires of this great and abominable church.

And also for the praise of the world do they destroy the saints of God, and bring them down into captivity. (1 Nephi 13:1–9)

Recall that, in the English Book of Mormon, the term *church* is used rather loosely, by our standards, for assemblies and movements and groups even in pre-Christian, indeed even in pre-exilic, times.

And I beheld a book, and it was carried forth among them.

And the angel said unto me: Knowest thou the meaning of the book?

And I said unto him: I know not.

And he said: Behold it proceedeth out of the mouth of a Jew. And I, Nephi, beheld it; and he said unto me: The book that thou beholdest is a record of the Jews, which contains the covenants of the Lord, which he hath made unto the house of Israel; and it also containeth many of the prophecies of the holy prophets; and it is a record like unto the engravings which are upon the plates of brass, save there are not so many; nevertheless, they contain the covenants of the Lord, which he hath made unto the house of Israel; wherefore, they are of great worth unto the Gentiles.

And the angel of the Lord said unto me: Thou hast beheld that the book proceeded forth from the mouth of a Jew; and when it proceeded forth from the mouth of a Jew it contained the fulness of the gospel of the Lord, of whom the twelve apostles bear record; and they bear record according to the truth which is in the Lamb of God.

Wherefore, these things go forth from the Jews in purity unto the Gentiles, according to the truth which is in God.

And after they go forth by the hand of the twelve apostles of the Lamb, from the Jews unto the Gentiles, thou seest the formation of that great

and abominable church, which is most abominable above all other churches; for behold, they have taken away from the gospel of the Lamb many parts which are plain and most precious; and also many covenants of the Lord have they taken away.

And all this have they done that they might pervert the right ways of the Lord, that they might blind the eyes and harden the hearts of the children of men.

Wherefore, thou seest that after the book hath gone forth through the hands of the great and abominable church, that there are many plain and precious things taken away from the book, which is the book of the Lamb of God. (1 Nephi 13:20–28)

In this light, Margaret Barker’s discussion of the history of “those who set up the second temple and its cult”—based to a considerable degree upon the so-called “Apocalypse of Weeks” in 1 Enoch—takes on a special interest for Latter-day Saints. For, she says, “those who collected and edited the Hebrew Scriptures as we know them were described as apostates.” Here is a passage in 1 Enoch that seems pretty plainly to depict the period when the temple was destroyed and the people of Jerusalem and Judah were led into captivity and then, after that, the period of Ezra the scribe and of Nehemiah:⁹¹

And after that, in the sixth week, all who live in [the temple] shall be blinded,

And the hearts of all of them shall godlessly forsake Wisdom.

And in it a man shall ascend;

And at its close, the house of dominion shall be burned with fire,

And the whole race of the chosen root shall be dispersed.

And after that, in the seventh week, shall an apostate generation arise,

And many shall be its deeds,

And all its deeds shall be apostate.⁹²

These are the people, Barker argues, who “compiled and transmitted the texts that became the Hebrew Scriptures, and their spiritual heirs

91. Barker, *The Mother of the Lord*, ms. 3.

92. 1 Enoch 93:8-9.

determined the Hebrew canon after the destruction of the temple in 70 CE.”⁹³

The apocryphal book of 2 Esdras has Ezra the scribe speaking:

So during the forty days ninety-four books were written.

And when the forty days were ended, the Most High spoke to me, saying, “Make public the twenty-four books that you wrote first and let the worthy and the unworthy read them;

but keep the seventy that were written last, in order to give them to the wise among your people.

For in them is the spring of understanding, the fountain of wisdom, and the river of knowledge.”

And I did so.⁹⁴

“Whoever recorded this story in this form,” comments Margaret Barker, “was saying, beyond any doubt, that the 24 books of the Hebrew canon were the less important texts, and that ‘Ezra,’ the leader of the apostates, was the reason that the more important books had been withdrawn. . . . The implications of this for reconstructing the antecedents of Christianity cannot be too strongly emphasized.”⁹⁵

Nephi’s vision of the future is closely patterned, it seems, on what would happen shortly after his time but, perhaps even more importantly, on what had already been happening during his lifetime and that of his father at the hands of the Deuteronomistic reformers.

“Deuteronomy . . . suppressed traditional forms of prophecy,” Margaret Barker comments.

According to Deuteronomy, a prophet could be recognized in two ways: s/he would be like Moses, or s/he would be recognised as a genuine prophet when the prophecies had been fulfilled (Deut. 18.22). This completely changed the nature and power of prophecy: teachings either had to repeat the words of Moses, or be fulfilled before they could be recognised. There would be no more waiting for prophecy to be fulfilled, no inspired interpreters who could relate the oracles to contemporary events. This redefinition explains why the writing prophets, apart from Isaiah, are not

mentioned in the D histories. Consistent with this tightly controlled system was the centralisation of worship into just one place—Jerusalem—and the prohibition of secret knowledge. Nobody went up to heaven or crossed the sea to receive revelation; these secret things were for the Lord alone. His people had only to obey the commandments which they had already received (Deut. 9.29; 30.11–14).⁹⁶

Listen to Deuteronomy itself:

If thou shalt hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to keep his commandments and his statutes which are written in this book of the law, and if thou turn unto the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul.

For this commandment which I command thee this day, it is not hidden from thee, neither is it far off.

It is not in heaven, that thou shouldest say, Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it unto us, that we may hear it, and do it?

Neither is it beyond the sea, that thou shouldest say, Who shall go over the sea for us, and bring it unto us, that we may hear it, and do it?

But the word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it. (Deuteronomy 30:10–14)

Now therefore hearken, O Israel, unto the statutes and unto the judgments, which I teach you, for to do them, that ye may live, and go in and possess the land which the Lord God of your fathers giveth you.

Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you. . . .

Behold, I have taught you statutes and judgments, even as the Lord my God commanded me, that ye should do so in the land whither ye go to possess it.

Keep therefore and do them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations. (Deuteronomy 4:1–2, 5–6)

The Book of Mormon continually describes itself as battling with those who deny prophecy and revelation, who fight the prophets, and announces that it will come forth in a time characterized by

93. Barker, *The Mother of the Lord*, ms. 22.

94. 2 Esdras 14:44–48.

95. Barker, *The Mother of the Lord*, ms. 22; compare ms. 23.

96. Barker, *The Mother of the Lord*, ms. 32.

such attitudes, when prophets will be dismissed and only the authority of past, written revelation will be accepted. “Many of the Gentiles,” the Lord tells Nephi, “shall say: A aBible! A Bible! We have got a Bible, and there cannot be any more Bible.” (2 Nephi 29:3)

“The influence of the Deuteronomists,” Barker writes,

best represented by the temple purges in the time of Josiah, was far-reaching and long-lasting, changing the meanings of individual words, and changing the way of reading several texts. Insofar as this process systematically obscured and obliterated the older faith, it became the major obstruction facing later scholars who wanted to establish the relationship between the Old Testament and the New. Fortunately, memories of the older ways were preserved outside the stream of texts that became the Hebrew Scriptures, and they reappeared in Christianity in their original context. It is a great irony and a great sadness that those Christians most committed to a Bible-based tradition, *sola scriptura*, are perhaps the least likely to read the Bible in its original context.⁹⁷

Incidentally, Barker repeatedly calls attention to memories of Jewish communities fleeing into Arabia at the time of Josiah’s purge. The Jerusalem Talmud gives the fantastic number of 80,000 young priests who went over to Nebuchadnezzar, probably around 597 BCE, and then to live among the Ishmaelites.⁹⁸ This was thought to be a fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy: “The burden upon Arabia. In the forest in Arabia shall ye lodge, O ye travelling companies of Dedanim [Aden]. The inhabitants of the land of Tema brought water to him that was thirsty, they prevented with their bread him that fled. For they fled from the swords, from the drawn sword, and from

the bent bow, and from the grievousness of war.” (Isaiah 21:13–14)

And, of course, Lehi and his party went, precisely, into Arabia, and at almost exactly that time.

They had with them the Urim and Thummim—something that Barker says disappeared right around the time of King Josiah—or soon created their own.⁹⁹ “In Enoch’s account, the judgement on sinners was based on the creation covenant, because all nature acted in accordance with the Creator’s commandments, but sinners did not.”¹⁰⁰

And one last note: Compare Mormon’s comments, which appeal to the example of nature rather than of the Mosaic law:

O how foolish, and how vain, and how evil, and devilish, and how quick to do iniquity, and how slow to do good, are the children of men; yea, how quick to hearken unto the words of the evil one, and to set their hearts upon the vain things of the world!

Yea, how quick to be lifted up in pride; yea, how quick to boast, and do all manner of that which is iniquity; and how slow are they to remember the Lord their God, and to give ear unto his counsels, yea, how slow to walk in wisdom’s paths!

Behold, they do not desire that the Lord their God, who hath created them, should rule and reign over them; notwithstanding his great goodness and his mercy towards them, they do set at naught his counsels, and they will not that he should be their guide.

O how great is the nothingness of the children of men; yea, even they are less than the dust of the earth.

For behold, the dust of the earth moveth hither and thither, to the dividing asunder, at the command of our great and everlasting God. (Helaman 12:4–8)

97. Barker, *The Mother of the Lord*, ms. 154.

98. See Barker, *The Mother of the Lord*, ms. 9-10, 54-55, 56, 123, 205–206.

99. Barker, *The Mother of the Lord*, ms. 30-31.

100. Barker, *The Mother of the Lord*, ms. 188.