



Type: Book Chapter

Jacob's Allegory: The Mystery of Christ

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Source: *The Allegory of the Olive Tree: The Olive, the Bible, and Jacob 5*

Editor(s): Stephen D. Ricks and John W. Welch

Published: Provo, UT/Salt Lake City; FARMS/Deseret Book, 1994

Page(s): 11-20



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M. Catherine Thomas

Joseph Smith explained the way to understand parables and allegories: "I have a key by which I understand the scriptures. I enquire, what was the question which drew out the answer?"¹ Jacob poses two key questions in his introduction to the allegory, which provide some clues to its meaning. First, Jacob asks: "Why not speak of the *atonement* of Christ, and attain to a perfect knowledge of him?" (Jacob 4:12). Jacob then points to the Jews' deliberate efforts to distance God and render him incomprehensible: they sought to create a God who could not be understood (Jacob 4:14). For their self-inflicted blindness God took away "his plainness from them . . . because they desired it" (Jacob 4:14). Here Jacob asks the second key question: "My beloved, how is it possible that these [the Jews], after having rejected the sure foundation, can ever build upon it, that it may become the head of their corner? Behold, my beloved brethren, I will unfold this *mystery* unto you" (Jacob 4:17–18). Among other meanings, a mystery is a spiritual truth grasped only through divine revelation. The mystery that Jacob unfolds, therefore, counters the Jews' deliberate mystification of God and reveals the true nature of Jesus Christ and his divine activity in the lives of even the most intractable of men. Jacob's two key questions alert the reader that the allegory

will deal with grace, atonement, and their relationship to Israel.

Superficially the allegory is the story of a man and his olive tree and the man's efforts to restore the deteriorating tree to its former pristine condition. At a deeper level, the allegory treats God's response to Israel's spiritual death, represented by its geographically scattered condition. Separation of the people of Israel from each other indicates that the atonement is not working in their lives; otherwise, they would live in Zion together. The allegory describes God's efforts to gather these disparate parts of Israel into at-one-ment with him. Fifteen times we read that he wishes to preserve the harvestable fruit and lay it up, as he says, "to mine own self."

In Latter-day Saint usage, *atonement*, or *at-one-ment*, refers not only to the act of redemption Jesus wrought in Gethsemane and on the cross, but also to the Lord's ongoing labors to bring his children back into oneness with him. After all, it is his work, as well as his glory, to bring to pass the eternal life of man (Moses 1:39). The word *atonement* first appears in William Tyndale's 1526 English version of the Bible.² He used the word *at-one-ment* to translate the Greek word for *reconciliation* (*katalagē*) (Romans 5:11). The Savior's yearnings for this state of oneness with his children appear not only in this allegory but also in such places as the great intercessory prayer in John 17 and the luminous prayer sequences in 3 Nephi 19. In understanding Jacob's allegory, it is helpful to understand the strength of the divine desire behind the process of at-one-ment.

We approach the meaning of the atonement in the allegory by consulting scripture for additional references to trees. Scripture abounds with symbolic trees. A tree planted by a river is an Old Testament symbol of a righteous man

(Psalm 1:3, Jeremiah 17:8). Isaiah writes, "The Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; . . . that they might be called trees of righteousness" (Isaiah 61:1, 3). In Daniel's dream the great tree represents a man (Daniel 4:10, 22). Another tree in Isaiah produces a stem (of Jesse), which is Christ (D&C 113:1–2). Two famous trees grow in Eden: the tree of knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life (Genesis 2:9, 17). A millennial tree of life in Revelation 22:2 has leaves to heal the nations, an obvious reference to the Savior. Jesus is hanged on a tree of life (Acts 5:30). In vision Lehi and Nephi see a divine tree that is connected with Jesus' saving ministry (1 Nephi 8:10; 11:8). Lehi's dream tree receives at least three meanings: the Son of God and his divine activity (1 Nephi 11:7); the love of God (1 Nephi 11:22, 25); the tree of life (1 Nephi 11:25; 15:22). Since these meanings all overlap, we would understand that Lehi's dream tree represents multiple facets of Christ.

Most often in scripture, then, the tree is an anthropomorphic symbol. A tree serves well as such a symbol because it has, after all, limbs, a circulatory system, the bearing of fruit, and so forth. Specifically, scriptural trees stand either for Christ and his attributes or for man.

Here we might make an observation about divine symbols. The finite mind wants to pin down a one-to-one correspondence between the elements of an allegory and that which they represent, but the divine mind works in multiple layers of meanings for symbols. In scripture the meaning often lies in the aggregate of allusions and associations. The olive tree is one of these layered symbols. It is Israel at the macrocosmic level; it is also an individual Israelite being nourished by an attentive God.

But the olive tree seems also to reflect the Savior himself, as we can see when we analyze the relationship



Olive branch laden with fruit. The olive tree symbolizes the atonement and the sweet fruit meet for repentance, mankind's efforts to revive their former relationship with God, and God's love and nurturing that lay up fruit against the decay of the world.

between Jacob's olive tree and Lehi's dream tree. The two trees appear in juxtaposition with each other in 1 Nephi, chapters 8 through 15. Lehi's dream tree first appears in chapter 8. The first reference to the olive tree appears two chapters later in chapter 10, grafting in to this olive tree being defined as coming to the knowledge of the true Messiah (1 Nephi 10:12-14). Then in chapter 11 Lehi's dream tree is shown to Nephi, who observes that the tree is the Son of God shedding forth his love (1 Nephi 11:7, 21-22). Next, in chapter 15, Nephi explicates the olive tree for his brethren, saying that the covenant people will

receive strength and nourishment from the *true* vine when they are grafted into the *true* olive tree (1 Nephi 15:16). The reference to the true vine suggests a passage from John: "I [Christ] am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing" (John 15:5). This discussion of the true vine and the *true* olive tree leads to Nephi's explication of the dream tree, suggesting that a strong relationship between these two trees exists in the minds of both Lehi and Nephi since they are discussed alternately. Thus the dream tree is Christ, and the true olive tree is Christ.

Extending this point, we can examine the fruit of these two trees. When Jacob is about to introduce the allegory he exhorts the reader to be the *first-fruits* of Christ (Jacob 4:11). Nephi says that the fruit from Lehi's dream tree is "*most precious* and most desirable above all other fruits" (1 Nephi 15:36). In identical language, the olive tree's natural fruit is "*most precious* above all other fruit" (Jacob 5:61) and "*most precious* unto him from the beginning" (Jacob 5:74); that is, the fruit from both trees is described as "most precious." It would seem that the fruit represents harvestable souls, or those that can be or have been sanctified by the Savior's atoning power. Both the olive tree and the dream tree in their sanctified state are the same tree, and the merging of these trees through these chapters heightens the message of at-one-ment between man and Christ. At the end of time, all of the trees and fruits have merged. The Lord observes that the trees have become "like unto one body; and the fruits . . . equal" (Jacob 5:74).

While we consider the olive tree, we may also wish to examine olive oil for additional atonement meaning. In ancient Israel, the olive tree was the tree of life; olive oil was

used in sacrifices and in ritual purification, rites which symbolized the restoration of God's favor and the return of joy to a man previously disgraced.³ It was associated with vigor and fertility. The sick were anointed with oil. Brides were anointed prior to marriage. Anointing with oil and washing and dressing symbolized a change of status throughout the Old Testament; for example, the consecration of Aaron to the priesthood included washing, donning of special garments, and anointing his head with oil (Leviticus 8:6–12). The holy anointing oil, which could not be used for any profane purpose, was made by Moses in the desert and was kept in the Holy of Holies, serving for the anointing of the Tabernacle and of all high priests and kings. Prophets were anointed with oil, as were temples and altars (Genesis 28:18). Olive oil was indispensable in the preparation of the Passover lamb.⁴ We remember that Christ is the *Anointed One*.

Perhaps the ultimate definition of oil in scripture, that which draws together all those mentioned above, appears in the Savior's parable of the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1–13), which he explicates in D&C 45, identifying the oil as the Holy Ghost (D&C 45:56–57). The Lord Jesus is the agent of the Atonement, but the medium of the at-one-ment is the Holy Ghost—that sap or moisture that flows from the trunk through the branches. Perhaps something of this idea suggests itself in Jacob 5:18: “The branches of the wild tree have taken hold of the *moisture* of the root thereof, that the root thereof hath brought forth much . . . tame fruit.” Jacob makes a similar metaphorical connection when he exhorts Israel not to “quench the Holy Spirit” (Jacob 6:8).

Though the symbolic elements of the allegory represent historical people and events, a yet greater insight may lie in the allegory as a theodicy, that is, God's explication of himself and his work. Not only did the Jews dematerialize God

and scramble the facts about him, but so also has every apostasy since. The mystery that Jacob illuminates is that God is not distant, but full of grace—of divine enabling power—ceaselessly involving himself with each of his children, seeking a response, seeking a relationship.

It is in the figures of pruning, grafting, and digging about that the Lord reveals most specifically the function of the Atonement. The allegory describes this divine activity as wrought both in the tree and in the environment of the tree, suggesting that God seeks access to man at several points. *Grafting in* might represent events and experiences which bring one to Christ—conversion. *Digging about* suggests the divine structuring of one's environment for individual tutorials. *Dunging* suggests spiritual nourishing. As to *pruning*, we might understand those painful experiences in which we feel stymied as the divine will operates against our own. Hugh B. Brown provided an excellent illustration in his little parable of the currant bush. At the end the Gardener speaks to the little bush, which he has cut back again and again:

Do not cry. . . . What I have done to you was necessary. . . . You were not intended for what you sought to be. . . . If I had allowed you to continue . . . you would have failed in the purpose for which I planted you and my plans for you would have been defeated. You must not weep; some day when you are richly laden with experience you will say, "He was a wise gardener. He knew the purpose of my earth life. . . . I thank him now for what I thought was cruel." . . . Help me, dear God, to endure the pruning, and to grow as you would have me grow; to take my allotted place in life and ever more to say, "Thy will not mine be done."⁵

This ceaseless divine activity in seeking to bring men into his presence, even while they walk the earth, is

reflected in the continual nourishing, digging, and pruning going on in the allegorical vineyard. The word *nourish* appears twenty-one times in the seventy-seven verses of the chapter, along with the words *digging*, *dunging*, *pruning*, and *preserving*, which appear frequently along with *nourishing*, indicating that the idea of nourishing, of personal attention to Israel and to Israelites, is a major theme of the allegory. The perfect knowledge of Christ that Jacob refers to (Jacob 4:14), that is, at-one-ment with him, is achieved in Christ's revelation of himself through the pruning, digging, and nourishing of his individual covenant children.

The idea that God himself seeks continual association with each of his covenant children is expressed in other Book of Mormon passages. Alma declared, "A shepherd hath called after you and is *still* calling after you. . . . The good shepherd doth call you; yea, and in his own name he doth call you, which is the name of Christ" (Alma 5:37–38). Lehi exclaimed, "I am encircled about eternally in the arms of his love" (2 Nephi 1:15). Helaman wrote to Moroni: "May the Lord our God, who has redeemed us and made us free, keep you continually in his presence" (Alma 58:41). Christ spoke poignantly in Revelation, "Behold I stand at the door and knock" (Revelation 3:20).

If God is seeking access to his children continually, what is the meaning of the periods of divine absence in the allegory? The Lord declares, "I have stretched forth mine hand *almost* all the day long" (Jacob 5:47). Jacob drops the word *almost* when he reiterates: "He stretches forth his hands unto them *all* the day long. . . . Come with full purpose of heart, and cleave unto God as he cleaveth unto you. . . . For why will ye die? . . . For behold, . . . ye have been nourished by the good word of God *all* the day long" (Jacob 6:4–7). *Cleave* is atonement language. It is not God who has ceased

to cleave, but man who has rejected God's love. These periods in which we do not see divine activity signify not so much the Master's absence, but rather *Israel's* voluntary withdrawal from the true olive tree.

At the end the Lord speaks to his servant, "Blessed art thou, . . . because ye have been diligent in laboring with me in my vineyard. . . . Ye shall have joy with me because of the fruit of my vineyard" (Jacob 5:75). Jacob echoes these words: "How blessed are they who have labored diligently in his vineyard" (Jacob 6:3)—those who have participated in the divine activity of at-one-ment. In latter days the Lord has said, "I will gather together in *one* all things, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth" (D&C 27:13). The allegory underscores the fact that the greatest work going forth on the earth is the work of bringing those who are scattered, alienated, and miserable back into harmony and oneness with each other and with the Creator.

One of the key insights that emerges from the allegory is that the power of the atonement seeks to affect men at every level of their existence. It urges people together geographically into Zions. It promotes generosity and consecration of goods. It prompts people to resonate emotionally and to synergize spiritually. The Lord says, "I say unto you, be one; and if ye are not one ye are not mine" (D&C 38:27).

Finally, an individual must discover Jacob's mystery for himself. The greatest value of the allegory may be that it serves to make one conscious of the efforts of the Lord to draw him by "the enticings of the Holy Spirit" (Mosiah 3:19) into a working relationship with a powerful Benefactor. This approach to the allegory enlarges one's confidence in the Lord's unceasing labors in his behalf and prompts him to search within to find the evidences of divine instruction and nurturing. The allegory teaches that

the structure of oneness, of at-one-ment, is already in place. One need only discover and embrace the relationship.

Notes

1. Joseph Smith's Journal, kept by Willard Richards, 29 January 1843, cited in *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980), 5:261.
2. See *atone* and *atonement* in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).
3. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 17 vols. (Jerusalem: Keter, 1972), s.v. "oils," 12:1347.
4. *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, 12 vols. (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1901), s.v. "oil," 9:392.
5. Hugh B. Brown, "The Gardener and the Currant Bush," in *Eternal Quest* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1936), 243.