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Symposium Explores Widespread Tree of Life Motif

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Insights

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Symposium Explores Widespread Tree of Life Motif

Scholars from various disciplines and institutions gathered in Brigham Young University's Varsity Theater on 28 and 29 September 2006 to explore the pervasive and powerful tree of life motif as found in civilizations spanning the Far and Middle East to Mesoamerica and as expressed in Latter-day Saint scripture and art. The following report highlights the two presentations by visiting non–Latter-day Saint scholars and briefly summarizes the others.

Symbolizing the Tree of Life: The Lotus Flower

After introductory remarks by symposium organizer S. Kent Brown (Maxwell Institute), the Thursday evening session opened with a botanist's view of the tree of life. J. Andrew McDonald (Biology, University of Texas–Pan American) presented images from ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia to illustrate his personal view that the lotus flower, rather than the date palm or any other tree, was the preeminent symbol of the tree of life.

McDonald noted that the preponderance of the bud/blossom motif in ancient temple art could signify a lotus, and he associated the serpent/sun-rising motif with the shoots that the lotus sends out from the water where its berries mature. In this way the flower perpetuates itself, signifying eternal life. The bud/blossom motif endured in Egypt until about AD 200 and was used in Solomon's temple, where, in common with Egyptian temple treasure, drinking vessels bore the lotus motif. McDonald believes that the lotus was seen as a link between heaven and earth and that further investigation is warranted to learn if the plant contains a euphoria-producing substance that might have been used with the temple's drinking vessels. He concluded that the tree of life is not a tree but a very sacred herb—the lotus—and that the sacral tree imagery found for 3,000 years in the Middle East is identified with a substance believed to make people into gods.

The Tree of Life as Facilitator of Aztec Conversion

On Friday morning Jaime R. Lara (Religion and Arts, Yale Divinity School) discussed how the tree of life figured in the Catholic conversion of the Aztecs. He began with the observation that Catholics consider the imagination to be a God-given faculty of the soul that enables one to appreciate what the physical senses cannot register—such as the metaphorical nature of reality and the immanence of God.

Lara went on to note that, since the second century, the Bible has been read four ways: historically (literally), allegorically (christologically), morally (tropologically), and anagogically (spiritually or mystically). For example, following that order, Jerusalem can be seen as the Holy Land, the church, the soul, and the heavenly Jerusalem; and Eden can be seen in terms of botanical plants, the graced soul, the victorious cross, and future life in heavenly Jerusalem. Thus the tree of life in Catholic iconography can carry different significations, such as that of a prophet prophesying of future events (an interpretation depicted in ceiling art in Venice's Basilica San Marco). Lara also noted the antiquity and ubiquity of the eschatological cross (or "living tree" cross) and explained that Catholics view the cross not as a "gallows cross" but as "Christ's trophy"—that is, as symbolic of his victory over death. This powerful symbolism flowered with the discovery of New Spain/Mesoamerica, which was seen as an eschatological event, Lara said.

Although shocked by the Aztec practices of human sacrifice and cannibalism, the Catholic friars saw points of common belief—for example, the tree of life and the Garden of Eden—that could be

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God" (Exodus 10:25). Baruch Levine, a leading authority on Israelite sacrifice, notes that this passage refers to the burnt offering (*olah-zebah*) and to the peace offering (*olah-shelamim*). Levine also suggests that frequent references in the Old Testament to these two sacrifices should be interpreted as "a merism for the entire sacrificial system" known to ancient Israel.[2] (Merismus is a literary device sometimes used in Hebrew in which an entire subject is represented by mentioning only some of its parts).[3] In other words, the phrase "sacrifices and burnt offerings" (Exodus 10:25) is simply an idiom that encompasses all the various sacrificial offerings made under the law of Moses without mentioning each specifically. In light of Levine's interpretation of such biblical passages, it is reasonable to interpret Mormon's use of the phrase "sacrifices and burnt offerings" in his abridgment in a similar way.

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Notes

1. For additional insights, see John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks, eds., *King Benjamin's Speech: "That Ye May Learn Wisdom"* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 507 (s.v. "[Mosiah] 2.3").
2. Baruch Levine, *In the Presence of the Lord: A Study of Cult and Some Cultic Terms in Ancient Israel* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 21–22.
3. See A. M. Honeyman, "Merismus in Biblical Hebrew," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 71 (1952): 15.

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exploited in art and architecture as they sought to Christianize the Aztecs. Lara concluded that cultural convergences such as the Aztecan anthropomorphic tree facilitated the 16th-century conquest of Mesoamerica.

Other Presentations

In addition to McDonald, the Thursday evening session hosted two other scholars. Charles Swift (Ancient Scripture, BYU) explored archetypal elements in Lehi's vision of the tree of life, noting dialectal patterns of opposites (such as darkness and light). He then interpreted the white-robed man as an archetype of the ideal world, the spacious field as a space offering freedom from restraint, and the rod of iron as a symbol of protection and security. Richard Oman (Museum of Church History and Art) presented a cross-cultural survey of Mormon folk art depicting Lehi's vision; shared stories of contemporary Latter-day Saint artists; and showed slides of artwork from Scandinavia, Asia, Europe, India, and the Americas that demonstrated a diversity of cultural responses to Lehi's vision.

Donald W. Parry (Asian and Near Eastern Languages, BYU) began Friday's session with an analysis of the Hebrew roots associated with six phrases in Genesis 3:24 that relate to protecting the path leading to the tree of life. He described this path in terms of sacred space and "architectural boundaries" and identified the "gestures of approach" necessary for one to pass the guardians along the way, all with a view to likening ancient temple ritual to a return to Eden. Sharing his personal views on the spiritual significance of the tree and its fruit, C. Wilfred Griggs (Ancient Scripture, BYU) pointed out that Christ's role as the nourishing vine essentially equates him with the tree of life. Griggs reviewed many scriptural texts related to eternal fruit and noted that those who partake of that fruit must do so with love, a word that appears 30 times in the account of Christ's teachings in the upper room (see John 13–17) before his crucifixion.

John W. Welch (Law School, BYU) presented early Christian artwork depicting the tree of life and identified many allusions to the tree in the New Testament (in which explicit references are few). He discussed Christ as the tree, the cross as the tree, people as trees who bring forth fruit, what it means to partake of the tree's fruit, and the cosmic world tree. He concluded that the beautiful, multifaceted images of the tree in Christian art represent stages in the unfolding plan of salvation. Allen J. Christenson (Humanities, BYU) discussed in great detail

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the Maya view of the tree of life and its identity with the ceiba tree in Maya iconography, which he interpreted with admirable facility. Daniel C. Peterson (Maxwell Institute) demonstrated how Islamic use of the tree of life motif was built on the Judeo-Christian tradition. Andrew C. Skinner (Maxwell Institute) spoke on the olive tree's position as the preeminent tree of life in Jewish tradition, concluding that many impressive connections help establish the core idea that the tree of life is the most desirable of all things.

John A. Tvedtnes (Maxwell Institute) discussed the tree of life's medicinal qualities as set forth in early Jewish texts, such as those specifying the healing properties of olive oil. He noted parallels in Revelation 2:7 (the tree of life heals) and Ezekiel 47:1–12 (water heals too) that are of added interest because both are embodied by Christ, who spoke of living water. John M. Lundquist (New York Public Library) concluded the day's events by showing images of the tree of life from Hindu, Buddhist, and other Oriental traditions (such as the sacred banyan and bodi trees). Those images figure in temple ideology and are shown to have much in common when examined closely.

Moderating the Thursday evening session and Friday's morning and afternoon segments were, respectively, S. Kent Brown (Maxwell Institute), M. Gerald Bradford (Maxwell Institute), and Gaye Strathearn (Ancient Scripture, BYU).

Sponsored by the Maxwell Institute, the symposium was made possible by a generous grant from Kenneth M. and Athelia T. Woolley. The Institute will publish the conference proceedings once the contributing scholars have finalized their papers. The resulting volume will include a much-anticipated study by Margaret Barker, a respected Old Testament scholar from England who was scheduled to speak at the symposium but was unable to attend.

PUBLICATIONS

Journey of Faith: From Jerusalem to the Promised Land (Maxwell Institute, 2006), the popular DVD featuring scholarly insights on Lehi and Sariah's journey across Arabia, is now available in both Spanish and Portuguese with English closed-captioning. This DVD also includes the documentary *A Filmmaking Odyssey: The Making of* Journey of Faith.

Oliver Cowdery: Scribe, Elder, Witness, edited by John W. Welch and Larry Morris (Maxwell Institute, 2006), compiles 30 years' worth of scholarly writings about the Second Elder of the Church in commemoration of the 200th anniversary of his birth on 3 October 1806.

Insights

A Window on the Ancient World

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The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship encourages and supports research on the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham, the Bible, other ancient scripture, and related subjects. The Maxwell Institute publishes and distributes titles in these areas for the benefit of scholars and interested Latter-day Saint readers.

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