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Nephi, Wisdom, and the Deuteronomist Reform

Biblical scholar Margaret Barker has argued that Judaism was reformed initially in response to the discovery of the “book of the law” (2 Kings 22: 8; 2 Chronicles 34:14) in King Josiah’s time (reigned 640–609 B.C.) and later in response to the destruction of the Israelite monarchy and the experience of the exile. Those reforms were carried out by a priestly group known to scholars as the Deuteronomists, credited with editing the books of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings (to celebrate Josiah and to address aspects of later Jewish history) and leaving a distinct imprint on the Hebrew Bible.

Barker summarizes their efforts:

The reform of Josiah/the Deuteronomists, then, reconstructed as best we can from both biblical and non-biblical sources, seems to have been a time when more than pagan accretions were removed from the Jerusalem cult. Wisdom was eliminated, even though her presence was never forgotten, the heavenly ascent and the vision of God were abandoned, the hosts of heaven, the angels, were declared to be unfit for the chosen people, the ark (and the presence of Yahweh which it represented) was removed, and the role

of the high priest was altered in that he was no longer the anointed. All of these features of the older cult were to appear in Christianity.¹

As might be expected, the Book of Mormon prophets show

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many affinities with the traditions of the First Temple period (1006–586 B.C.) that Barker reconstructs. Moreover, the Book of Mormon appropriately diverges from the later reform efforts that took place during the Babylonian exile of the Jews, when Lehi’s group was already in the New World. This report will highlight how the teachings and activities of Nephi preserve aspects of the preexilic Hebrew wisdom tradition. (A subsequent study will extend this idea to include temple themes in the teachings of Nephi’s successor, Jacob).

The Book of Mormon account, which begins about

10 years after Josiah’s death and thus understandably reflects positive aspects of the initial reforms in the attention given to Moses and to exodus themes,² also reflects the wisdom tradition that was prevalent in preexilic Israel but lost through later Deuteronomist reforms.³ Barker writes:

First, they [the Deuteronomists] were to have the Law instead of Wisdom (Deut. 4.6). . . . What was the Wisdom which the Law replaced? Second, they were to think only of the formless voice of God sounding from the fire and giving the Law (Deut. 4.12). Israel had long had a belief in the vision of God, when the glory had been visible on the throne in human form, surrounded by the heavenly hosts. What happened to the visions of God?⁴

Her primary guide for reconstructing the lost wisdom tradition is the pseudepigraphic Book of Enoch, which originated in Jewish tradition and was later used by the earliest Christians. Wisdom themes also preserved in the Book of Mormon have been discussed by LDS scholars Hugh Nibley and Daniel C. Peterson.⁵

Barker’s work illuminates the ancient wisdom themes further. Referring to the book of Daniel, Barker notes that “the text itself claims to be about a *wise man* who predicts the future, inter-

prets dreams and functions at court.”⁶ She adds that

Joseph, our only other canonical model [of a wise man], is very similar; he functions at court, interprets dreams and predicts the future. . . . How are we to explain his dealings with heavenly beings, and his use of an inexplicable mythology? . . . This suggests that the wisdom elements in the non-canonical apocalypses which have no obvious roots in the Old Testament may not be foreign accretions, but elements of an older wisdom which the reformers have purged.⁷

Nephi resembles the prototypical wise men Joseph and Daniel in several respects. He accepts a kingly role (2 Nephi 5:18) and interprets dreams as well as predicts the future (1 Nephi 11–15). Like Daniel, he shows commitment to the law of Moses (1 Nephi 4:14–17; 2 Nephi 5:10), communes with angels (1 Nephi 3:29–30; 11:21, 30; 12:1; 2 Nephi 4:24), seeks divine interpretation of symbols (1 Nephi 11:9–11), and values the cultural context behind prophetic writing (2 Nephi 25:1–5).

Searching the brass plates, Lehi discovers his descent from Joseph (1 Nephi 5:14–16). Not surprisingly, the Book of Mormon preserves Joseph traditions that did not survive in the transmission of the Bible (2 Nephi 3; Alma 46:23–27). Barker identifies many other details of Israel’s lost or suppressed wisdom tradition that illuminate Nephi’s activities. For example, “The wise man has *knowledge* of God, is a child/servant of the Lord . . .

and, as God’s son, will receive help.”⁸ Further:


Another of the angelic arts was metal-working, and we find wisdom attributed to a variety of craftsmen in the Old Testament. . . . 1 En[och] 8 links this skill to the arts of war, and in Isaiah 10.13 we do find that the king of Assyria’s military prowess is called wisdom. Job 28 implies that wisdom extended to the techniques of mining, damming

Resembling the prototypical wise men Joseph and Daniel, Nephi qualifies remarkably well as a representative of Israel’s lost wisdom tradition.

and irrigation. Ezekiel 27.8–9 says that the navigators and shipwrights were also wise.⁹

Consistent with the wisdom tradition of ancient Israel, Nephi is a king, a dreamer, an interpreter of apocalyptic visions, and a “forth-teller” who prophecies of great judgment to come (1 Nephi 11:36; 22:12–19), claims knowledge of God’s mysteries (1 Nephi 1:1; 2 Nephi 4:23–25), and knows of both the heavenly hosts of angels and the fallen ones (1 Nephi 1:8–10; 11:30–31; 2 Nephi 2:17).

Adding to his stature as a quintessential man of wisdom, Nephi demonstrates knowledge of writing (1 Nephi 1:2) and possesses appropriate wisdom

in relation to mining and metal-working (1 Nephi 17:9–10), shipbuilding (1 Nephi 17:8–9; 18:1–8), navigation (1 Nephi 18:12–13, 22–23), and the arts of war (2 Nephi 5:14, 34). In sum, Nephi qualifies remarkably well as a representative of Israel’s lost wisdom tradition that Barker so ably reconstructs. 

Notes

1. Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel’s Second God* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 15. See her book *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh: Clark, 2000), 16–17.
2. See my study “Paradigms Regained: A Survey of Margaret Barker’s Scholarship and Its Significance for Mormon Studies,” *FARMS Occasional Papers*, no. 2 (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001) 16–21.
3. See Margaret Barker, *The Older Testament: The Survival of Themes from the Ancient Royal Cult in Sectarian Judaism and Early Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1987), 83.
4. Barker, *Great Angel*, 13. I corrected the second reference to Deuteronomy 4:12.
5. See Hugh Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989), 551; and 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, Utah: FARMS, 1998), especially pp. 209–18.
6. Barker, *Older Testament*, 91; emphasis in original.
7. *Ibid.*, 91–92.
8. *Ibid.*, 92.
9. *Ibid.*, 95.

By Kevin Christensen