



## Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011

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Volume 19 | Number 1

Article 10

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2007

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**Title** Does God Have a Wife?

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**Reference** *FARMS Review* 19/1 (2007): 81-118.

**ISSN** 1550-3194 (print), 2156-8049 (online)

**Abstract** Review of *Did God Have a Wife? Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel* (2005), by William G. Dever.

# DOES GOD HAVE A WIFE?

Alyson Skabelund Von Feldt

Review of William G. Dever. *Did God Have a Wife? Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005. xvi + 344 pp., with subject and citation indexes. \$25.00.

Does God have a wife? Yes. Or so members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have understood since Joseph Smith's time. The most recent review of the doctrine is in David L. Paulsen's essay entitled "Are Christians Mormon?"<sup>1</sup> He devotes a section to the divine feminine, briefly surveying the formal expressions of the belief in a Mother in Heaven in Latter-day Saint doctrinal texts, in the published teachings of modern prophets, and of course in Eliza R. Snow's poem-turned-hymn "O My Father." He then explores the latest developments in theology to show how Joseph's once distinctive doctrine has gained wider acceptance.

But *did* God have a wife? When William G. Dever asks this question, he is asking about the beliefs of ancient Israelites, not Latter-day Saints. His *Did God Have a Wife?* is an archaeologist's consolidation and interpretation of the findings and analyses from modern excavations in Syro-Palestine. Dever's aim is to describe the religious practices of the common folk who lived in Canaan before the Babylonian exile, whether or not they correspond to those sanctioned by the

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1. David L. Paulsen, "Are Christians Mormon? Reassessing Joseph Smith's Theology in His Bicentennial," *BYU Studies* 45/1 (2006): 35–128.

Hebrew Bible (Old Testament). This topic will be of interest to many Latter-day Saints because Lehi and his family emerged from Jerusalem at the end of the period that Dever studies, and they burst forth crying “priestcraft!” and predicting the loss of plain and precious truths from the religious writings that would eventually be inherited in the Bible. Dever seeks out clues in the material remains from that culture about beliefs that may have been lost.

I will first take a look at Dever’s reconstruction of ancient Israelite religion. I will summarize his description of the religious sites that have been unearthed by archaeologists along with the paraphernalia found at those sites and highlight some of the beliefs and practices that he re-creates. Then I will investigate the major archaeological and biblical evidence for the goddess Asherah, including a broader discussion using narrative texts that Dever did not include that could shed additional light on the beliefs of ancient Israelites. The discussion will end with some thoughts about what all this means for Latter-day Saints.

### **Prelude to the Reconstruction**

It takes Dever four chapters to work up to a discussion of the archaeological evidence, but because his is a pioneering work and since almost none of his readers will have the broad range of expertise that he does, his introductory remarks are useful. I will not recapitulate most of this material, but a few notes seem worthwhile.

An important distinction made by Dever concerns “book religion” and “folk religion.” The first reflects a tradition preserved and codified in the Old Testament by the literati: the literate, educated, wealthy members of society—those who would have had the leisure and interest to pursue intellectual activity such as history, theology, and poetry (each in the form that they took in ancient times)—elites who might have actually had access to Solomon’s temple. The second comprises the practices that would have been part of the lives of poor, rural, illiterate farmers, for whom periodic pilgrimages to Jerusalem would have been impossible and for whom formal theology might have had little appeal even if they could have read or understood religious scrolls.

While only a fraction of a percent of the population fell into the former category, the great majority of Israelites would have fallen into the latter category.<sup>2</sup> We will return to a discussion of Dever's book-folk dichotomy below. For now, suffice it to say that his inquiry is into the beliefs of the *average layperson* as revealed by archaeological finds and illuminated by the biblical text as an artifact of its time.<sup>3</sup>

Dever argues that the people of the countryside of ancient Israel did in fact believe that God had a wife. But though it escapes being included as a teaser in the title of his book, another important aspect of the ancient religion that Dever reconstructs is the practice of ritual outside the Jerusalem temple at shrines in the home, the family compound, the gates of the cities, the "high places," and temples other than the official Jerusalem temple built by Solomon. The Old Testament fulminates against these places and practices, but Dever shows us that worship closer to home was the reality of everyday religion. Again, as Latter-day temples proliferate across the globe, we may certainly sympathize with the ancients' appreciation of a shorter commute. We may even find some evidence of lost truth at these sacred sites.

Reared a fundamentalist Christian and trained in Old Testament theology at Harvard while practicing as a parish minister, Dever converted to Judaism after many years as an archaeologist in Israel and Jordan; he now describes himself as a secular humanist. He advocates a systematic, disciplined inquiry, but not a dispassionate one. He wants us to "think and feel ourselves' empathetically into the past" (p. xi). He appreciates the common people, too often dismissed simply as ignorant, unrighteous, idolatrous losers.<sup>4</sup> He believes that the only reliable

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2. Dever states that even by Roman times only 5 percent of the population was literate enough to have read religious literature (p. 28), but Paul Hoskisson takes issue with this. See his review of *Did God Have a Wife?* in *BYU Studies* 45/2 (2006): 186–89.

3. Though most scholars date the finalization of the Old Testament well after the exile, Dever insists that late editors were familiar with the history of their religion and could not help but to reveal it, even while they attempted to suppress portions of that history. Also, he explains that the Bible as we have it was based on earlier texts and oral traditions (p. 260). We can discern clues about preexilic Israel even if the text was written decades or centuries later.

4. *Losers* is a word from a passage that Dever quotes by Susan Ackerman wherein she points out that "these losers probably held the majority and represented the mainstream

understanding of the religion of Israel must encompass the realm of archaeology. Both texts and objects must be taken as primary sources, though he believes that artifacts are “less biased and have been less deliberately ‘edited’ than texts” (p. 62). Indeed, the perspective of the Old Testament has been edited to *condemn* the mainstream with whom Dever feels a nostalgic connection. Because of this, he says that it is “archaeology, and archaeology *alone*, that can bring back those anonymous, forgotten folk of antiquity and give them their long-lost voice, allowing them to speak to us of *their* ultimate concerns” (p. 12, emphasis in original). He is confident that though a complete understanding of the ancient religion is still not possible, one that studies objects that have been recovered from the earth will be better than one derived only from texts hundreds of years and many hands distant from their origin. It is a position that should resonate with a Latter-day Saint appreciation of people and things that speak “out of the dust” (Moroni 10:27).

Infused throughout Dever’s book is a survey of the literature relevant to the topic at hand, and he includes a bibliography of basic sources at the end. This is handy for readers new to a discussion of ancient Hebrew religions that incorporates archaeological evidence. In reviewing recent scholarship, Dever situates himself within the debate. He criticizes biblical theologians on the whole for being oblivious to revolutionary archaeological evidence, complaining that they have been predominantly white Protestant male clerics or academics with a blinding bias toward Christian apologetics. He also censures students of ancient Israelite religion (not theology) for not adequately accounting for the archaeological data.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, he criti-

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in their day.” *Under Every Green Tree: Popular Religion in Sixth-Century Judah* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 2, as quoted by Dever (p. 47).

5. Exceptions that Dever lauds include Ziony Zevit’s *The Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Paralactic Approaches* (2001), Susan Ackerman’s *Under Every Green Tree: Popular Religion in Sixth-Century Judah* (1992), Karel van der Toorn’s *The Image and the Book: Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of Book Religion in Israel and the Near East* (1997), *Only One God? Monotheism in Ancient Israel and the Veneration of the Goddess Asherah*, ed. Bob Becking and others (2001), Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger’s *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel* (1998), various articles by Carol Meyers and her book, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (1988), and various articles by Phyllis A. Bird. Full citations are available in Dever’s bibliography.

cizes archaeologists for an “antipathy” toward religion (p. 304). He notes that not a single archaeologist has written on ancient Israelite religion (p. 88), which is incomprehensible since “religion was absolutely *fundamental* to all ancient societies” (p. 304, emphasis in original). So Dever plunges ahead, equipped uniquely as a trained biblical theologian and an experienced archaeologist. Urged forward by his sense of an oncoming “archaeological ‘revolution’ in the study of ancient Israelite religion . . . that will render *all* previous histories obsolete” (p. 62), he characterizes his attempt to reconstruct folk religion as “pioneering” (p. 89).

### Sacred Places, Sacred Practices

Surveying the archaeological evidence for folk religions in ancient Israel, Dever identifies dozens of religious sites, mapping the fifteen major ones (p. 111). In describing these sites, he begins with the more intimate, less sacred sites (these are unmapped) and moves to more public sites that were probably also considered more holy. He includes sketches or floor plans of many of the items and places he describes.

The bottom tier of sites consists of local shrines in the home or in the courtyard of the extended family compound. Dever samples several of these and explains that more than a dozen such sites have been identified. Here is his list of the “repertoire” of items documented at these one-or-two room places. Dever describes each type of item in detail and considers how they may have been used:

1. standing stones
2. altars, some “horned”
3. stone tables and basins
4. offering stands
5. benches
6. jewelry
7. ceramic vessels, many “exotic”
8. animal bones and food remains
9. astragali (knucklebones)
10. terra-cotta female figurines (see pp. 113–18)

The offering stands are particularly remarkable, and I will return to them below.

Dever explains that the family shrines were likely the scene of private, unsupervised, ad hoc worship. Family members “probably stopped briefly at these convenient shrines daily, singly or in groups” (p. 117). He doubts that liturgies or creeds would have been important. And he is convinced that women would have had a significant role in these places.

To understand this in a modern context, I imagine a scene that happens at our home once a week: the mother (that’s me), after assembling a special treat, calls out to family members to abandon their various pursuits and gather in the living room, reminds the kids to get out their scriptures, suggests that someone should change the names around on our responsibilities chart, and cues the person whose turn it is to conduct to go ahead and get things started. Then a period of teaching and worship called family home evening ensues.

Mothers in ancient Israel performed similar functions. Among other things, they likely prepared ritual food, burned incense, made vows, and mourned for the dead (pp. 239–47), not to mention such everyday tasks of domestic religion as keeping a traditional home, maintaining right relations with relatives, and performing acts of charity for family members and neighbors (p. 248). They may not have been able to read, but these women could have repeated the old stories along with their husbands and explained the meaning of the pillars in the room or the incense that burned. “Women,” according to Dever, “were the primary custodians of the ‘religion of hearth and home,’ the realities of which shaped ancient Israelite belief and practice far more than did the theology of the ‘official cult’ and canonical Scripture” (p. 237).

Dever next moves from a discussion of family shrines to the evidence of public open-air sanctuaries. He argues that these fit the depiction of sites known as “high places” (*bāmôt*) in the Old Testament. High places themselves were accepted in the days of the patriarchs and during the settlement of Canaan by the Israelites, but after Solomon built the first temple, worship was centralized in Jerusalem, at least according to the Bible. As Dever explains, “one of the dominant

motifs . . . in the Book of Kings was the centrality of the Royal Temple in Jerusalem as the *exclusive* dwelling place of Yahweh” (p. 71). This belief was the ideal rather than the reality, because Dever describes at least eight high places concurrent with the Jerusalem temple that were major religious centers in the countryside. The Old Testament records that Kings Hezekiah (2 Kings 18:4) and Josiah (2 Kings 23:4–25) initiated reforms to stamp out such unauthorized worship, but the archaeology suggests that these reforms had short-lived efficacy before the period of the Babylonian exile.

High places from this era include a large eighth-to-ninth century BC outdoor altar and an adjoining tripartite structure at Tel Dan on the Syrian border, found with some paraphernalia including a large horned altar, smaller altars, ashes, animal bones, and scepter heads. Dever suggests that animal and food offerings were given here as well as incense offerings, and for him the scepter heads are evidence that priests officiated. Of particular note is a spring pool and a large tub. Dever suggests that these would have been places of rites of purification of the sort mentioned in several biblical priestly texts (p. 146); he does not mention baptism, which of course comes to the minds of Book of Mormon readers.

He also details the eighth-century BC fort at Kuntillet ‘Ajrūd in the eastern Sinai desert. This major stopover for caravans was built in such a way that anyone entering or leaving the complex would necessarily pass through a gate flanked by two shrines. Three inscriptions found here provide important evidence that a goddess named Asherah was understood to be Yahweh’s wife, or consort. One was on a wall and the other two on large storage jars (pithos). All three include phrases linking Yahweh and Asherah, as does another inscription that Dever found in a tomb from the same time period at Khirbat El-Qôm. The jars are painted with icons, including a seated female figure (fig. 1). Dever is convinced that this is Asherah sitting on a cherub throne with her feet resting on a (missing) footstool. (The throne with its very stylized wing feathers looks surprisingly like the throne in Facsimile 3 from the Book of Abraham.) The inscription together with the image are evidence enough for Dever to conclude that she is Yahweh’s consort. He



Figure 1. Storage jar with Asherah on her throne. Permission by the excavator—Dr. Z. Meshel, Tel Aviv University.

acknowledges that the biblical texts couple her with Ba'al, but Dever thinks this is an attempt to discredit her. This libel, of course, eventually worked. But not until after the exile to Babylon.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, Dever discusses temples, considered the most sacred of the three levels of cultic sites. The most obvious example, of course, is Solomon's temple in Jerusalem, which Dever does not treat in detail in this book because he has done so elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> He does, however, question whether it was really the center of national religious life. He points out how difficult the requirements for temple worship would

6. Two bovine-headed humanoids are also depicted on the storage jar, one with breasts. Dever takes these both to be the Egyptian dwarf-god Bes, who was quite popular. Other scholars, including Margaret Barker, believe that these figures represent Yahweh and Asherah. See Barker, *The Great High Priest: The Temple Roots of Christian Liturgy* (London: Clark, 2003), 231.

7. William G. Dever, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It? What Archaeology Can Tell Us about the Reality of Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 144–57.

have been for the average Israelite. Few people journeyed to Jerusalem even once in their whole lives, let alone three times a year as prescribed in the Old Testament. He points out that “even if they did get there, they would not have been admitted to the Temple, . . . largely a royal chapel. . . . The activities [there] were conducted by and for a small priestly class, not even the majority of the small population resident in Jerusalem” (p. 98).

But to say that the *Jerusalem* temple may not actually have been the center of Israelite religion is not to preclude temple worship at other places. Evidence already discussed suggests that open-air sanctuaries and gate shrines may have been the sites of practices associated with the presence of the deity. There are two examples of monumental temples besides Solomon’s. One such temple is at Shechem in Samaria and is known as the Field V Migdal temple. Dever participated in its second excavation in the early 1960s (which followed a first pass in the 1930s). Its walls were as much as fifteen feet thick, and it stood two or three stories high. This site was associated by the 1960s excavators with specific passages in the Old Testament. Dever supports those connections, comfortable that this place could well have been the site where Joshua gathered the people after the conquest of Canaan (Joshua 24) and where Abimelech rallied support when he aspired to the throne (Judges 9). But this temple predates Israel’s monarchy. It was destroyed in the twelfth century BC, well before the Solomonic temple was built.

The only other Israelite temple identified to date is from the eighth century BC, at Arad, east of Beersheba. Many readers will be surprised to know that *any* examples of ancient Israelite temples other than Solomon’s exist at all from this time period because the Old Testament implies that ritual worship was by then centralized in Jerusalem. Dever argues that the temple at Arad was a large part of a Judean royal fortress and emphasizes how similar in plan it is to the Jerusalem temple. It was compatible with the official religion, at least in most respects. Evidence suggests that some of the paraphernalia found here—specifically three large standing stones and two altars—

was deliberately buried under the floor as part of Hezekiah's reform.<sup>8</sup> Dever notes that two of the standing stones (*māššēbôt*) that were later concealed—one larger than the other—were originally placed on the back wall of the inner sanctum, the holy of holies. For him, this is evidence that at least two deities were worshipped here. The temple itself, Dever believes, is no isolated case of rogue temple-building. His sense is that local temples were common (p. 175).

### Evidence of God's Wife

Having described folk religion—its sites and scenes—Dever homes in on an aspect that interests him particularly: the goddess Asherah and her worship. In fact, he has been an insider to the drama surrounding the discovery of her intimate association with Yahweh. He was

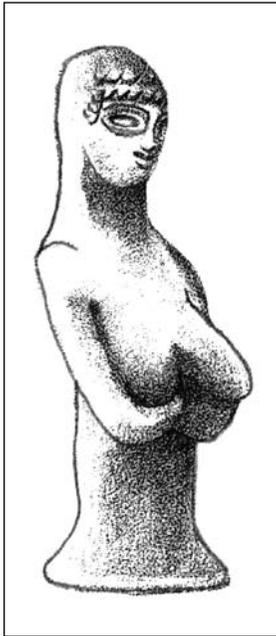


Figure 2. Asherah figurine.

the first to publish evidence from inscriptions that she was Yahweh's wife (back in 1969–70), which he says was overlooked for at least a decade (pp. 197–98). Then he was the first to suggest a cult of Asherah over twenty years ago (p. 79).<sup>9</sup>

The small clay figurines that have turned up by the hundreds during the last century are the first clues he considers. They are dated to the two hundred years just prior to the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem—the time of Isaiah, Josiah, Jeremiah, and Lehi. The most prominent feature of these little statues is their breasts, which they are cupping with their hands (see fig. 2). The faces are sometimes detailed and other times stylized in such a way that a pinch of the clay head has brought forward the

8. “[Hezekiah] removed the high places, and brake the images [*māššēbôt*], and cut down the groves [*asherim*]” (2 Kings 18:4).

9. Incidentally, as used here, *cult* is by no means a derogatory term. It is simply a technical term that refers to a set of religious practices as opposed to beliefs alone.

nose and recessed the eyes. The pillar that makes up the lower body is never detailed but resembles a tree trunk. They are clearly fashioned to stand up, and some look as if they could be gripped between the figure's arms and the flared base, much like one might grab a modern fitness hand weight. These are found in domestic contexts such as houses, garbage heaps, cisterns, and pits (p. 180). They were ubiquitous in the seventh and eighth centuries BC, and apparently rather disposable. Every woman might have possessed one or two or more. Notably, however, they are never part of cultic or tomb collections.

What is amazing is that these common household items, clearly of religious significance, are never, according to Dever, mentioned in the Bible (although the word *asherah* occurs over forty times). He concludes that this is because the editors avoided or purged any hint of them. And this is a clue about their interpretation. The edited Bible speaks caustically about Asherah. She was abhorred by the so-called Deuteronomistic redactors. The silence about these figurines, therefore, may mean that they represented her.

What did they mean? Because the emphasis is on the breasts—the lower body is columnar and not even the legs or feet are detailed—they have been called “*dea nutrix*” (nursing goddess) figurines. The image is not sexual, but maternal. Dever points out:

There is nothing “immodest” here. . . . Even today, one can see extremely modest Arab women in the villages nursing their babies in public. . . . While . . . Canaanite figurines portray the goddess as a rather lascivious *courtesan* of the gods, the Israelite ones are much more “chaste” and portray her simply as a *nursing mother*. The Great Mother becomes a patroness of mothers everywhere (although still possibly a divine consort). (p. 187)

Dever believes that these figurines were used as talismans, or charms. Women in ancient Israel, for whom childbearing was imperative socially as well as life-threatening physically, may have hoped that the figurines would bring successful conception, safe birth, and protection

for the child. These “prayers in clay” (p. 58)<sup>10</sup> were also probably thought to secure broader benefits as well for both men and women:

The figure of a woman with full breasts would have suggested the overall notion of “plenty,” the gods’ abilities to nourish the human family. . . .

The animals must multiply and flourish, too, and the fields must yield a bountiful harvest, if the family and clan and people are to survive. And these matters, too, are in the hands of the gods, who fructify and bless every living thing. (pp. 187, 192–93)

Most scholars agree that the pillar-base objects were talismans representing a goddess, though not all are ready to identify her as Asherah. But Dever is confident. He believes that veneration of her was accepted *alongside* worship of Yahweh. Dever thinks that it would have been natural for prayers dealing with fertility to have been addressed to the “Great Mother,” and he suggests that such supplications might have been made also to Yahweh *through Asherah* (p. 192). The use of these figurines was a popular and generally accepted part of the religion of Yahweh, though one would not recognize this by reading the Old Testament. Its ancient editors took great pains to suppress any evidence of her.

Dever and other modern scholars find other references to the goddess in the various occurrences of the word *Asherah* in the Bible. These occurrences are often misunderstood and mistranslated. The word is usually rendered “grove” and seems to mean a “wooden pole or living tree”—a symbol of the goddess, as Dever shows conclusively—but in a few cases the context indicates that the goddess herself is the intended meaning. For example, 1 Kings 15:13: “And also Maachah [Jeroboam’s] mother, even her he removed from being queen, because she had made an idol in a grove; and Asa destroyed her idol, and burnt it by the brook Kidron.”<sup>11</sup>

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10. Quoting Ziony Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Parallactic Approaches* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 274.

11. See note a of the LDS edition, which explains that the idol was made “for Asherah.”

The obvious confusion of the translators suggests to Dever, of course, that there has been tampering. The original editors were “squeamish” about her, sought to minimize and obscure references to her and her symbols, and “by the time the literary process had produced the final canonical texts, the old Mother Goddess had been driven underground and all but forgotten. Thus the final redactors of the Hebrew Bible *did not know* who ‘Asherah’ had been, or whether she had existed at all” (p. 102).

I believe that there are other clues in the canonical texts about God’s wife that have been generally undetected. I am thinking specifically of Proverbs 1–9, which tells of a woman named Wisdom who is portrayed at the creation of the world alongside Yahweh. Most biblical scholars—who, as Dever has shown, rely very little on archaeology—interpret this image as a literary personification or theological device rather than a goddess in her own right, or else they believe she is a foreign deity that has been syncretistically worked into the text. They are reluctant to understand her as a distinctly Hebrew goddess, especially because that would require a rethinking of Israel’s monotheism. But I support the few who claim that she is a memory of Asherah. I elsewhere have argued that Proverbs 1–9 could have a setting in the rituals of Israel’s ancient religion.<sup>12</sup> Dever’s suggestion that Asherah was venerated in templelike places throughout the countryside may open the possibility that the story of the Wisdom Woman has its roots in a belief in Asherah. Again, Asherah was not worshipped as an alternative to Yahweh, but rather alongside him. The author of Proverbs 1–9 understood Wisdom to be a gift from Yahweh:

If thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures; Then shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord giveth wisdom: out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding.  
(Proverbs 2:4–6)

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12. Alyson Skabelund Von Feldt, “My Secret Is with the Righteous: Instructional Wisdom in the Book of Mormon,” *FARMS Occasional Papers* 5, forthcoming.

The first time I read *Did God Have a Wife?* I was fascinated with the pillar figurines because I had heard so much about them. Other artifacts did not capture my attention as forcefully. The images from the book stayed with me and within a few days had fomented a revolution.

The catalytic artifact was a cylindrical offering stand (see fig. 3). It was found in a large room in a small hilltop village. It is the type of vessel in which incense might have been burned, and the fragrance would have wafted from its openings, or “fenestrations.” Dever points out that the stand has “an enigmatic row of human feet around the bottom” (p. 113), and that is why the stand caught my attention. Dever suggests that “while it was forbidden to portray the body or the face of Yahweh, these modest ‘feet’ may suggest symbolically his presence in the sanctuary” (p. 121). Dever himself jokes that perhaps the fashioners of the stand had a foot fetish (p. 121).

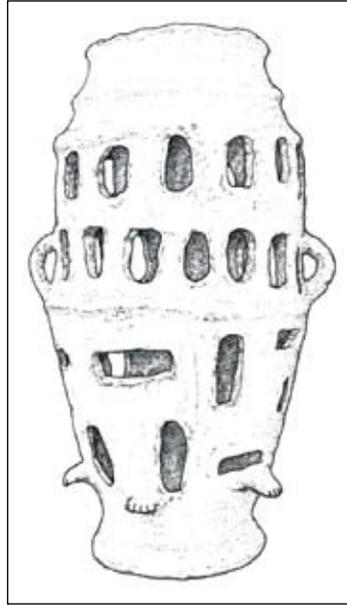


Figure 3. Fenestrated offering stand with feet.

While reflecting with admiration upon the artistry of these dainty feet, I remembered the scripture from Isaiah 52:7: “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth!” I had just reread a draft of Margaret Barker’s “The Fragrant Tree” in which she explains that in *1 Enoch*, the prophet makes several heavenly journeys. He sees a fragrant tree and a mountain of fire, which his angel guide explains is the throne of God.<sup>13</sup> It seemed to me that the offering

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13. Margaret Barker’s “The Fragrant Tree” will appear in a forthcoming volume of the proceedings of the Tree of Life Symposium held at BYU in September 2006. The volume will be edited by Donald A. Parry and John W. Welch; see *1 Enoch* 24:1–25:3.

stand—with its feet and fragrant, smoky innards—could represent the fiery mountain throne of God.

Dever suggests that other vessels found in the room could have been set on the top of the stand. He pictures several more stands (e.g., pp. 116, 120) made after the same fashion—cylindrical, windowed bases that flare at the bottom, one to two feet high, topped with a flat parapetted ledge or a socket in which a bowl fits. Some later models are embellished with drooping fronds as if to represent a palm tree. He says these terra-cotta objects are common at family shrines from 1200 to 600 BC. He notes that some scholars have suggested they are “multi-storied model temples,” but he adds that they are never mentioned in the Bible in connection with ritual (p. 121).

These stands often seem to incorporate tree iconography. In chapter 7, Dever goes to great lengths to show how archaeologists came to know from material artifacts that a tree is a symbol of the goddess Asherah. He tells the story of a woman curator at the Israel Museum, Ruth Hestrin, who noticed a critical connection between icons painted on two thirteenth-century BC vessels (figs. 4 and 5).

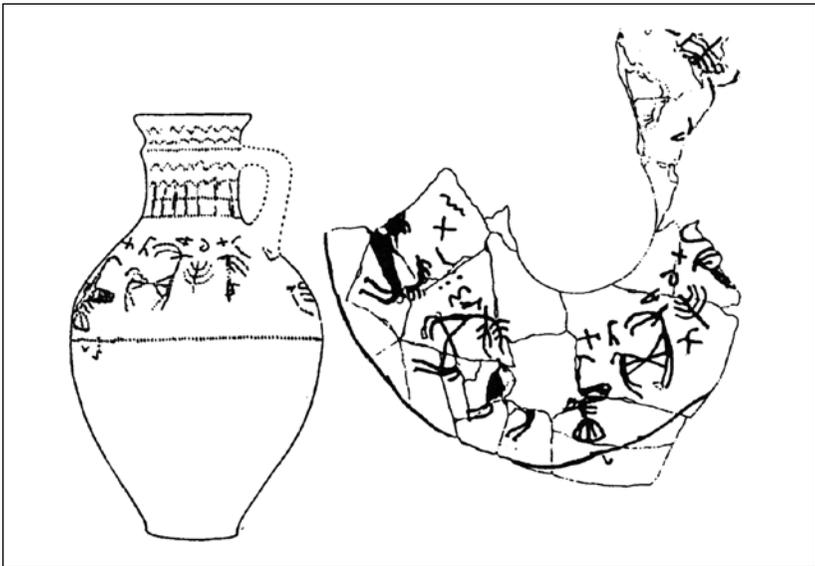


Figure 4. Lachish ewer.

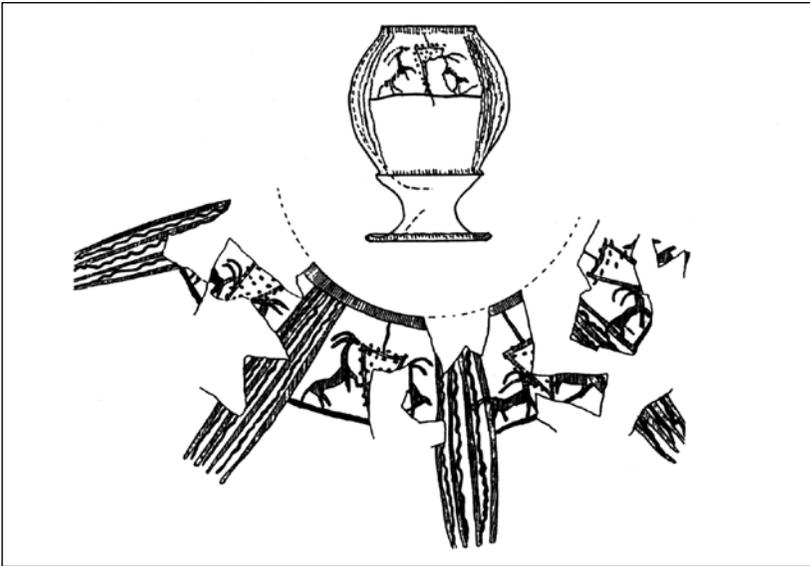


Figure 5. Lachish goblet.

One shows a pair of rampant wild goats eating from a tree—*rampant* means that they are rearing up on their hind legs. Dever explains that this is a very common scene from this time period. I should note, as Dever does, that the tree on this vase looks like a menorah. The inscription and context indicate that the vase held an offering for the Great Mother Goddess of the Canaanites, Elat. Elat is the feminine form of El, who was the Father God in the pre-Israelite pantheon, and she is also known as Asherah. Dever is very enthusiastic in crediting Hestrin, who was not an academic, with connecting the scene to a similar icon on a goblet found nearby. The goblet shows rampant wild goats nibbling not from a tree this time, but from a female pubic triangle. And this is the evidence that solidified for archaeologists that these two symbols—the tree and pubic triangle—are interchangeable and that they both stand for the mother goddess.

Even more compelling, Hestrin pointed out tree iconography on another object from roughly the same time period—a metal pendant—that is marked with a goddess wearing a bouffant wig and a necklace (fig. 6). Dever explains that the wig of the very ancient Egyptian goddess Hathor (the cow-goddess) is worn in later times by the Egyptian

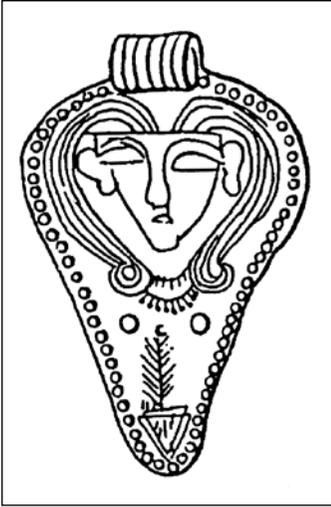


Figure 6. Electrum pendant.



Figure 7. Incense bowl. Courtesy of the Institute of Archaeology, Tel Aviv University.

equivalent of Asherah, known as Qudshu, which means “the Holy One” (p. 220). On the pendant, the goddess’s body is symbolized below her face: her breasts by circles and her vulva by a downward pointing triangle. The female pubic triangle is the “symbol from time immemorial of the source of all human conception, birth, and life” (p. 227). A tree sprouts from the triangle, a branching *linea nigra*.

Keeping in mind Barker’s work on the Enochian texts and this strong association of Asherah with the image of a tree, it seems to me that the offering stands combine the throne of God with the tree of life. In *1 Enoch* 24:1–25:7, the mountain throne stands next to an exquisitely fragrant tree. In *1 Enoch* 26:2, a stream flows from beneath a holy mountain. In *1 Enoch* 48:1, a “fountain of righteousness” is identified. In *1 Enoch* 28:3, a stream is described as issuing from the top of a mountain (throne), flowing water and dew. So it may be significant that the offering bowls were placed *on top of* the pillar thrones.

In fact, the bowl Dever pictures on page 116 appears to be an udder with teats (see fig. 7)—significant because of Asherah’s shared iconography with the cow-goddess Hathor. And the round basin pictured by Dever on page 120, its upper lip wreathed with leaves, looks in fact like a human breast, the

nipple forming the protrusion that fits into the socket of the pillar (see fig. 8). The inference, of course, is that nourishment from heaven is received at the temple and that nourishment is provided by the *dea nutrix* Asherah. That nourishment, I will suggest presently, was known as *wisdom*.

Dever says that chemical analysis has not been performed on the bowls and platforms that form the top of the stands. But I would think they held not *memorial* offerings, as Dever suggests, but *invocation* offerings.<sup>14</sup> Water, bread, or vessels containing oil



Figure 8. Tree of life basin.

could have been placed in the bowls to represent nourishment from heaven. We know of these substances from the biblical temple tradition. Barker has shown that the bread of the presence was an invocation offering that conferred holiness,<sup>15</sup> and we know from Jeremiah 44:19 that the women of Jeremiah’s time baked cakes to the “Queen of Heaven” to go along with their libation and incense offerings. Oil and water were also known to confer holiness. The people who used the terra-cotta offering stands may have had very lofty aspirations as they worshipped in their sacred spaces. Just because we are discussing the religion of the common folk, we cannot assume that all worship was about “the care and feeding of the gods,” as Dever puts it (p. 4), in an effort to secure the blessings of a good mortal life (p. 30). Some worship could have been about the godly care and feeding of mortals.

14. LDS sacrament prayers are both a memorial and an invocation: we eat and drink sanctified offerings to “always *remember*” Jesus Christ that we “may have his Spirit *to be with [us]*” (Moroni 4:3; 5:2).

15. On bread and cakes baked to the Queen of Heaven, see Margaret Barker, *Temple Theology: An Introduction* (London: SPCK, 2004), 84–86; Barker, *Great High Priest*, 87–95.

Here I will pause to offer a critique of Dever's dichotomy of book religion versus folk religion. I think it is the wrong dichotomy. To be sure, we are becoming more aware of the incongruity between the biblical text as we have it and some of the religious practices of ancient Israel as revealed through archaeology. But whereas Dever notes that there would have been many variations of the popular Israelite religion (p. 7), he speaks of only one monolithic book religion—presumably because there is only one Hebrew Bible. He has not considered the possibility that there could have been *other* narrative texts more closely aligned with everyday religious practices. There could have been an alternative tradition, with bookish adherents as well as folkish adherents.

This is what Margaret Barker argues. Barker, a non-LDS biblical scholar, has made an extensive case that a tradition that predated what Dever calls the book religion of the Bible not only thrived, but also survived to provide the milieu in which Christianity took hold. She has not only searched between the lines of the Bible to discover this older tradition but has also embraced a wide range of extrabiblical texts, art, iconography, architecture, and archaeological artifacts to find fragments and clues that reveal a “sophisticated theology expressed in subtle stories and vivid pictures.”<sup>16</sup> She calls it “temple theology” or “wisdom theology” because at its heart were the temple sanctuary and the associated experiences of atonement, ascension, and revelation. She has identified many examples of narrative texts stemming from this tradition, apparently produced by its bookish adherents, including the Enochian texts, Jewish apocalyptic, and the wisdom literature. I would add the Book of Mormon to this list.

To be sure, Dever uses the Bible to illuminate an artifact when he can sidestep any obvious tampering to the text. Sometimes he reaches far into the past for elucidation. For example, he turns to the mythological texts found at Ugarit from pre-Israelite times (ca. 1400–1300 BC) to explain the first beliefs about the goddess Asherah, her family relationships, her symbols, and her character as a venerable matron (and he does note that these texts also presented the official version of the religion) (pp. 209–11, 255). Here is where the greatest

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16. Barker, “Fragrant Tree,” 1.

opportunity lies: reaching forward or outward as Barker has done with nonbiblical sources that plausibly perpetuate or recollect alternatives to the official religion of the Bible. The challenge presented by *any* ancient text, canonical or otherwise, is for us to do our very best to discern what is valuable and relevant and what is not.

Barker's work enables scholars to interpret the religious symbols and practices evident in ancient Syro-Palestinian material culture. The Enochian texts are the foundation of her work, and though mainstream scholars have been unable to date their origins or align them with an identifiable Jewish or Christian tradition,<sup>17</sup> Barker has simply taken that to be a clue that they stem from a *missing* tradition. Portions of Enoch may be as old as the Hebrew Bible.<sup>18</sup> In Barker's portrait of this tradition, there is less detail than in Dever's about the actual religious structures and objects of the countryside, but far more material on the meaning of temple symbolism in ancient Israel.

With that, I turn at last to a scrutiny of what Dever believes is the most remarkable artifact of ancient Israelite religion found to date. It is an elaborate terra-cotta rectangular pillar from tenth-century BC Ta'anach (p. 154). I believe that Dever's archaeology and Barker's reconstruction of wisdom theology come together to elucidate this artifact, also bringing light to our own Latter-day Saint temple tradition.

The pillar was found at a site that functioned as a high place serving the public, so the context is definitely cultic. The pillar is extraordinary to him, as it is to me, but for slightly different reasons (see description on pp. 219–23). Nearly three feet high (fig. 9), it appears to be a four-tiered fenestrated (windowed) model temple topped with a parapet that could serve as a receptacle for offering bowls. Each tier is guarded by two animal-like creatures facing forward. The lowermost pair are lions and stand on each side of a nude woman, with prominent breasts, wearing a Hathor wig—a symbol we know to depict Asherah (known for millennia as “the Lion Lady”). Her arms are upraised and

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17. E. Isaac, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 1:8.

18. Margaret Barker, *The Lost Prophet: The Book of Enoch and Its Influence on Christianity* (1988; repr., Sheffield, England: Sheffield Phoenix, 2005), 1.



Figure 9. Ta'anach offering stand.

she has the animals by their ears. The second-story denizens have human faces with leonine bodies and wings—clearly cherubim—and flank an opening thought to be a doorway. The third-story animals are again lions, and they flank the goat-and-tree icon mentioned earlier that is indicative of the tree of life and Asherah. According to Dever, the guardians of the fourth floor are lions, but another scholar identifies them as griffins.<sup>19</sup> Griffins have lion bodies with eagle wings. The lions/griffins stand behind a curious front panel wherein a quadruped—Dever suggests a bull calf—strides between

two elongated vertical objects and supports a blazing or winged sun on its back.

This front panel deserves some attention. Dever says that the two elongated objects on the front panel are stylized trees, but if so, they look rather windblown. With their scroll-shaped tops tapering to narrower bases, they look like tornadoes, evoking the winds that “bear the earth as well as the firmament of heaven, . . . the very pillars of heaven” (*1 Enoch* 18:3). Perhaps they are not trees, but rather evoke the “whirlwinds” that carried Enoch into heaven (*1 Enoch* 39:3) or the “whirlwind” that came to Ezekiel encompassing the strange creatures that he sees (*Ezekiel* 1:4). The curb around the roof is decorated with round objects that represent heavenly bodies.

19. J. Glen Taylor, “Was Yahweh Worshiped as the Sun?” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 20 (May/June 1994): 54, 55.

Dever does not interpret the icon in the middle, but Daniel Peterson has noted J. Glen Taylor's suggestion that the plaque does not depict a *bull* carrying the sun, but rather a *horse*.<sup>20</sup> The reformers in Josiah's (and Lehi's) time were concerned with horses and suns: Josiah "took away the horses that the kings of Judah had given to the sun, at the entering in of the house of the Lord . . . and burned the chariots of the sun with fire" (2 Kings 23:11).<sup>21</sup>

Ezekiel describes apostate Jerusalem turning away from the Lord's temple to venerate the sun: "He brought me into the inner court of

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20. See 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), 193–43, and the abridged version of that same article in Peterson, "Nephi and His Asherah," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9/2 (2000): 16–25.

Taylor understands this sun icon and the empty space in the second-floor doorway to point to an understanding of Yahweh as "an abstract, non-anthropomorphic deity." Taylor, "Was Yahweh Worshipped," 53. For me, the winged sun could identify the temple as Yahweh's own without indicating that he was present in the visible world (under the firmament). Appearing on the upper tier, the winged sun disc could also suggest that one is nearing the heavenly world. The empty doorway conveys an expectation of either entry from the visible world into the invisible (initiation) or vice versa (incarnation). However, Asherah is portrayed as present in the visible world. That will be important below. After the Josianic reform and destruction of the first temple, apocalyptic will mourn that "Wisdom could not find a place in which she could dwell; but a place was found (for her) in the heavens" (1 Enoch 42:1). That could be why some of her naoi are found empty.

21. It is worth noting that Lehi makes a *direct comparison* between the Lord and the sun in the very first chapter of the Book of Mormon: "And it came to pass that he saw One descending out of the midst of heaven, and he beheld that his luster was above that of the sun at noon-day" (1 Nephi 1:9). And Malachi, centuries later, says, "But unto you that fear my name shall the *Sun* of righteousness arise with healing in his *wings*; and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall" (Malachi 4:2, emphasis added). For Barker, this passage is about a feminine deity who has been "translated out of the text." She recalls the Great Lady Sun from Ugarit, an epithet for Asherah, and argues that the winged sun disc is a representation of her. See Barker, *Great High Priest*, 229–30.

A reading identical to Malachi's in every way but spelling is given in 3 Nephi 25:2: "But unto you that fear my name, shall the Son of Righteousness arise with healing in his wings." Sidney B. Sperry has suggested that the use of "Son" instead of "Sun" in the Book of Mormon text is a scribal error. He notes that in Hebrew, "son," *ben*, which is a masculine noun, sounds utterly different from "sun," *shemesh*, which is feminine in this passage. Confusion is only possible because the English words "son" and "sun" are homophones. "The Book of Mormon and Textual Criticism," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4/1 (1995): 181–82.

the Lord's house, and, behold, at the door of the temple of the Lord, between the porch and the altar, were about five and twenty men, with their backs toward the temple of the Lord, and their faces toward the east; and they worshipped the sun toward the east" (Ezekiel 8:16). But as we shall see shortly, there is much more about this stand that is allied with Ezekiel's visions than opposed.

Dever does not discuss the sun icon in any detail. Rather, the symbol that grabs his attention is the first-floor female figure. He names this "the most astonishing representation of Israelite iconography that we have ever found" (p. 220). For him, the evidence is overwhelmingly in favor of identifying this woman as Asherah, and he is incredulous that most scholars have resisted such a conclusion. "What more *explicit* evidence of the cult of Asherah in monarchic Israel do scholars realistically expect? Here she is, wearing nothing but a great big smile" (pp. 220–21).

But I would go a bit further. To me, *the Ta'anach stand is a plausible model of the creature in Ezekiel's visions.*<sup>22</sup> To my knowledge, this has never been suggested. Ezekiel describes first a whirlwind, a great cloud, fire, and the color amber (Ezekiel 1:4), elsewhere lamps (1:13) and lightning (1:14). If incense was burned in or on this stand, smoke and perhaps flames would have been emitted. In Ezekiel's second vision (Ezekiel 10), an angel is commanded by the Lord to reach in between the cherubim to gather coals—easy to do when the structure is fenestrated. The fenestrations themselves could have been the eyes that Ezekiel describes: "And their whole body, and their backs, and their hands, and their wings, and the wheels, were full of eyes round about" (Ezekiel 10:12).

Ezekiel describes a fourfold living creature, or four living creatures, each one having four faces, four wings, and human hands. We

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22. For sample works of art representing these visions, see Margaret Barker, *An Extraordinary Gathering of Angels* (London: MQ Publications, 2004). The Western paintings on pp. 118–19 were made a full millennium after Ezekiel wrote and seem to have lost the gist of his vision. However, the traditional Russian icon on page 190 is less distant from Ezekiel than the Ta'anach offering stand. The Russian work still understands that the goddess Wisdom was the heart of the interpretation. For an extended analysis of the Ezekiel visions, see Barker, *Great High Priest*, 168–84.

do not see sixteen faces on the Ta'anach stand, and only one pair of the creatures has wings (or two pairs, according to Taylor), though the structure is rectangular and does have four sides. The paired icons on the Ta'anach stand face only one direction, but it is not too difficult to imagine a closer approximation of Ezekiel's description if creatures were fashioned on each side of the stand, their bodies supporting the walls in much the same way the oxen of the bronze sea at the Jerusalem temple face outward from the center toward the four cardinal directions and carry a basin on their backs (1 Kings 7:25). In fact, Ezekiel 1:7 notes that the creatures "sparkled like the colour of burnished brass" and their feet were like calves' feet.

In Ezekiel 1:10, the creatures have the faces of men, lions, oxen, and eagles. In Ezekiel 10:14, the faces are of cherubim, men, lions, and eagles. The Ta'anach stand astonishingly depicts lions, men, cherubim, and if the fourth-floor figures are griffins, eagles as well. It is Barker's insights into the Enochian and apocalyptic literature that help us interpret the meaning of such creatures. She explains that the Enochic histories talk of the transformation of the patriarchs from animals (bulls or sheep) into men, and this change occurs when they are instructed by an archangel (1 *Enoch* 89:1, 36, 52).<sup>23</sup> "In visionary texts, 'man' is the conventional description of an angelic being"<sup>24</sup>—she cites Daniel 9:21; 10:5; and Revelation 21:17. Cherubim, of course, are heavenly creatures that we know from elsewhere in the Bible.<sup>25</sup> Cherub thrones are always associated with royalty or deity, and we have already seen that Asherah is depicted sitting on one on the Kuntillet 'Ajrūd storage jar. So we can be sure that the creatures on the Ta'anach stand are understood to be heavenly beings, and we see them here and elsewhere closely associated with the goddess.

Of particular note is the fact that the men of the second tier are wearing Hathor wigs. Wearing the wig of Qudshu, the Holy One, would have been a sign of holiness, of having received purification and

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23. Barker, *Great High Priest*, 5; see also Barker, "Fragrant Tree," 10.

24. Barker, *Great High Priest*, 5.

25. For example, Genesis 3:24; Exodus 25:18; 1 Kings 6:23; 1 Chronicles 28:18; 2 Chronicles 3:10; Ezekiel 41:25. For a discussion, see Barker, *An Extraordinary Gathering*, 116–23.

wisdom from the Holy One.<sup>26</sup> These holy men could be understood to encode the Enochian metaphor that animals are made into men when they receive heavenly enlightenment. The Ta'anach stand is evidence that the "crown" Wisdom promises in Proverbs 1:9 and 4:9<sup>27</sup> may have been a Hathor wig. Perhaps the priests or priestesses at the high places wore Hathor wigs themselves.

The goddess's stance here amidst these heavenly beings, some in her grip and some in her wig, leads me to think of her as a mistress of the angels.<sup>28</sup> The equivalent expression for Yahweh would be Lord of Hosts. So she is Lady of Hosts. That the goddess is pictured on an Israelite model temple, Yahweh's fiery throne encrusted with icons of angels, suggests that the ancients believed that she had an important role there, confirming my interpretation above of other offering stands. Further confirmation comes in the form of "naoi" (fig. 10), smaller terra-cotta model temples, found in the biblical lands of Cyprus, Phoenicia, and Transjordan and dating between the tenth and eighth centuries BC. These are one-room houses,

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26. Solomon's reputation as a wise judge may have come from this angelic power. In 1 Kings 3:4, we read of Solomon offering sacrifices and incense in the high places. Specifically, he goes to Gibeon, "the great high place" (this was before the Jerusalem temple was built), and, after offering burnt offerings, has an important dream there. If these were invocation offerings, they seem to have worked. He sees the Lord and asks him for "an understanding heart to judge" (1 Kings 3:9), though in 2 Chronicles it is "wisdom and knowledge" that he requests so as to become a capable judge (2 Chronicles 1:10). The apocryphal *Wisdom* includes in the story a cognizance on Solomon's part that he is asking for the goddess Wisdom, though this account explains carefully that this gift is asked of the Lord, "for he is the guide even of Wisdom" (*Wisdom* 7:15; see *Wisdom* 7:4–8:18). Solomon becomes known as a wise judge, and in the 1 Kings account (part of the Deuteronomist history) the story of the two women and a child follows directly (1 Kings 3:16–28). This vignette is *not* what was understood by heavenly wisdom. The Deuteronomists downgrade it by suggesting Solomon had a knack for settling domestic disputes, making him the Judge Wapner of his day. Though this kind of practical wisdom may have been a by-product of heavenly enlightenment, the wisdom tradition understood true wisdom to be esoteric knowledge of and from the heavens.

27. "For they shall be an ornament of grace unto thy head, and chains about thy neck" (Proverbs 1:9). "She shall give to thine head an ornament of grace: a crown of glory shall she deliver to thee" (Proverbs 4:9). Notice that the Asherah pendant shows the goddess wearing not only the Hathor wig, but also a necklace.

28. She has also been called "Mistress of the Caprids," among others. See Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), 155.

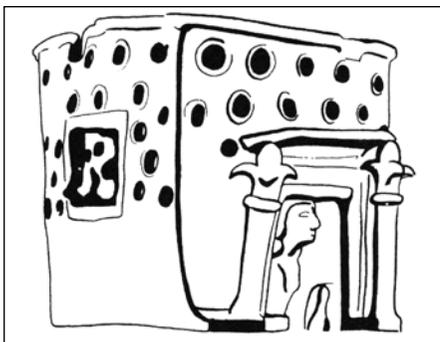


Figure 10. Naos, or model temple. Reprinted with permission from Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 165, fig. 225.

decorated with palm-tree columns and heavenly bodies. The lone Syro-Palestinian version is empty, but in other versions Asherah in her wig stands at the doorway and peers out from the windows (pp. 221–22).

Isolated biblical texts bear out the goddess’s association with the temple, though this is not an argument Dever makes. I have elsewhere<sup>29</sup> argued that the beseeching Wisdom figure in Proverbs 1–9 should be

understood as standing at the temple and calling out in invitation:

Doth not wisdom cry? and understanding put forth her voice? She standeth in the top of high places [*marom*], 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. Unto you, O men, I call; and my voice is to the sons of man. O ye simple, understand wisdom: and, ye fools, be ye of an understanding heart. (Proverbs 8:1–5)

In a similar passage, “Wisdom crieth without; she uttereth her voice in the streets: She crieth in the chief place of concourse, in the openings of the gates: in the city she uttereth her words, saying: . . . Turn you at my reproof: behold, *I will pour out my spirit unto you*, I will make known my words unto you” (Proverbs 1:20–21, 23, emphasis added).<sup>30</sup>

Barker takes the phrase *pour out my spirit* to be an allusion to a ritual anointing that was part of a process that conferred angelic status. We read about it in the Old Testament passages that describe the

29. Von Feldt, “My Secret Is with the Righteous.”

30. The phrase *pour out my spirit* occurs only twice more in the Old Testament: Joel 2:28–29, here associated with spiritual gifts. But it occurs, at least in variation, twelve times in the Book of Mormon.

consecration of Aaron and his sons for high priestly duties (Exodus 29:7, 21 and Leviticus 8:12, 30), but it is much more vibrant in the pseudepigraphic *2 Enoch*:

The Lord said [to Michael],  
 “Let Enoch come up and  
 stand in front of my face  
 forever!” And the glorious  
 ones did obeisance and  
 said, “Let him come up.”  
 The Lord said to Michael,  
 “Take Enoch, and extract

(him) from the earthly  
 clothing. And anoint him  
 with the delightful oil, and  
 put (him) into the clothes  
 of glory.” And Michael  
 extracted me from my  
 clothes. He anointed me  
 with the delightful oil; and  
 the appearance of that oil  
 is greater than the greatest  
 light, its ointment is like  
 sweet dew, and its fragrance  
 like myrrh; and its shining  
 is like the sun. And I gazed  
 at all myself, and I had  
 become like one of the  
 glorious ones, and there was  
 no observable difference. (*2 Enoch* 22:6–10)

We may associate the symbols in this text—oil, dew (water), light (fire), and sweet fragrance (incense)—with ancient offering stands. Barker even notes that one scholar has suggested that an anointing ritual was in fact performed for the “guardians” of rural high places.<sup>31</sup> If vessels of oil were placed on the fenestrated stands—and indeed Dever describes an olive press at Dan (p. 146)—then that oil perched atop a throne of burning incense would likely be understood as oil from the fragrant tree of life that we have discussed.<sup>32</sup> And likewise,



Figure 11. Model temples, such as this tabernacle of sugar of the Nauvoo Temple, are known in the modern church. As a former Primary president, I once led a group of children in fashioning “tabernacles of sugar.” They served a didactic purpose. Permission by Alyson Skabelund Von Feldt.

31. Barker, *Great High Priest*, 127 n. 80.

32. Barker has found texts that make the direct connection between the tree and its oil; see her discussion in *Great High Priest*, 129–33.

if water filled the bowls, this might have been thought to represent the fountain of righteousness that Enoch sees, set in the heavens, “which does not become depleted and is surrounded completely by numerous fountains of wisdom. All the thirsty ones drink (of the water) and become filled with wisdom. (Then) their dwelling places become with the holy, righteous, and elect ones” (*1 Enoch* 48:1).

If this is true, then the ancients may have watched for an approaching apocalypse. They may have hoped that Yahweh would come to their miniature mountain thrones to offer final judgment and share with them “all the secrets of wisdom. . . . In those days, mountains shall dance like rams; and the hills shall leap like kids satiated with milk” (*1 Enoch* 51:3–4; see *1 Enoch* 38). The ancient folk may have hoped that Wisdom would nourish them with heavenly knowledge to their utter satiation, and this was symbolized by the rampant goats pictured nibbling from her tree of life.

Dever says that “many dozen” vessels that functioned like the Ta’anach stand have been found at small shrines, but he says they are never mentioned in the Bible in connection with any known ritual. However, there is a possible Book of Mormon allusion to the terracotta temples. The angel who visits King Benjamin states:

For behold, the time cometh, and is not far distant, that with power, the Lord Omnipotent who reigneth, who was, and is from all eternity to all eternity, shall come down from heaven among the children of men, and shall dwell in a *tabernacle of clay*, and shall go forth amongst men, working mighty miracles, such as healing the sick, raising the dead, causing the lame to walk, the blind to receive their sight, and the deaf to hear, and curing all manner of diseases. (Mosiah 3:5)

The context provides evidence that Book of Mormon peoples may have known of such model temples or that the angel was using language from a lost text that referred to them. He pairs the image of the Lord’s eternal reign—God sitting on his *throne in heaven*—with an anticipated emergence from an *earthly throne*. It would have been the symbolic equivalent of explaining that the Lord would come through

the veil of the temple from the holy of holies (representing his emergence from the invisible world into the visible world). Evoking the symbolism of a clay model temple would teach not just of his condescension, but also of his incarnation. Alma also expects the Redeemer to dwell in a “mortal tabernacle” (Alma 7:8). Moroni uses “tabernacle of clay” as well:

And now, my beloved son, notwithstanding their hardness, let us labor diligently; for if we should cease to labor, we should be brought under condemnation; for we have a labor to perform whilst in this *tabernacle of clay*, that we may conquer the enemy of all righteousness, and rest our souls in the kingdom of God. (Moroni 9:6)

The context here is different, and though Moroni clearly knew that a “tabernacle of clay” meant a mortal body, he does not seem to be employing any additional meanings.

I have suggested that the Ta’anach offering stand represents the throne of God. I have discussed its two Asherah icons and possible Yahweh symbol. I have considered that the offerings associated with this stand may have been invocation offerings rather than memorial offerings. I infer that the men-cherubim wearing the Hathor wigs could be understood to be mortals who have received wisdom and been transformed into angels. So, taken all together and understood in light of the wisdom tradition, *the Ta’anach stand may well be physical evidence of a theology of apotheosis*. In the countryside of Israel in family shrines, ordinary men and perhaps women sought heavenly wisdom. They may have believed they could become holy ones, ascend to the throne of Yahweh, and receive cosmic knowledge. They may have understood that the power to bestow this experience was in the hands of Asherah, and their offerings of invocation were symbols of her life-giving essence. If we add a Book of Mormon text to the interpretation, we can see that the stand, like others of its kind, may also have encoded the incarnation of Yahweh. Because the Ta’anach stand is so productively interpreted by Ezekiel’s vision, it is possible

that apocalyptic has found new roots—in the ancient religion of the countryside.

Ezekiel is an exilic text, written in Babylon. Could Ezekiel have known about this pillar created more than six hundred years earlier? We know that he was a temple priest (Ezekiel 1:3), so the iconography of this object may have been part of the temple experience. Perhaps he had seen such an object, even used it in ritual. Perhaps he was not a Jerusalem priest after all, but a priest of the countryside. There is additional evidence in the text of Ezekiel that the prophet embraced the older traditions of the patriarchs—the folkish religion that was being “renewed” by the elite Israelites. Ezekiel uses the epithet “El Shadday,” a name for God found only in the oldest strata of the biblical text (Ezekiel 5:5). The Authorized Version translates it “Almighty God,” but Dever himself (in a discussion not directly related to the Ta’anach stand) shows that

“Shadday” means “mountain,” here possibly in the dual, so the divine name is really “El, the One of the mountains.” . . . In the Ugaritic texts, El in particular sits on the throne at the base of the cosmic Mt. Saphon . . . at the sources of two waters, sweet and salt. . . . The Hebrew term *shad*, “mountain,” derives from earlier West Semitic *thad*, “breast.” Thus the twin mountain peaks “Shadday” are likened to two breasts (think of the name “Grand Tetons” for the high-peaked Wyoming ranges). (p. 257)

This gives another reason to interpret the offering stands as representative of the mountain throne of God, but Barker takes the etymology of the word *Shadday* one step further. She points out that Ezekiel sees “two figures: one enthroned above the firmament . . . and then there was another figure or cluster of figures . . . beneath the firmament. *It is this cluster that is so hard to describe; perhaps a fourfold Living One, known as the Spirit of Life [hayyah], or perhaps the Spirit of Life in the midst of the fourfold group.*”<sup>33</sup> She suggests that the living creature itself could have been understood as a breasted God. To see Asherah depicted *twice* on the Ta’anach stand, as a tree of life *and* as

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33. Barker, *Great High Priest*, 251.

a nude woman, both depictions underneath the object's throne roof and parapet of stars, certainly seems to suggest that Ezekiel had her in mind when he described the creature and the voice of El Shadday.

More evidence comes from taking a second look at “the image of jealousy, which provoketh to jealousy” that Ezekiel describes seeing in the temple (Ezekiel 8:3). Barker points out that the addition of one Hebrew character delivers a much more sensible reading: Ezekiel saw “the image of the Creatrix who gives life.” The Creatress Who Gives Life was a epithet for Athirat/Elat/Asherah known from Ugaritic literature.<sup>34</sup> That Ezekiel's living creature was understood as the goddess is further confirmed by early Russian Christian icons—produced roughly the same number of centuries after Ezekiel's vision as the Ta'anach stand was produced before—of Sophia (Wisdom) enthroned beneath the throne of the Lord and the firmament of heaven.<sup>35</sup>

The Hebrew goddess died hard. Through her, resurrection was once offered to her respondents. Now, archaeology offers a resurrection to the Lost Lady.

### What Are the Implications for the LDS Theology of a Mother Goddess?

What does this all mean for a Latter-day Saint understanding of a Mother in Heaven?

For his part, Dever suggests that his book is a “*humanist* manifesto.” By studying the ancient culture from the perspective of the common folk, while hoping not to ignore the “transcendent dimensions” of religion, he has endeavored “to ‘humanize’ religion—to put a face on it, often a woman's face. This is the first face that we all see upon coming into this world, and in that face, the face of a mother, we glimpse the unconditional love that is the essence of all true religion” (p. 316). He says, “I have tried simply to anticipate her emancipation by showing that in the world of ancient Israel, among other places and

34. Barker, *Great High Priest*, 233. See also Kevin L. Barney, “Do We Have a Mother in Heaven?” at Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research Web site, [www.fairlds.org/pubs/MotherInHeaven.pdf](http://www.fairlds.org/pubs/MotherInHeaven.pdf), p. 5 (accessed 7 February 2007).

35. Barker, *Extraordinary Gathering*, 190.

times, [the Great Mother] was once alive and well. . . . Archaeology brings her back to life” (p. 317). It is indeed gratifying and comforting when the maternal is restored to its place in the divine. Paulsen’s list of contemporary convergences toward Joseph Smith’s teaching of a Mother in Heaven includes *Did God Have a Wife?* for good reason.<sup>36</sup>

But still, from a theological perspective, there remains a good deal of ambiguity. Even in Barker’s robust theology of the Lost Lady, heavenly relationships and roles come in and out of focus. If the ancients knew that God had a wife, what does that mean for Latter-day Saints? Can we conclude that our modern belief in a Mother in Heaven is restored from the period of the judges and the monarchy?

Dever emphasizes that the Deuteronomistic editors of the Bible endeavored to excise or obscure references to Asherah. They sought to cover up or discredit her veneration. They judged her influence to be negative, her worship condemnable. What about Book of Mormon prophets? Lehi lived in Jerusalem during the reign of Josiah and the subsequent four kings. As a literate, prosperous man, he would have known about the religious controversies of the time including countryside temple worship and the veneration of Asherah/Wisdom. But Lehi may not necessarily have been sympathetic to all of the reforms. Richard Elliott Friedman argues powerfully that much of the Bible as we have it was written and edited by Mushite and Aaronid priests—Levitical priests descended from Moses and Aaron.<sup>37</sup> But Lehi was not a Levite. He was from the tribe of Joseph. Nevertheless, he apparently was a priest—a Melchizedek priest.<sup>38</sup> The distinctive concerns of

36. Paulsen, “Reassessing Joseph Smith’s Theology,” 105.

37. Richard E. Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997). E was written by a Mushite priest from the city Shiloh in the northern kingdom (pp. 70–86). D was also written by Mushite priests connected with Shiloh (pp. 122–30). P was written by an Aaronid priest of Jerusalem (pp. 188–216). First and Second Chronicles are also tied to the Aaronid priesthood (pp. 211–13). R was an Aaronid priest (pp. 218–21). These are conclusions that stem from the Documentary Hypothesis of the Bible’s authorship, which I accept as reasonable, all the while remembering that it is theory, not fact. For more on the Documentary Hypothesis and its implications for LDS students of the scriptures, see Kevin L. Barney, “Reflections on the Documentary Hypothesis,” *Dialogue* 33/1 (2000): 57–99.

38. That Lehi was a descendent of Joseph is explained in 1 Nephi 5:14; that he was a Melchizedek priest can be deduced from Alma 13:1–19.

the Levitical priests that we read of in the Bible—for instance, obsession with purity laws, technicalities of temple construction, insistence on centralization of worship in Jerusalem, focus on the Davidic covenant, elevation of the Torah over personal revelation (Deuteronomy 29:29), downplaying of the anthropomorphism of God, strict monotheism—are absent from the Book of Mormon. Lehi offered sacrifices (1 Nephi 5:9), Nephi built a temple (2 Nephi 5:16), and Jacob was consecrated a priest (2 Nephi 5:26; 6:2) despite their non-Levitical descent. They practiced the law of Moses, but only as an interim arrangement while awaiting the arrival of the Savior (2 Nephi 25:24–27). Indeed, the constellation of theological images and concerns in the Book of Mormon are those of the alternative tradition that Barker has pieced together: the throne and kingship of God, the angels/hosts of heaven, fallen angels, the great judgment, the high mountain of God, sonship, atonement, ascent, wisdom, the temple, the tree of life, the fountain of living waters, and the Melchizedek priesthood.<sup>39</sup> Kevin Christensen has even identified evidence that Jacob deliberately affirmed beliefs that had been under attack by the reformers back in Jerusalem.<sup>40</sup> Most obviously, they took issue with the rejection of faith in a Redeemer.

Book of Mormon authors do not mention Asherah by name, but they do incorporate her symbols. It is Lehi who introduces tree of life

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39. See Kevin Christensen, “The Temple, the Monarchy, and Wisdom: Lehi’s World and the Scholarship of Margaret Barker,” in *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 449–522. See also Christensen, “Paradigms Regained: A Survey of Margaret Barker’s Scholarship and Its Significance for Mormon Studies,” *FARMS Occasional Papers* 2 (2001). Christensen’s later essays take a closer look at the relationship of the prophets to the reform and argue that Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob knew of the reform and deliberately opposed it: “Nephi, Wisdom, and the Deuteronomist Reform,” *Insights* 23/2 (2003): 2–3; “Jacob’s Connections to First Temple Traditions,” *Insights* 23/4 (2003): 2–3, and his series of articles “Plain and Precious Things Restored: Why Margaret Barker Matters,” “Plain and Precious Things Restored: Spiritual Blindness,” “Plain and Precious Things Restored: Margaret Barker and Josiah’s Reform,” “Plain and Precious Things Restored: Margaret Barker and Wisdom,” “Plain and Precious Things Restored: Margaret Barker and the Queen of Heaven,” *Meridian* online magazine, at [meridianmagazine.com/ideas](http://meridianmagazine.com/ideas) (accessed 7 February 2007 by searching on keywords in the archive).

40. Christensen, “The Temple,” 502–4.

imagery into the Book of Mormon,<sup>41</sup> and it is used persistently thereafter.<sup>42</sup> Daniel Peterson has shown that Nephi was fully aware of the association of this symbol with motherhood because he recognized that the fair virgin Mary with a baby in her arms symbolized the tree of life.<sup>43</sup>

The Jews who obtained power in Jerusalem after the exile to Babylon (which Lehi's family so narrowly escaped) remained hostile to Asherah. Besides downplaying her role in the preexilic religion, they apparently chose not to restore the menorah—a powerful tree of life symbol that was possibly enshrined in the first temple's holy of holies—to the holy of holies in the second temple.<sup>44</sup> But meanwhile, in the Americas, Lehi and his descendants were embracing the iconography. There is no evidence whatsoever of antipathy toward the goddess in the Book of Mormon.

Nephi, under the angel's guidance, identifies the fruit of the tree of life as the "love of God" (1 Nephi 11:22). This phrase is usually understood to mean that partakers will be filled with loving feelings from God or like God's. But the "love of God" could also mean not merely a possession of God's—the loving feelings that he directs or bestows—but rather the object of God's love—the person whom he loves. As Kevin Christensen put it, "a who as well as a what."<sup>45</sup> A beloved wife, perhaps.

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41. Lehi sees a tree whose fruit would make one happy, but he does not identify this as the tree of life. If Lehi was familiar with the type of visions described in *1 Enoch*—and he may well have been if he had had one or had had access to texts or oral traditions about *Enoch*—he would have known that many types of trees are envisioned in heaven, with different symbolic meanings. Perhaps Nephi was familiar with this broad tree imagery as well, and a desire to confirm the correct interpretation of the tree provoked his prayerful questioning.

42. See Bruce W. Jorgensen, "The Dark Way to the Tree: Typological Unity in the Book of Mormon," in *Literature of Belief: Sacred Scripture and Religious Experience*, ed. Neal E. Lambert (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1981), 217–31.

43. Peterson explains that some evidence suggests Asherah was also understood to be a virgin. See Peterson, "Nephi and His Asherah: A Note on 1 Nephi 11:8–23," 206–7. It is certainly a paradox because the buxom pillar figurines generously offering up their breasts hardly conjure up the image of demure virginity, but rather frank maternal practicality. I've seen many a nursing mother do it, but never an unmarried young woman.

44. Barker, "Fragrant Tree," 5–6.

45. Kevin Christensen, personal conversation, May 2003.

Lehi said that the “fruit was desirable to make one happy” (1 Nephi 8:10). Peterson was the first to point out that Lehi was playing with words here just like the author of Proverbs, who connects Wisdom’s fruit with Asherah by using the root of her name, *ʾashre*, in a chiasmic proverb that teaches about the fruit’s value.<sup>46</sup> Italicized words are from the same root:

*Happy* [*ʾashre*] is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding. For the merchandise of it is better than the merchandise of silver, and the gain thereof than fine gold. She is more precious than rubies: and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her. Length of days is in her right hand; and in her left hand riches and honour. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her: and *happy* [*meʾushshar*] is every one that retaineth her. (Proverbs 3:13–18)

I propose that this wordplay is also perpetuated in the Book of Mormon by Lehi’s and Nephi’s use of the word “strait” in connection with the “strait and narrow path” (1 Nephi 8:20, 2 Nephi 31:9, and 2 Nephi 31:18). Noel B. Reynolds and Royal Skousen have written of problems with the use of the word *strait* rather than *straight* in these verses, and they make a strong case in favor of the second choice.<sup>47</sup> By using the phrase in his final admonition (whatever the spelling of the word), Nephi refers us back to the primary tree of life sequence in the Book of Mormon. As we have seen, Nephi knew that the tree of life signified Asherah. But with the corrected spelling, we can deduce that Lehi and Nephi are using wordplay in association with the path that

46. For a more detailed discussion, see Barney, “Do We Have a Mother?” 4; see also Peterson, “Nephi and His Asherah: A Note on 1 Nephi 11:8–23,” 211–12.

47. Noel B. Reynolds and Royal Skousen, “Was the Path Nephi Saw ‘Strait and Narrow’ or ‘Straight and Narrow?’” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 10/2 (2001): 30–33. See Paul Y. Hoskisson, “The Use of Strait and Straight in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12/2 (2003): 58–71; and John S. Welch, “Straight (Not Strait) and Narrow,” forthcoming in the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*.

leads to the tree of life. Dever explains the background of the root of the word *asherah*:

The etymology of the Hebrew word is unclear, but it may derive from a verb meaning “to tread, go straight.” The 14th-13th-century B.C. Canaanite mythological texts from Ugarit on the coast of Syria portray Asherah there as “Lady Asherah of the Sea,” her name meaning (according to [s]ome scholars) “She Who Treads/Subdues Sea.” (p. 101)

With this etymology in mind, Barker suggests that a plausible translation of the tree of life verse in Proverbs is “She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her, he who holds her is made happy/blessed/set on the straight path” (Proverbs 3:18).<sup>48</sup> That both Lehi and Nephi would describe the path leading to eternal life as “straight and narrow” means more than just that it is neither crooked nor wide. They were linking the path with Asherah, disclosing their awareness that the tree of life was her symbol. They use the root of her name in describing both the *path* toward the tree and the *fruit* of the tree. Book of Mormon prophets knew of Asherah and her iconography, but they made no effort to eschew her.

So I ask again, can we conclude from all this evidence—Dever’s archaeology, Barker’s wisdom theology, and now the Book of Mormon tree of life imagery—that the Latter-day Saint doctrine of a Mother in Heaven is a restoration of the ancient Israelite belief in the Goddess Asherah/Wisdom?

I regretfully suggest that no, it is not. Though the Book of Mormon prophets seem to allude to Asherah, we have very little modern revelation by which to substantiate and flesh out this belief. We may not yet connect the dots between the Asherah of ancient Israel, the tree of life image in the Book of Mormon, and the very limited (though potent) modern-day prophetic teachings about a Heavenly Mother.

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48. Barker, “Fragrant Tree,” 13. I would add that the etymology of the word *Asherah* may also be the reason why Wisdom’s way is described as a path of “uprightness” (*yosher*) because uprightness derives from “straight” (*yashar*). See Proverbs 2:13.

## Summary

What Dever's book contributes is a strong case that the ancient Israelites believed that God had a wife. This Woman had an important and powerful place in the everyday lives of the common folk of ancient Israel. She was a creatress, assisting with the fashioning and fertility of the world, her enthusiasm spilling forth as delight, maybe even singing and dancing. Though her clay forms were a daily domestic companion to the women of ancient Israel, she was also closely associated with more sacred spaces—family shrines, high places, and temples. She provided nourishment from heaven and guided those who would listen toward the throne of Yahweh. She had an essential role in apotheosis. It is clear that the early Book of Mormon prophets seemed to know and embrace her as well.

Only a handful of LDS thinkers have taken a scholarly approach to the study of the divine feminine. I must observe that it has been men in the main—recently Daniel Peterson, Kevin Barney, Kevin Christensen<sup>49</sup>—who have successfully turned to the scriptures and other ancient texts to discern what information can be found there and to set their insights in a context that is compatible with LDS theology and practice. Others have been more likely to mourn the lack of scriptural teachings about the goddess. I myself have been guilty of such fretting. My impression is that the church membership in general assumes that there is little if any fruit in the scriptures on this topic, and they prefer to avoid baseless speculation.

Not until the last four decades did archaeology produce evidence that Israel venerated a goddess. Perhaps that is as Heavenly Father has wanted it to be; his judgment may have been that the world was not yet ready. However, we cannot escape the possibility that any dearth of doctrine may be our own fault as individuals. It is telling that a non-LDS Methodist preacher, a woman, was the first to reconstruct an ancient theology of Wisdom that is at home in the LDS milieu. I have come to believe that the scriptures—ancient and modern—and

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49. Peterson, "Nephi and His Asherah: A Note on 1 Nephi 11:8–23"; Barney, "Do We Have a Mother?"; Christensen, "Plain and Precious Things and the Kingdom of Heaven."

noncanonical ancient religious texts are bursting with evidence of the goddess, some of it quite direct, but we have been oblivious to it. Archaeology is yielding its treasures as well. Dever believes that we are on the precipice of an “archaeological ‘revolution’ in the study of ancient Israelite religion, one that will render *all* previous histories obsolete” (p. 62). This revolution will certainly *not* render the Book of Mormon obsolete. As I hope I have shown here, it may well strengthen its truth claims.

We cannot find certain truth through a study of texts and archaeology alone, but we can be sure that new revelation is more likely to be forthcoming when we have made good use of the knowledge that is already available.

In the book of Tobit, the angel Raphael helps Tobias secure the materials to cure his father’s blindness. When Tobias is reunited with Tobit and applies the concoction, the film falls away from his father’s eyes and he rejoices with his son (Tobit 11:7–15). We may pray that Raphael will pay us a visit soon and that our eyes will see again, too.