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The Tree of Life: From Eden to Eternity

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The Tree of Life: From Eden to Eternity, edited by John W. Welch and Donald W. Parry (Provo: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship and Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011).

One of humankind's most sacred and abiding symbols is the tree of life. From earliest recorded religious belief, that singular image encompassed the sense of our humanity, rooted deeply in this earthly life with branches stretching outward, heavenward, in hope of the divine. From the Garden of Eden to Lehi's dream, tree of life imagery is particularly evocative within Mormonism, and many contributors to this book are Latter-day Saints writing from scholarly and religious points of view. The tree likewise takes a central place in the development of various human belief systems. Scholars whose works appear in this collection explore the origins and significance of the tree as it is found in art, history, and religious tradition in cultures across the world.

This book includes eleven chapters and an extensive bibliography. The first six chapters focus in on biblical, noncanonical, and early Christian texts, including the Book of Mormon. For example, in considering tree of life imagery in the Hebrew Bible, Donald Parry discusses the trees of the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2–3; Andrew Skinner finds substantial correlating “touch points” among Mesopotamian, biblical, and Jewish perspectives. Margaret Barker traces patterns relating to Enoch's fragrant tree; and chapters by John Welch and Wilfred Griggs discuss the tree of life and the cross in the New Testament and early Christian art

and literature. Charles Swift's essay on Lehi's archetypal vision of the tree of life shows how the tree of life thrives at the heart of the entire Book of Mormon. The remaining chapters explore even broader landscapes. Two chapters address discoveries of the tree in the Western Hemisphere: Allen Christenson looks at Mayan culture and theology; Jaime Lara offers the Catholic Church's view of the tree as a symbol in Central American traditions. Daniel Peterson offers additional insight into the appearance of the tree in the Qur'an, and John Lunquist samples the evidence concerning the tree of life in southeast Asian religion and folklore. I am not aware of any other scholarly book that has gathered together lore on the tree of life from so many traditions around the world; this work is a vital and distinctive contribution to the literature in cross-cultural and religious studies, as Richard Oman graphically demonstrates.

Whether among Abrahamic religions or in Asian creeds and folklore, both anciently and into modernity, the symbolic and religious significance of the tree of life has been expressed for millennia. Some elements of the various stories about the tree are unique, but certain features appear with significant regularity across geography and time, including the tree—in fact, sometimes two trees—as life-giver. There is often a gardener, whether a king, prince, or god, and a pure place, such as a garden, temple, or mountain. The assemblage of these perspectives is interesting and valuable for the ways they are unique as much as for the ways they are the same.

—Liza Olsen