



2015

Beholding the Tree of Life: A Rabbinic Approach to the Book of Mormon

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Recommended Citation

Rust, Richard Dilworth (2015) "Beholding the Tree of Life: A Rabbinic Approach to the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 54 : Iss. 3 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol54/iss3/10>

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Bradley J. Kramer. *Beholding the Tree of Life: A Rabbinic Approach to the Book of Mormon*.

Draper, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2014.

Reviewed by Richard Dilworth Rust

Ever since his mission president in Florida assigned him to make the Jews in Miami his special project, Bradley J. Kramer has been passionate in learning about and from the Jewish people. This has included studying Hebrew, visiting synagogues, attending seminars and Torah classes, and doing everything he could to understand better how Jews approach their scriptures. Also holding an MA in English (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) and being a devoted student of the Book of Mormon, Bradley Kramer in *Beholding the Tree of Life* invites his Mormon readers to “understand the things which were spoken unto the Jews . . . [through being] taught after the manner of the things of the Jews” (2 Ne. 25:5). The book fits well the main purpose of the Contemporary Studies in Scripture series of Greg Kofford Books in its exploration of the “richness and complexity found in the standard works.”

Following Nephi, who understood “the things of the Jews” and who “beheld” the tree of life in his vision, Kramer invites his readers to use rabbinic principles embodied in Nephi’s vision in order to read the Book of Mormon more carefully and rigorously. These principles were put forth by the Talmudic sages, developed by classic medieval Jewish commentators, and emphasized by many contemporary rabbis. In this book that links rabbinic approaches to the Hebrew scriptures and studies of the Book of Mormon, Bradley Kramer sets forth tools developed through centuries by rabbis that help one connect to Jewish modes of studying scripture and help one find greater meanings in the Book of Mormon.

A rabbinic approach, as described by Rabbi Morris Kertzer, involves spending “a long time on a page. We do not read rapidly through a biblical text, so much as we read a single verse or two, and let our eyes meander through various commentaries on the page, playing with the

various ways Jews in times past have read a passage before us.”¹ In chapter 1, “The Fruit and the Tree,” Kramer introduces several key principles prominent in the rabbinic interpretive tradition. Believing that God wrote the entire Torah, Talmudic rabbis and their medieval descendants considered that each element of the Torah’s text—“every word and action, even gaps in the text—possessed potential significance for the reader.”² They believed the scriptures should be read deeply on several levels and from many perspectives. Too, they considered it essential to read the scriptures with others and in connection with other books. For them, knowledge was not the final goal; rather, scripture study itself was considered an experience with God.

In his second chapter, Kramer explains the four levels of rabbinic reading that are encapsulated in the acronym PaRDeS. It stands for *Peshat*, the literal level of meaning; *Remez*, the allegorical level; *Derash*, the sermonic level; and *Sod*, the mystical level. Kramer reveals these levels at work in the Book of Mormon. He demonstrates how both Nephi and Moroni encourage their readers “to have a *sod* experience with the text of the Book of Mormon as well as understand its plain sense, its allegorical meaning, and its sermonic significance” (42).

In his third chapter, Kramer explores additional tools found in rabbinic writings that apply well to close readings of the Book of Mormon. These “keys” or aspects of the scriptures comprise: opening sentences, the contiguity principle, similarities between different texts, differences between similar texts, repetitions and redundancies, and word order. Kramer cites Rabbi Avigdor Bonchek, a gifted Torah teacher at Hebrew University, who explains in his book *Studying the Torah* how following these keys provides a guide to in-depth interpretation of the Hebrew scriptures. Kramer then skillfully shows how they can be applied well to a close reading of the Book of Mormon.

It is not enough, though, to read closely on one’s own. In chapter 4, “Reading with Others,” Kramer tells how successful formal study of the Torah requires a partnership, or *chavrutot* (singular *chavrutah*). He quotes Rabbi Norman J. Cohen as saying, “Each one of us also needs someone with whom to study continually, from whom we can learn

1. Morris N. Kertzer, *What Is a Jew?*, 56, quoted by Bradley J. Kramer, *Beholding the Tree of Life: A Rabbinic Approach to the Book of Mormon* (Draper, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2014), xiv.

2. Norman J. Cohen, *The Way into Torah*, 74, quoted by Kramer, *Beholding*, 10.

in a variety of ways.”³ Kramer shows how Nephi could be considered a *chavrutah*. In *Beholding the Tree of Life*, which is even more meaningful on a rereading, Kramer implicitly becomes a *chavrutah* for his readers.

The first part of *Beholding the Tree of Life* treats what Kramer calls “Contemplating the Branches.” The second part, set forth in six chapters, is called “Appreciating the Roots.” It pertains to the Hebrew scriptures as the roots from which the rabbinic tradition sprang. Kramer shows how the study of the Torah was inseparably connected to the other books in the Jewish canon and quotes Rabbi Cohen’s affirmation that scriptural “intertextuality lies at the core of Torah learning.”⁴ Just as there is significant intertextuality between sections of the Torah and various writings of the Prophets, so is, as Kramer shows, the Book of Mormon intertwined with the Hebrew scriptures structurally as well as topically.

Kramer finds the basic historical structure of the Hebrew scriptures (beginnings, law-giving, judges, kings, prophets) to be mirrored chiasmatically in the Book of Mormon (prophets, kings, judges, law-giving, beginnings). In great detail, Kramer shows the Book of Mormon’s structural connection to the Hebrew scriptures. He says:

By presenting their historical periods in reverse and by providing positive examples, the Book of Mormon counters the negative examples that dominate the Hebrew Scriptures. In other words, just as the Torah and the Prophets move “downward,” describing period-by-period the mistakes that accumulate gradually, building inexorably to the final, widespread dispersion of the Israelite people, so the Book of Mormon moves upward, reiterating the gravity of those mistakes, to be sure, but also providing examples of people making better decisions and assuring its readers that the consequences of those historical mistakes are neither everlasting nor permanently part of their situation. (116)

Kramer also shows how ancient situations in the Hebrew scriptures and in the Book of Mormon are, through the rabbinic approach, translated into modern terms.

Kramer’s last chapter, “Providing Prophetic Hope,” is especially enlightening as it connects the closing books of the Book of Mormon with Genesis. As an example of discovering intertextuality, Kramer affirms that “God can yet salvage something salvific from Moroni’s dark situation. Echoing the way God brings light to the primordial

3. Cohen, *Way into Torah*, 96, quoted by Kramer, *Beholding*, 77.

4. Cohen, *Way into Torah*, 87, quoted by Kramer, *Beholding*, 106.

darkness—powerfully and miraculously—the book of Mormon shows how Mormon and Moroni’s bleak account will eventually enlighten future generations and save them from a similar fate” (183).

Kramer closes his book by affirming the Holy Ghost to be “the ultimate *chavrutah* [study companion] expressed in Christian terms. . . . All in all, the book of Moroni presents the Holy Ghost—whether it be as an ever-present study companion, as a timeless commentator, or the *Shechinah* itself—as a force that fosters an unending stream of aesthetic-spiritual information flowing from divinity to humanity” (198–99).

Inspired by reading *Beholding the Tree of Life: A Rabbinic Approach to the Book of Mormon*, I invited two colleagues in the Church History Library to join me in what over several months has been a rabbinic approach to reading scriptures. It has been a stimulating and deeply enriching experience to feast on the fruit of the Tree, the words of Christ.

Richard Dilworth Rust is Emeritus Professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He has published on nineteenth-century American authors and, for the scholarly Latter-day Saint audience, has published on the Book of Mormon as Literature in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, *BYU Studies*, and *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture*. In 1997, FARMS and Deseret Book brought out his book, *Feasting on the Word: The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon*. He and his wife currently serve in the Family and Church History Headquarters Mission.