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Stephen D. Ricks and John W. Welch, eds., *The Allegory of the Olive Tree: The Olive, the Bible, and Jacob 5*

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Reviewed by Terry B. Ball

While I was standing in a check-out line, an inquisitive sales clerk pointed to the book I was holding in my hand and asked, “What’s that?” I held up the volume for her to read the title, “The Allegory of the Olive Tree, edited by Stephen D. Ricks and John W. Welch.” Upon reading the title she exclaimed, “They wrote all that about the allegory of the olive tree?” The curious clerk’s incredulous response may well be representative of what many will think when first seeing this hefty volume on the shelf, yet those who read it will find it more fascinating than formidable. The book is a well-constructed anthology of articles that should prove to be the definitive work on the subject for years to come.

The contributions within the collection can be roughly grouped into five genres of studies: interpretive, comparative, historical, textual, and botanical. The lay reader will find the interpretive and botanical papers inspiring and insightful, while the comparative, textual, and historical works present a plethora of well-researched data to occupy the scholar.

**Interpretive Studies**

Of the interpretive studies in the volume, Paul Y. Hoskisson’s “The Allegory of the Olive Tree in Jacob” is the most comprehensive. Hoskisson offers a nice mixture of analytic, homiletic, and historical commentary as he answers four questions.

First, what do the symbols of the allegory represent? Second, why did Jacob include the allegory in his book of scripture? Third, to what historical events does the allegory allude in outlining God’s dealings with the
house of Israel? And fourth, what does the allegory have to say to us today? (p. 70)

In Hoskisson’s answers to these questions the reader will find carefully reasoned conclusions which, along with two similar works noted by Hoskisson,¹ are representative of most modern paradigms for understanding the allegory.

M. Catherine Thomas offers another paradigm by which the allegory can be interpreted. She suggests that the primary purpose of the allegory was to teach us of one aspect of the atonement, that of “the Lord’s on-going labors to bring his children back into oneness with him” (p. 12). Truman G. Madsen validates Thomas’s approach in his contribution as he discusses how much of the atonement was associated with, and symbolized by, the olive, the olive tree, the olive press, and olive oil.

Arthur Henry King’s contribution to the volume presents still another approach to studying and interpreting Zenos’s allegory or parable, as he prefers to call it.² He demonstrates how much can be learned from evaluating the language of the parable, and how it is constructed, i.e., considering such elements as “length of sentence, clause, phrase; stress intonation; word, sense, and image; scheme, trope; metaphor, topos, myth” (p. 141). His aim is to find “‘rhetorical truth,’ in distinction from ‘logical truth,’” in the parable (p. 141). As King analyzes the allegory using this enlightening approach, one finds that the rhetorical truths he uncovers lead to some important questions about, and insights into, the logical truths as well.

While the above contributions reflect modern interpretations of the allegory, Grant Underwood’s contribution, “Jacob 5 in the Nineteenth Century,” explores how the allegory was understood in the early period of the restored Church. Not surprisingly, the early interpretations of the allegory, especially those offered by


² For a discussion of the issue of nomenclature, see David Rolph Seely, “The Allegory of the Olive Tree and the Use of Related Figurative Language in the Ancient Near East and the Old Testament” (pp. 290–92).
Orson Pratt, appear very similar to those offered by Hoskisson and other recent commentators. Underwood also points out how early Church leaders occasionally found passages taken from the allegory useful in making a homiletic point. He notes that, in spite of the fact that the allegory was recognized as "‘one of the plainest parables, and sublimest prophecies’" (p. 67) in the canonized corpus, it received relatively little attention in the teachings of early Church leaders.

Although early Church leaders may not have mentioned Zenas’s writings often, the thesis of Noel B. Reynolds’s contribution, “Nephite Uses and Interpretations of Zenos,” is that the Book of Mormon prophets and authors did indeed frequently turn to Zenos for inspiration. He presents an impressive list of instances from the Book of Mormon wherein the words and themes of Zenos’s teachings may be either quoted or paraphrased. The striking number of cognates to Zenos’s language and teachings in the words of other prophets and teachers is a recurring theme in several of the comparative studies reported in the volume.

**Comparative Studies**

Several of the contributions evaluate what can be learned about Zenos’s allegory from other ancient texts containing similar themes and language. These valuable studies also frequently seek to identify a reason for the striking number of cognates to Zenos’s allegory in other texts. In “The Last Words of Cenez and the Book of Mormon,” John W. Welch considers how a text found in Pseudo-Philo dealing with a man named Cenez compares with what is attributed to Zenos and Zenock in the Book of Mormon. After carefully and thoroughly noting the cognates and some historical considerations, Welch suggests that, while Cenez most likely was not the same person as Zenos or Zenock, "perhaps they were associates, cousins, or known to each other" (p. 319), and thus arise the similar language and themes in the texts.

In another study, David Rolph Seely and John W. Welch explore the cognates to Zenos’s allegory in Old Testament texts, finally concluding that one simple explanation for the similarities
is that "Zenos probably preceded Psalms 52 and 80 by a few years and Hosea, Isaiah, and Jeremiah by several generations, and that all these later prophets knew and drew upon Zenos, often quite specifically" (pp. 343-44).

In the same fashion, John A. Tvedtnes, in his study entitled "Borrowings from the Parable of Zenos," examines similarities to Zenos's allegory in both the Bible and extracanonical books. After compiling an impressive and provocative collection of cognates, Tvedtnes affirms that "the corpus dealt with here leads me to conclude that a large number of other documents have borrowed from Zenos" (p. 415).

James E. Faulconer is more cautious in his explanation for the similarities to Zenos found in Romans 11. In identifying the similarities, Faulconer also notes the presence of significant differences. Rather than attributing the provenance of the similarities directly to Zenos, he suggests it is more likely that Paul had access to "some textual intermediary—such as a quotation [of Zenos] in a third text" (p. 358)—that influenced his writings in Romans 11. He discounts the notion that the striking cognates are due simply to a shared rhetorical tradition. Gary P. Gillum's bibliography of commentaries to Romans 11:17-24 provides a nice reference for additional study of the passage.

While Faulconer is not convinced that a shared rhetorical tradition can adequately explain the similarities between Romans 11 and Zenos's allegory, David Rolph Seely's observations, reported in his contribution dealing with related figurative language in ancient Near East texts, suggest that the abundance of cognates to Zenos may indeed be due to such a shared tradition. While noting that Zenos's allegory is unique in its "length, scope, detail, [and] span of history" (p. 294), he concludes that "the allegory of the olive tree relies on common comparisons known elsewhere, which are easily understood by people who are closely connected with agriculture in terms of tree and plant husbandry, productivity, and harvesting" (p. 301).

While it is plausible that Zenos's writings were widely circulated in the ancient Near East and thus influenced many other writers, it is also likely that many of the cognates to Zenos in other documents are simply the natural product of a people who share a common rhetorical tradition and agricultural background.
Because botanical metaphors, based especially on vegetation important to the people, are used so frequently by biblical prophets to teach the covenant people, it would seem strange if there were not some that dealt with the olive. For example, in Isaiah alone we find the prophet using more than 300 botanical metaphors to teach the covenant people about “their relationship to God, their need for repentance, their future according to His plan, and the ministry of their Messiah.” At least 20 different taxa are used in these more than 300 botanical metaphors. Naturally, because of its economic and agricultural import during Isaiah’s time, the olive is one of the taxa used, though explicitly only twice (Isaiah 17:6; 24:13). It seems likely Isaiah would have used the olive in these botanical metaphors whether or not he was aware of Zenos’s allegory.

If one were looking for a provenance for the ubiquitous use of botanical metaphor, especially that involving the likening of the covenant people to an olive tree, possibly that provenance identified by Nephi ought to be given first consideration. In Nephi’s explanation of the metaphor to his brethren, he said, “Behold, I say unto you, that the house of Israel was compared unto an olive-tree, by the Spirit of the Lord which was in our father” (1 Nephi 15:12). Could it be that the Psalmist, Zenos, Isaiah, Paul, Jeremiah, Hosea, and others likened Israel to an olive tree not because they all had access to a common text, but rather because they all had access to the Spirit of the Lord?

**Historical Studies**

A number of the contributions in the volume seek to add understanding to Zenos’s allegory by considering the historical origin, significance, use, and cultivation of the olive in the ancient Near East. John Gee and Daniel C. Peterson explore the topic in regard to the “Pre-Modern Mediterranean” world, while Stephen D. Ricks does the same for the “Second Temple Era and Early

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4 Olives may have also been included in many generic references to trees by Isaiah and certainly were involved in his references to oil.
Rabbinic Period.” The authors of both articles demonstrate careful scholarship as they consider topics both marginally and directly related to the allegory. The value of this genre of study is well illustrated as the authors are able to demonstrate and conclude that the composer of the allegory of the olive tree must have been well acquainted with ancient olive culture and its significance—someone like Zenas rather than a New World farm boy.

Three of the historical studies in the volume consider the use and symbolism of the olive in ancient religions. John Franklin Hall considers the issue in regard to Greco-Roman religion, Donald W. Parry does the same for ritual anointings in ancient Israelite religion, while John A. Tvedtnes explores the symbolism of the olive in ancient Israel and early Christian religions.

Hall notes that the olive played a more significant role in Greek than Roman religion. He suggests that such is the case because the Greeks were more influenced by Minoan Crete, which he identifies as the first culture to domesticate the olive. Although he found little in his study that reflected directly on Zenos’s allegory, he did observe that “for the Athenians the sacred tree of Athena [the olive] was the sacred symbolic tree of their race” (p. 256). The metaphor is reminiscent of Zenos’s likening the house or “race” of Israel to the olive tree.

Parry offers a fine review of the use and symbolism of olive oil in ritual anointings in ancient Israel. He centers most of his discussion on the ritual anointing of priests, prophets, and kings. A thorough discussion of ritual anointings in purification rites, e.g., Leviticus 14:15–18, is lacking. Still Parry is successful in establishing a precedent for a sacred connection between the olive and the House of Israel.

Tvedtnes entitled his historical study “Olive Oil: Symbol of the Holy Ghost,” yet he explores the symbolism of the olive in scripture and early Christian tradition far beyond its relationship to the Holy Ghost. Tvedtnes is an especially thorough scholar, leading him to include material on occasion that may be superfluous and not always germane to the topic at hand, e.g., “Among cannibals, the eating of human flesh is done not for nourishment but in an attempt to gain the strength of the slain enemy. Thus, eating Christ’s flesh symbolically gives us his qualities” (p. 442). The connection between cannibal and Christian theology seems
both strained and strange in his discussion of olive symbolism. Still, much of what he discusses is applicable, and the persistent reader can glean some valuable information on the topic from Tvedtnes’s efforts.

Textual Studies

Textual studies in the volume include a contribution by Royal Skousen detailing textual variants between manuscripts and editions of the Book of Mormon and an analysis by John W. Welch of words and phrases used in the allegory. Skousen’s report on the textual variations between manuscripts and editions reveals no startling shifts in doctrine or language between various versions of the allegory, but it does provide a valuable resource for those interested in a critical text of the work.

Welch renders a valuable service to students of Jacob 5 by cataloguing the distribution and frequency of words used in the allegory. In addition to this frequency and distribution study, Welch analyzes the words and phrases of the allegory to determine if they can reveal any information on its origin. He observes that the text has more affinities to the Old Testament than the New Testament. As one piece of evidence for his observation, he notes that more words and phrases from the allegory are used either exclusively or commonly in the Old Testament than in the New Testament. One would expect such to be the case in light of the fact that the Old Testament is a considerably larger document, covering a much wider range of topics, over a longer period of time. Overall, the material provided by Welch in this study can be an important resource for those interested in doing the kind of rhetorical analysis demonstrated by Arthur Henry King in his contribution to the volume discussed above.

Botanical Studies

One of the enigmatic aspects of Zenos’s allegory is the use of the term vineyard to refer to what is obviously an olive orchard. Was Zenos or Jacob confused in the use of the term in this allegory? John Tvedtnes addresses the question in a botanical and lexical study. He presents convincing evidence to support his conclusion that “the use of the term ‘vineyard’ to depict a place
where olive trees were planted is not an error in the Zeno's account in Jacob 5, but that it is perfectly in keeping with ancient practices and with the imagery of the vineyard" (pp. 481–82).

Perhaps one of the most significant contributions to this volume is that of Wilford M. Hess, Daniel J. Fairbanks, John W. Welch, and Jonathan K. Driggs. They present a fine scientific treatise in a report entitled the "Botanical Aspects of Olive Culture Relevant to Jacob 5." Their treatment offers important insights and clarifications to the allegory that may not be understood by one unfamiliar with olive trees and olive horticulture. (The need for some scientific understanding to best interpret the allegory is illustrated by one commentator who draws some interesting doctrinal opinions from a mistaken assumption that plant vascular fluids are equivalent to oil formed in fruits [p. 16].) This study reveals that while most of the horticultural practices and results recorded in the allegory are in line with what one would expect from a people familiar with growing olives, there are some anomalies. The authors suggest that the anomalies may be intentional in order to intensify the message. The contribution finishes with fifty-six questions regarding the botanical aspects of the allegory and olive culture in general. Some of the most poignant insights contained in the entire volume can be found in answers given to those questions.