

Root and Branch: An Abstract of the Structuralist Analysis of the Allegory of the Olive Tree

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THE ALLEGORY OF THE OLIVE TREE, as found in Jacob 5 in the Book of Mormon, is one of the most complicated and enigmatic of texts. These complications, however, can be resolved when the text is analyzed from the *structuralist* perspective. Such an analysis proceeds from the assumption that various cultural manifestations of (for instance) a single religion will incorporate a consistent underlying structure which, once discerned, will have both interpretive and predictive value. A structuralist analysis would suggest that the Allegory of the Olive Tree has a triadic structure of three interrelating terms: wild branches, tame branches, and root, which in turn represent: non-Mormon, Mormon by conversion or faith, and Mormon by birth. The element which causes the complexity in the text is the transformative quality of these categories. Each category, especially the first two, logically and almost automatically move toward the third category. Although this short paper will not present the details of the structuralist analysis, it will present an abstract of it to enable the reader to understand what is arguably a fundamental feature of the Book of Mormon as a whole, as well as other aspects of LDS practice.

THE TEXT

The Allegory of the Olive Tree is found in its most complete form in Jacob 5. It is a very long and complex text comprising 77 verses. Two shorter and closely interrelated texts are found in 1 Nephi 10:12-14 and 15:12-18. The second of these refers explicitly to the earlier version. All three versions include the same basic elements, though there is a slightly greater emphasis on the roots in the more elaborate version.

The narrative developed in the allegory focuses on the planting and growth of an olive tree, and the problems experienced by the owner in producing a crop of good fruit. Initially the olive tree produces good fruit, but as it grows older it starts to produce bad fruit. The narrative then follows a series of grafting wild branches into the root, removing the original branches, and planting them throughout the garden, some in good places and some in less-than-good places. In spite of these attempts, the original tree and the scattered branches do not consistently produce good fruit. At the conclusion of the narrative, some of the original branches are returned to be re-grafted into the root, while the wild branches that had been grafted in are selectively removed. Those which produce good fruit are retained, and those which continue to produce bad fruit are removed. Throughout the narrative there is a very strong emphasis on the need to preserve the root of the olive tree.

This allegory is explicitly stated in both versions of the 1 Nephi text. Likewise, the text in Jacob opens with the statement, "I will liken thee, O house of Israel, like a tame olive-tree, which a man took and nourished in his vineyard" (Jacob 5:3). The beginning of chapter 6 also specifically discusses some aspects of the allegory, particularly the last section in which the good branches (equivalent to those who have worked for God) are preserved, and the bad branches (equivalent to those who have rejected him) are cast into the fire.

The two versions found in 1 Nephi bring out further aspects of the allegory, and in a real sense, encapsulate some of the key elements. Both versions have a simple structure focusing on a single aspect of the narrative development. The version in 1 Nephi 10:12-14 focuses on the House of Israel, which is clearly associated with new world adherents rather than the Jews, who are usually specifically called "the Jews" in the Book of Mormon. (As we will see, by analogy this usage also implies the modern Mormon church or people.) The Book of Mormon uses the term "natural" to refer to this group of scattered branches, as indicated in verse 14: "The natural branches, or the remnants of the House of Israel, should be grafted in." In the remainder of this paper I will, for convenience sake, use the modern terms "Mormon" and "LDS" to refer both to supposed ancient and to contemporary adherents to this "other" House of Israel.

The second version, which purports to be an interpretation of these verses, focuses on the gentiles rather than the house of Israel. Although verse 12 reiterates that Nephi and his brothers (symbolically representing the LDS) are branches of the house of Israel, which has been broken off and scattered, verse 13 makes the gentiles its primary focus. Verse 13 seems to suggest that the natural branches do not represent the House of Israel, but rather the gentiles who are grafted into the tree. The gentiles receive the gospel, and through them the remnants of Israel are also returned to the tree. Thus, between these two variations,

the term "natural" is transformed from the "House of Israel" to those gentiles who become part of the "House of Israel."

Both these emphases and the apparent textual confusion are retained in the longer and elaborated version of the narrative. The Jacob version clearly divides the branches into two types: a) those branches that were originally part of the tree, and which are variously called natural or tame branches, and b) those branches that were not originally part of the tree, which are usually called wild branches. The natural or tame branches seem to refer to the House of Israel, while the wild branches refer to the gentiles.

Two main elements in the third (Jacob) version were not developed in the earlier (1 Nephi) versions: the nature of the fruit, and the emphasis on the root. The use of the fruit in Jacob 5 is related to a more complex view of history and religious anthropology. It allows the text to illustrate the reasons for the removal of the branches, as well as the processes of degeneration and ultimately of selection. The root is clearly also a part of the two earlier versions, but it becomes, to a great extent, the focus of the Jacob text. The problem of the role of the root is one of the key issues addressed here.

ABSTRACT OF THE STRUCTURALIST ANALYSIS

The first part of this discussion examines those elements which are developed in the narrative. The main focus here is on how these elements transform as the text develops. This discussion highlights the ambiguous usage of the term "natural," suggesting that this term is a key feature in the transformation of the wild branches into tame or "natural" branches.

The second half of this analysis examines the structural relations developed in the text at the more abstract level. I will argue that one of the interests of the text is the way in which the three elements—gentiles, Mormons by conversion, and Mormons by birth—can be related to one another. The relationship between the elements seems somewhat paradoxical: While the relationship between the first two elements emphasises their separation and distinctiveness, the relationship between the second two elements seeks to emphasise or create similarity.

The Jacob 5 text includes three main elements: the wild branches, the original branches from the olive tree, and the root itself. These elements are transformed as the narrative develops by various qualities expressed primarily in respect to the fruit, good and bad. Their quality is also expressed, and perhaps transformed, by the changes of the location of the branches after they have been removed from the olive tree.

The original branches of the olive go through a journey of transformation throughout the narrative. They start out attached to the root and producing good fruit, and thus have a positive quality. They become progressively more negative, which is expressed both in the quality of their

fruit and the distance from the root. Ultimately, they return to the positive by being returned to the root and producing good fruit. A similar, though opposite, journey occurs in regard to the wild branches. Initially their negative quality is emphasized by their distance from the root and the poor fruit that they produce. As the narrative develops, they become progressively more positive, initially by being grafted onto the root, and finally by the process of selection.

The two texts in 1 Nephi include a similar though simpler transformation; each of the texts focuses on a single element. 1 Nephi 10 focuses on the transformation of the tame natural branches, the House of Israel. There is a similar narrative development as found in Jacob, from positive to negative, and finally back to positive. As in the Jacob text, the root is untransformed and remains positive throughout the text. The text in 1 Nephi 15 focuses on the transformation of the gentiles, in this case exemplified by the natural branches. As in Jacob, they are initially negative and ultimately positive.

When we examine the process of transformation in all three versions of the allegory, the term "natural" becomes an important key to understanding the transformations in the Jacob text. The two texts from Nephi are helpful because they divide the issues into two, though in doing so they create some ambiguity about the meaning of the term "natural." Perhaps because it does not divide the issue so clearly, Jacob is able to be more consistent in its distinction between the different terms used in the text: In Jacob the original branches are called "natural" or "tame," while the other branches are always called "wild." Jacob, however, does introduce an ambiguity between "natural" and "wild" in verse 17. The verse states: "And it came to pass that the Lord of the vineyard looked and beheld the tree in which the wild olive branches had been grafted; and it had sprung forth and begun to bear fruit. And he beheld that it was good; and the fruit was like unto the natural fruit." This suggests that the transformation from wild to natural, which is divided by the two texts from Nephi, is at least hinted at in Jacob.

With the texts from Nephi in mind, we can divide the transformations described in Jacob into two: those processes which relate to the "tame" branches—which were originally part of the tree—and those processes which relate to the "wild" branches—which were not original to the tree. The "tame"¹ branches are not ultimately transformed in the text; they return to their original status, which is represented by location in the narrative. They begin by producing good fruit on the tree, and they end in the same place. Some of the "wild" branches, however, are

¹I use "tame" here to indicate specifically those branches which were originally part of the tree, as opposed to the term "natural" which, as suggested, is somewhat ambiguous in the texts from Nephi.

significantly transformed. This is symbolized by both their location and the quality of their fruit. They start out distant from the root, but a select few end up as part of the root, producing fruit which is indistinguishable from that of the "tame" branches. The ambiguity in the term "natural" thus reflects the transformative quality emphasised by the text: The wild branches can be transformed into the natural.

When the allegory is examined in terms of its symbolic explanation, that is, the gentiles and the "House of Israel," the relationship between these elements becomes clearer. The "House of Israel" is initially established as an opposing category in relation to the gentiles. The root, which is emphasized throughout the Jacob text, is metaphorically related to the genealogical definition of the "House of Israel." The scattering of the branches of the "House of Israel" is tied to the historic experience of the followers of Nephi and their descendants, and in the Jacob text is associated with sin. As suggested, however, the "House of Israel" is essentially untransformed in the text. They are ultimately returned to their genealogical roots.

The gentiles are the main focus of the text and undergo two levels of transformation. They are initially associated and brought into the "House of Israel" through grafting onto the genealogical tree. This initial transformation into the "House of Israel" is not complete. The fact that they are still somewhat wild is seen in their negative effect on the roots. The negative aspect can only be resolved when they are joined with the actual, genetically defined "House of Israel." This final stage is seen in the merging of terms: They are no longer wild "gentiles," they are now the tame "House of Israel."

A similar pattern can be discerned in a broad analysis of symbolic aspects of the conversion process within the LDS church. The conversion process can be seen as a two-stage process. Initially gentiles are in an opposite category from members born into (or converted into) the church. Through faith, they can make the first transformation and join the church. However, they still lack the genealogical element, which is then symbolically provided by the temple ritual of retrospective conversion. Through the conversion of all ancestors, the individual is effectively and symbolically "born" into the LDS church, since all his ancestors are now, retrospectively, members of that church. This genealogical element is also developed by a further notion regarding descent: All Mormons are regarded as descendants of the twelve tribes of Israel. This genealogical understanding is extended to individuals who join the church.²

²See for example, D. J. Davies, *The Mormon Culture of Salvation*, (Ashgate: Aldershot, 2000) 149-52.

THE BROADER CONTEXT: OTHER NARRATIVES IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

The theory behind my analysis suggests that structural patterns of the type illustrated herein should also be found in other contexts within LDS culture. As with the pattern found in the model of conversion, suggested above, similar patterns should be found within other texts in the Book of Mormon, as well as in other aspects of the LDS worldview. Thus, the triadic pattern, in which the first two elements are strongly distinguished and the second two elements are strongly identified, should be found to be characteristic. Although we do not have the space here to examine all aspects of LDS narrative and culture, a few examples will illustrate the argument. The narratives in the first chapters of the Book of Mormon, particularly 1 Nephi, are structured with the same underlying triadic pattern.³ One of the clearest examples of this pattern is found in the names of the six sons of Lehi. The oldest sons, who are qualitatively negative in the text, are named Laman and Lemuel, neither of which is an actual biblical name. They are structurally similar to the wild branches: They represent the rejected gentiles, though they ultimately have a transformative possibility and can achieve salvation. The second two brothers, who are born before the journey and thus are similar to converts (again, location is important), are Nephi and Sam. Their names reflect their partially transformed status. The name Nephi is not biblical, while Sam is partially biblical, that is, related to Samuel. Like the convert, they reflect the intermediate, not fully transformed category. Finally, the last two brothers, born in positive space, are Jacob and Joseph, both with fully biblical names reflecting their intrinsic positive quality. They represent the born Mormon and those Mormons who are symbolically reborn through retrospective conversion. Although these individuals in one sense are a static instantiation of the triadic structure, ultimately they have the same inner transformative quality, moving toward the category represented by Jacob and Joseph. This example illustrates the fact that the Allegory of the Olive Tree and other narrative and non-narrative texts in the Book of Mormon are shaped by the same structural relations. It also creates a model of history which can be used to understand the fate and future of the descendants of Lehi as described in the remaining sections of the text. The underlying structural pattern is also consistent, as suggested above, with LDS models of conversion and, therefore, identity. Another area of similarity is found in respect to mythic and actual geography, both macro and micro.

In the Book of Mormon, space is divided into three spheres: the initial, negative space associated with the Jews; the intermediate space of Laman; and, finally the positive space across the sea. The association is even stronger in respect to modern use of space. First, we have the space

³See Seth Kunin, "The Death/Rebirth Mytheme in the Book of Mormon," in Douglas J. Davies, ed., *Mormon Identities in Transition* (London: Cassell, 1996), 192-203.

of the gentiles (outside Utah, or perhaps outside the United States). Second, there is the space of the United States, or more specifically, Utah. This can be associated with Mormon churches, which are the intermediate sacred spaces, into which both born and re-born (my term) members can enter. The final sacred space, perhaps focused on Salt Lake City, centers on the temple, into which only re-born members can enter. Although this is somewhat complicated by the existence of temples outside the original sacred space, the triadic structure is retained: 1) gentiles who are unchurched, 2) those who can only enter the churches, and 3) those who can enter the temple. This structural pattern is also found in LDS theology regarding the transformation of man into God.

CONCLUSIONS

In this brief discussion of the Allegory of the Olive Tree, I have presented an abstract of some of the conclusions which can be drawn from structuralist analysis. I have suggested that the pattern underlying the Olive Tree narratives is based on a triadic pattern. This pattern is distinct from many structures found in other cultural forms (for example, the Hebrew Bible), which are dyadic rather than triadic. One of the most interesting features of this triadic pattern is its inherent transformational quality: All the elements in the system can, and perhaps must, move from one category to the next.

This analysis has also highlighted the presence of this pattern in other narrative texts—for example, the early chapters of 1 Nephi, and more importantly, in the model of conversion. In these examples, as in the Allegory of the Olive Tree, elements were dynamic (at least in the long run, if not in the specific narrative.) Thus, in conversion, gentiles ultimately should move from that negative category to the opposite category of Mormon (by conversion). This transformation occurs on the basis of faith. They then are transformed into “born” Mormons, the third category, which overlaps the second category by the process of retrospective conversion. The dynamic movement of man to God is also indicative of an identical structural process of transformation.

This preliminary discussion raises some important questions. First, in what ways are the structures developed herein similar or different to those cultures which have interrelated with the LDS community? Were other religious traditions and cultural forms developed in the U.S. at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries similarly structured? Perhaps even more importantly, what is the relationship of the structures found in the Book of Mormon to those of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament? These questions require a much broader analysis of the Mormon cultural context, as well as a comparative structuralist analysis of the Book of Mormon, Hebrew Bible, and the New Testament.