

alternatives to the more restrictive, militant conceptions of orthodox scholarship advocated by antipositivist critics like Louis Midgley and David Bohn. In fact, Midgley has complained that my essay casts him as the villain in a “morality play” that pits a “heroic New Mormon History” against a “deplorable Faithful History” (comment posted in response to Kaimi Wenger, “Moderation in All Things,” *By Common Consent*, August 2, 2008, <http://www.bycommonconsent.com/2008/07/moderation-in-all-things>, comment 34). While I hope I managed to give a more balanced and nuanced account in the article than Midgley’s complaint implies, his perception of my commitments around these issues is not so far off.

One source of confusion, perhaps, was my use of the term “antipositivist” to describe Alexander’s and Arrington’s critics. I used that term merely to reflect the language of the debates. I myself do not believe Alexander and Arrington were positivists; indeed, I find the accusation of positivism absurd. That accusation made sense to critics only because they (the critics) held a stark, fundamentalistic worldview that dismissed everything to the left of their own brand of orthodoxy as irreligion.

Given my lack of sympathy for the agendas that were pursued under the rubric of “faithful history,” I feel little enthusiasm about the efforts some LDS scholars are now making to enhance orthodox scholarship’s status within academia. Having watched “faithful scholarship” achieve its current position of privilege within Church institutions as a result of campaigns to enforce orthodoxy, I find it hard to be moved when orthodox scholars now bid for the academy’s sympathy by invoking postmodern appeals on behalf of marginalized and privileged voices.

Again, I regret that my article may have given a mistaken impression of my intentions to Professor Alexander, whom I regard as someone who tried to fight the good fight.

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Asherah Alert

For some time I have been hearing about and greatly anticipating the appearance of Kevin L. Barney’s scholarly comparison of the Mormon Mother in Heaven with the female deity Asherah. I have long admired Kevin Barney’s research, writing, and opinions. So it is with

some regret that I feel compelled to point out some dangers and flaws in his "How to Worship Our Mother in Heaven (Without Getting Excommunicated)" (41, no. 4 [Winter 2008]: 121–47).

I agree with Barney's assessment (and the starting point for my examination of this topic) that Daniel C. Peterson's article "Nephi and His Asherah" is "surely one of the most remarkable articles ever published in Mormon studies."¹ Here Peterson introduces Mormon readers to Asherah, chief goddess of the early Canaanites, who was also worshipped by at least some of the ancient Hebrews. Although the Old Testament is rife with condemnation of this idolatrous practice, Peterson, for the first time in Mormon writings, gives credence to the position that worship of the Asherah may have been legitimate.

In his article, Barney follows up on the link that Peterson proposed between Asherah, the tree goddess, with Nephi's vision of the mother of the Son of God and the Tree of Life. As much as I admire such an exegesis, I must point out that a more conservative reading of 1 Nephi 11 suggests that Nephi is shown Mary and her child to connect Jesus with the tree, not Mary with the tree. Among Mormon script-

uralists who accept this reading is Elder Jeffrey R. Holland: "The images of Christ and the tree [are] inextricably linked. . . . At the very outset of the Book of Mormon, Christ is portrayed as the source of eternal life and joy, the living evidence of divine love, and the means whereby God will fulfill his covenant with the house of Israel and indeed the entire family of man, returning them all to their eternal promises."²

This view fits better with the chapter as a whole, the condescension of God being the demonstration by the Father of His love for the world by sending His "only begotten Son," Jesus Christ (John 3:16).

Those who have some experience in women's studies of the Old Testament will readily recognize Barney's recapitulation of the "Sophia as Heavenly Mother" theme. I agree with his assessment that Sophia (Latin for Wisdom) "was present at the creation and assisted in its work" (134) as a divine female force. It is quite possible that the Wisdom figure can tell us a great deal about the Goddess Asherah and even our Heavenly Mother herself.

But when it comes to pegging Asherah as our Heavenly Mother, there are many prob-

lems which must be overcome, and Kevin Barney falls short of doing so. Barney's proposition is that the early worship form of venerating Asherah is more valid than the later, more evolved form of monotheism. If we accept this view, then we must acknowledge the entire pantheon of gods worshipped by the early Canaanites and Hebrews, which entails rejecting the prophetic authority of the reform period. I am willing to consider that worship of a Holy Mother figure may have been a part of the primordial religion. But by the time we come to know the Asherah figure in the Old Testament, she has been perverted into a licentious, dissipated, corrupt figure whom God's prophets denounced. Barney mentions, but downplays, the very severe rejection of Asherah by the prophets and by Josiah, a king whom the Deuteronomist considers to be a divinely inspired national hero. The frequent association between Asherah and the Canaanite fertility cults shows that, at least by the time of the major prophets, she had become a sign of idolatry and was henceforth rejected. In fact, Asherah may bear little or no resemblance to the Mormon Heavenly Mother. How do we know, I wonder,

which of her attributes are divine and which are not? Can we accept her association with trees, groves, or poles while rejecting, for example, the cult of prostitution accompanying her worship?

Kevin Barney concludes his article by suggesting some of the ways this conception of Heavenly Mother might be worshipped that are consistent with an orthodox LDS position. The best of these, which quite captured my imagination, was that we "reconceptualize" our Christmas tree traditions as symbols of the Christchild's mother. Says Barney, "Since the practice of putting up Christmas trees originated from a pagan fertility symbol that had to be reconceptualized in the first place to give it a Christian meaning, giving the tree our own reconceptualization would not be treading on inviolable ground. And, of course, putting a Christmas tree up each December is entirely unobjectionable in our culture, a practice at which no one would bat an eye. But seeing the tree as a symbol of our Mother may be a source of satisfaction to those who long to acknowledge Her in some way" (136).

This description in Barney's article had my head spinning as

I immediately began to imagine many different ways of decorating a Christmas tree. But Latter-day Saints might be better served by imagining ways to exclude paganism than from reconceptualizing it. After all,

Thus saith the Lord,
Learn not the way of the
heathen, and be not dis-
mayed at the signs of
heaven; for the heathen are
dismayed at them.

For the customs of the
people are vain: for one
cutteth a *tree* out of the for-
est, the work of the hands of
the workman, with the axe.

They deck it with silver
and with gold; they fasten it
with nails and with ham-
mers, that it move not. . . .

Every man is brutish in
his knowledge: every
founder is confounded by
the graven image: for his
molten image is falsehood,
and there is no breath in
them.

They are vanity, and the
work of errors: in the time
of their visitation they shall
perish. (Jer. 10:2-4, 14-15;
emphasis mine)

After spending many words advising his reader that the current policy of the Church is not to pray publicly to Heavenly Mother, Barney “suggest[s] a partial, small exception” (133).

Apparently Barney finds it acceptable for infertile women to pray to Asherah. I believe that Barney is treading on thin ice with this suggestion. Although I will admit to praying to a Heavenly Mother in private under certain circumstances, it is nonetheless a practice which might lead to the wrong side of the stake president’s desk. Church President Gordon B. Hinckley, in issuing his instructions, first to the Regional Representatives and then to the women’s general meeting, did not limit the restriction on prayer to a Mother in Heaven: “Logic and reason would certainly suggest that if we have a Father in Heaven, we have a Mother in Heaven. That doctrine rests well with me. However, in light of the instruction we have received from the Lord Himself, I regard it as inappropriate for anyone in the Church to pray to our Mother in Heaven.”³ I read Barney’s paragraph on prayer to the Mother as a dance of fancy footwork where he trips in and out of recommending these types of supplications but simultaneously absolves himself of responsibility for counseling that anyone actually do so.

The last area where I strongly feel that Kevin Barney has

stepped out of bounds is his assumption that he knows the personal name of our Heavenly Mother. Says he: "I personally regard it as very significant that we actually know the name of our Mother in Heaven: Asherah" (133). This possibility cannot, given the lack of other information, be discarded, but Barney would certainly have to give more evidence to convince me of this than that a few ancient Hebrews once adopted the appellation of a Canaanite Goddess as the object of their devotion. I feel no more comfortable using "Asherah" as Heavenly Mother's personal name than I do using as her title "Elat," which he identifies as an ancient word for "Goddess." (I do love the word studies, though. Kevin Barney excels at them, and his expertise is in evidence throughout his article.)

Other suggestions lose their potency as we realize that the Asherah of the Old Testament just may not be She whom we seek. Naming children Asher or Sophia, planting saplings to honor a tree goddess, seeing consecrated olive oil as a symbol of a feminine presence in ordinances, and even serving in the temple in the way described by Barney seem weak proposals compared with the active, vital worship of a

feminine deity in Goddess-based religions.

In writing this response, I do not wish to discourage those who are searching for greater light and revealed knowledge upon the important subject of the Divine Feminine. I commend Kevin Barney for his efforts in this matter and hope students of Mormonism will continue to probe in this direction.

Notes

1. 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*, edited by Davis Bitton (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 191-243; and "Nephi and His Asherah," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9, no. 2 (2000): 16-25.

2. Jeffrey R. Holland, *Christ and the New Covenant* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 160, 162. See also Garth Norman, *The Christmas Tree and the Tree of Life*, <http://www.meridianmagazine.com/articles/081223tree.html> (accessed January 6, 2008): "Nephi saw the Tree and marveled at its exceeding beauty and whiteness, but he still did not understand its relationship to the Son of God. Desiring to know the interpretation of this tree, Nephi was then told to look, and a vision of Jerusalem opened up to him. . . . The scene then changed and Nephi saw the same virgin bearing a child in her arms, which the angel introduced to Nephi as the Lamb of God,