

yea, even the Son of the Eternal Father! Now, the angel asked Nephi if he knew the meaning of the Tree of Life which his father (and he) had seen, and Nephi exclaimed, "Yea, it is the love of God." . . . This tree, as a sign of the Son of God, and the way God bestows his greatest gift on mankind was now clear to Nephi. It was all wrapped up in this infant child. The Tree as a sign of life was a sign of God's gift of the Christ child to the world as the ultimate expression of God's love."

3. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Daughters of God," *Ensign*, November 1991, 97.

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Kevin Barney Responds

Thank you so much for taking the time and making the effort to comment on my "How to Worship Our Mother in Heaven (Without Getting Excommunicated)" (41, no. 4 [Winter 2008]: 121–46). Let me assure you that I am in no measure offended or upset that you disagreed with me; on the contrary, I am flattered that you thought the piece was worthy of this substantive attention. So I thank you.

It should come as no surprise, however, that I disagree with your comments. I will try to outline the nature of my disagreements as follows:

1. Peterson's article. I was a bit

stumped by your comments on Daniel Peterson's article, "Nephi and His Asherah."¹ You seemed at first to be an enthusiastic fan of the piece. But Peterson basically does two things: (1) In general, the article is a survey of recent Asherah scholarship from an LDS perspective, and (2) In particular, it is an exegesis of 1 Nephi 11. Yet you reject both the general relevance of non-LDS Asherah scholarship to the topic of the Mormon Mother in Heaven and the specific exegesis Peterson offers, so it was unclear to me what, exactly, you found to like in the article at all.

I freely acknowledge that I stand on Peterson's shoulders in writing my article. I probably would not have had the confidence to attempt it if he had not plowed this ground ahead of me. I remember for a long time being familiar with the foundational work of Raphael Patai in *The Hebrew Goddess* (3rd ed. [Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 1990]); and as the scholarship on this point began to accelerate, I considered writing about it. But in the end, I threw up my hands, just overwhelmed by how much there had come to be out there—which is why I was thrilled when Peterson made the effort and did it

better than I could have. I did not know Peterson at the time (our times at BYU did not overlap), but I recall finding his email address and sending him congratulations on the achievement. We later crossed paths at a conference and have become friends.

On the exegesis you reject, you are no doubt correct that the more “conservative” approach to the chapter is to see the tree as a symbol of Christ. You quote Elder Holland as saying “The images of Christ and the tree are inextricably linked.”² It is unfortunate that Elder Holland does not present evidence or argumentation for this claim, and many questions go unanswered by his unelaborated assertion. Why is there a connection between the tree and Jesus? What I found so powerful about Peterson’s reading is that it resulted in the passage’s finally making sense to me. The angel does not explain the tree; but when he shows Nephi the virgin and then the virgin with the child in her arms, the meaning becomes clear to Nephi without further explication.

Seeing the tree as Asherah symbolism in this context makes tremendous sense to me. Trees were always associated with goddesses in the Old Testament. And I am fond of John Sorenson’s suggestion (in his

classic *Dialogue* piece, “The Brass Plates and Biblical Scholarship”)³ to the effect that the brass plates were a northern recension of scripture, reflecting Lehi’s familial background as part of Manasseh in the north. We know that the people of Israel prior to the Assyrian conquest worshipped Asherah, so for that tree symbolism to immediately make sense to Lehi’s son really works for me. Of course, you are welcome to read the passage in your own, more traditional way, but I continue to favor Peterson’s insight here.

2. Are we forced to acknowledge the Canaanite pantheon? Your letter seems to think my approach requires it. I disagree that if we accept any part of Asherah mythology, we are forced to accept the whole kit and kaboodle. Why? We know there was corruption involved, so we can certainly be selective about what we take and what we leave behind. I tried to follow a selection method of identifying positive allusions to Asherah in the scriptures, then used them as my base. Without stating it, obviously I was also looking at these things through the lens of modern Mormonism. And why not? I took pains to make it clear that my essay was engaged in religion-making. I do not see why

we have to reject the tradition completely, simply because it contains corrupted elements when it also, in my view, at least, contains valid ones.

To take your example of cultic prostitution, as I am sure you know recent studies have questioned whether such a thing ever really existed. But assuming *arguendo* that there was an Asherah-based prostitution cult, so what? We can leave that on the trash heap of history. I see no reason why we have to take all of it; it seems to me that we can pick and choose.

3. Reform prophets. Your comment about my proposal's potential for undermining the authority of reform prophets is where the rubber really hits the road, and I think it is your strongest point. I knew that this argument was going to be tough for rank-and-file Mormons to accept. We tend to want to read the scriptures as being univocal, without development. If one prophet rejected a certain practice, then it is unquestionably a bad practice and all prophets would agree.

Just recently I had to counsel with a man in another state who used to be in my ward, because his BYU-attending son had learned about the nineteenth-century Adam-God beliefs held by Brigham Young and oth-

ers. His son said, in effect, "Look, this isn't a trifle. It's a doctrine about the nature of God. It's something as important as can be. And Brigham Young as prophet taught this. So it either has to be true and the Church is in apostasy for not teaching it, or the prophets are wrong altogether and they have no authority." We have raised an entire generation of Saints with such linear thinking about prophetic infallibility that they cannot handle the nuances, and there really are a lot of them beyond the obvious Adam-God example.

The truth is that the winners get to write the history, and it was those who rejected Asherah who largely redacted or wrote the Old Testament as we have it today. There is, quite frankly, a lot of political spin in the Old Testament. I recognize that we get really nervous when we start talking about spin in the scriptures. So I do not blame anyone, including you, for not wanting to follow me there.

4. Evict paganism. On my mission I ran into very conservative Christians and, of course, Jehovah's Witnesses who saw clearly the pagan elements in such celebrations as Christmas and Easter and therefore advocated against celebrating them. I

can understand and respect that position, all the while disagreeing with it profoundly. I love the holidays, and I love the fact that we Mormons are pragmatic enough to acknowledge the pagan elements in them and celebrate them anyway. I love that we do not feel threatened by Santa Claus or Easter bunnies or yule logs or mistletoe or anything else like that. I think that such tolerance shows a certain amount of religious maturity for our people. (Even those who are sure Jesus was born on April 6 are content to celebrate Christmas on December 25—and good for them!)

5. Prayer. I referenced the same Gordon B. Hinckley statement you did, albeit quoted in two different places. I did not quite understand your criticism here. I made it clear that I personally do not pray to Mother in Heaven but that there is a scriptural precedent for such a prayer in limited circumstances. If people want to take the responsibility for themselves of following that precedent, then obviously the principle of agency is not suspended in their case and they are free to do so. You acknowledged that you sometimes pray to Mother in Heaven for unspecified reasons without scriptural precedent. Should we censure Leah for daring to offer a prayer

to Asherah at the birth of her son Asher, named in honor of the Goddess? I do not think so.

6. Personal name. I am also not sure why you object so strongly to acknowledging Asherah as the personal name of our Mother. As I showed in the article's appendix, that name appears forty times in the Old Testament, even if it is always mistranslated in the King James Version. If we cannot accept Asherah as a name, how can we accept El/Elohim or Yahweh as personal names of deity? Mormon scholars have become comfortable with the interface of Canaanite precedents and the early Hebrew pantheon. See, for instance, my article, "Examining Six Key Concepts in Joseph Smith's Understanding of Genesis 1:1," *BYU Studies* 39, no. 3 (2000): 107–24.

A good illustration of how Canaanite precedents influenced early Israelite belief is provided by Deuteronomy 32:8–9, which reads as follows in the Revised Standard Version: "When the Most High [*elyon*] gave to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of men, he fixed the bounds of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God [*bene elohim*]. For the LORD'S [*YHWH*] portion is his

people, Jacob his allotted heritage.”

Here the High God El fixes the number of the nations at seventy to equal the number of His sons (also seventy), assigning one son to each nation. El assigns His son Yahweh to be the God of Israel.⁵ The confluence of Canaanite mythology with the early Hebrew pantheon in this passage is striking.

In conclusion, I note that the bibliography I appended to the article had to be cut in half to meet space limitations. The amount of scholarship on Asherah as a Hebrew Goddess is absolutely huge. If one is unwilling to see that literature as relating in a meaningful way to the Mormon Mother in Heaven, then I would recommend following the position of my good friend Blake Ostler, who has stated that he is “open to the possibility that the entire belief in mother in heaven is a cultural overbelief.”⁶ You may as well, because there is not some vast body of evidence about some *other* Mother in Heaven figure in ancient Israel who would fit Joseph Smith’s statements. In my view, Asherah is our one shot at situating such a figure in the real world of the Old Testament, with actual Israelite worship directed to her.

Once again, thank you so

much for your careful attention to my article. I hope my response above gives a clearer idea of my perspective on specific points raised by your critique.

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. His shorter, popularized version appeared as “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: The Messianic Message of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 160, 162.

3. John L. Sorenson, “The Brass Plates and Biblical Scholarship,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 10 (Autumn 1977): 31–39.

4. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Daughters of God,” *Ensign*, November 1991, 100.

5. The KJV at the end of verse 8 reads “sons of Israel,” which is an attempt to soften the original reading “sons of God,” since the sons of Israel also numbered seventy. That the KJV reading is secondary is clear. The reading “sons of God” is attested in two fragments from the Dead Sea Scrolls: 4QDeut^j and 4QDeut^q. See Patrick W. Skehan, “A Fragment of the ‘Song of Moses’ (Deut. 32) from Qumran,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Re-*