

The Allegory of the Olive Tree and the Use of Related Figurative Language in the Ancient Near East and the Old Testament

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The prophecy of Zenos in Jacob 5 is often called the allegory of the olive tree. The objective of this study is to examine this allegory in the larger context of figurative language in the ancient Near East and, in particular, in its own literary tradition preserved in the Old Testament. Through general comparisons we can gain better perspectives on the allegory's relationship to other ancient traditions, a better understanding of its contents, and an appreciation for the Book of Mormon, which restored this marvelous piece to us.

Figurative Language and Jacob 5

Figurative language is an integral part of all of the Near Eastern literary traditions from the very earliest times. A prominent literary figure is comparison: in a simple form it is called a simile or a metaphor and in a more developed and extended form it is called a parable or an allegory. Modern literary theory has carefully defined and distinguished between each of these figures: simile, metaphor, parable, allegory, fable, proverb, and riddle. Briefly, modern theory defines a simile as a comparison of two dissimilar things using the words *like* or *as*. A metaphor is a comparison that finds a likeness between two dissimilar things without using *like* or *as*. A parable is a narrative containing an extended simile or metaphor intending to convey a single thought or message. An allegory is also an extended simile or metaphor differing from a parable in that each metaphorical element of the narrative is meant to correspond to a specific counterpart. A fable is a story, parable, or allegory in which the characters are plants or animals that act like humans. A proverb is a pithy statement or adage, and a riddle is a parable whose point is deliberately obscured.

Ancient languages do not make such precise distinctions in their terms for figures of comparison. For example, in biblical Hebrew, the presumed original language of Jacob 5, the most common word for comparisons is *mashal*—a word from a root meaning "to liken," literally translated as "saying" or "comparison." As one scholar noted, "No distinction is made in biblical usage between parable, allegory, and fable; all are forms of the *mashal* and have the same functions of illustration and instruction."¹ In addition, there is a word for riddle in biblical Hebrew, *hidah*, which indicates a figure of comparison in which the point is deliberately obscured, as in Samson's riddle (Judges 14:14) and in the allegory of the eagles and the vine (Ezekiel 17:3–10), which is described both as a *mashal* as well as a *hidah*. Just because ancient terms were not as precise as modern terms does not mean that categories such as those described by modern literary scholars did not exist, but it is important that the modern interpreter approach an ancient text without preconceived notions imposed by modern labels.

Many examples of figurative language do not fall into neat categories. For example, many extended comparisons in the Bible share the characteristics of several of the figures or genres, and scholars argue exactly how to classify certain passages. Isaiah's song of the vineyard in 5:1–7 is an explicit comparison of Israel to a vineyard: "For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel" (Isaiah 5:7)—which, incidentally, manifests many similarities to Zenos's comparison of Israel to an olive tree. Scholars have variously argued that it is a fable, a parable, or an allegory.² Because the vineyard is personified in Isaiah some have argued that it is a fable. Others emphasize the elements of a parable—a naturalistic story of a man who finally allows his unproductive vineyard to be destroyed, the single lesson of the comparison being if Israel does not repent they will be destroyed. Still others have developed an allegorical interpretation, finding a counterpart for each of the elements of the story: the planting of the vineyard as God planting Israel in Canaan, the protection of the vineyard as angels, the tower as the temple, the wine vat as altar, and bad grapes as sin.³ Obviously, in biblical Hebrew these categories are not mutually exclusive and a conscientious interpretation of figurative language must take into account many possibilities.

Jacob 5 also contains elements of several of these figures. It is a simile in that it is introduced as such, "I will liken thee, O house of Israel like unto a tame olive-tree" (Jacob 5:3). It has characteristics of a parable in that it is introduced as having a single message that transcends the details of the story. Jacob introduces the story as an

exposition of a mystery: "How is it possible that these [the Jews], after having rejected the sure foundation, can ever build upon it, that it may become the head of their corner?" (Jacob 4:17). It is an allegory in that throughout the extended narrative we find many details that lend themselves well to an interpretation involving a one-to-one correspondence with people, places, and events in the history of the scattering and gathering of Israel.

The allegory of the olive tree in Jacob 5 is designated in the Book of Mormon as "the words of the prophet Zenos" (Jacob 5:1)—the word *allegory* doesn't occur in the Book of Mormon. Nevertheless, the intricacy of the details in Zenos's prophecy and in Jacob's interpretation in Jacob 6 suggests it is to be read as an allegory, and since the publication of the Book of Mormon most have interpreted it as such, assigning each of the details to a particular people, period of time, or event in the history of the scattering and gathering of Israel.⁴ Clearly this is one of the ways it is meant to be read, though it is interesting to note that there remains no consensus among interpreters on several of the details of the passage, most notably the time periods of the various scenes.⁵

Considering the lack of distinction between a parable and an allegory in biblical terminology, it is worth examining Zenos's prophecy as a parable, looking for the larger lesson beyond the identification of each specific transplanted branch, period of grafting, and spot in the vineyard. John Tanner observed:

We often pay so much attention to what Zenos has told us about the history of Israel that we miss the powerful message that likely drew Jacob to the allegory: namely, that God loves and looks after the house of Israel, no matter where its people are scattered. The allegory is more than a complex puzzle whose solution unlocks world history, as some of us read it. The allegory also dramatizes God's steadfast love and active concern. Zenos's allegory ought to take its place beside the parable of the prodigal son. Both stories make the Lord's mercy so movingly memorable.⁶

Following Jacob's introduction to Zenos's allegory as an exposition of the mystery of the rejection of Christ as the foundation stone, Catherine Thomas reads the allegory as a symbolic description of the main features of the atonement:

This ceaseless divine activity in seeking to bring men into his presence, even while they still walk on the earth, is the meaning behind the continual nourishing, digging, and pruning going on in the allegorical vineyard. . . . The perfect knowledge of Christ that Jacob refers to (Jacob 4:14), that is, at-one-ment with him, is achieved in Christ's revelation of himself through the pruning, digging, and nourishing of his individual covenant children.⁷

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

When one compares Zenos's allegory with ancient Near Eastern and Old Testament literary traditions it is immediately apparent that Jacob 5 is a unique and extraordinary narrative. There is no other allegory anywhere in the ancient world that is anything like it in terms of length, scope, detail, or span of history until the Hellenistic period. While it is not possible to date Zenos's allegory with certainty, it is clearly to be dated before 600 B.C. since it was found on the brass plates brought by Lehi and his family from Jerusalem.⁸ Therefore this examination will limit itself to examples from the ancient Near East before 600 B.C. and those contained in the Old Testament through Ezekiel.

While there are no examples of an allegory of the magnitude of Jacob 5 in the ancient Near East, there are many examples of figurative narratives of a similar genre. Perhaps the closest parallels to Zenos's allegory in the ancient Near East are found in a corpus of Sumerian fables or contest literature also preserved in Akkadian. This contest literature consists of verbal debates between animals, plants, or other personifications. At stake are their respective merits and values for society: thus winter versus summer, silver versus bronze, the axe versus the plow, the tamarisk versus the palm, the grain versus the wheat, and the ox versus the horse.⁹ These fables were written expressly for the kings and were recited in the court of the kings either as praise or condemnation of the king and his court or simply as entertainment.¹⁰ A later Babylonian example of this genre is the contest between the tamarisk and the palm tree in which each first extols, then argues the usefulness and value of its own fruit to society.¹¹

Scholars have noted that most of these fables follow a stock pattern: (1) A mythological introduction, which gives the cosmological *raison d'être* of the conflicting parties. (2) A dispute, in which the opposing parties boast of their own superior functions and degrade the other. (3) An appeal to deity, who renders a decision and reconciles the disputants.¹²

Because of the aspect of judgment characteristic of this corpus of fables, at least one scholar has seen the song of the vineyard in Isaiah 5:1–7 as an example of this genre of contest literature.¹³ In Isaiah 5 the Lord calls for judgment of his unproductive vineyard, "And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem, and men of Judah, judge, I pray you, betwixt me and my vineyard. What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it?" (Isaiah 5:3–4).

Similarly, while the allegory of the olive tree does not exactly fit the pattern of contest literature, it does have some points of similarity. It can be seen as a contest between a man and his olive trees with a mythological introduction consisting of the tame olive tree growing old and decaying. The dispute is the various attempts to get good fruit, and finally the judgment consists of the destruction of the vineyard after the final harvest. The Lord, in Jacob 5:47, echoes a similar call for judgment as in Isaiah 5:4, "But what could I have done more in my vineyard? Have I slackened mine hand, that I have not nourished it?" In both the song of the vineyard and the allegory of the olive tree, the vineyard is ultimately destroyed (Isaiah 5:6–7; Jacob 5:77).

Another of these contest fables with a theme much like that of the song of the vineyard and the allegory of the olive tree is that of Nisaba, the Sumerian wheat goddess and the wheat. The text is fragmentary but from what can be reconstructed there is a conflict between the goddess and the wheat, which results in apparent judgment upon the wheat, the victory of Nisaba, and an assurance of future fertility and productivity.¹⁴ This fable has been compared to the song of the vineyard especially as it notes the importance of rain that will come through Nisaba—in Isaiah 5 the Lord commands the clouds that they withhold rain from the unproductive vineyard (Isaiah 5:6).¹⁵

Elsewhere there is much tree imagery in ancient Near Eastern literature on the level of a simple simile or metaphor. As examples we will look at only a couple of typical extended comparisons. Akkadian proverbs often contain tree imagery:

You are placed into a river and your water becomes at once stinking;
you are placed in an orchard and your date-fruit becomes bitter.

If the shoot is not right it will not produce the stalk, nor create seed.

Will ripe grain grow? How do we know?
Will dried grain grow? How do we know?¹⁶

In the Egyptian *Teaching of Amenemope*, dated between the tenth and the sixth centuries B.C., a man who cannot control his temper is compared with one who has self-control, in a simile of trees:

As for the heated man of a temple,
He is like a tree growing in the open.
In the completion of a moment (comes) its loss of foliage,
And its end is reached in the shipyards;
(Or) it is floated far from its place,
And the flame is its burial shroud.
(But) the truly silent man holds himself apart.
He is like a tree growing in a garden.
It flourishes and doubles its yield;
It (stands) before its lord.
Its fruit is sweet; its shade is pleasant;
And its end is reached in the garden.¹⁷

It is interesting to note that the value of the tree, just as in Jacob 5, is judged not only by the quantity of its fruit but also by the quality of the fruit (Jacob 5:17–18, 20).

Homer is also fond of tree imagery, particularly in his similes describing death. The simile in Homer is a common device in which a scene of human drama is compared with a scene from nature. It is argued that this device is used in epic for emphasis and vividness and also to control the tempo of the narrative.¹⁸ Let us look at one example in the *Iliad*, where the Trojan Euphorbus is about to be killed by Menelaus:

And as a man reareth a lusty sapling of an olive
in a lonely place, where water wellet up abundantly
—a goodly sapling and a fair-growing;
and the blasts of all the winds make it to quiver,
and it burgeoneth out with white blossoms;
but suddenly cometh the wind with a mighty tempest,
and teareth it out of its trench, and layeth it low
upon the earth;
even in such a wise did Menelaus, son of Atreus, slay
Panthous' son, Euphorbus of the good ashen spear, and
set him to spoil him of his armour.

(*Iliad* 17:53–60, translation A. T. Murray)

It is worth noting that the image of the shoot of an olive planted by rivers of water is an image also known from the Old Testament (Psalm 1:3), and, just as the tree falls in this simile, so the entire vineyard will be burned at the end of Zenos's allegory. Several other similar examples occur in the *Iliad* in 4:482–87; 13:178–81, 389–93; 16:482–86. Zenos may or may not be drawing on other ancient traditions for his imagery, but these diverse examples do show the common accessibility of the imagery of trees, planting, grafting, fruitfulness, and harvest to a people who lived in a similar Mediterranean environment and who therefore experienced and appreciated trees, in particular the olive tree, in much the same way.

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE IN THE BIBLE

The Old Testament contains many examples of comparisons both at the simple level of simile and metaphor as well as at the extended level of parables, allegories, fables, and riddles. For example, there is the fable of the trees and the bramble (Judges 9:7–21); Samson's riddle of the lion (Judges 14:14); Nathan's parable of the poor man and his lamb (2 Samuel 12:1–6); the parable of the escaped prisoner (1 Kings 20:39–40); and the song of the vineyard (Isaiah 5:1–7). Also to be included are the dreams of Joseph (Genesis 37:6–11) and the Pharaoh (Genesis 41:1–8) and the various visions in Daniel.

Much of the figurative language of the Old Testament involves metaphors describing Israel and her relationship with God. Perhaps the most pervasive metaphor is that which compares the covenant to a marriage—the Lord being the groom and Israel the bride: "For thy Maker is thine husband" (Isaiah 54:5); "Thus saith the Lord; I remember thee, the kindness of thy youth, the love of thine espousals, when thou wentest after me in the wilderness" (Jeremiah 2:2; cf. also Ezekiel 16:1–14; Hosea 1–3). In this extended metaphor, Sinai represents the marriage ceremony while Israel's constant unfaithfulness to God is described as adultery. This metaphor illustrates the love and tenderness of the relationship, the expectation of trust and fidelity, and the severe consequences of unfaithfulness, which are variously described as separation or divorce.

Also prominent is the comparison of Israel as a plant and the Lord as the gardener: "Thou shalt bring them in, and plant them in the mountain of thine inheritance" (Exodus 15:17); "As the trees of lign aloes which the Lord hath planted, and as cedar trees beside the waters" (Numbers 24:6); "Moreover I will appoint a place for my people Israel, and will plant them" (2 Samuel 7:10); "For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah his pleasant plant" (Isaiah 5:7); "The Lord called thy name, A green olive tree, fair, and of goodly fruit" (Jeremiah 11:16); "And I will plant them in this land assuredly with my whole heart and with my whole soul" (Jeremiah 23:41). This agricultural metaphor emphasizes the dependence of Israel on her God, the care which he gives to his plants, and the expectation of productivity measured by the quality and quantity of the fruit at the harvest. Clearly the closest parallel to Zenos's allegory is found in Isaiah's song of the vineyard (Isaiah 5:1–7) where Israel is compared with an unproductive vineyard that the Lord attempts to make fruitful but finally allows to be destroyed by its enemies and lack of rain.

In the Bible, allegories are most characteristic of the writings of Ezekiel where Israel is compared to various things. Ezekiel first compares Israel to a useless vine whose wood is good only for the fire (Ezekiel 15); then he presents the allegory of the three harlot sisters, which follows the metaphor of the covenant as marriage (Ezekiel 16). Elsewhere he portrays Israel as a cedar tree, in the eagle and the cedar tree (Ezekiel 17), and a lioness and her cubs (Ezekiel 19). Tree imagery is found in the passage in which he compares Assyria and Egypt to the tallest cedar (Ezekiel 31).

The height and grandeur of the cedar are symbolic of Assyria's and Egypt's pride, and because of their pride it is they, the tallest tree, who fall and are cast down to Sheol (cf. "loftiness," Jacob 5:48). Herodotus, writing more than a century later in Athens, also used this same figure when Artabanus advises Xerxes the Great that the tallest tree attracts the wrath of the gods.¹⁹

Just as the word *liken* occurs in Jacob 5 where the Lord says, "I will liken thee, O house of Israel, like unto a tame olive-tree" (Jacob 5:3), so many of the comparisons in biblical usage involving tree or plant imagery are also introduced by the words *like*, *liken*, and *as*. For example, Psalm 52:8, "I am like a green olive tree in the house of God"; Jeremiah 17:8, "He shall be as a tree planted by the waters"; Psalm 1:3, "He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season"; Psalm 92:12–13, "The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree: he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon. Those that he planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God"; and Psalm 128:3, "Thy wife shall be as a fruitful vine by the sides of thine house: thy children like olive plants round about thy table."

Besides the allegory of the olive tree, the most extensive allegory found in scripture, though not in the Old Testament, is the vision of the tree of life, which is presented twice in 1 Nephi—once to Lehi (1 Nephi 8) and once to Nephi (1 Nephi 11–14)—and is interpreted for Nephi (1 Nephi 11–14). Many elements of this allegory may be compared to those in Jacob 5, such as the tree of life, the importance of the fruit, the concern of the Lord, and the rebellion of many of his children. Another important allegory in the Book of Mormon using plant imagery is the allegory of the seed in Alma 32.

CONCLUSIONS

The prophecy of Zenos in Jacob 5 is a sophisticated extended comparison using elements of simile, metaphor, parable, and allegory. Modern terms defining these figures are more precise than the ancient terms; hence Jacob 5 can best be described as an allegory containing a history of the scattering and gathering of Israel, though it can also be read as a parable of the love of God. While Jacob 5 is unique in its sophistication, there is evidence in the ancient Near East that Zenos's allegory of the olive tree does not come out of a vacuum. There are other known examples in ancient Near Eastern literature of extended comparisons such as fables, parables, and perhaps even allegories, but there is nothing of the length and scope of Jacob 5. In addition, 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.

Comparative examples from the ancient Near East and specifically from the Old Testament serve to provide background for a reading of Zenos's allegory of the olive tree and provide some understanding as to its ancient context. Similarities can be found in imagery, language, and function. A comparison with ancient traditions, however, highlights the uniqueness of "the words of the prophet Zenos." The allegory of the olive tree transcends any allegory from a comparable time period in terms of length, scope, detail, and span of history. It is an extraordinary piece of ancient Near Eastern literature, not rivaled by any narrative in the Old Testament in terms of its intricacy.

After Jacob recounted the words of Zenos he testified, "The things which this prophet Zenos spake, concerning the house of Israel, in the which he likened them unto a tame olive-tree, must surely come to pass" (Jacob 6:1). In light of this testimony the meaning of the allegory of the olive tree is important to Israel and to all the inhabitants of the world. Its minute details challenge us and yet its clear message of the constant care of the Lord for his vineyard moves us. We are blessed to have it.