

“Ye Shall Have Joy with Me”: The Olive Tree, the Lord, and His Servants

Daniel Belnap

Daniel Belnap is a part-time instructor of ancient scripture at BYU.

In chapter 5 of the book of Jacob, we find a unique text commonly referred to as the allegory of the olive tree. President Joseph Fielding Smith once said that “the parable of Zenos . . . is one of the greatest parables ever recorded.”¹ Composed of seventy-seven verses, this allegory is thought to follow the progression of a particular olive tree and its offspring in the Lord’s vineyard. Many readers have commented on the special nature of the allegory, with studies ranging from theological meaning, to linguistic comparisons, to actual viticultural practices. Though these studies differ in content, they are similar in one respect: each explores and explains the relationship between the tree and the Lord of the vineyard. This approach is the result of verse 3 concerning the tree itself: “I will liken thee, O house of Israel, like unto a tame olive-tree, which a man took and nourished in his vineyard” (Jacob 5:3). The olive tree, its offshoots, and their interaction with the Lord of the vineyard are the central features of these studies.

Equally important, yet often forgotten, is the relationship between the Lord and the servant of the vineyard. Though we are never given the name of this servant, the interaction between the Lord and His servant as the vineyard grows is worthy of its own study. More importantly, this relationship parallels the future state of the vineyard itself—eventual oneness, or the establishment of Zion on the earth.

Literary Structure of the Allegory

When the tree is the central focus, the allegory is often divided into seven periods. Each period is concerned with an epoch of Israel's temporal history, beginning with the covenant given to Abraham and ending with the Millennium.² This approach is productive in understanding the future of the tree and its offspring, but it is not the only approach available, as the term "Israel" has more than one meaning.³ Too often, we discuss Israel solely in its biological or social context. According to this view, Israel refers to those who are literal descendants of Jacob, or Israel, and is, therefore, a title given to specific bloodlines. Although the title does fit this definition, *Israel* is also the title given to those who have entered into a covenant relationship with God. As Paul points out, "They are not all Israel, which are of Israel" (Romans 9:6).

Elsewhere, Paul explains how both Gentile and Jew are bound by the covenant through the Atonement of Christ, thus becoming family, or "fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God" (Ephesians 2:19) and are, therefore, called *Israel*. The Book of Mormon also teaches that the truest nature of Israel is the covenant relationship. In 1 Nephi 14:1–2, the angel tells Nephi, "If the Gentiles shall hearken unto the Lamb of God . . . and harden not their hearts . . . they shall be numbered among the seed of thy father; yea, they shall be numbered among the house of Israel." In 3 Nephi 16:12–13, the relationship between the covenant and Israel is quite clear: "And then will I remember my covenant unto you, O house of Israel. . . . If the Gentiles will repent and return unto me, saith the Father, behold they shall be numbered among my people." In D&C 103:17, the Lord refers to His covenant members of the Church as "the children of Israel, and of the seed of Abraham." When Israel is approached from this definition, the allegory does not have to represent a literal history of the tribes of Jacob's descendents; instead, it can trace the progression of that covenant made between God and Israel.

With this in mind, we can study the allegory from a point of view in which the covenant relationships between the characters are highlighted. In this approach, the allegory is made up of three sections, each coinciding with a particular series of actions that furthers the Lord's design. The first section starts in verse 3 and runs through verse 28 and is concerned with the first series of actions by which the Lord will seek to save His vineyard. The second section, verses 29–50, is a lamentation scene that plays a pivotal role in the relationship between the servant and the Lord. The third section begins in verse 51, continues through the second series of actions, and ends with the fulfillment of the Lord's plan for the vineyard. This

approach takes into account the trees, but it also provides a more complete understanding of what exactly the Lord plans for the whole vineyard and follows the progression of Israel’s covenant obligations. More importantly, it allows for the actions of the servant, as a growing, maturing individual, to be just as important in the plan as the trees are.

The Servant, the Lord, and the Tree

For some readers, the Lord of the vineyard has been associated with Jesus Christ and the servant with a mortal agent, usually the prophet.⁴ But Paul Hoskisson suggests that the Lord of the vineyard was God the Father, the servant being Jesus Christ.⁵ Noting that the interaction between the Lord and the servant is vital to the allegory, he connects the servant in the allegory to the “righteous servant” mentioned in Isaiah 53:11. As Hoskisson notes, Abinadi later identifies the servant in Isaiah 53 as Christ.⁶ This reference is found in one of the four “servant” passages comprising Isaiah 42, 49, 50, and 52–53. Although in 52–53 it appears that the servant is, in fact, Christ, this is not quite so clear in the three other passages.⁷

In Isaiah 49, the servant is explicitly identified with Israel: “Thou art my servant, O Israel, in whom I will be glorified” (v. 3),⁸ which is followed by the duties the servant is to perform for the Lord: “And now, saith the Lord that formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob again to him, . . . Thou shouldest be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel” (vv. 5–6). Although this language may refer to Christ, it is equally valid for other individuals, such as Joseph Smith, who appears to have used verse 2 to refer to himself.⁹ Doctrine and Covenants 86:9–10 further expands the servant Israel to include latter-day covenant members: “For ye are lawful heirs, according to the flesh, and have been hid from the world with Christ in God. . . . Therefore, blessed are ye if ye continue in my goodness, a light unto the Gentiles, and through this priesthood, a savior unto my people Israel.” Note that in Isaiah 49, the term “Israel” is used to denote two identities—the individual servant and the collective social group.¹⁰ The same is implied in Doctrine and Covenants 86 where the “lawful heirs” are also to be a “savior” (singular) to God’s people, Israel.¹¹

Thus, as the Isaiah reference given above suggests, it may not have been foreign to the ancient Israelites to think of two interpretations of Israel—in which one representation would serve the other. Each interpretation implies an aspect of God’s relationship to Israel overall. References to communal Israel should remind the reader of the great promises made

to Abraham and the other fathers. References to individual Israel would bring to mind the intimate, personal relationship between God and the members of the covenant.¹² Thus, the allegory of Zenos, if approached from this perspective, presents the servant as a covenant member of Israel who has responsibilities for the eventual salvation of communal Israel and the greater world.¹³

Beginnings of the Design (Jacob 5:3–28)

The allegory begins in verse 3, where we learn that the olive tree represents a spiritually declining Israel. Verse 3 also introduces the Lord of the vineyard. Immediately, we learn of the Lord's intent to prune, dig about, and nourish the tree in hopes of reversing the process of decay. We learn an important principle to understanding the allegory: it is the Lord, and later His servants, who is actively engaged in caring for the well-being of the trees. In verse 5, we are told that the Lord intends to nourish the tree with the hope that it will produce young shoots or saplings, which He will transfer to other parts of the vineyard. As we will see later, this is only part of His plan, but this first grafting itself will serve a twofold purpose.

Not only does the Lord intend to plant the saplings elsewhere to save the fruit of the tree but He also intends to separate the saplings to save the mother tree, for "it grieveth me that I should lose the tree" (v. 7). His plan is to replace the offensive branches with grafted branches from other parts of the vineyard. So far the agent of action has been the Lord. Now the servant is involved, though, significantly, we do not hear from him at all. In verses 7–9, the Lord explains the work concerning the mother tree and His servant. More importantly, the servant is given a duty to perform—to graft in the new wild branches into the mother tree. As far as the text states, his only concern is with this single task because he is not told where the saplings are to go. Finally, it doesn't appear that he does any of the actual cutting on the mother tree; he only grafts in the alternate branches.¹⁴ The servant is a worthy one, as is seen in verse 10, where his fulfilled stewardship is duly noted.

The Lord then prepares His servant to fulfill more duties by explaining in greater detail why the grafting needs to be done. Before, the servant was merely following instructions; now, the servant learns how this grafting will benefit the tree: "Wherefore, that perhaps I might preserve the roots thereof that they perish not . . . I have done this thing" (v. 11). It is necessary for the servant to receive this understanding if he is to fulfill correctly the second set of duties to which he will be assigned. In verse 12, the Lord tells the servant to "watch the tree, and nourish it, according to my words." The tree is now completely in the servant's

care. Whereas earlier it was the Lord who nourished and pruned, now it will be the servant's responsibility to keep the tree alive. Moreover, the servant is given some freedom in determining how to do these things, though he is to follow the Lord's instructions, for we find that the servant will be left alone in this endeavor. Verses 13–14 state that the Lord was going to plant and graft in the saplings to the other parts of the vineyard, leaving the servant behind to tend the mother tree.

As recorded in verses 19–28, after an undisclosed amount of time, the Lord calls His servant to work again in the vineyard. But before the new work can commence, the servant must give a report concerning his stewardship; and, in verse 16, the servant does that: “Behold, look here; behold the tree.” The servant allows the tree's progress to speak for his worthiness. Just by looking at the tree, the Lord is able to see that the grafts have taken and that the servant has nourished the tree properly. Having now reported on his successful labor, the servant has been found worthy of even more responsibility. As before, the performances of the duties are preceded by instruction, as the servant must be taught more in the ways of the vineyard and the Lord's plan for the vineyard.

Earlier, the Lord had mentioned that it was His purpose to save the roots by virtue of the grafts. Now, in verse 18, He explains in much greater detail the exact relationship between the roots and the branches. Moreover, upon inspecting the tree, He acknowledges the servant's report by pointing out that the branches have indeed strengthened the roots. This, in turn, brought out the virtue inherent in the roots, allowing the grafts to produce good fruit: “Behold, the branches of the wild tree have taken hold of the moisture of the root thereof, that the root thereof hath brought forth much strength; and because of the much strength of the root thereof the wild branches have brought forth tame fruit.” Thus, the servant gains knowledge and power, as well as a greater appreciation for the efforts of his Lord.

Having learned these lessons, the servant is ready to be introduced to the rest of the vineyard. This, too, is a learning period, as reflected in verses 21 and 22. As he observes the saplings, the servant notes the poor quality of the soil and questions planting the saplings in such an environment. This observation does not necessarily indicate imprudence on the part of the servant but should instead be seen as a great teaching opportunity, allowing the Lord to explain that proper care of the saplings is not always obvious (note the similarity between this point and Jacob's reason for giving the allegory in the first place). The Lord's explanation does not contradict the servant's observation. Instead, it reveals that the poor ground was part of the overall design of the vineyard: “Counsel me

not; I knew that it was a poor spot of ground.” This acknowledgement is followed by the Lord’s statement that He had nourished the tree the entire time and that the choice of the ground along with the nourishing had produced good fruit. This lesson is repeated three times as the servant and the Lord visit each of the saplings. In each case, the Lord emphasizes the nourishing He had done with the poor ground and the subsequent good fruit. Finally, at the last sapling, the Lord points out that the ground was good and that He had nourished the tree but that the fruit was only partially good.

At this point, new duties are given: “Pluck off the branches that have not brought forth good fruit, and cast them into the fire” (v. 26). Unlike the first time the servant received his duties, this assignment appears to test the servant’s understanding of his role concerning the tree. Before, his only concern was the mother tree; now he is to work with the saplings. Moreover, he has been called to cut off the useless branches just as the Lord of the vineyard did with the mother tree. But the servant realizes that there are steps in the process that have not been fulfilled yet. He says, “Let us prune it, and dig about it, and nourish it a little longer, that perhaps it may bring forth good fruit unto thee” (v. 27). This is the same process that the Lord did with the mother tree prior to its grafting. Thus, the servant has realized that before cutting the branches, a servant must dig and prune. Further, the servant has realized that the cutting itself is necessary for the future growth of the tree. The servant’s answer, therefore, signifies not only that he has absorbed the instruction given him but also that he has watched the Lord work. He has learned the correct way to strengthen the saplings and has proven himself worthy of greater responsibility in the vineyard.

Although it appears that the servant changed the mind of the Lord of the vineyard, he was actually being tested in his stewardship. This feature in the relationship between the servant and the Lord is not unprecedented. Other scriptures record similar real-life exchanges between God and His chosen. Genesis 18:16–33 records the Lord’s discussion with Abraham concerning the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. Here we read of the Lord’s plan for the cities and of Abraham’s repeated requests for their preservation. Each request is based on the number of righteous inhabitants of the cities. Abraham begins by asking for a reprieve if there are fifty righteous citizens. When he is granted this, he asks for a reprieve if there are forty—and so on until he gets the final reprieve if there are only ten such inhabitants. Like the servant in the allegory, it appears that Abraham changed the mind of the Lord; in fact, it appears that he did so again and again.

But when the story of Abraham is examined more closely, we see that, like the servant, this event concerns Abraham’s stewardship, not the Lord’s decision making. First to be noted is that the cities were destroyed, as there were not even ten righteous inhabitants. No doubt the Lord was well aware of this during His exchange with Abraham. Knowing this, we are left to wonder what was the point of the exchange at all. Part of the answer may be in verse 17, where the Lord soliloquizes, “Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do?” Note that the question is not whether He should destroy Sodom and Gomorrah but whether He should explain all His actions to Abraham. The soliloquy continues as the Lord explains why Abraham should know the plans, “seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation” (v. 18). It is because of Abraham’s great mission that he should understand the plan. Finally, the soliloquy ends as the Lord further explains His purpose based on the future actions of Abraham’s covenant, saying, “And all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him” (v. 18). This aspect of Abraham’s mission is important. Although Abraham is to have a nation arise from him, it is through Abraham that all mankind will be blessed. Abraham is responsible for much more than his direct descendants. This, in turn, puts the entire exchange in another light. Already knowing the outcome, the exchange tells the Lord something about Abraham, whose concern for the two cities demonstrates his active awareness of his stewardship beyond his family upon which the covenant hinges.

Moses, too, appears to have been tested concerning his stewardship. In Exodus 32, Israel has seemingly pushed God to the point of no return: “I have seen this people, and, behold, it is a stiffnecked people: now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them: and I will make of thee a great nation” (vv. 9–10). Numbers 14 also records the Lord stating to Moses, “I will smite them with the pestilence, and disinherit them, and will make of thee a greater nation and mightier than they” (v. 13). In keeping with his stewardship, Moses intervenes on behalf of Israel. Having said this, the Old Testament as a whole makes it abundantly clear that it was never the Lord’s true intention to completely destroy Israel. This does not mean they would not experience discipline for their sins (see Joseph Smith Translation—Exodus 32:12), but, as in the case of Abraham, it does tell us that the Lord knew that Israel was not going to be destroyed at that time. Thus, the exchange between Moses and the Lord was also a test for Moses.¹⁵

In Exodus 32:13, Moses “reminds” the Lord of the covenant He made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (significantly referred to as the Lord’s servants) and the promises concerning land and posterity. But as was mentioned above, the covenant of Abraham also included the provision that he would be a blessing to the nations. Moses, like Abraham, appears to understand that his stewardship extends to those beyond Israel. In both Exodus 32 and Numbers 14, Moses points out that the total destruction of Israel would cause Egypt to not understand the true nature of God: “Wherefore should the Egyptians speak, and say, For mischief did he bring them out, to slay them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth?” (Exodus 32:12). This question suggests two things. First, Moses is concerned with the future status of Egypt and its relationship with God just as much as he is concerned with Israel’s future relationship with God. Moreover, the statement implies that aspect of the Abrahamic covenant in which all nations are blessed since it is Israel’s continued existence that will bless Egypt with a true knowledge of God. Either way, it is the greater stewardship of Moses concerning more than just his immediate duties that is tested. Like Abraham, Moses passed the test.

Lament of the Lord of the Vineyard (vv. 29–50)

After another undisclosed period of time, the Lord and the servant go down again to review the progress of the vineyard. Their first stop, as before, is the mother tree. There they discover that the fruit has gone wild, whereupon the Lord of the vineyard turns to His servant and asks, “What shall we do unto the tree, that I may preserve again good fruit?” (v. 33). This question represents a new stage in the developing relationship between the servant and the Lord of the vineyard. Clearly, the servant has advanced in both his knowledge and in his care for those parts of the vineyard he has been given stewardship over—specifically, those trees associated with Israel. From the beginning, his primary responsibility has been the mother tree. As we saw earlier, the tree’s welfare was turned over completely to the servant (supervised by the Lord of the vineyard). That duty has not been lifted, so the servant is still responsible for the tree. Even though the Lord knows exactly what to do, He gives the servant the chance to find out for himself.

The servant demonstrates his maturation and growth in his responses. He says, “Behold, because thou didst graft in the branches of the wild olive-tree they have nourished the roots, that they are alive and they have not perished; wherefore thou beholdest that they are yet good” (v. 34). Not only does the servant demonstrate his mastery of the

knowledge concerning the health of the tree but also he has learned that the Lord has a master design, even if he, the servant, doesn't understand or see all of it. Compare this response to when he questioned the Lord's choice of soil for planting the saplings (see v. 21), and we can see the development of the servant's understanding. The Lord, in turn, recognizes the insights provided by His servant, and in verse 37, He explains the direness of the new situation. Even though the roots are alive, the branches have brought forth so much evil fruit that the roots themselves have been infected and are beginning to die.

The second stop is the saplings and branches planted elsewhere. Upon inspection, the fruit there is also found to be corrupt. At this point, the Lord cries out, “What could I have done more for my vineyard” (v. 41). Thus begins the lament presented in verses 41–47. Verse 47 highlights the poignant nature of the Lord's sorrow over the vineyard: “What could I have done more in my vineyard? Have I slackened mine hand, that I have not nourished it? Nay, I have nourished it, and I have digged about it, and I have pruned it, and I have dunged it; and I have stretched forth mine hand almost all the day long, and the end draweth nigh. And it grieveth me that I should hew down all the trees of my vineyard.” We notice immediately that the lament is not just for Israel and its saplings but for the entire vineyard.¹⁶ This observation is significant because up to this point, the focus in the allegory and in the vineyard has been on Israel and the saplings. There have only been hints to a larger design in the dealings with the trees. Now, though, the Lord's concern for the entire vineyard is made explicit. As we will see, the servant must understand and share this concern if he is to progress in his stewardship. Thus, though the lament appears to be spontaneous, it is, in fact, another learning experience for the servant. The servant is not the first to learn this lesson by witnessing the Lord's grief. Nor is this the only scriptural form of this lesson.

Moses 7 records an exchange between God and Enoch after Enoch had successfully brought his people back to the presence of God (see v. 21). In verse 20, Enoch confidently declares that “surely Zion shall dwell in safety forever.” He is satisfied in the eternal security of his people. The Lord agrees with Enoch, saying, “Zion have I blessed,” and He then adds, “but the residue of the people have I cursed” (v. 20). This second clause suggests that something is missing in Enoch's initial declaration. As we will see, Enoch needs to learn something concerning the “residue of the people” and himself before he can declare victory. Enoch begins to learn this lesson in verse 23 as he is taken into heaven. There, he immediately witnesses the entire earth covered in darkness because of the chain

of the adversary, as Satan looks up into the faces of Enoch and God and laughs. Following this, Enoch witnesses the exaltation of Zion (see v. 27) and sees God's sorrowful reaction to the "residue of the people."

God's reaction is different than what Enoch was expecting, which is expressed in verses 28–30. Here Enoch asks with surprise, "How is it that the heavens weep, and shed forth their tears as the rain upon the mountains?" (v. 28). Enoch inquires of God, "How is it that thou canst weep, seeing thou art holy . . . [and that] thou art just; thou art merciful and kind forever; and thou hast taken Zion to thine own bosom . . . and naught but peace, justice, and truth is the habitation of thy throne; and mercy shall go before thy face and have no end; how is it thou canst weep?" (vv. 29–31). Though we are told that the weeping came as a direct result of God's observation of the residue—those who were left behind after the exaltation of Zion (see v. 28)—this has not impressed itself on Enoch, who is shocked that God would weep, even though Zion was safe.

That it was a lesson for Enoch becomes apparent when God states that the residue Enoch has ignored is, in fact, family: "The Lord said unto Enoch: Behold these thy brethren" (v. 32). Up to this point, Enoch's only concern has been Zion. Now, the Lord has begun the process by which Enoch may open his eyes to a larger responsibility. The same designation, "thy brethren," is repeated two more times over the next four verses, emphasizing the familial relationship between the residue and Enoch, the presiding authority of Zion.¹⁷ With the relationship now properly understood, Enoch is prepared to comprehend the sorrow of God. In verse 37, he is told that God weeps because of the suffering that Enoch's brethren, the residue, will have to endure because of their sins: "Wherefore should not the heavens weep, seeing these shall suffer?" Later, in verses 39–40, the Lord states, "They shall be in torment; wherefore, for this shall the heavens weep," and He adds, "yea, and all the workmanship of mine hands" (v. 40). This added content includes Enoch among those who will weep because, as he has learned, the "residue of the people," which he had previously ignored, are, in fact, his responsibility as much as Zion is. His joy is now tempered by the same sorrow he had witnessed in his Lord. "Wherefore Enoch knew, and looked upon their wickedness, and their misery, and wept and stretched forth his arms, and his heart swelled wide as eternity; and his bowels yearned; and all eternity shook" (v. 41). By witnessing God's lament, Enoch came to understand the true nature of his stewardship, which in turn allowed him to become even more like God and progress into something greater.¹⁸

In the allegory, the servant, like Enoch, experiences the Lord’s lamentation. Similarly, the lament appears to teach the servant that his stewardship, just like his Master’s, includes the entire vineyard. Moreover, he is able to use the knowledge and experience he has with the mother tree and its saplings to explain what has happened to the entire vineyard. “Is it not the loftiness of thy vineyard—have not the branches overcome the roots which are good?” (Jacob 5:48). Before, the servant did not recognize the overburdening of the roots (see above). Now, he can discern the true nature of the problem for all the trees. His increased discernment, as well as the new understanding of his stewardship, explains his response to the Lord’s injunction to burn the vineyard down: “Spare it [the entire vineyard] a little longer” (v. 50).

Like Enoch and Moses, the servant has become a type of Christ as he mediates between the Lord of the vineyard and the trees. Because of the corrupt nature of the entire vineyard, the servant could have simply followed the Lord’s instructions and burned down the vineyard. The lament demonstrates that such an action would have been justified. Moses, too, would have been justified in doing nothing, as he was not responsible for the individual sins committed by Israel. Ultimately, Christ in the garden had no need to suffer for His own actions. He, too, was justified. In these cases, the servants would have been justified without mediating on behalf of others. Thus, each was tested to see if he would accept a greater stewardship and follow his Master. As we have seen, Moses passed this test, and so did the servant in Zenos’s allegory. It goes without saying that Christ did so as well.

Establishment of Zion (vv. 51–77)

As was pointed out earlier, the lament was necessary for the servant to understand his relationship with the rest of the vineyard. That this was the purpose for the servant to witness the lament can be seen in verse 51. Here, the Lord responds to the servant’s request for more time with a strong affirmative, saying, “Yea, I will spare it a little longer, for it grieveth me that I should lose the trees of my vineyard.” It does not appear that the Lord ever truly planned to burn the vineyard. In fact, the verse reads just the opposite; it was always His plan to preserve the vineyard as much as possible.¹⁹ Moreover, as we saw, the lament revealed the true nature of the Lord’s design. It is the success of the whole vineyard and not just a few trees that is His true concern. This understanding is made explicit as the second set of actions in His overall design are begun in verse 52. Verses 3–28 described the first set of actions in which the saplings were separated from the mother

tree and were transplanted to the various parts of the vineyard, and the mother tree was rejuvenated by receiving grafts from other trees in the vineyard. Now, the branches of the mother tree and the branches of the saplings are to be grafted back into each other.

Verses 67–68 record the reasoning behind this series of actions: “And the branches [saplings] of the natural [mother] tree will I graft in again into the natural [mother] tree, and the branches of the natural [mother] tree will I graft into the natural branches [saplings] of the [mother] tree; and thus will I bring them together again, that they shall bring forth natural fruit, and they shall be one.” The purpose of the Lord of the vineyard has always been to bring together again the saplings and the mother tree. But this unity between the trees representing Israel was not the only purpose to the Lord’s work. In verse 74, we read, “And the Lord had preserved unto himself that the trees had become again the natural fruit; and they became like unto one body; and the fruits were equal.”

Yet the Lord’s true concern is for the entire vineyard—not just for the growth of the mother tree and her saplings: “That I may have joy again in the fruit of my vineyard, *and*, perhaps, that I may rejoice exceedingly that I have preserved the roots and the branches of the first fruit” (v. 60; emphasis added). Note that His end design was to rejoice both in the fruit of the entire vineyard and in the harvest of the first fruit—that is, the mother tree and her saplings. Moreover, just as He sought for oneness among the mother tree and her saplings, He also planned for the eventual oneness of the entire vineyard. He says, “And blessed art thou; for because ye have been diligent in laboring with me in the vineyard . . . and have brought unto me again the natural fruit, that my vineyard is no more corrupted, and the bad is cast away, behold ye shall have joy with me because of the fruit of my vineyard” (v. 75).²⁰ It is at this point that we truly see the grand design the Lord of the vineyard had concerning the tree representing Israel. By separating, disseminating, and grafting the saplings and the mother tree with the other trees of the vineyard, the Lord has not only strengthened and preserved the mother tree but also has succeeded in transforming the entire vineyard by spreading Israel to all the trees. Now, as He grafts the branches in again, disseminating them across the vineyard once again, the oneness is achieved. As one cannot distinguish the fruit of any given tree, it all is good. At this point, we see how the paradox Jacob sought to explain is answered by the allegory. The Lord is the stumbling block of Israel because He scatters and cuts off what appears to be healthy Israel. But He is also the foundation stone because He

strengthens the roots and saplings of the mother tree. Finally, He is also the means by which Israel fulfills its covenantal obligations to all the family of mankind because His actions graft Israel to the other trees of the vineyard, bringing about the health of His entire vineyard.

The growth of the servant also reaches its climax at this point. Having proved himself as one who is like the Lord of the vineyard in his care for the entire vineyard, now the Lord gives him the greatest responsibility of all: “Wherefore, go to, and call servants, that we may labor diligently with our might in the vineyard” (v. 61). The servant now performs the same duties the Lord of the vineyard did at the beginning of the allegory—that of calling servants to their own individual stewardships. Having proved his care, love, and stewardship for the vineyard, the servant receives responsibility to raise others to the same standard by going through the same process he experienced. At this point, the servant has become like the Lord of the vineyard in every way. This is reflected in verse 71, where he and all the others who have become like the Lord will “have joy in the fruit which I [the Lord] shall lay up unto myself” if they prove faithful and labor with their might in the vineyard.²¹

Finally, the Lord commends His servants by taking the conditional promise recorded in verse 71 and making it unconditional: “Blessed art thou; for because ye have been diligent in laboring with me in my vineyard, and have kept my commandments, and have brought unto me again the natural fruit, that my vineyard is no more corrupted, and the bad is cast away, behold ye shall have joy with me because of the fruit of my vineyard” (v. 75). The promise is that they will be with the Lord forever. Thus, unity is the end result of the Lord-servant relationship. The trees are also unified at the end of this process. The servant becomes one with the Lord and, in fact, becomes a lord himself, enjoying the fruit of the vineyard as the Lord does and enjoying the companionship of the Lord as an equal. This outcome fulfills the covenantal obligations of Israel individually. In Doctrine and Covenants 86:11, the Lord states, “Therefore, blessed are ye if ye continue in my goodness, a light unto the Gentiles, and . . . a savior unto my people Israel.” These are exactly the same duties outlined for the servant in Isaiah 49. The servant has become a lord of the vineyard, becoming a savior to the vineyard as well.

Conclusion

In Zenos’s allegory, Israel may be seen as both the tree, representing the communal nature of Israel, and as the servant, representing the individual nature of Israel. When read in this manner, we gain a greater

appreciation of the Lord's design for all of His children through His chosen people, Israel. Because Israel is grafted and transplanted across the vineyard, all have the opportunity to become a part of Israel, thus fulfilling the covenantal promise given to Abraham. It is in this manner that Israel blesses all mankind. Yet Israel is not just the passive tree; as the servant, Israel is an active participant in accomplishing the plan. By fulfilling the duties assigned to it, Israel, as the servant, learns not only about the vineyard but also about what it means to be a lord. Moreover, the process the servant experiences leads to that lordship.

Thus, the allegory follows the covenantal progress of Israel both on the individual level and on the communal level. Although this might not have been the stated purpose of Jacob, it appears to have been understood by Lehi, who experienced a twofold vision of the tree of life. Not only did he see himself as the individual relating to the tree but also he witnessed "numberless concourses" seeking the tree. This duality of the individual and the communal, reflected in both Nephi's dream and Zenos's allegory, may have resonated with Lehi, which would explain his immediate discourse on the allegory following his presentation of the dream (see 1 Nephi 9–10).

We should not be surprised that the allegory still resonates today. The allegory reveals truths concerning who we are, what we are expected to do, and what we can become. More importantly, the allegory reveals to us that the Lord truly has a plan, that He is aware at all times what is going on in His vineyard, and that He strives only for the best of all involved. The true power of the allegory comes from understanding that He is seeking not only for oneness and good fruit but also for servants who become companions, associates, and equals—or "heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ, . . . that we may be also glorified together" (Romans 8:17).²² **RE**

Notes

1. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979), 4:141.

2. This division is discussed in great detail in Paul Y. Hoskisson, "The Allegory of the Olive Tree in Jacob," in *The Allegory of the Olive Tree: The Olive, the Bible, and Jacob 5*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: FARMS, 1996), 70–104. He is not alone in this approach. See also Dennis L. Largey, ed., *Book of Mormon Reference Companion* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), and especially *Book of Mormon 121 Student Manual* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981).

3. This point has led to modest differences in the seven-epoch chronologies.

Hoskisson points out that his division of temporal periods differs from Monte S. Nyman’s chronology (see Hoskisson, “The Allegory,” 100ff.; see also Monte S. Nyman, *An Ensign to All People* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987], 24).

4. *Book of Mormon 121 Student Manual*, 121, 140.

5. Hoskisson, “The Allegory,” 73. See also Largey, *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, where the servant is identified with the Savior. The *Reference Companion* notes, though, that others equate the servant with the prophets.

6. This is made explicit only in the Book of Mormon. Jewish exegesis states that the reference referred to Moses (see b. Sota 14a in I. Epstein, *The Babylonian Talmud*, vol. 20 (1932), 55–56, 73–74).

7. This is discussed in length in Klaus Koch, *The Prophets, vol. 2: The Babylonian and Persian Periods*, trans. Margaret Kohl (United Kingdom: Fortress Press, 1984), 136–46. See also Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 189–92, 216–22, who suggests a relationship between the “servant” passages and the “servants” passages found later in Isaiah.

8. Some have suggested that the Hebrew structure behind the verse allows for alternate interpretations, which would take away the identification of the servant as Israel. Interestingly, Nephi translates the Hebrew text in the same manner as recorded in the King James Version of the Bible in 1 Nephi 21. After recording changes in the first verse, he then records, “And said unto me: Thou art my servant, O Israel, in whom I will be glorified” (v. 3).

9. Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 304: “I am like a huge, rough stone rolling down from a high mountain; and the only polishing I get is when some corner gets rubbed off by coming in contact with something else, striking with accelerated force against religious bigotry, priestcraft, lawyer-craft, doctor-craft, lying editors, suborned judges and jurors, and the authority of perjured executives, backed by mobs, blasphemers, licentious and corrupt men and women—all hell knocking off a corner here and a corner there. Thus I will become a smooth and polished shaft in the quiver of the Almighty.” See Isaiah 49:2–3: “In the shadow of his hand hath he hid me, and made me a polished shaft; in his quiver hath he hid me; and said unto me, Thou art my servant, O Israel.”

10. See also Psalms 105:23; 136:22; and Jeremiah 30:10 for other references to Israel as the singular servant of the Lord.

11. Joseph Fielding McConkie and Craig J. Ostler, *Revelations of the Restoration* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 622, speaking of Doctrine and Covenants 86:11: “This phrase combines the prophetic language of Isaiah and Obadiah. It identifies the destiny of *Israel*, meaning those who hold the priesthood restored to the Prophet Joseph Smith, which is to gather the scattered remnant of Abraham’s seed. . . . It foreshadows *the role that those gathering Israel will play* in the house of the Lord as they perform ordinances for their kindred dead” (emphasis added).

12. Following are references to individuals who also acted as God’s servants. For Moses, see Exodus 14:31; 33:11; Deuteronomy 34:5; Joshua 1:1, 2, 7; 8:31; 13:8; and Malachi 4:4. For Joshua, see Numbers 14:24 and Joshua 24:29. In the Psalms and the prose texts of Kings, it is David who is the servant of God.

13. See M. Catherine Thomas, “Jacob’s Allegory: The Mystery of Christ,” in *The Allegory of the Olive Tree*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 11–20. M. Catherine Thomas also suggests that Israel

can be seen both in the communal and individual sense when we read the allegory, even though her central focus is still the trees and the Lord: “In scripture the meaning often lies in the aggregate of allusions and associations. The olive tree is one of these layered symbols. It is Israel at the macrocosmic level; it is also an individual Israelite being nourished by an attentive God” (Thomas, “Jacob’s Allegory,” 13).

14. This does not necessarily mean that the servant did not do this—just that these actions, if performed by the servant, are not mentioned explicitly in the text. That the servant may have been involved in the cutting process can be seen in verse 7, where the servant is told that he needs to go “pluck” the wild branches. Later, the pronoun “we” allows for the servant to have been involved in the actual pruning process for the mother tree.

15. This apparent change of mind by God has been discussed elsewhere in Latter-day Saint literature. See Blake T. Ostler’s review of Francis J. Beckwith and Stephen E. Parrish, “The Mormon Concept of God: A Philosophical Analysis,” in *FARMS Review of Books* 8, no. 2 (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1996): “The most faithful way to understand this passage, it seems to me, is to view Yahweh as having formed an intention to do one thing—and thus at one time believing that he would do it—and at a later time changing his mind and coming to believe something different. Yet if God did not know at the time of his conversation with Moses whether Israel would be destroyed, then certainly there were a good many things about the future that he did not know.” Ellis T. Rasmussen, like this author, suggests that Moses was being tested: “Moses declined the Lord’s offer to substitute him and his seed for the apostate Israelites. If this offer was a test, Moses passed it humbly, pleading with God for mercy for his erring people” (*A Latter-day Saint Commentary on the Old Testament* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994], 119). Sidney B. Sperry suggests the same thing: “Through long experience he [Moses] knew the faults and failings of his people. They were none too easy to handle. And now the Lord was offering to make of him a great nation in their stead. What should he do? His answer is a wonderful tribute to another quality he possessed, namely, loyalty to his God and to his people despite the frailties of the latter” (*The Spirit of the Old Testament* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980], 41).

16. Over the seven verses of the lament, the totality of the vineyard is referred to seven times.

17. The use of kinship language here and through the next few verses reveals the covenant obligations of all the parties. Frank Moore Cross discusses the relationship between kinship terminology and covenant language (see Cross, *From Epic to Canon* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998], 3–21). He states, “The language of covenant . . . is the language of kinship” (11). It is this kinship-covenantal relationship that Enoch does not possess with the “residue” that God makes him aware of. The idea of the Divine Kinsman is also evidenced. According to Cross, “the God of the Fathers” was the Divine Kinsman, who, like the mortal kinsman, “fulfills the mutual obligations and receives the privileges of kinship.” In Moses 7:33, the Lord states that He had given Enoch’s brethren the commandment to love one another and choose Him as their Father, “but behold, they are without affection, and they hate their own blood.” The father they did choose is mentioned in verse 37: “But behold, their sins shall be upon the heads of their fathers; Satan shall be their father.”

18. In later Jewish literature, Enoch is taken into the company of the gods, becoming one of the divine beings around God, and is actually given the name

YHWH Qaton, or the lesser Yahweh.

19. Arthur Henry King, “Language Themes in Jacob 5: ‘The Vineyard of the Lord of Hosts Is the House of Israel’ (Isaiah 5:7),” in *The Allegory of the Olive Tree*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 146, says, “Immediately after agreeing to the servant’s suggestion that the trees should further be spared, the Lord imposes action—the immediacy is such that we would presume that the Lord had been prepared to continue. That would mean that the Lord’s decision to hew down the trees at this point functioned more to find out how the servant would react than as a decision.”

20. The theme of oneness and Zion is the central focus of M. Catherine Thomas’s study of the allegory: “One of the key insights that emerges from the allegory is that the power of the atonement seeks to affect men at every level of their existence. It urges people together geographically into Zions” (Thomas, “Jacob’s Allegory,” 19).

21. Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions*, 2:57: “Thus through this scattering the Lord has caused Israel to mix with the nations and bring the Gentiles within the blessings of the seed of Abraham. . . . It is by this scattering that the Gentile nations have been blessed, and if they will truly repent they are entitled to all the blessings promised to Israel, ‘which are the blessings of salvation, even of life eternal.’”

22. See James E. Faulconer, “The Olive Tree and the Work of God: Jacob 5 and Romans 11,” in *The Allegory of the Olive Tree*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 347–66. See also Thomas, “Jacob’s Allegory,” 19: “Finally, an individual must discover Jacob’s mystery for himself. The greatest value of the allegory may be that it serves to make one conscious of the efforts of the Lord to draw him by ‘the enticings of the Holy Spirit’ (Mosiah 3:19) into a working relationship with a powerful Benefactor.”