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Abstract: The Book of Mormon contains a lengthy allegory representing the house of Israel. Because the allegory of the olive tree is associated with Israel, it is reasonable to assume that its symbolic events correspond to real events in the Israelites' history. Brigham Young University professor of ancient scripture Paul Y. Hoskisson attempts to pinpoint dates, events, and places that may be referred to. Hoskisson also seeks to answer the question of how apostate Israel could ever accept Jesus Christ, as the allegory asserts. He claims that the answer is also found in the allegory: such a conversion is possible only through the grace of Christ purging evil and pride from the hearts of men.



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Explicating the Mystery of the Rejected Foundation Stone: The Allegory of the Olive Tree

Paul Y. Hoskisson

Because the tame olive tree, the central image in the allegory of Zenos,¹ represents a historical people, the house of Israel (Jacob 5:3), it follows that at least some of the other symbols and allusions in the allegory concern actual events and people in history. In fact, the reason the prophet Jacob delivered Zenos' allegory of the olive tree to the Nephites was to explain a mystery, namely, how Israel "after having rejected" Jesus Christ as their "sure foundation" (Jacob 4:17), could ever return and build on him in this world.²

If the allegory is meant to explain actual events in the temporal and spiritual history of the house of Israel, the allegory must be understandable in a temporal and spiritual sense. Nevertheless, though Jacob did comment tangentially on the allegory, no satisfactory explanation of the historical significance and the temporal referents in the allegory exists.³ One treatise on the subject even states that "it is impossible to ascribe a timetable to the various allegorical scenes described by Zenos."⁴ I will demonstrate that many of the historical metaphors in the allegory can be placed in time with relative precision, that some can be located in space, and that much can be said about their significance.

With one exception, I will not discuss at length the metaphors in the allegory. Most of them have been identified previously and do not require lengthy explanations, but rather are accepted here with little commentary.⁵ The tame olive tree, the dominant metaphor in the allegory, symbolizes the house of Israel (Jacob 5:3). The wild olive trees therefore refer to non-Israelites. The vineyard in which the olive trees, both wild and tame, have been planted is the world (Jacob 6:3; 5:77). The decay in the tame tree represents apostasy from the gospel of Jesus Christ. Several commentaries equate the

roots with progenitors. No doubt this interpretation comes from a prosaic belief that if the word *root* means “progenitors” in Malachi 4:1, it must mean that in all scriptural contexts. Departing from this interpretation, *The Book of Mormon Student Manual* suggests that the roots represent the covenants associated with the house of Israel.⁶ I would suggest that the symbol of the roots represents a broader referent, namely, the gospel of Jesus Christ, including its covenants. This suggestion is based on the assumption that the “good word of God” (the gospel) in Jacob 6:7 that nourished the tree must refer to the roots.⁷ The other elements of the allegory either require no explanation or no consensus has yet been reached.⁸

Assignment of the events in the allegory to approximate historical time periods, a prerequisite to any interpretation, must start by determining the dates of the beginning and the end. The allegory begins in verse 3 with the founding of the house of Israel by the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob/Israel.⁹ Because the most probable time period for the Patriarchs lies within the Middle Bronze Age, 2100–1600 B.C., the historical beginning of the allegory must fall in that period.¹⁰ The allegory ends with the last verse of the chapter, when the good and bad fruit are gathered and then fire destroys the vineyard. Therefore, since the vineyard stands for the world, the allegory concludes with the destruction of the earth by fire after the Millennium.¹¹ All other time periods of the allegory must fit within these parameters.

The time sequences represented in the allegory from the first cultivation of the tame olive tree to the destruction of the vineyard can be conveniently divided into seven periods:¹² (1) *verse 3*, the founding of the house of Israel (the “taking and nourishing” of the tame olive tree) sometime in the first half of the second millennium B.C. and the aging thereof in the latter half of the same millennium; (2) *verses 4–14*, the nurturing, starting approximately 1200 B.C., through the scattering of the house of Israel, culminating near 600 B.C.; (3) *verses 15–28*, the Day of the Gentiles,¹³ approximately the first century of the Christian Era; (4) *verses 29–49*, the Great Apostasy, up to about 1820; (5) *verses 50–74*, the gathering of Israel beginning in 1820; (6) *verses 75–76*, the Millennium; and (7) *verse 77*, the end of the world. I will discuss these periods in this order.

FIRST PERIOD: THE FOUNDING AND AGING OF THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL (VERSE 3)

The founding years of the house of Israel, the starting point of the allegory, date to the first half of the second millennium B.C., the most likely setting for the Patriarchal Age. By the end of verse 3,

however, the tree had already “waxed old,” an indication that considerable time had passed since the tree was first cultivated, probably four to six hundred years or more.¹⁴ In addition, the tree had begun to decay; that is, apostasy against the gospel of Jesus Christ had arisen in the house of Israel. If the Lord of the vineyard did not take appropriate measures, the tree would continue to decay and eventually die. At this point, long after the planting of the tree, the Lord paid a visit to his vineyard, thus initiating the second period.

SECOND PERIOD: THE NURTURING AND SCATTERING OF THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL (VERSES 4–14)

The Lord of the vineyard, on seeing his now venerable tree and the decay therein, outlined a course of action to correct the situation, to rejuvenate the tree, and then to plant offshoots of the tame olive tree in other parts of his vineyard. In the first stage of his efforts, he stimulated the aged tree to produce younger branches that could bear good fruit: “And it came to pass that the master of the vineyard went forth, and he saw that his olive-tree began to decay; and he said: I will prune it, and dig about it, and nourish it, that perhaps it may shoot forth young and tender branches, and it perish not” (v. 4). Beginning with prophets such as Moses, Samuel, Elijah, Isaiah, and others, the Lord attempted to reclaim the house of Israel from apostasy. Even with this effort and after working a period of “many days,” the Lord met with only minimal success: “[The olive tree] began to put forth somewhat a little, young and tender branches” (v. 6), while most of the tree continued to deteriorate. As the allegory also makes clear, the rulers and the ruling class, the “main top” of the tree, were with few exceptions almost beyond recovery (v. 6).

Two examples of this apostasy suffice. Jeroboam, the initial king of the Northern Kingdom, introduced calf icons at the cultic sites of Dan and Bethel, thus establishing one of the great political/cultic sins of king and people in the Old Testament (1 Kgs. 12:25–33; 15:30).¹⁵ Manasseh, a king of the Southern Kingdom, ushered in one of the most condemned reigns in Biblical history, summarized in one verse, “But they [the Kingdom of Judah] hearkened not: and Manasseh seduced them to do more evil than did the nations whom the Lord destroyed before the children of Israel” (2 Kgs. 21:9).¹⁶ It is no wonder that the Lord of the vineyard grieved that he “should lose this tree” (v. 7), that is, that the house of Israel should cease to exist as a cultural entity.

At this juncture the Lord of the vineyard instructed the servant to take three additional measures: “Go and pluck the branches from a wild olive-tree, and bring them hither unto me; and we will pluck

off those main branches which are beginning to wither away, and we will cast them into the fire that they may be burned. And behold, saith the Lord of the vineyard, I take away many of these young and tender branches, and I will graft them whithersoever I will" (vv. 7–8). These three steps entailed cutting out those parts of Israel in apostasy (mainly the upper classes) and destroying them, grafting into Israel other peoples, and placing some of the young and tender natural branches of the house of Israel in other parts of the vineyard.

The first step was accomplished, at least in part, when the Lord through the Assyrians brought about the destruction of Israel by about 720 B.C. and of parts of Judah within the next twenty years, and through the Babylonians the final destruction of Judah in approximately 586 B.C.

In at least two stages after 720 B.C., the Assyrians helped fulfil the second set of instructions by moving other peoples into the territorial vacuum created when they substantially depopulated Israel.¹⁷ These imported peoples, at least to some extent, intermarried with the remaining Israelites, producing a new cultural melding. The Israelites that were carried into captivity by the Assyrians as well as the Judahite captives of the Babylonians probably intermarried with their non-Israelite neighbors and accepted new cultural elements.¹⁸

The third measure the Lord of the vineyard proposed involved transporting puerile groups of Israelites to other lands away from Palestine. We certainly do not know the full extent or all of the means the Lord used to scatter Israel. The deportation of people from Israel and Judah was part of this process, as was the departure of the Lehighites, alluded to in the allegory. Certainly other groups were led away also.

If it is possible from the allegory to make observations about the nature of the scattering of Israel, I would suggest two conclusions. First, the apostate branches of Israel were not scattered but destroyed: "We will pluck them off and cast them into the fire" (v. 7). This statement does not necessarily refer to apostate individuals, but certainly it applies to cultic, political, and cultural continuity. Second, the branches that were scattered were "young and tender" (v. 8), that is, they were at the time of their scattering still formable and capable of bearing good fruit.

With parts of the house of Israel scattered over much of the surface of the earth, with intermarriage between Israelites and non-Israelites, and with the subsequent cultural shifts both in and outside of Palestine, perhaps the tree would be saved. For the result we must turn to the next period.

THIRD PERIOD: THE DAY OF THE GENTILES (VERSES 15–28)

The allegory provides three bits of information that add precision to the dating of the period I have termed the Day of the Gentiles. First, after the nurturing of Israel and the scattering of the puerile and pliable branches of Israel, the Lord allowed “a long time” to elapse before coming to inspect the vineyard (v. 15).¹⁹ If the removal of the decayed parts of the house of Israel from Palestine was essentially completed and the scattering of the young and tender branches of Israel well underway by about 586 B.C., then the Day of the Gentiles must have been considerably later than this date. How much later can be determined by the next indication.

Second, when the Lord eventually returned to the vineyard, he discovered that the mother tree, with the Gentiles grafted in, had produced “tame fruit” (v. 18). The only historical period when Israel with Gentile grafts produced good fruit came at the time of Christ’s mortal ministry and in the decades following. Thus, the tentative dates for the third era in the allegory, the Day of the Gentiles, can be placed around the time of Christ, about six hundred years after the closing of the previous period.

This dating is confirmed by the third bit of information in this section. The last transplanted tree, placed in “a good spot of ground; yea, even that which was choice unto [the Lord] above all other parts of the land of [his] vineyard” (v. 43), produced at this time part good and part evil branches.²⁰ The choicest spot of land on the whole earth in which the transplanted branch of Israel produced both a good and an evil culture can refer only to the righteous and unrighteous Lehites in the Americas,²¹ and the historical setting can only have been before the Great Apostasy.²² The date for this part of the allegory must also be the first Christian century.

After seeing that the good fruit of all the trees was gathered and that the last transplant was nurtured so that its evil parts might bring forth good fruit, the Lord left his vineyard, not to return for some time. Upon his return, the fourth period received definition.

FOURTH PERIOD: THE GREAT APOSTASY (VERSES 29–49)

When the Lord arrived again after “a long time” (v. 29) to inspect his vineyard, he found that the mother tree had “brought forth much fruit, and there is none of it which is good. And behold, there are all kinds of bad fruit” (v. 32). This is precisely the situation of the (Christian) world as described by the Lord to the Prophet Joseph in the Sacred Grove (JS-H 1:19). The mother tree in Israel, after having born much good fruit in the early Christian era, had

become entirely corrupt. As for the first transplanted branches, they also carried nothing but bad fruit. In addition, the good section of the last tree, the righteous Lehites, had been entirely destroyed by the evil branch, the apostate Lehites, so that nothing but wild fruit remained on it. The apostasy had been complete and universal in all the trees representing Israel.

The allegory suggests a reason for the apostasy. When the Lord of the vineyard asked his servant what caused the corruption of his vineyard, the servant answered, “Is it not the loftiness of thy vineyard—have not the branches thereof overcome the roots which are good? And because the branches have overcome the roots thereof, behold they grew faster than the strength of the roots, taking strength unto themselves” (v. 48). In general, pride, arrogance, and vanity—all synonyms of “loftiness”—allowed branches of the house of Israel to usurp the authority of the gospel of Jesus Christ, nullifying any restraints the gospel might have exerted to stem the spread of the apostasy. The proud, arrogant, and vain branches appropriated strength from their own conceits and not from the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It is at this point that the Lord proposed a total destruction of the trees in his vineyard: “Let us go to and hew down the trees of the vineyard and cast them into the fire, that they shall not cumber the ground of my vineyard, for I have done all. What could I have done more for my vineyard?” (v. 49). What need did he have of trees that produce only unprofitable fruit? Better to cut down the trees, burn them, and make something else out of the vineyard.²³ After all, the Lord had done everything possible to save the world from apostasy. Yet the Lord’s servant counseled him to spare the world for a little time, and the Lord accepted the advice. Now began the fifth era of time in the allegory.

FIFTH PERIOD: THE GATHERING OF ISRAEL (VERSES 50–74)

The text states explicitly that between the Scattering of Israel and the Day of the Gentiles and again between the Day of the Gentiles and the Lord’s acknowledgment of the Great Apostasy, “a long time passed away” (v. 15). Unlike the long passages of time between these previous periods, the allegory makes it clear that no significant time transpired between the acknowledgment of the Great Apostasy and the beginnings of the gathering of Israel (vv. 49 through 52). This assessment is, of course, exactly how Latter-day Saints read history. On a spring day in 1820 the world turned away from total submersion in apostasy and took the first steps that would begin the gathering. To be sure, the aggregate of the first decade was minuscule, but the gathering had commenced.

The gathering described in the allegory is also deliberately slow:

Wherefore, dig about them, and prune them, and dung them once more, for the last time, for the end draweth nigh. And if it be so that these last grafts shall grow, and bring forth the natural fruit, then shall ye prepare the way for them, that they may grow. And as they begin to grow ye shall clear away the branches which bring forth bitter fruit, according to the strength of the good and the size thereof; and ye shall not clear away the bad thereof all at once, lest the roots thereof should be too strong for the graft, and the graft thereof shall perish, and I lose the trees of my vineyard. (Vv. 64–65)

From the transplanted tame trees that had become wild, natural branches would be cut and grafted back into the mother tree, and from the mother tree that had also become wild, branches would be grafted into the transplanted tame trees. As these branches gained strength and as the roots could bear it, the branches that continued to produce wild fruit would eventually be pruned out and destroyed.

This process is observable not only in the history of the Church, but also in contemporary stakes and missions. Through the missionary program individuals are brought into the Church. These new members remain in the Church and serve more or less faithfully for a number of years. But some of these new twigs and boughs fail to progress with the rest of the membership. As was the case during the Great Apostasy, pride prevents them from changing and repenting. They leave the Church or just fade away, usually taking their posterity with them. In time, such boughs are pruned out of the tree. At the same time, the Lord of the vineyard continues to work with those branches and individuals that can still be reclaimed or improved.

This period is, however, the last time the Lord of the vineyard will, through grafting and pruning, clean and purify the vineyard (vv. 62–63). He will continue this process until the vineyard is free of degeneracy or corruption and the whole earth is full of his glory. When the earth no longer produces evil, the sixth or penultimate epoch of the allegory will commence.

SIXTH PERIOD: THE MILLENNIUM (VERSES 75–76)

Unlike the other periods so far discussed, the benefit of hindsight is not available at present. However, lack of hindsight does not prevent discussing the points made in this section of the allegory. Of this thousand year period the allegory simply states that the Lord will “for a long time . . . lay up of the fruit of [his] vineyard unto [his] own self” (v. 76).²⁴ There will be no corruption on the earth during this time. “The Lord of the vineyard saw that his fruit was good, and that his vineyard was no more corrupt, . . . and the bad [was] cast away” (v. 75). When after this “long time,” branches of

the tree again begin to degenerate and bad fruit appears, the Millennium will have concluded and the seventh and final epoch of the allegory will have begun.

SEVENTH PERIOD: THE END OF THE WORLD (VERSE 77)

Again, the benefit of hindsight is not available. During the ultimate stage of the earth's existence, when the world will have degenerated from its Millennial state, the good and the bad will be separated. The Lord will take the good fruit to himself, and the bad he will destroy by fire along with the world that spawned it.

CONCLUSIONS

Contrary to the statement quoted in the opening paragraph of this treatise that "it is impossible to ascribe a timetable to the various allegorical scenes," all of the past and current periods of the allegory can be assigned with relative certainty to specific historical times. But, however interesting these historical correlations might be, the allegory was delivered with a far greater purpose in mind, namely, to explain how it is possible that the Jewish people, "after having rejected . . . the stone [Jesus Christ] upon which they might build and have safe foundation. . . . can ever build upon [him], that [he] may become the head of their corner" (Jacob 4:15–17). The answer, according to the allegory, is simple. In the latter days, when the Lord of the vineyard sets his hand for the last time to rid this world of apostasy and evil, he will begin by grafting natural branches into the tame olive trees and by pruning out the more corrupt parts of Israel. Whether the branch has been grafted into the tame tree or whether it is one of the original natural branches, the branch must accept the nourishment of the roots, the gospel of Jesus Christ, and produce good fruit in order to stay on the tree, that is, to build on the foundation of Jesus Christ. That is how those who have rejected Christ can come to know of his goodness.

In addition to this explanation of how the grace of Christ can purge men's souls of evil, the allegory holds a specific message for members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In nonallegorical terms, the Church is the institution through which members nourish and are nourished by the gospel of Jesus Christ with its covenants, doctrines, and responsibilities. If the members are to be purged of evil and thus remain in the Church, pride (the loftiness of the vineyard), the cause of the Great Apostasy, can have no place. Furthermore, only in the Church can members continue to let the purging and healing balm of the gospel excise, often

painfully, each of their favorite sins. Consequently, for individuals who are still in the Church, that is, who have not been cut off yet, there is hope, for only the worst cases of unregeneracy are pruned out of the tree.

In conjunction with this message, the rhetorical question of the Lord of the vineyard should be rephrased to apply to us, the present members of the Church: Is there any way in which the Lord has failed to provide us with every opportunity to become good fruit (v. 41)? As our husbandman, has he in any measure been found wanting?

NOTES

¹Though Jacob recorded the allegory in Jacob 5, the allegory was originally given by Zenos, apparently a prophet of Old Testament times whose writings were recorded on the Brass Plates. No known Old World source mentions him, though he is mentioned elsewhere in the Book of Mormon: 1 Nephi 19:10, 12, 16; Alma 33:3, 13, 15; 34:7; Helaman 8:19; 15:11; and 3 Nephi 10:16. Though Jacob is the first author in the Book of Mormon to connect this allegory to Zenos, Jacob was most likely not the first Book of Mormon prophet to mention the allegory's content. Nephi said that his father, Lehi, spoke about an olive tree that represented the house of Israel from which "branches would be broken off and should be scattered upon all the face of the earth" (1 Ne. 10:12).

²Jacob 4:15–18. Catherine Thomas treated this particular aspect of the allegory in "Jacob's Allegory: The Mystery of Christ," read at the 1988 Brigham Young University Annual Book of Mormon Symposium, unpublished manuscript.

³As part of the discourse (Jacob 4–6) of which the allegory is an integral part, Jacob does build on the allegory in chapter 6, applying it to his audience. This discourse, however, falls short of explaining the time periods and the central message of the entire discourse. Though Zenos is not mentioned, in 1 Nephi 10:12–14 Nephi records in summary form teachings of Lehi that seem to be based on a knowledge of the allegory. John W. Welch has suggested that none of the biblical material (for example Rom. 11:16–24) is as complete as the version in the Book of Mormon and that therefore the biblical accounts draw on an ancient source, perhaps the same source on which the Book of Mormon depends (personal communication to author).

The best previous correlations can be found in Kent P. Jackson, "Nourished by the Good Word of God (Jacob 4–6)," in *Studies in Scripture: Volume Seven, 1 Nephi to Alma 29*, ed. Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1987), 190–94; Monte S. Nyman, *An Ensign to the People* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1987), 24–34, and the summary table on page 36. See also Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 2:46–82; Ariel Crowley, *About the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: n.p., 1961), 150–52; and *Living Truths from the Book of Mormon* [no author listed] (Salt Lake City: Deseret Sunday School Union, 1970), 119–26. Richard K. Wilson has prepared a not-yet-for-publication, unique, and wide-ranging discussion of the allegory, of which I have a copy.

⁴*Living Truths*, 123. In spite of the above statement, this treatment of the allegory *does* assign several of the episodes to historical periods. Though McConkie and Millet warn in reference to Jacob 5:3 that "the exact historical time period to which Zenos is making reference is unclear" (50), they do suggest correlations.

⁵For a convenient summary, see Nyman, *Ensign to the People*, 35, table 1. His reasons for the identifications can be found on pages 22–24. See also the summary in Jackson, "Nourished," 190; and *Book of Mormon Student Manual*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 140. The interpretations of the elements of the allegory of Zenos in the 1989 edition of the student manual are essentially the same as in the old manual (see pp. 47–48). In the text that follows, I have identified various symbols used in the allegory. To identify the symbols, I have consulted the above commentaries. I cannot, however, agree with the usual identification of the "Lord of the vineyard" as Jesus Christ and the "servant" as the prophets. I believe the "Lord" is God the Father and the "servant" is Jesus Christ. A complete discussion here of this issue would require too much space; therefore, suffice it to say that the servant appears to be the same person, not a series of persons, throughout the allegory. It should also be borne in mind that the titles used in the allegory should not necessarily be equated on a one-to-one basis with other occurrences of the same title in other Holy Writ. Note that *About the Book of Mormon*, pages

150–51, uses the generic “God,” and Jackson, on page 190, uses “Lord” for the Lord of the vineyard, thus avoiding the issue.

⁶*The Book of Mormon Student Manual*, 140.

⁷Chauncey C. Riddle suggested to me privately that the roots of the trees represent the various scriptural traditions. This interpretation happily departs from the “progenitor” symbol. While Riddle’s suggestion on the surface diverges from the suggestion I offer above, the two are in essence very close. His scriptural tradition is a subset of the Gospel traditions because the different scriptural traditions stem from different Gospel traditions, i.e., Old Testament, New Testament, Book of Mormon, etc. If, then, the roots do not represent people but rather the Gospel of Jesus Christ, then the main branches and/or trees also do not represent individuals but rather could stand for different cultures. (For this latter observation I thank Bruce Wilson, who in a private conversation expressed this opinion, based at least in part on Richard K. Wilson, unpublished study, 30.)

⁸For example, this lack of consensus allows the fruit to be called “good works” (*The Book of Mormon Student Manual*, 140), or, as I would suggest and Jackson has written (190), “people.”

⁹For the house of Israel beginning with Abraham and continuing with Isaac and Jacob, see Bruce R. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1985), 503: “Israelite history begins not with father Jacob, who is Israel, nor with his tribal descendants who adopted his name as theirs, but with Abraham, their father. In the true and spiritual sense of the terms, Abraham was the first Hebrew, the first Israelite, and the first Jew.” Reviewers to whom I have given this paper have suggested variously that the house of Israel began with Adam or Noah or Moses. It seems to me that the allegory makes it clear that only the house of Israel is being discussed and that therefore the allegory begins with the founding of the house of Israel.

¹⁰Though the “Bible Dictionary” of the Latter-day Saint edition of the Holy Bible (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1979), 636, places the Patriarchs in the first half of the second millennium B.C., as I propose, this date is not unanimous among scholars. Cyrus H. Gordon, for instance, dates many of the events of the Patriarchal Narratives to the Late Bronze Age (“Abraham and the Merchants of Ura,” *Journal of Near East Studies* 17 [January–October 1958], 31). However, I accept the likelihood that the pharaoh of the Exodus was Rameses II, who reigned in the middle of the thirteenth century B.C. Such dating would place the *Eisodus* at the very beginning of the Late Bronze Age (allowing, with Gen. 15:13 and Exo. 12:40, 400 to 430 years for the sojourn in Egypt) and would push the Patriarchs back into the Middle Bronze Age. See also Nyman, *Ensign to the People*, 24, for placing the beginning of the allegory at “about 1800 B.C., when the twelve sons of Jacob were living in Canaan.”

¹¹For this same conclusion see Jackson, “Nourished,” 193–94. The destruction of the earth by fire after the millennium is mentioned at least once in the standard works, “For the great Millennium, of which I have spoken by the mouth of my servants, shall come. For Satan shall be bound, and when he is loosed again he shall only reign for a little season, and then cometh the end of the earth. And he that liveth in righteousness shall be changed in the twinkling of an eye, and the earth shall pass away so as by fire. And the wicked shall go away into unquenchable fire, and their end no man knoweth on earth, nor ever shall know, until they come before me in judgment” (D&C 43:30–33). For the theological underpinnings of the destruction of the earth by fire, see Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 210, 251; the references there to Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954–56), 1:72–89; and Parley P. Pratt, *A Voice of Warning and Instruction to All People* (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1950), chap. 5.

If the destruction of the earth by fire, mentioned in verse 77, refers to the destruction by fire before the Millennium (see for example McConkie, 692, 735), then one could argue that the end of the allegory coincides with the beginning of the Millennium. The unlikelihood of this interpretation becomes evident from an internal examination of the allegory. As I demonstrate below, verses 75 and 76 refer to the Millennium. Therefore, verse 77 must refer to the period after the Millennium.

¹²Nyman also divides the allegory into seven periods, but we agree on only three of the divisions. He separates the allegory into the following time periods: (1) verses 3–14: “From Jacob to the end of the prophets,” about 1800–400 B.C.; (2) verse 15: “A long time passed away”; (3) verses 16–28: “The ministry of Jesus Christ,” about A.D. 30–34; (4) verse 29: “A long time passed away”; (5) verses 30–75: “The Restoration, about A.D. 1820 to the Millennium”; (6) verse 76: “A long time passed away”; and (7) verse 77: “The end of the earth.”

¹³I have purposely chosen the phrase *Day of the Gentiles* because it is not found in the standard works or in the *History of the Church*, nor was it ever used by the Prophet Joseph Smith as far as I can determine, and, therefore, it should not necessarily be connected with the “times of the Gentiles” spoken of in D&C 45:24–30. The allegory speaks of the blood lines in their respective cultures, the branches, and therefore the Day of the Gentiles is an apt designation for the only period in the allegory when the Gentiles, who had been grafted into the house of Israel, do bear good fruit.

¹⁴That four to six hundred years is plausible and even probable seems likely from personal observation of olive trees in present-day Palestine. Like contemporary olive trees, it is likely that ancient olive trees, when cared for properly, could not only live for hundreds of years (not the decades of most domestically cultivated trees), but could also produce valuable crops for the life of the tree. See also Arthur Wallace, “The Allegory of the Tame and Wild Olive Trees Horticulturally Considered,” in *Scriptures for the Modern World*, ed. Paul R. Cheesman and C. Wilfred Griggs (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center,

Brigham Young University, 1984), 113–20. Therefore, if the olive tree had “waxed old,” its life would be measured by centuries.

¹⁵To see how Jeroboam influenced subsequent Israelite history, see 2 Kings 10:29–31.

¹⁶Josiah’s reforms at about 620 B.C. certainly must have been a breath of fresh air after the abominations of Manasseh (2 Kgs. 22–24; see also 2 Chr. 33), but it was too little, too late.

¹⁷As part of their foreign policy, the Assyrians deported rebellious subjects to areas within their empire that had previously been partially depopulated because those inhabitants had been rebellious. This relocation policy was meant to discourage other insurrections and make further revolt difficult. The Babylonians, on the other hand, did not shift rebellious subjects around. Rather, they sent all deported peoples to a central location, the land of Babylon, thus leaving a vacuum in the respective homelands. This practice made it possible for the deportees eventually to return when the Babylonian Empire collapsed. For this and other reasons, the Northern Kingdom deportees could not return to their homeland, but the Jews of the Babylonian captivity could.

¹⁸An example of the adoption of new cultural elements is seen in the fact that the Babylonian calendar is still used today by Jewish people.

¹⁹We can gain some idea of how long a “long time” is by looking at verse 76, where it is said that during the penultimate period of the allegory, the Lord of the vineyard would gather good fruit “for a long time.” I will argue below that this period is the Millennium. Accepting this interpretation would indicate that “a long time” is to be measured in centuries and not in decades.

²⁰Some exegetes of this allegory have found only three transplanted branches, taking for their reason verse 39, where the first, second, and the last natural branches are mentioned. This explanation disregards the four branches clearly set off with “Behold these” in verse 20, “Look hither” in verse 23, “Look hither” in verse 24, and “Look hither” in verse 25, and ignores the possibility of an extended merism in verse 39. The distinct parallelism between 20, 23, 24, and 25 cannot be overlooked because verses 23–25 are the only verses in the standard works that contain “look” and “hither” together. To do away with the parallel in verse 24 and combine it with verse 25 would do violence to the poetic structure of the allegory. However, whether there are three or four transplanted trees is not relevant to this discussion, though a conclusion would be necessary before a more detailed explanation of the identities of these transplants could be made.

²¹*Living Truths*, 122–23.

²²There is a slight discrepancy in the time here if the allegory is seen as strictly consistent and chronologically exacting. (Wilson, 38–39, also notes this apparent inconsistency.) The period in the Old World when the mother tree (with Gentiles grafted in) bore nothing but good fruit must be placed between A.D. 35 and A.D. 100. Yet during this period the majority of the Jews rejected Jesus Christ and his message. This same time period in the New World saw *all* the people “converted unto the Lord, upon all the face of the land” (4 Ne. 2). This discrepancy exists only because, with the advantage of hindsight, we want to impose on the Near Eastern allegory our occidental training that insists on logical, consistent, and chronological interpretations. The telescoping of time and the less-than-sharp depth of field of received versions of prophecies should certainly allow us to view these episodes as accurate, general characterizations of the historical periods discussed. Thus we see in Book of Mormon history from roughly 600 B.C. to A.D. 400, the division of this transplanted branch of the house of Israel into the righteous and the apostate cultures. (For this same interpretation, see Jackson, 192.) The only exception to this division is a short interlude when the Nephites and Lamanites became one people between approximately A.D. 36 and about A.D. 190 (4 Ne. 19–21), about 155 years, not the traditional 200 years often cited by Latter-day Saints. The New Testament, on the other hand, if we ignore the Jews and Gentiles who rejected Christ and his messengers, presents a fairly unified and righteous community of Israelites and Gentiles, notwithstanding cultural rifts and the early signs of apostasy that gave rise to Paul’s polemics.

²³If the allegory is to be taken literally in all respects, this account would not be the first time God had threatened to destroy all the inhabitants of the earth (Gen. 6:7) or all of his chosen people (Ex. 32:9–11).

²⁴See Revelation 20:2–7; D&C 29:11,22; 88:110; Moses 7:64–65.