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Plain and Precious Things Restored, Part 4: Wisdom
By Kevin Christensen

Wisdom teaching, as preserved in the Hebrew Old Testament is mostly confined to the books of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes, books that show clear traces of being edited by the reformers. Daniel Peterson observes that wisdom literature shows “the frequent use of the term wisdom, . . . the absence of typically Israelite or Jewish themes, such as the promises to the patriarchs, the story of Moses and the Exodus, the covenant at Sinai, and the divine promise to David. There is, however, a strong emphasis on the teaching of parents, and especially the instruction of the father.”¹ Peterson also observes that these “characteristics are present in the accounts of the vision of Lehi and Nephi as they are given in the Book of Mormon.” Peterson discusses many connections, such as the equation of the tree of life and wisdom in Proverbs, the opposition to wisdom by the harlot (a conspicuous theme in 1 Nephi 14-13) and even the name Lemuel, given by Lehi to his second son, which appears in the Bible only in Proverbs. The Book of Mormon uses the terms wisdom/wise about 100 times, and recent studies have begun to see distinctive wisdom teaching in many chapters. Modern scholarship on the ancient Wisdom tradition began in earnest in the 1970s, much too late to help Joseph Smith.²

Margaret Barker makes the case that “Wisdom was something that the Deuteronomists reformed.”³ Consequently, the scriptural passages that state their agenda also preserve hints about wisdom tradition that their law replaced. Looking at passages in Deuteronomy that explicitly state the reformers agenda, Barker observes this:

First, they were to have the Law instead of Wisdom (Deut. 4.6). . . . [W]hat was the Wisdom which the Law replaced? Second, they were to think only of the formless voice of God sounding from the fire and giving the Law (Deut. 4.12). Israel had long had a belief in the vision of God, when the glory had been visible on the throne in human form, surrounded by the heavenly hosts. What happened to the visions of God? And third, they were to leave the veneration of the host of heaven to peoples not chosen by Yahweh (Deut. 4.19–20). Israel had long regarded Yahweh as the Lord of the hosts of heaven, but the title Yahweh of

¹ Daniel C. Peterson, “Nephi and his Asherah: A Note on 1 Nephi 11:8-23,” in *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World: Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson*, ed. Davis Bitton (Provo: FARMS, 1998), 209.

² See Alyson Skabelund Von Feldt, “His Secret Is With the Righteous: Instructional Wisdom in the Book of Mormon,” unpublished 2003 paper in my possession. Like Peterson’s paper, his is a very significant work, illuminating aspects of the Book of Mormon that have not been noticed before, and is due to be published by FARMS in the Occasional Papers series in the near future.

³ Margaret Barker, *The Older Testament: The Survival of Themes from the Ancient Royal Cult in Sectarian Judaism and Early Christianity* (London, SPCK, 1987), 83.

Hosts was not used by the Deuteronomists. What happened to the hosts, the angels?⁴

Barker works to recover the lost tradition in several ways. She notes that Daniel and Joseph are both called “wise” and that they have characteristics in common that do not appear in the surviving wisdom texts. For example, both are involved in the politics and the court, both interpret dreams and visions, and both have dealings with angels. (LDS readers will note that this is also true of Nephi.) The non-canonical book of Enoch also features angels, the interpretation of dreams and visions, and points to the period just before the exile as a time when wisdom was forsaken. For example, consider the idea of a vision of God in human form upon the throne. Barker cites a study on the reformers that says:

The concept of God advocated by Deuteronomistic theology is strikingly abstract. The throne concept has vanished and the anthropomorphic characteristics of God are on their way to oblivion. Thus the form of God plays no part in the D work on the Sinai theophany. (Deut. 4:12).⁵

Barker comments that “This warns us more than anything else that the traditions which emphasized the throne of God, e.g., those of Daniel 7, Matthew 25.31-46, and Revelation, must be understood in light of something other than the Deuteronomistic point of view that has come to dominate our reading of the Old Testament.”⁶ LDS readers who note that the Book of Mormon begins with Lehi’s vision of God on his throne (1 Nephi 1:8) should pay attention, particularly since the Book of Mormon is rooted in the key time and place to have knowledge of the other tradition.

For another example, Barker observes that both Isaiah 2-36 and 1st Enoch make use of the title “the Holy One of Israel.” In an effort to discover specific associations with the Holy One, she surveys the Biblical passages that use the title to see if a “picture emerges” that will “provide the context for Isaiah’s and 1 Enoch’s *usage if the occurrence of that title is significant*.”⁷

A pattern does emerge from passage in Habbakkuk, Jeremiah, and the Psalms. “Many of its elements are those of the later apocalypses, such as visions, heavenly tablets, theophany and angelic judgment, but the royal figure is also prominent. . . Judgment upon foreign nation is also part of the pattern, and there are associations with the temple.”⁸ Book of Mormon readers will recognize these as elements in Lehi’s first vision (1 Nephi 1). She continues her study in other Biblical passages and observes:

⁴ Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel’s Second God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 13

⁵ T.N.D. Mettinger, *The Dethronement of the Saboath* (Lun., 1982), 124. Cited in Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel*, 100.

⁶ Barker, *The Great Angel*, 100.

⁷ Barker, *The Older Testament*, 105.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 106.

“Texts dealing with the Holy Ones and the Holy One have significant elements in common: theophany, judgment, triumph for Yahweh, triumph for his anointed son, ascent to a throne in heaven, conflict with beasts and with angel princes caught up in the destinies of earthly kingdoms. Many of these texts are corrupted; much of the subject matter is that of the ‘lost tradition’ thought to underlie the apocalyptic texts. The textual corruption and the lost tradition are aspects of the same question.”⁹

Barker surveys a wide range of sources in this manner and observes that “Everything points to a development during the exile which radically altered wisdom but did not succeed in destroying it.”¹⁰ In looking at previous scholarly studies of wisdom, she observes that none of them had considered the importance of the Enoch texts.¹¹ But after exploring the implications, she can conclude that the “*simplest, and most likely idea of wisdom to underlie the New Testament is that of the Enoch tradition.*”¹²

Because of efforts of the reformers, Barker observes that the “exile in Babylon is a formidable barrier to anyone wanting to reconstruct the religious beliefs and practices of ancient Jerusalem.”¹³ Despite this, Lehi’s visions of throne and of the tree of life take us directly into the lost tradition, and Nephi’s account the hostile reaction to those visions takes us directly into the real conflicts of the time. A number of ancient texts describe specific kinds of knowledge as wisdom. In looking at these kinds of knowledge, Nephi emerges as an archetype of the wisdom tradition.¹⁴ Jacob, consecrated as a temple priest by Nephi (2 Nephi 5:26), also provides a direct window into First Temple Wisdom traditions in his teachings.¹⁵ Jacob 4:14 not only provides one of the best descriptions of the blindness, but the themes that Jacob emphasizes in that chapter illuminate exactly the doctrines that were being suppressed at that very time. Jacob emphasizes active prophesy, the relation of the Father and the Son, the creation, and the atonement. “For behold, ye yourselves know that he counseleth in wisdom, in justice, and great mercy, over all his works.” (Jacob 4:10).

Next time, I will consider another aspect of the lost tradition of particular interest to LDS readers. “What are we to make of the female figure who appears so often, just beyond the reach of certainty, as a shadow across many texts and as an obvious gap in many others?”¹⁶

⁹ Ibid., 119.

¹⁰ Barker, *The Older Testament*, 89.

¹¹ Ibid., 81.

¹² Ibid., 99.

¹³ Barker, *The Great Angel*, 12.

¹⁴ See Kevin Christensen, *Paradigms Regained*, 20-21.

¹⁵ Kevin Christensen “The Temple, The Monarchy, and Wisdom: Lehi’s World and the Scholarship of Margaret Barker” in John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely and Jo Ann H. Seely eds., in *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem* (Provo: FARMS, 2004), 502-504.

¹⁶ Barker, *The Great Angel*, 48.