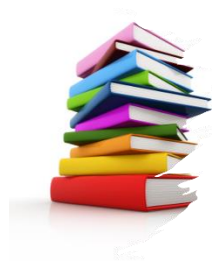


## Ep 73 – Bonus Episode – Plain & Precious Things with David Butler



In this outline are a few links to some the books that have really helped me understand the context and content of the scriptures, especially this question we examined in this episode. [Click here to see all of my favorite books on Amazon.](#)

As an Amazon Affiliate, I do earn a small commission from qualifying purchases (at no extra cost to you).

For access to Ziony Zevit's book *The Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Parallaxic Approaches*, go [here](#). Paul D. Hanson's book *The Dawn of Apocalyptic: The Historical and Sociological Roots of Jewish Apocalyptic Eschatology* can be purchased [here](#). For links to see Dave Butler's two excellent books on the Book of Mormon, go [here](#) and [here](#). To read more about the translation of Matthew 6.11 and another reading of "Give us this day our daily bread," go [here](#). To see a great representation of how the tabernacle in Exodus was a physical reversal of the Fall of Adam and Eve, go [here](#). For a brief overview of Margaret Barker's book [The Mother of the Lord Volume 1: The Lady in the Temple](#) and how it teaches more about the ascent into God's presence and the Tree in the Holy of Holies, go [here](#). For access to a free PDF of John Welch's book *Illuminating the Sermon at the Temple & the Sermon on the Mount*, go [here](#). It can also be purchased [here](#).

On 11/14/23, I did an interview with the Paul brothers, where we examined the reforms of Josiah in greater detail than my discussion with Dave Butler. Below are the notes to this discussion. You can see the video of my discussion with Hayden and Jackson Paul [here](#).

### Was Jesus Edited From the Old Testament? (11.14.23)

#### Introduction

In my interview with Hayden and Jackson Paul on November 14, 2023, titled "Was Jesus Edited From the Old Testament?", we examined several provocative ideas, and with this, I briefly highlighted some fascinating scholarship that I want to make accessible to all viewers. While it is important to acknowledge that scholars often have differing viewpoints, and while I don't necessarily agree with all the perspectives we explored, my goal was to present a nuanced case for the idea that 23 year-old Joseph Smith's 1829 Book of Mormon translation is just that: a translation. He had access to an ancient text, and this text reflected many of the tensions that Lehi and Nephi were experiencing in real time in 600 BC Jerusalem.

Specifically, I aimed to show how the political and religious context of Lehi and Nephi during their era might be mirrored in the Book of Mormon's text. Our brief discussion is merely a starting point, recognizing that our understanding of the intricate nature of Israelite religion

between 1000-600 BCE is still evolving. With our current knowledge, it is intriguing to observe how the seventh-century conflicts and debates are echoed in Nephi's writings on the Small Plates. I hope this summary provides valuable insights for your gospel study and adds depth to your understanding of our fascinating conversation. Thank you for tuning into the discussion, and as Hayden and Jackson say, stay hungry and stay curious!

### **The Documentary Hypothesis: A Quick Look**

The Documentary Hypothesis is a theory about the origins of the first five books of the Bible, commonly referred to as the Pentateuch or the Torah. It is the model taught at most universities and seminaries, and it appears in most introductions to the Bible.<sup>1</sup> The central premise of this theory is that the initial books evolved over an extended period and involved layers of editing, construction, and hermeneutic development. Instead of seeing these books as the work of a single author, this theory suggests that they are a compilation of several different sources or documents. These sources are often labeled as J, E, P, and D, based on their unique characteristics and the names they use for God. The idea is that over time, various authors, groups, or scribal schools wrote down their own accounts and traditions. Then, later editors combined these different sources to create the Pentateuch that exists today. It can be likened to multiple authors each penning distinct renditions of a narrative, which are subsequently synthesized by a later scholar into a cohesive and comprehensive account. This hypothesis is based on things like differences in style, language, and viewpoint found in the Pentateuch, and is a tool scholars use to try to understand the history and development of these ancient texts.

### **The Sources: J, E, P, and D**

#### **The Yahwist (J)**

The sources of the Pentateuch, according to those holding to the Documentary Hypothesis, each reflect different ideologies, terminologies, and historical contexts. Firstly, the Yahwist (J) source, presumably written in the southern Kingdom of Judah during the time of the united monarchy of Israel around the 10th century BCE, consistently refers to God as "Yahweh" (יהוה).<sup>2</sup> This source tends to provide a more anthropomorphic view of God and frequently incorporates narrative details, showcasing a heightened interest in the patriarchs. The depiction of an embodied God presents a profound and evocative imagery, shaping humans from the soil and breathing into them the breath of life. J's depiction of the creation of woman is even more fascinating, as Harold Bloom explains, "there is absolutely no other story of the forming of a

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Friedman, [The Hidden Book in the Bible: The Discovery of the First Prose Masterpiece](#), Harper Collins, 1998, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Many scholars see J as a non-unified construction, consisting of multiple edits, or accounts were later authors redacted or edited and reworked J. See: Baron Albert de Pury, in David Noel Freedman, Problem of the Unity of J, in "Yahwist (J) Source," in [The Anchor Bible Dictionary](#) (6 Volumes), Bantam Doubleday, 1992, 9559/9907 electronic version.

female in all the surviving literature of the ancient Near East. That J gives six times the space to a woman's creation as to the man's may well reflect J's gender."<sup>3</sup>

The Yahwist (J) narrative begins in what we recognize as Genesis 2.4b, unfolding the account of the creation of man and woman from the dust of the earth. This differs from the Priestly version's cosmological creation as contained in Gen. 1.1-2.4a. J then goes on to narrate Adam and Eve's habitation and eventual eviction from the Garden of Eden. It is noteworthy that the J source culminates with tales of the exploration and anticipated conquest of a land abundant in produce and "flowing with milk and honey" (Ex. 3.8), that is, the southern realm of Judah.<sup>4</sup> J contains the majority of the sweeping tales of grandeur that most readers of the Bible remember. As Peter Ellis stated, J is "the Hebrew Homer."<sup>5</sup> Much of the J narrative gravitates towards themes integral to the southern kingdom of Judah: its geography, its geopolitical dynamics with neighboring ethnic groups, its significant cultic centers, and its legendary ancestors.<sup>6</sup> For this reason, many biblical scholars often attribute the Yahwist's writings to the scribes of southern Judea. Upon closer examination, a discernible pattern emerges where many of these narratives appear tailored to endorse the political and ideological tenets of the southern kingdom. J's stories focus on the heroic lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. These stories have been notably influenced by later Priestly interpretations (P). Some narratives also exhibit overlaps with the Elohist tradition (E), adding another layer of complexity to the multifaceted text that we recognize today as the Bible. For many years, scholars have adhered to Wellhausen's initial theory suggesting that J is the earliest documentary source in the Pentateuch, penned likely in the tenth or perhaps ninth century BC. Yet, further examinations of the J material have introduced claims indicating that segments of J may not date back earlier than the seventh century BC.<sup>7</sup> ***The J source is the most comprehensive of the four***, and when separated from the others, it presents a cohesive narrative with a consistent flow.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Elohist (E)**

Next, the Elohist (E) source, originating from the northern Kingdom of Israel around the 9th century BCE, uses the term "Elohim" to refer to God prior to the divine revelation to Moses in Exodus 3, after which it adopts "Yahweh." E primarily revolves around the narratives, cultic

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<sup>3</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Book of J*, translated by David Rosenberg, Grove Weidenfeld, 1990, p. 28.

<sup>4</sup> This phrase appears 22 times in the Hebrew Bible, from Exodus 3.8 to Ezekiel 20.15. In many places it can be said that it is speaking of the kingdom of Judah, but it can also be argued that the entire Land of Canaan fits the description.

<sup>5</sup> Friedman, *The Hidden Book in the Bible*, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Michael D. Coogan, *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 26.

<sup>7</sup> Antony F. Campbell and Mark A. O'Brien, *Sources of the Pentateuch: Texts, Introductions, Annotations*, Fortress Press, 1993, p. 1-20. Much of these ideas line up with Gunkel's view that J represented not a single author, but a school of narrators. Later scholars (Budde, Brunston, Smend Sr., and Eissfeldt) continued to develop the multiple authorship of J. See: De Pury, Albert, "Problem of the Unity of J, in Yahwist (J) Source," in David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (6 Volumes), Bantam Doubleday, 1992, 9559/9907, electronic version.

<sup>8</sup> Michael D. Coogan, p. 26.

centers, and patriarchal figures tied to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, leading some scholars to believe it originated there in the North. While some attribute its creation to the 9th century BC during Jeroboam's reign, others place it sometime before the Northern Kingdom's fall in 722 BC. E was probably composed by a priest living in the northern kingdom of Israel.<sup>9</sup> The first parts of E's narratives are missing, and so E begins in Genesis in the middle of the story of Abraham in Genesis 20.1b.<sup>10</sup> E has a prominent role in the stories in Exodus. Some of the stories in E parallel J, while others do not. For example E includes the stories of the binding of Isaac and the sin of Aaron and the golden calf in Exodus 32, which are not found in J. Both J and E render an account of the sale of Joseph into slavery, which a later editor wove into one continuous narrative. After the fall of Israel at the hands of the Assyrians, priests and scribes from the north fled to Judah for protection.<sup>11</sup> ***It is likely that keepers of the texts took their accounts of their history with them when they fled Israel when it was invaded by Assyria. As Judah became populated with people who were aware of separate accounts of their history, it is probable that later scribes and priests would want to incorporate both northern and southern legends into one cohesive structure.*** Richard Friedman offers his account as to how E came to be woven into J by later editors:

In the year 722 BCE, the Assyrian empire destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel. J and E were then no longer separated by a border. These two versions of the people's history now existed side by side in the kingdom of Judah. In the years that followed, someone assembled a history that used both J and E as sources. The editor/historian who combined J and E into a single work is known as the Redactor of JE, or RJE for short.<sup>12</sup>

Some researchers propose that E was meant to enhance and even morally reinterpret the J narrative, for example, J and E present different brothers as saving the hero of the final story in Genesis: Joseph. In this fashion, both narratives recounted historical tales in a way that elevated their own people, while subtly diminishing the stature of the other side. For example, in the version presented by E, Reuben, a brother representing the tribes of north, comes in to save Joseph when he is about to be killed by his other brothers (Gen. 37.21-22). In J's account of the betrayal of Joseph, it is Judah who strives to save him (Gen. 27.26-27). In the doublet of the story of Jacob's sons acquiring Shechem, in the E version (Gen. 33.19) the land is purchased for

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Elliott Friedman, [The Bible with Sources Revealed](#), HarperOne, 2005, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Bokovoy, following Jenks' scholarship, has E first showing up in Genesis 15. However, Friedman disagrees with this and puts E's first work in Genesis 20.1b. See: Jenks, "Elohism," in David Noel Freedman, [Anchor Bible Dictionary](#), 2:481-83. See also: Bokovoy, [Authoring the Old Testament](#), p. 55; and Richard Friedman, [Sources](#), p. 61.

<sup>11</sup> Finkelstein and Silberman (p. 229-250) discuss how the archaeology shows that around 722 the population of Judah increased significantly, from about one thousand to fifteen thousand inhabitants, what they term "a population explosion." They attribute this to the influx of people coming from Israel in the north into southern regions in and around Jerusalem. By the end of the eighth century, they note that the area around Jerusalem swelled to around 120,000 in the wake of Assyria's campaign against the northern kingdom of Israel. See: Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, [The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts](#), Touchstone, 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Friedman, [Sources](#), p. 4.

a hundred *qesita* (קְשִׁיטָה). In J's narrative (Gen. 35), Simeon and Levi (both northern tribes), driven by anger over the violation of their sister Dinah, resort to violence, annihilating the entire population of Shechem to take over the territory. In J, Judah gets the birthright from Jacob, but in E it is given to Ephraim and Manasseh, Joseph's two sons, both from the north (Gen. 49).

Notably, while E and J both discuss a covenant, they differ in location and commandment details.<sup>13</sup> J emphasizes an anthropomorphic Yahweh appearing to Abraham, while E places emphasis on the role of prophecy and indirect communication with God, through dreams and visions that stands apart from the other sources. The E account especially centers on Moses, suggesting its possible authorship by Levites or those with Levitical interests.<sup>14</sup> This is evident in narratives such as the golden calf episode (Ex. 32).

### The Priestly Author (P)

The Priestly (P) source, running from Genesis 1 through Numbers, employs "Elohim" and "El Shaddai" (translated as God Almighty in the KJV)<sup>15</sup> until the covenantal revelation in Exodus 6.3 where the name "Yahweh" (יהוה) is revealed to Moses. P's writings are characterized by a structured, formal style with a significant emphasis on ritual, genealogies, and liturgical practices. The dating of P has been hotly contested among scholars, with some, like Wellhausen, taking the position that P came last, probably during or after the exile (586 BCE), while others picture P coming much earlier, perhaps as early as Hezekiah's day, closer to the time of the construction of JE. Those taking this position see D reacting to P and altering P's claims.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> E's theology portrays the covenant with God at Mount Horeb, while this is Mount Sinai in the J and P sources. Jenks, "Elohist," in David Noel Freedman, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 2:481-83.

<sup>14</sup> Friedman sees E being constructed by priests that were disenfranchised by Jeroboam's religious reforms (931/22-910/01 BCE). Friedman lays out the complexity of E's historical situation in [Who Wrote the Bible?](#), pages 70-88.

<sup>15</sup> It is important to note that El Shaddai is most used in the Priestly text to describe God, and **all the references in Genesis come to us from P**. See: David Biale, "The God with the Breasts: El Shaddai in the Bible," *History of Religions*, Vol. 21, No. 3, (Feb. 1982), p. 240-256. El Shaddai appears six times in Genesis, and once in Exodus 6.3, where the author of P announces that where the Patriarchs previously knew God as El Shaddai, from this point forward God will be known as Yahweh. Within the Pentateuch, El Shaddai occurs twice more, in the Balaam oracles of Numbers 24 (also from P) and this deity also appears in the Priestly lists in Numbers. El Shaddai is completely absent in the historical books, but appears a couple of times in the Psalms (Ps. 68.15 and 91.1), as well as in identical passages in Isaiah 13.6 and Joel 1.15, twice in Ezekiel (1.24 and 10.5), twice in Ruth (1.20-21), and 31 times in Job. All the blessings using El Shaddai in Genesis, with one exception, are fertility blessings, a point of importance for the author of P.

<sup>16</sup> Campbell and O'Brien put forth the claim that P was written "around the time of Israel's exile" (*Sources*, p. 22) and that "the Priestly writer was telling it (his story) for a specific audience around the time of Israel's exile- either shortly before it, during the exile itself, or shortly after it" (*Sources*, p. 21). Friedman writes in *Who Wrote the Bible* on p. 225 that P comes from the time period of Hezekiah (741-687 BCE), and that D was hostile to P, working in opposition to many of P's claims. Friedman asserts, "The combination of P with J, E, and D was even more extraordinary than the combination of J and E with each other had been centuries earlier. P was *polemic*—it was an answer-*torah* to J and E. JE denigrated Aaron. P denigrated Moses. JE assumed that any Levite could be a priest. P said that only men who were descendants of Aaron could be priests. JE said that there were angels, that animals occasionally could talk, and that God could be found standing on a rock or walking through the garden of Eden. P would have none of that. D, meanwhile, came from a circle of people who were as hostile to P as the P-circle were

The Priestly source, often referred to as "P," is characterized by its methodical and structured approach to the biblical narrative. It places a significant emphasis on genealogical lists, ritualistic laws, and precise order. P is also concerned with matters of cultic purity, the role of the priesthood (specifically the House of Aaron), and the specifics of religious ceremonies in detailed design. Additionally, themes of fertility and God's blessings to humankind play a prominent role in this source. I often advise my Old Testament students that when reading the Pentateuch, if you come across a section that sounds as meticulous and dense as the legal disclaimers in a pharmaceutical advertisement, you're probably working through the Priestly material. This is one reason why Leviticus, mainly from P,<sup>17</sup> reads the way it does.

The Priestly document presents a contrasting style to the Yahwist narrative. Instead of a seamless tale like that of J, Campbell and O'Brien see the Priestly text resembling a necklace: its principal stories are akin to pearls, woven together by the threads of genealogies, journeys, and a succinct narrative. These "pearls" include accounts of creation, the flood, covenants with Abraham, Sarah's burial, Jacob's divine encounter at Bethel, God's revelation of his name to Moses, the plagues narrative, the Passover, the crossing of the Red Sea in Israel's escape from Egypt, and the manna in the wilderness. A significant portion of the Priestly narrative revolves around Sinai, emphasizing God's directives for the creation of the sanctuary, its subsequent construction adhering to divine guidelines (Ex. 25-31, all from P), the dedication of the sanctuary, and the organization of Israel in preparation for their journey to the promised land. The narrative concludes with episodes highlighting Israel's missed opportunity to enter the promised land and the transition of its initial leadership. This encompasses tales of land reconnaissance, the miraculous extracting water from a rock, and the passing of Aaron and Moses, succeeded by Eleazar and Joshua.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Deuteronomist (D)**

Finally, the Deuteronomist (D) source, primarily linked to the book of Deuteronomy and thought to have been composed in Jerusalem in the 7th century BCE, uses both "Elohim" and "Yahweh," but has a distinct style and ideology focusing on law, centralized worship, social equity, and the importance of loyalty to God.

### **D and Near Eastern Treaties**

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to JE. ***These two priestly groups had struggled, over centuries, for priestly prerogatives, authority, income, and legitimacy.*** Friedman, [Who Wrote the Bible?](#) p. 217, emphasis added.

<sup>17</sup> All of Leviticus is P except for a brief passage at the end of Leviticus 26. Leviticus 26.39-45 threatens exile. This passage, does not in itself establish that it was written during the period of the exile, as this was a real threat in the ancient Near East. However, when read in its entirety, it relates that the land will be available to Israel should they be humbled and accept responsibility for the exile and return to God. If they do, they are promised that God will remember them and they will have access to the land. Some see this as evidence of a post-exilic insertion into P. See Friedman, *Sources*, p. 235-236. Friedman, while not saying it here, would put this passage in the hands of R, or the redactor who worked with all the sources of J, E, P and D and fashioned them into the Bible that we have today.

<sup>18</sup> Anthony F. Campbell and Mark A. O'Brien, *Sources of the Pentateuch: Texts, Introductions, Annotations*, Fortress Press, 1993, p. 21.

The book of Deuteronomy exhibits clear parallels to the structure and content of ancient Near Eastern vassal treaties, particularly those of the Hittites of the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries BCE. This connection highlights the cultural context in which the Israelites lived and how common legal and covenantal practices influenced their sacred texts. The Hittite treaties began with a preamble, which can be seen in Deut. 1.1-8. This was followed by a historical prologue that recounted the relationship between the parties, mirrored in Deut. 1.9-4.43. Next in the Hittite format were the stipulations, the terms of the covenant, echoed in Deut. 4.44-26.19. The consequences of adhering to or breaking the covenant, commonly referred to as sanctions, included blessings and curses, paralleled in Deut. 27.1-29.1. These treaties also contained a section directing how the treaty should be publicly displayed, a notion captured in Deut. 27.1-4. The treaties would conclude with an oath of allegiance, where the vassal pledges loyalty to the suzerain, to “love the ruler”;<sup>19</sup> which is mirrored in Deut. 29.2-30.20. If we understand the context of the command to “love” God as contained in Deuteronomy, (Deut. 30.6, 16, 20) seeing that this expression represents loyalty to God, then difficult passages where it states that God “hates” individuals will make more sense (Hosea 9.15, Malachi 1.1-3). In light of these Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) treaties, when the ruler “hates” certain peoples, as Moran explains, it is an ANE way of expressing that these individuals are outside of the protection of the ruler due to their infidelity, rather than an emotional state as many modern readers would assume. Lastly, a witness clause in the Hittite treaties can be observed in Deut. 31.1-32.47. The alignment between Deuteronomy's structure and these ancient treaties highlights the broader ANE context in which the Israelite tradition emerged.<sup>20</sup>

Weinfeld's exploration of Deuteronomy's connections to ANE treaties exemplifies the intricate task of tracing the origins of biblical ideas. While many scholars view resemblances between biblical passages and older content as indicators of the Bible's reliance on that content, Weinfeld offers a more nuanced understanding of this issue.

Weinfeld engaged deeply with the works of E. Mendenhall,<sup>21</sup> who was the pioneer in highlighting the striking similarities between the Israelite covenant and ancient Near Eastern treaties, especially the Hittite vassal-treaties. These Hittite treaties, dating back to the 14th and 13th centuries BCE, coincided with the time when the Israelite tribes started settling in Canaan. Consequently, Mendenhall posited some ideas about the Sinai and Shechem covenants (presented in Exodus 19-24) that belonged to this era. However, Mendenhall did not explore

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<sup>19</sup> William L. Moran, “The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25 (1963): 77-87. See also N. Lohfink, “Hate and Love in Osee 9, 15” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25 (1963): 417. Both Moran and Lohfink see the conception of “love” in many of the sections of Deuteronomy and Hosea having to do with loyalty and political faithfulness in the context of how the people in the ancient Near East understood the term, and not from modern Western conceptions of love.

<sup>20</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Moshe Weinfeld, “II Treaty form and phraseology- Affinities with the Ancient Near Eastern Treaty Formulae,” in *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1972, p. 59-157.

<sup>21</sup> G.E. Mendenhall, “Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition,” *BA* 17, 1954, p. 50. See also: D.J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant*, *Analecta Biblica* 21, 1963; D.R. Hillers, *Treaty Curses and O.T. Prophets*, *Biblica et Orientalia* 16, 1964.

potential resemblances between the Hittite treaty format and the Covenant of the Plains of Moab. He believed that Deuteronomy, drafted during the time of Josiah, couldn't have reflected the genuine treaty pattern, as he thought such structures had faded away by then. Yet, this standpoint overlooked some state treaties from the 9th to the 7th centuries B.C., which suggested that similar treaty designs were still in vogue during the first millennium. Mendenhall's theories were further contested with the discovery of treaties between Esarhaddon and his vassals from 672 BCE. These findings, especially the one with Ramataia the Median,<sup>22</sup> suggested an enduring treaty formulation tradition from the Hittite era to the neo-Assyrian period. Consequently, Weinfeld argues that the Hittite treaty wasn't the sole model for the Biblical covenant. While early biblical sources undoubtedly mirror the Hittite state treaties, the discovery of state treaties from Deuteronomy's period<sup>23</sup> indicates that Deuteronomy's author might have been influenced by the political treaties of his time, which continued the Hittite treaty tradition.<sup>24</sup>

The D source incorporates much more than simply the book of Deuteronomy. D encompasses what scholars today call the **Deuteronomistic History (DH)**. This is a modern scholarly term referring to a series of books in the Old Testament that seem to have a shared theology, style, and historical perspective. **Besides Deuteronomy these works include Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel, and 1-2 Kings.** Together, they narrate the history of Israel from the end of the wilderness wanderings, with Moses' final exhortations in "on the other side of Jordan," to the conquest of Canaan in Joshua, the period of the Judges, the establishment of the monarchy under Saul, David, and Solomon, and the subsequent division into the northern and southern kingdoms. The narrative continues through the downfall of the northern kingdom to Assyria in 722 BCE and culminates in the fall of the southern kingdom and the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon in 586 BCE, ending with a ray of hope as the last survivor of the Davidic dynasty, Jehoiachin, is released by the Babylonian ruler and allowed to live (2 Kings 25.27-30). **Throughout this historical account, a consistent theological perspective is evident: Israel's success or failure in the land is contingent upon its adherence to the covenant with Yahweh, as articulated in the book of Deuteronomy.** Apostasy and idolatry lead to disaster, while faithfulness yields divine blessing.<sup>25</sup>

D demonstrates a striking coherence in its stylistic, theological, and thematic elements. This consistency is attributable to its refinement and development by a distinct group of scribes, termed the Deuteronomic school, with its writers known as the Deuteronomists. This group

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<sup>22</sup> 'The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon,' Iraq 20, 1958, 1-100. See Moshe Weinfeld, [Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School](#), Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1972, p. 60.

<sup>23</sup> Bokovoy discusses this, emphasizing the Deuteronomy could have been a polemic against Assyria, which was using the same covenant treaty formula. In constructing the text of Deuteronomy, the authors were demonstrating their allegiance to Yahweh rather than the political rules of the ancient Near East, using their own form of discourse to undercut their claims of authority. See: Bokovoy, [Authoring the Old Testament](#), Greg Kofford Books, 2014.

<sup>24</sup> Weinfeld, pages 59-61.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 16.



operated over an extended timeframe, spanning from the late monarchal era in the 7th century BCE, through the tumultuous exilic phase in the 6th century BCE, and into the Persian period (539-332 BCE). **The evolution of the book of Deuteronomy emerged from a multi-century process of meticulous editing.**<sup>26</sup> As each century presented its own unique historical challenges, the Deuteronomic scribes adeptly revised the text to address the shifting concerns, convictions, and requirements of their respective communities.<sup>27</sup> **The editorial contributions of the exilic Deuteronomist stand out distinctly. Faced with the devastation of Jerusalem, the loss of Judah, and the resultant exile of its inhabitants, this scribe or scribes recalibrated the pre-exilic perspectives to resonate with and respond to the new, challenging realities of the exilic community.**

The Deuteronomist Historian presents a nuanced and distinct view of God and worship, notably differing from other traditions in the Hebrew Bible. Central to Deuteronomy is the emphasis on the temple as the chosen place "where His name shall dwell," (Deut. 12.5, 11, 21) rather than portraying it as a literal dwelling place of God as described in P.<sup>28</sup> **The Deuteronomist refrains from an anthropomorphic view of God, emphasizing God's transcendent nature.** This is highlighted by passages that assert that the mysteries belong to God alone (Deut. 29.29), and that God cannot be seen by human eyes (Deut. 4.12).<sup>29</sup> The text of Deuteronomy also presents

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 158-178.

<sup>27</sup> Weinfeld discusses this idea throughout his work. Quoting Kaufmann (p. 22), Weinfeld writes, "When a word of God fails to materialize or does not completely materialize, then a second word of God appears which nullifies or qualifies the former so that it is the second word of God which is fulfilled. This editorial phenomenon is characteristic only of the Deuteronomistic history and stands in contrast to the Chronicler, who deleted all the negative prophetic cycles and based his work solely on the positive cycles. The singularity of the Deuteronomist's treatment of the word of God is particularly evident in his account of the ancient word of God concerning the conquest of Canaan to which we have referred above. The Patriarchs were promised that their posterity would inherit the land whose borders were to extend from the river of Egypt to the Euphrates (Gen. 15.18; Exod. 23.31), a promise which is reaffirmed in the divine word to Joshua met with in deuteronomic literature (Josh. 1.1-9; 13.1-6a). According to the deuteronomic account, however (Josh. 10-11), the promise was only partially fulfilled, for Joshua had only conquered the land 'from Mount Halak, that rises to Seir, as far as Baal Gad in the valley of Lebanon' (11.17; 12.7). The remaining territory (Josh. 13.1-6a) was therefore, according to Joshua's command, to be conquered after his death (Josh. 23); but this was never carried out. To save the credit of the first promise, the Deuteronomist reconstructed a second word of God which nullified the first one: 'So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel; and he said, "Because this people have transgressed my covenant which I commanded their fathers, and have not obeyed my voice, I will not henceforth drive out before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died . . ." (Judg. 2.20-1). Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, Eisenbrauns, 1972.

<sup>28</sup> In the Priestly account of the Tabernacle found within the book of Exodus, Yahweh's presence among the Israelites is depicted. Specifically, Exodus 40.34-35 illustrates this connection, describing how "the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of Yahweh filled the tabernacle." Moses himself could not enter due to the overwhelming presence of this divine glory. This intimate connection between God and His people is further highlighted in Exodus 25.22, where Yahweh declares a meeting point with Moses "from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim" on the Ark of the Covenant. Through this portrayal, the Tabernacle becomes not just a structure, but the place where God dwells and meets with his servants, thus remaining accessible to His chosen people.

<sup>29</sup> Deut. 4.12 seems to be a polemic against other accounts where it is plainly stated that Moses did in fact see God. Deut. 4.12 reads, "And the LORD spake unto you out of the midst of the fire: ye heard the voice of the words, but saw no similitude; only ye heard a voice." For example, Ex. 33.11 (E) reads, "And the LORD spake unto

a clear stance against idolatry, directing that any depictions of the Israelite God Asherah<sup>30</sup> be destroyed (Deut. 16.21-22).

### The Deuteronomistic Reforms 640-609 BCE

Scholars for years have noted that the “Book of the Law” that was discovered in the temple as described in 2 Kings 22.8-14 was very likely the text of Deuteronomy.<sup>31</sup> It is the belief of many biblical scholars that it was in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE that the text of Deuteronomy was constructed. The evidence for this is very persuasive.<sup>32</sup>

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Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend. And he turned again into the camp: but his servant Joshua, the son of Nun, a young man, departed not out of the tabernacle.” It is noteworthy here in the Elohist account of God speaking face to face with Moses that Joshua is also depicted as being inside the tent of meeting, as this is forbidden by P. The Priestly source plainly states that anyone who is not a priest is forbidden from entering the tent of meeting, with the penalty being death (see Num. 1.51; 3.10, 38; 18.5,7).

<sup>30</sup> Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*, Wayne State University Press, 1990. See also [William Dever, \*Did God have a Wife?: Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel\*](#), Eerdmans, 2008. Both Patai and Dever provide extensive evidence indicating that, during the era of Josiah's reforms, the Israelites venerated a goddess named Asherah. Despite rigorous efforts from Josiah's administration to curtail this worship, it persisted. Dever provides extensive archaeological evidence to support his claims. Patai elaborates on the enduring nature of goddess worship, tracing its continuation from the period of Josiah's reforms through to rabbinic Judaism and later periods.

<sup>31</sup> “The contents of this scroll and Josiah's and the people's reaction to it suggest that it was some form of the book of Deuteronomy.” Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Jewish Study Bible*, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 771.

<sup>32</sup> The very beginning of the text reads, אֵלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן בַּמִּדְבָּר, “These be the words which Moses spake to all of Israel **on the other side** of the Jordan, in the wilderness” (Deut. 1.1a, my translation, emphasis added). This use of “on the other side of the Jordan” clearly shows that it was written after Moses' day, for, according to the texts, **Moses never crossed the Jordan!** De Wette was the first to crystallize these arguments. Wilhelm De Wette (1780-1849) in many ways laid the foundation for Wellhausen's construction of his arguments about the Hebrew Bible and its complicated construction. Wellhausen argued that the Hebrew Bible was a tapestry of separate texts from separate authors, and his ideas today are called the Documentary Hypothesis. De Wette's analysis of the Old Testament's historical context and authorship significantly influenced Wellhausen. In 1805, while in Germany, De Wette took a close look into the origins of Deuteronomy. He theorized that the book of the law presented to King Josiah by Hilkiah (2 Kings 22.8 -14) was the text of Deuteronomy. However, he refuted its Mosaic authorship, suggesting instead that it wasn't a long-lost ancient text rediscovered by Hilkiah. According to De Wette, Deuteronomy was penned shortly before its alleged “discovery” in the Jerusalem Temple, with the discovery serving more as a theatrical act. Its content, he believed, was intended to underpin Josiah's religious reforms as detailed in 2 Kings 23.4-27. See: Richard Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?*, Simon and Shuster, 2019. Longman and Dillard explain, “Assigning Deuteronomy to the late seventh century BC would become a linchpin for critical scholarship in the heyday of source criticism (Wenham 1985).” This is due to the elements of Josiah's reforms and the contents of the “Book of the Law” that was “discovered” in his day. He writes, “**There was good reason to suggest that Josiah's law book was either Deuteronomy itself or some earlier alternate edition of material that eventually became the book.** The book of Kings was widely recognized to have been influenced by the laws of Deuteronomy in general. Features of Josiah's response to the law book suggest his acting under the influence of laws largely unique to Deuteronomy.” See: Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, Zondervan, 2006, p. 105.

The Deuteronomistic Reformers, active in Jerusalem the late seventh century BCE, played a pivotal role in reshaping the theological landscape of ancient Israel. Their influence is particularly evident in the Old Testament, which underwent significant editorial changes to align with the ideas and beliefs of the reformers in King Josiah's court. Prior to these reforms, the pre-Exilic temple cult and theology of Israel were rich and multifaceted, encompassing elements of the role of God in the grand history of Israel from the creation and through the difficulties of combat with chaos and the victory over death and hell. This grand historical presentation, where the king embodied the attributes of God was portrayed in the First Israelite Temple and this early pre-Josianic religion included many elements such as heavenly visions and ascents, angelic manifestations, prophecy, revelation of divine wisdom, esoteric teachings and rituals, and theophanies.<sup>33</sup> This ancient religious practice also revered a divine feminine figure, often associated with the biblical "Lady" Wisdom,<sup>34</sup> oftentimes symbolized as a tree<sup>35</sup> or wisdom.

However, under the Deuteronomists' influence, especially during the reign of King Josiah, there was a systematic effort to downplay, obscure, and suppress many aspects of the original Israelite temple cult. This shift reflected a significant theological transformation, moving away from the rich, mystical practices of earlier times towards a more standardized form of worship and belief, as advocated by the Deuteronomistic Reformers.

Despite the Deuteronomists' efforts to suppress the original temple cult, these ancient beliefs and practices managed to survive among various minority Israelite religious groups and movements. This earlier temple theology is notably reflected in noncanonical Israelite books, such as those found in the pseudepigrapha and the Dead Sea Scrolls. These texts provide a window into the diverse religious landscape that existed before the Deuteronomistic reforms.

Interestingly, the early Christian movement, including the teachings of Jesus and the practices of the earliest New Testament Christians, seems to have been influenced by these temple-oriented movements. The suppressed or hidden temple beliefs, rituals, and practices re-emerged in early Christianity. For instance, the Book of Hebrews presents Jesus as the cosmic king and high priest, while the Book of Revelation describes the visionary ascent to heaven for a theophany of God in His celestial temple.

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<sup>33</sup> See Baker and Ricks, [\*Who Shall Ascend to the Hill of the Lord? The Psalms in Israel's Temple Worship In the Old Testament and in the Book of Mormon\*](#), Eborn Books, 2010.

<sup>34</sup> Proverbs 1.20-21 - "Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares **she raises her voice**." Proverbs 3.13-18 - "Blessed is the one who finds wisdom, and the one who gets understanding... **She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her**; those who hold her fast are called blessed." Proverbs 4.5-9 - "Get wisdom; get insight; do not forget, and do not turn away from the words of my mouth. **Do not forsake her, and she will keep you; love her, and she will guard you**." Proverbs 8 - An entire chapter dedicated to personifying wisdom as a woman who was present at creation and offers insight and benefit to humanity. Proverbs 9.1-6 - "**Wisdom has built her house**; she has hewn her seven pillars."

<sup>35</sup> Understanding Daniel Peterson's argument that the goddess of the Canaanites was *the tree* is significant here. This goddess is found throughout much of the Old Testament, and the images of the goddess are also found in 1 Nephi 8 and 11. I leave it for the reader to decide if the connection is significant.

Margaret Barker, a scholar in this field, posits that the reforms of Josiah represented a form of apostasy. These reforms enabled the Deuteronomists to gain power within the state and temple, allowing them to suppress the authentic pre-Exilic temple theology, mysteries, and rituals. According to Barker, *it was Christianity that eventually restored these suppressed elements*.<sup>36</sup> This interpretation implies that much of the Old Testament, as it stands today, was written and edited by those who had deviated from the original faith, thus reflecting the theological perspectives of the Deuteronomistic Reformers rather than the diverse spiritual landscape of ancient Israel. This understanding challenges traditional views of the Old Testament, suggesting that it is not just a religious text but also a document shaped by the political and religious ideals of the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

Despite these efforts, the original temple beliefs and practices survived (underground) among minority Israelite religious groups and movements.<sup>37</sup> These elements are reflected in noncanonical texts such as those found in the pseudepigrapha and the Dead Sea Scrolls.<sup>38</sup> These texts provide a window into the rich spiritual landscape of pre-Exilic Israel, revealing a theology and practice significantly different from that which was later mainstreamed by the Deuteronomists.

Interestingly, some of these suppressed temple beliefs, rituals, and practices resurfaced in early Christianity. For instance, John's encoded depiction of the ascent to the Holy of Holies/*Debir* in

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<sup>36</sup> I think that the Book of Mormon, in many respects, backs up these claims. For example, we read of prophets that have been edited from the Hebrew Bible in 1 Nephi 19.10. We also read Jacob's statement, "for this intent have we written these things, that *they may know that we knew of Christ, and we had a hope of his glory* many hundred years before his coming; and *not only we ourselves had a hope of his glory, but also all the holy prophets* which were before us." (Jacob 4.4, emphasis added). The witness of Jacob, Zenos, Zenock, and Neum are examples of clear ideas that were removed from the text of the Hebrew Bible. If the Book of Mormon is what it claims to be, then it is the lens through which we should be reading the Old Testament, for it is a First Israelite Religious text that sees how God is operative, how the covenant operates, and who Yahweh really is. It is the interpretive lens that can unlock the intricate editorial process of the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC.

<sup>37</sup> See Paul Hanson, [\*Dawn of the Apocalyptic: Historical and Sociological Roots of Jewish Apocalyptic Eschatology\*](#), Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1975. Hanson refers to these groups as "visionaries." He explains (p. 261), "The Hierocrats were adversaries of Yahweh, according to the visionaries. Their claims were illegitimate, and they and their temple would be objects of Yahweh's wrath in the imminent judgment. The visionaries found themselves in a situation similar to the one experienced by Jeremiah, where opposite claims were being made in the name of the same God."

<sup>38</sup> Martha Himmelfarb sees the visionary's ascent to angelic status as central to the themes of apocalyptic texts. She sees the following list encompassing "ascent apocalypses" through the second century: The Book of the Watchers, the Testament of Levi, 2 Enoch, The Similitudes of Enoch (1 Enoch 37-71), The Apocalypse of Zephaniah, The Apocalypse of Abraham, The Ascension of Isaiah, and 3 Baruch. See: Himmelfarb, [\*Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses\*](#), Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 7.

John 1,<sup>39</sup> Jesus' coded discussion of the temple mysteries in the Sermon on the Mount,<sup>40</sup> the portrayal of Jesus as the cosmic king and high priest in the Book of Hebrews, and the visionary ascent to heaven for a theophany of God in His celestial temple as described in Revelation, are indicative of this resurgence. The authors of the earliest Christian texts reflect this view of early Israelite religion that was **suppressed by those in power** in the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

Nephi discusses how the Lord commanded him to make plates to tell his story and to communicate the "more plain and precious" things that the Lord would have him preserve "for the instruction of my people... and for other wise purposes, which are known unto the Lord" (1 Nephi 19.3-4).

He then proceeds to inform his readers how he understands Jesus will be treated, and I believe he is including his contemporaries who are in power in Jerusalem:

For the things which some men esteem to be of **great worth**, both to the body and soul, **others set at naught and trample under their feet**. Yea, even **the very God of Israel** do men **trample under their feet**; I say, trample under their feet but I would speak in other words—they set him at naught, and hearken not to the voice of his counsels. And behold he cometh, according to the words of the angel, in six hundred years from the time my father left Jerusalem. And the world, **because of their iniquity, shall judge him to be a thing of naught; wherefore they scourge him, and he suffereth it**; and they smite him, and he suffereth it, because of his loving kindness and his long-suffering towards the children of men. And the God of our fathers, who were led out of Egypt, out of bondage, and also were preserved in the wilderness by him, yea, the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and **the God of Jacob, yieldeth himself**, according to the words of the angel, as a man, into the hands of wicked men, to be lifted up, according to the words of **Zenock**, and to **be crucified**, according to the words of **Neum**, and to be buried in a sepulchre, according to the words of **Zenos**, which he spake concerning the **three days of darkness**, which should be a sign given of his death unto

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<sup>39</sup> See the discussion in our podcast covering John 1 on *Talking Scripture*, [Episode 186](#). David Butler (and I agree) sees John 1 as a temple play, where an entire encoded discourse is taking place, showing those "in the know" how to ascend and experiences the mysteries. It is the ascent of the "shalems." David Butler defines the "Shalems" as visionaries who have become initiates in the temple ordinances. These are the "visionary men" of the Old and New Testaments (men being humans, not necessarily just males). These "shalems" were the losers of history, as their story was written out of the Old Testament. They formed an "underground religion," meaning that of Isaiah and Lehi. They had to write in code to protect their works, so that those with ears to hear would hear, and those who did not know the mysteries were protected from being responsible for their words and works. Evidence for these people are throughout ancient history. Butler (*Goodness and the Mysteries*, p. 15) explains, "If the thought-world of the visionary men predates the Bible, like the visionary men themselves claim it does (Alma 13.1-9), then we should expect to see *shalem* images in the religion, folklore, and literature of non-Biblical cultures, too. The Paradigm is a big idea, in other words, and we should expect to see evidence bearing on it all over the place. Our problem shouldn't be scarcity of evidence, but over-abundance, and understanding how to interpret what we find." See: David John Butler, [The Goodness and the Mysteries: On the Path of the Book of Mormon's Visionary Men](#), Create Space, 2012.

<sup>40</sup> See the discussion I have with David Butler in [Episode 73 of Talking Scripture](#).

those who should inhabit the isles of the sea, more especially given unto those who are of the house of Israel. (1 Nephi 19.7-10, emphasis added)

Book of Mormon writers mention five prophets whose words appear in the brass plates: Zenos, Zenock, Ezias, Isaiah, and Neum. Of these prophets, only Isaiah is known from existing biblical texts. Internal evidence suggests a reason why: The other four prophets seem to direct a great deal of attention to the Northern Kingdom. Since the Masoretic text, which lies behind our King James version, came out of the South, omission of three of the four (or four of the five, counting Neum) is explicable. Zenos is quoted as saying, “And as for those who are at Jerusalem. . . .” Nowhere else in the extensive quotes from Zenos does he mention Judah or Jerusalem. This in context strongly suggests that *he was not located in the territory of Judah*. (It is implied in 3 Nephi 11.16 that Zenos and Zenock were of a Joseph tribe, although nothing is said of location.) The reference to Jerusalem implies a date after David’s capture of the city and quite probably after the division of the monarchy (about 922 BCE). A careful reading of the Allegory of the Olive tree, from Zenos,<sup>41</sup> as well as Alma 33.3-17 concerning both Zenos and Zenock, further confirms a context of a sinful Israel more reminiscent of the time of Amos (mid-8th century BCE) than earlier or later. Moreover, Zenock was said to be a “prophet of old,”<sup>42</sup> a chronological term not used regarding Jeremiah or even Isaiah. **The probability is high, therefore, that the prophets cited from the brass plates date between 900 BCE and the end of the Northern Kingdom in 721 BCE.**<sup>43</sup>

The point worth emphasizing here is this: If the Book of Mormon is what it claims to be, then there were prophets who understood the idea of a dying and rising God.<sup>44</sup> And many of them, at least Zenock, Zenos, Neum, Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob - knew this God to be the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Holy One of Israel, and cosmic king referenced in much of the wisdom literature. My reading of the divine translatability between the conceptions of gods in the ANE and throughout the Mediterranean have convinced me that though he may have gone by by different names, there is a strong possibility that he may have been worshipped by many cultures. Herodotus noticed how similar the gods of the ancient world when he went visiting different cultures.<sup>45</sup> What if Jehovah יהוה was known by different names throughout the ancient world? As Bruce Louden asserted, “People in one culture, most commonly at a highly elite level,

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<sup>41</sup> Jacob 5.

<sup>42</sup> Alma 33.17. Hugh Nibley thought Zenock an Egyptian name, *Lehi in the Desert*, Deseret Book, 1988, p. 30.

<sup>43</sup> Mike Day, [Could the Book of Mormon be an “E Source” Document?](#), 10.17.2017.

<sup>44</sup> Trygve N.D. Mettinger, *The Riddle of Resurrection: “Dying and Rising Gods” in the Ancient Near East*, Eisenbrauns, 2013.

<sup>45</sup> Herodotus, when traveling throughout the ancient world, recognized that the gods of different people translated across cultures, even though the names of the gods had changed. They were essentially worshipping the same gods. “Herodotus understood an Assyrian, Arabian, and Persian goddess as versions of Aphrodite, Horus as Apollo, and Osiris as Dionysus.” Speaking of Aphrodite, Herodotus writes, “She is called by the Assyrians Mylitta, by the Arabians Alilat, by the Persians Mitra.” Herodotus, *The Histories*, 1.131.3. Of Apollo he writes, “Of these gods one or another had in succession been supreme; the last of them to rule the country was Osiris' son Horus, whom the Greeks call Apollo; he deposed Typhon, and was the last divine king of Egypt. Osiris is, in the Greek language, Dionysus.” *Histories*, 2.144.2.

explicitly recognize that the deities of other cultures are as real as its own. Those different peoples who participate, would, from our perspective, understand their deities in cross-cultural discourse with each other.”<sup>46</sup> I am open to this, however strange it may sound.

### **Vindicating Josiah: Counterclaims to the Negative Portrayal of Josiah’s Reforms**

William J. Hamblin disagrees with Margaret Barker on several points regarding the Deuteronomistic reforms.<sup>47</sup> First, Hamblin believes that the Deuteronomistic reforms were a restoration of the original pristine Mosaic temple theology, rather than an apostasy from the real temple theology as Barker claims. Second, he argues that the situation is much more complex than Barker suggests, with multiple competing visions of what authentic ancient Israelite temple theology originally was and ought to be. Third, Hamblin asserts that sectarian complexity in temple theology, ritual, and mysticism was already the norm in pre-exilic Israel, rather than being suppressed by the Deuteronomistic reforms. Finally, he argues that Josiah’s reforms were necessary and inspired, and that no biblical prophet ever opposed or criticized them.<sup>48</sup> These disagreements suggest that Hamblin has a different interpretation of the Deuteronomistic reforms and their place in ancient Israelite history than Barker does.

Hamblin argues that Joseph Smith’s production of the Book of Mormon reflects the complexity of early Israelite thought and the competing visions of what authentic ancient Israelite temple theology originally was and ought to be. Hamblin suggests that the Book of Mormon contains elements of both the Deuteronomistic and non-Deuteronomistic traditions, and that it reflects the sectarian complexity of ancient Israelite religion.

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<sup>46</sup> Bruce Loudon, *Greek Myth and the Bible*, p. 12. See also: Mark Smith, *God in Translation: Deities in Cross-Cultural Discourse in the Biblical World*, Eerdmans, 2008.

<sup>47</sup> William J. Hamblin, *Vindicating Josiah*, *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 4 (2013): 165-176.

<sup>48</sup> A careful reading of 1 Nephi 1 will show that at least Nephi and Lehi took issue with the reforms of Josiah, which is the subject of this paper. However, he does construct a strong argument. He says, “I believe that Josiah’s reforms were necessary and inspired. The first thing to note is that no biblical prophet ever opposed or criticized Josiah’s reforms. No biblical prophet ever endorsed the worship of the goddess Asherah. No biblical prophet ever endorsed the worship of any god other than YHWH. No biblical prophet ever endorsed the worship of idols. Now, one could in theory argue this is because the Deuteronomists decided which books to include in the Bible and consciously suppressed alternative viewpoints from non-Deuteronomistic prophets. But the fact remains that in the surviving texts, all the prophets agree with at least these three basics of Josiah’s reforms: (1) Israel should worship only Yhwh; Israel must not worship foreign gods; (2) Israel must not worship idols (or worship YHWH as an idol), or follow other Canaanite cultic practices; and, to the extent they discuss it, (3) Israel must worship only in the Jerusalem temple. Even Ezekiel, whom Barker sees as one of the most important prophets of authentic temple theology and mysticism, agrees with these principles and insists that failure to follow these three principles was the cause for the departure of the Glory/kābôd of YHWH from the temple (Ezekiel 10), leaving it ripe for destruction by the Babylonians.” Hamblin, p. 171-172. I could record an entire podcast countering Hamblin’s claims on pages 171-172. While I believe his argument has some strong points, I would contend that the monotheistic portrayal of the Hebrew Bible he presents is far from a settled argument. I would also add that the portrayal of El Shaddai counters his claims, at least in part to his second point “no prophet ever endorsed the goddess Asherah.” While El Shaddai is not Asherah, the portrayal of a feminine deity, interesting in the fertility of prophets, is worth consideration. I would also add Daniel Peterson’s argument to this discussion (see Peterson’s article: Nephi and his Asherah).

## Deuteronomy in the Book of Mormon

Despite my disagreement with Hamblin's analysis, I do see many elements of Deuteronomy contained in the text of the Book of Mormon. The covenant treaty formula is clearly found in King Benjamin's speech,<sup>49</sup> and is reflective of Deuteronomic approaches to understanding covenantal obligations and was a response to the Assyrian captivity that was part of the zeitgeist of the authors of Deuteronomy.<sup>50</sup> This can help us understand that King Benjamin was a man of his time, contextualizing his understanding of Yahweh in the language and covenant treaty patterns of the ancient world. Deuteronomy's emphasis on humanitarian issues is also prevalent throughout the Book of Mormon. In my estimation, all the best of the Deuteronomist (D) is reflected in the text, just as the best elements of the Yahwist (J), and the Priestly author (P) are also found in the writings of Book of Mormon prophets.

## Nephi's Presentation of 7<sup>th</sup> Century Issues

### The Reforms of Josiah

1. No other altars, a centralization of worship – Deut. 12.2; 2 Kgs 23.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Mosiah 1-6 contains all the elements of the covenant-treaty formal in Deuteronomy. Stephen Ricks explains that this pattern did "include a preamble, antecedent history, stipulations, witness formulas, blessings and cursings, and provisions for the recital and deposition of the text." This covenant assembly in Mosiah 1-6 is, to Ricks, evidence that this meeting was held at the Israelite Feast of Tabernacles and that the Nephites were continuing this tradition, as they were a branch of Israel that had been broken off. Ricks sees this formula as evidence of the Book of Mormon's ancient textualization and another way to establish "the genuineness of the Book of Mormon." See Stephen Ricks, *The Treaty/Covenant Pattern in King Benjamin's Address (Mosiah 1-6)*, *BYU Studies Quarterly*: Vol. 24 : Iss. 2 , Article 3, 1984, p. 151-162. See also Ricks, [King, Coronation, and Covenant in Mosiah 1-6](#), *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, FARMS, p. 209-219.

<sup>50</sup> See: William L. Moran, "The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25 (1963): 77-87. See also N. Lohfink, "Hate and Love in Osee 9, 15" *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25 (1963). For a more detailed discussion, see Weinfeld, "II Treaty form and phraseology- Affinities with the Ancient Near Eastern Treaty Formulae," in *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, Clarendon Press, 1972, p. 59-157. G.E. Mendenhall, "Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition," *BA* 17, 1954, p. 50. See also: D.J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant*, *Analecta Biblica* 21, 1963; D.R. Hillers, *Treaty Curses and O.T. Prophets*, *Biblica et Orientalia* 16, 1964.

<sup>51</sup> At least this is what the message of the person who wrote 2 Kings wants us to believe. The evidence from archaeology tells a different story, prompting one archaeologist to state that the narrative in Kings is a "minority report" of what the authors were trying to convince of, but that it was just an idealized hope of how Israelite religion should be at the time the text of Deuteronomy was constructed. See William G. Dever, [Has Archaeology Buried the Bible?](#), Eerdmans, 2020, p. 125-126. Dever, noting that there were many cult sites outside Jerusalem, where Israelites practiced a religion more in line with some of the practices of the Patriarchs as discussed by Barker, explains, "From beginning to end, the biblical writers and editors are specific about what the elements of this apostasy were. Scholars thus draw a contrast: on the one hand there is the orthodox cult, or what may be called "book religion." This is the ideal, institutionalized religion of the Bible. Then there is popular or "folk" religion. The biblical writers condemn the latter, a perversion in their view, and try to call Israel back to an original, purer version—theirs. But **their religion was an ideal, almost never the reality, an ideal that they projected back upon a largely imaginary past.**" See also Dever, *Did God have a Wife? Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel*, Eerdmans, 2005. Commenting on the powerful priests and scribes that created Deuteronomy, labeling them "extremists," Dever wrote (p. 71, emphasis added), "**They have no tolerance for divergent views**, not even when they are held by kings, all of whom they despise except for the "good" reformist kings Hezekiah and Josiah. These extremists were, of course, minority parties given the historical reality in 8th-7th century Israel. But it is *they* who



2. His "name" only – Deut. 12.5, 11, 21.
3. No secret things - Deut. 29.29.
4. He (Josiah) hunted down the *Cemarim* – 2 Kings 23.5.
5. God is not seen – Deut. 4.12.
6. Cut down Asherah – Deut. 16.21-22; 2 Kgs. 23.6.
7. No Divine Council – Deut. 4.19.
8. No mention of the Urim and Thummim in the Deuteronomistic History (DH).
9. No mention of The Day of Atonement/Yom Kippur in the DH.

### 1. No other altars – Cultic Centralization

Throughout the text of the Hebrew Bible, there are references to prophets building altars, oftentimes in connection with sacred trees<sup>52</sup> associated with these sites.<sup>53</sup> When we read of the reforms of Josiah, we learn that he cut down all the trees and banished all other altars, thereby essentially forcing the people to come to Jerusalem, as it became (in the writers of the Deuteronomistic History) the only sanctioned location for sacrifice (see 2 Kings 23 and Deut. 12).<sup>54</sup>

Note the prohibition of outside altars:

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wrote the Hebrew Bible. The Hebrew Bible, as one of my theological friends (I have a few) likes to say, is a "minority report." As we would put it today, *the writers were "spin doctors."* Thus the Bible is ancient "revisionist history," on a grand scale."

<sup>52</sup> When the Lord brought his chosen people out of Egypt and eventually led them into the promised land, they made a covenant at Shechem. Joshua wrote a book of the Law, and set up a great stone to mark the occasion 'under the oak in the sanctuary of the Lord' (Jos.24.26). The LXX has *terebinthon*, so that translator, as late as the second century BCE, thought there had been a great tree in the sanctuary of the Lord at Shechem. In the Hebrew text, however, 'oak tree', *'ēlāh*, was pointed as *'allāh*, curse, another example of later editors expressing their opinion through the way they transmitted the text. The great trees were remembered as a curse, not just as an ancient custom. The same consonants can also mean 'goddess', *'eloah*, and 'under the oak tree', *tht h'lh* can therefore mean 'instead of the goddess'. So what are we reading? Barker, *Mother of the Lord*, p. 78.

<sup>53</sup> See: Genesis 8.20 - Noah built an altar to the Lord after the flood. Genesis 12.7 - Abram built an altar to the Lord who had appeared to him. This altar was under the oak of Moreh. The name 'Moreh' suggests 'teacher', i.e. the teacher's oak, but its earlier name may have been 'Shaddai's oak' – see Barker, p. 78. Genesis 13.18 - Abram moved to Hebron and built an altar there. Gen. 18.1-8 - Abraham has a vision of the Lord and three holy men. These individuals eat with Abraham and give him a blessing, all while being "under the tree" (תַּחַת הָעֵץ). This is a temple setting for many reasons: 1) The Lord is seen, 2) Eating takes place, 3) A fertility blessing is pronounced, and 4) All while being under the tree, or the Holy of Holies. Genesis 21.33 - Abraham planted a tamarisk tree (אֶשְׁל) in Beersheba and called on the name of the Lord. Genesis 22.9 - Abraham built an altar on Mount Moriah to sacrifice Isaac. Genesis 26.25 - Isaac built an altar in Beersheba. Genesis 35.1-3 - God told Jacob to build an altar in Bethel. Exodus 17.15 - Moses built an altar and called it "The Lord is my Banner." Exodus 24.4 - Moses built an altar at the foot of Mount Sinai. Joshua 8.30 - Joshua built an altar on Mount Ebal as Moses commanded. Joshua 24.26 - Joshua set up a great stone and set it up under an oak (אֶלֶה), a sanctuary of Yahweh. Judges 6.19-24 - Gideon built an altar to the Lord under an oak (אֶלֶה) and called it "The Lord is Peace."

<sup>54</sup> Of course, there were other altars in the land during the time of the Deuteronomistic reforms, as well as a temple in Elephantine in Egypt. See: William Dever, [Did God Have a Wife?: Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel](#), Eerdmans, 2005. See also Ziony Zevit, [The Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Parallactic Approaches](#), Continuum, 2001.

Take heed to thyself that thou offer not thy burnt offerings in every place that thou seest: But in the place which the Lord shall choose in one of thy tribes, there thou shalt offer thy burnt offerings, and there thou shalt do all that I command thee. (Deut. 12.13-14)

Note that Nephi describes his father Lehi being admitted into the Divine Council at an altar, having the heavens opened, receiving visions, and a sacred book, all in the first chapter of his Small Plates record (1 Nephi 1).

It is important to note that when Lehi builds an altar we read that his sons Laman and Lemuel murmur against him:

And it came to pass that he built an altar of stones, and made an offering unto the Lord, and gave thanks unto the Lord our God (1 Ne. 2.7)

"And they did murmur because they knew not the dealings of that God who had created them" (1 Ne. 2.12)

## 2. Name Theology.

The Deuteronomistic reformers, active during the period of King Josiah's reign in Judah, propagated a "name theology" suggesting that it was God's name that dwelt at the temple. ***This is a subtle yet powerful distinction.*** By changing this perception of God, the reformers were emphasizing a transcendent, yet disembodied God. It is important to understand that for the Deuteronomist, God did not "dwell" in the temple, as he was non-corporeal. His "name" dwelt at the temple.

By having "his name" at the temple, rather than His physical presence (Deut. 12), ***these authors and reformers could reframe known passages of their sacred texts to reflect a new way of conceiving God.*** This change is powerful, and has implications today among Christians of all denominations, and is mostly misunderstood.

This massive shift in the 7<sup>th</sup> century thinking was, in the words of G. Von Rad, a "**theological corrective**" to the primitive view of God as one who was corporeal, able to be seen.<sup>55</sup> This was in contrast to other biblical authors who depicted God in more material and corporeal terms. The Yahwist (J) source often attributes human characteristics and actions to God, such as walking in the garden (Genesis 3.8) or speaking face to face with Moses as a man speaks with his friend (Exodus 33.11) and the theophany on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24.9-11) where the 70

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<sup>55</sup> Gerhard Von Rad wrote, "As we see it in Deuteronomy, it [the name] may be established in a particular place, the conception is definite and within fixed limits; it verges closely upon a hypostasis. The deuteronomic theologoumenon of the name of Jahweh clearly holds a polemic element, or, to put it better, ***is a theological corrective. It is not Jahweh himself who is present at the shrine, but only his name as the guarantee of his will to save;*** to it and it only Israel has to hold fast as the sufficient form in which Jahweh reveals himself. Deuteronomy is replacing the old crude idea of Jahweh's presence and dwelling at the shrine by a theologically sublimated idea."

See: Gerhard Von Rad, *Studies in Deuteronomy*, SCM Press, 1956, p. 38-39, emphasis added. See: <https://archive.org/details/studiesindeutero012415mbp/page/n39/mode/2up>

Elders of Israel saw Yahweh and ate and drank with him, foreshadowing the coming day when the Saints of God will partake of the bread and wine with the Lord Jesus Christ when he comes again to the earth to reign as king of kings (D&C 27). Similarly, the Priestly (P) source contains passages that imply God's anthropomorphic nature, such as the account where the Gods (אֱלֹהִים) create man and woman (בְּצַלְמֵנוּ) "in our image" (Gen. 1.26-27), and the detailed descriptions of the Tabernacle where God dwells among the Israelites (Exodus 25.8). These portrayals highlight a distinction between conceptions of God. We see in the non-Deuteronomistic material many portrayals of God as literal, anthropomorphic, and divine as opposed to transcendent and immaterial, where his "name" is all that is present in the created sphere.

**There were many texts that reflected a corporeal view of God, and many of them still exist in the Hebrew Bible.** For example, Exodus 25:8 - "And let them make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them." Exodus 29:45-46 - "And I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will be their God." Psalm 132:13-14 - "For the Lord hath chosen Zion; he hath desired it for his habitation. This is my rest for ever: here will I dwell; for I have desired it." Leviticus 26:11-12 - "And I will set my tabernacle among you: and my soul shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and ye shall be my people."

These texts often symbolize the presence of God among His people, with the Temple or Tabernacle serving as a physical representation of that divine presence.

### 3. No Secret Things

The reformers were "wary of the secret things" and thus stressed the importance of following the law. "The wisdom of the chosen people was to obey the commandments, and, by implication, to leave the secret things with God (Deut.4.6; 29.29)."<sup>56</sup> In this way, "Nobody went up to heaven or crossed the sea to receive revelation; these secret things were for the Lord alone. His people had only to obey the commandments which they had already received (Deut.29.29; 30.11-14)."<sup>57</sup>

As to Nephi's construction of his history and his argument, we need to remember that in the very beginning of his text he writes "having had a great knowledge of the goodness and the mysteries of God" ... Nephi later writes of his experience with *seeing the mysteries*, just as Isaiah had, when he writes, "He (Isaiah) verily saw my Redeemer, even as I have seen him. And my brother, Jacob, also has seen him as I have seen him... Wherefore, by the words of three, God hath said, I will establish my word" (2 Ne. 11.2-3). In this way, Nephi provides evidence that he

<sup>56</sup> Margaret Barker, *Mother of the Lord: Volume 1: The Lady in the Temple*, T&T Clark, 2012, p. 19.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 40. "Later texts show that this ascent to heaven to learn divine knowledge had been the prerogative of the Davidic kings and high priests, 105 and Josiah did depose some priests, described as the *kemārîm* who had kept the high places (2 Kgs 23.5), and other priests, *kohanîm* who had burned incense at high places (2 Kgs 23.9)... It is possible that a *komer* had significance that later editors sought to obscure, and the indications are that this was an association with Melchizedek. The Syriac Old Testament chose *kumra'* to describe Melchizedek, not *kohēn* (Gen.14.18), which may preserve a memory of the distinction between the two types of priest in earlier times."

had been initiated into the mysteries. The Book of Mormon stands as a witness to the fact that God will grant wisdom and enable mankind to “know the mysteries” despite the strong assertions of the Deuteronomic Reformers.

#### 4. Josiah hunted down the *Cemarim*

“And he put down the *Cemarim*” (וְהִשְׁבִּית אֶת־הַכְּמָרִים) (2 Kings 23.5a, my translation). The *Cemarim* are not mentioned in any other parts of the Bible and their identity is not certain. It is believed by some scholars that the word *Cemarim* is a Hebrew word derived from the Akkadian word "kimtu" which means “priest.” But the exact meaning of the word is not clear from the context. Some scholars believe that the *Cemarim* were a group of priests or religious leaders who were associated with the worship of foreign gods, specifically the god Ba'al and the goddess Asherah. According to 2 Kings 23, King Josiah sought to eliminate their influence and thus centralized the worship of God in the Temple of Jerusalem in order to do so. Margaret Barker, a British biblical scholar, argues that the *Cemarim* mentioned in 2 Kings 23 were Melchizedek Priests. Her assertion is that the *Cemarim* were part of a pre-exilic temple tradition that predates the Jerusalem temple, in which the High Priest was identified with Melchizedek, a figure from the book of Genesis who is described as a priest of God Most High. Barker argues that this tradition was suppressed during the reforms of King Josiah, who sought to centralize worship in the Jerusalem temple and eliminate other forms of worship. This fits with what is going on during the reforms of Josiah and the shift towards radical monotheism happening in this time period of the late 7th century. Margaret Barker explains the execution of the *Cemarim*:

The Deuteronomic historian's favourable account of Josiah's changes should be read with this in mind. When the king ordered the destruction and removal of anything that the Deuteronomists would not tolerate, not everyone considered this a reform. Josiah altered the religion of the city and the religion of the rural areas, so this was not a case of one of these traditions taking over the other. ***This was a wholesale change, but nobody knows where these 'reformers' originated.*** Josiah removed from the temple all the vessels for Baal, for Asherah and for the host of heaven (2 Kgs 23.4), because Deuteronomy forbade dealing with the host of heaven (Deut. 4.19) despite the LORD's ancient role as the LORD of Hosts (Isa. 6.3), a title which survived in liturgy, but not in the Deuteronomists' materials. Josiah deposed the 'idolatrous' priests whom the kings of Judah had ordained to burn incense at the high places, those who burned incense to Baal and to the host of heaven (2 Kgs 23.5). 4.6). Josiah broke down the houses of the 'male cult prostitutes' in the temple precincts, where the women wove hangings for Asherah (2 Kgs 23.7). The Hebrew consonants for 'male cult prostitutes' are the same as those for holy ones, angels *qdsim*, and, given what is known about the censorship methods of the ancient scribes, reading the letters in this way could have been deliberate. Josiah's breaking down the houses of the holy ones could have been his suppression of the cult of the heavenly host. These two elements alone indicate that Josiah abolished what is recognizable as the veneration of Wisdom and her seventy

sons, the angels. Almost all that Josiah swept away can be matched to elements in the older religion, not in the cults of Canaan, but in the religion of the patriarchs and the prophets.<sup>58</sup>

What is important for this discussion is how this relates to the Book of Mormon. We need to remember the Lehi was not from the tribe of Levi. He was a visionary, a Melchizedek Priest. He was also being hunted down by the reforming zeal of the Deuteronomists, the “elders of Israel” that opposed his teachings (see: 1 Ne. 1.18-20). In this way, **Nephi portrays Lehi as a Melchizedek Priest,<sup>59</sup> initiated in the mysteries (1 Ne. 1, 8), being hunted down by the Deuteronomistic reformers. In this way, this depiction of Lehi and Nephi fits right in the context of 600 BC Jerusalem.**

### 5. God is not seen

The Deuteronomistic perspective, reflected primarily in the book of Deuteronomy and the **Deuteronomistic History** (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings), **emphasizes the incomprehensibility and transcendence of God**. This perspective insists that God cannot be seen by humans because of His divine incorporeal nature and the inherent limitations of human beings. Indeed, the story of Moses seeing God was corrected by later Deuteronomistic editors intent on completely changing the narrative: “And the Lord spake unto you out of the midst of the fire: **Ye heard the voice of the words, but saw no similitude**; only ye heard a voice” (Deut. 4.12).

The reformers who constructed the text of Deuteronomy insisted that there had been and could be no vision of God. Other accounts of the happenings at Sinai said that Moses, the priests and the elders of Israel had indeed seen the God of Israel (and had a covenantal meal with him! See: Ex. 24.9-11) when they ascended Mount Sinai. But the reformers who textualized Deuteronomy denied all of this. קול דְבָרִים אָתֶם שָׁמַעְתֶּם וּתְמוּנָה אֵינְכֶם רִאִים זולתי קול ‘You all heard the sound of words, **but saw no form**; there was only a voice’ (Deut.4.12).

**This insistence reinforces the prohibition against idolatry**, as it would be impossible to create an image of a God who has no visible form. The Deuteronomist's theology was also a response to the idolatrous practices surrounding them, where gods were often represented in physical forms and images. By emphasizing the invisible and transcendent nature of God, the

<sup>58</sup> Margaret Barker, [The Great High Priest: The Temple Roots of Christian Liturgy](#), T&T Clark, 2004, p. 149. Note: Matt Bowen wrote an article where he compares the putting down of the priests by both Josiah and King Noah in their respective traditions. See: [“Putting down the priests” Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship](#) 51 (2022): 105-114.

<sup>59</sup> “Lehi and Jeremiah are an interesting study in contrast. Both were prophets, but Lehi was called to leave Jerusalem and deliver his family from destruction, while Jeremiah was called to stay and witness the destruction and exile of his people. Both were priests—**Lehi after the order of Melchizedek** and Jeremiah a member of a distinguished Aaronid family. Both were patriarchs—Lehi of a family that would become a people divided among themselves for centuries and Jeremiah of a people who were already divided, taken into exile where they would face the challenge of maintaining their identity.” David and JoAnn Seely, [Lehi and Jeremiah: Prophets, Priests, and Patriarchs](#), *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 1999, p. 26, emphasis added.

Deuteronomists sought to distinguish their worship from these practices and to focus on the law and obedience to God's commands as central to worship.

And yet through this narrative we also read counter-claims to the proposition that God remains unseen. For Adam, Eve, Abraham, Jacob, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Lehi, Nephi and Jacob all saw the Lord, for “the vision was part of the temple tradition – but this was not allowed for Deuteronomy’s Moses.”<sup>60</sup>

## 6. Josiah Cut Down Representations of Asherah

The Deuteronomistic history portrays Josiah's cutting down of the Asherah poles as part of his rigorous campaign to centralize worship in Jerusalem and eliminate idolatry from Judah. This act is described in 2 Kings 23.14, where Josiah not only destroys the poles but also desecrates the high places where they stood. The Deuteronomists supported the idea of an aniconic worship—that is, worship without physical images—and the Asherah poles, often associated with the Canaanite goddess Asherah, represented a direct violation of this principle. By emphasizing Josiah's actions against the Asherah, the Deuteronomistic historians were stressing the importance of pure Yahwistic worship, free from syncretism, and reinforcing the laws against idolatry as outlined in the book of Deuteronomy.

The cultural and religious proximity between Canaanites and Israelites was much closer than previously considered by Bible scholars. Michael Coogan notes this succinctly: “Israelite religion [was] a subset of Canaanite religion.”<sup>61</sup> In their efforts to deepen their comprehension of ancient Israelite beliefs, modern scholars have benefitted from non-biblical texts and relics unearthed from the Near Eastern lands. For extended periods, little outside the biblical texts was available for their analysis. This changed significantly in 1929 with the unearthing of the Ugaritic tablets at Ras Shamra, in Syria, which profoundly transformed our grasp of Canaanite and early Hebrew religious practices. The deity El reigned at the apex of the Canaanite divine hierarchy.

*El Olam*, one of the titles ascribed to El, signifies his ancient and eternal dominion. Frank Moore Cross Jr. observed: “We must understand it . . . as meaning originally ‘El, Lord of Eternity,’ or more accurately, ‘El, the Ancient One.’ The narratives inscribed on the Ugaritic tablets depict El as an aged figure with a flowing beard, acknowledged as both the progenitor of the gods and of humankind.”<sup>62</sup>

Asherah, the Canaanites' principal goddess, was El's consort and the divine mother to gods and kings, symbolizing maternity. Linked to Sidon, she was also revered by the Israelites, evident in

<sup>60</sup> M. Barker, *Mother of the Lord*, p. 35.

<sup>61</sup> Michael D. Coogan, “Canaanite Origins and Lineage: Reflections on the Religion of Ancient Israel,” in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*, ed. Patrick D. Miller Jr., Paul D. Hanson, and S. Dean McBride, Fortress Press, 1987, 115. Compare William G. Dever, *Recent Archaeological Discoveries and Biblical Research*, University of Washington Press, 1990, 121, 128, 166.

<sup>62</sup> Frank Moore Cross Jr., “Yahweh and the God of the Patriarchs,” *Harvard Theological Review* 55, 1962, p. 240.

burial customs, temple design, and numerous figurines, particularly as a nurturing figure rather than as a principally fertility figure, as seen in Canaanite artifacts. Her worship persisted from Canaan's conquest until Jerusalem's fall in 586 B.C. Notably, King Solomon introduced her cult to Jerusalem, suggesting her influence extended from rural to urban settings and across various social strata. The connection between the high God El in both Israel and Ugarit must be emphasized, for they both have a consort, and the evidence suggests that in both cases her name is Asherah.<sup>63</sup> She was the Hebrew Goddess,<sup>64</sup> what many Latter-day Saints would call “Heavenly Mother,” and yet she is shrouded in mystery, especially for those who have only the English rendition of the Hebrew Bible at their disposal.

After Israel and Judah split, Ahab and Jezebel, a Phoenician princess, introduced Asherah worship into Samaria, considering her Yahweh's consort until Israel's fall in 721 B.C.<sup>65</sup> In Judah, Solomon's son Rehoboam brought Asherah into the Jerusalem temple, a practice intermittently removed by reformist kings like Asa, Jehoshaphat, and Hezekiah, but reinstated by Joash and Manasseh, persisting until Josiah's reforms around 639-609 B.C.<sup>66</sup> Jeremiah, a contemporary of Lehi, denounced her cult,<sup>67</sup> which survived in the temple for much of its history, evident in artifacts and temple architecture, showing her integral role in Israelite religion before Deuteronomist reforms around 600 B.C. eliminated her from mainstream Judaism.

The biblical term “asherah” could refer to a wooden object, likely a stylized tree, embodying the goddess. In the temple, the menorah—a stylized almond tree—provides a parallel, and is likely linked to the divine feminine. Thus, Asherah was venerated both as a goddess and through her cult symbol, the tree. As Peterson has emphasized, “It was not uncommon in the ancient Near East for a god or goddess to be essentially equated with his or her symbol, and Asherah seems to have been no exception: Asherah was both goddess and cult symbol. ***She was the “tree.”***”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> I see this cross over happening throughout the ancient world. We see parallels between Israel and her depiction of El and his consort Asherah in the Hebrew Bible with El and Asherah in the Ugaritic materials as well as in Greek texts where we have Kronos and his wife Rhea, with Zeus as the parallel between Yahweh and Baal.

<sup>64</sup> See: Raphael Patai, [The Hebrew Goddess](#), Wayne State University Press, 1990. See also: William Dever, [Did God Have a Wife?: Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel](#), Eerdmans, 2008. Mark Smith, *The Early History of God: : Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, Eerdmans, 2002.

<sup>65</sup> Debate exists as to whether Asherah was the consort of El, Yahweh, or both. See Daniel Peterson, “[Nephi and his Asherah](#),” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*: Vol. 9: No. 2, Article 4. See also: M. Barker, *Mother of the Lord*.

<sup>66</sup> “For about six centuries (after Israel entered Canaan), that is to say, down to the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BCE, the Hebrews worshiped Asherah (and next to her also other, originally Canaanite, gods and goddesses) in most places and shrines. Only intermittently, although with gradually increasing intensity and frequency, did the prophetic demand for the worship of Yahweh as the one and only god make itself be heard and was it heeded by the people and their leaders.” Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*, p. 34.

<sup>67</sup> An argument can be made here that Jeremiah was edited by the Deuteronomistic Reformers to reflect their theological views. The anti-Asherah texts may be an editorial insertion here. See: Mike Day, [The Book of Jeremiah, A Composite Text](#).

<sup>68</sup> Peterson, p. 22. See also: See Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 26, 28, 31–32; W. L. Reed, “Asherah,” in George Arthur Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Abingdon, 1962–, 1:250–52; de Moor, “Asherah,” 1:441; Day, “Asherah in the Hebrew Bible,” p. 408.

By this point, it ought to be clear why Nephi, an Israelite from the seventh to early sixth century BCE, discerned an answer to his query about a splendid tree in the vision depicting a virgin mother with her divine offspring. His comprehension of the vision of the Tree was not immediately self-evident, but it did contain the imprint of his culture, and with a little help, was probably easily recognized. The *Apocalypse of Paul* illustrates cultural influences on interpretive frameworks. It recounts Paul's vision akin to Nephi's: a Tree of Life beside a glowing sword and the Virgin Mary, praised by angels.<sup>69</sup> Nephi's revelation, rooted in the pre-exilic Palestinian milieu, also aligns Mary with the tree. ***Mary wasn't literally Asherah***, but as Nephi's angelic guide emphasized, she was "the mother of the Son of God, after the manner of the flesh," epitomizing the divine maternity of both Asherah, Heavenly Mother, Mary, and many of the goddesses of the ancient world. In the words of Daniel Peterson, "she was the perfect mortal typification of the mother of the Son of God."<sup>70</sup>

Peterson also notes the crossover with wisdom and tree, noting that wisdom literature has much in common with the Book of Mormon, for "wisdom itself is represented in Proverbs 1-9 as a female person. Indeed here and elsewhere in ancient Hebrew and Jewish literature," and wisdom is portrayed as "the wife of God, which can hardly fail to remind us of ancient Asherah."<sup>71</sup>

Despite her revered status, Wisdom confronts "scorners," paralleling the mockers in "the large and spacious building" in 1 Nephi, who scorn the faithful at the tree of life. The great and spacious building symbolizes worldly wisdom, contrasting with divine wisdom (1 Nephi 11.35). Wisdom brings life; its absence leads to death, illustrated by the living tree versus the lifeless building. The wicked, likened to those seduced by the "whorish woman," oppose Wisdom and love death, says Proverbs 8.35–36. This theme is echoed in the Book of Mormon by Ammon (Mosiah 8.20)<sup>72</sup> and in Lehi's vision, where rejecting the fruit leads to being lost. Ecclesiasticus warns that Wisdom will leave those who stray. These preexilic symbols in 1 Nephi, like Asherah and Wisdom, ***are strong indicators of the Book of Mormon's ancient origins***.

## 7. No Divine Council

Deuteronomy's rejection of the divine council (ΤΙΟ) is emphasized in passages like Deuteronomy 30.11-14, which stress the sufficiency and supremacy of the Law of Moses, accessible and earthbound, over celestial wisdom. This notion was contrary to the understanding of prophets like Jeremiah, who criticized the contemporary leaders for not having "stood in the heavenly

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<sup>69</sup> "And he [the angel] showed me the Tree of Life," Paul is reported to have said, "and by it was a revolving red-hot sword. And a Virgin appeared by the tree, and three angels who hymned her, and the angel told me that she was Mary, the Mother of Christ." See: Peterson, *Nephi and his Asherah*, p. 22. See also: Ernest A. Wallis Budge, *Egyptian Tales and Romances: Pagan, Christian and Muslim*, Thornton Butterworth, 1935, 280.

<sup>70</sup> Peterson, p. 22.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>72</sup> "They will not seek wisdom, neither do they desire that *she should rule over them*" (Mosiah 8.20b), emphasis added.



council" (Jer. 23.22), implying they lacked true wisdom from the Lord. Instead, the Deuteronomists asserted that hidden things were God's domain, but revealed law was humanity's guide (Deut. 29.29). Yet, Job, Amos, Isaiah, Lehi, and others acknowledged the divine council, indicating an older tradition where wisdom and decrees from the divine assembly were crucial for prophetic insight (Amos 3.7). Jeremiah lamented the loss of this true wisdom, indicting the leaders for their false assurance of safety (Jer. 23.16-17), which would bring disaster upon Jerusalem.

As Min Suc Kee has indicated, "in ancient Near Eastern literature the 'heavenly council' represents the most authoritative decision-making agent in the universe and history."<sup>73</sup> The major type-scenes of the heavenly council in the Hebrew Bible are 1 Kgs 22.19-23, Isaiah 6, Job 1 and 2, Psalm 82, Zechariah 3, and Dan. 7.9-14.<sup>74</sup> These passages are set apart from other passages because they are much fuller in their visual description of the heavenly council and employ common phrases that are widely attested in ancient Near Eastern texts.<sup>75</sup> The visual descriptions of the outlook, the process, and the location of the members are particular characteristics of the heavenly council in Mesopotamian, Ugaritic, and ancient Israelite texts. In the type-scene of the heavenly council, both the high god and the attendees "stand" as the council is set to commence.<sup>76</sup> In both Job 1.6 and Psalm 82.1, either YHWH or the attendees stand as the council is set to begin. Additionally, the members of the council "stand before/by" the high god of the council. Therefore, both the high god and the attendees are depicted as standing in the type-scene of the heavenly council. These councils portrayed in the Hebrew Bible are also placed at "pivotal points in their respective literary contexts."<sup>77</sup>

1 Nephi 1 opens<sup>78</sup> with Lehi entering into the heavens, having a vision of God seated on the throne (1 Ne. 1.8), surrounded by "numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing

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<sup>73</sup> Min Suc Kee, *The Heavenly Council and its Type-scene*, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, Vol. 31.3, 2007, p. 259-273.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 269.

<sup>75</sup> I would argue that Isaiah 40 is a Divine Council text because Isaiah 40.1 begins with a second person plural imperative: נְחַמוּ נְחַמוּ עַמִּי יֵאמֶר אֱלֹהֵיכֶם "You all are to comfort, comfort my people, says your (plural) God." The LXX of the text holds this second person imperative as well: παρακαλεῖτε παρακαλεῖτε τὸν λαόν μου λέγει ὁ θεός.

<sup>76</sup> Min Suc Kee, p. 264.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 269.

<sup>78</sup> It really opens with him punning on his own name: "I Nephi, having been born of goodly parents" (1 Nephi 1.1). See: Scripture Central, "[How Did Nephi Use a Pun on His Name?](#)" [Knowwhy #445](#). John H.C. Pippy explains how important paronomasia, or word-play was common in Egyptian texts. Pippy writes (p. 45), "In some Egyptian texts, especially religious ones, puns could be used as simple mnemonics to remind a priestly reader of the true meaning of a passage." He notes that language was considered to be a gift given from the gods, and so the Egyptians viewed it differently than people today. Quoting Goelet, he writes (p. 50), "One of the consequences of the Egyptian's belief that their language was a divine gift was a conviction that a similarity between words did not arise accidentally, but instead reflected an actual relationship which the gods themselves had intended to be discovered by the people." He continues, "Words which sounded similar were therefore related." Later, quoting Budge, he writes (p. 51), "Paronomasia (punning) was especially important as a means of revealing the hidden connections between this world and the next." See: John H.C. Pippy, [Egyptian Origin of the Book of Revelation](#), self published, 2011. See also: Ogden Goelet, *A Commentary on the Corpus of Literature and Tradition Which Constitutes the Book*

and praising” God. He sees One coming out of the midst of heaven, followed by 12 others, whose “brightness did exceed that of the stars in the firmament” (1 Ne. 1.9-10). The One who descended from heaven, “stood before my father,” giving Lehi a book which told of the coming destruction of Jerusalem (1 Ne. 1.11-13). In this way, Lehi’s visionary experience notes that the high God in the council was sitting, while members of the council were “standing” as one came and “stood before my father.” This is a classic example of a prophet being admitted into the divine council and being given instructions from the heavenly council to give to mortals, and it is in opposition to the Deuteronomist’s rejection of the Divine Council. This is yet another example of Nephi undercutting the claims of the Deuteronomic Reformers!

### 8. No Mention of Urim and Thummim

The Urim and Thummim were sacred instruments, in the form of stones, used in ancient Israelite religious practices to discern the will of God. In the Hebrew Bible they are described as lots, and in Joseph Smith’s description, they enabled him to see things, and he referred to them as “interpreters.”<sup>79</sup> They were part of the high priest’s regalia and kept within the ephod—a priestly garment—and referenced in biblical texts such as Leviticus and Numbers. This method of divination, through the Urim and Thummim, was considered a direct line to divine guidance. For instance, when leaders like David or Joshua sought God’s counsel, they did so through the high priest who used these sacred objects. The Urim and Thummim were believed to provide clear ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers to questions posed by the high priest on behalf of the inquirer.

However, during the Deuteronomistic reform, a significant shift occurred. These reforms aimed to centralize worship in Jerusalem and eliminate practices considered foreign or improper for the evolving religious identity of Israel. Deuteronomy explicitly forbids various forms of divination and seeks to distance Israelite practices from those of neighboring cultures, possibly as a means to establish a more distinct and unified religious identity. By rejecting the older methods, such as the Urim and Thummim, the Deuteronomistic reformers were also dismissing a part of the pre-Deuteronomic religious tradition that included prophets and diviners. This move was likely an effort to purify and simplify Israelite worship by removing elements that could be associated with polytheism or syncretic practices. In doing so, they were also redefining the nature of God’s communication with His people, moving away from the tangible and mediated forms like the Urim and Thummim to a more spiritualized and centralized form of guidance.

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*of Going Forth by Day*. In *The Egyptian Book of the Dead, The Book of Going Forth By Day*, edited by E. Von Dassow et al, third revised and expanded edition, 2015, p. 157.

<sup>79</sup> When Joseph Smith received the golden plates in 1827, he also received a translation instrument with them, “two stones in silver bows” used by “‘seers’ in ancient or former times” (*Joseph Smith—History* 1.35). This instrument was referred to in the Book of Mormon as the “interpreters.” During the translation of the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith apparently used them as well as a seer stone to translate the Book of Mormon. See: [Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Seer Stones.”](#)

So what happened? Tradition tells us that the stones disappeared. Barker explains:<sup>80</sup>

The stones did disappear: later tradition said this happened after the time of the former prophets, that is, in the time of Josiah,<sup>81</sup> that they were among the five items missing from the second temple.<sup>82</sup> One account says they were still in the temple but not so helpful.<sup>83</sup> The meaning of their names was forgotten by the second century BCE: the LXX translated Urim and Thummim as *dēlōsis* and *alētheia*, revelation and truth, which undoubtedly described their function,<sup>84</sup> and assumed that the Hebrew words derived from *’ōr*, light, and *tom*, integrity. Josephus said that oracles were given when the stones shone – he too thought that Urim meant ‘light’ – but that the oracle had ceased 200 years before his time.<sup>85</sup> It is now thought that Urim derived from *’ārār*, curse, and Thummim from *tom*, integrity, so that the stones gave the answer ‘guilty’ or ‘innocent’. Although Josephus thought the oracle stones still existed in the early second temple period, other biblical and rabbinic texts say that the stones were not used after the destruction of the first temple.<sup>86</sup> When the exiles returned from Babylon there were no stones to determine the case of those men whose claim to priesthood was uncertain (Ezra 2.63; Neh.7.65) and in the time of the Maccabees, there was no prophet, presumably with the stones, to determine what should be done with the desecrated altar stones (1 Macc.4.46) or who should be high priest (1 Macc.14.41). Ben Sira, writing in Jerusalem at the beginning of the second century BCE, said that the law had replaced the stones as the means of guidance: ‘A man of understanding will trust in the law; for him the law is as dependable as an enquiry by means of Urim’ (Ben Sira 33.3).<sup>87</sup> It is likely that the original role of the stones was abandoned after Josiah’s purge, and that they were another aspect of the older ways that was replaced by the Law.

The Book of Mormon, although not using the term “Urim and Thummim” anywhere within its text, presents the Urim and Thummim as “interpreters,” that is, ancient instruments given by God to assist in the translation and interpretation of sacred records. This perspective aligns closely with the pre-exilic milieu, where the Urim and Thummim were employed as legitimate

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<sup>80</sup> M. Barker, *Mother of the Lord*, p. 38.

<sup>81</sup> Mishnah *Sotah* 9.12, meaning here all the prophets except Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, the post exilic prophets, see H. Danby, *The Mishnah*, p.305, n.8.

<sup>82</sup> Jerusalem Talmud *Ta’anit* 2.1.

<sup>83</sup> There are various lists of the five items present in the first temple but not the second. In the Babylonian Talmud *Yoma* 21b the missing five are: the ark, its cover and the cherubim; the fire; the Shekinah; the Holy Spirit; and Urim and Thummim. The following line – ‘They were present but not so helpful’ – may apply to all five missing items, rather than just the stones.

<sup>84</sup> Symmachus chose *teleiotēs kai didachē*, perfection and teaching, but Aquila and Theodotion chose *phōtismoī kai teleiōseis*, illumination and perfection.

<sup>85</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 3.8.9.

<sup>86</sup> Mishnah *Sotah* 9.12. See Dandy, *The Mishnah*, . 305.

<sup>87</sup> The exception may have been the ancient ritual on the day of atonement, when lots were still cast over the two goats but these may not have been the divination stones, Mishnah *Yoma* 4.1. If the lot for the Lord was drawn first when the high priest put in his right hand, it was a good omen, but for the last 40 years before the destruction of the temple, this never happened. Babylonian Talmud *Yoma* 39b.

means for discerning the will of God. In the context of the Book of Mormon, these instruments are mentioned specifically in conjunction with seers, regarded as prophets who could receive and interpret divine revelations.

The Urim and Thummim are referred to in several passages within the Book of Mormon. In the book of Omni, we read that in the “days of Mosiah, there was large stone brought to him with engravings,” and by the gift and power of God, an interpretation was given.<sup>88</sup> In the book of Mosiah, the instruments are connected to the role of a seer, which is described as being greater than that of a prophet, due to the seer's unique ability to use these tools to translate unknown languages and reveal things which are hidden or thought to be unknown (Mosiah 8.13-18; 28:11-20).<sup>89</sup> In the book of Ether, the Urim and Thummim are used by the brother of Jared to receive revelations from the Lord concerning the Jaredite people (Ether 3.21-28).<sup>90</sup> Additionally, the introduction of the Book of Mormon explains that Joseph Smith used a pair of spectacles that he and his followers identified as the Urim and Thummim, to translate the golden plates into what would become the Book of Mormon text.

These references illustrate that, within the Book of Mormon, the Urim and Thummim hold a continuity with ancient Israelite tradition, serving as a divine medium for guidance and revelation. The inclusion of these instruments bolsters the narrative's connection to pre-Josianic Old Testament practices, thus reflecting an understanding of divine communication that mirrors pre-exilic Israelite culture. I do not believe Joseph Smith could have, with the tools at his disposal and at the young age of 23, to have had any clue as to the complexity of the arguments associated with the Urim and Thummim and its relationship to the reforms that occurred under Josiah's administration.

### 9. No Mention of Yom Kippur – The Day of Atonement – The Recreation of the World

The Day of Atonement, a celebration of the recreation of the world and the cosmic covenant, is not found in the writings of the Deuteronomistic Reformers. Margaret Barker explains:

The day of atonement, for example, **the most important temple ritual, does not even appear in the calendar of the Deuteronomist** (Deut.16). This ritual involved gemination: it was centred on two goats which had to be identical in every way (Lev.16.7-10), just as

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<sup>88</sup> Omni 1.20. Note that it is king Mosiah using this power here in the text. This king is portrayed as a unifying force-bringing the two separate worlds of the Mulekites and the Nephites into one culture and language.

<sup>89</sup> Ammon remarks that “A seer can know of things which are past, and also of things which are to come, and by them shall all things be revealed, or, rather, shall **secret things** be made manifest, and **hidden things** shall come to light, and things which are not known shall be made known by them, and also things shall be made known by them which otherwise could not be known. Thus God has provided a means that man, through faith, might work mighty miracles; therefore he becometh a great benefit to his fellow beings” (Mosiah 8.17-18, emphasis added). This discussion fits right in the context of a worldview prior to the Deuteronomistic reformers who negated the Urim and Thummim.

<sup>90</sup> “Behold, these two stones will I give unto thee, and ye shall seal them up also with the things which ye shall write. For behold, the a language which ye shall write I have confounded; wherefore I will cause in my own due time that these stones shall magnify to the eyes of men these things which ye shall write” (Ether 3.23-24).

the cleansing of a leper required two identical birds (Lev.14.4-7). **The day of atonement was part of the new year celebration, when the creation was re-created and the king was enthroned**, that is, born as the divine son.<sup>91</sup>

The **Atonement and recreation of the world**, and divine king are central ideas in the Book of Mormon text. See: Alma 5.14, where individuals experience a new creation in their rebirth: “Have ye spiritually been born of God?” We see this idea of spiritual renewal repeated throughout the text of the Book of Mormon.<sup>92</sup> We also see it expressed communally in 3 Nephi, when the King comes to the people and recreates the social order.

In **3 Nephi 17**, Jesus’ healing miracles symbolize a **new creation**, as his heart, filled with compassion, heals the sick and afflicted, blind, dumb, leprous, and withered. These people are made whole, the onlookers are brought to tears, reflecting the transformative power of the Savior's love and healing. The scene is further sanctified by the presence of **little children**, who are emblematic of innocence and **new creation**. Christ's blessing of the children, and the subsequent descent heavenly fire, which encircles them without harm, emphasizes the divine protection and purity enveloping this sacred gathering of Saints. The joy and the deep spiritual significance of the moment are such that, as **3 Nephi 17.17** states, “No tongue can speak, neither can there be written by any man, neither can the hearts of men conceive so great and marvelous things as both saw and heard Jesus speak; and no one can conceive of the joy which filled our souls at the time we heard him pray for us unto the Father.”

**This new creation is seen as being fundamental to understanding the cosmic covenant.** The temples were “sacral representations of heavenly temples” and “contained symbols of the heavenly bodies and earthly creatures and were the privileged meeting-places of heaven and earth as well as the points from which the cosmic forces of chaos and disorder could be controlled.”<sup>93</sup> It was at the temple where heaven and earth met, and the temple provided “access to the cosmic and transcendent spheres in which God is worshipped by spiritual beings,”<sup>94</sup> and it is here where humans meet Jesus as God at the temple. Robert Murray notes that it is in the Bible where we find texts with missing rituals, something he stresses that existed anciently but are now lost to us. In his view, this should “challenge us to think” as to what these rituals were. The Book of Mormon text also leaves out many of the details of the rituals, yet speaks in code throughout, inviting those that have participated in rituals to consider the multivalent nature of these texts.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> M. Barker, *Mother of the Lord*, p. 160.

<sup>92</sup> The covenant ceremony in Mosiah 1-6 at the Feast of Tabernacles is another example of this renewal, where the people covenanting to follow God are then called “His sons and his daughters” because of the covenant that they have entered into.

<sup>93</sup> Robert Murray, *The Cosmic Covenant*, Gorgias Press, 2007, p. 71.

<sup>94</sup> Murray, p. 72.

<sup>95</sup> See: John Welch, *Illuminating the Sermon at the Temple & Sermon on the Mount: An Approach to 3 Nephi 11-18 and Matthew 5-7*, Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 1998. See also: D. John Butler, *Plain and Precious Things: The Temple*

## What was lost with Josiah's Reforms

Much was lost in the reforms of Josiah. **Women who participated in worship were excluded.** The wisdom of God was replaced with a more focused emphasis on law. The Divine Council was superseded by a disembodied God, who no longer dwells among Israel – rather, “his name” is now in their presence! As Barker explains:

The account in 2 Kings describes the material changes – the removal of temple furnishings and personnel, the destruction of rural shrines, their furnishings and personnel, the banning of anyone who practised any form of divination... all this is explained as reaction to the discovery of a book. **There is no account of how religious belief changed.** Combining the description of Josiah's purges and the prescriptions of Deuteronomy, there would have been **no more old style prophecy, no more revelations from the council of the Lord** (the secret things, as in Amos 3.7), **no more visions of the Lord enthroned** (as in Isa.6.1), **no more day of atonement** (it is not mentioned in the D calendar, Deut.16), **no more 'Wisdom'** (the Law would replace her, Deut.4.6, symbolised by the removal of 'the Asherah'). This is what the Apocalypse of Weeks described as the result of rejecting Wisdom: the people in the temple lost their vision, the great gift of Wisdom; but the early Christians still knew that Wisdom spoke through the prophets (Luke 11.49).<sup>96</sup>

A couple of different ways to understand the word “covenant.”<sup>97</sup> One way is to focus on Moses, Sinai, and the laws associated there, detailing the idea that Israel's safety lie keeping these laws in order to be preserved. The other way to view the covenant has to do with “the cosmic covenant,” or “covenant of reconciliation,” something we read about in Paul's writings. As Barker explains:

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[Religion of the Book of Mormon's Visionary Men](#), 2012 and [The Goodness and the Mysteries: On the Path of the Book of Mormon's Visionary Men](#), 2012.

<sup>96</sup> Barker, [The Mother of the Lord](#), p. 43, emphasis added.

<sup>97</sup> Barker's etymological detail here fits right in the context of the Book of Mormon. She writes, “**What did covenant mean?** There has been much debate over the meaning of the word *berîṭ*, and its derivation: • from *brh* I, meaning eat, and so the reference is to eating a covenant meal. • from *brh* II, meaning see and its derived meaning choose. • from an Akkadian word *birtu* meaning clasp or fetter. • from the Akkadian preposition *birīt* meaning between. • from a hypothetical root [br] meaning separate. Barker, *Mother of the Lord*, p. 208. All of these meanings are right at home in the Book of Mormon, especially in the “New Creation” narrative where Jesus comes to the people in 3 Nephi and separates the wicked from the righteous (3 Ne. 10.12-13), eats with them (twice – 3 Ne. 18 and 3 Ne. 20), he is “between” or “among” them, in a “one by one” setting (3 Ne. 11.15), they see him throughout the narrative, and he emphasizes the importance of the covenant and the promises of land inheritance (3 Ne. 20.14-46). All of this is, of course, in a temple setting, where the “watchmen.. sing... (and) see eye to eye” (3 Ne. 20.32), they arise and put on garments (3 Ne. 20.36-37), know the “name” (3 Ne. 20.39), and are gathered “as sheaves into the floor” (3 Ne. 20.18), which is, of course, the Foundation Stone of the Holy of Holies. See: Maurice Moshe Aranov, *The Biblical Threshing-Floor in the Light of The Ancient Near Eastern Evidence: Evolution of an Institution*, New York University, 1977 dissertation.

More than half the references to covenant in the New Testament occur in Hebrews, where ***the primary context is not Sinai but Abraham, Melchizedek and the day of atonement*** (Heb.7.15–9.22), ***none of which has any place in the D writings***. Paul contrasted the promise given to Abraham and the Law given to Moses (Rom.4, *passim*, and on a different basis, Gal.3.5-8); ***he contrasted the letters carved in stone and the transforming presence of the Spirit*** (2 Cor.3.7-18); and ***he emphasized reconciliation and peace*** (e.g. Eph.2.11-22; Col.1.15-20). At the last supper, Matthew's ***Jesus spoke of a covenant for putting away sins*** (Mt.26.28, translating literally), ***and none of the covenants usually cited in the Hebrew Scriptures deals with putting away sins***. The contexts for the New Testament covenant – ***Abraham, Melchizedek, atonement, the transforming presence of the Spirit, reconciliation and peace, putting away sins – all point to the everlasting covenant*** (also known as the covenant of peace), and the New Testament is full of this language.<sup>98</sup>

So how did Moses and the keeping of 613 laws come to dominate the understanding of covenant? Barker explains:

***The Moses covenant came to dominate the field, along with the Deuteronomists' view of history***. The so called Deuteronomistic history (Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings) had a characteristic vocabulary and style, but also a defining theology: ***a negative view of the temple cult and monarchy***,<sup>99</sup> and the belief that the chosen people were defined as those who had been brought from Egypt and given the Law of Moses. Cultic reform was the constant theme, and Moses and Josiah were the great heroes.<sup>100</sup> Since the D history was usually read as the 'standard' history of Israel, it is hardly surprising the Moses covenant was also seen as the norm.<sup>101</sup>

The apostle Paul saw the covenant as tied to creation. In Romans 8 he wrote:

The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together. For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God. For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope, Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we

<sup>98</sup> Barker, *Mother of the Lord*, p. 208.

<sup>99</sup> Bernard M. Levenson identifies this in "Textual Revision and Cultural Transformation: The Hermeneutics of Legal Innovation in Deuteronomy," in [Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics of Legal Innovation](#), Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 3-22. He demonstrates how the scribes that constructed Deuteronomy during the reforms of Josiah's day reshaped the culture of their time, reframing cultic sacrifice location, the Passover, and legal history.

<sup>100</sup> Martin Noth, [The Deuteronomistic History](#), Sheffield, 1991.

<sup>101</sup> Barker, *Mother of the Lord*, p. 207.

know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now (Romans 8.16-22).

Jonathan Moo notes that Paul saw in Isaiah's writings the notion of a glorious vision. This vision was of the cosmic covenant – a sacred promise that God has given to mankind. This cosmic covenant helped him understand the relationship between creation, humanity, and God. Isaiah 24-27 describes a cosmic judgment in which the Lord punishes the earth for the guilt of its inhabitants and judges heavenly powers and earthly kings, followed by the glorious reign of the Lord on Mount Zion. This vision of cosmic judgment and salvation is developed further in later chapters of Isaiah, but it is in Isaiah 25 and 26 that Paul could find explicit reference to life beyond death, and chapter 24 may have supplied for him the vivid picture of creation's ongoing slavery to the ruin brought upon it by human sin. By drawing on these themes and language from Isaiah, Paul was able to articulate a vision of creation's groaning and liberation that was rooted in the Hebrew prophetic tradition and the ongoing relationship between God, Adamic humanity, and the rest of creation.<sup>102</sup>

### **The Wisdom Tradition was Lost in Josiah's Purges**

The "wisdom tradition" in ancient Israel was a stream of thought and literature that valued insight, understanding, and the pursuit of knowledge as ways to live righteously and discern God's will. It often involved teachings from sages who pondered the complexities of life, morality, and the divine, and is exemplified in books like Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes.

King Josiah's reforms, as discussed in this paper, centralized worship in Jerusalem, reaffirmed the covenant, and emphasized strict adherence to the Law of Moses. These reforms, while unifying and purifying religious practice, shifted focus away from the wisdom tradition's broader and more individual search for divine understanding through observation and reflection on life's experiences. "Nobody knows what happened in the development and demise of wisdom teachings, and that includes those who have formulated theories about the origin of wisdom teaching within an ancient civil service, the intellectual elite of their time, the gentleman scholars of the foreign office whose legacy now is little more than muddled platitudes."<sup>103</sup> Even though we don't have a detailed account of the wisdom tradition, fragments remain. These fragments are also evidenced in the Book of Mormon. Although her subject is not the Book of Mormon, Barker expresses her view of the fragments of the Wisdom Tradition that was lost:

1. First, the setting of the Enochic wisdom visions is the **Holy of Holies**. She explains that Enoch "learned the secrets of creation and the imminent judgement" that was to come upon mankind. Visions of the holy of holies are contained throughout the Book of Mormon, starting in 1 Nephi 1 and extending to other references to the sacred tree, seeing the finger of the Lord, and prophetic statements about seeing Jesus. The entire narrative structure of 3 Nephi, with the conclusion that the people lived in peace for 200

<sup>102</sup> Jonathan Moo, Romans 8.19-22 and Isaiah's Cosmic Covenant, *New Testament studies*, 2008, Vol.54 (1), p.74-89.

<sup>103</sup> Barker, *Mother of the Lord*, p. 176-177.



years can also be seen as a holy of holies *shalom* experience that transcends generations.

2. **The High Priest is central in the Wisdom Tradition.** In this interpretation, the high priest takes on the role of an angelic messenger, embodying the presence of God. He emerges to deliver the divine decrees, a scene that likely provides clarity to the event described in Leviticus 9:23. Here, after Moses and Aaron enter the tent of meeting and subsequently emerge to bless the congregation, the splendor of God becomes visible to everyone present. This sacred act in the temple parallels the narrative in Isaiah, where the 'servant' emerges from the most holy place, carrying forth justice—referred to as *mishpat*—having been endowed with the Spirit through the consecration of anointing oil, as described in Isaiah 42.1.<sup>104</sup> This image is what we see depicted in 3 Nephi, where a resurrected Jesus comes to his temple in glorious splendor as the Great High Priest, visible to all 2,500 present, bringing *mishpat* to the people.
3. **The manifestation of the king to the people as a symbol of God's presence.** Barker writes, "the opening passage in *1 Enoch*, which is a direct reference to the Blessing of Moses when 'the Lord came from Sinai ... with ten thousand holy ones ...' (Deut.33.2). This described the temple ceremony when the Lord became king, and all the leaders of the people were assembled." This is literally the highlight of the Book of Mormon text as it now stands. Yahweh has become king to this group of 2,500 gathered saints at Bountiful, and his kingship among them lasted for 200 years.<sup>105</sup>

By the time of Lehi and his contemporaries, the wisdom tradition was destroyed or lost among those in power in Jerusalem. The passages that spoke of the suffering of Yahweh, his condescension among mortals, life and death, as well as his glorious resurrection, were deliberately removed from the text, lost to history. They remained in the Brass Plates teachings of Zenos, Zenock and Neum, but are absent from our Hebrew Bibles today. The oldest copies of the Hebrew Bible no longer contain their words. What would survive the editorial purges of Josiah's day would have to remain written in code. I believe Isaiah wrote of the Savior in this fashion.

This way, the sacred prophecies of a dying and rising Messiah could be preserved in plain view for later truth seekers to understand as Jesus taught them of their true meaning. I believe almost all of the teachings that were plain and precious were edited during the time of the reforms in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. One day we may know for sure. So in the process of time, many

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 177.

<sup>105</sup> "And it came to pass that there was no contention in the land, because of the love of God which did dwell in the hearts of the people. And there were no envyings, nor strifes, nor tumults, nor whoredoms, nor lyings, nor murders, nor any manner of lasciviousness; and **surely there could not be a happier people among all the people who had been created by the hand of God**... And it came to pass that two hundred years had passed away; and the second generation had all passed away save it were a few... And now, in this two hundred and first year there began to be among them those who were lifted up in a pride, such as the wearing of costly apparel, and all manner of fine pearls, and of the fine things of the world. And from that time forth they did have their goods and their substance no more a common among them." (4 Nephi 1.15-16, 22, 24-25, emphasis added).

aspects of Israel's religious practice that involved visions, prophecies, cultic celebration of creation, kingship and enthronement ceremonies, and other forms of direct divine communication were sidelined in favor of a standardized form of worship and law-keeping that emphasized rules over the wisdom of the heavens. The rich diversity of Israelite religious expression, including the acceptance and veneration of revelatory wisdom as a means of understanding God's will, was narrowed to conform to a singular interpretation of religious law and centralized cultic practice.