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- Title** *Review of Beholding the Tree of Life: A Rabbinic Approach to the Book of Mormon*, by Bradley J. Kramer
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- Reference** *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 26 (2017): 237–44.
- ISSN** 2374-4766 (print), 2374-4774 (online)
- DOI** <https://doi.org/10.18809/jbms.2017.0111>

Bradley J. Kramer. *Beholding the Tree of Life: A Rabbinic Approach to the Book of Mormon*. Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2014.

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Journal of Book of Mormon Studies, vol. 26, 2017, pp. 237–44

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Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18809/jbms.2017.0111> Journal DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18809/mijbms.23744774>

THIS BOOK WAS DIFFICULT TO REVIEW. On the one hand, it provides intriguing insights into the Book of Mormon as well as useful tools for Latter-day Saints to look at this important text in new ways. On the other hand, it often provides those tools through methodological missteps and by glossing over elements of historical reading in both Book of Mormon and Jewish studies. I firmly applaud the impetus behind this book and even some of the individual points, but it is also a book that illustrates how having a heart in the right place is insufficient to make it completely successful in its proposed thesis. According to the preface, the purpose of this book is to approach the Book of Mormon in a way similar to how Jews approach the reading of the Torah (see pp. xiv–xv). *Beholding the Tree of Life* broadly succeeds in presenting some Jewish interpretive tools to a Latter-day Saint audience but falls short in a number of specific aspects.

Part of the difficulty stems from the subtitle of the book and the use of the word *rabbinic*, something that Kramer addresses in his preface. Kramer notes that in his usage, rabbinic Judaism refers to those forms of Judaism that derive from the Sages of the Talmud and Mishnah, thus excluding non-Talmudic Jews such as Karaites, as well as Jewish groups that predate the Mishnah (see p. xvii). Defining rabbinic Judaism is a good thing, since there can be a tendency to just talk about “the Jews” without reference to the very real differences between assorted expressions of Judaism in various times and places. However, Kramer and I differ on our use of *rabbinic*, which therefore explains my expectations for this book. I tend to use *rabbinic* in a somewhat more limited sense than Kramer does—the OED suggests that the word *rabbinic* is “used

most frequently with reference to the rabbis whose teachings constitute the Talmud.”¹ As I understand the term, a rabbinic reading of the Book of Mormon is one that is primarily situated in the reading traditions of the Talmudic Sages and not one that draws heavily on more medieval or modern sources. Thus, Kramer’s use of modern Jewish thinkers presents an LDS perspective on a modern Jewish reading of the Book of Mormon, but it falls short of being a rabbinic one, in that sense.

Part of my concern lies in something of the occasionally fraught relationship between Latter-day Saints and Jews. On the one hand, Latter-day Saints inherited from the rest of Christianity something of the traditional difficult relationship with Judaism, a fact that was exacerbated by Latter-day Saint notions of Jewish apostasy.² On the other hand, because of our perspective as being part of Israel, Latter-day Saints have a great enthusiasm for Jews and Judaism. This can be seen in everything from Passover Seders presented annually at Brigham Young University to references to “Jewish tradition” in the footnotes of the Latter-day Saint edition of the Bible. Like Kramer, I believe that understanding Judaism can help us better understand our own tradition. I also believe that we owe it to ourselves and to our Jewish friends to do it right.

Part of the difficulty in reading this book is that no rabbinic approach to the Book of Mormon is going to be truly rabbinic if it does not emphasize *halakhah*, which is the body of Jewish legal decisions, as well as the various literatures whose purpose is to explore and promulgate those decisions. The rabbinic movement was one that was ideologically centered on the temple and the law, and most of their literature derives from discussions and concerns associated with law.³

1. S.v. “rabbinical,” OED. Accessed online at <http://www.oed.com.erl.lib.byu.edu/view/Entry/156968?redirectedFrom=rabbinic#eid>. Accessed on August 16, 2016.

2. This is well framed in Matthew J. Grey, “Latter-day Saint Perceptions of Jewish Apostasy in the Time of Jesus,” in *Standing Apart: Mormon Historical Consciousness and the Concept of Apostasy*, ed. Miranda Wilcox and John D. Young (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 147–73.

3. Jacob Neusner, “Map without Territory: Mishnah’s System of Sacrifice and Sanctuary,” *History of Religions* 19/2 (November 1979): 103–27; Naftali Cohn, *The Memory*

The ancient Sages are interested in the Bible at least in part because it is a text from which they can derive halakhic principles and concepts. Latter-day Saints are interested in the Bible (and by extension the Book of Mormon) primarily as places for devotional reading and personal application. The tools that the Sages developed for reading the Bible were tools designed to yield what they were most interested in: articulating and establishing halakhah. The ignoring of halakhah means that this book cannot really be rabbinic.

In a certain kind of irony, Kramer's book is more like the ancient Sages than is apparent at first blush. The ancient rabbinic Sages would often "rabbinize" biblical individuals to make them accord more with their understanding and their search for halakhah.⁴ In some ways, Kramer "Mormonizes" his Jewish sources in ways very similar to how the ancient Sages rabbinized their own sources. Examples of this are visible in a number of places. Chapter 4 discusses the importance of reading the scriptures with others, drawing on the rabbinic concept of *havruta* (see pp. 76–78). The trouble is that he suggests Nephi or the other Book of Mormon authors as the *haver* for the reader, which retains the generally solo nature of Latter-day Saint scripture study, somewhat undermining the rabbinic purpose of a *havruta* (see pp. 75–76). This is in addition to the problematic suggestion that a static literary figure, however skilled at walking through scripture as Nephi, serves the same function as a living study buddy.

Some Mormonizing is to be expected in comparing two disparate systems. I am reminded of Jonathan Z. Smith's observation that one does not compare things that are identical, either in poetry or scholarship.⁵ Kramer is aware of this as well, and in the preface he states, "To be perfectly clear, although I very much see the text of the Book of Mormon

of the Temple and the Making of the Rabbis (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

4. Not even God is immune to this process, whom the Sages often describe as doing distinctively rabbinic activities such as studying Torah.

5. Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 244. Smith is following Andrew Lang here.

as responding to and even encouraging the use of many fundamental rabbinic interpretive techniques, I do *not* believe that the Book of Mormon writers knew of or consciously employed these techniques in their writings” (p. xviii, emphasis in the original). I agree with Kramer in his observation that the Book of Mormon authors and the rabbinic Sages were completely unaware of one another. I also agree that looking at the ways in which the Sages understood and read scripture can give valuable insights into ways to read scripture generally. Once again, this is why I approve of the broad project of this book and appreciate some of the specific points but find other individual aspects to be disappointing. Because the Sages and the Book of Mormon authors and editors were, in fact, unaware of one another, sometimes the connections that Kramer highlights seem improbable.

Kramer begins his book by associating Lehi’s dream of the tree of life in 1 Nephi 8 with what he calls a “quotation-centered approach” to the scriptures (p. 4). This approach, which he finds in the New Testament, is essentially looking to the scriptures for individual fruits (that is, scriptures or passages) that can be deployed in various environments.⁶ He then suggests that the Book of Mormon also responds well to this kind of reading but that its creation as a unified literary production suggests it should be read “reflectively, carefully, and holistically” (p. 6). This is essentially the source of the metaphor behind Kramer’s title. Quotation-centered approaches to scripture look at the fruit, while more unified approaches look at the entire tree. It is quite a nice metaphor, one that is suggestive of both the strengths and weaknesses of both approaches. It is here that Kramer brings in a “rabbinic”/Jewish approach to reading the Book of Mormon, comparing Nephi’s experience with Lehi’s vision in 1 Nephi 11–14 with the rabbinic experience of interpreting the scriptures. This, then, provides the central metaphor for this book and the source of its title. While Lehi’s dream is about partaking of the fruit, Nephi’s visionary experience is about beholding the tree in its fullness—that is to say, exploring the Book of Mormon

6. Although this is largely how the ancients read the scriptures, it has fallen out of favor in the modern era.

in all its literary glory.⁷ As noted, Kramer's metaphor is an elegant one, and the call to experience the Book of Mormon as a literary piece is engaging and ultimately fruitful.

Kramer then suggests that rabbinic methods can be useful in reading the Book of Mormon in this fuller way. He lists several propositions that he sees in both Nephi's vision and the methods put forth by the Sages:

- The scriptures require sustained mental effort in order to be understood.
- The scriptures should be read closely and everything about them should be pondered and thoroughly considered.
- The scriptures should be read deeply on several levels and from many perspectives.
- The scriptures should be read with others and in connection with other books.
- Scripture study ultimately is not about information; it is an experience with God. (see pp. 8–20)

I agree strongly with each of these propositions and with Kramer that an approach to scriptures that incorporates these elements would enhance understanding of the Book of Mormon. Again, in my estimation, Kramer's book lays out a suggestive program for reading the Book of Mormon that, however, fails in that it doesn't always correctly represent rabbinic discourse (especially where the halakhah is concerned), and it lacks nuance and specificity in its details.

I get the feeling that this book is the result of a personal journey and experience for Kramer. When Kramer quotes from Jewish writers such as Avigdor Bonchek or Norman Cohen, his respect for the insights they have given him into Latter-day Saint scripture is clear.⁸ The books he

7. Kramer's comparison of the two visionary experiences is an astute one. First Nephi 8:2–38 refers to *fruit* 18 times over the course of 37 verses. First Nephi 11–14 refers to *fruit* one time. Fruit, and the eating of fruit, represents one of the central ideas in Lehi's vision and is simply background in Nephi's version.

8. This is especially apparent in the conclusion to his book, where having cited these authors throughout, he cites them again. Kramer, *Beholding*, 198.

gets this material from are, however, primarily designed as nonscholarly introductions to reading the Torah, directed at a modern Jewish audience. Kramer's dependence on these books⁹ means that this book is largely focused on how Jewish modes of reading, developed in both the Talmudic and the post-Talmudic era but essentially filtered through a modern Jewish sensibility, can aid in an LDS-style devotional reading of the Book of Mormon.

The individual chapters in this book are mostly discrete discussions of various ways in which Kramer sees this kind of reading pointing to the entire "tree of life." Chapter 2, which covers reading the scriptures on multiple levels, presents an excellent example of how Kramer's book provides a useful suggestion for enhanced Book of Mormon reading alongside missteps (see pp. 23–42). I draw it out as a specific example because it is a distinct example that is illustrative of the book as a whole. Kramer introduces what is known in Judaism as the *PaRDeS* method.¹⁰ This represents the four ways in which Jewish interpreters can read a given text—*peshat* (literal), *remez* (allegorical), *derash* (midrashic) and *sod* (mystical). The idea that the scriptures can be read on multiple levels is one that resonates with Latter-day Saint readers.¹¹ Looking at the types of levels that some ancient Jews brought to their authoritative texts can provide Latter-day Saint readers with a useful perspective on their own scriptures. So far, so good.

The specific examples go too far, however. A clear example of this is the discussion of the *remez*, the allegorical reading of scripture. Here Kramer connects this to Jacob 5 and Jacob's presentation of Zenos's allegory of the olive tree (see p. 30). The intent here seems to be to show the productiveness of the *PaRDeS* approach by showing an example of an allegory in the Book of Mormon. The problem with this is that reading

9. Chapter 3 is essentially based on Bonchek's introduction to Torah reading.

10. *Pardes* is a Hebrew word, deriving from the Persian word for "orchard," which was transferred to "pleasure garden," and ultimately to the "blessed abode." The same Persian word is also the source of English *paradise*, which followed a similar trajectory.

11. See, for example, David A. Bednar, "A Reservoir of Living Water," *BYU Speeches*, February 4, 2007. https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/david-a-bednar_reservoir-living-water/.

an allegory allegorically is not *remez* at all. Reading an allegory the way its author intended it to be read is, in fact, the plain meaning of the text, and so is reading the *peshat*, not reading the *remez*. An example of a *remez* reading of the Book of Mormon would be something closer to how Latter-day Saints often read the war chapters of Alma as representing our spiritual warfare. In a *remez* reading, the narrative of the scripture is turned into something that is directly applicable to the reader through the process of generalizing and allegorizing the elements of the narrative. Thus, the Lamanites become the forces of Satan while the fortified cities of the Nephites become places where modern Latter-day Saints have built up their known weaknesses and temptations. All of this shows, as Kramer contends, that the Book of Mormon does yield well to a *remez* reading. However, pointing to actual allegories in the Book of Mormon is not the place to find such a reading. This kind of methodological misstep plagues the entire project.

On the other hand, Kramer's discussion of mystical readings (*sod*), which is probably the most difficult of the *PaRDeS* levels, is quite good, not the least because mystical readings mean something entirely different for Latter-day Saints than for Jews, ancient or modern (see pp. 38–42). According to Doctrine and Covenants 130:22, Latter-day Saints believe that Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ are beings inhabiting physical bodies and physical space, and therefore mystical communion with them entails something a little bit different than a kabbalistic joining with the *Ein Sof*.¹² Kramer connects the Latter-day Saint *sod*

12. For example, although I expect it was a visionary experience, Joseph Smith would not have characterized the first vision as a mystical experience. Latter-day Saint seeking of visions lacks the extreme piety and denial that often characterizes the mystic in other religious traditions. See the discussion in Louis Midgley, "Editor's Introduction: Knowing Brother Joseph Again," *Mormon Studies Review* 18/1 (2006): xi–lxxiv, especially xxvi–xxix. In many ways the classic articulation of this distinction is Hugh W. Nibley, "Prophets and Mystics," in *The World and the Prophets* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1987), 98–107. This article was first published 1954 and then revised in 1962. The division between prophet and mystic are not always as sharp as Nibley suggests, but the typology of traditional mysticism is useful and revealing. See also William J. Hamblin, "'Everything Is Everything': Was Joseph Smith Influenced by the Kabbalah?" *FARMS Review of Books* 8/2 (1996): 251–325.

reading as one rooted in the searching out of the “mysteries” and the searching for spiritual experiences through the scriptures (p. 42). Since Latter-day Saints do not have a mystical tradition in the usual sense of the word, connecting what we call spiritual experiences with the Jewish mystical tradition can provide useful space for thinking about our experiences with the divine world. Essentially, Kramer is able to provide a useful synthesis because the original concept was not meaningful in a Latter-day Saint context.

The above example provides one instance of how this book succeeds in some of its goals but could have accomplished much more. I wish to reiterate that I think this can be a useful book that has potential to enhance readers’ appreciation and understanding of the Book of Mormon. There is much good in this book. A reader thoughtfully working through it will find many things to spark deeper or more meaningful study of the Book of Mormon. Yet, in spite of its use of Jewish sources, the uses to which those sources are turned and deployed remain largely Latter-day Saint. Occasionally this process transforms the original Jewish practice, such as studying in pairs or *havruta*, into something familiarly Mormon. Other times the Mormonizing produces a useful synthesis, as in Kramer’s discussion of a *sod* reading in the Book of Mormon. The turning of Jewish methods to Mormon ends is not necessarily a bad thing, as this is a book targeted to Latter-day Saint audiences. It simply means that in the end this is not a really a “rabbinic reading of the Book of Mormon” but instead a Mormon reading of the Book of Mormon that draws inspiration from Jewish writings.

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