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JACOB — THE PROPHET OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

Stephen O. Smoot

Review of Deidre Nicole Green, *Jacob: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo, UT: The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2020). 148 pages. \$9.99 (paperback).

Abstract: *Deidre Nicole Green, a postdoctoral research fellow at the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, offers an analysis of the theology of the book of Jacob with her new contribution to the Institute's brief theological introduction series to the Book of Mormon. Green focuses on the theology of social justice in Jacob's teachings, centering much of her book on how the Nephite prophet framed issues of atonement and salvation on both personal and societal levels. Her volume offers some intriguing new readings of otherwise familiar Book of Mormon passages.*

Deidre Nicole Green is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship and is the author of the institute's volume on the book of Jacob in its series of brief theological introductions to the Book of Mormon.¹ Green brings with her a PhD in Religion from Claremont Graduate University, a Master of Arts in Religion from Yale Divinity School, and a Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy from Brigham Young University. Besides these impressive credentials, as a specialist on the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard — one of the

1. Deidre Nicole Green, *Jacob: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo, UT: The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2020). Citations of this volume will be in the body of this review. As of this writing, the Maxwell Institute has published five out of its twelve planned volumes in the series. See <https://mi.byu.edu/publications/>.

most influential and important Christian philosophers of the modern age — Green is well equipped to provide theological analysis.²

Although it is a relatively short book in the Book of Mormon, the book of Jacob is nevertheless theologically dense. Not only does it feature Jacob's important temple sermon (Jacob 2–3) but also Zenos's allegory of the olive tree (Jacob 5) and the confrontation with Sherem (Jacob 7). The prophet providing us this content was the “firstborn in the days of [Lehi's] tribulation in the wilderness” (2 Nephi 2:1). As Green observes in her introductory remarks, this makes Jacob a “unique voice in the Book of Mormon” who offers a “rare and distinct perspective” on account of his vulnerable upbringing. “Jacob concerns himself largely with issues of social justice,” she writes, “demonstrating that religious life and social life should not be separated into distinct spheres. Jacob's personal experience of suffering, his compassion for those on the margins of society, his concern for equality, and his commitment to forming a faithful and just community inform his testimony of Jesus Christ in a way that highlights many of the salient issues of the twenty-first century” (2).

After her introduction (2–5), Green structures her theological analysis of the book of Jacob as follows: a brief biography of Jacob (8–15), a look at Jacob's theodicy and theology of holy suffering (18–28), Jacob's teachings on building a sacred society (30–57), the temple sermon (60–93), the allegory of the olive tree (96–107), and final thoughts and conclusion (110–121). The theological stream Green identifies running through the book of Jacob is summarized in her conclusion: “[Jacob] invites all people to view the death of Christ and, I believe, to view every aspect of reality through the lens of reconciliation that it affords. In this way, we are reminded of God's infinite and ever available love. ... This love shows us the way through to flourishing and fruitfulness, reminding us that all objectives worth seeking ultimately rely upon faithful communities who strive to reach back in love toward the divine for their attainment” (120). As would befit a social justice prophet like Jacob, Green emphasizes that the “communal and faithful” love of God “requires us to see all human beings as equals, a vision that is facilitated by viewing one another through the lens of the death of Christ: we are all equally in need of reconciliation to God and all equally loved by both God and Christ, a truth attested by Christ's willingness to suffer and make the atonement equally available to all” (120).

2. Green's biography and examples of her work can be found at “Deidre Nicole Green,” Scholars, Maxwell Institute, <https://mi.byu.edu/scholars/deidre-nicole-green/>.

There was much that I appreciated about Green's analysis of the book of Jacob. I was particularly interested in her reading of the allegory of the olive tree as more than just pertaining to the scattering and gathering of Israel. While this is certainly the primary intent of the allegory, Jacob 5 can also, as Green shows, be fruitfully read as touching on the atonement of Jesus Christ and the reconciliation of humanity with God. "Jacob senses deeply his responsibility to teach that the atonement is universally accessible, necessary, and efficacious and that it not only restores individuals and societies torn apart by trauma and sin to wholeness but also seals relationships with the divine and with others" (99–100). Green's Christological and soteriological reading of Zenos's allegory was a new, invigorating way of approaching the text I had never before considered and found most welcome. Indeed, although it should have been more obvious, it had never before occurred to me that the eschatological restoration of Israel and the infinite atonement of Israel's Messiah are two theological matters that are deeply intertwined. As such, reading them together simultaneously in Jacob 5 strikes me as entirely appropriate. As Green writes,

This allegory is most often understood in terms of the scattering and gathering of Israel as an integral part of divine covenant. It can also be read in more expansive terms, with the restored vineyard representing the integration, reconciliation, and wholeness possible only through the atonement of Jesus Christ for both individuals and societies who have been fragmented and disintegrated through traumatic experience or sin. This reading amplifies the breadth and profundity of God's love for humanity. (100)

True to the theme of the book, Green couches this soteriology in the context of social justice. "Just as Jacob has shown us that all suffering and sin are inherently social, so too is the work of redemption. In Jacob 5 we read an elaboration of how it is that communities are healed and reconciled, and we avail ourselves of a greater appreciation and understanding concerning the fact that atonement operates on every level of existence, reconciling individuals to themselves, to God, and with their communities" (100–101). While I found her analysis insightful overall, I was disappointed that Green does not appear to draw from or otherwise alert her readers to the significant 1994 volume *The Allegory*

of the Olive Tree: *The Olive, the Bible, and Jacob* 5.³ Not only is this landmark publication on Jacob 5 essential reading on Zenos's allegory, but it also extends theological insights into this chapter that would have nicely complimented Green's own reading.⁴

I was likewise underwhelmed somewhat by Green's reading of the temple sermon in Jacob 2–3. Green correctly identifies the three cardinal sins in Nephite society of his time that Jacob singles out and condemns (namely: classism, sexual immorality, and racial prejudice) and articulates some important theological points that can be drawn from the temple sermon in addressing these systemic problems that sadly still haunt us today (60–93). However, Green's examination and the points she draws out from Jacob's sermon, while helpful, could have been strengthened with some historicized perspective such as is offered by Brant A. Gardner. As Gardner explores at length, Jacob's conceptual linkage (and subsequent condemnation) of seeking riches and unauthorized polygamy becomes more intelligible when his sermon is placed in an ancient Mesoamerican and biblical background.⁵ Gardner's historicized reading, I feel, offers a more grounded context for making sense of a number of the features in Jacob's condemnation of unauthorized, exploitative polygamy. This includes why Jacob singled out David and Solomon (Jacob 2:24) as unrighteous polygamists worthy of condemnation but not Abraham and his own ancestral namesake (cf. Genesis 16:1–3; 29:21–30; 30:1–4, 9), and also why Jacob allows for plural marriages to be contracted under specific circumstances

3. Stephen D. Ricks, *The Allegory of the Olive Tree: The Olive, the Bible, and Jacob* 5, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1994). Green does not appear to cite this volume in her reading of Jacob 5 and does not list it in her recommendations for further reading (122–23).

4. I'm thinking in particular of the offerings in Truman G. Madsen, "The Olive Press: A Symbol of Christ," in *The Allegory of the Olive Tree*, 1–10, and Paul Y. Hoskisson, "The Allegory of the Olive Tree in Jacob," in *The Allegory of the Olive Tree*, 70–103, both of which give readings of Jacob 5 that are consonant with Green's.

5. Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 2:483–99; Gardner, *Traditions of the Fathers: The Book of Mormon as History* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2015), 197–204. For accessible summary treatments of Gardner's points, see "What Does the Book of Mormon Say About Polygamy?" KnoWhys, Book of Mormon Central, March 28, 2016, <https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/knowhy/what-does-the-book-of-mormon-say-about-polygamy>; "Why Does the Book of Mormon Warn Against Seeking after Riches?" KnoWhys, Book of Mormon Central, May 30, 2019, <https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/knowhy/why-does-the-book-of-mormon-warn-against-seeking-after-riches>.

(Jacob 2:30).⁶ The issue for Jacob is not that plural marriage is *inherently* sinful or exploitative, only that it *can be* if improperly practiced.

Green is right that the problem was that the form of polygamy being practiced by the Nephites in Jacob's day was turning women into sexual commodities that robbed them of their agency (80–85). But she could have taken her reading further by exploring, as Gardner does, how the specific historical and social circumstances of the early Nephite colony in the New World affected the content of Jacob's temple sermon.⁷ As a text deriving from the ancient world (both the ancient biblical world and ancient America), at least *some* effort should be made on the part of the exegete to situate the Book of Mormon's theological teachings in their ancient context before bringing other potentially useful modern interpretive paradigms into the discussion. This is not to say that Green's reading of Jacob 2:23–35 is necessarily wrong, only that I felt it could have been stronger.

Other interesting insights Green provides in her study include her view of Sherem as a sort of ironic, unintended witness for Christ (49–57). "Jacob's treatment of Sherem is unique in the Book of Mormon because, rather than silencing him, Jacob gives Sherem the opportunity to repent and to influence the Nephites for good by testifying of Christ and the atonement. It is Jacob's humility and love for his neighbor that makes it possible for Sherem to be an instrument of God" (49). As with her treatment of Jacob 5, this is a noteworthy way to look at Jacob 7 I had not heretofore considered. Sure enough, the ironic outcome at Jacob 7:17–21 would seem to reinforce Green's intriguing reading of the showdown

6. Latter-day Saints since at least the mid-nineteenth century have read Jacob 2:30 as an exemption to what is otherwise Jacob's unflinching condemnation of polygamy. The comments by Orson Pratt, "Polygamy," *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1859), 6:350–51, serve as one illustrative example of how historically Latter-day Saints have (justifiably) read this verse.

7. Green's observation that "every instance of polygamy in the Book of Mormon serves as a negative example" (82), while true, would likewise have benefitted from some historical context. See for instance Taylor Halverson, "Deuteronomy 17:14–20 as Criteria for Book of Mormon Kingship," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 24 (2017): 1–10, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/deuteronomy-1714-20-as-criteria-for-book-of-mormon-kingship/>. Green also overlooks the likelihood that the righteous Amulek was a polygamist. See "Why is Amulek's Household Significant?" KnoWhys, Book of Mormon Central, June 8, 2016, <https://knowwhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/knowwhy/why-is-amuleks-household-significant>.

between Jacob and Sherem that doesn't strike me as being too clever for its own good (as some other recent treatments of Jacob 7 have been⁸).

Whatever diverging views I may have with Green on this or that point throughout her volume,⁹ I ultimately appreciate her sensitivity to the Book of Mormon's emphasis on equality, which Green underscores as "a fundamental ethos" of the record. "Calling out pride, greed, and violations of the law of chastity, Jacob's unrelenting critique of Nephite society also decries attitudes and practices that oppress based on differences in wealth, skin color, and gender" (32). In Green's recasting, Jacob is the prophet of social justice *par excellence* who, mindful of his own vulnerable and marginalized origins as Lehi's "firstborn in the wilderness" who "suffered afflictions and much sorrow" (2 Nephi 2:2–3), boldly proclaims that love and equity towards all men and women is "required of followers of Christ" (32, emphasis in original). As with his brother Nephi who declared that "all are alike unto God" (2 Nephi 26:33), Jacob joins the chorus of ancient and modern prophets who stress that being truly reconciled through Christ can only come when the children of

8. I am thinking of, for instance, Jana Riess, "'There Came a Man': Sherem, Scapegoating, and the Inversion of Prophetic Tradition," in *Christ and Antichrist: Reading Jacob 7*, ed. Adam S. Miller and Joseph M. Spencer (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2018), 1–17, which, upon recent rereading, struck me as an undeniably sophisticated reading of the text that is more fanciful than actually insightful. For additional engagement with Riess's effort, see Kevin Christensen, "Light and Perspective: Essays from the Mormon Theology Seminar on 1 Nephi 1 and Jacob 7," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 31 (2019): 25–70, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/light-and-perspective-essays-from-the-mormon-theology-seminar-on-1-nephi-1-and-jacob-7/>; Duane Boyce, "Text as Afterthought: Jana Riess's Treatment of the Jacob-Sherem Episode," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 33 (2019): 123–40, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/text-as-afterthought-jana-riesss-treatment-of-the-jacob-sherem-episode/>.

9. If I had one main critique of Green's book, it would be her apparent reluctance to acknowledge or reference valuable work on the book of Jacob that has preceded her. To cite another example, as with her failure to acknowledge or otherwise engage the important FARMS volume *The Allegory of the Olive Tree* when discussing Jacob 5, I was also disappointed that Green did not offer even a brief comment or note on John W. Welch's important legal analysis of the confrontation between Sherem and Jacob in Jacob 7. John W. Welch, "The Case of Sherem," in *The Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press and the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2008), 107–38. Welch's reading of Jacob 7 through the lens of ancient law is not mere academic navel-gazing. His legal analysis offers some important theological insights into the text, including a point discussed by Green: the significance of Sherem's confession.

God work together “to build bridges of understanding rather than create walls of segregation.”¹⁰ Green’s brief theological introduction to Jacob’s teachings helpfully explores ways that readers of the Book of Mormon can appreciate and work toward this prophetically-mandated ideal.

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10. Russell M. Nelson, “President Nelson Shares Social Post about Racism and Calls for Respect for Human Dignity,” Church Newsroom, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, June 1, 2020, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/president-nelson-shares-social-post-encouraging-understanding-and-civility>.

