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The Personification of Death and Hell

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Source: *Testaments: Links between the Book of Mormon and the Hebrew Bible*

Published: Toelle, UT; Heritage Press, 2003

Page(s): 79–97

Chapter 14

THE PERSONIFICATION OF DEATH AND HELL

Like sheep they are laid in the grave; Death shall feed on them; and the upright shall have dominion over them in the morning; and their beauty shall consume in the Grave from their dwelling. But God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave: for he shall receive me. (Psalm 49:14–15)

In one of the most powerful discourses recorded in the Book of Mormon, Jacob presents a well-constructed treatise on the atonement of Jesus Christ. In the midst of his sermon, the Nephite prophet declared, “O how great the goodness of our God, who prepareth a way for our escape from the grasp of this awful monster; yea, that monster, *Death and Hell*” (2 Nephi 9:10). With this statement, Jacob participated in an ancient tradition of personifying Death and Hell as the adversaries of deity.

The word personify means “to think of or represent an inanimate object or abstraction as having personality or the qualities, thoughts, or movements of a living being.”¹ This convention represents a standard ploy in the literature of antiquity. Statements such as “weep for you, father do the rocks of Baal,” and “the grey hairs of your beard instruct you” abound in Near Eastern writings.² A classic example of this technique appears in

¹ As defined in *The American Heritage Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. “personify.”

² See Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), 270.

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Joseph Smith's inspired revision of Genesis where Enoch converses with Earth, the mother of men: "Enoch looked upon the earth; and he heard a voice from the bowels thereof, saying: Wo, wo is me, the *mother of men*; I am pained, I am weary, because of the wickedness of my children. When shall I rest, and be cleansed from the filthiness which is gone forth out of me? When will my Creator sanctify me, that I may rest, and righteousness for a season abide upon my face?" (Moses 7:48–49).

Most ancient societies viewed the earth as a "mother-goddess" and the sky as her husband.³ As such, many people of the ancient Near East thought of the earth as the mother of mankind. This same notion appears in some biblical passages.⁴ The earthly tomb, for example, is sometimes compared to the mother's womb.⁵ Admittedly, it is difficult to determine whether personification in ancient literature represents an actual animistic belief or simply poetic imagery.⁶ Nonetheless, the personification of inanimate objects such as sleep, heaven, hell, and death was a widespread phenomenon in the ancient Near East. Jacob's reference to the monster Death and Hell in the Book of Mormon relates to this general tradition.

³ John A. Tvedtnes, "Mother Earth and Father Sky in LDS Scriptures and Ancient Near Eastern Belief." (unpublished).

⁴ For a partial discussion of this subject, see John A. Tvedtnes, "Burial as a Return to the Womb in Ancient Near Eastern Belief," *Newsletter and Proceedings of the Society for Early Historic Archaeology* 152 (March 1983).

⁵ See, for example, Job 1:21; 10:19; 24:20; Ecclesiastes 5:15; Proverbs 30:16.

⁶ Watson has made the following observation: "In the case of Hebrew poetry, it was largely a matter of demythologizing ancient Canaanite borrowings. Not every reference of this kind was expunged to mention Sheol is enough proof." Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to its Techniques* (Trowbridge: JSOT, Press, 1984), 270.

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Assuming an original Hebraic background to the Book of Mormon, the word *hell* that appears in Jacob's discourse would represent the Hebrew word *Sheol*. If this assumption is correct, then the Book of Mormon would reflect the King James Version of the Bible, which usually renders *Sheol* as "hell."⁷ Yet the English word *hell* possesses a much different connotation than the word *Sheol* conveys in Hebrew. In the Old Testament, Sheol is not the place where Satan resides but rather the shadowy realm of the underworld, where the departed spirits dwell in a state of sorrow and grief.⁸

Sheol also appears in the poetic sections of the Bible as a demonic force with humanlike features.⁹ "Thought to be similar to representations of underworld deities elsewhere, these biblical portrayals have been felt to reflect not only the underworld itself but also the personified chthonic power behind death, a demon or deity Sheol."¹⁰ The personification of Sheol functioned as a popular literary convention throughout the ancient Near East.

Like Sheol, Death also functions in ancient literature as a possessor of humanlike qualities. He often appears as the adversary of deity. For example, in the mythology of ancient Canaan, Mot (Death) serves as the enemy of Baal, the great Canaanite deity. Mot's absence from the sphere of cultic activities and personal names seems to suggest that the "monster" Death was never

⁷ For specific examples see the comparative passages provided on the subsequent page.

⁸ Even in LDS theology, the spirit world is described as a place of bondage, where the dead wait longingly for a renewal of their bodies; see for example D&C 138:50.

⁹ See, for example, Proverbs 1:12; 27:20; 30:16.

¹⁰ H. M. Barstad, "Sheol," in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. vander Horst (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 768.

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considered an actual member of the Canaanite pantheon.¹¹ Instead, Mot appears in the tablets of Ugarit as Baal's demonlike adversary. In these recently discovered tablets, Mot eventually vanquishes Baal in a remarkable struggle for cosmic supremacy.¹² The tale reports that Mot's victory led to Baal's descent into the underworld. "Baal will enter into [Mot's] innards," reports the account, "into his mouth he will descend like a dried olive."¹³ There Baal remained in the jaws of his demonic adversary until he was eventually rescued by Anat, the female goddess who prepared a way for Baal to escape "from the grasp of this awful monster."

This classic example of Near Eastern theomachy demonstrates the general precedent for personifying Death as the adversary of deity.¹⁴ In several of the tablets from Ugarit, Mot appears as a demonic force that possesses both an enormous mouth and a voracious appetite. It is dangerous to approach Death, lest he "take you like a lamb in his mouth, like a kid crushed in the

¹¹ J.F. Healey, "Mot," in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, 598. Though in Ugaritic, the divine determinative appears before the personal name Mot, this need not suggest that he was considered a part of the divine pantheon.

¹² Ugaritic refers to the language of the city of Ugarit (modern Ras Shamra). Over a thousand cuneiform tablets from the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries B.C. have now been published in this ancient Semitic language. The greater portion of the archives of Ugarit was discovered during excavations from 1948 through 1955. See Marguerite Yon, "Ugarit," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, trans. Stephen Rosoff, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:695–706.

¹³ Fifth tablet column 2 lines 3–6 as translated in Simon B. Parker, ed., *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 143. Some early Christian literature, such as the Gospel of Nicodemus, have Hell (Greek *Hades*) conversing with Satan during Christ's arrival in the spiritworld to free the dead.

¹⁴ The word *theomachy* refers to a myth of divine combat.

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chasm of his throat.”¹⁵ Thus, Jacob’s personification of Death and Hell, together with his reference to Christ’s *victory* over the grave, fits perfectly in the context of Near Eastern tradition. Jacob specifically testified that through his atoning sacrifice, the Savior prepared “a way for our escape from the grasp of this awful monster.”

This is not to suggest the highly improbable notion that certain segments of Nephite society were at all familiar with the Baal Cycle. Certainly this was not the case. However, the cosmological motifs that appear in both Nephite scripture and Canaanite mythology ultimately transcend the boundaries of these traditions. They represent archaic themes that perhaps derive from a much earlier awareness of the atonement of Jesus Christ.

Joseph F. Smith once explained, “if the heathen have doctrines and ceremonies resembling to some extent those which are recorded in the scriptures, it only proves, what is plain to the Saints, that these are the traditions of the fathers handed down from generation to generation, from Adam, through Noah.”¹⁶ Thus, Jesus, like the goddess Anat in Canaanite lore, prepared an escape route from the binding clutches of the monster Death. Significantly, these same motifs, including the personification of Death and Hell, also appear in the Old Testament:

I will ransom them [Ephraim] from the power of the grave [Sheol]; I will redeem them from *Death*: O *Death*, I will be thy plagues; O grave [*Sheol*], I will be thy destruction. (Hosea 13:14)

¹⁵ Fourth tablet column 8 lines 17–20 in Parker, ed., *Ugaritic Narrative*, 139.

¹⁶ Joseph F. Smith, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854-86) 15:325–327.

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He . . . enlargeth his desire as hell [Sheol], and is as *Death*, and cannot be satisfied, but gathereth unto him all nations, and heapeth unto him all people. (Habakkuk 2:5)

Therefore hell [Sheol] hath enlarged herself, and opened her mouth without measure: and their glory, and their multitude, and their pomp, and he that rejoiceth, shall descend into it. (Isaiah 5:14)

For *Death* is come up into our windows, and is entered into our palaces, to cut off the children from without, and the young men from the streets. (Jeremiah 9:21)¹⁷

[Disease] shall devour the strength of his skin: even the firstborn of *Death* shall devour his strength. (Job 18:13)

He [Jehovah] will swallow up *Death* in victory; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from off all faces. (Isaiah 25:8)

In this final example of the personification of *death* in the Old Testament, Isaiah testifies that Jehovah will eventually overcome Mot in a battle that will include the *swallowing* up of his foe. This concept proves meaningful since in Canaanite mythology, Death himself was typically depicted as the “swallower.” “One lip to Hell, one lip to Heaven ... a tongue to the Stars,” Mot

¹⁷ A parallel seems to exist between this passage concerning Death and those Akkadian texts that refer to the Mesopotamian demon Lamastu; see Shalom M. Paul, “Cuneiform Light on Jer 9, 20,” *Biblica* 49/3 (1968): 373–376. In the Ugaritic Baal epic, Mot (Death) is said to climb through the windows to steal away Baal’s wives.

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possesses a limitless appetite.¹⁸ In this passage Isaiah, therefore, employs a degree of satire by suggesting that Jehovah will eventually “swallow the swallower.”¹⁹ This exact concept, together with the personification of Death and Hell, also appears in the Book of Mormon:

And if Christ had not risen from the dead, or have broken the bands of Death that the grave [Sheol] should have no victory, and that Death should have no sting, there could have been no resurrection. But there is a resurrection, therefore the grave [*Sheol*] hath no victory, and the sting of Death is *swallowed up* in Christ.” (Mosiah 16:7-8)

In this Book of Mormon passage, Abinadi not only personified Death and Hell in a manner consistent with Near Eastern tradition, but he also drew up a motif that specifically occurs in the book of Isaiah and Canaanite mythology, namely the act of swallowing. In addition, by suggesting that Christ “broke the bands of Death,” Abinadi described the Savior’s accomplishment with a statement that coincides with the ancient theme of divine combat.²⁰ “And thus God breaketh the bands of Death,” declared Abinadi on this same occasion, “having gained the victory over death” (Mosiah 15:8). Abinadi also taught that “the bands of death shall be broken, and the Son reigneth, and hath power over dead” (Mosiah 15:20). In this example of divine combat, Jehovah will prove the victor. He will wear the crown of cosmic

¹⁸ Fifth tablet column 2 lines 2-3 in Parker ed., *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, 143.

¹⁹ J.F. Healey, “Mot,” 601.

²⁰ The Book of Mormon refers to Christ “breaking the bands of death” in Mosiah 15:8–9, 20, 23; 16:7; Alma 4:14; 5:7, 9–10; 7:12; 11:41; 22:14.

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supremacy and therefore gain control over the dominion of Mot.

Abinadi's testimony that Christ will gain power over Death proves extremely significant in light of Near Eastern mythology, some of which appears in the Old Testament. In some biblical passages Sheol is defined as a location outside Jehovah's sphere of influence. "For in *Death* there is no remembrance of thee" laments one biblical author, "in the grave [Sheol] who shall give thee thanks" (Psalm 6:5). Yet Abinadi testifies like the author of Psalm 18: "the sorrows of hell [*Sheol*] compassed me about: the snares of Death prevented me. In my distress I called upon the Lord, and cried unto my God: he heard my voice out of his temple, and my cry came before him, even into his ears" (Psalm 18:5–6).²¹ The word translated as both "sorrow" and "snares" in this passage is the Hebrew word *hevel*. Additional translations for the word *hevel* include "cord" or "band."²² For example, the King James translators render the plural form of the word *hevel* as "bands" meaning cords in Psalm 119.²³ Thus Psalm 18:6 could read "the bands of Death prevented me." From this observation it seems that *hevel* is the word that

²¹ Kraus suggests that "these are metaphors derived from the widespread concept in the ancient Near East of chaotic, primeval waters, which swallow up all life in the primeval destruction of the *tohu wabohu* (formlessness and void) that existed before creation (Genesis 1:2). This is one of the many metaphorical perspectives which speak of the power of death and the other forces that are hostile to life." Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 165.

²² See Francis Brown et al., *The Brown, Driver, Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1996), 286.

²³ In this passage, *hevel* refers to the bands meaning cords rather than bands meaning companies as is seen in verse 110 where the word *pah* "snare" appears. The two words occur together in a similar context in Psalm 140:5.

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originally occurred in those Book of Mormon passages that refer to the “bands of Death.” While this phrase does not appear in the King James Version of the Bible, it does appear in the original Hebrew, a fact that would have been unknown to the prophet Joseph at this time.²⁴

The personification of Death and Hell, together with motifs such as bands of death, preparing an escape route, and swallowing up one’s adversary, demonstrate an authentic core to the Book of Mormon’s claim for ties with the ancient Near East. Until quite recently, biblical scholars were unaware of these cosmological elements in the Old Testament. Yet Book of Mormon authors drew upon these archaic themes with poetic ease when presenting their testimonies that Christ was victorious over the grave.

²⁴ See also 2 Samuel 22:6; Psalm 116:3. However, the statement, “there are no bands *in their* death” does appear in Psalm 73:4 (KJV).