



Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship

Volume 28 | Number 6

Article 3

January 2008

Update: The “Familiar Spirit” in 2 Nephi 26:12

Paul Y. Hoskisson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/insights>



Part of the [Mormon Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hoskisson, Paul Y. (2008) "Update: The “Familiar Spirit” in 2 Nephi 26:12," *Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship*: Vol. 28: No. 6, Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/insights/vol28/iss6/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Update: The “Familiar Spirit” in 2 Nephi 26:12

There are two ways to read a text, through exegesis and through eisegesis. The first means, approximately, “reading out of the text,” while the second means, approximately, “reading into the text.” Both are legitimate ways of approaching a text. Anyone who reads the scriptures will at times engage in both exegesis and eisegesis, whether knowingly or unwittingly. Therefore, the more conscientiously and consciously we engage in rigorous and careful exegesis and eisegesis, the better the chance that our reading of the scriptures will truly enlighten the mind and provide substance for the soul. I will illustrate both approaches using the term *familiar spirit* found in 2 Nephi 26:12, Isaiah 29:4, and 1 Samuel 28.

First, an example of the eisegetical approach.

The word *familiar* has various meanings in English and only the context can help decide which meaning is the intended one. Thus, one way to understand 2 Nephi 26:12 might come when the common understanding of *familiar* is applied. That is, *familiar* can suggest “to be acquainted with,” or as the Oxford English Dictionary reads, “known from constant association.” This is the meaning that some Church members have given to *familiar* in this verse. It is certainly true that the Book of Mormon will have a spirit about it that will be familiar to those who know the Bible; they will recognize the same spirit in both books. This connotation of *familiar* is certainly appropriate to describe the effect the Book of Mormon has on all those who are honest in heart.

Now, an example of an exegetical approach.

Familiar also has another meaning that is at play in Isaiah 29:4 and 2 Nephi 26:12, and because of this other sense a different understanding of these verses becomes possible. The Hebrew behind the “familiar spirit” in Isaiah 29:4 (King James Version) is *ʾob*.¹ This Hebrew word denotes, approximately, “the spirit of a deceased person.” This sense is most apparent in 1 Samuel 28 when Saul first asks about and then visits a medium, the infamous “Witch of En-Dor.” But she is never called a witch in the King James Bible; rather, she is simply called “a woman

that hath a familiar spirit” (1 Samuel 28:7), or more literally from the Hebrew, “a female master of familiar spirit.”² Because the biblical context of those who deal with “familiar spirits” is usually that of a séance, which is uniformly condemned in the Old Testament, people have assumed that the “familiar spirit” is evil or demonic, when actually, it is the medium who brings up the “familiar spirit” who is condemned, and not the “familiar spirit” per se.

That the “familiar spirit” is not always evil is apparent in 1 Samuel 28 where the spirit called up from the dead is the prophet Samuel (real or imagined). If Saul had thought that all “familiar spirits” were evil, he would not have ventured to have Samuel called up.

Therefore, when the Bible says in Isaiah 29:4 that the inhabitants of Jerusalem who will be destroyed will speak “out of the ground . . . as one that hath a familiar spirit,” the meaning is that destroyed Judah will speak from the dead, that is, from the records they left behind, the Old Testament, and without the aid of a medium. This has nothing to do with necromancy and divination, but everything to do with the dead speaking to the living through the records the dead leave behind. This is made even clearer in 2 Nephi 26:12 where Isaiah is paraphrased and applied to the Nephites who will, like the inhabitants of Jerusalem, be destroyed. They also shall speak “out of the ground . . . as one that hath a familiar spirit; for the Lord God will give unto him [Joseph Smith], that he [the translator of the Nephite records] may whisper concerning [the destroyed Nephites], even as it were out of the ground” where they are buried, and where the plates had been buried.

As can be seen, the reader has the choice of interpreting 2 Nephi 26:12 eisegetically, reading into these passages the meaning “a spirit which seems familiar,” or exegetically, reading out of these passages “a message from those who have passed on before us.” Both ways of approaching 2 Nephi 26:12 are correct and legitimate methods that can lead to enlightenment and understanding. ♦

by Paul Y. Hoskisson

Director, Willes Center and FARMS

Notes

1. Hebrew: אוב.
2. Hebrew: אשת בעלה אוב.