



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

Volume 25 | Number 6

Article 3

January 2005

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Recommended Citation

Volluz, Corbin T. (2005) "“O Death, Where Is Thy Sting?”," *Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship*: Vol. 25: No. 6, Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/insights/vol25/iss6/3>

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“O Death, Where Is Thy Sting?”

The Book of Mormon has come under frequent fire from its critics for allegedly quoting portions of the New Testament before the New Testament was written. A classic example of this is the famous phrase from 1 Corinthians 15:55, “O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?” Clear allusions to this passage are made by three Book of Mormon prophets: Abinadi (Mosiah 16:8), Aaron (Alma 22:14), and Mormon (Mormon 7:5).

Book of Mormon apologists have theorized the existence of a common source for this quotation that predates both Paul and the Book of Mormon prophets. Support for this theory is found in the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, an apocryphal work that “scholars agree in assigning . . . to the middle of the fourth century,”¹ though it was “considered supplementary rather than false” by early Christians.² The *Gospel of Nicodemus* (originally known as the *Acts of Pilate*) deals primarily with the events of the Savior’s passion, as well as with his descent to hell to set free the captive spirits.

According to this account, as Christ makes his glorious descent, imprisoned prophets cry out in joy and cite their prophecies made in mortality as evidence of Christ’s triumph over death and hell. These prophets include Adam, Isaiah,

and David from the Old Testament and John the Baptist and Simeon from the New Testament.³ Of especial interest is a statement attributed to Isaiah (who is quoted more than once in the *Gospel of Nicodemus*):

After this another prophet, namely, holy Isaiah, spake in like manner to all the saints, did not I rightly prophesy to you when I was alive on earth? The dead men shall live, and they shall rise again who are in their graves, and they shall rejoice who are in earth; for the dew which is from the Lord shall bring deliverance to them [compare Isaiah 26:19]. **And I said in another place, O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?** When all the saints heard these things spoken by **Isaiah . . .**⁴

From this, it appears that the author of the *Gospel of Nicodemus* may have had access to a version of Isaiah that contained the quotation “O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?” This passage is not found in the King James Version of Isaiah, though the passage quoted in *Nicodemus* immediately before that is found in Isaiah 26:19.

Thus it seems possible that Paul’s exclamation “O death,

where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?” is not his original composition but rather a quotation from a lost passage from Isaiah. This conclusion is strengthened by the fact that Paul’s passage in 1 Corinthians 15:55 immediately follows a quotation from Isaiah 25:8, “Death is swallowed up in victory.” Here is the relevant portion from 1 Corinthians 15:54–56:

So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory [compare Isaiah 25:8]. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law.

Taken in context, then, it appears that Paul’s quotation from Isaiah 25:8 (“Death is swallowed up in victory”) may not end there, but may continue with the missing passage from Isaiah that is preserved in 1 Corinthians 15:55 (“O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?”). Paul’s commentary on the quoted Isaiah passage may not begin until verse 56 (“The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law”).

If this is the case, and there are questions that can be raised,

it may pinpoint the location of the missing passage from Isaiah as having been in Isaiah 25:8 after the words “He will swallow up death in victory,” or perhaps at the very end of the verse, inasmuch as that would appear to be more contextually appropriate.

Regardless of the exact location of the suspected missing text from Isaiah, the *Gospel of Nicodemus* provides some evidence that both Paul and certain Book of Mormon prophets were, in fact, referring to an earlier, common source in Isa-

iah when they made reference to the “sting of death.”

Given that the Book of Mormon quotes copiously from Isaiah and puts such high stock in all of Isaiah’s writings (see 3 Nephi 23:1), which the Nephites had with them on the brass plates (see 1 Nephi 5:13), the fact that three Book of Mormon prophets allude to this same quotation possibly from Isaiah is not surprising. What is pleasantly surprising is that one more subtle indication of the Book of Mormon’s authenticity sheds light not only on

an apparently missing passage from Isaiah, but also on the content of the brass plates. 📖

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Notes

1. *Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Acta Pilati,” online edition, 2003.
2. *The Lost Books of the Bible* (New York: Bell, 1979), 9.
3. *Gospel of Nicodemus* 13:4,5; 16:7; 13:11,7, respectively (in *Lost Books*, 80–81, 83).
4. *Ibid.*, 16:9–12 (in *Lost Books*, 83–84).

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that it is a grand mistake to turn the Christian story into theology bounded by ontological categories. My own efforts to defend the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon and hence also Joseph Smith’s prophetic truth claims flow directly from these early insights.”

Nibley’s scholarship is also a key topic in the reviews of Martha Beck’s *Leaving the Saints: How I Lost the Mormons and Found My Faith*, by Kent Jackson (professor of ancient scripture, BYU) and Gregory Taggart (lecturer in the Honors University Writing program, BYU). Beck uses her book as a platform for attacking her father, Hugh Nibley, and his scholarship, although she does not mention him by name. Jackson notes there are “serious and insurmountable problems” with Beck’s story of “a man in a tweed jacket” who supposedly approached her in a grocery store and claimed that as a source checker for her father’s publisher he had discovered that at least 90 percent of Nibley’s footnotes were complete fabrications. As Jackson (himself critical of Nibley’s scholarship) points out, however, Beck’s claims can easily be checked because Nibley’s books are still in print and because the source checkers are listed by name in the publications

and can be contacted. “Nowhere in my examination of [Nibley’s] research and writing,” writes Jackson, “did I find any hint of his making up sources for fictional references.”

An anti-Mormon book that has shared the recent spotlight with Beck’s *Leaving the Saints* is Simon G. Southerton’s *Losing a Lost Tribe: Native Americans, DNA, and the Mormon Church*, which critics have employed to supposedly demonstrate that DNA research shows the Book of Mormon to be false. Southerton states that “the question of whether or not Jews or members of the Ten Lost Tribes anciently found their way to the New World is susceptible to examination using DNA technology” (*Lost Tribe*, 118).

In his review of Southerton’s book, Ryan Parr, who holds a PhD in biological anthropology and is currently vice president of Research and Development at a Canadian biotechnical company, argues that such a proposition “indicates an ignorance of the complexities of population dynamics.” He goes on to explain that “the ideal of obtaining samples from a continuous biological breeding population is rarely, if ever, met.” Parr concludes that “nothing within the Book of Mormon precludes an Asian ancestry for Native Americans” and that “the insistence that the presence of small groups from the

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