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**Title** Evaluating the Sources of 2 Nephi 1:13-15: Shakespeare and the Book of Mormon

**Author(s)** Robert F. Smith

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**Abstract** The early and persistent claim that Joseph Smith quoted Shakespeare in the Book of Mormon fails to take into account the broader context of sources. Much closer parallels than Shakespeare are available in the Bible as well as in ancient Near Eastern literature. Indeed, the constellation of ideas about death expressed in 2 Nephi 1:13-15 fits that ancient Near Eastern context in several powerful ways—ways that belie the claim that Joseph Smith plagiarized Shakespeare.

# EVALUATING THE SOURCES OF 2 NEPHI 1:13–15

## Shakespeare and the Book of Mormon

ROBERT F. SMITH



Jehudo Epstein (1870–1945), *Dying Job*, 1901, oil on canvas, 55 1/2 x 97 1/2 inches. Brigham Young University Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by the Bertin Family Foundation, 2008.

### FROM THE EDITOR:

Robert F. Smith wrote this piece years ago as an occasional paper for the FARMS growing shelf of Book of Mormon papers. The version printed here is an update offered to long-standing readers and new readers alike to remind them, or perhaps inform them for the first time, that Joseph Smith did not crib from Shakespeare. In fact, Shakespeare probably cribbed from the same ancient sources that form the background out of which the Book of Mormon was produced.

One oft-repeated claim made against the Book of Mormon is that Joseph Smith quoted Shakespeare at 2 Nephi 1:14. The claim began with Alexander Campbell, and many detractors have continued to repeat it.<sup>1</sup> An undeniable similarity of expression does exist between them (the similar words in boldface):

- “But that the dread of something after death, / The undiscovered country **from** whose bourn **no traveller returns**” (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 3.1.78–80; cf. *Richard III*, 1.1.128).
- “the cold and silent grave, **from** whence **no traveller can return**” (2 Nephi 1:14; cf. Mosiah 3:25, “a state of misery and endless torment from whence they can no more return”).

In response to this parallel, Mormon defenders have been quick to note that similar phraseology was available to both Joseph and Shakespeare in the form of KJV renditions of Job.

- “So he that goeth down to the grave shall come up no more. / He shall return no more to his house, neither shall his place know him any more” (Job 7:9–10).
- “Before I go whence I shall not return” (Job 10:21).
- “When a few years are come, then I shall go the way whence I shall not return” (Job 16:22).

Such examples can be multiplied either biblically (Psalms 39:13 [in Hebrew, v. 14]; 88:10–12 [Heb. 11–13]) or extrabiblically—as we shall see—and it should be clear that (1) such phrasing was available to Joseph in several forms, (2) translation normally requires the use of equivalent phrases in one’s own language, (3) such an expression is as modern as it is ancient, and (4) such a phrase cannot be critically considered in isolation from its broader context simply due to its ubiquity. In other words, the phrase alone proves nothing about the authenticity of the Book of Mormon. The facts can be made to fit any one of several scenarios of the most widely divergent sort, unless we broaden our purview somewhat.

Hugh Nibley showed us long ago what the contextual approach means and how it is to be applied, although he did no more than give us a few arresting glimpses into how well Lehi’s imagery fits into the

ancient Near Eastern context.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, a few more rational anti-Mormons have softened their single-minded devotion to the Shakespeare theory and have taken a broader, contextual approach, albeit of an anti-Mormon variety. This new sophistication is to be praised and adopts a policy long accepted by true scholars: isolated instances of similarity can easily be no more than coincidences. To say anything one way or the other requires a chain of circumstantial evidence—a pattern—and this has been the burden of Hugh Nibley’s efforts throughout his career as a patternist historian. Thus, a dispassionate observer

In the end, one is faced with self-contradictory evidence, with but one scholarly way out of the dilemma: Occam’s Razor. Parsimony.

finds patterns from the ancient world being placed over and against patterns from the nineteenth century in order to show the “true” origin of the Book of Mormon.

Unfortunately, neither side seems to pay a great deal of attention to what the other side is doing and saying. This is probably due to a sense of mutual disrespect or contempt, though Stephen Smoot suggests the double-edged sword of cognitive dissonance in the face of information that does not fit in with one’s preconceived worldview or religious tenets.<sup>3</sup> I merely suggest that a calm view of both positions (in tandem), accompanied by familiarity with consensus in modern scholarship, might lead to resolution for many who stick to only one side of the issue.

However, where does the current negative approach leave us? It leaves us with a picture of an extraordinarily well-read raconteur in Joseph Smith Jr.—a young man with a well-integrated mind/personality and a lack of formal education who managed to assimilate a tremendous amount of data from the broadest possible range of sources available in his immediate area. Whether we see Joseph as engaged in a noble but misguided defense of God or (with most of his detractors) see him as a fraud, we are then left with the question of coherence: within reason, are the sources available in the early nineteenth century sufficient to explain the origins of the Book of Mormon in naturalistic terms? Does the naturalistic theory cohere with the facts? It might be nice to

say yes and be done with it. It is at least a convenient solution to the nagging problem of having to engage in never-ending and unpredictable research projects.

In the end, one is faced with self-contradictory evidence, with but one scholarly way out of the dilemma: Occam's Razor. Parsimony. The explanation that does the least violence to the facts is the best. No matter that we are left with plenty of imponderable details. There is an abundance of conflicting "evidence," and it is fashionable in some circles to laugh at the Bible for most of the same reasons that it is fashionable to guffaw at the Book of Mormon.

### The Broader Context

The present state of research permits us to take the entire section of 2 Nephi 1:13-15 and to demonstrate that the constellation of ideas and expressions found there (and in parallel texts) were available throughout the ancient Near East in Lehi's own time. I have appended a chart with some of the possibilities (see the appendix), but the chart should not be taken to mean that Joseph Smith could have put such a section together from the literature of his day (including biblical literature).

Even the book of Job does a lot of borrowing of ideas and imagery. It was dated by the late William F. Albright to the seventh or early sixth century BC, and

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he felt that the composition was made in northern Israel, or near Phoenicia. As evidence of this, Albright noted the contemporary Phoenician usage of the name of the Egyptian Moon-god, Thoth, in the same vocalization as is found in Job 38:36.<sup>4</sup> Job also contains material very similar to the earlier hymn of Pharaoh Akhenaton to the Sun-disk Aton. Phoenicia is thus a likely intermediary in the transmission of certain Egyptian features to classical Israel.<sup>5</sup> I limit my comments here to Job only because of the claims that Lehi or Joseph must have been cribbing from a Shakespeare who sounds suspiciously like Job.

However, the Bible is replete with such parallels. In any case, our horizons go beyond the Bible.

In a work unintentionally dedicated to the concepts contained in 2 Nephi 1:13-15, Jan Zandee gives us some important clues as to just what those horizons may be.<sup>6</sup> Lehi's declaration that death is an enemy that can be defeated, for example, is in accord with ancient Egyptian belief. Death "was the source of eternal life for mankind. According to the Egyptians man becomes in death the peer of the gods."<sup>7</sup> Zandee<sup>8</sup> and Sigmund Mowinckel seem to share the view that Semites held a dualistic conception of death, the latter saying that "neither Israel nor early Judaism knew of a faith in any resurrection nor is such a faith represented in the psalms."<sup>9</sup> However, Mitchell Dahood, in criticizing and refuting this notion, has provided us with several examples of a biblical paradisiacal "Elysian Fields" concept, for example, in Psalms 5:8 (Heb. 9); 23:2-3; 36:9-10; 56:13 (Heb. 14); 61:4 (Heb. 5); 97:11; 116:9; and Isaiah 26:19.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, the fact that *'ere* ("earth; netherworld") and *'apar* ("dust, mud; netherworld") appear in parallel in Hebrew, Ugaritic,<sup>11</sup> and Book of Mormon sources is an important indication that Lehi needn't have been a pro-Egyptian revisionist of Hebrew religion. Yet it is a fact that the Old Testament lacks any clear and unambiguous statements on this issue—hence the need for our concern for the clearly monistic Egyptian belief in a life after death. True, there were parallels with the negative Semitic idea of *She'ol* (= Sumerian KUR), and Lehi's statement, out of context, might seem comparable. The concept is an old one:

- "May you not go on the roads of the western ones [the dead]; They who go on them [travelers] do not return" (Pyramid Text 697 §2175ab).<sup>12</sup>
- "There is nobody who returns from there" (P. Harris 500, VI/8).
- "Behold, there is nobody who has gone, who has returned" (P. Harris 500, VII/2-3).<sup>13</sup>
- "None that have gone have come back" (Song of Vizier Paser, line 12).<sup>14</sup>

Zandee speaks of this also as the Babylonian concept of the Netherworld: *ir it lā tāri*, "land without return"—"where dust is their nourishment and mud their food."<sup>15</sup> Here we may compare the Sumerian KUR.NU.GI<sub>4</sub>, "land of no return."<sup>16</sup> On her



a-na KUR NU.GI4.A qaq-qa-ri [la ta-ri] "to the land of no returning, the territory [of not coming back]." KUR is a Sumerogram that means "land," and NU.GI4.A is a Sumerogram meaning "not returning" in this Akkadian Iron Age text. Transcription and translation by Paul Hoskisson.

descent into the Netherworld, the gatekeeper of the Netherworld asks the goddess Inanna:

Why, pray, have you come to the "Land of No Return,"  
On the road whose traveler returns never,  
How has your heart led you? (Sumerian *Descent of Inanna*)<sup>17</sup>

The Semitic version of the same story has lines similarly applicable to Lehi's imagery:

To the house from which he who enters never goes forth;  
To the road whose path does not lead back  
(*Descent of Ishtar*, obv., lines 5-6).

However, as Zandee demonstrates, most Egyptian sources exhibit a strongly positive view of resurrection and eternal life, and the Coffin Texts (CT) and Pyramid Texts (PT) closely parallel the very words of the full context of 2 Nephi 1:14:

- Rise, shake off your dust! (CT 71ab I 297)
- Raise yourself, throw off your dust, . . . loosen your bonds, . . . ! (PT 553 §1363ac, following Faulkner; CT 248ae III 341)
- Raise yourself, shake off the dust of the earth which is on your flesh! (PT 373 §654ad, following Faulkner and Zandee)
- Throw off your dust, loosen your bonds! (PT 676 §§2008ab; 2009a, following Faulkner)<sup>18</sup>
- Your ties are loosened! (PT 358 §593b)

Zandee hints that these ties ( *s.t*) or bands of death are not necessarily mummy bandages.<sup>19</sup> Egyptian *s* also means "knot; vertebra," which shows a semantic range sufficient to include the idea of "chains" (2 Nephi 1:13) as well. Zandee lists a host of other words that have similar meanings and usage, noting in particular PT 703 §2202:<sup>20</sup>

- Horus comes to you, that he may loosen your ties, that he may burst your chains!

Sleep too is a major aspect of death, as we see in PT 670 §1975ab:<sup>21</sup>

- You go away and return, you sleep and wake up.

Other examples follow:

- Truly, I live (again), after having fallen asleep [*sdr*]. (Book of the Dead 41, 111, Theban rec.)
- You who hates sleep [*qd*], who is made tired, rise! (PT 247 §260b)

So also for Lehi's concept of the "silent grave": Egyptian 'Igrt is the name of the realm of the dead—also *t3 'Igrt*, "Land of Silence" (from *gr*, "be silent"), while the god of the dead (Osiris) is called the "Lord of Silence."<sup>22</sup>

- Landing at the land that loves silence. (Song of Neferhotep I, line 9)
- There is no coming back. (Song of Neferhotep I, line 24)<sup>23</sup>

Other observations from Zandee may also be found pertinent to Mormons—for example, on the second death,<sup>24</sup> sin,<sup>25</sup> and so forth. Lehi's statement in 2 Nephi 1:15 (intended as a kind of "prophetic perfect"), "But behold, the Lord hath redeemed my soul from hell!" is paralleled in the final chapter of the same chiastic book (2 Nephi 33:6) as well as biblically. Lehi's use of the broad-ranging store of ancient Near Eastern images and styles of expression did not prevent his adherence to a truly Hebraic religious view, eschatological and apocalyptic as it may have been.

This should give some hint of what lies in store for those who systematically apply knowledge of Egyptian language, religion, and culture to an understanding of the Book of Mormon—a book written in Egyptian script, if not in that very language. This also demonstrates that the purported Shakespearean quotation can hardly be given credence as something

from a late period. Shakespeare is a relative latecomer to the phrase, and his context does not fit the complete ancient Near Eastern image of death and the Netherworld—though I have provided a mere sampling of the context here—as well as Lehi’s does. If later phrasing just happens (perhaps not so coincidentally) to fit certain portions of our context, then so much the better for Joseph Smith—whose burden was to provide a contemporary mode of expressing such terms insofar as his own limited education allowed. The parallels with the KJV and with other books available to Joseph cannot be taken as anything more than an effort at making a good, modern

translation simply because the ancient Near Eastern parallels are so much closer and better integrated in the Book of Mormon than examples more contemporary with Joseph. ■



**Robert F. Smith** has studied languages and archaeology at BYU, Hebrew University in Jerusalem, UCLA, and California State University, Long Beach. He was the editor of the FARMS Book of Mormon Critical Text from 1979 through 1987.

<b>Appendix</b>	
<b>2 Nephi 1</b>	<b>Book of Mormon and Biblical Parallels</b>
<p>13. O that ye would awake; Awake from a deep sleep,<sup>26</sup> Yea, even from the sleep<sup>27</sup> of hell, And shake off the awful chains<sup>28</sup> by which ye are bound, Which are the chains which bind the children of men, That they are carried away captive Down to the eternal gulf of misery and woe.</p> <p>14. Awake! and arise from the dust,<sup>29</sup> And hear the words of a trembling parent, Whose limbs<sup>30</sup> ye must soon lay down In the cold and silent grave,<sup>31</sup> From whence no traveler can return;<sup>32</sup> A few more days And I go the way of all the earth.<sup>33</sup></p> <p>15. But behold, The Lord hath redeemed my soul<sup>34</sup> from hell;<sup>35</sup> I have beheld his glory, And I am encircled about<sup>36</sup> eternally In the arms of his love.</p>	<p>2 Nephi 8:24-5; Judges 5:12 Isaiah 26:19; 51:17; 52:1 <i>'uri</i> Isaiah 14:15 <i>šē'ōl</i></p> <p>Alma 5:9-11</p> <p>Proverbs 15:11; Luke 16:26 Isaiah 26:19; 51:17; 52:1-2; Psalm 90:3 <i>'āpar</i></p> <p>Psalm 88:4 (Heb. 5) <i>yrd</i> Psalm 30:3, 9 (Heb. 4, 10)</p> <p>Joshua 23:14</p> <p>2 Nephi 33:6; Psalms 56:13; 86:13; 116:8, 16 <i>šē'ōl</i></p>

The overall theme of the appendix is elaborated on in 2 Nephi 1:21-23, but in general see the relevant Old Testament and New Testament perspectives studied by Howard Bream.<sup>37</sup>

## NOTES

1. Franklin S. Harris Jr. lists several examples in *The Book of Mormon Message and Evidences* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1953), 110; Martin T. Lamb, *The Golden Bible* (New York: Ward & Drummond, 1887), 236-37; cf. Daniel H. Ludlow, *A Companion to Your Study of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1966), 29-30, citing Sperry. For a summary of the criticism see Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *The Case against Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Modern Microfilm, 1968), 2:107-8.
2. Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: FARMS and Deseret Book, 1988), 275-77.
3. Stephen O. Smoot, "Shaken Faith Syndrome and the Case for Faith," *Interpreter* 2 (2012): 112.
4. William F. Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan: A Historical Analysis of Two Contrasting Faiths* (London: Athlone, 1968), 212-17, 220, 224.
5. Marvin H. Pope, *Job* (New York: Doubleday, 1965), lxvii; cf. Psalm 104.
6. Jan Zandee, *Death as an Enemy: According to Ancient Egyptian Conceptions* (Leiden: Brill, 1960), 2, 7-10, 54-56, 93-94, and passim.
7. Zandee, *Death as an Enemy*, 7, citing W. B. Kristensen, *Het leven uit de dood [Life from Death]* (1949; repr., Louvain: Peeters, 1992), 40-41.
8. Zandee, *Death as an Enemy*, 1, 7.
9. Sigmund Mowinkel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 240.
10. Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms 1-50* (New York: Doubleday, 1965), xxxvi, 145-46; cf. Nicholas J. Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions of Death and the Nether World in the Old Testament* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969).
11. Stanley Gevirtz, "The Ugaritic Parallel to Jeremiah 8:23," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 2/1 (1961): 43; Dahood, *Psalms 1-50*, 43n6.
12. Following Zandee, *Death as an Enemy*, 10; cf. Raymond O. Faulkner, *Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 305.
13. Both examples from the Song of King 'Intef; Zandee, *Death as an Enemy*, 55, citing Miriam Lichtheim, "The Songs of the Harpers," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 4/3 (1945): 192-93, and Wilhelm M. Müller, *Die Liebesposie der alten Ägypter* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1899), XII, 8; XIV, 2; cf. Song of Neferhotep I.
14. Zandee, *Death as an Enemy*, 55, citing Lichtheim, "Songs of the Harpers," 202-4.
15. Zandee, *Death as an Enemy*, 7, citing Carl Bezold, *Babylonisch-Assyrisches Glossar* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1926), 69b; cf. Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, for other examples; see also Leonard W. King, *Babylonian Religion and Mythology* (London: Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1899), 179-80; *Descent of Ishtar*, obverse, line 8.
16. *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*, E, 308, kur.nu.gi<sub>4</sub>.a = KI-tim, or = er- e-et la tari, citing the lexical series of Antagal G 20, and Lu Excerpt, II, 65; *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch*, 245a, has KUR.NU.GE<sub>4</sub>; cf. James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 107a, 108ab.
17. Samuel N. Kramer, *Sacred Marriage Rite* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1969), 112.
18. All these Egyptian examples are cited in Zandee, *Death as an Enemy*, 104-5.
19. Zandee, *Death as an Enemy*, 108.
20. Zandee, *Death as an Enemy*, 20-21, 78-81.
21. Zandee, *Death as an Enemy*, 81-85; this and following two examples.
22. Zandee, *Death as an Enemy*, 12, 53; cf. Wilhelm Spiegelberg, "Das Schweigen im Grabe," *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache* 65 (1930): 122.
23. Zandee, *Death as an Enemy*, 56, citing Lichtheim, "Songs of the Harpers," 196.
24. Zandee, *Death as an Enemy*, 20, 186-88.
25. Zandee, *Death as an Enemy*, 41-44.
26. PT 247 §260b; 670 §1975; cf. Arabic *innaumu 'ahu-'Imauti*, "sleep is the brother of death," G. R. Driver, "Ugaritic and Hebrew Words," *Ugaritica* 6 (1969): 184:1.
27. CT 71ab I 297; PT 373 §654a; 553 §1363a; 676 §§2008ab, 2009a.
28. CT 248ae III 341; PT 358 §593b; 553 §1363ac; 703 §2202; Psalm 18:5-6 (Heb.).
29. CT 71ab I 297; PT 222 §260b; 373 §654ad; 553 §1363ac; 676 §§2008a, 2009a; Eg. *mw*, "dust"; Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan*, 66n49, in Amarna letters; cf. Genesis 3:19; 18:27.
30. PT 373 §654; 676 §2008.
31. CT 26a I 78; Neferhotep I/9; *Eloquent Peasant*, 20/12; the Vizier and H.P. of Amon under Amen-Hotep III said (on his monument): "I have reached this (state) by silence and coolness," Alexandre Varille, "Une stèle du vizir Ptahmes, contemporain d'Aménophis III (n° 88 du Musée de Lyon)," *BIFAO* 30 (1930): 504; cf. John A. Wilson, *Culture of Ancient Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 299n33.
32. PT 697 §2175ab; 'Intef VI/8; VI/2-3; Paser, 12; Neferhotep I, 24; Job 7:9-10, 10:20-1, 14:12, 16:22.
33. PT 373 §654ad; *sm3 t3*, "burial, union with the earth"; going into the Netherworld; Umberto Cassuto, "Biblical and Canaanite Literature (conclusion)," *Tarbiz* 14 (1942):1-10, for parallel of "earth" || "dust," #1 (Heb.).
34. Eg. *k3* (ku'), "soul, spirit," arms extended upward; Alan Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1957), 172, sign-list D 29.
35. PT 670 §1975a; 2 Nephi 33:6.
36. Eg. *inq*, "envelop," and *pt*, "embrace," using the encircling-arm sign; see Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, 24, and sign-list D 32; PT 546 §1341; 593 §1629; Nina Davies and Alan Gardiner, eds., *Tomb of Amenemhet*, Theban Tomb Series (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1915), 10, 27; *Shipwrecked Sailor*, 6; *Sinuhe*, B, 143; Kurt Sethe and Wolfgang Helck, *Urkunden der 18. Dynastie* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1909), 229, 4; Hermann Grapow, *Religiöse Urkunden* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1915), 48, 6; PT 268 §375, 'wy || *k3*.
37. Howard Bream, "Life without Resurrection: Two Perspectives from Qoheleth," in *A Light unto My Path: Old Testament Studies in Honor of Jacob M. Myers*, ed. H. N. Bream, R. D. Heim, and C. A. Moore (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1974), 49-65.