

CHAPTER 15



EXPLORING THE BIBLICAL PHRASE “GOD OF THE SPIRITS OF ALL FLESH”

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It is a pleasure to dedicate this study to S. Kent Brown, who has been a colleague and friend to me at BYU. I have learned much from Kent. I appreciate and have enjoyed the opportunities I have had to work and travel with him.

Various biblical passages indicate that ancient Israelites believed in the existence of a person’s “spirit,” a spirit personage, which lived on *after* human death. Biblical prohibitions against necromancy—consulting the spirits of the dead for information and protection—certainly testify to this (e.g., Leviticus 19:31; 20:6).¹ And there is the classic narrative about the medium of Endor who reportedly called up the spirit of dead Samuel at Saul’s request (1 Samuel 28:5-20). However, what is never discussed in the Old Testament is when, where, or how such spirits originated.

This article represents the revised form of a presentation I gave in the “Latter-day Saints and the Bible” section at the national meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, 19 November 2007 in San Diego, California. I thank Jacob Rennaker and Trevan Hatch for assisting with gathering materials for this study.

1. See the discussion, for example, by J. Tropper, “Spirit of the Dead,” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst, 2nd ed. (Boston: Brill, 1999), 806-9.

Modern scholars generally consider the claim in Jeremiah 1:5—that the Lord “knew” Jeremiah *before* he was conceived in the womb—to be figurative. In reviewing this concept—“figurative preexistence”—I have wondered about this question: does the Hebrew Bible (the Christian Old Testament) contain any persuasive indication that at least some Israelites believed in the premortal existence of spirits that inhabit human bodies?

Because of the restoration of Christ’s gospel through the Prophet Joseph Smith, Latter-day Saints understand and accept the premortal existence of all humans.² This doctrine is not based on clear exposition in the Old or New Testaments. But Latter-day Saints claim some biblical passages do attest to and presuppose this doctrine. This article does not seek to “prove” the doctrine of premortal existence by using the Hebrew Bible. Rather, it explores the biblical language of the phrase *ʾēlohê hārûḥōt lēkol-bāśār*,³ “God of the spirits of all flesh,” which is found only in Numbers 16:22 and 27:16, to determine whether this phrase can plausibly be read as presupposing the idea of premortal existence even if a person does not accept the Restoration. I have elsewhere examined Jeremiah 1:5, the best Old Testament passage preserving this concept.⁴ The present study is another test case, an additional stone in a larger mosaic of studies.⁵

2. See, for example, “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign*, November 1995, 102; and Gayle O. Brown, “Premortal Life,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1123–25.

3. The transliteration scheme used in this article follows the academic style provided in *The SBL Handbook of Style*, ed. Patrick H. Alexander et al. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 26–27.

4. I analyzed the content of this verse in a presentation entitled “Figurative Preexistence?—The Case of Jeremiah 1:5” at the national meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, 24 November 2008, in Boston, Massachusetts. This presentation will soon be published elsewhere.

5. It is a happy coincidence that the entry, “Souls, Preexistence of,” in the academic *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:161, was written by S. Kent Brown, the Latter-day Saint scholar honored by this article and this volume!

Academic discussions of the concept of premortal existence in the Old Testament deal only with the female personification of Wisdom. An important passage in Proverbs 8 reads: “I wisdom dwell with prudence. . . . The LORD possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old. I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was . . . when he appointed the foundations of the earth: Then I was by him, as one brought up with him: and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him” (Proverbs 8:12, 22–23, 29–30).⁶ Thus Wisdom, personified as a woman, existed before the creation of the earth.⁷

Christ’s premortal existence, however different Christians interpret this concept, is well attested in the New Testament.⁸ The concept of individual premortal existence of humans is not clearly attested in texts in the biblical tradition until the last few centuries BC on into the early Christian centuries. Examples found in some early Jewish and Christian documents include:

As a child I was naturally gifted, and a good soul fell to my lot; or rather, being good, I entered an undefiled body. (Wisdom of Solomon 8:19–20)⁹

But he [God] did design and devise me [Moses], who (was) prepared from the beginning of the world, to be the mediator of his covenant. (*Testament of Moses* 1:14)¹⁰

6. Biblical quotations are taken from the King James Version (KJV) unless otherwise indicated. NRSV is the abbreviation for the New Revised Standard Version.

7. Speaking of personified wisdom, Roland E. Murphy, “Wisdom in the OT,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6:927, states: she “seems to be something of God, born of God, in God. Usually she is said to be a divine attribute, a personification of the wisdom with which God created the world.”

8. See the LDS Topical Guide, s.v. “Jesus Christ, Antemortal Existence of.” See also, for example, Douglas McCready, *He Came Down from Heaven: The Preexistence of Christ and the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005).

9. NRSV Apocrypha, as found in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy (New York: Oxford, 1994), AP 68.

10. As found in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (New York: Doubleday, 1983, 1985), 1:927; hereafter abbreviated *OTP*.

Enoch was instructed that “all the souls are prepared for eternity, before the composition of the earth.” (2 *Enoch* 23:5; see further 1 *Enoch* 48:2-3)¹¹

Such attestations of this concept in early Jewish and Christian texts are regularly cited as dependent on Greek influence, especially Platonic thought. For example, “the Platonic view of the soul as pre-existent seems to be reflected here [in Wisdom of Solomon 8:19-20], but unlike Plato’s view, there is union with an *undefiled body*.”¹²

Numbers 16:22 and Numbers 27:16 in Context

The phrase *’ēlohê hārûḥōt lēkol-bāsār*, “God of the spirits of all flesh,” occurs only twice in the Masoretic Text, the traditional text of the Hebrew Bible: Numbers 16:22 and Numbers 27:16. Both of these passages occur in what scholars refer to as Priestly texts, due to the priestly perspectives and concerns in this material. And both of these passages occur in expressions of intercession, attributed to Moses and Aaron in the first passage and to Moses alone in the second.

Numbers 16 recounts the rebellion of Korah and his followers against Moses and Aaron. In the dramatic showdown, “Korah gathered all the congregation against them unto the door of the tabernacle of the congregation: and the glory of the LORD appeared unto all the congregation. And the LORD spake unto Moses and unto Aaron, saying, Separate yourselves from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment. And they [Moses and Aaron] fell upon their faces, and said, O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, shall one man sin, and wilt thou be wroth with all the congregation?” (Numbers 16:19-22). Rather than destroy all the Israelites, the earth opened and only swallowed up those who rebelled against Moses and his brother (16:23-35).

11. As found in *OTP*, 1:140.

12. Note on Wisdom of Solomon 8:19-20, in *New Annotated Oxford Bible*, AP 68, emphasis in the original.

According to Numbers 27:12-23, “the LORD”—the conventional way of rendering Hebrew *yhwh*/YHWH, also known in English as Jehovah—informed Moses that he (Moses) would not enter the promised land because of his rebellion against YHWH/Jehovah at the waters of Meribah.¹³ At that point Moses, concerned for his people, pled, “Let the LORD, the God of the spirits of all flesh, set a man over the congregation . . . that the congregation of the LORD be not as sheep which have no shepherd” (Numbers 27:16-17).¹⁴ The Lord instructed Moses to set Joshua apart as his divinely sanctioned successor (27:18-23).

Neither of these two passages occurs in the context of a theological discussion or sermon on creation or some other aspect of the plan of salvation. Nor is it immediately clear why this particular title was employed when YHWH/Jehovah was invoked in both of these passages. While Numbers 16 narrates that the power of God, who is the giver of life, was employed to put to death the rebellious Israelites, the death of people by God’s power is narrated elsewhere in the Old Testament without the use of this phrase in reference to God.

The Components of the Phrase “God of the spirits of all flesh”

The following comments discuss the major components of the phrase “God of the spirits of all flesh” in order to illustrate challenges to accurately translating and understanding it.

13. For a discussion of why the divine name *yhwh* is rendered “the LORD,” and how the form “Jehovah” originated, see Dana M. Pike, “Biblical Hebrew Words You Already Know, and Why They Are Important,” *Religious Educator* 7/3 (2006): 97-114, especially 106-9.

14. Interestingly, the first eleven verses of Numbers 27 recount that the daughters of Zelophehad, of the tribe of Manasseh, approached Moses at the “entrance to the tent of meeting,” requesting that they receive their father’s inheritance since he had died with no sons. Included in their request is the claim that “our father died in the wilderness; he was not among the company of those who gathered themselves together against the LORD [*yhwh*] in the company of Korah” (Numbers 27:3). This suggests a literary connection between this passage and Numbers 16, in which appears the only other biblical attestation of the phrase “God of the spirits of all flesh.” The Lord revealed that Moses should honor their request (27:6-7).

God. In Numbers 27:16, Moses invoked “the LORD” [*yhwh*/Jehovah], the God [*’ēlohê*] of the spirits of all flesh.” Numbers 16:22 reads, “O God [*’ēl*], the God [*’ēlohê*] of the spirits of all flesh.” In the context of Numbers 16 as it now exists, YHWH/Jehovah is clearly the *’ēl*, or God, intended (see verses 19, 20, 23). The term translated “God” in the phrase “God of the spirits of all flesh” in Numbers 16:22 and 27:16 is the noun *’ēlohê*, a grammatically altered form of *’ēlohîm*. Throughout the Hebrew Bible the title *’ēlohîm*, “God,” is used interchangeably with *yhwh*/Jehovah, Israel’s God, as it is here.¹⁵ Thus, YHWH/Jehovah is titled “the God [*’ēlohê*] of the spirits of all flesh.” This could be viewed as problematic for Latter-day Saints, who teach that God the Father, not Jehovah—God the Son—created the premortal spirits of all humans. However, creation of spirits is not the issue here. The issue is who presides over and judges “the spirits of all flesh,” and that was YHWH/Jehovah, as far as the ancient Israelites were concerned.

The spirits. The most important factor for interpreting this phrase is determining what *hārûḥôt*, “the spirits,” designates. The singular form of this noun, *rûaḥ*, has a broad semantic range in biblical Hebrew, signifying “moving air, breeze, wind, breathe, life-breath, and spirit,” with “spirit” designating a person’s life force and internal power, as well as the “spirit of the LORD,” the “spirit of God,” the “holy Spirit,” an evil spirit, and a spirit personage. One example of the challenge facing translators when rendering the noun *rûaḥ* into English is found in Ezekiel 37:9-10.¹⁶ In this passage

15. For a discussion of the titles *’ēl* and *’ēlohîm* (of which *’ēlohê* in this phrase is a grammatical variant) in the Hebrew Bible and how they are used in relation to YHWH/Jehovah, see Dana M. Pike, “The Name and Titles of God in the Old Testament,” *Religious Educator* 11/1 (2010): 17-31, especially 21-25. See also the study elsewhere in this volume by Ryan Conrad Davis and Paul Y. Hoskisson, “The Usage of the Title *elohim* in the Hebrew Bible and Early Latter-day Saint Literature,” pages 113-35, that demonstrates how early Latter-day Saint church leaders were not always so consistent with their use of the term *Elohim*.

16. While Latter-day Saints often consider Ezekiel 37:1-14 to be about resurrection, this passage actually utilizes resurrection imagery to depict the future restoration of

Ezekiel learns that the future gathering of Israel will be as a great army of dead soldiers coming back to life.

KJV: Then said he unto me [Ezekiel], Prophecy unto the wind [*hārûah*], prophecy, son of man, and say to the wind [*hārûah*], Thus saith the Lord GOD; Come from the four winds [*rûhôt*], O breath [*hārûah*] and breathe [*pěhî*] upon these slain, that they may live. So I prophesied . . . and the breath [*hārûah*] came into them, and they lived.

NRSV: Then he said to me, “Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” I prophesied . . . and the breath came into them.¹⁷

The variety of interpretive possibilities and the ambiguity inherent in certain attestations of *rûah* thus create a challenge to understanding the intent of the phrase *ʾēlohê hārûhôt lēkol-bāsār*, often translated “God of the spirits of all flesh” but occasionally translated “the breath of all flesh” (see below).

Curiously, the feminine plural suffix *-ôt* on *hārûhôt* in both Numbers 16:22 and 27:16 is written defectively: *-ôt*. These are the only two times the plural of *rûah* (always feminine) is written this way in the Hebrew Masoretic Text. The significance of this defective orthography in the plural ending—*rûhôt*—is not readily apparent. There are examples of the nominal feminine plural suffix written defectively in other words in the Masoretic Text. For example, the Hebrew word translated “fire-pan” is written *mahtôt* in Numbers 16:6, but *mahtôt* in Numbers 16:17. So, defective feminine plural suffixes do

Israelites to their land. It is not a passage about the resurrection per se.

17. There are other interesting examples of passages in which *rûah* is rendered differently in different translations, including Psalm 104:4, in which the KJV reads: “Who maketh his angels spirits [*rûhôt*]; his ministers a flaming fire,” but the NRSV reads: “you make the winds [*rûhôt*] your messengers, fire and flame your ministers.”

occur, but the only defective plural forms of *rûah* are in Numbers 16:22 and 27:16.¹⁸

Forms of the noun *rûah* occur 378 times in the Masoretic Text; feminine plural forms constitute only thirteen of those occurrences. Complete *plene* orthography, *rûhôt*, is attested nine times, in passages that contextually assure the translation “[four] winds” (e.g., Jeremiah 49:36; Ezekiel 37:9). The exception is Proverbs 16:2, in which this *plene* plural form is translated “spirits” in the KJV. The more likely rendition, based on the context (16:1-3), is “intentions, motives,” as is found in some modern translations. The medially defective form *rûhôt* occurs twice and can be confidently rendered “winds” both times (Jeremiah 49:36; Zechariah 6:5). The remaining two occurrences of the plural are in the two verses examined herein. Thus, the feminine plural form of *rûah*, no matter what the orthography, typically designates something specific, although intangible (winds, spirits, intentions); it is not used to represent an abstract phenomenon such as “life force.”

All flesh. In the Hebrew Bible the noun *bāsār* designates human as well as animal “flesh.” The expression *lēkol-bāsār*, “(belonging to) all flesh,” occurs eight times in the Masoretic Text, including the two verses under discussion. Given the context of Numbers 16:22 and 27:16, the term *bāsār* in these verses clearly refers to humans. Thus, in these two verses YHWH/Jehovah is described as the God of the spirits of all humanity, or of human flesh (according to the common translation). This suggests that the term *hārûhôt*, “the spirits,” is not simply referring to the heavenly host located in YHWH/Jehovah’s presence. That spirits were part of this host is attested in 1 Kings 22, where the adventures of a prophet named Micaiah are narrated. At one point Micaiah proclaimed: “Hear thou therefore the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD sitting on his throne, and

18. Given this limited data, and the fact that *rûhôt* and *rûhôt* also occur, it is not possible to confidently claim that a literary “signal” was intended by the use of defectively written *rûhôt* in the phrase “God of the spirits of all flesh,” but it is possible.

all the host of heaven standing by him on his right hand and on his left. And the LORD said, Who shall persuade [king] Ahab, that he may go up and fall [in battle] at Ramoth-gilead? . . . And there came forth a spirit [*hārûah*] and stood before the LORD, and said, I will persuade him” (1 Kings 22:19-21 // 2 Chronicles 18:20). There is nothing in this passage, however, suggesting that such spirits—spirit personages—would inhabit human “flesh,” or even that God created such spirits (although this latter point could be assumed).

Other Textual Witnesses

The phrase *ʔelohê hārûhôt lēkol-bāsār*, “God of the spirits of all flesh,” is not attested in any Israelite or other ancient Semitic inscriptions, so only versions of the biblical text are available for this study. The remains of eight copies of the book of Numbers were found at Qumran among the Dead Sea Scrolls. The remains of three other copies were found elsewhere in the Judean Desert. However, none of these preserves the text of Numbers 16:22 or 27:16.¹⁹ The text of the Hebrew phrase in question is essentially the same in the Samaritan Pentateuch as in the Masoretic Text, with the exception that the feminine plural ending on *rûhôt* is written *plene* in both verses: *rûhôt*.²⁰

In the Septuagint, the early Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, the phrase in Numbers 16:22 and 27:16 reads: *theos tōn pneumatōn kai pasēs sarkos*, “God of the spirits [*pneumatōn*] and of all flesh.”²¹ The occurrence of *kai*, “and,” in the Greek version of this phrase disassociates the “spirits” and the “flesh,” possibly suggesting two separate entities: (heavenly?) spirits and human flesh.

19. See, for example, David L. Washburn, *A Catalog of Biblical Passages in the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), 50–52, and Eugene Ulrich, ed., *The Biblical Qumran Scrolls: Transcriptions and Textual Variants* (Boston: Brill, 2010).

20. A. F. von Gall, *Der hebräische Pentateuch der Samaritaner*, 4 vols. (Giessen: Töpelmann, 1916).

21. So translated by Peter W. Flint in *A New English Translation of the Septuagint*, ed. Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright (New York: Oxford, 2007). For the Greek text, see John William Wevers, *Numeri* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982).

Alternatively, one commentator suggests “the spirits refer to the breath of life for all flesh.”²²

There is quite a bit of variation from the phrase *ʾēlohē hārûḥōt lēkol-bāsār* in the Targumim (or Targums), the Aramaic versions of the Hebrew scriptures. The phrase in *Targum Onqelos* essentially parallels the Masoretic Text of Numbers 16:22 and 27:16: *ʾylh rwḥyʾ lkl-bysrʾ*.²³ Inexplicably, one translator renders this, “God of the breath of all flesh” in Numbers 16:22, but as “God of the spirits of all flesh” in 27:16.²⁴ Numbers 16:22 in the *Jerusalem Targum (Pseudo-Jonathan)* is rather expansive: “O God, who put the spirit [*rwḥ*] of life in the bodies of mankind and from whom is given the spirit [*rwḥʾ*, singular] to all flesh.” Numbers 27:16 in the same Targum reads: “Let the Memra [utterance] of the Lord, which rules over the soul [*nšmh*] of man and from whom has been given the breath [*rwḥ*, singular] of life to all flesh.”²⁵ Finally, Numbers 16:22 in *Targum Vatican Neophyti* (or, *Neofiti*) reads: “O God, you who rule the breath [or, spirit; *nšmh*] of all flesh”; and 27:16 reads: “God who rules the spirits [*nšmh*] of all flesh.”²⁶ Thus, the word *nšmh* has replaced *rwḥ* in both of these verses in *Targum Neofiti*. This is not too surprising, since even in the Hebrew Masoretic Text *něšāmâ*, “breath,” and *rûaḥ* sometimes occur combined or in parallel. For example, “All [on dry land] in

22. John William Wevers, *Notes on the Greek Text of Numbers* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1998), 270.

23. Israel Drazin, ed., *Targum Onkelos to Numbers* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1987), 181. The Targumim are not vocalized as the Masoretic Text is, so the transliteration only represents the consonantal text.

24. Drazin, *Targum Onkelos to Numbers*, 180. Again highlighting the ambiguity of the term *rûaḥ*, Bernard Grossfeld, *The Targum Onqelos to Leviticus and the Targum Onqelos to Numbers* (Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1987), 115, translates Numbers 16:22 as “God of the spirits of all mankind,” similar to how the Hebrew is often rendered.

25. Ernest G. Clarke, trans. and ed., *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Numbers* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical/Glazier, 1987), 270, emphasis deleted. For the Aramaic text, see Ernest G. Clarke, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan of the Pentateuch: Text and Concordance* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1984), 193.

26. Martin McNamara, trans. and ed., *Targum Neofiti 1: Numbers* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical/Glazier, 1987), 97, 150, emphasis deleted. The Aramaic text is available in Alejandro Díez Macho, ed., *Neophyti 1*, vol. 4 (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1974), 155, 261.

whose nostrils was the breath of life [*nišmat-rûah hayyîm*] . . . died” (Genesis 7:22); and “By the blast [*nišmat*] of God they perish, and by the breath [*rûah*] of his nostrils are they consumed” (Job 4:9).

While theological motivation may well lie behind how this phrase is represented in these expanded and altered renditions in some of the Targumim, and perhaps also in the Septuagint, they conceptually hark back to the expression “breath/spirit of life” in Genesis 2:7: “the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed [*yippah*] into his nostrils the breath of life [*nišmat hayyîm*]; and man became a living soul.” This concept appears to also lie behind Ezekiel 37:9-10 (quoted above), in which “breath [*hârûah*]” enlivened the dead who were coming back to life. Thus, those who employed the singular *rwḥ* or *nšmh* when rendering the Hebrew plural *hârûḥôt* into Aramaic did not have to alter much to build what for them was a biblically based interpretation into their translation.

Numbers 16:22 and 27:16 in Various English Translations and Commentaries

It is instructive to see how the Hebrew phrase *’el ’ēlohê hârûḥôt lēkol-bāšār* (Numbers 16:22) has been rendered in some of the leading English translations of the Old Testament:²⁷

- KJV: O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh
- NRSV: O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh
- NET: O God, the God of the spirits of all people
- NJPSV: O God, Source of the breath of all flesh

As illustrated in this sample, many English translations render *hârûḥôt* in Numbers 16:22 and 27:16 as “the spirits.” The NJPSV translates it as “breath,” presumably drawing on the sense conveyed in Genesis 2:7 (quoted just above).

27. KJV = King James Version; NRSV = New Revised Standard Version; NET = New English Translation; and NJPSV = New Jewish Publication Society Version.

Even when *hārûḥōt* in this phrase is translated “the spirits,” most readers and commentators understand the sense of this term differently than do Latter-day Saints. Unfortunately, some commentators provide no explanation at all of *hārûḥōt*, “the spirits.” Some commentators observe that the phrase conveys God’s power to create, enliven, and sustain life, conveying the understanding behind the NJPSV translation “the [life-]breath of all flesh.”²⁸ Others indicate this phrase is similar to expressions in “postbiblical literature,” meaning post-Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, but provide no further comment.²⁹ Obvious similarities with later Jewish and Christian texts include:

In *Jubilees* 10:3 Noah addressed the “God of the spirits which are in all flesh.”³⁰

2 Maccabees 3:24 refers to God as “the Sovereign of spirits and of all authority.”³¹

1 *Enoch* 37-71, the so-called “Book of Parables (or, Similitudes),” often refers to God as “the Lord of the Spirits” (e.g., 37:2, 4; 38:2, 4, 6; 40:1-10).³²

Hebrews 12:9: “Furthermore we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits [*pneumatōn*], and live?”

28. See, for example, Martin Noth, *Numbers: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), 127, who comments, “God is addressed as the creator of life (*rûah*, in the plural here, is to be understood in this sense);” and Jacob Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary, Numbers* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 135, who states, “The implication of this divine epithet is that since God is the creator of all life, He alone determines who is to live and who is to die.”

29. See, for example, Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 313.

30. *OTP*, 2:75.

31. Translation from *New Annotated Oxford Bible*, AP 234. 2 Maccabees 14:46, which refers to God as “the Lord of life and spirit,” is sometimes cited in this regard as well (translation from *New Annotated Oxford Bible*, AP 256).

32. *OTP*, 1:30-32.

Such similarities are helpful in supporting a translation of the phrase “God of the spirits of all flesh” in Numbers 16:22 and 27:16 and in providing an understanding of “the spirits” that appears to be in harmony with a Latter-day Saint perspective. However, since these later texts postdate the Greek Platonic view of the premortality of souls—individual spirits—their value for determining whether at least some ancient Israelites believed in the premortal existence of spirits that entered physical bodies is limited.

Conclusion

Latter-day Saints bring a full-blown doctrinal position—belief in the premortal existence of spirits that inhabit human bodies—to bear in interpreting certain texts in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Numbers 16:22 and 27:16; Jeremiah 1:5; plus John 9:2). In this regard, they have the benefit of Restoration scripture that is related to the Old Testament. Both the Book of Abraham and the Book of Moses contain specific references to the premortal existence of spirits that would inhabit human bodies (e.g., Abraham 3:22-28; 5:7; Moses 4:1-4; 5:24). Abraham 5:7, for example, delineates between the “man’s spirit” that was put into Adam’s body and the “breath of life” that was “breathed into his nostrils,” something that is not clearly recounted in the received text of Genesis. This reinforces the idea that ancient saints did understand this doctrine, despite its general absence in the text of the Old Testament as it has come down to us.

Most biblical scholars would say that the Latter-day Saint doctrine of premortal spirits is not expounded in nor substantiated by the received text of the Hebrew Bible. Since they do not accept the notion of premortal existence, most modern Jews and Christians do not “see” any such thing in the Hebrew Bible (other than the preexistence of “Wisdom” personified). This is partly because they are not looking for it and partly because of the ambiguous nature of the Hebrew term *rûah*, as reviewed above. And as emphasized herein, the primary challenge is how to understand the plural form *hârûhôt*, “the spirits,” in Numbers 16:22 and 27:16.

To summarize the points made above about the phrase *’ēlohē hārûḥōt lēkol-bāsār*, “God of the spirits of all flesh”:

- occurrences of the plural form *rûḥōt* in the Masoretic Text are best rendered as plurals (e.g., “winds”), not abstracts, so “the spirits” seems to be the most likely translation of *hārûḥōt* in the phrase in question (and so it is usually translated);
- the plural *rûḥōt* (or *rûḥōt*, as in the phrase under review), “winds, spirits,” is not used in the Masoretic Text to refer to God’s “breath of life”; rather, the singular *rûaḥ* is;
- with the exception of the less preferable KJV translation of Proverbs 16:2, there is no other passage besides Numbers 16:22 and 27:16 in the Masoretic Text in which *rûḥōt* or *rûḥōt* is rendered “spirits,” thus making its use in those verses unique (neither “winds” nor “intentions” makes sense in them);
- the qualifying expression, *lēkol-bāsār*, “of all flesh,” in the Hebrew text indicates these “spirits” do not function merely as part of the heavenly host, but somehow belong to “(human) flesh”;
- most non-Hebrew versions of this phrase exhibit a tendency to distance themselves from the plain reading of the Masoretic Text, which appears to preserve the oldest form of this passage;
- most commentators favor explaining the plural *rûḥōt* as if it were the singular *rûaḥ*, rendering this phrase in harmony with the concept that God creates and sustains life.

These points combine to indicate that there is something preserved in the phrase “God of the spirits of all flesh” in Numbers 16:22 and 27:16 that is different from the occurrences of *rûḥōt* in the Bible (why translate *rûḥōt* as “spirits,” but explain away the plain sense of the term in this context?). It is thus my assertion that certain passages in the received text of the Hebrew Bible, including Numbers 16:22 and 27:16, do plausibly support the idea that some ancient Israelites believed in premortal existence. The concept of

premortal existence is not as clear-cut and conclusive in the Old Testament as many Latter-day Saints think it is, but it is attested there.

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