

# As a Garment in a Hot Furnace

*“The life of king Noah shall be valued even as a garment in a hot furnace.” (Mosiah 12:3)*

In Mosiah 12:3, Abinadi prophesied “that the life of king Noah shall be valued even as a garment in a hot furnace.” Noah’s priests reported the words a little differently, “thy life shall be as a garment in a furnace of fire” (Mosiah 12:10). The prophecy was fulfilled when King Noah was burned to death (see Mosiah 19:20).

Mark J. Morrise has shown that Abinadi’s words fit the pattern of a simile curse, in which the subject of the curse is likened to a specific event;<sup>1</sup> Morrise provides many examples, such as the following from an Aramaic treaty of approximately 750 B.C.:

Just as this was is burned by fire, so shall Arpad be burned.

Hugh Nibley suggested that Abinadi borrowed from the simile curse in Isaiah 50:9, 11 (cited in 2 Nephi 7:9, 11): “Who is he that shall condemn me? lo, they all shall wax old as a garment; the moth shall eat them up. . . . Behold, all ye that kindle a fire, that compass yourselves about with sparks: walk in the light of your fire, and in the sparks that ye have kindled.”<sup>2</sup>

But the Isaiah parallel is only a partial one, for verse 11 (which mentions fire) has nothing to do with the garment, which is consumed by the moth, not the fire. If there are parallels to be found, one might expect them to include both the garment and the fire and possibly the furnace. Yet no such complete parallels are forthcoming from the Old Testament or other ancient Near Eastern literature. Nevertheless, there are some partial parallels.

The law of Moses provides that a garment visibly tainted by the plague is to be burned (see Leviticus 13:52, 57; compare Jude 1:23). While the Lord knew about germs, the ancient Israelites did not. Therefore, the burning of garments to prevent the spread of disease would not have been reasonable before the nineteenth century, when people learned that microorganisms caused diseases. But the burning of a man’s possessions after his death is very common in “primitive” cultures throughout the world. Typically, all his personal possessions would be brought into his house (usually a rather insubstantial structure in such societies), which would then be set on fire. In this way, the deceased would not be able to find his possessions and would be free to move on to the world of spirits. In such cases, we have the garment and the fire, but not the furnace.

A ceremonial burning of worn-out priestly clothing took place in the Jerusalem temple of Christ’s time during the Feast of Tabernacles. Located above the court of the women were huge cups in which olive oil was burned; these garments served as wicks. Just as priests who developed bodily infirmities were disqualified from performing priestly functions under the law of Moses (see Leviticus 21:17–23), so, too, their worn clothing became unsuited for temple service.<sup>3</sup>

Proverbs 6:27 asks, “Can a man take fire in his bosom, and his clothes not be burned?” The answer is that this can happen only if he is righteous and the Lord intervenes to protect him. A number of ancient Jewish texts speak of how Abraham was tossed into a fiery furnace to be burned. One of these accounts notes that all but his “lower garments” (i.e., undergarments) were removed and that, while the cords that bound him were burned, these undergarments were not (see *Book of Jasher* 12:27). Similarly, when Daniel’s three friends were tossed into the fiery furnace, fully clothed (see Daniel 3:21), their clothing sustained no fire or smoke damage (see Daniel 3:27).

In the Book of Mormon, the three Nephites were thrice “cast into a furnace and received no harm” (3 Nephi 28:21; see Mormon 8:24). Three times the Bible compares Israel’s deliverance from Egypt to rescue from a furnace of iron (see Deuteronomy 4:20; 1 Kings 8:51; Jeremiah 11:4). Indeed, the righteous are purified as silver or gold in the furnace (see Psalm 12:6; Proverbs 17:3; 27:21; Isaiah 48:10 [see 1 Nephi 20:10]; 1 Corinthians 3:12–15). On the other hand, the wicked are considered dross, to be melted down in the furnace (see Ezekiel 22:18–22). Jesus said that he would send forth angels to gather up the wicked and “cast them into a furnace of fire” (Matthew 13:41–42, 49–50). Of course, this does not necessarily mean a literal furnace. The wicked of Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by fire from heaven and “the smoke of the country went up as the smoke of a furnace” (Genesis 19:28).

A number of pseudepigraphic texts speak of a heavenly river of fire into which the dead are made to pass. The righteous cross the river without injury and approach the throne of God, while the wicked are burned or tortured in the fire.<sup>4</sup> This reminds us of the declaration in Genesis 14:35 JST that “the sons of God should be tried so as by fire.” In 2 Nephi 30:10, we read, “the wicked will he destroy; and he will spare his people, yea, even if it so be that he must destroy the wicked by fire.” Lehi and Nephi, in their vision of the tree of life, “saw that the justice of God did also divide the wicked from the righteous; and the brightness thereof was like unto the brightness of a flaming fire, which ascendeth up unto God forever and ever, and hath no end” (1 Nephi 15:30).<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, “were the wicked, in their sins, under the necessity of walking into the presence of the Father and the Son . . . their condition would be more excruciating and unendurable than to dwell in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone.”<sup>6</sup> Elder Orson Pratt declared:

I have often heard blasphemers and drunkards and abominable characters say, I really hope I shall at last get to heaven. If they get there, they will be in the most miserable place they could be in. Were they to behold the face of God, or the angels, it would kindle in them a flame of unquenchable fire; it would be the very worst place a wicked man could get into: he would much rather go and dwell in hell with the Devil and his host.<sup>7</sup>

The Book of Mormon prophet Moroni probably had this idea in mind when he wrote to the wicked:

Ye would be more miserable to dwell with a holy and just God, under a consciousness of your filthiness before him, than ye would to dwell with the damned souls in hell. For behold, when ye shall be brought to see your nakedness before God; and also the glory of God, and the holiness of Jesus Christ, it will kindle a flame of unquenchable fire upon you. (Mormon 9:4–5; see also Mosiah 2:38; 3:25, 27; compare Jacob 6:9–10)

It seems that Abinadi’s curse of King Noah, with the specific mention of fire, was intended to indicate the very serious nature of Noah’s sins. Like the diseased garment in Leviticus 13:52, 57 and the useless garment in Isaiah 14:19–20 (another simile curse), he is not to be honored with burial. Instead, he will suffer death by fire, which is the ultimate punishment of the wicked.

*Research by John A. Tvedtnes, originally published in the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 6/1 (1997): 76–79.*

## Notes

1. See Mark J. Morrise, “Simile Curses in the Ancient Near East, Old Testament, and Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/1 (1993): 124–38. His discussion of Mosiah 12:3, 10–12 is found on page 135.

2. Hugh W. Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989), 305.
3. Jewish tradition indicates that priestly garments could not be consumed by fire and sometimes protected their wearers from harm. See the discussion in John A. Tvedtnes, "Priestly Clothing in Bible Times," in *Temples of the Ancient World*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1994), 659–61.
4. See *Testament of Isaac* 5:21–29; *Sibylline Oracles* 2:196–213, 252–308, 313–18, 330–38; *Ethiopic Apocalypse of Peter*; compare Zechariah 3:2.
5. Joseph Smith taught that "God Almighty Himself dwells in eternal fire . . . all corruption is devoured by the fire. 'Our God is a consuming fire' [Hebrews 12:29; compare Deuteronomy 4:24]. . . . Immortality dwells in everlasting burnings. . . . All men who are immortal dwell in everlasting burnings" (*History of the Church*, 6:366). While the wicked suffer "a torment as the lake of fire and brimstone" (*ibid.*, 6:317), the righteous dwell in flames (see *ibid.*, 6:51–52). Those who are exalted become, in the resurrection, kings and priests to God, as the other gods before them, and are "able to dwell in everlasting burnings, and to sit in glory, as do those who sit enthroned in everlasting power" (*ibid.*, 6:306; see 6:476 and *Journal of Discourses*, 8:92).
6. *Journal of Discourses*, 8:153–54.
7. *Ibid.*, 7:89.