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Having since absorbed FARMS into the Willes Center for Book of Mormon Studies, the Maxwell Institute offers the FARMS Preliminary Reports here in that same spirit. Although their quality is uneven, they represent the energy and zeal of those who sought to enrich our understanding of LDS scripture.

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Robert F. Smith

Shakespeare and the Book of Mormon
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This F.A.R.M.S. preliminary report reflects substantial research but is not ready for final publication. It is made available to be critiqued and improved and to stimulate further research.

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SHAKE, SPEARE, A KICK IN THE REAR!

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Hamlet, III, 1, 78-80, "But that the dread of something after death, the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns" (cf. Richard III, I, 1, 128).
2 Nephi 1:14b, "the cold and silent grave, from whence no traveler can return."
Mosiah 3:25c, "a state of misery and endless torment from whence they can no more return."

Because he is acknowledged to have been an assiduous plagiarist, Will Shakespeare is hardly a dependable original source, and Mormon defenders have been quick to note that similar phraseology was available to Joseph and Shakespeare in the form of KJV renditions of Job:

7:9b-10, "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."
10:21a, "Before I go whence I shall not return, . . ."
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Or in Lord Byron's translation of Catalus' 1st century B.C. "Elegy on a Sparrow": "Now having passed the gloomy bourne/From whence he never can return."

And, more recently, a non-Mormon U. S. Senator used the same style in referring to the abyss of total tyranny which America may face at the hands of the U. S. intelligence establishment—Frank Church on NBC-TV "Meet the Press," 19:33 (17 August 1975), p. 6:

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Even the prayer of the Worshipful Master during Masonic burial services comes into question (Grand Lodge of Texas, 1921, p. 13):

". . . we may be enabled to prosecute our journey without dread or apprehension, to that distant country, from whose bourne no traveller returns."

Such examples can be multiplied ad nauseam either biblically (Pss 2:19, 39:13, II Sam 12:23), or extra-biblically—as we shall see—and it should be clear, first, that such phrasing was available to Joseph in several forms; second, that translation normally requires use of equivalent phrases in one's own language; third, that such an expression is as modern as it is ancient; finally, that such a phrase cannot be critically considered in isolation from its broader context simply due to its ubiquity, i.e., alone it proves nothing pro or con 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, though he did no more than give us a few arresting glimpses into how well Lehi’s and Shakespeare’s imagery fits into the ancient Near Eastern context with regard to II Ne 1:14.2 Indeed, Jerald and Sandra Tanner have now abandoned 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 as easily as not be no more than coincidences. To say anything one way or the other, one 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 finds patterns from the ancient world being placed over and against patterns from the 19th century A.D. 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 Chris Eccel suggests the double-edged sword of cognitive dissonance in the face of information which does not fit in with one’s preconceived world-view or religious tenets. 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.

The broader approach taken by the Tanners focuses on a book once in the Manchester Library and, therefore, available to Joseph Smith, Jr. This was Josiah Priest, The Wonders of Nature and Providence Displayed (Albany, 1825), and is merely one of a number of published sources which anti-Mormons use to show that the Book of Mormon is a pseudopigraphon based on early 19th century A.D. sources. For example, not only does Priest provide us with a phrase closer still to II Ne 1:14b, on page 469,

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but other systematic parallels are adduced as well. The Tanners now frankly acknowledge that a single instance "could be a coincidence, ..."3 More and more, they and their colleagues concentrate on patterns of influence. This is quite an improvement over the early by-gosh-and-by-golly approach to scholarship which all Mormons and anti-Mormons would do well to abandon.

However, where does the current anti-Mormon 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 level of intelligence anywhere from brilliant to genius. Thus, despite his lack of formal education, he managed to assimilate a tremendous amount of data from the broadest possible range of sources available in his immediate area. Whether we follow Robert Hullinger in seeing Joseph as engaged in a noble but misguided "defense of God," or (with most of his detractors) see him as an impetuous fellow out to satisfy his lusts for power, money, etc., we are then left with the question of coherence:

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Within reason, are the sources available in the early 19th 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 have done with it—as many an anti-Bible free-thinker did with the Bible in the 19th century!! It is at least a convenient solution to the nagging problem of having to engage in never-ending and unpredictable research projects. Surely one can find things to do which are more "fun." In fact, the case made by the anti-Mormons is compelling as far as it goes, and one unfamiliar with modern scholarship is particularly vulnerable to their claims of clear-cut evidence. Unfortunately, the evidence is anything but clear-cut, and explaining how Joseph Smith, Jr., might have been able to put together a piece of 19th century A.D. fiction liberally laced with data not known to the scholars of his day is perplexing to say the least. Most anti-Mormons speak only disparagingly of this other side of the case which they are unable to explain away with their 19th century patterns. Others new to the Satanic-Inspiration theory to explain such remarkable ability and knowledge, and can certainly find biblical precedent for their approach. In the end one is faced with evidence in conflict with itself with but one scholarly way out of the dilemma: Occam's Razor. Parsimony. The explanation which does the least violence to the facts is the better. No matter that we are left with plenty of imponderable details. A good many people found themselves in a similar quandary immediately following the ministry of Jesus. Who, or what was he? Did he in fact rise from the dead? Are those who believe that to have been the case merely naive, credulous fools? There is an abundance of conflicting "evidence," and it is chic to laugh at the Bible for most of the same reasons that it is chic to guffaw at the Book of Mormon and its pitiable adherents. Why? Why, indeed!

The Context

The present state of research permits us to take the entire section of II Nephi 1:13-15 and to demonstrate that the constellation of ideas and expressions found there (and in parallel texts) were available from Mesopotamia to Egypt in Lehi's own time—especially in Egypt. I have appended a chart with some of the midrashic possibilities, 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 is dated by W. F. Albright to the 7th or early 6th century B.C., and he feels that the composition was made in North-Israel, or near Phoenicia. As evidence of this, Albright notes the contemporary Phoenician usage of the name of the Egyptian Moon-god, Thoth, in the same vocalization as is found in Job 38:36. Job also contains material very similar to the earlier hymn of Pharaoh Akhnaton to the Sun-disk Aton. Phoenicia is thus a likely intermediary in the transmission of certain Egyptian features to Classical Israel. 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 wholly dedicated to the concepts contained in II Ne 1:13-5, J. Zandee gives us some important clues as to just what this horizon is like.  

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Lehi's declaration that death is an enemy which 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." 8 Zandee 9 and S. 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"! However, Mitchell Dahood, in criticizing and refuting this notion, has provided us with not a few examples of a biblical paradisiacal "Elysian Fields" concept, e.g., Ps 5:9, 36:9-10, 61:14, 97:11, 116:9, Isa 26:11, etc. 10

Moreover, the fact that 'ereš, "earth; netherworld," and ṣapar, "dust, mud; netherworld," appear in parallel in Hebrew, Ugaritic, 11 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 OT is lacking in 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 to compare well. The concept is an old one:

May you not go on the roads of the western ones [the dead];
They who go on them [travellers] do not return.

Pyramid Text 2175ab 12

There is nobody who returns from there.

Papyrus Harris 500, col. VI, line 8

Behold, there is nobody who has gone, who has returned.

Ibid., VII, 2-3 13

None that have gone have come back.

Song of Vizier Paser, line 12 14

Zandee speaks of this also as the Babylonian concept of the netherworld:

iršit lā tārī, "land without return"—"where dust is their nourishment and mud their food." 15 Here we may compare the Sumerian KUR.NU.GI₄, "land of no return." 16

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13. Both examples from the Song of King 'Intef; Zandee, op. cit., p. 55, citing M. Lichtheim, "The Songs of the Harpers," JNES, 4:192-3, and W. M. Müller, Liebespoesie, XII, 8; XIV, 2; cf. Song of Neferhotep I.
15. Zandee, op. cit., p. 7, citing C. Bezold, Babylonisch-Assyrisches Glossar, 69b; cf. Nibley, n. 2, above, for other examples; see also L. W. King, Babylonian Religion, pp. 179-80; Descent of Ishtar, obverse, line 8.
16. CAD, E, 308; kur.nu.GI₄.a = KI-tim, or = er-šê-et la tari, citing the lexical series of Antagal G 20, and Lu Excerpt, II, 65; AHw, 245a, has KUR.NU.GE₄; cf. AHEP, 3 pp. 107a, 108ab.

RFSmith 1980
On her 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

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 these sources closely parallel the very words of the full context of II Ne 1:14:

Rise, shake off your dust!  
Coffin Text, Spell I, 7lab

Raise yourself, throw off your dust, . . . loosen your bonds, . . . !  
Pyramid Text, 1363ac (following Faulkner); Coffin Text, III, 248ac

Raise yourself, shake off the dust of the earth which is on your flesh!  
Pyramid Text, 554ad (following Faulkner & Zandee)

Throw off your dust, loosen your bonds!  
Pyramid Texts, 2008ab; 2009a (following Faulkner)

Your ties are loosened!  
Pyramid Text, 593b

Zandee hints that these ties (ts.t) or bands of death are not necessarily mummy bandages. 19 Egyptian ts.t also means "knot; vertebra," which shows a semantic range sufficient to include the idea of "chains" (II Ne 1:13) as well. Zandee lists a host of other words which have similar meanings and usage, noting in particular Pyramid Text 2202:

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 Pyramid Text 1975ab:

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

Other examples are:

Truly, I live (again), after having fallen asleep [sdr].  
Book of the Dead, 41, Ill (Theban rec.)

You who hates sleep [qd], who is made tired, rise!  
Pyramid Text, 260b

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18. All these Egyptian examples cited in Zandee, op. cit., pp. 104-5.
20. Ibid., pp. 20-1, 78-81.
21. Ibid., pp. 81-85; this and following two examples.
Book of Mormon: Shakespeare? - 6 -

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." 22

Landing at the land that loves silence. Song of Neferhotep I, line 9

There is no coming back. Ibid., line 2423

Other of Zandee's observations may also be found to be pertinent to Mormons, e.g., on the second death, 24 sin, 25 etc.

Lehi's statement in II Ne 1:15 (probably intended as a kind of "prophetic perfect),

But behold, the Lord hath redeemed by soul from hell!

is paralleled in the final chapter of the same chiastic book (II Ne 33:6) as well as biblically (see the attached sheet). 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 language!! This also demonstrates that the purported Shakespearean quote can hardly be given credence as something from a late period. Shakespeare is a relative latecomer to the phrase, and his context doesn't even fit as well as Lehi's does the complete ancient Near Eastern image of death and the netherworld, though I have provided a mere sampling of that context here. If later phrasing just happens (perhaps not so coincidentally) to fit certain portions of our context, then so much the better for Joseph—whose burden was to provide a contemporary mode of expressing such terms insofar as his own private education allowed. The parallels with the KJV and with other books available to Joseph cannot be taken as anything more than this 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 the later examples.

22. Ibid., pp. 12, 53.
24. Ibid., pp. 20, 186-8.
25. Ibid., pp. 41-4.
13. O that ye would awake;  
Awake from a deep sleep,  
Yea, even from the sleep of hell,  
And shake off the awful chains by which ye are bound,  
Which are the chains which bind the children of men; Alma 5:9-11  
That they are carried away captive  
Down to the eternal gulf of misery and woe!  

14. Awake! And arise from the dust,  
And hear the words of a trembling parent,  
Whose limbs ye must soon lay down  
In the cold and silent grave,  
From whence no traveler can return;  
A few more days  
And I go the way of all the earth.  

15. But behold,  
The Lord hath redeemed my soul from hell,  
I have beheld his glory,  
And I am encircled about eternally  
In the arms of his love.


1. Fyr. 260b, 1975; BD (Theban recension); Arabic innaamu 'awju-'Imauti, "sleep is the brother of death" (Lane), Ugaritica, VI:184:1.
2. Coffin Text, Spell I, 7lab; Fyr. 2008ab; 2009a; 654a; 1363a.
3. C T III, 248ae; Fyr. 593b, 1363ac; 2202; Ps 18:5-6 (Heb).
4. C T I, 7lab; Fyr. 654ad; 1363ac; 2008a; 2009a; 260b; Eg. ëmm, "dust"; Albright, YGC, p. 66, n. 49, in Amarna letters; cf. On 3:19, 18:27; see also n. 8, below.
6. CT V, 26a; Neferhotep I, 9; Eloq. Peas., 20, 12; BD (Theban rec.); the Vizier and H.P. of Amon under Amen-Ḥotep III said (on his monument): "I have reached this (state) by silence and coolness," A. Varille, BIFAO, XXX (1930), 504, cited in J. Wilson, CAE, 299, n. 33.
7. Pyr. 2175ab; Antef VI, 8; VII, 2-3; Paser, 12; Neferhotep I, 24; Job 7:9-10, 10:20-1, 14:12, 16:22.
8. Pyr. 654ad; BD Ib (Theban rec.), sm3 t3, "burial, union with the earth"—going into the Netherworld; U. Cassuto, Tarbiz, 14 (1942), 1-10, for parallel of "earth"/"dust," #1 (Heb.).
11. Eg. lq, "envelop," and hpt, "embrace," using the encircling-arm sign; see Gardiner, EG, §24, and Sign-list D 32; Pyr. 1341; 1629; Gardiner & Davies, Tomb of Amenemhet (Thebes), 10, 27; Shipwrecked Sailor, 6; Sinuhe, E, 143; Sethe & Helck, Urkunden der 18. Dynastie, 229, 4; Grapow, Religiöse Urkunden, 48, 6; Pyr. 375, ฤฤฤ./ฤฤฤ.

#On Ug. Baal Epic and Ps 63:4-6, see YCC, p. 123, n. 80 (including ICIs, yrd).