



Type: KnowWhy

KnowWhy #491 - How Are the Words of the Book of Mormon Like “One That Hath a Familiar Spirit”?

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Published by: Springville, UT; Book of Mormon Central, 2018

Abstract: The Book of Mormon’s use the term “familiar spirits” is related to the ancient practice of necromancy that was forbidden by God in the Old Testament. However, instead of condoning this practice, the Book of Mormon turns it on its head, showing how the God of Israel can allow the dead to speak to the living in a righteous and holy way.



KnoWhy #491
December 6, 2018



HOW ARE THE WORDS OF THE BOOK OF MORMON LIKE “ONE THAT HATH A FAMILIAR SPIRIT”?

“For those who shall be destroyed shall speak unto them out of the ground, and their speech shall be low out of the dust, and their voice shall be as one that hath a familiar spirit.”

2 Nephi 26:16

THE KNOW

In his prophecies about the last days, Nephi declared that “those who shall be destroyed shall speak ... out of the ground, and their speech shall be low out of the dust, and their voice shall be as one that hath a familiar spirit” (2 Nephi 26:16). This passage is a reference to peoples in the Book of Mormon who were destroyed long ago. Readers may wonder, though, what a “familiar spirit” is and why the voice of deceased Nephites was being compared to an individual who possessed such a spirit.

First of all, it should be recognized that Nephi’s use of this term is an allusion to Isaiah 29:4.¹ The relevant passages and their shared words and phrases are highlighted in the following chart:²

2 Nephi 26:15–16	Isaiah 29:3–4
15 After my seed and the seed of my brethren shall have dwindled in unbelief, and shall have been smitten by the Gentiles; yea, after the Lord God shall have camped against them round about , and shall have laid siege against them with a mount , and raised forts against them ; and after they shall have been brought down low in the dust, even that they are not, yet the words of the righteous shall be	3 And I will camp against thee round about , and will lay siege against thee with a mount , and I will raise forts against thee . 4 And thou shalt be brought down , and shalt speak out of the ground , and thy speech shall be low out of the dust , and thy voice shall be, as of one that hath a <i>familiar spirit</i> , out of the ground ,

written, and the prayers of the faithful shall be heard, and all those who have dwindled in unbelief shall not be forgotten.

16 For those who shall be destroyed **shall speak** unto them **out of the ground, and their speech shall be low out of the dust, and their voice shall be as one that hath a *familiar spirit***, for the Lord God will give unto him power, that he may whisper concerning them, even as it were **out of the ground; and their speech shall whisper out of the dust.**

and thy speech shall whisper out of the dust.

So, before trying to figure out what Nephi meant by a “familiar spirit,” readers first need to understand what Isaiah had in mind. Throughout the Old Testament, “familiar spirits” are almost exclusively discussed in a negative way. A familiar spirit was typically understood as the ghost of someone who had passed away. And those who consulted such spirits, usually to divine the future, were called necromancers.³ Several biblical passages, such as Leviticus 19:31, expressly prohibited Israelites from seeking out such spirit mediums: “Regard not them that have familiar spirits, neither seek after wizards, to be defiled by them.”⁴

Isaiah’s use of “familiar spirit” in Isaiah 29, however, is quite unusual.⁵ Isaiah prophesied that after being besieged and presumably destroyed, Ariel (Jerusalem)⁶ would “speak out of the ground, and thy speech shall be low out of the dust, and thy voice shall be, as of one that hath a *familiar spirit*” (Isaiah 29:4). Isaiah’s use of “familiar spirit” clearly evokes the concept of necromancy or communicating with the dead.⁷ His purpose was to warn the people of their impending destruction. If they wanted to communicate with the living, they would have to do so as spirits because their physical bodies would soon be destroyed.⁸ Yet the appropriateness and purpose of this communication, as well as how literal or figurative it may be, is less than clear in the text.

What is clear is that Nephi felt at liberty to “liken” this metaphor to his own people, just as Isaiah had done with the people of Jerusalem.⁹ Much like deceased spirits were thought to be able to communicate with the living, Book of Mormon prophets knew that their words would speak to future generations “out of the dust” long after they had passed away (2 Nephi 26:16).¹⁰ Joseph Smith can be seen as a divinely prepared messenger through which these words have been conveyed to future generations (see 2 Nephi 27:19–22).¹¹ And just as the familiar spirits were often sought to predict the future, the Book of Mormon contains many prophecies about the last days, including warnings of impending calamities if people don’t repent.¹²

THE WHY

Obviously, Isaiah’s prophecy did not approve of illicit necromancy (Isaiah 8:20; 19:3–4). Instead, he was saying that fallen Jerusalem’s ability to communicate to future generations would be *similar* to the voice of a spirit of a dead person. In other words, Isaiah was using necromancy as a metaphor for the sake of comparison.¹³ It is therefore natural and appropriate that Book of Mormon prophets felt they could follow Isaiah’s prophetic example.

Yet, like all metaphors, there is a point where the Book of Mormon’s similarities with necromancy end and important differences begin. Ancient necromancy or soothsaying sought to bring information to light through the use of unauthorized, illegitimate means. In particular, ancient mediums were thought to summon spirits from the underworld who chirped and moaned to the living.¹⁴ In stark contrast, the Book of Mormon was literally brought forth from the dust of upstate New York by an exalted heavenly being to share its powerful truths and testimony of Jesus Christ with the world today.¹⁵

In bringing forth the Book of Mormon, God allowed the dead to communicate the law and testimony of the Lord with the living (see Isaiah 8:19). This was done by sending His angel Moroni to speak clearly to Joseph Smith and also through the miraculous translation of the Book of Mormon itself.¹⁶ Unlike the mumbling of the diviners of ancient times, God did this through His own “gift and power” (1 Nephi 13:35; cf. 2 Nephi

27:12–26), as Lord of both the living and the dead (Romans 14:9).¹⁷

In a way, the Book of Mormon shows that God’s ability to allow the dead to speak to the living is superior to the forbidden practice of necromancy condemned in the Old Testament. Taking an otherwise negative topic and transforming it into a positive spiritual message is not uncommon in the Bible.¹⁸ Old Testament prophets, for instance, would sometimes compare the God of Israel to the false gods of surrounding nations and show how He surpassed them in every way.¹⁹ When viewed in this light, the production of the Book of Mormon can be seen as a divinely orchestrated miracle that turns the traditional concept of necromancy on its head.²⁰

Thus, rather than being brought forth through an unsanctioned act of divination, the Book of Mormon has been brought forth to the world of the living by the power of Christ.²¹ Its words symbolically connect people living today with deceased prophets from long ago.²² Some of these prophets, like Nephi and Moroni, even saw our day. They knew that we would have their record, and in some cases, they wrote as if they were speaking directly to us from the past.²³ As we open our hearts to their message, it will be as if they are speaking to us from the dust, as a true and living voice from the past.

FURTHER READING

Amanda Colleen Brown, “[Out of the Dust: An Examination of Necromancy as a Literary Construct in the Book of Mormon](#),” *Studia Antiqua* 14, no. 2 (2016): 27–37.

Grant Hardy, “[2 Nephi 26 and 27 as Midrash](#),” *Insights* 24, no. 5 (2004): 2–3.

Robert A. Cloward, “[Isaiah 29 and the Book of Mormon](#),” in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 191–247.

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NOTES

1. See Book of Mormon Central, “[Why Does Nephi Use Isaiah 29 as Part of His Own Prophecy?](#) (2 Nephi 26:16),” *KnoWhy* 52 (March 11, 2016); Robert A. Cloward, “[Isaiah 29 and the Book of Mormon](#),” in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald

W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 191–247.

2. Emphasis is added to all scriptural passages in the chart.
3. See Amanda Colleen Brown, “[Out of the Dust: An Examination of Necromancy as a Literary Construct in the Book of Mormon](#),” *Studia Antiqua* 14, no. 2 (2016): 29–32.
4. See also, [Leviticus 20:6, 27](#) and [Deuteronomy 18:10–11; 1 Samuel 28:3, 7–9; 2 Kings 21:6; Isaiah 8:19; 19:3](#). For further descriptions of these practices as being evil, see [1 Chronicles 10:13; 2 Chronicles 33:6](#). In all of these passages, the word “familiar” is implied in the Hebrew words for ghost or spirit.
5. For a discussion of Isaiah 29’s unique usage of imagery related to necromancy and several possible ways to understand it, see Brown, “[Out of the Dust](#),” 32–34.
6. For a discussion of the term *Ariel*, its possible etymology, and its association with Jerusalem, see Cloward, “[Isaiah 29 and the Book of Mormon](#),” 192.
7. See [Isaiah 8:19; 19:3](#). See also, Brown, “[Out of the Dust](#),” 32–33. For a different interpretation, see Paul Y. Hoskisson, “[The ‘Familiar Spirit’ in 2 Nephi 26:16](#),” *Insights* 28, no. 6 (2008): 7.
8. “In other words, [Jerusalem’s] voice will be like that of a ghost from the underworld, chirping from the dust as one seemed to expect when the necromancers contemporary with Isaiah called up the dead for consultation with the living ([Isaiah 8:19](#)). If Jerusalem was not dead yet, the best that one could say for her was that she already had one foot in the grave.” J. J. M. Roberts, *First Isaiah* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2015), 364.
9. For instance, Nephi earlier declared that he would “write more of the words of Isaiah, for my soul delighteth in his words. For I will *liken* his words unto my people” ([2 Nephi 11:2](#); emphasis added). See also, Grant Hardy, “[2 Nephi 26 and 27 as Midrash](#),” *Insights* 24, no. 173 (2004): 2–3.
10. The plural sense of this text is reflected in the Septuagint translation of [Isaiah 29:4](#), “thy voice shall be as *they* [*phonountes*] that speak out of the earth” (emphasis added). For the importance of dust-related imagery, see Brown, “[Out of the Dust](#),” 29; Cloward, “[Isaiah 29 and the Book of Mormon](#),” 193–194; Jeff Lindsay, “[‘Arise from the Dust’: Insights from Dust-Related Themes in the Book of Mormon \(Part 1: Tracks from the Book of Moses\)](#),” *Interpreter* 22 (2016): 179–232; Jeff Lindsay, “[‘Arise from the Dust’: Insights from Dust-Related Themes in the Book of Mormon \(Part 2: Enthronement, Resurrection, and Other Ancient Motifs from the ‘Voice from the Dust’\)](#),” *Interpreter* 22 (2016): 233–237; Jeff Lindsay, “[‘Arise from the Dust’: Insights from Dust-Related Themes in the Book of Mormon \(Part 3: Dusting Off a Famous Chiasmus, Alma 36\)](#),” *Interpreter* 22 (2016): 295–318.
11. See Brown, “[Out of the Dust](#),” 36–37.
12. See Book of Mormon Central, “[What Do Nephi and Isaiah Say about the End Times?](#) (2 Nephi 23:6),” *KnoWhy* 46 (March 3, 2016).
13. See Cloward, “[Isaiah 29 and the Book of Mormon](#),” 200.
14. For a modern condemnation of necromancy, see Robert J. Matthews, “[What the Scriptures Say about Astrology, Divination, Spirit Mediums, Magic, Wizardry, and Necromancy](#),” *Ensign*, March 1974, online at lds.org.
15. Clearly there is a significant difference between God bringing angels to speak to Joseph Smith and a medium bringing spirits back from the dead to speak with people. For more on

- the distinction between magic and religion, see Eric A. Eliason, "[Seer Stones, Salamanders, and Early Mormon 'Folk Magic' in the Light of Folklore Studies and Bible Scholarship](#)," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (2016): 73–93, esp. 86–92. It should also be recognized that the Book of Mormon repeatedly condemns various forms of witchcraft. See [Alma 1:32](#); [Mormon 1:19](#); [2:10](#).
16. See Book of Mormon Central, "[Why Did the Book of Mormon Come Forth as a Miracle?](#)" (2 Nephi 27:23)," *KnoWhy* 273 (February 10, 2017).
 17. The Bible actually contains several examples of deceased or translated persons interacting with the living. For example, Christ and his chief apostles communicated with Moses, Elijah, and John the Baptist while on the Mount of Transfiguration ([Matt. 17:1–13](#); [Mark 9:2–13](#); [Luke 9:28–36](#)). See Larry E. Dahl, "[Who appeared to Peter, James, and John on the Mount of Transfiguration? What was the purpose of their appearance?](#)" *Ensign*, April 1983, online at lds.org. It should also be noted that Jesus Christ Himself appeared to His disciples after His resurrection and committed them to share His message to the world. While Christ's resurrected body makes the circumstances somewhat different, his post-death visitation to a select group of mortals to communicate a message to the living is conceptually similar to necromancy.
 18. For instance, Jesus compared God to an unjust judge ([Luke 18:1–8](#)), a woman to a dog at a table ([Matthew 15:26–27](#)), the apostle Peter to Satan ([Matthew 16:23](#)), and the reception of Christ's Atonement to an act of cannibalism ([John 6:51–56](#)). Yet, just because Jesus compared the sacrament to eating His flesh and blood doesn't at all mean that Jesus was condoning the literal eating of human flesh or the drinking of human blood. While each of these metaphors teaches a powerful and holy spiritual truth, they can be confusing or unsettling if they are interpreted incorrectly.
 19. See, for example, John A. Tvedtnes, "[Elijah: Champion of Israel's God](#)," *Ensign*, July 1990, online at lds.org. For other examples of prophets drawing upon pagan myths and beliefs to help teach spiritual truths, see Book of Mormon Central, "[Why Does Jacob Choose a 'Monster' as a Symbol for Death and Hell?](#)" (2 Nephi 9:10)," *KnoWhy* 34 (February 16, 2016); Book of Mormon Central, "[Why Are Later Jewish Sources Relevant to Texts in the Book of Mormon?](#)" (3 Nephi 4:28)," *KnoWhy* 478 (October 23, 2018).
 20. As explained by Brown, "the imagery necromancy conjures in these passages is both rooted in the actual practice and transmits these concepts through metaphor to juxtapose YHWH [Jehovah] against popular religion and its practices." Brown, "[Out of the Dust](#)," 37.
 21. The prophet Nephi declared, "we talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ, and we write according to our prophecies, that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins" ([2 Nephi 25:26](#)).
 22. Elder Richard G. Scott has explained that the scriptures can become "stalwart friends that are not limited by geography or calendar." Richard G. Scott, "[The Power of Scripture](#)," *Ensign*, November 2011, 6, online at lds.org. See also, Book of Mormon Central, "[Why Is It Important to Keep Records?](#)" (1 Nephi 9:5)," *KnoWhy* 345 (July 28, 2017).
 23. See [2 Nephi 33:10–15](#); [Mormon 8](#); [Mormon 9](#); [Moroni 10](#).