

PSALM 18:4–5

The imagery used in these verses of being surrounded by enemies, drowning, and being pulled down to hell by cords or ropes is a recurring metaphor for a feeling of impending doom found in the Psalms and in the words of some ancient prophets. These expressions convey a message of dependence on Jehovah for deliverance from sin, sickness, intense trials, actual or figurative enemies, or often a mix of these, perhaps to allow the audience to personalize the message for their own pressing needs.

A key expression in verse 4 is the Hebrew phrase *heveli-mot*, translated in the King James Version as “the sorrows of death” (see also Psalm 116:3). Other Bible translations use “bands of death” (Darby); “cords of death”;¹ “ropes of death” (New Living Translation, Holman Christian Standard Bible); or “snares of death” (Psalm 116:3 English Standard Version). The Hebrew word *hevel* can carry the meaning of “sorrow, pain, travail” and is used to speak of the sorrow and pain of, among other things, drowning, death, and, quite frequently, childbirth.²

In what can be seen as a testament to the ancient Hebrew background of the Book of Mormon, both Abinadi and Alma the Younger seem to be familiar with the Hebrew phrase *heveli-mot*, rendered in English in the Book of Mormon as “the bands of death.”³ Both Alma and Abinadi discuss “the bands of death” in conjunction with the Atonement and Resurrection of Christ. In every instance Abinadi used the phrase, he associated the expression with Jesus Christ, using either the title “Christ” or “the Son.” Alma used the phrase in much the same way, generally focusing on Christ and His Resurrection. Isaiah also seemed to make this connection in Isaiah 26:16–19.

1 New International Version, English Standard Version, New American Standard Bible, International Standard Version, American Standard Version, Easy-to-Read Version, World English Bible.

2 See, for example, Isaiah 13:8; 26:16–19; Jeremiah 13:21.

3 See Mosiah 15:8, 9, 20, 23; 16:7; Alma 4:14; 5:7, 9–10; 7:12; 11:41; 22:14.

A close reading of Psalm 18 reveals imagery that can, similarly, be understood as prefiguring Jesus Christ's death and resurrection (and perhaps also His baptism). The psalm presents a royal figure, the Lord's "anointed" (verse 50), suffering with the "bands of death" and drowning in the "floods of destruction" (verse 4; translation mine). He sees himself as being down in hell/Sheol (the "grave" or realm of the dead; verse 5). The king cries out to God and is then miraculously saved from death. Verse 16 states: "He [God] reached down from on high and took hold of me; he drew me out of deep waters" (New International Version). Verse 19 then implies that the anointed king has ascended to a safe place, perhaps to heaven.

Psalm 18 provides an awesome and inspiring message of the power of God to deliver us from our most painful, sorrowful, and frightening trials, just as He was able to hear the cries of His Messiah and save Him from the awful grasp of the chains of death and hell.

Related verses

Psalm 22:12–16

Psalm 69:2

Psalm 107:10–14

Psalm 116:3

2 Samuel 22:5–6

Jonah 2:2–7

Isaiah 13:8

Isaiah 26:16–19

Isaiah 37:3

Hosea 13:9–14

Micah 4:9–10

Romans 6:4

Colossians 2:12

1 Peter 3:21

Mosiah 15:8, 9, 20, 23

Mosiah 16:7

Alma 4:14

Alma 5:7, 9–10

Alma 7:12

Alma 11:41

Alma 22:14

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