The Sôd of Yhwh and the Endowment

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Abstract: Most scholars agree that sôd, when used in relationship to God, refers to the heavenly council, which humans may sometimes visit to learn divine mysteries or obtain a prophetic message to deliver to humankind. Biblical texts on this subject can be compared to passages in Latter-day Saint scripture (e.g., 1 Nephi 1:8-18; Abraham 3:22-23). In this article, William Hamblin succinctly summarizes this concept and argues that the Latter-day Saint temple endowment serves as a ritual and dramatic participation in the divine council of God, through which God reveals to the covenanter details of the plan of salvation — the hidden meaning and purpose of creation and the cosmos.

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In its broader sense the Hebrew term sôd (סוד) means a confidential discussion, a secret or plan, a circle of confidants, or council. Nearly all scholars now agree that sôd, when used in relationship to God, refers to the heavenly council/sôd of God, which humans may sometimes visit to learn divine mysteries or obtain a prophetic message to deliver to
humankind. The celestial members of this council are variously called the “host of heaven” (1 Kings 22:19), “gods” or “sons of God” (Psalms 82:1, 6), or “Holy Ones.” Sôd can refer to either the divine council itself or to the deliberative secret results of that council — that is the secret plans of the council — which a prophet is sometimes permitted to learn or to reveal to humankind. Only those who are part of the divine sôd council know the sôd/secret plan, and only those who are given explicit permission may reveal that sôd to humankind. This concept is illustrated in a number of biblical passages:

In 1 Kings 22:19–23, the prophet Michaiah describes his vision of the sôd as follows:

19 I saw Yhwh sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him on his right hand and on his left; 20 and Yhwh said, “Who will entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?” And one said one thing, and another said another. 21 Then a spirit came forward and stood before Yhwh, saying, “I will entice him.” 22 And Yhwh said to him, “By what means?” And he said, “I will go out, and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets. “ And he said, “You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do so.” 23 Now therefore behold, Yhwh has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets; Yhwh has declared disaster for you.

Notice here that Michaiah participated in the sôd of Yhwh and therefore knows Yhwh’s secret plan and therefore can accurately prophesy, whereas the other court prophets, with no knowledge of Yhwh’s sôd, are deceived. Note, too, the important motif that God is sitting on his throne surrounded by his sôd. Biblical divine enthronement scenes and throne theophanies often imply a meeting of the sôd.

In Isaiah 6, Isaiah enters the presence of Yhwh seated on his throne in the temple (6:1). There he meets with the divine council (6:2–3) and is invested with a mission to reveal the deliberations of the council to humankind (6:8–9). Note that in Isaiah the sôd of Yhwh meets in the celestial temple, where Yhwh sits enthroned just as in Michaiah’s vision.

Jeremiah 23:16–18 describes Jeremiah’s response to prophets who prophesy victory for Judah over Babylon. Jeremiah writes:

16 Thus says Yhwh of hosts: “Do not listen to the words of the [false] prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of Yhwh. 17 They say continually to those who despise...
the word of Yhwh, ’It shall be well with you’; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, ‘No disaster shall come upon you.’ 18 But who among them has stood in the sôd of Yhwh to see and to hear his word, or who has paid attention to his word and listened?

Jeremiah 23:21–22 continues this theme, when Yhwh himself speaks:

21 “I did not send the [false] prophets, yet they ran; I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied. 22 But if they had stood in my sôd, then they would have proclaimed my words to my people, and they would have turned them from their evil way, and from the evil of their deeds.”

The obvious implications of these two passages is that Jeremiah has “stood in the sôd of Yhwh,” just like Michaiah and Isaiah before him, and therefore knows Yhwh’s sôd/secret plan, which he can reveal to humankind through his prophecies. The distinction between a true prophet and a false one is that the true prophet has “stood in the sôd of Yhwh,” while the false prophet hasn’t. This precisely parallels the description of Micaiah’s vision of the sôd, while the false prophets don’t know God’s sôd/secret plan.

Psalm 82 offers a fascinating description of the “council of God”:

1 God (אלהים ĕlōhîm) has taken his place in the council (עדה ūdā) of God (אלהים ĕl); in the midst of the gods (אלהים ĕlōhîm) he holds judgment. . . . 6 I [God] said, “You [of the divine council/עדה ūdā] are gods (אלהים ĕlōhîm), sons of the Most High (בני עליון benê ‘elyôn), all of you.”

In this meeting of the “council of God,” God calls the members of his sôd “gods” and “sons of the Highest.”

Amos 3:7 — a passage often quoted by LDS — describes Yhwh’s sôd as follows: “For the Lord Yhwh doesn’t do anything (דבר dābār) without revealing his sôd to his servants the prophets.” Amos provides here a summary principle paralleling the explicit examples of Michaiah, Isaiah and Jeremiah given above. God reveals the sôd (secret plan) of his sôd (divine council) to his prophets.

Psalm 25:14 adds an interesting covenantal aspect to the sôd. “The sôd of Yhwh is for those who honor him; he reveals his covenant (ברית berît) to them.” In this verse knowledge of the sôd of Yhwh is directly linked
with the revelation of his covenant.

Finally, Job provides a description of God’s sôd, composed of the “sons of God,” meeting in council (Job 1:6, 2:1). In Job 15:8, Eliphaz insists that Job has not sat in the sôd and therefore cannot understand God’s will regarding Job.

All of this is, of course, familiar to many Latter-day Saints, since these texts have been compared to several passages in LDS scripture which also describe the sôd of Yhwh (e.g., 1 Nephi 1:8–18; Abraham 3:22–23). I would like, however, to move one step further and suggest that we should understand the LDS Endowment as a ritual and dramatic participation in the sôd/divine council of God, through which God reveals to the covenanter his sôd/secret plan of salvation — the hidden meaning and purpose of creation and the cosmos. When we consider the Endowment drama in this way — remembering that in Isaiah the meeting place of the sôd of Yhwh is in the temple (Isaiah 6:1) — the Endowment fits broadly in the biblical tradition of ritually observing or participating in “the council/sôd of Yhwh” described in these biblical texts.

Bibliography

Heiser, M. “You’ve Seen One Elohim, You’ve Seen Them All? A Critique


Summary of issues at: http://answering-lds-critics.blogspot.com/

Notes


2. See Bibliography.


4. Translations are generally modified by me from the English Standard Version (ESV), which is a modernized and corrected KJV.


6. The Hebrew dābār can mean “thing” or “word.”

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