

INTERPRETER

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A JOURNAL OF MORMON SCRIPTURE

Volume 4 · 2013 · Pages 147-154

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William J. Hamblin

Offprint Series

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THE SÔD OF YHWH AND THE ENDOWMENT

William J. Hamblin

Abstract: In the Hebrew Bible, the Sôd of God was a council of celestial beings who consulted with God, learned His sôd/secret plan, and then fulfilled that plan. This paper argues that the LDS endowment is, in part, a ritual reenactment of the sôd, where the participants observe the sôd/council of God, learn the sôd/secret plan of God, and covenant to fulfill that plan.

In its broader sense the Hebrew term *sôd* (סוד) means a confidential discussion, a secret or plan, a circle of confidants, or council.¹ 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.² The celestial members of this council are variously called the “host of heaven” (1 Kings 22:19), “gods” or “sons of God” (Ps. 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

1. L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 745; J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975–2003), 10:171–77.

2. See “General Bibliography” at the end of the paper.

sôd to humankind.³ 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.⁴

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

3. Part of this is reflected in the Bible, where prophets are often expressly “sent” from YHWH (Hebrew *Yahweh*, anglicized as *Jehovah*) with a message—hat is they are to reveal YHWH’s *sôd*. See Exod. 3:10, 15, 7:16; Deut. 34:11; Josh. 24:5; 1 Sam. 15:1; 2 Sam. 12:1, 25; Isa. 6:8–9; Jer. 1:7, 7:25, 19:14, Ezek. 2:3–4; Mic. 6:4; Hag. 1:12; Zech. 2:12, 13, 15; Mal. 3:23; Ps 105:26. See James Ross, “The Prophet as Yahweh’s Messenger,” in Bernhard W. Anderson and Walter Harrelson, eds., *Israel’s Prophetic Heritage: Essays in Honor of James Muilenburg* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 98–107.

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

sôd. (22:19). Biblical divine enthronement scenes and throne theophanies often imply a meeting of the *sôd*.⁵

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."

5. On the significance of throne theophanies, see Timo Eskola, *Messiah and the Throne* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001).

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 *ēlōhîm*) has taken his place in the council (עדה *’ădat*) of God (אל *’el*); in the midst of the gods (אלהים *ēlōhîm*) he holds judgment. . . . 6 I [God] said, “You [of the divine council/*’ădat*] are gods (אלהים *ēlōhîm*), sons of the Most High (בני עליין *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*)⁶ 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 (*berît*) to them.” In this verse knowledge of the *sôd* of YHWH is directly linked with the revelation of his covenant.

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

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).⁷ 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 (Isa. 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.

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William J. Hamblin is Professor of History at Brigham Young University (Provo, Utah, USA), specializing in the ancient and medieval Near East. He is the author of dozens of academic articles and several books, most recently, Solomon's Temple: Myth and History, with David Seely (Thames and Hudson, 2007). In the fall of 2010 his first novel was published (co-authored with

Neil Newell): The Book of Malchus, (Deseret Book, 2010). A fanatical traveler and photographer, he spent 2010 teaching at the BYU Jerusalem Center, and has lived in Israel, England, Egypt and Italy, and traveled to dozens of other countries.

