

THE “FIERY DARTS OF THE ADVERSARY” IN 1 NEPHI 15:24

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After receiving a revelation (1 Nephi 11–14) that clarified the meaning of his father Lehi’s dream (1 Nephi 8), Nephi explained to his rebellious brothers the significance of the various symbols of that dream. Concerning the “rod of iron,” which led to the tree of life, Nephi recorded,

And I said unto them that it was the word of God; and whoso would hearken unto the word of God, and would hold fast unto it, they would never perish; neither could the temptations and the fiery darts of the adversary overpower them unto blindness, to lead them away to destruction. (1 Nephi 15:24)

The inclusion of the phrase “the fiery darts of the adversary” calls to mind Paul’s description of the various parts of the spiritual “armour of God” that disciples of Jesus are exhorted to put on in their spiritual warfare against evil (Ephesians 6:11–17). “Above all,” Paul recommends as part of this defensive ensemble, take “the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked” (Ephesians 6:16). It is tempting to see 1 Nephi 15:24 as simply echoing the language of the King James rendition of Ephesians 6:16. After all, the phrase “fiery darts” appears nowhere else in the KJV. This may lead some to wonder about the connection between this New Testament phrase and Nephi’s words. Did Joseph Smith imitate (or, as critics would suggest, plagiarize) either consciously or unconsciously the language of the King James Version in this Book of Mormon passage, or is more going on here?

There may indeed be something more going on here — and something that works in favor of the Book of Mormon’s historicity. Although not appearing in the KJV, the phrase “fiery darts” or “fiery arrows” appears in the Hebrew of Psalm 7. This psalm depicts Yahweh as both a “refuge ... from all of [David’s] enemies” (v. 1) and a divine warrior who executes judgment against David’s foes. It includes a cry unto the Lord to “rise up ... in [his] anger” (v. 6) and overthrow the wicked in righteous judgment (vv. 7–9). The psalm contains striking martial imagery of God as a

“shield” (v. 10), armed and ready for combat. The psalmist exclaims, “If one does not repent, God will whet his sword; he has bent and strung his bow; he has prepared his deadly weapons, making his arrows *fiery shafts*” (vv. 12–13 NRSV, emphasis added). On the other hand, the KJV’s rendering of the same verse reads, “He hath also prepared for him the instruments of death; he ordaineth his arrows *against the persecutors*” (emphasis added). But as will be seen below, the KJV’s rendering of this verse is undoubtedly in error, for the underlying Hebrew of Psalm 7:13 contains the word for “fiery shafts” or “fiery darts” as is also found in the English translation of Ephesians 6:16.

The Hebrew underlying the NRSV’s “making his arrows fiery shafts” (v. 13 in English and v. 14 in Hebrew) is *ḥiṣṣāyw lēdōlēqiyw yip’āl*. The King James Bible translators misunderstood *dālaq* (“to burn,” “to inflame”) as meaning in this case “to pursue,” and thus rendered *dōlēqiyw* as “persecutors” (v. 13 KJV). While it is true that *dālaq* can mean (in a metaphorical sense) “hotly to pursue,” its primary definition is “to set on fire,” and this is certainly the meaning intended in this passage.¹ Thus, while the NRSV has produced an acceptable translation of v. 13, a more literal reading of the text would be, “he makes his arrows to [be] fiery.” Or, simply put another way, “he makes his fiery arrows.” This is clear when one consults both the Septuagint and the Vulgate translations of Psalm 7:13. In these two ancient translations of the Hebrew, *dōlēqiyw* is rendered with *kaiō* (“to burn,” “to kindle”)² and *conburō* (“to burn up”),³ respectively, thus erasing any doubt as to the KJV’s misreading of the Hebrew.

More significantly, the ancient Greek version renders *ḥiṣṣāyw* (“his arrows”) as *ta belē autou*. This is important to note, as the Greek word in Ephesians 6:16 for “darts” in “fiery darts” is the same noun—*belē* (*belos*). Rather than the short darts one might encounter in an English pub, *belos* (and its Hebrew equivalent *ḥēṣ*) means “missile” or “arrow.” Furthermore,

1 Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2001), 1:223; Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 196. With an understanding that the English word “persecutor” comes ultimately from the Latin *persecūtor* (to prosecute, pursue after), the translators of the KJV were (in this instance erroneously) following the idiomatic definition of *dālaq* with their choice of “persecutor” or someone who pursues or follows.

2 Henry Liddell and Robert Scott, *Liddell and Scott’s Greek–English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1891), 341.

3 Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879), s.v. *combūro*.

although it uses a different verb than *kaiō*, the phrase in Ephesians 6:16 is qualified by *pyroō*, the common Greek verb for “to burn.”⁴ Thus, there can be little question that the original Hebrew underlying Psalm 7:13 is a functional equivalent to the Greek that underlies Ephesians 6:16. Both passages speak of, basically, “set-on-fire missiles.”⁵

Historically, the use of fiery arrows or missiles is known in ancient Near Eastern warfare perhaps as early as the Neo-Assyrian period in the eighth century BC. Robert G. Grant reports that the Assyrian siege engines used during Sennacherib’s attack on Lachish in 701 BC were evidently “covered with dampened leather hides to protect [them] from flaming arrows — an incendiary weapon apparently used by both sides.”⁶ In the Persian and classical Greek periods, Herodotus (*Histories* 8.52) and Thucydides (*History* 2.75) mention the use of fiery missiles, both likewise in the context of siege warfare. Interestingly, Bernardino de Sahagún recorded at the time of the European conquest of the New World the ancient Aztec use of fiery arrows in Mesoamerican warfare in his *General History of the Things of New Spain* (the celebrated “Florentine Codex”).⁷

Incendiary arrows were also evidently used in dispelling infantry ranks. “With their shields on fire,” Williams explains, “soldiers were tempted to throw them down, thus making themselves more vulnerable to the enemy.” If that weren’t enough, “heavier loads of burning material were [also] launched by catapults, against which a shield was of little protection.”⁸ Such is recorded by the anonymous native author of the so-called *Anónimo Mexicano* (“a twelve-chapter document concerning

4 Liddell and Scott, *Liddell and Scott’s Greek–English Lexicon*, 619–620.

5 David J. Williams, *Paul’s Metaphors: Their Context and Character* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 240.

6 R. G. Grant, *Battle: A Visual Journey through 5,000 Years of Combat* (London: Dorling Kindersley, 2009), 17. See also the discussion provided by Steve A. Wiggins, *Weathering the Psalms: A Meteorological Survey* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 36–37. David Ussishkin suggests that the Assyrian reliefs depicting the siege of Lachish show “the defenders standing on the wall ... throwing flaming torches on the siege-machine” as opposed to firing incendiary arrows, but in any case incendiary projectiles (arrows or otherwise) were used. See David Ussishkin, “Excavations and Restoration work at Tel Lachish,” online at <http://archaeology.tau.ac.il/?page_id=2045> (accessed October 2, 2015).

7 Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain, Book 8 — Kings and Lords*, trans. Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble (Santa Fe, NM: The School of American Research, 1954), 53.

8 Williams, *Paul’s Metaphors*, 240.

the history of the Nahuatl Tlaxcalteca”⁹ who mentioned the use of “some sort of smoking arrows” in Aztec infantry combat.¹⁰

Thus, the phrase “fiery darts” (or more properly “fiery arrows” or “incendiary missiles”)¹¹ undoubtedly found currency in the world of the ancient Near East, including Israel, and is therefore not alien to the world of Nephi. Although one might still argue that the Book of Mormon’s English rendering of “fiery darts of the adversary” is an imitation of KJV Ephesians 6:16, there’s no controversy in proposing that the phrase would have been accessible to Nephi, who could have used a similar phrase on the plates that Joseph Smith could eventually have rendered into the equivalent KJV idiom of his day (see Doctrine and Covenants 1:24).¹²

Granted, the metaphor in 1 Nephi 15:24 is not likely to have been drawn directly from Psalm 7, as Nephi’s metaphor portrays the fiery darts as something evil or otherwise negative, whereas in Psalm 7 the fiery arrows are instruments of God’s justice against David’s enemies and therefore something positive. It is always possible, I suppose, that Nephi deliberately reversed the imagery of God’s avenging fiery arrows in Psalm 7 into something negative (Satan’s fiery arrows of temptation), but I personally find this unlikely, given Nephi’s piety. Rather, I am suggesting that the metaphor and language in 1 Nephi 15:24 fits comfortably in an ancient Near Eastern setting. Psalm 7 and the evidence of fiery arrows used in ancient Near Eastern warfare examined above indicates that Nephi’s metaphor need not be strictly seen as coming from Ephesians, but rather could easily have been available to the prophet in his ancient Israelite cultural setting.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that it would have been practically impossible for Joseph Smith to have stumbled upon any of this, as first, the KJV, the only biblical translation feasibly accessible to the Prophet,¹³ mistranslated Psalm 7:13, and second, Joseph began his study of Hebrew

9 Richley H. Crapo and Bonnie Glass-Coffin, eds., *Anónimo Mexicano* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2005), 2.

10 Crapo and Glass-Coffin, *Anónimo Mexicano*, 40.

11 Williams, *Paul’s Metaphors*, 222.

12 As a bonus, the Book of Mormon’s singular “the adversary” comes closer to the Greek underlying Ephesians 6:16, which reads *tou ponērou* or “the evil one” (cf. the NRSV), as opposed to the KJV’s ambiguous “wicked,” which in English could be construed as either a collective singular or a plural. If one is going to suggest that Joseph Smith was simplistically cribbing from the KJV, one must account for the change in 1 Nephi 15:24 that brings the text closer to the underlying Greek than what is rendered by the KJV.

13 The Coverdale (1535), Matthew (1537), Great (1539), Geneva (1560), and Bishops’ (1568) Bible translations mishandled the Hebrew in the same manner as the

and Greek some five years *after* the translation of the Book of Mormon. While I wouldn’t at all call it “proof” of the Book of Mormon’s antiquity, the evidence examined above leads me to conclude that 1 Nephi 15:24 need not be seen as a sloppy plagiarism of Ephesians 6:16. Rather, I am convinced that even if the Prophet Joseph Smith imitated the language of the KJV in his English translation of the plates, Nephi’s metaphor of “the fiery darts of the adversary” in 1 Nephi 15:24 can ultimately be traced to the world of ancient Israel.

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KJV. Only Wycliffe’s (1382–95), based on the Vulgate, preserves the sense of the Hebrew of Psalm 7:13: “He hath fulli maad his arewis with brennynge thingis.”

