
SIMILE CURSES

“as a garment in a hot furnace” (Mosiah 12:3)

Simile curses are compelling literary forms that are found in the ancient Near East, the Old Testament,¹ and the Book of Mormon.² As the name suggests, a simile curse combines the elements of a simile with a curse.³ In literature a simile is a comparison of two things that is usually marked with the words *like* or *as*. For example, “The man is hungry *as* a bear” or “Her words cut *like* a knife” are similes. A curse is a declaration that misfortune or trouble will befall the subject of the curse. Simile curses can be found in certain prophecies, ancient treaties, and religious covenants.

An Old Testament example of a simile curse is found in 2 Kings 21:13, where the Lord states that he will “wipe Jerusalem as a man wipeth a dish, wiping it, and turning it upside down.” The simile compares Jerusalem to a dish, while the curse predicts the destruction of Jerusalem. Inasmuch as Judah’s king Manasseh and the inhabitants of Jerusalem had become thoroughly wicked, the Lord uttered the curse that Jerusalem would be destroyed so completely that it would become like a dirty dish that is wiped clean after one eats from it.

Another Old Testament simile curse appears in 1 Kings 14. That chapter first registers King Jeroboam's evil deeds and idolatries and then pronounces the curse: "Therefore, behold, I [the Lord] will bring evil upon the house of Jeroboam . . . and will take away the remnant of the house of Jeroboam, as a man taketh away dung, till it be all gone" (verse 10; see verses 7–8). According to the curse, the remnant of Jeroboam's family will be exiled—thrown out of their position of power and their place of habitation, just as excrement is taken out of the city and dumped in a heap of filth.

Here are two other examples of simile curses in the Old Testament:

I will break the pride of your power; and I will make your heaven as iron, and your earth as brass. (Leviticus 26:19; compare Deuteronomy 28:23)

The multitude of all the nations that fight against Ariel, even all that fight against her and her munition, and that distress her, shall be as a dream of a night vision. (Isaiah 29:7)

This unique form of expression in the Bible is also found in the Book of Mormon. Three examples are found in the story of King Noah. The Lord, speaking through his prophet Abinadi, curses King Noah because of his great wickedness. In a dramatic way, Abinadi stretches forth his hand, utters the words "Thus saith the Lord," and then pronounces three curses on Noah's head, each in the form of a simile:

It shall come to pass that the life of king Noah shall be valued *even as a garment in a hot furnace*; for he shall know that I am the Lord. (Mosiah 12:3; see verse 10)

Thou shalt be as a stalk, *even as a dry stalk of the field*, which is run over by the beasts and trodden under foot. (Mosiah 12:11)

Thou shalt be as the blossoms of a thistle, which, when it is fully ripe, if the wind bloweth, it is driven forth upon the face of the land. (Mosiah 12:12)

Noah's subsequent death by fire, fulfilling the three curses, is recorded in Mosiah 19:20.

In the Book of Mormon the narrative of Moroni raising the title of liberty contains three simile curses pronounced in a desperate circumstance requiring the people's fierce loyalty. The first is recorded in Alma 46:21: "When Moroni had proclaimed these words, behold, the people came running together with their armor girded about their loins, rending their garments in token, or as a covenant, that they would not forsake the Lord their God; or, in other words, if they should transgress the commandments of God, or fall into transgression, and be ashamed to take upon them the name of Christ, *the Lord should rend them even as they had rent their garments.*"

The next verse contains the two other simile curses. As the people throw their garments at Moroni's feet, they declare: "We covenant with our God, that *we shall be destroyed, even as our brethren in the land northward, if we shall fall into transgression; yea, he may cast us at the feet of our enemies, even as we have cast our garments at thy feet to be trodden under foot, if we shall fall into transgression*" (verse 22). Those who rallied to Moroni's standard could not afford to shrink from total commitment to defending the cause of liberty, and the simile curses were a means of galvanizing the recruits to fight to the death.

Another simile curse is uttered by a Nephite soldier during negotiations for a treaty. Raising the scalp of Zerahemnah high into the air, he proclaims, "*Even as this scalp has fallen to the earth, which is the scalp of your chief, so shall ye fall to the earth except ye will deliver up your weapons of war and depart with a covenant of peace*" (Alma 44:14).

A final example of a simile curse occurs in 1 Nephi 17:48. After Nephi reprimands his brothers because of their wickedness, they respond with anger and seek to throw him into the sea. Nephi counters with these words: "In the name of the Almighty God, I command you that ye touch me not, for I am filled with the power of God, even unto the consuming of my flesh; and whoso shall lay his hands upon me *shall wither even as a dried reed.*"

Simile curses in the Book of Mormon, which have the same form and purpose as those of the Bible and ancient Near East, are yet another subtle

Hebraistic feature that supports the claim that the Book of Mormon was framed in antiquity. What's more, it is doubtful that Joseph Smith was aware of their form or setting in scripture, since not many examples of simile curses appear in the Old Testament.

Notes

1. For an exploration of curses found in the Old Testament and ancient Near East, see Hillers, *Treaty-Curses*; Brichto, *Problem of the "Curse"*; Gevirtz, "West-Semitic Curses"; Blank, "Curse, Blasphemy, the Spell, and the Oath"; and Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 532.
2. See Ricks, "Oath Taking in the Old Testament"; Ricks, "Pattern in King Benjamin's Address"; Morrise, "Simile Curses in the Ancient Near East"; Tvedtnes, "Garment in a Hot Furnace"; and Parry, "Hebraisms and Other Ancient Peculiarities," 156–59.
3. For a definition of *simile* in light of the Old Testament, refer to Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible*, 727–33.