



Type: Book Chapter

Strange Ships and Shining Stones (A Not So Fantastic Story)

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Source: *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed.

Published: Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1988

Page(s): 340–358



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Strange Ships and Shining Stones (A Not So Fantastic Story)

Nothing in the Book of Mormon has elicited louder whoops and howls of derision than the account in the second and third chapters of the book of Ether of the ships of the Jaredites and their illumination by shining stones. This, according to J. C. Bennett, was the "climax" of all of Joseph Smith's indiscretions, in which he "used his utmost endeavors to see how far he could impose on the gullibility of mankind. It [would] be useless to make any further comments to prove the absurdities of this extraordinary book," and in 1855 T. Taylder declared this story to be nothing less than "a libel on the wisdom of God."¹ "It seems impossible," another investigator wrote, "for sensible men to credit such trash."² "My soul is filled with disgust at this monstrous absurdity," cried the Reverend C. Fenwick Ward as he perused the pages of Ether, "that I dare not trust myself to comment upon it."³ "Of the incredible things in the incredible book," the critical H. C. Sheldon concludes, "no item is perhaps more fantastic than that which recounts

This chapter first appeared in Improvement Era (July, 1956): 509-11, 514, 516; (August, 1956): 566-67, 602; (September, 1956): 630-32, 672-75. It was then reprinted in Book of Mormon Treasury (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1959), 133-51, and in 1964 was included as a chapter in the second edition of the present volume. Hence this chapter does not have an introductory prospectus or questions for discussion as do the other chapters in this book which were initially prepared as Melchizedek Priesthood lessons. Compare also CWHN 5:350-79.

the voyage of the Jaredites to America in very peculiarly constructed barges. Anyone who can believe this story ought to feel obliged to challenge the historicity of any marvellous tales of Alice in Wonderland," and in a work reprinted as recently as 1956, Mr. Biederwolf finds "the fantastic story of the passage of the Jaredites to America" one in which "the tales of Baron Münchhausen and Alice in Wonderland are certainly put in the shade."⁴

We cannot pass on to a closer consideration of the barges and the stones without remarking on a sore discrepancy between such reactions to the book of Ether and certain theories of its origin that are being put forth with great insistence by the present generation of Book of Mormon critics. Mrs. Brodie claims that Joseph Smith wrote the book of Ether as a sort of afterthought to cover up the scientific blunders and inaccuracies of the rest of the Book of Mormon which were causing him disturbing doubts and misgivings.⁵ But the fact is, as the above quotations show, that this particular book was greeted from the first as the most unscientific and utterly "fantastic" of all; and that fact disposes of Mrs. Brodie's theory without further ado. The hilarious reaction to Ether among the Gentiles also lets the air out of another argument that is being heavily exploited today to explain the Book of Mormon, namely that it was just an ordinary religious book faithfully reflecting the everyday world of sober and pious though superstitious "Yorkers."⁶ Actually the good Yorkers had fits when they read it. Ether was as wholly out of their world as it was removed from the whole world of contemporary science and scholarship, both biblical and profane. So let us have no more nonsense about a perfectly ordinary book that any reasonably clever Yankee could have written.

Where does the book of Ether stand today? In a state of total neglect, of course—what else could one expect? That leaves us free to point out to whoever is interested some of the really remarkable and puzzling coincidences

that the experts might stumble upon if they were ever to ask serious questions about Jared's ships and stones.

First about the ships. An important clue is the statement in Ether 6:7 that Jared's boats were built on the same pattern as Noah's ark. Then why don't the critics laugh their heads off at the ark? The answer to that is that some of them do, but the things that really tickle the critics of the Book of Mormon when they come to the story of Jared's ships are things that are *not* found in the Bible but *are* found in other and even more ancient sources that were not known to the world of Joseph Smith. The Bible is not the only ancient record that tells about the ark, nor does it pretend to give anything like an exhaustive description of it: following its directions alone, hundreds of illustrators, ancient, medieval, and modern, have attempted to show the world what Noah's ark looked like, only to prove by the variety and oddity of their efforts that students of the Bible haven't the remotest idea what the real ark was like. But can the non-biblical documents really help us? Of course they can, if they are read with a critical eye. What Bible scholar has ever hesitated to make the fullest use of Josephus or Pliny?

When almost a hundred years ago Layard unearthed in the library of Assurbanipal at Nineveh a Babylonian text of the Flood story dating from the seventh century B.C. and thus far older than any known text of the Bible, it was believed "impossible to question the fact that the primal version of the Biblical legend of the Deluge had been found." But when forty years later the University of Pennsylvania working at Nippur dug up a Sumerian version of the Deluge story that was a good fifteen centuries older than the Nineveh texts, it became apparent that the latter were anything but the "primal version" of the Flood story. For a generation the educated had insisted with loud and strident voices that Nineveh tablets had debunked the Bible once and for all, and then there suddenly appeared on the scene vastly older tablets whose story of the Flood differs

fundamentally from the two Nineveh versions, and agrees most remarkably with the biblical story in very essential details both as to contents and language.⁸ So after all it would have been far more accurate to have said that the book of Genesis was the “primal version” of which the Nineveh texts were the corrupt descendants, and not the other way round! But did the learned ever confess their blunder and apologize for years of dedicated rudeness and glib misrepresentation? You should live so long!

What we wish to point out here is that there are various versions of the Flood story floating about, all of which tell some of the story, none of which tell all of it. The most ancient of these versions substantiates the Bible account to a remarkable degree. Let us place these⁹ side by side with Ether’s description of the Jaredite ships, matching some twelve peculiarities of the latter with the same peculiarities of the *magur*-boat which was the ark of Utnapishtim, that being the Babylonian name for Noah. First the Jaredite vessels:

1. They were built “after the manner of barges which ye have hitherto built” (Ether 2:16). That is, except in some particulars, these boats were not a new design but followed an established and familiar pattern—there really were such boats.

2. They were built “according to the instructions of the Lord” (Ether 2:16).

3. “They were exceedingly tight, even that they would hold water like unto a dish; and the bottom thereof was tight like unto a dish; and the sides thereof were tight like unto a dish” (Ether 2:17).

4. “And the ends thereof were peaked” (Ether 2:17).

5. “And the top thereof was tight like unto a dish” (Ether 2:17).

6. “And the length thereof was the length of a tree” (Ether 2:17). “And they were small, and they were light upon the water, even like unto the lightness of fowl upon the water” (Ether 2:16).

7. "And the door thereof, when it was shut, was tight like unto a dish" (Ether 2:17).

8. "And the Lord said . . . thou shalt make a hole in the top thereof, and also in the bottom thereof; and when thou shalt suffer for air, thou shalt unstop the hole thereof, and receive air. And if it so be that the water come in upon thee, behold, ye shall stop the hole thereof, that ye may not perish in the flood" (p. 542, Book of Mormon, 1st ed.) An exacting editor by removing those very significant *thereof's* has made it appear that when Jared wanted air he was to open the top window of the boat and admit fresh air from the outside. But that is *not* what the original edition of the Book of Mormon says. For one thing, the ships had no windows communicating with the outside—"ye cannot have windows" (Ether 2:23); each ship had an airtight door (Ether 2:17), and that was all. Air was received not by opening and closing doors and windows, but by unplugging air holes ("thou shalt *unstop* the *hole* thereof, and receive air"), this being done *only* when the ship was not on the surface—"when thou shalt *suffer* for air," i.e., when they were not able to open the hatches, the ships being submerged (Ether 2:20).

This can refer only to a reserve supply of air, and indeed the brother of Jared recognizes that the people cannot possibly survive on the air contained within the ships at normal pressure: "We shall perish, for in them we cannot breathe, save it is the air which is in them; therefore we shall perish" (Ether 2:19). So the Lord recommended a device for trapping (compressing) air, with a "hole in the top thereof and also in the bottom thereof," not referring to the ship but to the air chamber itself. Note the peculiar language: "unstop" does not mean to open a door or window but to unplug a vent, here called a "hole" in contrast to the door mentioned in verse 17; it is specifically an air hole—"when thou shalt suffer for *air*, thou shalt unstop the hole *thereof*, and receive air" (1st ed.) When the crew find it impossible to remain on the surface—"and if it so be that the water come in upon thee" (Ether 2:20), they are to plug up the air chamber: "Ye shall stop the hole thereof, that ye may not perish in the flood." This, I believe, refers to replenishing the air supply on

the surface, lest the party suffocate when submerged – “that ye may not perish in the flood.”

9. “Ye shall be as a whale in the midst of the sea; for the mountain waves shall dash upon you” (Ether 2:24).

10. “Their flocks and herds, and whatsoever beast or animal or fowl that they should carry with them . . . got aboard of their vessels or barges” (Ether 6:4).

11. “The Lord . . . caused that there should be a furious wind” (Ether 6:5). “They were tossed upon the waves of the sea before the wind” (Ether 6:5). “The wind did never cease to blow . . . and thus they were driven . . . before the wind” (Ether 6:8).

12. “They were many times buried in the depths of the sea” (Ether 6:6). “When they were buried in the deep there was no water that could hurt them, their vessels being tight like unto a dish, and also they were *tight like unto the ark of Noah*” (Ether 6:7). “And no monster of the sea could break them, neither whale that could mar them” (Ether 6:10).

Now let us match each of these twelve points with a corresponding feature of the *magur*-boat that Utnapishtim built to survive the flood, not trusting our own interpretation but quoting from Hilprecht throughout:¹⁰

1. “This class of boats [writes Hilprecht], according to the Nippur version [the oldest], [were] in use before the Deluge.” In historic times the type still survived but only in archaic vessels used in ritual, the gods “in their boats . . . visiting each other in their temples during certain festivals . . . the Babylonian canals, serving as means of communication for the *magur*-boats. . . . [Billerbeck and Delitzsch] show that a certain class of boats really had such a shape.” All the main features of the prehistoric ritual divine *magur*-boat seem to have survived even to the present time in some of the huge river craft still found on the streams of southeast Asia – veritable arks built in the shape of Jared’s barges.¹¹

2. “In all three versions of the Deluge story Utnapishtim receives special instructions concerning the construc-

tion of the roof or deck of the boat." Oddly enough he received instructions by conversing with Anu, the Lord of Heaven, through a screen or partition of matting, a *kikkisu*, such as was ritually used in the temple. In the Sumerian version God announces the Flood thus: "By the wall at my left side stand, by the wall a word will I speak to thee. . . . My pure one, my wise one, by our hand a deluge [shall be caused], the seed of mankind to destroy."

3. There was in the ship "of course a solid lower part, strong enough to carry a heavy freight and to resist the force of the waves and the storm."

4. "Jensen explains MA-TU as a 'deluge boat,' . . . adding, that when seen from the side it probably resembled the crescent moon. . . . Moreover, the representations of the sea-going vessels of the Tyrians and the Sidonians . . . show that a certain class of boats really had such a shape."

5. "The principal distinguishing feature of a *magur*-boat [was] . . . the roof or deck of the boat. . . . We notice that in the Biblical as in the Babylonian Version great stress is laid on the preparation of a proper 'roof' or 'cover.' . . . 'Cover it with a strong deck' [Nippur Version, line 9] ' . . . with a deck as strong as the earth,' or 'let its deck be strong like the vault of heaven above.' " (Second Nineveh Version, lines 2-3) It is quite plain from the emphasis on tightness in Ether that the ordinary vessel was not nearly so closely or firmly constructed.

6. The lines containing "a brief statement concerning the measures of the ark" have been effaced in the Nippur version. The first Nineveh text says simply: "Its measures be in proportion, its width and length shall correspond." Since only one ark was built, as against eight Jaredite vessels, one would hardly expect the dimensions to be the same.

7. "Furthermore in the First Nineveh Version the boat . . . has a door to be shut during the storm flood." The various names for the boat "designate 'a boat which can be closed by a door,' i.e., practically a 'house boat,' expressed in the Hebrew story by an Egyptian loanword, *Tevah*, 'ark' originally meaning 'box, chest, coffin,' an essential part of which is its 'cover' or 'lid.' "¹²

8. "The boat has . . . a door to be shut during the storm flood and at least one 'air-hole' or 'window' (*nappashu*, line 136)." The word *nappashu*, meaning "breather" or "ventilator," designates no ordinary window.

9. "The vessel built by Utnapishtim being such a 'house boat' or *magur*, this word could subsequently also be rendered ideographically by MA-TU, a 'deluge boat.' . . . A *magur*-boat, then is a 'house boat' in which gods, men and beasts can live comfortably, fully protected against the waves washing overboard, the drenching rain from above and against the inclemencies of wind and weather." The fact that the *magur*-boat was built to be completely submerged gives strong support to our preceding point.

10. In a *magur*-boat "men and beasts live comfortably." In the second Nineveh version Utnapishtim is to take "domestic animals of the field, with wild beasts of the field, as many as eat grass." The Nippur version mentions "the beasts of the field, the birds of heaven." C. S. Coon, writing of the earliest water transportation known, says, "Dogs howled, pigs grunted, and cocks crowed on these sea-going barnyards."¹³ The idea that the *oldest* sailing vessels might have been built for the specific purpose of transporting men and animals together, often for vast distances, may strike the reader as strange at first, yet there is ample evidence to show that such was the case. The Asiatic river boats mentioned in point no. 1 above keep whole households afloat for months with their animals and poultry—an idea which, like the riding of buffaloes, seems utterly incomprehensible to the Western mind.

11. "The Storm-winds with exceeding terror, all of them together raced along the deluge, the mighty tempest (?) raged with them . . . and the mighty ship over the great waters the storm-wind had tossed." Thus the Sumerian version. "Jensen explains MA-TU as a 'deluge-boat,' seeing in it 'a boat driven by the wind,' 'A sailing vessel' . . . [But] a *magur*-boat was written ideographically MA-TU, literally 'a deluge boat,' not because it was a sailing boat driven by the wind or rather hurricane (*abubu*, *shubtu*), but because it possessed certain qualities which

rendered its use especially effective during the deluge, when its exclusive purpose was to carry the remains of life and to protect men and beasts against the waters from below and the pouring rain from above." Though driven by the storm it had "nothing in common with a boat in full sail, (and) nowhere . . . is a sail mentioned, nor would it have been of much use in such a hurricane as described. . . . Besides, we observe that the pictures of the Tyrian boats referred to have no sails." A *magur*-boat was driven by the wind, but not with sails.

12. "It shall be a house-boat carrying what is saved of life," says the Nippur version, its purpose being to preserve life and offer full protection "against the waves washing overboard."

Truly remarkable is the statement in Ether that the *submarine* nature of Jared's ships made them "like unto the ark of Noah," since that aspect of the ark, perhaps its most characteristic, is not specifically mentioned in the Bible, and has led to great confusion among Bible illustrators, ancient, medieval, and modern.¹⁴ The only peculiarities mentioned in the brief three verses of Genesis (Genesis 6:14-16) are the window and the door; but they, combined with persistent traditions about the ark, were enough to perplex the learned for generations. They lead us directly to the most puzzling problem of all—that of the illumination of the ark, for while the window is called a *zohar* (more properly *tsohar*), i. e., shiner or illuminator, in the Hebrew versions, the Babylonian word for it is *nappashi*, meaning breather or ventilator. Of course, all windows have the double function of lighting (hence the common *fenester*—"light giver"), and ventilation ("window"), but in a boat equipped to go under water other sources for both would have to be found, and it is in the lighting department that the Jewish sources are most specific. For the rabbis do not settle for the *zohar*—the lighter of the ark—as being simply a window: for some of them it was rather a miraculous light-giving stone. Its purpose, however, was not to furnish illumination as such,

but to provide Noah with a means of distinguishing night from day. It is in that connection that the rabbis come to mention the stone, for a very important point in the observation of the Law is to determine the exact moment at which night ends and day begins, and vice versa. The rabbis, according to the *Midrash Rabbah*, "could not explain the meaning of *zohar*," but they did know that it had something to do with light in the ark.¹⁵ Rabbi Akiba ben Kahmana, for example, says it was a skylight, while Rabbi Levi said it was a precious stone. He quotes R. Phineas as saying that "during the whole twelve months that Noah was in the Ark he did not require the light of the sun by day or the moon by night, but he had a polished gem which he hung up: when it was dim he knew that it was day, and when it shone he knew it was night," and to illustrate this odd arrangement, R. Huna tells a story: "Once we were taking refuge from [Roman] troops in the caves of Tiberias. We had lamps with us: when they were dim we knew that it was day, and when they shone brightly we knew that it was night."¹⁶ The reference to hiding from the Romans shows that this tradition is at least two thousand years old. But all such stories seem to go back to a single source, a brief notice in the *Jerushalmi* or *Palestinian Talmud*, which reports that Noah was able to distinguish day from night by certain precious stones he possessed, which became dim by day and shone forth by night.¹⁷

Plainly we have here statements which *could* have given Joseph Smith some hints in writing about the shining stones with which the vessels of Jared, constructed and operated "like unto the ark of Noah," were illuminated. Only there is conclusive evidence that Joseph Smith had no access to such material, either directly or indirectly, and equally clear evidence that if such material was available to him he did not use it. To consider the last point first, we can be sure that anyone who had access to the old Jewish sources, either directly or indirectly, had a gold mine of useful information

at his disposal. Yet of all this wealth of material, the Book of Mormon exploits only one small detail – and that a detail that is merely hinted at in these sources, which say nothing about the stone or gem being actually used to illuminate the ark, but only mention it as a device for distinguishing night from day. But while the Ether version of the shining stones has only a distant relationship to one minor detail in the Palestinian Talmud, it follows much more closely and fully certain far more ancient versions of the story. From that it would appear that the Book of Mormon and the Talmud are drawing on a common ancient source, for there can be no question of Joseph Smith's lifting material from the latter. Why not? Because to this day the Palestinian Talmud remains a rare and difficult book. Only the most eminent rabbis ever read or cite it.¹⁸ Only four printed editions of it have appeared, two of them after 1860, the other two in 1523-24 (the Bomberg edition, containing no commentary) and 1609 (with a very short commentary in the margin).¹⁹ The commentaries are important since it is they that give us the various ancient theories about the stones. The language of this book is a terrible barrier, being the difficult West Aramaic dialect, rather than the familiar East Aramaic of the Babylonian Talmud, which is fairly close to modern Hebrew. Who can and does read this book even today? It is full of technical expressions that nobody understands; it is a much smaller work than the Babylonian Talmud, and considered much duller.²⁰ The scholars and ministers who studied Hebrew in America in the 1830s knew Rabbinical Hebrew no better than they do today; their whole interest was in the Old Testament, and if any of them ever looked into the Talmud we can be sure it was not the Jerushalmi. Recently Professor Zeitlin has deplored the almost total ignorance of Rabbinical Hebrew among the scholars who are attempting to interpret the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Granted that the language of the Palestinian Talmud presented an insuperable barrier to Joseph Smith and his

friends, or for that matter to any scholar in America at that time, they would of course have used translations. Only there were no translations! In 1871 a small section of the work was translated into German, but it is not the section containing the account of the *tsohar*. After that there was nothing until Schwab's French translation, done between 1871 and 1890; in 1886 Schwab also undertook an English version but did not get very far with it.²¹ No translation was available in any modern language in 1830. If Joseph Smith lifted the story of the shining stones, it was not from the Talmud or any source known to his contemporaries; for they never charge him with plagiarism on this point, but only insist that his tale is the sheerest, wildest fantasy of a completely undisciplined and unbridled imagination.

One of the most shocking things about the story of the ships and stones, to judge by the reaction of the critics, is God's failure to supply lighting for the ships in the first place. The Lord told the brother of Jared that the usual means of lighting and illumination would not suffice for a ship that was going to spend a good deal of time under the water, but instead of giving him a light on the spot, or at least telling him how to make one, the Lord left it all up to the Jaredites: "What will ye that I should do that ye may have light in your vessels?" (Ether 2:23, 25). If Joseph Smith had written the Book of Mormon, this would have been a stroke of pure genius. What follows is even better: the brother of Jared falls to with a will and manages to "molten" (the word is perfectly good English)²² out of the rock a number of small stones "white and clear, even as transparent glass" (Ether 3:1). The only trouble is that the stones don't shine. What shall the man do next? He carries the stones up to the very top of "an exceedingly high mountain" – and that is as far as he can go. Of course God could have appeared to him in the plain, but the idea of the whole thing is that man himself must meet God halfway. So the brother of Jared toils up the mountain as he had toiled at

the smelter until, as it were, he reaches the end of the line — he can go no further; he has done all that is in his power. From then on it is up to the Lord. Standing on the mountaintop, the brother of Jared holds up his pretty but worthless stones and asks the Lord to take over: “O Lord, look upon me in pity, and turn away thine anger from this thy people, and suffer not that they shall go forth across this raging deep in darkness; but behold these things which I have molten out of the rock. And I know, O Lord, that thou hast all power, and can do whatsoever thou wilt for the benefit of man; therefore touch these stones, O Lord, with thy finger, and prepare them that they may shine forth in darkness. . . . Behold, O Lord, thou canst do this” (Ether 3:3-5). So man cannot save himself after all, and yet God requires him to perform acts of obedience demanding both brain and brawn before He will help him.

But who gave the brother of Jared the idea about stones in the first place? It was not the Lord, who left him entirely on his own; and yet the man went right to work as if he knew exactly what he was doing. Who put him on to it? The answer is indicated in the fact that he was following the pattern of Noah’s ark, for in the oldest records of the human race the ark seems to have been illuminated by just such shining stones.

We have said that if the story of the luminous stones was lifted from any ancient source, that source was not the Talmud (with which the Book of Mormon account has only a distant relationship) but a much older and fuller tradition, with which the Ether story displays much closer affinities. The only trouble here is that these older and fuller traditions were entirely unknown to the world in the time of Joseph Smith, having been brought to light only in the last generation. But since the critics have said again and again that the story of the shining stones is the last word in pure nonsense and the surest index of a cracked brain, they

deserve to be shown just how ancient and widespread this particular type of nonsense really is.

First of all, let us recall that "the brother of Jared . . . did molten out of a rock sixteen small stones; and they were white and clear, even as transparent glass" (Ether 3:1). Now the oldest traditions of India have a good deal to say about a wonderful stone that shines in the dark.²³ This gem can be produced only by subjecting certain types of stone (or the heart of a poisoned person) to terrific heat – it must in fact be kept in an exceedingly hot fire for no less than nine years!²⁴ By this process was supposed to be produced a perfectly clear, transparent crystal, which "would illuminate even the deepest darkness and sometimes shine as brightly as the sun."²⁵ Now this strange belief did not originate in India, though it is very ancient there; Meyer and Printz have both traced it to distant China and the West. It receives prominent mention by certain leading thinkers of the Middle Ages, including the great Albertus Magnus. It was even believed in Europe that the Holy Grail was such a jewel and of such fiery power that the Phoenix bird cremated itself in its heat and was thus reborn, for among other things the stone had the power of regeneration.²⁶

The common name by which this wonderful shining stone was designated was *pyrophilus* or "friend of fire," usually described as a perfectly transparent crystal and called in the Indian sources (which are the fullest) "Moon-friend" and *Jalakanta*. The last term is significant, for it means "that which causes the waters to part," the peculiar power and virtue of the stone, the most celebrated of all its many miraculous powers being a strange capacity for enabling its possessor to pass unharmed through the depths of the waters.²⁷

So we have a very ancient, widespread tradition of a clear, transparent stone, formed by a smelting process requiring terrific heat, that shines in the dark and guides and preserves its owner beneath the waves. Surely a strange

combination of clues, and yet one that has led the experts (to whom, of course, the book of Ether meant nothing at all) directly and unerringly to a single source – the story of the Flood and the ark! It became apparent that the story and legend of the pyrophilus stone did not originate in India when certain classical sources directed the scholars to the old Mesopotamian Flood stories. The philosopher Aesculapius, in a letter to the Emperor Augustus, for example, gave an authentic description of the pyrophilus, closely agreeing with the Indian accounts, but with the added information that such a stone had been the prized possession of Alexander the Great, who carried it always under his belt and would never part with it for a moment, until one day, wishing to bathe in a stream, he laid his belt and jewel on the bank, where a serpent promptly seized the stone, carried it off, and vomited it up into the Euphrates.²⁸

That this story is no fantasy of the medieval imagination is clear from the fact that Aristotle, Alexander's teacher, mentioned such a stone in a lost writing,²⁹ while long before the time of Alexander and Aristotle the story of the stone and its loss was identified with a much older Greek hero.³⁰ In this earlier version the stone is interchangeable with the *plant* of life. It will be recalled that the shining pyrophilus stone was also a life-giving stone, possessing "power of regeneration," and that it was even identified with the Holy Grail. The Greeks called it the *pharmakon agērasias* or "specific against old age," the "medicine of immortality." It is the marked and widespread identity of the life-giving stone with the life-giving plant that makes the pyrophilus at home in Babylonia. To go back to the dawn of history, when the hero Gilgamesh after a long search for the secret of eternal life was on his way home with the treasured plant of life, he bathed himself in a pool, placing the plant upon the bank, where a serpent snatched it up in his mouth and thus robbed the hero of his chance for eternal life. The

wonderful plant is described in terms strangely reminiscent of early descriptions of the Cross of Redemption:

I will disclose, O Gilgamesh, a hidden thing and . . . tell
it to you.
That plant is like a thorn in the field.
Its thorn will pierce thy hand like a thorny vine; it will pierce
through thy hand.
When thy hands grasp that plant, thou canst return again to
thy land.
When Gilgamesh heard this
He opened the. . . .
He tied heavy stones on his feet,
And they dragged him down into the cosmic ocean and he
found the plant.
He took the plant and it pierced through his hand.
He cut the heavy stones loose, and. . . .
A second one he cast down to his. . .

Then Gilgamesh [on the way home] saw a pool of water,
which was cold.
He went down into it and washed himself with water.
A serpent smelled the fragrance of the plant, came
up . . . and took the plant away.
Then when he came back he mocked and taunted
[Gilgamesh],
Then Gilgamesh sat himself down and wept. . . .³¹

Though the stones on the feet are the key to the story, according to Printz, the identity of the plant of life with Alexander's stolen pyrophilus stone is obvious. Now in the Gilgamesh epic there is only one person who can tell the hero how and where to obtain the plant of immortality, and that person is Utnapishtim—Noah—who not only directs him to his goal but also tells him the story of the Flood. What leads the hero to search for the plant of life in the first place is the death of his inseparable companion or double, Humbaba. This Humbaba has been shown to be identical with the Kombabus of the West, who is Attic, the

Syrian Adonis, and the Egyptian Osiris, the hero who is slain and resurrected.³²

In Western Asia, his great prehistoric cult center (where he was still known as Kombabus) was the famous shrine of his wife, the Dea Syra, where the story of Deucalion (the Greek term for Noah) was immortalized in song, legend, and ritual; the pagan Lucian, a native of Syria, has preserved for us the story of Deucalion, which he heard there from the priests, and it matches the biblical story of the Flood at every point.³³ The vast throngs of pilgrims that came to this shrine from all over the world were shown the hole down which the waters of the Flood were said to have retreated, and were told how Deucalion erected at that spot the first temple, which was also the first building to be erected after the Deluge.³⁴ The most remarkable object in this temple was, says Lucian, "a stone which is called *lynchnis*, and the name is very appropriate; for by night it gives off a good deal of light, which illuminates the whole shrine just like a lamp, though by day the glow is weak."³⁵ This recalls, of course, the peculiar *zohar* described by some of the rabbis. Furthermore, the shrine was made to represent a vessel illumined by a sacred light, floating in the midst of a cosmic sea, so that the only way the devotee could reach it was by swimming.³⁶ The stone itself was set in the crown of the Lady in her capacity of Moon goddess, reminding one of the principal designation of the shining stone of the Indian legends as "Moonfriend."³⁷ Turning again to Hilprecht, we learn that the *magur*-boat in which Utnapishtim survived the Flood was a vessel sacred to the moon: "Sin's [the moon's] *magur*-boat is called 'A bright house' (*esh azag*), in which at times he dwells, as other Babylonian gods do in their boats, when visiting each other in their temples, . . . The Moon god himself is represented as 'sailing in a bright *magur*-boat through the midst of heaven.'"³⁸ The *magur*-boat of the Sumerian Noah was thus a moon-boat not only because it was crescent-shaped and wandered

through space for twelve months, but also because it was illuminated by a miraculous light. If space allowed, we might elaborate on how the "Moonfriend" was really dependent on the sun, shining by a borrowed light, as the moon itself does; we might point out that the ancients were familiar with properties of such fluorescent stones as barite that will shine for some time in the dark after being exposed to sunlight; we might note that Macrobius describes the light of the stone of the Syrian shrine (no longer in operation in his day) as divine, life-giving light.³⁹ In short, we could show how the shining stones of the ancients were thought not to contain the light-giving power within themselves, but to have received the illumination from a higher source.

In this connection a recent study by Schoneveld on the Urim and Thummim is very interesting. The name *Urim*, from the root *Or-m*, which means light, actually does indicate, according to Schoneveld, that the Urim was some sort of shining stone; it was the chief jewel of the twelve gems on the ephod of the High Priest, and was nothing less than "the symbol of God's presence."⁴⁰ Here surely is a striking parallel with the shining stones of the Jaredites, actually touched by the finger of God, and thus the most marvelous tokens of his actual presence. Furthermore, on the very occasion on which God touched the stones he also gave to the brother of Jared "two stones" which "shall magnify to the eyes of men, these things which ye shall write" (Ether 3:24). As seen above, according to Schoneveld the stones worn by the High Priest were the symbols of a very ancient tradition; they were not first introduced by Moses, "but were already known in the times before the institution of the high priest's ritual clothing."

It has also recently been shown that the words *Urim* and *Thummim* are not classical Hebrew but go back to the earliest times.⁴¹ Neither is the name *Noah* necessarily of Semitic origin, but like that of Humbaba seems to have connections with the "Hurrians" of the north.⁴² Lucian says

that the Deucalion of Noah revered at the Syrian shrine was a Scythian—an “Indo-European” from the north and identifies him with the romantic Assyrian hero Kombabus.⁴³ Such things tend to bring Noah and the Jaredites ever closer together, but a lot of work remains to be done before we can draw conclusions.

Now whether the ark of Noah was actually lit by shining stones is not what concerns us here. What we have attempted to show is that the *idea* of stones shining in the darkness of the ark was not invented by Joseph Smith or anybody else in the nineteenth century but can be found in very ancient sources that were for the most part completely inaccessible to Joseph Smith and unknown to his contemporaries. The few sources that might have been available to the prophet were obscure and garbled accounts in texts that not half a dozen men in the world could read, eked out by classical sources that were entirely meaningless until the discovery of the *key*—the great Gilgamesh Epic—long *after* the appearance of the Book of Mormon. That key ties the pyrophilus stone, the Alexander Cycle, the Syrian rites, the Babylonian Flood stories and the Urim and Thummim together in a common tradition of immense antiquity and makes the story of the Jaredite stones not only plausible but actually typical.