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The World of the Jaredites, Part I

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Abstract: This series is a detailed reconstruction of the epic milieu and ancient historical setting in the third millennium B.C. in Mesopotamia and Asia relative to details about the Jaredites: their ships, shining stones, government, wars, society, and worldview. The first part introduces the series and focuses on the Great Flood.



—Painting by Goff Dowding

An artist's conception of the brother of Jared, at the time of the Tower of Babel, crying unto the Lord that their language be not confounded.

Author's Note

THE epistolary form of this series of articles, is the style in which the writer most commonly expounds his views. Although "Professor F." to whom these letters are addressed is a purely fictitious anthropologist in an eastern university, he is typical of many a real correspondent, and the letters themselves are no less typical. If "F." seems unduly meek and teachable, that is because with the limited space at our disposal it would be folly to engage in long and needless controversies.

My dear Professor F.:

I WARNED you that you would find the Book of Mormon full of strange and puzzling things. Please don't hesitate to tell me what you think; above all, there is no need to be concerned about of-

fending my religious sensibilities. The Book of Mormon is tough; it thrives on investigation; you may kick it around like a football, as many have done; and I promise you it will wear you out long before you ever make a dent in it.

As to your first objection, you say that you are disturbed by the apparent attempt of the Book of Mormon to trace the origin of our Indian tribes to a single city in the Near East and to a time as recent as 600 B. C. This would seem to you to be a much too simple and limited explanation for everything. It seems so to me, too. But since you have only begun your reading of the Book of Mormon, my urgent advice to you is, read on! There

is a great surprise awaiting you in the next to last book. Far from being oversimplified, this strange history is extremely varied and complicated. As you know, the missionaries in the early days of the Church recommended the Book of Mormon to the world as "a history of the Indians," Indians being one of the few subjects on which Americans in general possessed some information and on which their interest could be easily aroused. But as a matter of fact, the Book of Mormon is not so much a history of the Indians as of their distant ancestors—people as different from them in many things as our Anglo-Saxon forefathers are from us. The story of the Indians

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only begins where the Book of Mormon ends: before that it deals largely with those great city-building nations of the south, about whom you know much more than I do.

But before the Book of Mormon ever approaches your glamorous field, it has a good deal to say about another culture, one that has been much studied in our day and can still be examined at first hand, namely (of all things) that of the desert Arabs, which is brought before our eyes in First Nephi with a vividness and clarity which, I believe, say much for the authenticity of the record. The same book also gives us a glimpse into the life of the prosperous and civilized "Jews at Jerusalem" in the days of Zedekiah, briefer but no less clear and specific than the picture of life in the desert.

Already, you see, this remarkable document offers to impart information on no less than *four* widely-divergent cultures. I leave it to you whether an accurate description of any one of them, with the possible exception of some Indian tribes, would have been possible from source materials available in the days of Joseph Smith. But it is to the culture number *five* that I would now call your attention. The last history in the Book of Mormon, which goes under the

THE *Book of Mormon* is tough; it thrives on investigation; you may kick it around like a football, as many have done; and it will wear you out long before you ever make a dent in it.

are free to laugh at this, but if you think I am trespassing, what would you say of a man who tried to give an account of life in that prehistoric world from what was known of it 120 years ago!

With the same unfaltering and unhurried step that led us across the sands of Arabia (and you must agree that that was a marvelous performance), the author of the Book of Mormon now conducts us into a world so remote, so utterly different from anything within the scope of the Biblical or classical student, that if we would follow him, we must acquire a whole new gear and tackle for the journey. I think we are agreed that it would take a great deal of training for anyone to acquire the background necessary to compose First Nephi. Now imagine any man insane enough to try after such colossal exertions to write *another* such story, of equal length and detail but this time about a totally different race of people, living in an age far removed from the other and in a wholly different geographical setting! As far as I know, not even Joseph Smith ever called anyone's attention to this prodigious

and so forth, but always in a different setting; so that the test of an historical document lies, as we have so often insisted, not in the story it tells but in the casual details that only an eyewitness can have seen. The story of Jared and the story of Lehi have the same theme, the familiar one of the righteous man who leads his people out of a doomed and wicked world. There is nothing original in that: it is also the story of Noah, Enoch, Abraham, Moses, "The Church in the Wilderness," and, for that matter, the restored Church. But what a setting! What strange institutions and practices! How shall we ever be able to check up on such recondite stuff? It is going to require a bit of doing, and so I would advise you to prepare yourself for a long siege.

As you know, it is my unfortunate habit either to write appallingly long letters (twenty pages yet) or none at all. Since you have set this off by accusing the Book of Mormon of proposing an over-simplified story of the Indians, I am not going to let go of your throbbing wrist until, Hamlet-like, I have forced you to look upon a number of strange and disturbing pictures. Had the Jaredites lived in a vacuum, their story would today be beyond the reach of criticism. But they did not live in a vacuum: the Book of Ether tells us that they continued in the New World the customs and vices that had flourished in the Old. If, then, we can only find out what people were up to in the homeland at that early day we will have our "control" for the Ether story. That, as you will recall, is the way we handled the problem of Lehi in the desert—found out what was going on in the world that Nephi was supposed to be describing and then compared the data with what Nephi had to tell us. The task of checking up on Lehi's activities was greatly simplified by the fact that the Beduins of Arabia do things in our day much as they did them in his. What we find in Central Asia—Jared's country—are customs equally stable.

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Of The JAREDITES

PART I

By Hugh Nibley, Ph. D.

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, HISTORY AND RELIGION, BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

title of Ether, is even more wonderful in my opinion than the first. It takes us into the twilight world of proto-history where the dim half-described shadow-empires of Asia are only in our day beginning to take on recognizable form. As you know, my constitutional weakness for whatever is vague and fuzzy has drawn me irresistibly to this dangerous area, and I have been guilty of a number of lengthy articles on matters that sensible people hold to be unsearchable. You

sees its wars, treaties, migrations, religious feat; we all take it for granted. Yet you will soon see that the author of Ether could have obtained precious little help from any materials used in writing First Nephi. On the contrary, the former experience could only tend to embarrass any attempt at a new history, which would call for an entirely new training and preparation.

What the author of Ether has to supply is not a new plot but all new props and scenery. Every century

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"But," I can hear you snorting, "what about the evidence?" It is one thing, I will admit, to read Arabic, and another to lisp the chaste Mongolian. From the isolation of Utah it is not possible to do more than skim the top of our materials; but if you will hasten to consult the bibliographies of such standard works as McGovern and Vernadsky, you will see that even they have hardly done more. Until someone appears who is competent to deal with the difficult documents—a Classicist who is also a Sinologist, an Indologist, an expert on Semitics, Turkish, Slavic, and whatnot, in short, another Vambéry—we must be content to base our speculations on the limited materials within our control. Our whole justification is that these are adequate, as in the case of Lehi, to prove what we want to prove, no more. And what are we going to prove? That certain strange and unfamiliar things described in Ether actually could have taken place as described, because they actually *did* take place—characteristically and repeatedly—in those very cultural areas in which, according to the Book of Mormon, the Jaredites acquired their culture and civilization.

And what are those "materials" to which we have been so darkly alluding? They come in periods. To illustrate, let us say that there is a peculiar custom—of the royal court or the hunt, for example—described in Ether. We find the same custom described by modern travelers in Central Asia (source number one); Christian and Moslem merchants, geographers, and missionaries report the same peculiar custom in the same region in the Middle Ages (source number two); next we move back another seven or eight hundred years and behold: the spies and ambassadors of the Byzantine court describe the same custom (source number three, and so on), for which we are now beginning to feel a measure of respect! Moving back through the centuries, we find that classical historians from Cassiodorus to Herodotus, a full thousand years apart, mention the same custom, and then slipping back another fifteen hundred to two thousand years we read about it in the records of the Assyrians and

Babylonians. Last of all, the Russian archaeologists find evidence for the same thing in prehistoric times. From these many points of reference we may project as it were a smooth curve right back to the Jaredites, and safely assume that when the Book of Ether describes the very institutions depicted in these records of early Asia it is on solid ground. In each instance, however, you will have to be the judge, for all we can give at the present interval is a sampling of the evidence. You may have to wait thirty years for the rest of it.

Please note that we are limiting our curiosity to *the sort of thing that happened*. The exact time and place of any specific event are no concern of ours. Such matters are always open to dispute, and in the case of the Jaredites they don't begin to come within guessing distance. Bear in mind that these people lived their lives in a realm far removed from the current of world history; in a dateless age they took their culture from the common source and thereafter were on their own until they disappeared from the earth. What difference whether they had a battle in one spot or another—in one year or another? The important thing is that they did have battles and, for our purpose, that those battles followed patterns of warfare peculiar to Central Asia. We specialize in patterns.

COUNTRY DOCTOR

(For my Grandfather)

By Eleanor A. Chaffee

I REMEMBER him as one recalls
Not form or feature, but a heart well-known.
I remember his strong New England walls
Stripped by harsh winter to the granite bone.
His door was never locked—his rest unbroken.
The horse's harness, ready to his hand,
Waited the urgent step, the low word spoken.
Many a night his buggy used to stand
Outside a farmhouse, while he parried
Death
With grave eyes and a touch made sure
by years.
His was the burden of the faltering breath
Steadied: the faintest sound a doctor hears.
Across my life his passing shadow fell:
I never met him, but I know him well.

The first chapter of our text gives us warning not to be dogmatic about chronology. Three times in the genealogical list of thirty names running back to "the great tower" the word "descendant" occurs in place of "son." (1:6, 16, 23.) As you know, in Hebrew and other languages "son" and "descendant" are both rendered by one very common word. One and the same word describes a modern Jew and Father Isaac as "sons" of Abraham—the word is understood differently in each case, but is *not* written differently. A person confined to a written text would have no means of knowing when *ben* should be taken to mean "son" in a literal sense and when it means merely "descendant." The ancient Hebrews knew perfectly well when to make the distinction: like the Arabs and Maoris they kept their records in their heads, and the mention of a particular patriarch assumed that the hearer was familiar with his line down to his next important descendant, the written lists being a mere outline to establish connections between particular lines—the name of a patriarch was enough to indicate his line, which did not have to be written out in full. Sir Leonard Woolley has some interesting things to say on this subject in his book *Abraham*. Now Ether proves, at least to Latter-day Saints, that "son" and "descendant" were both used in the ancient genealogies, which thus do not present an unbroken father-to-son relationship. We are told that the genealogy in Ether belongs to the second part of a record and that "the first part of this record . . . is had among the Jews." (1:3). So we may regard the Old Testament genealogies as the earlier part of this same list and are thus faced with the possibility, long suspected by many, that in Biblical genealogies *ben* must sometimes be read "son" and sometimes "descendant," though men have long since lost the knowledge that enabled the ancient ruler to make the necessary distinction. The result is, of course, that our Biblical genealogies as we read them today may be much too short.

Incidentally, the genealogy in Ether, chapter one, explains why

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clear his will appertaining to the spiritual and temporal health of his children.

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neither the brother of Jared nor his children are ever named. (We are not even told how many sons he had, though Jared's own sons are listed by name.) This once puzzled me, since the brother of Jared is by all odds the most important character in the book. It is, of course, because "he that wrote this" is a direct descendant of Jared (1:2, 32), and not of Jared's brother, and is giving the history of his own line only.

To get involved in Andree's eighty-eight versions of the Flood story, or the sixty-four conflicting accounts of the dispersion listed by von Schwarz, might jeopardize the terseness and brevity that give our little notes their gem-like quality. Let us consign such matters to the decent obscurity of a footnote.* As long as you insist on having the evidence for everything by the way, you cannot object to an occasional reference in small print. The trouble with the Babel story is that we are told so little. A few short enigmatic verses in Genesis are not enough in themselves to justify the dogmatic reconstructions and wild surmises that have raged about the tower. Ether has the support of the latest conclusions, based on Genesis, chapter 10, that when the tower was built, the people had already been "spread abroad in the earth after the deluge" for some time.² When our source describes a particular region

(Continued on following page)

*Numbers refer to bibliography at end of article.

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as "that quarter where there never had man been" (Ether 2:5), the implication is that men had certainly been in other quarters. Moreover, Jared's people were reluctant to leave their homes, and when they were finally "driven out of the land," they took with them flocks, herds, and seeds of every kind, together with the knowledge and skills (they even took books with them) necessary to establish a great civilization—all these things being the necessary products of a long-established and widespread economy. Civilization meets us full-blown, nay, decadent, in the pages of Ether. One looks in vain for any sign of evolution in the Book of Mormon. This is a red rag to the social scientists, I know, but that is only because social scientists don't read the historical documents, which, if they only knew it, are the inexhaustible field notes and lab. notes of the human race. To those whose view of the world comes from questionnaires and textbooks, it seems incredible that the early dynastic civilization of Sumer, for example, should be so far ahead of later cultures that "compared with it everything that comes later seems almost decadent; the handicrafts must have reached an astounding perfection."⁸ It is hard to believe that the great Babylonian civilization throughout the many centuries in which it flourished was merely coasting, sponging off the achievements of a much earlier civilization which by all rights should have been "primitive"; yet that is exactly the picture that Meissner gives us in his great study.⁴ It is against the rules that those artistic attainments for which Egypt is most noted—the matchless portraits, the wonderful stone vessels, the exquisite weaving—should reach their peak at the very dawn of Egyptian history, in the predynastic period, yet such is the case. It is in the earliest dynasties, and not in the later ones, that technical perfection and artistic taste of the Egyptians in jewelry, furniture, ceramics, etc., are most "advanced." Is it not odd that the very earliest piece of literature surviving in the heritage of western literature should also be incomparably the best? That

the first of all novels and dramas should be still the best? Are not the earliest paintings of the human race to this day unexcelled? Please note that we are only able to pass judgment on those things which happen to have survived from those remote ages: We assume that those people were crude and primitive in all other things, until some of those other things turn up and show them to be far ahead of us. We must admit, for example, that the stone chipping of certain paleolithic hunters has never been equaled since their day; it so happens that stone implements are all that have survived from those people—have we any right to deny them perfection in other things? Is there any reason for supposing that their wood or leather work was inferior? Anyone with a modern education will tell you without hesitation that the earliest weaving of our ancestors *must* have been very crude indeed. But when contrary to all expectations, some of that cloth is actually found, the French experts give it careful examination and declare it the equal of the very finest stuff we are capable of producing today.⁵ The only weapons that have survived from prehistoric times are far more suited for their purpose than a modern rifle. The deadliest of all hunting weapons remains to this day the stone-headed (not steel-headed) arrow. In my recent labors on the marked arrows I had occasion to assemble an impressive amount of evidence on this head.⁶ Eyre has recently supplied a good deal of evidence to prove that our "primitive" ancestors enjoyed a good deal more security, comfort, and pleasure in life than we do.⁷ Moreover, as an anthropologist you know perfectly well that backward and primitive people may have mental powers equaling or excelling our own—look at Elkin's Australian aborigines or, if they are too far away, I can lead you to some Indians who in some things can make us feel like cretins. If it would not take us too far afield, I could show you that the dogma of the evolutionary advancement of the human race as a whole is nothing but an impressive diploma which the nineteenth century awarded—*summa*

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cum laude—to itself. Modern man is a self-certified genius who, having pinned the blue ribbon on his own lapel, proceeds to hand out all the other awards according as the various candidates are more or less like *him*.

"Yes," I can hear you say, "but there must have been a long evolution behind all these early achievements." Which is for you to prove, not assume, if you are a scientist. What is certain to date is (a) that their evolutionary background has not been discovered, and (b) that there is no record of *subsequent* improvement through all these thousands of years. So let the biologists talk of evolution; for the historian it has no meaning.

By now I imagine I have placed you into such a state that you would refuse to read farther even if I had the time to write more. I leave you now with a promise of coming attractions, pending your willingness to carry on the discussion. Be so good as to indicate your reactions to all these words, and I shall conduct myself accordingly.

(To be continued)

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⁵"*La finesse des fils est telle qu'avec nos machines les plus recentes, nous ne l'avons guere depassee.*" Lacasine, quoted by Moret, *op. cit.*, I, 66. The earliest known cloth shows a high degree of perfection, F.-M. Bergounioux and A. Glory, *Les Premiers Hommes* (Paris: Didier, 1945), pp. 319, 346, Pl. xxix.

⁶The superiority of the stone-headed arrow has been fully demonstrated by Saxton Pope, *Hunting with the Bow and Arrow* (New York: Putnam, 1947).

⁷Ed. Eyre (Ed.), *European Civilization* (Oxford: 1934-8), Vol. I, chap. i. "The paleolithic artists," says Moret (*op. cit.* I, 23), "must have lived in a time when they could work with continuity, security, and permanence." We might envy them!



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