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New Approaches to the Book of Mormon Study, Part VIII

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Abstract: This series vividly displays internal and external evidences to test whether the Book of Mormon is or is not a forgery, using the standard scholarly criteria for detecting forged writings. The author offers insightful comments on methodology for studying the Book of Mormon, evaluating evidence, using newly discovered documents, metal plates, literary criticism, poetry, lower criticism, and history. Nibley also comments on animals, weights and measures, and the use of the Bible in the Book of Mormon. The eighth part discusses the language and influences of the Book of Mormon in the context of the ancient Near East.

New Approaches to

BOOK OF MORMON Study

by Dr. Hugh Nibley

PROFESSOR, HISTORY AND RELIGION, BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

PART 8

THE LIFE of the tent-dwellers which Lehi and Ishmael effected was not the way of the Bedouin renegade, but the traditional choice of seekers after righteousness. Lehi's concern to keep his people from degenerating into Bedouins is thoroughly typical of an attitude illustrated in Jawad Ali's new two-volume *Arabs before Islam*, the first work of the kind to appear in Arabic. That author notes in his opening lines that the term *Jahiliyah*, "time of ignorance," is used to describe the pre-Islamic Arabs not because of their ignorance of Islam, but because of their low cultural level: "They were nomadic tribesmen, living in ignorance and sloth, having no contacts with the outer world, and keeping no records."¹⁰⁰ This state of things has always been regarded as utterly abominable by the cultivated Arab, (as it was by Lehi), proud though he is of his desert heritage: the danger of degenerating into a desert tramp is a real and constant one, and the only way of combating it—by *adab*, a thorough training in the poetry of the fathers, and by the keeping of records—has been an obsession with the high-minded men of the desert throughout their history.¹⁰¹

In the summer of 1953 a copy of the eighth book of Hamdani's *Al-Iklil* came into the author's possession from the library of the late J. A. Montgomery, one of the great Arabists of our time. Here is the key to one of Lehi's most wonderful dreams, for this book of the *Iklil* is devoted to describing the early castles of Arabia, "great and spacious buildings" which "stood as it were in the air, high above the earth," filled with proud and finely dressed people who held the wandering Bedouins in contempt. The imagery is Nephi's, but it might have been taken right out of Hamdani: "And the castle of Ghumdan," he writes of one of the most famous,

"had twenty stories of upper chambers, one above another. There is disagreement as to its height and breadth, for some say each of its walls measured a thousand by a thousand (a "great and spacious house" indeed!), while others say it was greater, and that each of its (20) stories was ten cubits (15 feet) high. And the poet Al-Aösha says:

And never was there a more splendid assemblage of people
Than the people of Ghumdan when they gathered.
But dire calamity befell them,
Even as a wailing woman who has been utterly bereft.¹⁰²

Numerous other accounts of this and other castles are cited but the moral is always the same: the magnificent gathering in the great and spacious building high above the earth is doomed to the destruction reserved for the haughty and the wicked. If no evidence for the provenience of the Book of Mormon existed except the 8th chapter of First Nephi, that alone would be quite adequate to establish its oriental origin beyond a doubt. Indeed there is but one objection to its claims of authenticity, and that is a far-fetched story that a certain young man once told about an angel.

The reader may find in our above translations of Arabic poets ample proof of the claim that the greatest verses of those artists cannot be made into anything remotely resembling good literature in English and still preserve a trace of their original form or content. To judge the Book of Mormon as a literary work, therefore, is the height of folly. Nicholson notes that the very best oriental poetry contains "much that to modern taste is absolutely incongruous with poetic style. Their finest pictures . . . often appear uncouth or grotesque, because without an intimate knowledge of the land and people it is

impossible for us to see what the poet intended to convey, or to appreciate the truth and beauty of its expression."¹⁰³ One is constantly coming upon strange little expressions that recall the Book of Mormon. Thus the non-Biblical "white and delightful" of the Book of Mormon is the exact equivalent of the Arabic *al-hasan wa'lbiyah*—a very early expression,¹⁰⁴ while the designation of the sea by the earliest Arab poets as "the ocean spring" or "fountain," immediately recalls the term used by Lehi's wanderers, "the fountain of the Red Sea," and solves a knotty problem with a single cut.¹⁰⁵

A recent study by Rosenblatt on oaths bears out well what we said about the episode of the swearing of Zoram. Among both Arabs and Jews, says Rosenblatt, "an oath without God's name is no oath," while "both in Jewish and Mohammedan sources oaths by 'the life of God' are frequent."¹⁰⁶ So Nephi's "as the Lord liveth" is strictly correct.

The whole picture of the racial and linguistic composition of the human race in the Jaredite era at the dawn of history has in our own day undergone such a complete alteration that those theories so stoutly defended in the 1920's and 1930's as the final verdict of scientific objectivity now appear almost pitifully biased. As Pittioni pointed out in 1952, a "sociologically oriented evolutionism" has so thoroughly preconditioned the thinking of the experts, who have "unconsciously and unquestioningly assumed a point of view sprung directly from the natural-science orientation of nineteenth-century cosmology," that they address themselves to the problem of origins with the implicit conviction that they already know exactly how everything happened!¹⁰⁷ So ingrained is this child-like faith in the infallibility of the

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New Approaches to Book of Mormon Study

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evolutionary rule of thumb, that it has enabled our colleges in the West to dispense almost entirely with libraries, and to offer large numbers of impressive courses in ancient life and culture without ever feeling the disquieting urge to consult original sources: why bother to read hard books when evolution gives you an easy answer to everything?

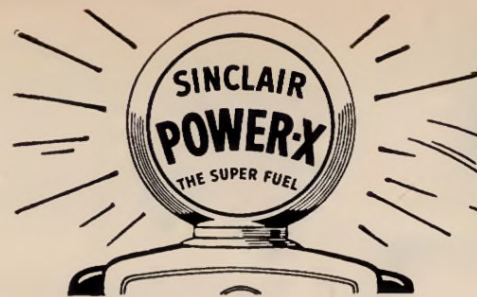
Every new discovery tends to substantiate the theory of a primary radiation of peoples from the "Jaredite country" in the northern reaches of the Tigris and Euphrates. It is to that area that archaeologists have now turned for the solution to the problem of world-civilization. Whether or not Jarmo, east of the Tigris in northern Iraq, is actually the oldest village in the world, as was announced in 1951 (and Braidwood estimates its age at only six-thousand—not sixty-million—years),¹⁰⁸ it certainly lies at the center of a series of radiating zones that embrace ruins of the same type that rival it in antiquity. The most ancient cities in the world are not strewn about the earth in haphazard fashion, but give every indication of spreading from a single center.¹⁰⁹

The same tendency to converge towards a single point on the map has marked the study of linguistic origins during the last decades. The identification of exotic central and even eastern Asiatic languages as members of our own linguistic family was followed at the end of the 1920's by the surprising discovery that the mysterious Hittite was cousin to such homely western idioms as Latin and Welsh. Within the last year or two archaeologists claim to have filled up the gap between the Indo-European and the Turanian languages; if that is so, almost all of Europe and Asia will turn out to be speaking variations of a single tongue.¹¹⁰ In 1952 Carnoy announced that Etruscan, which has baffled researchers for centuries, belongs to a very early wave of Indo-European migration into the west, a wave which brought in with it such strange "Pelagian" languages as Lydian and Lycian, and that Etruscan's closest relative is the thoroughly western Hittite.¹¹¹

Along with this amazing predominance of "our own people" in times

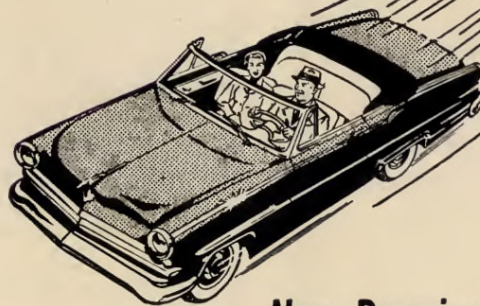
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NEW APPROACHES TO BOOK OF MORMON STUDY

(Continued from preceding page)
and places at which any suggestion of their presence a few years ago would have excited gales of contemptuous laughter, goes the newly-won conviction that the great civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia did

not originate in those lands at all. At present the experts are meditating and arguing about the peculiar circumstance, that writing was introduced into both areas suddenly and first appears in both places in an
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A Favor for Themselves

Richard L. Evans

WE OFTEN see the familiar picture of parents and teachers pleading with young people to improve themselves, to learn their lessons, to make the most of their lives. And because of this sincere anxiety on the part of parents, young people may sometimes assume that they are doing teachers or parents a favor by learning their lessons, by improving their lives. In one sense this is true. It is true that much of the measure of a parent's success and satisfaction is found in the soundness and happiness and success of his children. It is true that much of a teacher's success is found in the lessons that his students learn. But in another sense, it is a peculiar paradox that parents or teachers should so much, so long, so patiently have to plead with young people to make good use of their lives—for every effort they make, all the knowledge they acquire, every lesson they learn is for their own everlasting advantage. And in doing what they should do and in learning what they should learn, they are doing a favor for themselves. Leaving for the moment the matter of prodding and persuading young people, may we look briefly at another side of the subject: Sometimes we may think that we have done someone else a special favor if we live according to law. Sometimes we may think we are doing the Lord God a special favor if we keep his commandments. And it is true that it would please him to have us do so, for his declared purpose is "to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man,"¹ to bring to pass the happiness, and peace and everlasting progress of his children. For this cause were the commandments given, and for this cause has he patiently repeated them through his servants, the prophets. But in keeping them, we serve first ourselves—no matter what we may do for others besides ourselves. And in breaking them we do injury to ourselves, no matter what we may do to others besides ourselves. It is a great virtue to love and to please parents; it is a sincere satisfaction to a teacher to see a lesson learned; and it is good to keep the commandments for the approving favor of our heavenly Father. But in all this pleasing of others, in all this learning of lessons, in all this keeping of commandments, we do immeasurable service for ourselves. And others shouldn't have to plead with us so much or labor with us so long to persuade us to do what we ought to be anxiously doing.

¹Pearl of Great Price: Moses 1:39.

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NEW APPROACHES TO BOOK OF MORMON STUDY

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identical stage of development; this would indicate as plain as day that it must have come from the same source. But in that case, why are the earliest Egyptian and the earliest Babylonian writings so different from each other?¹¹² Whatever the answer, we must now give up the old illusion that the origin of civilization is to be sought in either Egypt or Babylonia. The once popular theory that China saw the earliest beginnings must also be abandoned, though in view of the

impressive list of common cultural traits that bind ancient Egypt, Babylonia, and China, one must assume that China, too, drew from the common source.¹¹³

How far afield the authorities now range in their search for Eden may be estimated from A. Herrmann's *Erdkarte und Urbibel*. Herrmann believes that the oldest parts of Genesis are the geographical passages, and that these all have one source, a lost "Ur-Genesis," which was in fact originally a History of Abraham,

which he designates as the Ur-Abraham, the ultimate source of Genesis.¹¹⁴

[According to this source, the entire human race was living in the Land of Eden (not the Garden of Eden) when they were overwhelmed by water.¹¹⁵ The largest surviving pieces of this lost Book of Abraham are to be found in the Book of Jubilees, according to Herrmann, which, interestingly enough is of all questioned Apocrypha the one most thoroughly vindicated by the finding of the Scrolls, which show Jubilees to be not a medieval but a genuinely ancient document. According to this source, the entire human race was living in the Land of Eden (not the Garden of Eden, but the land where it had been) when they were overwhelmed by water.¹¹⁵ This cannot have taken place in Mesopotamia or Egypt, Herrmann observes, since both those lands are described in the sources as being uninhabited in Noah's day,¹¹⁶ and Kraeling has noted that according to other sources the people in the ark did not have the vaguest idea where they were after the flood, but being in strange surroundings had to learn of their location by revelation.¹¹⁷ So Herrmann seeks the Land of Eden in Abyssinia, South Arabia, and the headwaters of the Nile—all dubious locales and all far from the conventional Babylonian sites. It is a quest that would have struck the dogmatic scholars of past years with amazement: they *knew* where the Garden of Eden was.

No subject has been studied more diligently of recent years than that of the ancient towers. In 1946 L. H. Vincent showed that the ziggurat was designed from the first as a means by which the *gigunu* could mount up to heaven; it was "a scale model of the world," and a sort of link between the heavenly and earthly temples and at the same time "a model of the universe" and a ladder to the upper world.¹¹⁸ The biblical explanation for the Tower of Babel is thus strictly correct.¹¹⁸ G. Thausig in 1948 included the Egyptian pyramid among such structures, as "symbol of the outpouring of light, architectural manifestation of the idea of emanation and symbol of the uniting of Heaven and Earth. Its very name—*mr*, 'binding' (shows that) it is the Way to the world below, but also to the world above."¹¹⁹ In the following year André Parrot published a large book on ziggurats, in which

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he sums up all the previous theories as to the nature of these mysterious towers, e.g., that they were meant to represent mountains, thrones, dwellings, the universe, altars, but especially that they are special structures "which the gods use in order to pass from their celestial habitation to their terrestrial residence, from invisibility to visibility. The ziggurat is thus nothing but the supporting structure for the edifice on its top, and a stairway between the upper and the lower world."¹²⁰ In a study on the Tower of Babel, Parrot in 1950 elaborated on this last conception as the true explanation for the towers: the god was thought to "land" with his escorting troupe at the "Hochtempel" at the top of the tower, and then to descend the stairs to the "Tieftempel" at the bottom, where everything was in readiness to receive him; the holy company was thought to return to heaven by the same route.¹²¹ In the same year, Contenau in his book on the Babylonian Deluge concluded that the Ziggurat of Babylon actually was the Tower of Babel, that such towers while serving as astronomical observatories were originally "temples of passage," reception places for divinity whenever it visited the earth; the holy mountain itself, according to this authority, was originally such a place of contact between heaven and earth.¹²² There is no doubt at all, Contenau believes, that these Babylonian towers are the same as the Egyptian pyramids in their function of "passages for divinity from heaven to earth and back again," the two having a common, but very ancient and unknown, origin.¹²³

From a study of the archaic seals of Babylonia, the oldest written documents in the world, Pierre Amiet in 1951 concluded that in the archaic period "the ziggurat was at one and the same time an immense altar on which were placed the gifts designed to attract the god, the platform where the priests raised themselves up to be nearer to the divinity, as an aid to their prayers, and the support for the stairway which the god, in response to those prayers, employed in order to descend to the earth. . . ."¹²⁴ The same scholar in 1953 is more specific still: one idea is clear above all others in these old tower-temples, "the idea of ascension, of mounting up."¹²⁵ The steps of the tower, like the steps of the altars in the most primitive seals, are stairways, "binding the heavens

to the earth."¹²⁶ The earliest of all known temples is "the supra-terrestrial place, celestial as it were, where the two aspects of divinity become fused on the occasion of the performance of essential ordinances, destined to assure fecundity upon the earth."¹²⁶ Thus a hundred years of speculation have arrived at the point of departure: there was a real tower that meant what the Bible said it did.

A conspicuous aspect of the sacred tower is that it is always thought of as standing at the exact center of the earth; it is an observatory from

which one takes one's bearings on the universe. This being so, it is easy to see how men would regard such a tower as the starting point for the populating of the whole world. Thus in the Book of Jubilees (38:4), when the sons of Jacob went forth to claim their heritage, "they divided themselves into companies on the four sides of the tower." This is no mere mythological concept: in every ancient land the seat of government was an exalted structure thought to stand at the exact geographical center of the world.¹²⁷ The practical

(Continued on following page)



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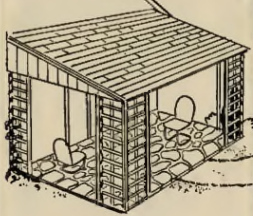
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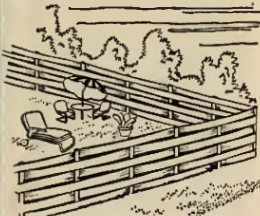
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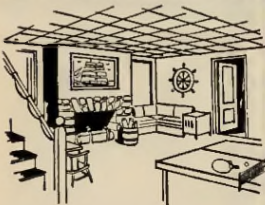
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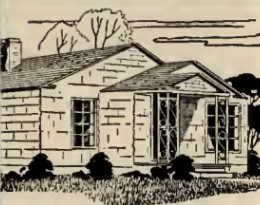
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**New Approaches to
Book of Mormon Study**

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economy of this is obvious; after all, most of our state capitals are placed as near the geographical center of the states as is practical. When the scriptures tell us that the people of the world had a great common center to which they repaired and from which, when it broke up, they scattered in all directions, it is not telling a fabulous or impossible tale, but is rehearsing a well-known historic pattern.

By now many readers will be aware of an interesting study on "Men and Elephants in America" recently appearing in the *Scientific Monthly*; the writer concludes: "Archaeology has proved that the American Indian hunted and killed elephants; it has also strongly indicated that these elephants have been extinct for several thousand years. This means that the traditions of the Indians recalling these animals have retained their historical validity for great stretches of time . . . probably the minimum is three thousand years. . . ."128 The author favors three thousand years ago as the terminal date for the existence of the elephant in America,¹²⁹ which would place its extinction about a thousand years B.C., when the Jaredite culture was already very old and Lehi's people were not to appear on the scene for some centuries. This suits very well with the Book of Mormon account, and in that case the Indian legends must go back to Jaredite times, and indeed the author of the study quoted insists that they must be at least three thousand years old. But since legends are word-of-mouth tradition, the presence of Jaredite legends among the Indians presumes a survival of the Jaredite strain among them, and at the very least such legends cannot have been transmitted from Jaredite to Lamanite hunters without long and intimate contact between the two groups. Here, then, is a strong argument for Jaredite survivors among the Indians, and if one refuses to interpret it as such one must certainly admit extensive intercourse between the two groups in order to transmit to the Lamanites knowledge which only the Jaredites possessed.

My own inclination is to see actual Jaredite heredity in the Indian strain.

THE IMPROVEMENT ERA

In Section 49, Verse 24 of the Doctrine and Covenants it is promised that ". . . the Lamanites shall blossom as the rose." Yet many of the great nations of the eastern forests, the most formidable tribes of all, have entirely disappeared; whatever happens, they will never flourish. Can it be that those fierce and vanished tribes were predominantly of Jaredite stock and not true Lamanites at all?
(To be continued)

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¹⁰⁰Jawad Ali, *Ta'rikh al-Arab qabl al-Islam* (Bagdad, 1951), I, 6.

¹⁰¹At the beginning of their long wandering, the Sheikh of the Beni Hilal ordered them to keep a record of each important event, "that its memory might remain for the members of the tribe, and that the people might read it and retain their civilized status (ifadah)," *Kitab Taghribah Beni Hilal* (Damascus edition), p. 14. Accordingly, verses recited on notable occasions were written down on the spot (*loc. cit.*), just as Nephi wrote down his father's utterances by the River of Laman.

¹⁰²Hamdani, *Al-Iklil*, Book VIII (Baghdad, 1931), pp. 15f. The work was translated in 1940 by Nahib Amin Faris (Princeton University Press, 1940), but I have not seen the translation.

¹⁰³Nicholson, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

¹⁰⁴The expression is found in an Arabic rendering of a very early Christian *Logion* (saying attributed to Christ), No. 102 in the collection in *Patrologia Orientalis* XIII, 426.

¹⁰⁵I have not been able to see the original text of the poem of Hassan b. Thabit, which Nicholson, *op. cit.*, p. 18, renders: "Followed he (the hero Dhu 'l-Qarnayn) the Sun to view its setting. When it sank into the sombre ocean-spring."

¹⁰⁶S. Rosenblatt, "The Relations between Jewish and Muslim Laws Concerning Oaths and Vows," *Amer. Acad. of Jewish Research*, 1936, pp. 231, 238. For an account of the various things the Arabs swear by, T. Kowalski, "Zu dem Eid bei den Arabern," *Archiv Orientalni* VI (1934), 68-81.

¹⁰⁷Richard Pittioni, "Urzeitliche Kulturveränderungen als his orisches Problem," *Anzeiger der Oesterreichische Akademie der Wissenschaft*, 1952, No. 11, pp. 162f.

¹⁰⁸In *Illustrated London News* for Dec. 15, 1951, pp. 992ff.

¹⁰⁹See the map in *Archaeologia* for Autumn, 1952, p. 158.

¹¹⁰V. Altman, in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 67 (1947), pp. 82f. J. J. Gelb, "A Contribution to the Proto-Indo-European Question," *Jarhbuch für kleinasiatische Forschung*, II (1951,) p. 34, proclaims "the common ancestry of the Semites, Hamites, and Indo-Europeans," a proposition that would have shocked and amused the experts of twenty years ago.

¹¹¹A. Carnoy, "La Langue Etrusque et ses Origines," *L'Antiquite Classique* XXI (1952), p. 328.

¹¹²R. Engelbach, "An Essay on the Advent of the Dynastic Race in Egypt and its Consequences," *Annales du Service des An-*

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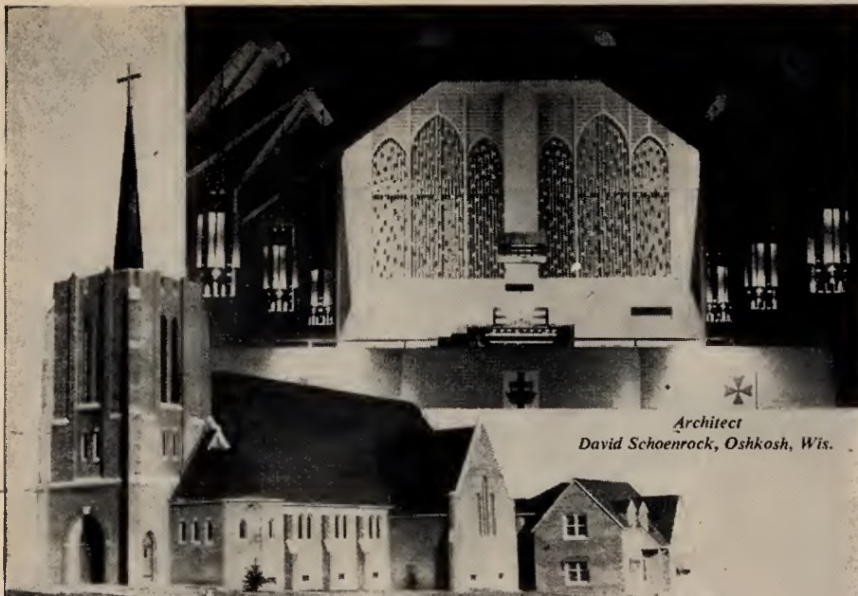
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New Approaches to Book of Mormon Study

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tiquites de l'Egypte, XLII (1943), pp. 193-221, esp. p. 208. M. Frankfort, *Birth of Civilization in the Near East* (London: William & Norgate, 1951), p. 106.

¹¹⁵A. von Ros horn, "Sind die Tsehinesen ein autochthones Volk?" *Berichte des Forschungs-Instituts für Osten und Orient*, III (1918), 28-33; A. Wesselski, "Einstige Brücken zwischen Orient und Okzident," *Archiv Orientalni*, I (1929), 85; M. A. Murray, "China and Egypt," *Ancient Egypt and the East*, 1933, Parts i and ii, pp. 39-42.

¹¹⁴A. Herrmann, *Erdbild und Urbild* (Braunschweig: G. Westermann, 1931), p. 124.

¹¹⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 30ff.

¹¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 106.

¹¹⁷E. G. Kraeling, "The Earliest Hebrew Flood Story," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, LVI (1947), 290, 280ff.

¹¹⁸L. H. Vincent, "De la Tour de Babel au Temple," *Revue Biblique* LIII (1946), 403-440, quotes from p. 438.

¹¹⁹G. Thausig, in *Oesterreich. Akademie Anzeiger*, 1948, No. 7, p. 130.

¹²⁰A. Parrot, *Zigurrats et Tour de Babel*, (Paris: A. Michel, 1949), p. 208.

¹²¹A. Parrot, "La Tour de Babel et les Zigurrats," *La Nouvelle Cléo IV* (1950), 153-161.

¹²²G. Contenau, *Le Deluge Babylonien*, etc. (Paris: Payot, 1952), pp. 244, 246.

¹²³*Ibid.*, pp. 245, 249f, 260.

¹²⁴P. Amiet, "La Ziggurat, d'après les cylindres de l'époque dynastique archaïque," *Revue d'Assyriologie* XLV (1951), p. 87.

¹²⁵P. Amiet, "Zigurrats et 'Culte en Hauteur' des Origines à l'Époque d'Akkad," *Rev. d'Assyriol.* XLVII (1953), pp. 23ff.

¹²⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 30f.

¹²⁷Nibley, *Western Polit. Quart.*, IV (1951), 235ff.

¹²⁸L. H. Johnson, III, "Men and Elephants in America," *Scientific Monthly* LXXV (1952), p. 220.

¹²⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 216 and *loc. cit.*

MIA June Conference Calendar

(Concluded from page 374)

BEE HIVE—9:00 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. General Sessions for Stake and Ward Bee Keepers, Kingsbury Hall, U of U Campus, 12:00 noon Birthday Luncheon 85c.

YM ATHLETIC—8:30 a.m. Division Supervisors, Room 21, 50 No. Main; General Sessions 10:00 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. Mission Home (31 No. State). Box Lunches at noon 90c.

DANCE—8:10 a.m. and 1:50 p.m. General Sessions, University Ward (160 University St.) and U of U.

DRAMA—9:00 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. General Sessions, Colonial Hills Ward (1455 So. 17th East, 12:00 noon Haywagon Theatre, Lunch 85c at noon.

MUSIC—8:00 a.m. Stake Supervisors, 9:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. General Sessions for Stake and Ward Leaders, South East Stake

THE IMPROVEMENT ERA