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A Hebrew Inscription Authenticated

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6

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In dedicating this article to Professor Hugh W. Nibley, I am expressing an admiration I have long felt. Ever since visiting the campus of Brigham Young University two decades ago, I saw in Dr. Nibley a savant who was inspiring a generation of disciples with a love of learning and with the dedication to devote their lives to it. May he, like Moses, live to be a hundred and twenty, with undiminished vision and vigor!

In 1889 a Smithsonian Institution expedition, under the direction of Dr. Cyrus Thomas, unearthed a hitherto undisturbed[1] burial at Bat Creek (Mound #3), Loudon County, Tennessee. In it were nine skeletons, laid out in orderly fashion (as shown in fig. 1). Under the skull and jawbone of the only one with the head pointed south (#1) was found a number of objects, including an inscribed stone (figs. 2 and 3). The text is in Old Hebrew letters (*ketav ʿivrî*) closely akin to those on Jewish coins of the two rebellions against Rome, and therefore to be dated ca. A.D. 100.

The stone is broken at both ends. The two vertical strokes above the line of writing were made with a sharp tool after the discovery of the tomb. The word that ends in two letters after the initial break on the right may be [H]ZQ "strong, strength."[2] But the sequence LYHWD[ ] after the word-divider can be read and translated "for Ju-

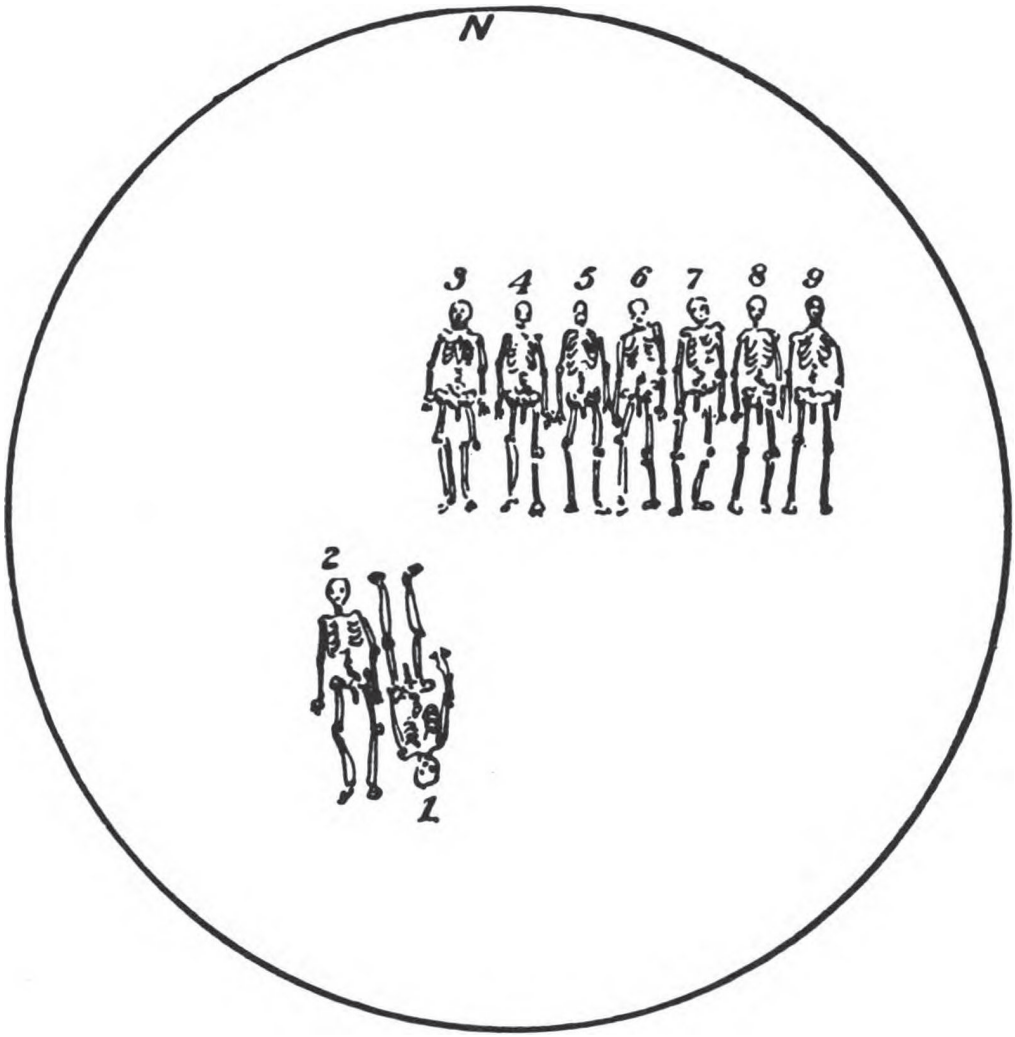

Figure 1: Disposition of Skeletons, Bat Creek Mound #3

dea."[3] The "pearls" (little drilled dots, as at the top of the L and Y) are familiar from coins of both rebellions, especially the Second (Bar Kokhba) Rebellion. The L, Y, and H could appear in several periods. The W, however, is found on coins of Roman date showing that the fifth letter is D (as attested on coins of Roman date) and not an improperly formed aleph. The sole letter on the last line, which approximates an aleph on coins of either rebellion, occurs more commonly on Bar Kokhba coins. It might pos-

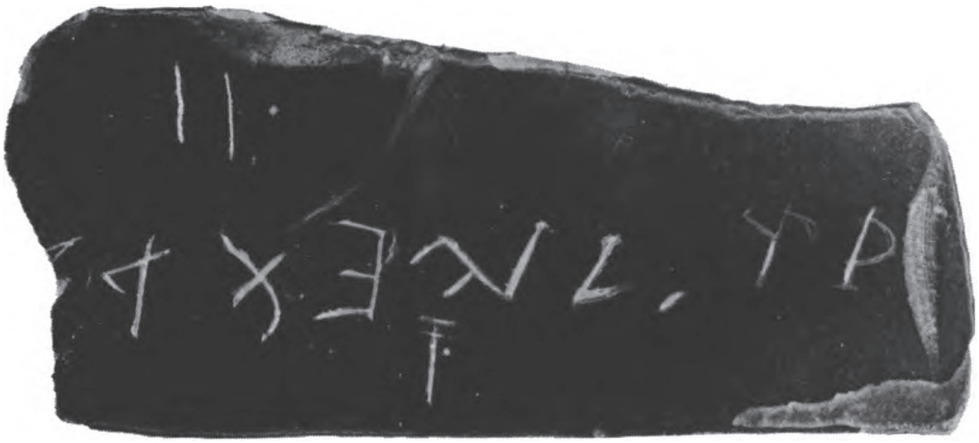

Figure 2: Photograph of Bat Creek Inscription

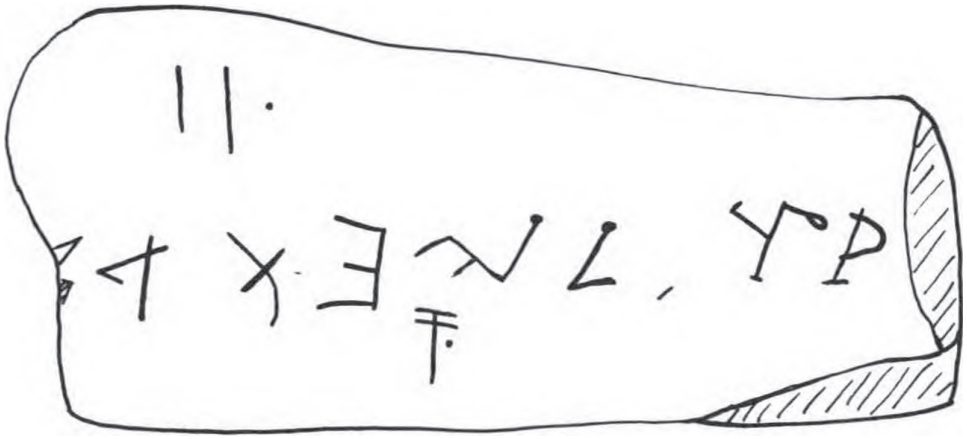

Figure 3: Facsimile of Bat Creek Inscription

sibly serve as the numeral "1" to designate the First Year of the Rebellion.

For epigraphic details and a general discussion, the reader is referred to my article "The Bat Creek Inscription."[4] As noted there,[5] I had already asked the Smithsonian to run a carbon-14 test on the wood fragments and bone implement found with the inscription and other objects under the skull and jawbone of skeleton #1. For various reasons the test was not made then. It remained for Pro-

fessor J. Huston McCulloch of Ohio State University to reopen the problem of Bat Creek Mound #3 and devote himself to it indefatigably since 1979. He has succeeded in having the wood fragments put through a "state-of-the-art" carbon-14 test which establishes a date not earlier than A.D. 32 and not later than 769.[6]

I stand by the scenario I proposed in 1972: During and after the rebellions, the Jews incurred such intense hostility from the Romans that the more desperate and adventuresome Jews with navigational expertise or contacts[7] tried to get as far away from the long arm of Rome as possible.

The stone was carved either ca. A.D. 100 in the Old World, or aboard ship, or in America by someone trained in the tradition of that script, some time after the refugees landed in what is now the eastern United States. By the time of its interment in Bat Creek Mound #3, it might have been passed down as an heirloom for several generations. But the carbon-14 test proves that the burial took place over seven centuries prior to Columbus' discovery in 1492. The letter-forms imply cultural contact between America and Palestine ca. A.D.100. The inscription cannot be a modern forgery, on the one hand, nor can it be pre-Christian, on the other.

Cyrus Thomas had an ax to grind. His theory was that the Mound Indians (including everybody buried at sites like Bat Creek) were the same people as the local Indians (notably the Cherokees) of modern times. He published the inscription upside-down and called it Cherokee (in the script invented by Sequoyah around 1821). Neither Thomas nor those who have agreed with him have attempted to translate any of the text.

A few amateurs, in the midtwentieth century, matched up two or three of the letters correctly by comparing them with published Phoenician alphabet charts. My friend, Dr. Joseph B. Mahan, Jr., consulted me on the Bat Creek Inscription in 1970. He was convinced that the letters were

Phoenician, after he had compared them with an alphabet chart in the *Cambridge Ancient History*. No one had been able to make any sense of the text either as Phoenician/Hebrew or as Cherokee. I was the first Semitist to study the text and read the sequence LYHWD[ ] "for Judea."[8] I favored attributing the migration to the Bar Kokhba Rebellion, partly because three different Bar Kokhba coins had been found at three widely separated sites, at quite different times,[9] in the neighboring state of Kentucky. One of the coins might possibly be a modern copy, but the other two cannot easily be accounted for that way.[10]

There are traces of Jewish influence in pre-Columbian America. We may single out the Tepatlaxco (Veracruz) Stele (ca. A.D. 100-300) showing a Mayan wearing phylacteries; the arm windings are seven in number and are followed by finger windings. This monument is noteworthy because no scholar, in any field, has ever questioned its authenticity or pre-Columbian date. To be sure, the Amerindian experts did not detect the Old World origin of the ritual depicted and very few are even now aware of it.[11]

The Bat Creek Inscription is important because it is the first scientifically authenticated pre-Columbian text in an Old World script or language found in America; and, at that, in a flawless archaeological context. It proves that some Old World people not only could, but actually did, cross the Atlantic to America before the Vikings and Columbus.

While the Northwest Semitic (including Jewish) contribution to pre-Columbian America is a fact, we must state unequivocally that Columbus' achievement remains unique and undiminished. It was he who united the Eastern and Western hemispheres so that from 1492 their histories became indissolubly intertwined. His feat was the culmination of trans-Atlantic crossings since remote anti-

quity. Like all great discoveries, his was not a primitive beginning but the climax of a long development.

We must also state clearly that the boat which carried the Bat Creek Inscription—or its carver—to America in Roman times was not the first to bring immigrants or visitors to the western shores of the Atlantic. Various sea-lanes had brought different Old World peoples to America via both the Pacific and Atlantic. The Hebrews who came to America before the Vikings and Columbus were not the first to come, and no claim that "the Jews discovered America" is justified.[12]

General background on pre-Columbian crossings of the Atlantic and Pacific is available in my *Before Columbus*. Here we need only single out the circumnavigation of Africa by Phoenician mariners commissioned by Pharaoh Necho II around 600 B.C. Herodotus[13] relates that as they sailed westward around what we call the Cape of Good Hope, the sun was on their right. Herodotus confesses that he did not understand how that could be. (After all, he was acquainted only with the Northern Hemisphere where, if we head westward, the sun is always on our left.) Yet, as an honest reporter, he passes on the information to his readers. Modern scholars have long realized that the narrative proves the historicity of the Phoenician circumnavigation of Africa precisely because Herodotus did not understand the solar observation. What is just as significant is that Near East mariners were not only exploring seas in the Southern Hemisphere but also adding to the store of navigational science available in the Near East center of Western civilization, for the celestial observation made by the Phoenicians off the Cape of Good Hope did reach Herodotus on the shores of the eastern Mediterranean.

Two brass bracelets were among the artifacts found with skeleton #1 in Bat Creek Mound #3. Their composition (with lead as well as zinc alloyed with the copper)[14] was used by the Romans from about 45 B.C. to about A.D. 200,

thus covering the dates of both Jewish rebellions. Brass of this approximate composition has been used in modern times since at least the fourteenth century. But the carbon-14 test of the wood fragment shows that all the contents of the burial were interred over half a millennium before the first "modern brass" and that therefore the bracelets were fashioned in Roman times.

The authentication of the Bat Creek Inscription raises the theme of global diffusion. However distinctive a high culture may be, it never arises *ex nihilo*. Egypt, for geographical reasons, favored the development of its own very distinctive civilization. Sealed off by mountains and deserts on both sides of the long Nile Valley, it was open to the outside world only at the north and south ends; to wit, the Delta and Black Africa. In between, along the narrow fertile valley, the Egyptians in relative isolation developed as unique a high civilization as ever existed. And yet we know of fundamental factors borrowed by Egypt in early formative periods. The seal cylinder is an obvious loan from Mesopotamia in the fourth to third millennia B.C.[15] The recessed facades of early Egyptian architecture are rightly compared with the same type of recessing in Sumer. It is no accident that the earliest pyramid in Egypt (designed by Imhotep for Joser at Saqqara) is stepped like a ziggurat.[16] The political chief *insi*[17] in Egypt invites comparison with Sumerian *ensí* "ruler (of a city-state)" though both may be of Syro-Palestinian origin.[18] Such borrowings are always modified in the process, and it is the business of the perceptive scholar to detect real (primary) identity in apparent (secondary) difference.[19]

Anyone who works on both Indo-European and Semitic languages knows the great gaps that separate them. That they share vocabulary imbedded at different levels is often enough due to borrowing at various stages. But how are we to explain the same duals they share? We cannot dissociate—or attribute to ordinary borrowing—the Greek

dual suffix *-ā/-ayn* from Arabic *-ā/-ayn*; nor Homeric Greek *nōï* "we two" from the Old Egyptian and Ugaritic suffix -NY "we two." Since the dual is on the way out in all these languages,[20] this feature shared by Egypto-Semitic and Indo-European is deeply imbedded.[21] Indeed there are so many widespread comparable phenomena that a vigorous school of Afro-Asiatic studies has grown up since World War II, devoted to investigating the relationships among many languages—spanning whole linguistic families—throughout the Old World. Some avant-garde comparativists see detailed connections between Amerindian and Old World families of languages. There is something to this, even though the high margin of error renders the subject too hazardous for cautious linguists.

To clarify the technical side of prehistoric migration, it is to be noted that the simpler the mode of travel, the easier it is to reach difficult places. One can reach rough terrain by jeep where an airplane cannot land; or forested hills by mule, where a jeep would be useless; or mountain peaks (and caverns) on foot, where riding animals would be futile. The same holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for sea travel. A small vessel may survive on stormy high seas when a larger ship might break asunder with the prow atop one high wave and the stern atop another. Moreover, large ships require special harbors; small craft may be beached or find safety in little coves.

When I first became involved in the study of early transoceanic navigation, most prominent authorities considered it impossible. But now that every year daredevils cross the oceans solo (often in tiny primitive craft), relying on winds, currents, and luck, no one can say it is, or ever was, impossible. Yet the person most responsible for changing the intellectual climate regarding early, and even prehistoric, oceanic crossings, was not an authority on navigation and naval architecture (like the late Admiral and Harvard Professor Samuel Eliot Morison), but the mav-

erick anthropologist and showman, Thor Heyerdahl, who had no conventional training in sailing or ship-building.

Heyerdahl and I were on a television program in 1973 in Paris. After the show, we had some time to stroll and talk privately. He explained that although he is Norwegian, he grew up with no experience in seamanship or boat construction. To the contrary, it was his bizarre contraptions like the raft *Kon-Tiki* and his oversized "Egyptian laundry basket" *Ra II* that captured the public's imagination and showed that if vast expanses of ocean could be traversed in such "Rube Goldberg" vessels, we can no longer say that pre-Columbian crossings were impossible. If it can be done by a motley crew aboard *Ra II*, how much more so by the great sailors of antiquity such as the Phoenicians, whose oceangoing vessels ("ships of Tarshish") were infinitely more seaworthy than Heyerdahl's extravaganzas.

Vast expanses of the Pacific (from olden times to the present) have been repeatedly crossed by Polynesian navigators in simple craft such as outrigger canoes. For Polynesians to sail and row a thousand miles to some far-off point like Easter Island might be attributed to "dumb luck," but to return again to their exact point of embarkation cannot be a repeat performance of "dumb luck." The Polynesian science of navigation is quite different from ours, but it is a science nonetheless. When they see a cloud with a green tinge, they know it is reflecting the verdure of a shore where they might land. They know that various specific kinds of birds have rookeries on specific islands, and by observing which birds are in flight, they find specific islands in their seas. They know that waves roll toward, not away from, the coast. By proceeding with, and not against, the waves, they reach the nearest haven by night as well as by day. The Polynesians discovered that when a radiance under the surface (called "underwater lightning"; it is not phosphorescence) is seen darting, the mo-

tion is always away from the dry land. When it appears, they can find the shore in darkest night. Those navigators have, of course, also extensive knowledge concerning celestial navigation, winds, and currents.

Virtually every major landmass, plus countless smaller islands, have yielded Pre-Modern skeletal remains of people, often accompanied by artifacts. To get there people had to migrate by land and sea. To reach distant isolated islands, they had to resort to boats or rafts.

It is instructive to outline the changes in "authoritative" opinion during the last half century. In the 1930s, leading anthropologists and historians were insisting that the earliest remains of man in the Western Hemisphere were less than two thousand years old. Now the evidence is pushing mankind in America further and further back into remote pre-Christian millennia. Between 1935 and 1938, when I was stationed at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, I often visited the Smithsonian Institution in nearby Washington, where I met the elderly and influential dean of American archaeology, Aleš Hrdlička. His dogma was that Old World man entered pre-Columbian America by only one route: across the Bering Strait. Unless a young anthropologist subscribed to that view, it was virtually impossible for him to get a museum or university job in American anthropology or archaeology. This explains some of the inflexibility in that field down to the present. Gradually the evidence for Pacific crossings found its way into respectable circles, but until now the denial of Atlantic crossings before Columbus and the Vikings is still common in academia.

McCulloch has demonstrated that as long as the Bat Creek Inscription was considered Cherokee, no one questioned its authenticity. It was only after I found it to be Hebrew that the pundits began to brand it as a forgery. But the laboratory tests in 1988 show that all the contents of the undisturbed tomb were interred long before the

Vikings and Columbus reached America, while the letter-forms establish the Imperial Roman date of the script. Similarly, the lead content of the brass bracelets supports the Roman date, once the modern date is ruled out.

In the light of the general mobility of mankind, especially since the Neolithic revolution, all high civilizations owe so much to their predecessors and contemporaries that none of them can have arisen independently. Indeed the *sine qua non* of any high civilization is the creative combination of several stimuli by a talented population that is ready for it.

There are isolated cases of the survival of human babies reared by animals, so we are not declaring individual cases of independent cultural invention a logical impossibility, but only that the regular development of human societies is through the transmission and mingling of cultures. When there is a minimum of mingling, a culture tends to be relatively static.[22] When there is migration or symbiosis, new combinations arise. Some combinations produce brilliant innovation (e.g., classical Greece); others are disastrous.[23]

Greek epic stood on the shoulders of its predecessors. But however much the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* owe to the Gilgamesh and Ugaritic epics, Homer is incomparably greater than the poets of the cuneiform world. Hymns were composed and sung in Sumer and Egypt long before Israel appeared on the stage of history. Yet the Psalms of David eclipsed all that went before and remain the finest in their category to this very day. In the light of ancient trans-Pacific and trans-Atlantic crossings, the effects of borrowings from both directions mingled in Mexico and Central America where the shores of the two oceans come closest together so that gifted people had a maximum of stimuli for developing creative civilizations such as the Mayan.

Not long ago, New World civilization was regarded as quite independent of developments in the Old World. The

fact that no pre-Columbian inscription in an Old World script or language was regarded as authentic in respectable academic circles enabled the independent inventionists to maintain that pre-Columbian civilizations in America had arisen in isolation from the rest of the world. The carbon-14 dating of the Bat Creek wood fragments ushers in a new era in which anyone who is not an obscurantist will have to accept not just the possibility but also the actuality of a specific contact between the Eastern and Western hemispheres long before Columbus and the Vikings. The full story may take a long time to unfold, but the fact of global diffusion is here to stay. Moreover, interrelations are two-way streets. Apparent pre-Columbian influences of the Western Hemisphere on the Eastern have been pointed out (mainly, but far from exclusively, by amateurish enthusiasts) and disregarded, if not discredited. The historic facts of West-to-East as well as East-to-West diffusion across both oceans will force blind denial to give way to open-mindedness.[24]

The authentication of the Bat Creek Inscription is a milestone in the process of formulating a credible unified global history.[25]

Notes

1. The latest and best documented account has been written by J. Huston McCulloch, "The Bat Creek Inscription: Cherokee or Hebrew?" *Tennessee Anthropologist* 13/2 (Fall 1988): 79-123. It provides detailed data on the excavation and the artifacts, as well as the inscription, plus the laboratory tests that authenticate the antiquity of the grave and all its contents.

2. To insist on the reading (though it is carved clearly), let alone its meaning, would be unjustified at this time. Professor Robert Stieglitz of Rutgers University makes the interesting suggestion that ZQ (*zîq*) means "comet" and refers to Bar Kokhba (the Hero's title which means "son of the star").

3. The traces of a final letter, which are compatible with the letter M (but not with H), make it conceivable to read "for the Judeans." YHWD, without final -H, already designates "Judea" in the Achaemenian Age; e.g., Daniel 2:25; 5:13; 6:14; Ezra 5:1, 8; 7:14.

4. Cyrus H. Gordon, "The Bat Creek Inscription," in *The Book of the Descendants of Dr. Benjamin Lee and Dorothy Gordon* (Ventnor, NJ: Ventnor, 1972), 5-18.

5. Ibid., 8.

6. The test (made in Zurich through Beta Analytic, Inc., of Coral Gables, Florida) was reported on 2 May 1988. McCulloch, "The Bat Creek Inscription," describes the technical refinements in the new methods used for the carbon test.

7. See Gordon, "The Bat Creek Inscription," 14-15, on ancient Jewish seamanship.

8. In the postscript to my *Before Columbus* (New York: Crown, 1971), 175-78.

9. The first was found at Louisville in 1932, the second at Clay City in 1952, and the third at Hopkinsville in 1967. Since they are all surface finds, without archaeological context, they cannot by themselves be used as proof of ancient contacts with Roman Judea.

10. For example, Clay City is a small unsophisticated community (population under five hundred) where no one was interested in collecting exotic antiquities such as Bar Kokhba coins.

11. A photographic close-up of "The Phylactery Stele" is reproduced (with an explanation) in my *Riddles in History* (New York: Crown, 1974), 151.

12. Such claims have been attributed to me although I have never said, written, or thought any such thing.

13. Herodotus IV, 42.

14. See Table 4 in McCulloch, "The Bat Creek Inscription," for the composition of the two brass bracelets; one has 68.2% copper, 27.5% zinc, and 3.29% lead; the other has 66.5% copper, 26.5% zinc, and 3.3% lead.

15. Egyptian seal cylinders are different from their Mesopotamian prototypes in several ways. They may bear hieroglyphic inscriptions, have sides without vertical curvature, be made of materials not used in Mesopotamia, etc. Borrowings regularly undergo modification. The obelisk in Washington, D.C., is easily distinguished from its prototypes in Egypt.

16. One of Imhotep's innovations is especially important. It is the first recorded monumental free-standing architecture in stone—and still extant!

17. The Egyptian royal title transliterated *nsw bity*, "King of Upper and Lower Egypt," is rendered phonetically in cuneiform as *insibiya*, showing that the first element was pronounced *insi*.

18. Since neither the Egyptian *insi* nor the Sumerian *ensí* has a

recognizable etymology in those languages, both may be derived from *nasî'* "prince, king, (and nowadays) president" (lit., "raised up, exalted") in Canaan, which connects Mesopotamia and Egypt.

19. An illustration from another field may highlight this point. A whale looks like a fish, but is in fact an air-breathing mammal. The wings of a bird do not look like the hands of a man, but they share the same origin. This is why only in art do angels have hands as well as wings; in nature, if a creature has the one, it cannot have the other.

20. There are survivals of duals. Arabic even uses duals down to the present day for all nouns even in colloquial speech, and not just for natural pairs (like "hands," "eyes," etc.). But, in modern Greek, and in ancient or modern Hebrew, "two dogs" (etc.) would be in the plural, not dual.

21. For the dual of the first person to survive in Old Egyptian, Ugaritic, and Greek implies very deep roots in an ancient shared stratum.

22. For example, the cultures of the Arabs in remote areas of Arabia (until the nineteenth century) and of the Eskimos (until the relatively modern encroachment of the Europeans and now the Americans) both remained rather static.

23. Cf., for example, the combination of the traditional American way of life with the drug culture of Asia, resulting from the stationing of troops in the Orient. Alcohol is also toxic, but that was a part of the European culture brought by the settlers to America. Opium and other hard drugs were alien to American culture, and its effects on U.S. troops were—and still are—devastating. In Iran, on the other hand, I knew some highly cultivated and respected citizens who were not ruined by smoking opium daily.

24. These generalities have hard facts to back them up. But we should not keep repeating the same facts. I am now preparing studies with *new* detailed hard evidence on ancient Near East contacts with the Far East, India, and America. For the extensive published literature down to 1988, see John L. Sorenson and Martin H. Raish, "Transoceanic Culture Contacts between the Old and New Worlds in Pre-Columbian Times: A Comprehensive Annotated Bibliography," rev. and enl. ed., F.A.R.M.S., May 1988.

25. The discredited pre-Columbian American inscriptions in Old World scripts or languages will have to be reexamined and reevaluated, each on the merits of the evidence, case by case.