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Some Fairly Foolproof Tests

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Some Fairly Foolproof Tests

Checking the Background

To the trained eye, every document of considerable length is bound to betray the real setting in which it was produced. This can be illustrated by something Martin Luther wrote two days before his death: "No one can understand the *Bucolics* and *Georgics* of Virgil who has not been a herdsman or a farmer for at least five years. And no one can understand Cicero's letters, I maintain, who has not been concerned with significant affairs of state for twenty years. And no one can get an adequate feeling for the Scriptures who has not guided religious communities by the prophets for a hundred years."¹ What is the world of experiences and ideas that one finds behind the Book of Mormon? What is its real *Sitz im Leben*? We can start with actual experiences, not merely ideas but things of a strictly objective and therefore testable nature; for example, the book describes in considerable detail what is supposed to be a great earthquake somewhere in Central America, and another time it sets forth the particulars of ancient olive culture. Here are things we can check up on; but to do so we must go to sources made available by scholars long since the days of Joseph Smith. Where *he* could have learned all about major Central American earthquakes or the fine points of Mediterranean olive culture remains a question. But the first question is, how well does he describe them?

The Great Earthquake. Since Cumorah the earth has done a great deal of quaking, and seismology has become a sci-

ence. Today it is possible to check step-by-step every phenomenon described in the account of the great destructions reported in 3 Nephi 8–9 and to discover that what passed for many years as the most lurid, extravagant, and hence impossible part of the Book of Mormon is actually a very sober and factual account of a first-class earthquake. It was a terror—about XI on the Wood-Neuman scale—but at that it is probably not the worst quake on record, since we are expressly told that the damage was not total—“And there were some cities which remained” (3 Nephi 8:15); whereas in the great Assam earthquake of 1950 the damage was total over a large area.² Take the Book of Mormon events in order:

First “there arose a great storm . . . and . . . also a great and terrible tempest,” from which it would appear that the storm developed into a hurricane (3 Nephi 8:5–6). Major earthquakes are so often accompanied by “heavy rains, thunder and hailstorms, violent tempests,” etc., that some specialists insist that “there is some evidence that certain weather conditions may ‘trigger’ an earthquake,”³ as in the Japanese earthquake of 1923, of which some Japanese seismologists maintain that “the low barometric pressure was the trigger force which set off the earthquake.”⁴ At any rate, great earthquakes are preceded by great storms often enough to cause speculation.

Next there was a lot of noise, “terrible thunder, inso-much that it did shake the whole earth as if it was about to divide asunder” (3 Nephi 8:6). Note that the thunder was thought to cause the shaking, obviously preceding it. This is another strange thing about earthquakes: “In accounts of earthquakes we always hear of the frightful noise which they produce. . . . But in addition, it seems that sometimes the earthquake can be heard *before* it is felt,” which is “difficult to explain. . . . One should feel the shock before hearing it.”⁵ The thunder seems to shake the earth, since “the sound always appears to come from the ground beneath the observer.”⁶ In the Assam earthquake of 1950

“one thing is stressed in all the reports: the awful rumble that heralded the outbreak of the quake, . . . a deafening roar, louder than anything any of the witnesses had ever heard before.”⁷ The Book of Mormon aptly describes the continuous sounds as “the dreadful groanings . . . and . . . tumultuous noises” (3 Nephi 10:9).

“And there were exceedingly sharp lightnings” (3 Nephi 8:7). According to an eyewitness account, the great earthquake that completely destroyed the old capital of Guatemala on September 11, 1541, was preceded by “the fury of the wind, the incessant, appalling lightning and dreadful thunder” that were “indescribable” in their violence.⁸ One of the still unexplained phenomena of earthquakes is that “all types of lights are reported seen. . . . There are flashes, balls of fire, and streamers.”⁹ The terrible wind at Guatemala City is matched in the Book of Mormon by high winds with occasional whirlwinds that even carried some people away (3 Nephi 8:12, 16; 10:13–14). In the Japanese earthquake of 1923 the wind reached a velocity of 50 m.p.h., and “the fires, in turn, set up minor tornadoes”; and in the Assam earthquake “strong winds raised the dust until visibility was reduced to a few feet.”¹⁰

“And the city of Zarahemla did take fire” (3 Nephi 8:8). It would appear from the account of the Nephite disaster that the main cause of the destruction was fire in the cities (3 Nephi 9:8–11), which agrees with all the major statistics through the centuries; for “earthquakes are largely a city problem,” mainly because the first heavy shock invariably sets fires all over town: in the Japanese experience “wind-driven flames were shown to be more dangerous than the greatest earthquake.”¹¹

“And the city of Moroni did sink into the depths of the sea” (3 Nephi 8:9). The *tsunami* or sea wave “is the most spectacular and . . . appalling of all earthquake phenomena” and almost invariably follows a major shakeup on the coast.¹² Along with this, however, we have in the Book of



Contemporary woodcut of a mountain covering a settlement, and invasion of the sea, 1538

Mormon record what seems to be a permanent submergence of coastal areas when “the waters . . . [come] up in the stead thereof” and remain (3 Nephi 9:7). Such a submergence happened on a spectacular scale in the Chilean earthquake of 1960: “We would have taken these flooded stretches—permanently flooded—for coastal lagoons,” a geologist reports, “if here and there we had not seen roads that ran straight toward them and into them. . . . roads that vanished, or sometimes showed under the stagnant water, branching into what had been the streets of a town.”¹³ In the New Madrid, Missouri, earthquake of 1811, two vast tracts of land were covered with fresh water both by the damming of streams and the bursting out of numerous earthquake blows or fountains, flooding the newly submerged areas.¹⁴

“And the earth was carried up upon the city of Moronihah, that in the place of the city there became a great mountain” (3 Nephi 8:10). In September 1538 during a tremendous storm and tidal wave a volcanic mountain suddenly appeared and covered a town near Puzzuoli on the Bay of Naples; ever since, the mountain has been known as *Monte Nuove*, or New Mountain.¹⁵ The carrying *up* of the earth upon the city suggests the overwhelming of Pompeii by vast heaps of volcanic ash or the deep burial of Herculaneum under lava in 79 A.D.¹⁶ On the other hand, other cities were “sunk, and the inhabitants thereof . . . buried up in the depths of the earth” (3 Nephi 9:6). This could have been an actual engulfment: in the great earthquake of 1755, which was felt all over Europe, the “quay [at Lisbon] sank, with all the people on it, into a fissure, and no trace of quay or people was seen again.”¹⁷ It was a fine new breakwater, and a sizable number of the town’s inhabitants had fled to it to escape from the fire and falling houses of the city.

“The quakings . . . did last for about the space of three hours” (3 Nephi 8:19), though the aftershocks, correctly described as the tremblings and groanings, continued for three days (3 Nephi 10:9), during which time the afflicted people carried on in hysterical fashion with frightful howling and lamentation. This too is a normal part of the picture, since “the incessant recurrence of aftershocks after a great earthquake is most unnerving to the populace.”¹⁸

“There was thick darkness . . . the inhabitants . . . could feel the vapor of darkness; . . . neither could there be fire kindled . . . so great were the mists of darkness” (3 Nephi 8:20–22). This, like much else in the account (e.g., that God “did *send down* fire and destroy them,” 3 Nephi 9:11), suggests nearby volcanic activity. And indeed, in many cases earthquakes are the preparation for the volcano that follows, as in the Chilean 1960 quake, which triggered the activity of long-dormant volcanoes in the area.¹⁹ Most

of the victims of the great catastrophes of Pompeii, St. Pierre (Martinique, 1902), and Mt. Pelee (1906) died of suffocation when earthquake dust, volcanic ash, steam, and hot gasses (mostly sulfureted hydrogen gas) took the place of air. In some areas, the Book of Mormon reports, people were "overpowered by the vapor of smoke and of darkness," and so lost their lives (3 Nephi 10:13). Even without volcanic accompaniments, however, major earthquakes kick up a terrible dust and, according to Sieberg, are accompanied by phenomenal vapors and astonishingly thick air.²⁰ In the Assam earthquake such contamination "reduced [visibility] to a few feet and made breathing a nightmare."²¹

According to 3 Nephi 8:20–21 the "vapor of darkness" was not only tangible to the survivors, but defeated every attempt to light candles or torches for illumination. At present, intensive studies are being made of the destruction of the Greek island of Thera (today Santorini) in 1400 B.C. This catastrophe, well within historic times, is thought to have been eight times as violent as Krakatoa (!) and is described in terms exactly paralleling the account in 3 Nephi. Among other things it is pointed out that the overpowering thickness of the air must have extinguished all lamps.²²

The Book of Mormon also mentions the rising and sinking of the land, forming new "hills and valleys" (3 Nephi 9:5–8) — with no mention of major mountain ranges! In the New Madrid earthquake of 1811, "over an area of 30,000 square miles the land surface was lowered by amounts of 6 to 15 feet and over a much smaller area was raised by similar amounts."²³ Hydrographic surveys after the Japanese quake of 1923 showed that over an area of 500 square miles some "areas were . . . lowered as much as 689 feet and other . . . areas raised 820 feet" — a difference of over 1,500 feet.²⁴

In the Nephite catastrophe, some cities escaped total destruction, since they did not lie at the center of the earthquake zone but were south of it (3 Nephi 8:15, 12). As is

well known, "Central America lies in the heavy earthquake belt,"²⁵ as well as being both a coastal and a volcanic area — a perfect setup for all the disasters which the Book of Mormon describes so succinctly and so well. That everything looked strangely changed after the debacle, with seams and cracks everywhere and "highways . . . broken up, and the level roads . . . spoiled, and many smooth places became rough" (3 Nephi 8:13, 17–18), needs no commentary, since such are the most common of all earthquake phenomena. The remarkable thing about such statements is their moderation. Here was a chance for the author of the Book of Mormon to let his imagination run wild (as too many of his followers have done), with whole continents displaced, signs in the heavens, and monsters emerging from the deep. Instead, we get level roads spoiled and smooth places made rough!

We must bear in mind that what the Book of Mormon reports are the happenings as the people experienced them rather than as instruments would record them. Most earthquake data are of this very human nature, and exactly match the account in 3 Nephi. The Book of Mormon description emphasizes the fact that it was not any one particular thing but the combination of horrors that made the experience so terrible. As N.H. Heck puts it, what makes a major earthquake so devastating is "the combination of forces . . . into an almost irresistible source of disaster."²⁶ The picture of cumulating disaster at the destruction of Guatemala City in 1541 strikingly parallels the story in the eighth chapter of 3 Nephi: "It had rained incessantly and with great violence. . . . The fury of the wind, the incessant, appalling lightning and dreadful thunder were indescribable. The general terror was increased by eruptions from the volcano to such a degree that . . . the inhabitants imagined the final destruction of the world was at hand. . . . [The following morning] the vibrations of the earth were so violent that the people were unable to stand;

the shocks were accompanied by a terrible subterranean noise which spread universal dismay."²⁷

We have then in the Book of Mormon a factual and sober account of a major upheaval in which by comparison with other such accounts nothing seems exaggerated. However wildly others may have chosen to interpret the Book of Mormon record, so far is it from bearing the marks of fantasy or wild imagination that it actually furnishes convincing evidence that the person who wrote it must have had personal experience of a major Meso-American quake or else have had access to authentic accounts of such.

Olive Culture. A more tranquil theme is the story of the olive tree. As we shall see below, some Book of Mormon writers were greatly concerned with the imagery of the olive tree. In setting forth its symbolism, they found it necessary to go into a description of olive culture in some detail. Now as far as the Book of Mormon is concerned, there is no sign of any cultivation of olives in the New World; the story of the olive tree as given in the Book of Mormon is supposed to be quoted from the writings of an ancient prophet who lived in Palestine long before Lehi left the place—he is wholly concerned with describing ancient Palestinian or Mediterranean olive culture; there is no other kind mentioned in the Book of Mormon.

Jacob's (or rather Zenos') treatise on ancient olive culture (Jacob 5–6) is accurate in every detail: Olive trees do have to be pruned and cultivated diligently; the top branches are indeed the first to wither, and the new shoots do come right out of the trunk; the olive is indeed the most plastic of trees, surpassing even the willow in its power to survive the most drastic whacking and burning; a good olive tree is greatly cherished, and no end of pains are taken to preserve it even through many centuries, for really superior fruit is very rare and difficult to obtain and perpetuate; the ancient way of strengthening the old trees (especially in Greece) was to graft in the shoots of the oleaster

or wild olive; also, shoots from valuable old trees were transplanted to keep the stock alive after the parent tree should perish; to a surprising degree the olive prefers poor and rocky ground, whereas rich soil produces inferior fruit; too much grafting produces a nondescript and cluttered yield of fruit; the top branches if allowed to grow as in Spain and France, while producing a good shade tree, will indeed sap the strength of the tree and give a poor crop; fertilizing with dung is very important, in spite of the preference for rocky ground, and has been practiced since ancient times; the thing to be most guarded against is bitterness in the fruit.²⁸ All these points, taken from a treatise on ancient olive culture, are duly, though quite casually, noted in Zenos's Parable of the Olive Tree.

The Axial Period. Even more difficult to fake than an accurate description of how things really were done in a practical way is the spiritual and cultural image of an age. For the setting and color of life in Jerusalem in 600 B.C. the author of the Book of Mormon could have borrowed from the Bible. Only he goes far beyond the Bible in describing the world of Lehi. We have discussed this picture at some length and pointed out that the author of the Book of Mormon could have picked no better time or place in all history for the launching of a new civilization, and no better qualified parties to lead the enterprise, than the time, place, and characters he chose.²⁹ This is by no means a rationalization of our own. Over a century ago the French scholar Lasaul noted what many have since confirmed, that the years around 600 B.C. are the "Axial Period" of world history, that is, the pivotal point or axis around which that whole history turns. At that time "a strange movement of the spirit passed through all civilized peoples."³⁰ And what historian does not recognize as a basic fact of "Geopolitics" that the pivotal region of world history, ancient, Medieval, and modern, is that point where three continents come

together and where the sea reaches farthest into the great central land-mass, i.e., Palestine?

The great shift of the Axial period was from the old sacral monarchies to more free and popular forms of government, and from a religious or "mantic" orientation of thought to a scientific or "sophic" one. The swing took place quickly all over the Near East and around the Mediterranean, but mid scenes of great confusion and revolution. There is something to be said for both ways of thinking, and the great debate between them—political, religious, economic, intellectual—has been going on ever since. That debate is nowhere more clearly set forth than in the pages of the Book of Mormon. It begins with furious heat and passion, right in the household of Lehi, where the issue is clearly drawn between the defenders of the prosperous, respectable, pharisaical "Jews at Jerusalem" and the refugee father, who has turned his back on wealth and respectability to live as a righteous outcast in the desert; and the controversy continues right on down through all of Nephite history as a long line of clever and sophisticated professional preachers take issue with a long line of prophets. No Greek dramatist or philosopher ever set forth the issues with greater vigor and clarity than they are presented in the pages of the Book of Mormon.

One of the most interesting features of the Book of Mormon is the inclusion in it of long speeches by false prophets. These men are skilled Sophists who use all the stock arguments against the gospel with practiced skill and great success. It is hard for a philosopher today to find anything to add to the arguments of Sherem, Korihor, Zeezrom, or Nehor.

But are not such arguments typical of a later age, that of the schoolmen in the days when Greek thought had pervaded the East? Indeed they are, but their history goes clear back to the beginning. The split between rationalists and believers, which runs right through the Book of Mor-

mon from the first page to the last, is what Goodenough calls the perennial conflict in Judaism between the "horizontal" and the "vertical" types of religion, that is, between the comfortable and conventional religion of forms and observances as opposed to a religion of revelations, dreams, visions, and constant awareness of the reality of the other world and the poverty of this one.³¹ We have called this the conflict between the "sophic" and the "mantic," and it goes back to the earliest records of Greece and the Levant;³² but was brought to its sharpest focus in the period just after 600 B.C.

The conflict between these two views of life and religion flared up at the time when the old sacral order of society, weakened by corruption, wars, and migrations, was attacked by a new skepticism and rationalism which suddenly became bold and outspoken. This controversy was fanned to fever-heat in the political and moral crisis of Jerusalem under Zedekiah, and was carried to the New World in the baggage of Lehi and Mulek. It begins with Laman and Lemuel, the perfect exponents of the smug "horizontal religion" with its careful concern for outward observances of the law and its utter contempt for visionary prophets of doom:

"And thou art like unto our father, led away by the foolish imaginations of his heart; . . .

"And we know that the people who were in the land of Jerusalem were a righteous people; for they kept the statutes and judgments of the Lord, and all his commandments, according to the law of Moses; wherefore, we know that they are a righteous people; and our father hath judged them" (1 Nephi 17:20, 22). The issue is clearly drawn and has continued to this day, as we shall see when we consider the case of Korihor.

Some Strange Customs

The Book of Mormon mentions a number of strange customs and usages not found in the Bible and only discovered in other sources in recent years.

1. The most notorious of these is *temple building*. Ministers and other Bible students gleefully pounced on what they thought an outrageous gaffe when they caught Nephi telling how he and the more religious part of the people went apart from the main body after they had been a while in the New World, and founded their own religiously oriented community, setting about to make a temple after the manner of Solomon's Temple only not so splendid (2 Nephi 5:16). In 1895 began the discovery of the writings of another group of refugees from Jerusalem, who left about Lehi's time, settling far up the Nile at Elephantine. The most surprising discovery to come out of this archive was that these Jews also erected a temple in their new home, and when it was destroyed by the hostility of a local governor, they applied to the directors of the temple at Jerusalem for permission to rebuild it—which permission was granted.³³

2. *The Order of Battle*. The so-called Battle Scroll from Qumran throws a flood of light on peculiar military practices described in the Book of Mormon, especially those of Moroni: his improvised banner with its high-sounding patriotic inscription, and his dedicating of the enemy's land to destruction we have discussed elsewhere.³⁴ But we failed to take sufficient note of his consultation with a prophet before the battle to learn by divine revelation the enemy's disposition and what his own movements should be. This is standard practice in the Book of Mormon (Alma 43:23–24), and we now learn on the evidence especially of the Battle Scroll that it was also the regular practice in ancient Israel.³⁵ In confronting the enemy, Moroni reminds his people that they are the poor and the outcasts of the world, fittingly following a banner which was his own rent coat, representing the torn garment of their ancestor Joseph, the outcast and suffering servant (Alma 46:18–23). Again, the Battle Scroll described the hosts of the Children of Light as the poor and outcast of the earth, despised and now threatened with extermination by the haughty gentiles.³⁶

3. Following the example of Moroni, all the people who were willing to enter his army and take the covenant rent their garments as he had his, only they went further and proceeded to *tread upon their garments*, saying as they did so, "We covenant with God, that . . . he may cast us at the feet of our enemies, even as we have cast our garments at thy feet to be trodden under foot, if we shall fall into transgression" (Alma 46:22).

In a very recent study J.Z. Smith considers under the title of "Treading upon the Garments" an ancient ritual practice attested in the newly discovered early Christian Coptic texts in which a person upon becoming a member of the church would take off his garment and trample on it "in token" of having cast away an old way of life and as a symbol of trampling his old sins underfoot, with "curses placed on the inciter" to sin.³⁷ Heretofore the custom has been traced to Hellenistic sources, but it now appears from the newly found documents that it is an original and very old Jewish rite "probably to be traced back to Jewish exegesis of Genesis 3:21."³⁸ It has all the marks of being archaic and shows that peculiar blend of ritual and real-life behavior which at first made the understanding of the Battle Scroll so difficult and which puts such a distinctive stamp upon some of the historical events in the Book of Mormon.³⁹

Before the battle "when he had poured out his soul to God," Moroni "named all the land which was south of the land Desolation, . . . and . . . all the land, both on the north and on the south—a chosen land" (Alma 46:17). Whether we punctuate this to mean that he named the enemy land Desolation and the rest "Chosen," or that he named the "chosen land" and let the rest keep its ill-omened title, the point is that we have here the practice, now attested by the Battle Scroll, of formally blessing the hosts of Israel and cursing the land of their enemy before the battle.⁴⁰

4. The rite of the *Rameumptom* is as strange as the name:

For they had a place built up in the center of their

synagogue, a place for standing, which was high above the head, and the top thereof would only admit one person. Therefore, whosoever desired to worship must go forth and stand upon the top thereof, and stretch forth his hands towards heaven, and cry with a loud voice, . . . [a long prayer follows]; . . . every man did go forth and offer up the same prayers. Now the place was called by them Rameumptom, which, being interpreted, is the holy stand (Alma 31:13–21).

The fact that the term had to be translated into Nephite indicates that these people had their own strange dialect. And indeed they were not Nephites but Zoramites, a people who preferred the old customs of the Mulekites to the discipline of the Nephites. The Mulekites, it will be recalled, were a mixed crowd of Near Eastern emigrants who took little stock in the rites and customs of the Jews. Recently Leipoldt has shown that the pillar-sitting monks of Syria, who caused such a sensation in early Christian times, were actually carrying on an ancient pagan tradition in the land, by which a man would mount on a high pillar at some important ceremonial center and from the top of it pray for the people.⁴¹ The performance of the Christian stylites consisted of endless gyrations atop a high pillar. A large number of related Greek words describe the idea: *Remb-*, *ramp-*, *rhamph-* imply wild ecstatic circling motions, especially in the air. The word has been traced back to a Phoenician original, *raba-* (Hebrew *rab*), applied to a kind of missile launcher. Could we be here on the trail of our word Rameumptom?⁴²

5. There is a peculiar rite of execution described in the Book of Mormon whose ancient background is clearly attested. When a notorious debunker of religion was convicted of murder, "they carried him upon the top of the hill Manti, and there he was caused, or rather did acknowledge, between the heavens and the earth, that what he had taught to the people was contrary to the word of God; and

there he suffered an ignominious death" (Alma 1:15). A like fate was suffered centuries later by the traitor Zemnarihah. This goes back to a very old tradition indeed, that of the first false preachers, Harut and Marut (fallen angels), who first corrupted the word of God and as a result hang to this day between heaven and earth confessing their sin. Their counterpart in Jewish tradition is the angel Shamhozai, who "repented, and by way of penance hung himself up between heaven and earth."⁴³ These may be only old legends, but they were legends that certain ancient people took very seriously, and the peculiar and symbolic punishment they describe is known to the author of the Book of Mormon.

6. We have said a good deal about the hiding up of sacred records, but have not noted that according to the Book of Mormon it was a prescribed practice to "hide up treasures to the Lord." The prophet Samuel the Lamanite condemns the Nephites not for hiding up treasures, but specifically for not hiding them up to the Lord:

I will, saith the Lord, that they shall hide up their treasures unto me; and cursed be they who hide not up their treasures unto me; . . . [I] will hide up their treasure when they shall flee before their enemies; because they will not hide them up unto me, cursed be they and also their treasures (Helaman 13:19-20).

When they flee before their enemies, the faithful are expected to hide up their treasures to the Lord. This is exactly the lesson of the Copper Scroll, which was "intended to tell the Jewish survivors of the war . . . where this sacred material lay buried, so that . . . it would never be desecrated by profane use."⁴⁴

7. The Dancing Maidens are a picturesque touch in the Book of Mormon:

Now there was a place in Shemlon where the daughters



The copper scrolls

of the Lamanites did gather themselves together to sing, and to dance, and to make themselves merry (Mosiah 20:1).

The refugee priests of Noah discovered them "having tarried in the wilderness." The custom is not Nephite but Lamanite-Zoramite, that is, not necessarily of Israelitish origin. Such a rite flourished in the same cultural complex that seems to have produced the Rameumptom, for the Sabaeen women in December used to celebrate a dance and feast to Venus and the water-nymphs at some pleasant place outside the city of Harran; they would bring fruit, and flowers as offerings, and camp out in the country, and of course no men were allowed.⁴⁵ In Israel also the maidens would dance on the day of Atonement.⁴⁶ Asiatic legends are full of such ladies ritually disporting themselves in the woods.⁴⁷ The thing proves nothing in the Book of Mormon, but it is an authentic little touch just the same.

8. Perhaps the most formidable challenge of the Book of Mormon to scholarship today is the long description of a coronation ceremony included in it. Of all the possible ties between the Book of Mormon and the Old World, by far the most impressive in our opinion is the exact and full matching up of the long coronation rite described in the book of Mosiah with the "standard" Near Eastern coronation ceremonies as they have been worked out through the years by the "patternists" of Cambridge. Imagine a twenty-three-year-old backwoodsman in 1829 giving his version of what an ancient coronation ceremony would be like — what would be done and said, how, and by whom? Put the question to any college senior or dean of humanities today and see what you get. To the recent pronouncements of the "Cambridge school" that conform so beautifully to the long description of Mosiah's enthronement, we may add another interesting bit of confirmation. In the tenth century A.D., Nathan, a Jewish scholar living in Babylon, witnessed the enthronement of the Prince of the Captivity,

carried out by the Jews in exile as a reminder of the glories of their lost kingdom. Since no regular coronation is described in the Bible, and since the rites here depicted conform to the normal pattern of a Near Eastern coronation, we have here a pretty good picture of what a coronation in Israel would be like in Lehi's day.⁴⁸

The new king is set aside by the elders on the Thursday preceding his coronation. The elders are also in charge in the Book of Mormon, though they do not figure in the pre-coronation arrangements in the book of Mosiah because this was an unusual case in which the old king was still living—it is he who designates and crowns his successor. All the people "great and small" are then summoned to the royal presence, each being required to bring the most precious gift his means can afford. In return the Prince of the Captivity entertains them all at a great feast of abundance. The day before the coronation a high wooden tower (*migdol*) had been built. This was covered with precious hangings, and concealed within it was a trained choir of noble youths which under the direction of a precentor led the congregation in hymns and antiphonals preparing for the new king's appearance. This explains how at the coronation of Mosiah all the people would respond to the king in a single voice—it was the practiced and familiar *acclamatio* of the ancient world. Thus the conductor would say, "The breath of all the living . . .," whereupon the choir would answer, "shall bless thy name," and continue until they reached the passage known as the Kedusha, when the entire multitude would join in the familiar words. After this all the people sat down.

When the preliminaries were over, the king, who until then had remained invisible, appeared dramatically on the top of the tower, which until then held only three empty thrones; at the sight of him all the people stood up and remained standing while he seated himself, to be followed after a few moments by the head of the Academy of Sura,

who sat on a throne to his right, though separated from him by an interval, and a little later by the head of the Academy of Pumbeditha, who sat on the king's left. This, of course, is the image of the "three men" who represent God on earth—a Book of Mormon concept, as we have noted above.

Over the king's head alone, however, was the splendid *baldachin*, or royal tent—for as in the Book of Mormon the coronation rite is essentially a camp ceremony. The precentor, who has been the master of ceremonies from the first, then goes under the tent and imparts royal blessings on the new king. In the Book of Mormon the old king, who is still alive, does all this and has general charge of the meeting. Because the blessing cannot be heard by the vast multitude, the chorus of youths standing beneath the throne shout out a loud "Amen!" at the end of it to signify the universal approval.

Then comes the time for the great royal speech, the new king deferring to the head of the Academy of Sura, who in turn courteously defers to the head of the Academy of Pumbeditha, "thus showing deference to one another" and indicating their perfect oneness of mind and purpose. The speech is delivered in the manner of a message from heaven, the speaker "expounding with awe, closing his eyes, and wrapping himself up with his tallith." The people stood wrapped in silence and overwhelmed by the occasion: "There was not in the congregation one that opened his mouth, or chirped, or uttered a sound. If he [the speaker] became aware that any one spoke, he would open his eyes, and fear and terror would fall upon the congregation."

The royal speech was immediately followed by a question period, in which the king would put questions to the people, who would answer him in the person of a venerable old man "of wisdom, understanding, and experience." Then the precentor (Benjamin) would pronounce a blessing on the people with the special words, "During the life of

our prince the exilarch, and during your life, and during the life of all the house of Israel." This is the typical New Year and birthday formula that always goes with a coronation. Then the precentor blesses the king and then his two counselors and makes a formal roll call of the people. This is the formal registry of the people described in Mosiah, and while the people are still standing the precentor hands the book of the Law to the new king, who reads to the people the covenant they are entering. When the book of the Law is returned to the ark, all sit down and are regaled by learned discourses on the Law, beginning with one by the king himself. After this the precentor again "blessed the exilarch by the Book of the Law," and all said amen. After a final prayer all the people departed to their homes.

The reader can see for himself how closely these rites conform to the substance and spirit of the coronation of Mosiah. But the most remarkable feature of the whole thing is the nature of the royal discourse on government. In the Book of Mormon Benjamin clearly alludes to the Old World coronation rites in which the king is treated like God on earth, receiving the rich offerings and awed acclamations reserved for divinity; and he also emphasizes the royal obligation to assure victory and prosperity for the land. While he recognizes the value of these things, Benjamin's whole speech is devoted to giving them a special twist—the homage and the offerings are very well, but they are for the heavenly King, not for Benjamin, who is only a man; victory and prosperity will surely follow, but they come not from him but from God.⁴⁹

In a study entitled "The Refusal of the Kingship as a Characteristic of Royal Authority in the Old Testament," K.H. Bernhardt has shown at great length that part of the nomadic desert heritage of the Jews was the idea that kingship is an "unauthorized infringement of God's majesty." While in post-exilic times, Bernhardt explains, the king was no longer expected formally to disclaim his right to rule, in

the days of Jeremiah and the Rechabites (Lehi's half-nomadic contemporaries) he was still felt to be something of a usurper. Thus while the Jews shared the common props and protocol of the coronation rites with other Near Eastern peoples, their King's formal renunciation of absolute power put the whole thing on a different footing.⁵⁰ This is exactly what we have at the enthronement of Mosiah. Bernhardt gets most of his evidence from the Old Testament, of course; yet it took the perspicacity of a modern scholar to discover, in 1961, the institution and the idea which are so clearly set forth in the Book of Mormon.

9. *The Liahona*.⁵¹ We have in the Book of Mormon a most interesting apparatus called the Liahona. Now the chances of finding a genuine Liahona are, to say the least, remote; but what if something just like it showed up in the hands of Lehi's relatives? That should certainly come as a surprise, and even provoke some thought. The Liahona has given rise to endless merriment and mockery among critics of the Book of Mormon; only the shining stones of the Jaredites can equal it as a laugh-getter. Even the present writer, for all his curiosity about Book of Mormon oddities, has always passed it by in an abashed silence—it was like nothing he ever heard or read of—until the year 1959. For it was in that year that an Arabic scholar by the name of T. Fahd published the hitherto scattered, scanty, and inaccessible evidence that makes it possible for the first time to say something significant about the Liahona. But before we consider his report, let us see what the Book of Mormon has to say on the subject. This what the first edition tells about the Liahona:

“And it came to pass that as my father arose in the morning, and went forth to the tent door, to his great astonishment, he beheld upon the ground a round ball, of curious workmanship; and it was of fine brass. And within the ball were two spindles; and the one pointed the way

whither we should go into the wilderness" (p. 39, 1 Nephi 16:10).

"And it came to pass that I, Nephi, beheld the pointers which were in the ball, that they did work according to the faith, and diligence, and heed, which we did give unto them. And there was also written upon them, a new writing, which was plain to be read, which did give us understanding concerning the ways of the Lord; and it was written and changed from time to time, according to the faith and diligence which we gave unto it: And thus we see, that by small means, the Lord can bring about great things.

"And it came to pass that I, Nephi, did go forth up into the top of the mountain, according to the directions which were given upon the ball. And it came to pass that I did slay wild beasts, insomuch, that I did obtain food for our families" (pp. 40–41, 1 Nephi 16:28–31).

"And moreover, he also gave him charge concerning . . . the ball or director, which led our fathers through the wilderness, which was prepared by the hand of the Lord, that thereby they might be led, every one according to the heed and diligence which they gave unto him. Therefore, as they were unfaithful, they did not prosper nor progress in their journey" (p. 155, Mosiah 1:16–17).

"And now my son, I have somewhat to say concerning the thing which our fathers call a ball, or director; or our fathers called it liahona, which is, being interpreted, a compass; and the Lord prepared it. And behold, there cannot any man work after the manner of so curious a workmanship. And behold, it was prepared to shew unto our fathers the course which they should travel in the wilderness; and it did work for them according to their faith in God; therefore if they had faith to believe that God could cause that those spindles should point the way they should go, behold, it was done; therefore they had this miracle, and also many other miracles wrought by the power of God, day by day; nevertheless, because those miracles were worked

by small means, nevertheless it did shew unto them marvellous works. They were slothful, and forgot to exercise their faith and diligence, and then those marvellous works ceased, and they did not progress in their journey; therefore, they tarried in the wilderness, or did not travel a direct course, and were afflicted with hunger and thirst, because of their transgressions.

“And now my son, I would that ye should understand that these things are not without a shadow; for as our fathers were slothful to give heed to this compass, (now these things were temporal,) they did not prosper; even so it is with things which are spiritual. For behold, it is as easy to give heed to the word of Christ, which will point to you a straight course to eternal bliss, as it was for our fathers to give heed to this compass, which would point unto them a straight course to the promised land. And now I say, Is there not a type in this thing? . . .

“O my son, do not let us be slothful, because of the easiness of the way; for so it was with our fathers; for so it was prepared for them, that if they would look, they might live; even so it is with us. The way is prepared, and if we will look, we may live forever” (pp. 329–30, Alma 37:38–46).

“And it came to pass that after they had bound me, insomuch that I could not move, the compass, which had been prepared of the Lord, did cease to work; wherefore, they knew not whither they should steer the ship. . . . And it came to pass that after they had loosed me, behold, I took the compass, and it did work whither I desired it” (pp. 48–49, 1 Nephi 18:12–13, 21).

Listing the salient features of the report we get the following:

1. The Liahona was a gift of God, the manner of its delivery causing great astonishment.
2. It was neither mechanical nor self-operating, but worked solely by the power of God.

3. It functioned only in response to the faith, diligence, and heed of those who followed it.

4. And yet there was something ordinary and familiar about it. The thing itself was the “small means” through which God worked; it was not a mysterious or untouchable object but strictly a “temporal thing.” It was so ordinary that the constant tendency of Lehi’s people was to take it for granted—in fact, they spent most of their time ignoring it: hence, according to Alma, their needless, years-long wanderings in the desert.

5. The working parts of the device were two spindles or pointers.

6. On these a special writing would appear from time to time, clarifying and amplifying the message of the pointers.

7. The specific purpose of the traversing indicators was “to point the way they should go.”

8. The two pointers were mounted in a brass or bronze sphere whose marvelous workmanship excited great wonder and admiration. Special instructions sometimes appeared on this ball.

9. The device was referred to descriptively as a ball, functionally as a director, and in both senses as a “compass,” or Liahona.

10. On occasion, it saved Lehi’s people from perishing by land and sea—“if they would look they might live” (Alma 37:46).

11. It was preserved “for a wise purpose” (Alma 37:2, 14, 18) long after it had ceased to function, having been prepared specifically to guide Lehi’s party to the promised land. It was a “type and shadow” of man’s relationship to God during his earthly journey.

We should not pass by Alma’s description without noting a most remarkable peculiarity of verses 40 and 41 (chap. 37). Let us read these verses without punctuation, as the

ancients did; and as the Book of Mormon manuscript is written:

“Therefore they had this miracle and also many other miracles wrought by the power of God day by day nevertheless because those miracles were worked by small means nevertheless it did shew unto them marvellous works they were slothful and forgot to exercise their faith and diligence and then those marvellous works ceased.”

The meaning is perfectly clear: though Lehi’s people enjoyed daily demonstrations of God’s power, the device by which that power operated seemed so ordinary (Alma included it among “small and simple things . . . very small means” Alma 37:6–7) that in spite of the “marvellous works” it showed them they tended to neglect it. We could punctuate the passage accordingly:

“Therefore they had this miracle, and also many other miracles, wrought by the power of God day by day. Nevertheless, because those miracles were worked by small means (albeit it did show unto them marvellous works), they were slothful and forgot to exercise their faith and diligence.”

A comparison of various editions of the Book of Mormon will show that others have tried their hand at punctuating these phrases.⁵²

But it is time to turn to Mr. Fahd’s study of belomancy in the ancient Near East. Belomancy is the practice of divination by shooting, tossing, shaking, or otherwise manipulating rods, darts, pointers, or other sticks, all originally derived from arrows. Over ten years ago the present writer made a fairly exhaustive study of ancient arrow-divination, and some years later presented in the pages of the *Era* a long discourse on the ritual use of sticks and rods, especially in ancient Israel.⁵³ Yet it was not until he saw Fahd’s study, the first full-length treatment of old Semitic arrow-divination, that it dawned upon him that these old practices might have some connection with the Liahona. For the most

common use of divination arrows, and probably their original purpose, was, according to the forgotten evidence unearthed by the diligent Fahd, the direction of travelers in the desert.

Fahd begins by pointing out that the "arrows" used in divination, called *qidh* or *zalam*, were devoid of heads and feathers, being mere shafts or pointers.⁵⁴ Since Lane has given a fuller description of these objects from the sources, we can do no better than quote *his quotations*:

"*Zalam*, plural *azlām* [divining—] arrows by means of which the Arabs in the Time of Ignorance [i.e, before Islam] sought to know what was allotted to them: they were arrows upon which the Arabs in the Time of Ignorance wrote 'Command' and 'Prohibition'; or upon some of which was written 'My Lord hath commanded me'; and upon some, 'My Lord hath forbidden me'; or they were three arrows; upon one of which was written 'My Lord hath commanded me'; [etc.] . . . and the third was blank; and they put them in a receptacle, and took forth an arrow; and if the arrow upon which was 'Command' came forth, he went to accomplish the purpose; but if that upon which was 'Prohibition' came forth, he refrained; and if the blank came forth, they shuffled them a second time. . . . The *azlām* [were arrows that] belonged to Kureysh, in the Time of Ignorance, upon which were written 'He hath commanded,' and 'He hath forbidden,' and 'Do thou' and 'Do thou not'; they had been well shaped and made even, and placed in the Kaʿbah [the holy shrine of Meccah] . . . and when a man desired to go on a journey, or to marry, he came to the minister, and said, 'Take thou forth for me a *zalam*'; and thereupon he would take it forth and look at it. . . . There were seven of the arrows thus called with the minister of the Kaʿbah, having marks upon them, and used for this purpose: and sometimes there were with the man two such arrows, which he put into his sword-case; and when he desired to seek the

knowledge of what was allotted to him, he took forth one of them."⁵⁵

But why arrows? Because, as we have shown elsewhere, the shooting of arrows is a universal form of divination, "as is evident in the prayers that the legendary heroes of the steppe – Finnish, Norse, Russian, Kazakh, Turkish, and Yakut – address to their three enchanted arrows before releasing them, and for instance, in the arrow-prayers of the Indian and Beduin, all eloquently expressing the humility of men about to entrust their lives and their fate to a power beyond their control."⁵⁶ The consultation of the arrows by one about to marry was, according to Gaster, also an old Jewish custom; the parties concerned would throw rods into the air, "reading their message by the manner of their fall; this, Gaster observes, is 'tantamount' to the shooting of arrows."⁵⁷ Other substitutes for shooting were shaking or drawing from a bag or quiver, "balancing on the finger, or spinning on a pivot."⁵⁸

In the New World "the antetype . . . possibly of all the Indian dice games" is one in which the "arrows or darts are tossed . . . or shot . . . at an arrow tossed or shot to the ground so that they fall one across the other." More often than not, the arrows in question were mere sticks or pointers.⁵⁹ In Arabic, *sāhamahu* means both to shoot arrows with another and to draw lots or practice sortilege with one. There was no more popular form of divination among the magic-minded Babylonians than arrow-lottery, and Meissner suggest that "casting lots" in Babylonian (*salú sha puni*) refers to an original shaking or shooting of arrows.⁶⁰

All this shaking, tossing, and shooting emphasizes the divinatory office of arrows as *pointers*,⁶¹ but along with that they also conveyed their message, as the passages from Lane demonstrate, by the *writing* that was upon them. Fahd notes that "on the arrows words were inscribed determining the object of the cleromantic consultation."⁶² Whenever

divination arrows are described, they are invariably found to have writing on them, like the Zuni "word-painted arrows of destiny."⁶³ The Arabic proverb for "Know thyself!" is *absir wasma qidhika*, literally, "Examine the mark on thy divination-arrow!"⁶⁴ It has even been maintained that writing originated with the marking of arrows,⁶⁵ but whether this be so or not, it is certain that men from the earliest times have sought guidance by consulting the pointings and the inscriptions of headless and tailless arrows.

The word for "divination-arrow" in the above proverb was *qidh*, defined in Lane as one of the "two arrows used in sortilege." The original and natural number of arrows used in divination seems to have been two. Even when the "magic three" were used, the third was a dud, the *manih*, which is a blank "to which no lot is assigned."⁶⁶ It is the other two that do the work. On the same day on which the king of Persia shook out the divining-sticks (the *baresma*), the Jews would draw three boxwood lots to choose the scapegoat; but the Talmud says there were only two lots and they were of boxwood or gold.⁶⁷

The reason for the two basic staves is apparent from their normal designation as "Command" and "Prohibition." To this the priests at some shrines added a third arrow called the "Expectative" — "Wait and see!"⁶⁸ But the original arrangement was that *two* arrows designated the advisability or inadvisability of a journey; they were designated as "the *safr* [Go ahead!] and the *khadr* [Stay where you are!]"⁶⁹ From passages in Lane it is clear that the regular consultants of the arrows were those faced with travel-problems — all others are secondary. The patron of the caravans of the Hejaz from time immemorial was the archer-god Abgal, "the lord of omens," in his capacity of the master of the arrows of divination.⁷⁰ The inscriptions on the arrows themselves give top priority to travel: typical examples from the various systems, which employ from two all the way to ten arrows, are "Go slow!" (*bata'*), "Speed Up!" (*sari'*),

“Water!” “Stay where you are!” “Get moving!” “You are in the clear,” etc.⁷¹

It would be an obtuse reader indeed who needed one to spell out for him the *resemblance* between ancient arrow-divination and the Liahona: two “spindles or pointers” bearing written instructions provide superhuman guidance for travelers in the desert. What more could you want? But what is the *relationship* between them? On this the Book of Mormon is remarkably specific. Both Nephi and Alma go out of their way to insist that the Liahona did not work itself, i.e., was not a magic thing, but worked only by the power of God and only for appointed persons who had faith in that power.

Moreover, while both men marvel at the wonderful workmanship of the brass ball in which the pointers were mounted, they refer to the operation of those pointers as “a very small thing,” so familiar to Lehi’s people that they hardly gave it a second glance. So contemptuous were they of the “small means” by which “those miracles were worked” for their guidance and preservation that they constantly “forgot to exercise their faith,” so that the compass would work. This suggests that aside from the workmanship of the mounting, there was nothing particularly strange or mystifying about the apparatus, which Alma specifies as a “temporal” thing.

Here we have an instructive parallel in the ship and the bow that Nephi made. Without divine intervention those indispensable aids to survival would never have come to the rescue of Lehi’s company – their possession was a miracle. Yet what were they after all? An ordinary ship and an ordinary bow. Just so, the Liahona was “a very small thing” for all its marvelous provenience, having much the same relationship to other directing arrows that the ship and the bow did to other ships and bows. We must not forget that the ancients looked upon even ordinary *azlām* as a means of communication with the divine: “In view of

the importance of religious sentiment in every aspect of the activity of the ancient Arab and of the Semite in general," writes Fahd, "I do not believe that one can separate these practices [i.e., of arrow-divination] from their character as a consultation of divinity. . . . They always believed, however vaguely, in a direct and constant intervention in human affairs."⁷²

Like the wonderful staff of Moses in Jewish history, these things suggest remote times and occasions when, according to popular belief, God communicates more directly with men than he does now. Tha'labi knows of a Hebrew tradition that Moses led the children of Israel through the wilderness with the aid of a double arrow mounted on the end of his staff.⁷³ Such a device seems to be represented as a very ancient cult object in Egypt, going back to the earliest migrations.⁷⁴ This is certainly implied in the status of the ritual arrows or marked sticks among the American Indians, regarding which Culin writes: "Behind both ceremonies and games there existed some widespread myth from which both derived their impulse," though what this mysterious tradition is he does not know.⁷⁵ Consistent with their holiness, "the consulting of the mantic arrows," according to one Ibn Ishaq, "seems to have been reserved to questions of general public concern and to solemn occasions of life" and death.⁷⁶ Which again reminds us of the Liahona, "that if they would look, they might live" (Alma 37:46).

Was the Liahona, then, just old magic? No, it is precisely here that Nephi and Alma are most emphatic – unlike magic things, these pointers worked solely by the power of God, and then, too, for only those designated to use them. *Anybody* about to make a journey could consult the mantic arrows at the shrines, and to this day throughout the world mantic arrows are still being consulted. But it is clear from Alma's words that in his day the Liahona had been out of

operation for centuries, having functioned only for a true man of God and only for one special journey.

Another man of God, Lehi's great contemporary, Ezekiel, showed a remarkable interest in divinatory sticks and rods, as we have pointed out elsewhere, and he describes how the fate of certain wicked cities is sealed as God "shakes out the arrows," each one being marked with the name of a condemned city.⁷⁷

Where, then, does one draw the line between the sacred and the profane? Religion becomes magic when the power by which things operate is transferred from God to the things themselves. As Fahd notes, the Arabs were extremely vague about the powers with which they dealt, as "primitive" people are everywhere. When men lack revelation they commonly come to think of power as residing in things. Did the staff of Moses make water come from the rock or cause the Red Sea to part? Of course not; yet in time the miraculous powers which were displayed through its agency came to be attributed by men to the staff itself. It became a magic thing, like Solomon's seal, which possessed *in itself* the wonder-working powers which gave Solomon his ascendancy over men and beasts.

In time the Bible became a magic book in men's eyes, conveying all knowledge by its own power, without the aid of revelation. So also after a fierce controversy on the matter, priesthood itself acquired the status of a thing that automatically bestows power and grace, regardless of the spiritual or moral qualifications of its possessor—it became a magic thing. Strangest of all, science has consistently supplanted religion by magic when dealing with final causes. When Sir Charles Sherrington, for example, after describing the incredibly complex and perfect workings of the body, insists that it is the cells *themselves* that agree to cooperate in following an indescribably complex plan of development, he is simply appealing to the old doctrine of the magicians, that things in themselves possess wondrous

powers of performance: "It is as if an immanent principle inspired each cell with knowledge for the carrying out of a design."⁷⁸

Hunters and medicine men throughout the world who use arrows to bring them luck pray to their arrows, blow on them, and talk to them, as gamblers do to dice and cards — for at an early date "the use of the divination arrows drifted down into the vulgarisation of gaming cards," i.e., the practice quickly degenerated to magic.⁷⁹ That is why it is so important to understand, and why the Book of Mormon is at such pains to make perfectly clear, that the Liahona was *not* magic. It did not work itself, like other divination arrows, in any sense or to any degree.

And yet it seems to have been an ordinary and familiar object, a "temporal thing," which could also serve as "a type and a shadow," teaching us how God uses "small things" to bring about great purposes. Here we have an implement which, far from being the invention of a brain-sick imagination, was not without its ancient counterparts.

If we were to stop here, this would probably be the only article ever written about the Liahona that did not attempt to explain the meaning of the name. Fortunately the Book of Mormon has already given us the answer: "Our fathers called it Liahona, which is, being interpreted, a compass" (Alma 37:38). Liahona is here clearly designated as an Old World word from the forgotten language of the fathers, which must be interpreted to present readers. But what is a compass? According to the Oxford Dictionary, the derivation of the word remains a mystery; it has two basic meanings, but which has priority nobody knows: the one is "to pass or step together," referring always to a *pair* of things in motion; the other refers to the nature of that motion in a circle, "to pass or step completely," to complete a "circumference, circle, round," to embrace or enclose

completely. Thus whether it refers to the ball or the arrows, "compass" is the best possible word to describe the device, though generations of Book of Mormon critics have laughed their heads off at the occurrence of the modern word in what purports to be an ancient book.⁸⁰