Book of Mormon Central

KnoWhy #171 - Why Did Mormon Mention Hagoth?

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Abstract: The Book of Mormon reports that "an exceedingly curious" man named Hagoth "went forth and built him an exceedingly large ship" (Alma 63:5). Hagoth eventually built even more ships and many people set sail in these vessels toward the land northward. This episode helps establish that the scattering of Israel was taking place even among the Nephites. It also narratively sets the stage for expanding Nephite and Lamanite civilizations. Wherever Hagoth's seafarers ended up, the story of their journeys expands the narrative scope and the geographical horizons of the Book of Mormon peoples.
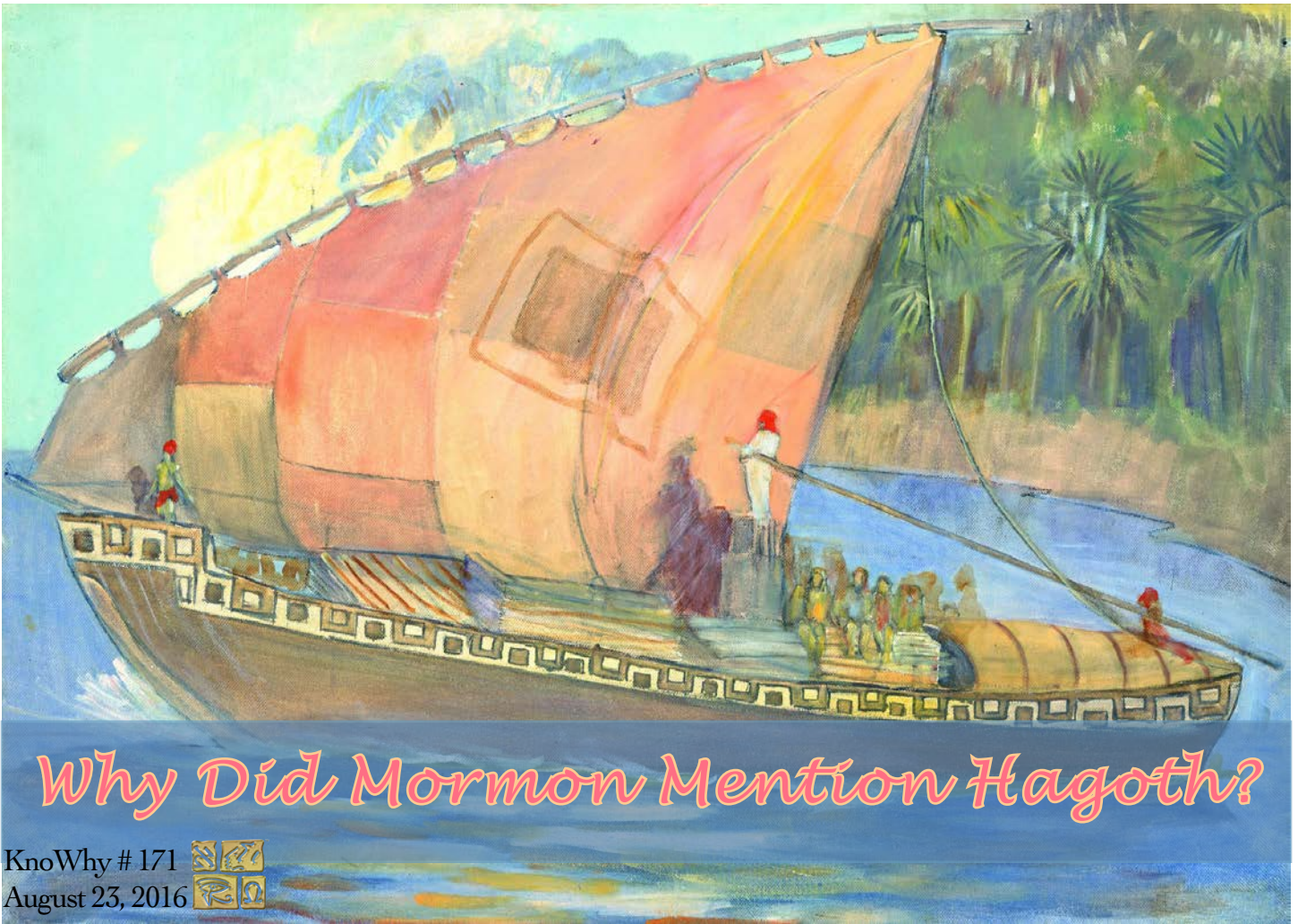
The Ship of Hagoth, Minerva Teichert

"And it came to pass that Hagoth, he being an exceedingly curious man, therefore he went forth and built him an exceedingly large ship."
Alma 63:5

The Know

At the conclusion of the extended conflict between the Nephites and the Lamanites, Mormon reported that a "large company of men, even to the amount of five thousand and four hundred men, with their wives and their children, departed out of the land of Zarahemla into the land which was northward" (Alma 63:4).

Next, the reader learns that "an exceedingly curious" man named Hagoth "went forth and built him an exceedingly large ship" (Alma 63:5).[1] "And behold, there were many of the Nephites who did enter therein and did sail forth with much provisions, and also many women and children; and they took their course northward" (v. 6). During the next year, Hagoth built even more ships, and when the first ship returned, "many more people did enter into it; and they also

took much provisions, and set out again to the land northward" (v. 7). Exactly what type of ships Hagoth built is uncertain, except the description of his first ship being "exceedingly large" (v. 5).[2]

Mormon concluded his narrative about migrations on this somber note:

> And it came to pass that they were never heard of more. And we suppose that they were drowned in the depths of the sea. And it came to pass that one other ship also did sail forth; and whither she did go we know not. And it came to pass that in this year there were many people who went forth into the land northward. (Alma 63:8–9)

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A careful reading of these events shows that in the space of two years Mormon reported at least five notable migrations—three by sea, two by land,[3] and all of them "northward."[4] Although brief, Mormon's sampling of these migrations helps the reader catch a glimpse of an expanding Nephite civilization. While nothing is said further concerning the matter, Mormon's mentioning that "Hagoth built even more ships" implies that further seafaring migrations may have been on the horizon.[5]

The Why

The uncertainty concerning the final destination of Hagoth's voyagers (and potentially Hagoth himself, assuming he accompanied the second journey of his ship),[6] has captured the attention of Book of Mormon readers for generations.[7] Several LDS prophets and general authorities have believed Hagoth's seafarers were progenitors of various peoples of the Pacific Islands.[8] Thus, for many Polynesians the story about Hagoth and the possibility of other Lehite voyages by sea has significantly influenced perceptions of cultural identity and heritage.[9] Officially, though, the LDS church claims no specific revelation or position on these matters.[10]

While the fate of Hagoth's travelers is not certainly known, the very fact that their journeys are mentioned at all is relevant to interpreting the Book of Mormon. Mormon was very selective about what things he included into his narrative,[11] which suggests that digressing into details about these migrations must have served some overarching narrative goal.

Wherever they went and whatever their relationship with the indigenous peoples in the Pacific, Hagoth's oceanic voyagers certainly open up the possibility for the Lehite lineage to have been dispersed to locations far away from the central locus of the Book of Mormon narrative.[12] Thematically speaking, this helps readers recognize that even among the Nephites, the scattering of Israel was still taking place.[13] Indeed, nine years after Hagoth set sail, large numbers of Nephites migrated a "great distance" to the north (Helaman 3:3), and Mormon's description of their multiplying and spreading abroad to the south, north, west and east, uses language similar to the covenantal promise given to Jacob in Genesis 28:14, indicating that he saw these migrations as part of that larger Abrahamic narrative.

Furthermore, the fact that ships were being built at all and that Nephites were feeling a need to relocate suggest that population growth and industry were being restored after the lengthy war between the Nephites and the Lamanites.[14] This renewed economic prosperity accompanied by a northward expansion helps set the stage for the next phase of Nephite history. As John L. Sorenson explained:

Other major realignments took place during the Expansion phase. Cultural, and probably genetic, interchange continued between the main Lamanite and Nephite centers. … As the Book of Mormon narrative approached AD 30, the picture of society throughout the "promised land" occupied by Lehi's descendants was one of factional fragmentation and perhaps increasing cultural differentiation within a highly variegated set of environments. It was evidently difficult for the component peoples to maintain stable social and cultural conditions.[15]

In other words, expansion and prosperity helped pave the way for increasing social complexity and eventual instability. Sorenson's analysis helps demonstrate that the story about Hagoth and the other voyages northward was not merely a casual digression into historical trivia. On the contrary, Mormon (who would have had a personal interest in the land northward where he grew up[16]) presented this information to help readers better conceptualize the largescale transportations and important transformations happening among the Nephite and Lamanite civilizations.[17] No narrative takes place in a historical vacuum, and the better readers understand the historical backdrop of the Book of Mormon, the more real and meaningful its sacred stories will become to them.

Further Reading

Mark Alan Wright, "Heartland as Hinterland: The Mesoamerican Core and North American Periphery of Book of Mormon Geography," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 13 (2015): 111–129.

John L. Sorenson, *Transoceanic Voyaging: How Ancient America Became Civilized* (unpublished manuscript, 2013), online at bookofmormoncentral.org.

Tyler Livingston, "The Book of Mormon and Mesoamerican travels 'Northward,'" *Book of Mormon Archeological Forum*, January 2011, online at bmaf.org.

Notes

1. See "HAGOTH" online at https://onoma.lib.byu.edu/index.php/HAGOTH. See also, John A. Tvedtnes, "Curious Hagoth," *Meridian Magazine: Latter-day Saints Shaping Their World*, September 20, 2010, online at ldsmag.com.

2. See John L. Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex: An Ancient American Book* (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2013), 136–137, 358–360, 630–631, for a proposal of possible ship constructions as well as Hagoth's departure location.

3. Alma 63:9 could be argued to be somewhat ambiguous as to the mode of travel: "And it came to pass that in this year there were many people who went forth into the land northward." Within the immediate context of sea voyages and the building of more ships, it's possible to assume that the people who "went forth" were actually sailing forth. However, it should be remembered that land migration is also part of this context (v. 4), and that Mormon had just reported that "one other ship also did sail forth; and whither she did go we know not" (v. 8). After this he introduced the next details about migration with the phrase "And it came to pass" which often acts as a marker between separate ideas (v. 9). It would seem odd for Mormon to explicitly mention "one other ship" (which sort of has a tone of finality to it) and remark upon its uncertain fate, and then report an additional seafaring journey without even mentioning that it was by ship. Because of the difficulty of such a reading, it seems much more likely that this chapter's final—though unspecified—mention of a journey northward was by land rather than by sea. This point is relevant because two northward land migrations within a short period of time holds greater implications for Nephite territorial expansion.

4. For an analysis of the term "northward" as used in the Book of Mormon, see Brant A. Gardner, "From the East to the West: The Problem of Directions in the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 3 (2013): 148–149; John L. Sorenson, *Mormon's Map* (Provo UT, FARMS, 2000), 78–81. See also, Book of Mormon Central, "Why Did Mormon Give So Many Details About Geography? (Alma 22:32)," *KnoWhy* 130 (June 27, 2016).

5. For a treatment of oceanic voyages in the Americas, see John L. Sorenson, *Transoceanic Voyaging: How Ancient America Became Civilized*, (unpublished manuscript, 2013), online at bookofmormoncentral.org, 11–14; See also, Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex*, 150–172.

6. There is textual ambiguity as to whether or not Hagoth actually boarded any of his vessels. Alma 63:7 reports, "And in the thirty and eighth year, this man [Hagoth] built other ships. And the first ship did also return, and many more people did enter into it; and they also took much provisions, and set out again to the land northward." From this sparse statement, it simply cannot be determined if Hagoth himself was part of the "many more people" who again sailed northward.

7. Russel T. Clement, "Polynesian Origins: More Word on the Mormon Perspective," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 13 (Winter 1980): 91.

8. See Clement, "Polynesian Origins," 92–97; Robert E. Parsons, "Hagoth and the Polynesians," in *The Book of Mormon: Alma, the Testimony of the Word*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1992), 250–258.

9. See Eric B. Shumway, "Polynesians," *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 4 vols., ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Company and Brigham Young University, 1992 and 2001), 1:1110–1112; Jerry K. Loveland, "Hagoth and the Polynesian Tradition," *BYU Studies Quaterly* 17, no. 1 (Autumn 1976): 59–73; Ian G. Barber, "Matakite, Mormon Conversions, and Māori-Israelite Identity Work in Colonial New Zealand," *Journal of Mormon History* 41, no. 3 (July 2015): 167–220; Grant Underwood, "Mormonism, the Maori and Cultural Authenticity," *The Journal of Pacific History* 35, no. 2 (2000): 133–146; Louis Midgley, "A Māori View of the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8, no. 1 (1999): 4–11, 77; Louis Midgley, "Māori Latter-day Saint Faith: Some Preliminary Remarks," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 8 (2014): 45–65; Louis Midgley, "The Māori Stairway to Heaven," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 12 (2014): 97–110; Louis Midgley, "A Singular Reading: The Maori and the Book of Mormon," in *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World: Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson*, ed. Davis Bitton (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 245–276.

10. Parsons, "Hagoth and Polynesians," 250–251: "In a letter to the mission president of the Samoan Mission dated September 6, 1972, and signed by N. Eldon Tanner and Marion G. Romney, under the letterhead of the First Presidency, they wrote: 'In your letter of September 6, 1972, you ask if the Polynesian people are Lamanites or Nephites. There has been much speculation about the origin of these people. We have, however, no scriptural evidence or revelation from the Lord that would tell us exactly where these people came from or their background.'"

11. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), 207.

12. For possible linguistic connections related to Hagoth's voyagers, see Brian D. Stubbs and John L. Sorenson, "Was There Hebrew Language in Ancient America? An Interview with Brian Stubbs," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9, no. 2 (2000): 62; Brian D. Stubbs, "A Few Hundred Hints of Egyptian and Northwest Semitic in Uto-Aztecan," presentation given at the 2006 FairMormon conference, online at Fairmormon.org; Brian D. Stubbs, *Exploring the Explanatory Power of Semitic and Egyptian in Uto-Aztecan* (Provo, UT: Grover Publications, 2015), 359–362.

13. For example, Nephi discussed the scattering as something that would happen "sooner or later" and elaborated upon "all those who shall hereafter be scattered" (1 Nephi 22:3–5).

14. For indications of increasing prosperity tied to migrations and free commerce, see Helaman 6:6–9.

15. Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex*, 51–53.

16. As is implied in Mormon 1:6.

17. For possible implications of northward expansion, see Mark Alan Wright, "Heartland as Hinterland: The Mesoamerican Core and North American Periphery of Book of Mormon Geography," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 13 (2015): 111–129; Tyler Livingston, "The Book of Mormon and Mesoamerican travels 'Northward,'" *Book of Mormon Archeological Forum*, January 2011, online at bmaf.org.