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The Wheel in Ancient America

Author(s): Thomas S. Ferguson

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Abstract: This article argues against those that believe that the ancient Americans had no knowledge of the wheel by presenting five reproductions of wheeled toys and several scholarly views on the existence of such in Mesoamerica.

The Wheel IN ANCIENT AMERICA

By Thomas Stuart Ferguson, LL.B.

"THE Book of Mormon says the wheel was in use in ancient America. Scientific evidence shows the wheel was not known in the western hemisphere prior to the coming of the European the latter part of the sixteenth century. Therefore, the Book of Mormon is false." This was typical of one line of attack levied against the Book of Mormon from certain quarters during the past few decades. This type of unfavorable criticism of the record has usually come from the "expert" type of person who insists on talking only of "the facts." This type of critic has assumed the facts were all in on this particular technicality of the Book of Mormon, and he has generally been willing to condemn the entire Nephite work as a fabrication, reasoning that part of the account is false, therefore the entirety must fall.

The scholarly critic was certain that wheels were not known in ancient America because when the Spanish, Portuguese, English, French, Dutch, and other colonists first contacted the natives of this hemisphere following the discovery of America, they found no use being made of the wheel. Further, archeologists, in carefully examining the ancient works of art brought to light by excavations and research, found no representations of vehicles with wheels. Also, in the then known native traditions there were apparently no memories of the wheel. From these sources, it was concluded by many that the wheel did not exist in ancient America. This view was almost universally accepted by leading American archeologists and historians. This was true in spite of the fact that but a small fraction of the known archeological sites of Middle America and other important zones had been touched by the scientific shovel.

It is not disputed that in 600 B.C. wheels were in common use in Palestine and the Near East. It was from there the Book of Mormon colonists came. There is little doubt that the people of Lehi and the people of Mulek would have brought with them a knowledge of the wheel, a mechanical device so useful to mankind. And it is so implied in the Book of Mormon. If Joseph Smith fabricated the idea that these early cultured inhabitants of Middle America came from the Near East, he necessarily had to give them the wheel. He did, and some of his critics laughed. After the lapse of one hundred years, Joseph Smith has been vindicated on this technicality.

IN the Book of Mormon there are seven references to *chariots*. The first and earliest reference is in Second Nephi, chapter twelve, and is a quotation from the brass plates, the record brought out

of Jerusalem by the colony of Lehi. The earliest indication of actual usage of the wheel by Book of Mormon people is found in Alma. The date is approximately 90 B.C.:

Now the king [Lamoni, a Lamanite] had commanded his servants, previous to the time of the watering of their flocks, that they should prepare his horses and chariots, and conduct him forth to the land of Nephi; . . . (Alma 18:9. See also Alma 18:10, 12; 20:6.)

It is interesting to observe that in the entire record there is, in addition to the above mentioned references to the chariots of Lamoni, the Lamanite, but a single reference to the use of chariots. This is found in Third Nephi and concerns an event taking place about 17 A.D.:

And it came to pass in the seventeenth year, in the latter end of the year, the proclamation of Lachoneus [Nephite governor] had gone forth throughout all the face of the land, and they had taken their horses, and their chariots, and their cattle, and all their flocks, and their herds, and their grain,

This, too, is in a quotation from the writings of Isaiah:

Wo unto them that draw iniquity with cords of vanity, and sin as it were with a cart rope. (II Nephi 15:18.)

Thus, it is clear that the Book of Mormon credits the ancients with a knowledge of the wheel from the very outset of Nephite-Mulekite history in 600 B.C. In contrast, the well established view of most students in the field of American antiquities has been that the wheel was first introduced by the European invaders of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. A typical expression of this view is the following:

No wheel in any form seems to have been used in America, and we have already noticed that in general our foster-ancestor was very unmechanical. (Gregory Mason, *Columbus Came Late*, The Century Co., New York, 1931, p. 56.)

In stubborn adherence to this view, the experts went so far as almost to



Wheeled toys from Mexico. a, b, from Panuco, Vera Cruz, length seven inches; c, from Tenenepango (Charnay's illustration); d, from Tres Zapotes, Vera Cruz; e, from Valley of Oaxaca.

—Courtesy, *American Antiquity*, April 1946.

and all their substance, and did march forth . . . to the place which had been appointed that they should gather themselves together, to defend themselves against their enemies. (III Nephi 3:22.)

The word *wheels* itself is used in one instance, being part of a poetic quotation from Isaiah, taken from the plates of brass:

. . . their horses' hoofs shall be counted like flint, and their wheels like a whirlwind, their roaring like a lion. (II Nephi 15:28.)

A single mention is made of the word *cart*.

ignore and discredit the important discovery near the valley of the Mexico in 1880 of an ancient wheeled toy. Désiré Charnay, a French archeologist, while excavating on the slopes of the magnificent mountain, Popocatepetl, at a site known as Tenenepango, made this significant find. (Charnay, *Désiré. 1887. The Ancient Cities of the New World*, pp. 170, 174.)

(Continued on page 818)

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THE WHEEL IN ANCIENT AMERICA

(Continued from page 785)

In February 1946, the writer in company with J. Willard Marriott of the Washington, D.C., stake presidency, saw, in the *Museo Nacional de Mexico*, the important and recently discovered wheeled toy found at Tres Zapotes (near the Isthmus of Tehuantepec) in southern Mexico. This discovery, along with others recently made, has caused a complete reversal of opinion on the part of most of the experts on this significant question. In an excellent current discussion of the problem, it is said by one scholar:

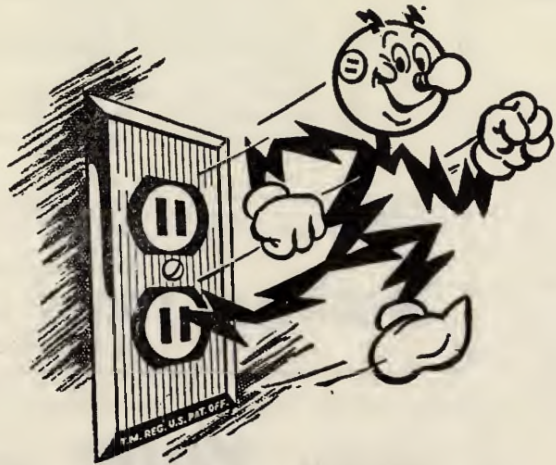
In my opinion, the evidence to be presented [in his article] indicates that the Indians of Mexico had some knowledge of the principle of the wheel in pre-Conquest times. This will come as a surprise to many, because the supposed absence of any knowledge of this principle in the New World has often been stressed in discussions concerning the origin of the American Indian and his cultures. (Gordon F. Ekholm, "Wheeled toys in Mexico," *American Antiquity*, April 1946, p. 222. See accompanying cut from the same article showing the toys discovered, including a reproduction of Désiré Charnay's drawing of his discovery of 1880.)

Pictures are also given in the *National Geographic Magazine*, September 1940, p. 314, of the wheeled toys found by Dr. Matthew. In a discussion "Did the Middle American Natives Know the Wheel," in *Cuadernos*

Americanos, 25, no. 1, pp. 193-207 (January - February 1946), Mexico City, a group of scholars discuss the problem and mention that there are at least six places where wheeled toys have been found. The group includes Alfonso Caso, Matthew W. Stirling, Samuel K. Lothrop, J. Eric S. Thompson, Jose Garcia Payón, and Gordon F. Ekholm. As Dr. Caso concludes:

... It appears that there are sufficient arguments to confirm that at least some Mexican Indians and perhaps also of Central America knew and used the wheel for little animals which may have had a special significance or used simply as toys. (Page 197.)

Proof having been supplied to establish the existence in ancient America of a knowledge of the principle of the wheel, the question arises as to why wheels were not in use by the natives at the time of the discovery of the New World in the fifteenth century. A possible explanation might be that since the ancient and highly advanced Maya, Toltec, and Olmec cultures had been destroyed several centuries previously, the wheel may have fallen to disuse simultaneously with roads, the refined religion of Itzamna, and other features of those cultures. It is well established that those ancients far excelled the more recent Aztec and that most of the more advanced aspects of Aztec culture were derived from the refined pred-



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The Wheel In Ancient America

processors in Middle America. It is also well understood that many refinements and skills of the ancients were lost and were not transmitted to the warring tribes making up the Aztec Confederation of Montezuma and the New Empire of the Maya. It is quite possible that in the long centuries between the golden eras of the Mayas, Toltecs, and Olmecs, and the conquest of Mexico, a knowledge of the wheel was lost.

These Times

(Concluded from page 773)

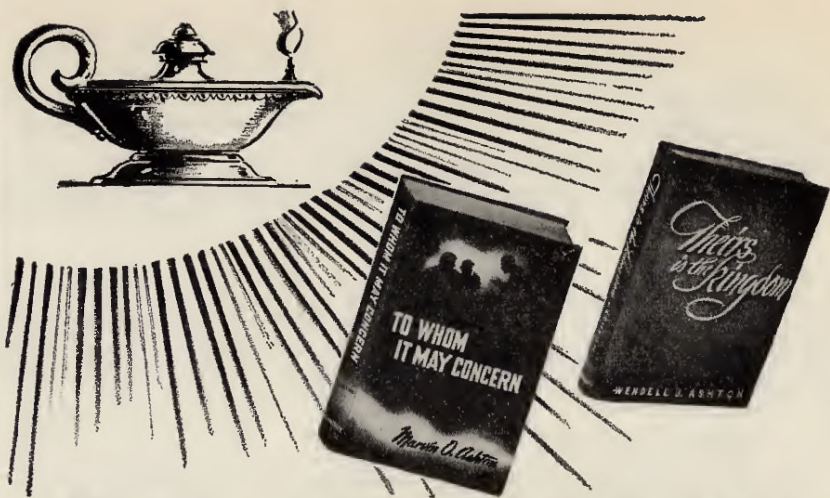
Earth," Marx and Engels prepared the original "Communist Manifesto" (1848) in Europe.

TODAY, after wars and revolutions, professed followers of Marx rule one sixth of the globe's land surface, maintaining their power by terror and force where needs be. By mild, voluntary water baptism, the followers of Joseph Smith have won about one-half of one percent of the numbers controlled by Communism.

THE facts, this Christmas of 1946, seem to indicate that it could be much easier for a conquering doctrine to sweep our world than it was for Christianity to emerge as the state religion of Rome. Will it be Marx or Christ? Communism is a state religion (sans God) in Russia, and more. Its adherents would like to see it become the dogma of the world. Under such a system, created by force, there can be no liberty.

WHAT era may yet unfold as we listen to the holy carol, "peace on earth"? The single doctrine upon which all men of good will can voluntarily unite is the doctrine pronounced above by Brigham Young. Coupled with Christian tolerance, lies the hope, too, that by our example, any intolerant bigots who would use freedom to enslave may some day learn the lesson of human freedom—respect for the rights of others to be different. Meantime, freedom must gird itself with physical, as well as moral might. Tolerance has to be strong to live with intolerance. Otherwise we may well anticipate holocaust instead of the carol.

WHAT can followers of Joseph Smith, Christian prophet, do to demonstrate that Christ's way is superior to the "party line"? The way to begin is to convince ourselves of the validity of the angels' message and not flinch from making that testimony live around our Christmas firesides.



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