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There Were Jaredites, Part VII: Our Own People— continued

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Abstract: This wide-ranging series discusses the “epic milieu” of the second millennium B.C. and places the Jaredites in their historical context alongside the Babylonians, Egyptians, early Greeks and others. It makes a comparison between the Book of Ether and ancient writings of Babylon, Egypt, Sumer, and others. The description of the Jaredite boats seem to resemble the boat of Ut-Napitshtim who was the Sumerian counter-part of Noah. Old Jewish and even older Indian sources record the use of shining stones that protect the owner beneath the water. These have been traced back to Babylonian tales of the deluge. Since the Jaredite record reports that their boats were patterned after Noah’s ark, ancient myths that surely have their foundation in real events help to provide greater understanding of the book of Ether. The book of Ether meets all the criteria of epic traditions of heroic societies. The remains of heroic societies are difficult to identify. The seventh part continues the discussion of heroic societies and the book of Ether.

There Were Jaredites

by Dr. Hugh Nibley

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OUR OWN PEOPLE

CONTINUED

AN EXCELLENT IDEA," said Blank, taking his briefcase as he had done on the night of his first meeting with F. "Let us begin at the beginning.

"Ether starts out on the keynote of all epics, the two factors which according to Kramer are 'primarily responsible for the more characteristic features of the . . . heroic ages,' namely, the scattering and wandering of the peoples and the disintegration of world civilization.²⁹ And here we have it: ' . . . Jared came forth with his brother . . . at the time the Lord . . . swore in his wrath that they should be scattered upon all the face of the earth; and . . . the people were scattered.' (Ether 1:33.) 'They went forth with their flocks and herds, friends, and families (1:41), all alike torn up by the roots and driven out of the land (1:38), but still hoping, like every heroic people, to become 'a great nation' and equal or surpass all others.' (1:43.)

"Philip de Comines gives us an interesting commentary on that last point," F. interrupted, "when he tells us that by the laws of chivalry it is the solemn duty of every nation and monarch to become greater than all others—a rule which makes war the natural state of things. A state of chronic warfare was thus the heritage of the Middle Ages from the times of migration."³⁰

"Strictly in keeping with the epic tradition," Blank continued, "the history of the Jaredites is presented in the form of a royal genealogy; the book of Ether is in fact simply a running commentary on a genealogy, with Moroni doing most of the commenting. The story opens with a long list of royal names, and all that follows is a continuation and expansion of that list. In dealing with its heroes, many of whom are 'oversized' figures either for good or for evil in the best heroic manner, the book of Ether scrupulously observes the rule that in the true epic 'there is no

character who appears uniformly in an unfavorable light.' Who was the worst of the Jaredites—Akish? Rip-lakish? Coriantumr? Shiz? No matter which one you pick you will find yourself as much inclined to pity as to hate him; nor can you deny a grudging admiration for the ferocious and abandoned heroism of these terrible warriors who, though they know they are doomed, continue, like Milton's Lucifer, to shout defiance and pursue one another with fierce and unrelenting energy to the end."

The behavior of the heroes in the epics is "often childish and brutal," as we have seen, and even the noblest of them is not beneath gaining an advantage by some underhanded trick. The career of Akish in the eighth to tenth chapters of Ether is a perfect illustration of this, although others are just as bad. On the other hand, in true epic "a dignified and fastidious tone" prevails in the dealings of these men with each other, and strict rules of chivalry are observed, especially in war and duels. So we are told in Ether how Shiz and Coriantumr pitch formal camps and "invite" each other's armies forth to combat by regulated trumpet blasts (14:28), exchange letters in an attempt to avoid needless bloodshed (15:4-5, 18), and rest at night without attempting to attack each other, fighting only at the proper and agreed times. (15:8, 21-26.) As in all epics, including Ether, "the waging of war is not incidental but essential to the heroic way of life." A great chief gains "power over all the land" only after he has "gained power over many cities," and "burned many cities," (14:17) in the best Homeric fashion.

Again, as in all true epics, every scene in the book of Ether takes place either on the battlefield (as in chapters 13 to 15), in the court (as in the tales of intrigue, chs. 7 to 12), or in the wilderness, where hunting and hiding play almost as conspicuous a part as fighting. (Ether 2:6-7; 3:3; 14:4,7; 10:21.) Fighting takes the proper heroic form of the single combat between heroes, with the personal feud as its motive, the contest being

conducted by the established rules of chivalry. This is well illustrated in the career of Coriantumr, who was wounded in a single combat with his rival Shaz, whom he dispatched (13:27-31); then he fought hand to hand with Gilead (14:3-8), and next with Lib (14:12-16). Finally he met his bitterest rival, Shiz, in a number of face-to-face combats. (14:30, 15:30.) Since in heroic ages one becomes a leader by proving his prowess in open competition, personal rivalry and ambition are the ordinary and accepted motives for war and need no excuse. Throughout our Jaredite history the perennial source of strife and bloodshed is the purely personal rivalry between great leaders, and so it is in all epic literature.

Jaredite society, like every other heroic society, is a feudal organization bound together by an elaborate system of oaths. This is indispensable to the survival of the society in which the followers of a chief are a free ranging, mounted nobility, always on the loose and free to serve anyone they choose. The oath is the only possible control over such men. We are clearly told in the book of Ether that the terrible oaths and conjurations behind every ambitious project for power and gain were imported directly from the Old World. (8:9, 15-18, 22ff; 9:5, 26f, 10:33; 11:7, 15, 22; 14:8, etc.) At the same time, loyalty must be bought with a price. To attract and hold followers every great lord must be generous with his gifts and promises. In Ether loyalty is bought by "cunning words" (8:2) and by gifts. (9:10f; 10:10.) By such means in heroic societies great chiefs attempt to "draw off" each other's supporters. This is a commonplace in the book of Ether. (7:14, 15; 9:11; 10:32.) Gangs were quickly formed and dissolved, and each regarded itself as an independent society whose own aggrandizement was the only law, "every man with his band fighting for that which he desired." (13:25.) Even an unpopular prophet could seek and find personal safety under the protection of a great chief (11:2), and an unpopular leader

could be liquidated by an uprising, no matter what his claim to the throne, "and his descendants . . . driven out of the land." (10:8.)

To defray the expenses of lavish and necessary gift-giving, the lords of all heroic ages engage in a systematic and perfectly honorable business of plunder and exaction. It is their prerogative to try to grab whatever does not belong to them already, and that includes the seizure and holding of one another's persons for ransom. The Jaredite brothers, Shez and Riplakish, show us this free competitive economy in action: Shez was well on the way to taking the kingdom away from his father, thanks to his "exceeding riches," when those same riches got him killed by a robber. (10:2-3.) Riplakish paid for his royal magnificence by oppressive taxation and extortion, which resulted in getting him, too, assassinated. (10:5-8.) Everyone grabbed what he could, and nothing was safe (14:1), with every strong man leading his own gang to plunder. (13:25-26.) As to the retaining of each other's persons in honorable captivity, nothing is more characteristic of heroic ages or more familiar to the readers of *Ether*. (7:7; 8:3-4; 10:4, 15, 30:31; 11:9, 19, 18, 23.)

The feudal contract on which every heroic society is based is before all else a mutual obligation of fief and overlord to avenge wrongs done to the other. The book of *Ether* is full of this. The sons of Omer, for example, "were exceedingly angry" against Jared for stealing their father's throne, and "did raise an army" and force him to give it back again. (8:2-6.) In the same way "the sons of Coriantumr . . . did beat Shared, and did obtain the kingdom again unto their father," (13:24) in whose interest they "fought much and bled much." (13:19.) But this same Coriantumr had to reckon with equal devotion when it was directed against himself at a time when the brother of Lib "had sworn to avenge himself . . . of the blood of his brother" (14:24), whom Coriantumr had killed in single combat during a battle. (14:16.) Blood vengeance is obviously the rule in this as in other heroic societies, where it touches off those long tragic feuds that make up so much of the epic literature, especially

of the "saga period." The fights in *Ether* are nearly all family feuds, sordid quarrels between warring kings, ambitious sons, and avenging brothers (8:2ff, 5ff; 7:4, 13-16; 8:9ff, 12; 10:3-4; 11:4; etc.), though typically Asiatic complications, must have been introduced by polygamy, an institution reported quite casually by *Ether* (14:2) and thoroughly typical of the early heroic periods. The worst plot of all in *Ether* is engineered by a woman, who employs as her "do-it-yourself" guide to the art of murder certain books of the ancients brought over from the Old World. (8:9-10.) As we have seen, nothing is more typical of the post-heroic saga times of settling down after the migrations than these terrible women and their criminal ambitions—the Greek tragedies like the Norse sagas are full of them, and they are not lacking in any heroic literature. (Chadwick, pp. 90f.) When Chadwick describes a typical epic cycle as "little more than a catalogue of the crimes committed by one member [of the ruling family] against another," and further describes those crimes as particularly horrible in nature, we need not apologize for the book of *Ether*, either for neglecting or overdoing that sort of thing.

Relatively early in Jaredite history a war of extermination took place, leaving only thirty survivors "and they who fled with the house of Omer." (9:12.) A general war of all against all in the Asiatic manner nearly wiped out the race again "in the days of Shiblom" (11:7), and "utter destruction" was promised by the prophets unless the people changed their ways. (11:20.) Finally, in the last great war, the destruction was systematic and thorough, the people laboring under what the Greeks called the spell of Ate, as if they were determined, no matter what happened, to accomplish their own annihilation. (14:19-25.) The whole population was cut down to fifty-nine souls (15:25), and these slew each other in the best heroic fashion, leaving the two kings as the last survivors. This is not a fantastic coincidence at all. We have seen that the common and established rule of heroic warfare demanded that the king be the last survivor in any conflict. Since the entire host had

taken a solemn oath to die in defense of his person, in theory the king had to be the last to go, and in practice he sometimes actually was. The only way to get around that sometimes inconvenient rule was by another rule which dissolved the nation automatically on the death of the king, as if all had been destroyed with him. In such cases all the former subjects of a king would automatically become the subjects of his conqueror.³¹

"But there is one thing that puzzles me," said F. when the friends were together for the last time. "Where is the archaeological record for all this?"

"I am glad you asked that," Blank replied. "People are prone to expect any civilization described in the records as great and mighty to leave behind majestic ruins. The mighty piles of Egypt and Babylon have fooled us into thinking that the greatness or even the existence of a civilization is to be judged by its physical remains. Nothing could be further from the truth. The greatness of a civilization consists in its institutions, and as Professor Coon has recently observed, 'institutions leave no easily detected archaeological remains.'³² This has led even the experts to overlook the importance and sometimes the existence of heroic or epic worlds."

"Or rather," Professor Schwulst amended, "it led them for many years to assume that there was no alternative in early history between complete savagery or sedentary life in farms and cities. Actually the ancients were committed to neither type of life. But because farmers and city-dwellers leave remains behind them while the nomads do not, they have always received the credit for coming first. As Professor Childe observes here: 'The nature of the archaeological evidence is liable to favor this view unduly; herdsman living in tents and using bone tools and leather vessels leave few remains behind them,' and so wherever the remains of the first civilization turn up it is a hundred-to-one chance that they will have been left by townspeople or cultivators, who thus get all the credit for founding civilization.³³ Actually a little reflection will show that they cannot have come first, and today scholars are agreed in describing the first

(Continued on page 41)

ings, temporal and spiritual, which are the gifts of God. Why not obtain them in the appointed way: by honoring, receiving, and respecting the priesthood, so that all that your Father hath shall be given unto you. Can you ask more? Remember that without the ordinances and the authority of the priesthood, "the power of godliness is not manifest unto men in the flesh."

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civilizations in heroic terms rather than agricultural ones. Nilsson warns his fellow archaeologists that they are wasting their time looking for remains from the genuinely heroic—that is, the migration time, of the Greeks: "... no archaeological record is preserved," he says. "... Some archaeologists have tried to find the ceramics of the invading Greeks. I greatly fear that even this hope is liable to be disappointed, for migrating and nomadic tribes do not use vessels of a material which is likely to be broken, as will be proved by a survey of the vessels used by modern nomadic tribes.' This was a period of great importance and activity, and of a really high civilization, yet it has left us no remains at all."

"Isn't that rather unusual?" F. asked.

"On the contrary," Schwulst replied, "it is the rule when we are dealing with heroic ages and peoples. Like the early farmers, such people, even though their culture and their practices may be very ancient, 'rarely remain long enough at one site to produce a mound.'"³⁴

(To be concluded)

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³⁰Am. J. Arch. 52 (1948), p. 159.

³¹The highest compliment Philip de Comines can pay his master, Louis XI of France, is that "as for peace, he could hardly endure the thought of it." *Memoirs*, Book I, Ch. x.

³²A. Goetze, *Hethiter, Churriter, und Assyrer* (1936), p. 130. A number of examples of this have been given in the course of these articles.

³³C. S. Coon, *The Story of Man* (New York: Knopf, 1954), p. 103.

³⁴V. G. Childe, *New Light on the Most Ancient East* (1953), p. 24.

³⁵M. P. Nilsson, *The Minoan-Mycenaean Religion* (Lund: Gleerup, 1950), pp. 6-7.

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