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Lesson 25 - Some Test Cases from the Book of Ether

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Abstract: In this lesson we pick out some peculiar items in the Book of Ether to show how they vindicate its claim to go back to the very dawn of history. First, the account of the great dispersion has been remarkably confirmed by independent investigators in many fields. Ether like the Bible tells of the Great Dispersion, but it goes much further than the Bible in describing accompanying phenomena, especially the driving of cattle and the raging of terrible winds. This part of the picture can now be confirmed from many sources. In Ether the reign and exploits of King Lib exactly parallel the doings of the first kings of Egypt (entirely unknown, of course, in the time of Joseph Smith) even in the oddest particulars. The story of Jared's barges can be matched by the earliest Babylonian descriptions of the ark, point by point as to all peculiar features. There is even ample evidence to attest the lighting of Jared's ships by shining stones, a tradition which in the present century has been traced back to the oldest versions of the Babylonian Flood Story.

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SOME TEST CASES FROM THE BOOK OF ETHER

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Was There a Great Dispersion?: The test of the Epic Milieu is a rigorous and convincing one, (See *The Improvement Era*, Jan. 1956 to Feb. 1957!) but there is a great deal of detail in the Book of Ether that can now be checked against new evidence. Let us consider a few conspicuous examples of this.

Since the idea of the scattering of the nations from the great tower is not original to Ether we need not discuss it here, but there are some peculiar aspects of the event which deserve a word. The tower of the dispersion is never called the Tower of Babel in the Book of Mormon; it is never referred to as anything but "the great tower." Where it stood we do not know; the expression "land of Shinar" in Gen. 11:2 is a vague and general designation for all of Babylonia,¹ and the orientation of the wandering "down into the valley which is northward" (Ether 1:42 — all following references are from Ether) and the long migration that followed with "flocks both male and female of every kind" (Ether 1:41) certainly looks towards the steppes. The great philologist

Hrozny has recently concluded that “we must now seek the Hamito-Semitic home only in the region of the original Indo-European home,” that is to say, all the great languages of the earth, ancient and modern, spring from a single center! This center Hrozny finds “north of the Black Sea, Caucasus, and Caspian. “It seems altogether likely,” Hrozny continues, “that the earth was populated from Central Asia.” It was drought that caused the people to scatter with their herds, he surmises, seeking grass “in a centrifugal emigration . . . that moved out in all directions.”²

Hrozny’s evidence for this is philological, and it merely confirms what is being concluded on other grounds, but the interesting thing is that the principal philological key to the problem is the name *Kish*, which is both an Old World and a Jaredite name. Now this name—Kish, Kash, Kush—is, according to Hrozny, the most widespread proper name in the ancient world, yet it can be traced back “to a definite point of diffusion in the Caspian area.”³ This is what the present writer has always referred to as “Jaredite country.” It was our guess that the Caspian was “the sea in the wilderness” that the Jaredites had to cross. (Ether 2:7.) Whatever the specific aspects of the thing, the point to note is that the idea of the diffusion of all the great languages of the world and of civilization itself from a single area in Asia and at a single time is now being seriously considered by the greatest scholars.

Another aspect of the thing to notice is the suggestion that the people had to scatter in all directions to find grass for their herds. This is not a whim of Hrozny’s—there is a great deal of evidence to support the claim that the scattering was attended by very unpleasant weather conditions.⁴ As cattlemen know, a disastrous year does not have to be one of spectacularly violent meteorological displays: grazing is a marginal business and a few dry years can mean ruin. Nevertheless there is much to indicate that the violent winds on which the book of Ether insists (Ether 6:5, 6, 8), were a reality.

To the Asiatic materials we gave in *The World of the Jaredites*⁵ may be added some very old documentary evidence from Egypt and Babylonia.

The Great Winds: Egyptian Traditions: In the Pyramid Texts, "the oldest large body of written material in the world," the first Pharaoh is described as coming into Egypt in a terrible storm, and often the king is depicted as accompanied by a fierce wind, as moving with the North Wind, etc.⁶ In one interesting text God is described as "letting loose an inundation over the Ancients," as "letting go a tempest on those who did wrong," and as pushing over "the wall on which thou leanest."⁷ Can this be a reference to the flood, the great wind and the fall of the tower? It is possible: the legend persisted in Egypt, that after the waters of the Flood had subsided to the level of the present seashores, a great wind came and piled sand over the idols of the ancients, thus forever concealing their abominations from view.⁸ The first king to rule in Egypt after Noah, according to another account, built a great wooden castle on the banks of the Nile (it is interesting that the oldest royal structure known in Egypt *was* a massive wooden edifice!) in which the constellations were depicted, and while the king sat there surrounded by beautiful women before a table loaded with drink, a great and terrible wind arose, dashing the waters against the palace until it collapsed and all in it were drowned.⁹ The parallel to the great house of Lehi's dream is interesting. The grandson of that wicked king devised an apparatus by which he "caused the winds to blow against all the lands, until the inhabitants thereof came and submitted to him."⁹

Babylonian Traditions: Haldar has made a study of the wind in the oldest Babylonian texts. According to these, when the divine presence is withdrawn from man "the raging storm blows in over the country, bringing with it locusts and other accompaniments of the desert wind, whereby the country is laid waste and becomes the desert," the "pasturage of cattle" being destroyed.¹⁰

“The sheep-fold is delivered to the wind,” says one text in which “the wind is clearly described as the destructive power.”¹⁰ In another text the gods decree the destruction of the city of men by a great wind, the “evil wind” under which “the land trembles, the people are killed, and the dead bodies are lying in the gates of the city.”¹¹ In a Sumerian epic hymn the god departs from the city like a flying bird while the Great Wind comes and the people “perish through hunger, the mother leaves her daughter, the father turns away from his son, the wife is abandoned, the child is abandoned, the possessions are scattered about—an excellent description of the state of chaos . . .”¹² When God leaves the earth, the enemy moves into his place and then “turns the *edin* into a desert by the hurricane,” which destroys people and cattle, while the land becomes prey to “the hordes from the ‘desert.’”¹⁴ Being expelled from her city by the wind, the Lady Ishtar “wanders among the ‘bedouin sheikhs’ . . . the pastures and fields have become a desert . . .”¹³ In Sumerian and Babylonian ritual texts “the ‘word’ is very often compared to a raging wind, or an overflowing flood . . . the ‘word’ (of Enlil) is said to be a storm that destroys the ‘stable’ and the ‘fold’, that fells the wood, that causes the Anunnakis to abandon the temples, and locusts to plunder the grove of the goddess.”¹⁴

Haldar cannot avoid the conclusion that all these references to the winds that ruin the grazing and destroy civilization are no mere ritual inventions but are actually “describing historic events in the terms of religious language,” even though they may not refer to one “specific historic situation.”¹⁵ In one of the oldest of all historic monuments the king compares himself with “an evil storm-wind,” in explanation of which Haldar notes that “It may be easy to imagine that in an early period . . . historical experience may have influenced the development of religious worship,” since the “storm-wind” epithet seems to be a kind of formula in the earliest Egyptian as well as the earliest Sumerian religion.¹⁶

A very interesting Jewish apocryphal writing tells

how in the last days "God will bring a strong wind . . . and from the midst of that wind the Holy One . . . will scatter the tribes in every town, and men will find no bread until the Holy One turns sand into flour."¹⁷

Hebrew Traditions: Eisler has examined the Jewish tradition that tells of how the baptism of the earth by water in the days of Noah, purging it of its wickedness, was later followed by a baptism of wind, to be followed in turn at the end of the world by a baptism of fire. The baptism of winds, we are told, took place at the time of the tower.¹⁸ According to the Book of Jubilees (called the "Little Genesis"), "The Lord sent a mighty wind against the tower and overthrew it upon the earth, and behold it was between Asshur and Babylon in the land of Shinar, and they called its name 'Overthrow'."¹⁹ Of these traditions by far the most interesting is the Mandaeen teaching that when the world was purged at the time of the great wind the human race was broken up into many languages, but there were two men whose language was not changed: they were Ram and his brother Rud.²⁰ The names are contractions, the second from Jared, the first from some unknown name. This Jared may be confused with the son of Mahalaleel in the Book of Jubilees, who was given a vision of "what was and what will be . . . as it will happen to the children of men throughout their generations until the day of judgment." This Jared "testified to the Watchers, who had sinned with the daughters of men, (at the time of the tower, according to the usual calculation) . . . And he was taken from amongst the children of men, and we conducted him into the Garden of Eden . . . and behold there he writes down the condemnation . . . and all the wickedness of the children of men."²¹ Since Jared, unlike Lehi, widely publicized his departure, attempting to gather recruits wherever he could (Ether 1:41), it is quite conceivable that some memories of him and his strange departure should have lingered.

Ether makes it very clear that Jared's migration was

but a small part of a great world movement in which "the people" were "scattered upon all the face of the earth," (Ether 1:33); Jared himself hoped to be a lone exception, but in vain. (Ether 1:38.) And so when we find among the oldest traditions of the oldest civilizations that their first kings came into their various lands as wanderers in the beginning in a time of terrible winds we have a confirmation of a clear historical pattern.²² What is most interesting about this is that in the oldest and best documented of all these instances the royal symbol is the bee, and the word for royalty is Deseret. We have treated this subject elsewhere at considerable length; what we would reiterate here is the easily demonstrable fact that in the Egyptian symbolism the Bee may be substituted for the Deseret crown in any operation.²³

Lib a Typical "Predynastic" King: The organization of the land of Egypt under the first Pharaoh presents a remarkable parallel to the reorganization of the Jaredite land under King Lib. Let us briefly summarize our longer study of the subject.

Story of the Snakes: There had been a great drought, so severe that it permanently affected conditions of life: the population was terribly reduced by famine; the country began to swarm with snakes; the cattle started a mass movement of drifting towards the south, where there was better grazing; in desperation "the people did follow the course of the beasts, and did devour the carcasses of them which fell by the way . . ." (Ether 9:34.) When the drought finally ended things got better, but the snakes were still so bad towards the south as to shut off attempts at migration and colonization in that direction for at least two hundred years to come. Then came the heroic Lib, who "did that which was good in the sight of the Lord," and in whose days, and apparently under whose leadership, "the poisonous serpents were destroyed." They did not just vanish or cease to annoy, they "were destroyed." Consequently the coveted

southland was again open to exploitation, and the first step was a great national hunt; "they did go into the land southward, to hunt food for the people of the land, for the land was covered with animals of the forest." In this King Lib himself would have taken the lead, for "Lib also himself became a great hunter." (Ether 10:19.)

Instead of colonizing the forested land to the south, however, it was set aside as a game preserve: "And they did preserve the land southward for a wilderness, to get game. And the whole face of the land northward was covered with inhabitants." (Ether 10:21.) Exactly at the point of meeting between these two zones, "they built a great city by the narrow neck of land, by the place where the sea divides the land." (Ether 10:20.) Then follows a description of a great economic boom and expansion period, marking King Lib as the founder of a new age. (Ether 10:22-29.)

Turning to Egypt, we note that whoever the first Pharaoh and chief author of Egyptian civilization may have been, it is apparent from the texts we quoted in the *Era* that he opened vast new tracts of land to settlement by a systematic destruction of serpents and crocodiles which hitherto had barred settlement and even passage throughout the area.²⁴ The serpents are always associated with a drought. It was also he who having come in and settled with his people, "the followers of Horus," established the system of the Two Lands, the double organization of Egypt, building a great city in the narrow neck just at the point of the Delta at a place called "the balance of the two lands."²⁴ It is also known that the whole Delta with its lush meadows and dense thickets, was preserved down to a late period as a hunting grounds for the nobility, and that Pharaoh himself enjoyed the ritual position of chief hunter.²⁵ All this information is gathered from ritual texts, and it is folly to try to distinguish too sharply between religious institutions and the secular elements in them, since at all times, as Kees has shown, the Egyptian state itself was a huge religious institution while the king's office was from first to last

a sacred one and everything he did was a religious ritual.²⁶ The great and prolonged drought that marked a new phase in Jaredite history may have been the same world-wide weather disturbance that sent the Horus people into Egypt; at any rate there is to say the least a remarkable resemblance in the way things are done in the two worlds, that puts a clear stamp of authenticity of Ether's claim to be telling a tale of archaic times.

Jared's Ships: Since the story of Jared's barges and the shining stones with which he illuminated them has been the subject of much mockery and fun among the critics of the Book of Mormon, they are all the more convincing evidence if they can be shown to have a genuine archaic background. The key to the barges is found in the declaration that they were built on conventional lines and yet in their peculiarities patterned after Noah's Ark.²⁷ The discovery of a number of Babylonian texts has given rise to a good deal of speculation as to just what the ark of Noah may have been like. According to Babylonian versions of great antiquity which add some important items to the brief Biblical account without in any way contradicting it, Noah's ark must have had certain peculiar features which had never been noted by Biblical scholars, even though the Bible hints at some of them. These peculiar features are precisely those that have beguiled and amused the critics of the Jared story. Both Noah's and Jared's boats were designed from conventional lines, but, "according to instructions of the Lord," both were made water tight above as well as below, were peaked at the ends, had a door that could be sealed tight, had a special kind of air-hole, were designed to go under the water, containing all sorts of animals as well as men, were driven by the wind without the use of sails, and were designed to resist the force of unusually violent weather, especially hurricane winds.²⁸

The Luminous Stones: But the Babylonian texts do not tell us how the Ark was lighted and the Bible mentions only a *tsohar*, about the nature of which the

Rabbis could never agree.²⁹ Jared's shining stones have been held up to ridicule as a remarkable piece of effrontery and the invention of a diseased imagination. Yet it can now be shown beyond any dispute:³⁰

1) That there existed throughout the world in ancient and medieval times the report of a certain stone, the *Pyrophilus*, that would shine in the dark. This stone, it was believed was a pure crystal and could only be produced and made luminous by the application of terrific heat. It had the miraculous quality of enabling its possessor to pass unharmed through the depths of the water.

2) The story is not a folk-tale but is found only in the recondite writings of the most celebrated scholars in the East and West, who passed the tale around among them. The wonderful shining stone is found only in the possession of a Cosmocrator, like Solomon, its most famous owner being Alexander the Great.

3) The Alexander accounts of the stone are actually much older than Alexander, and have easily been traced back to the Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic, in which the stone appears as the Plant of Life which Gilgamesh seeks from Utnapishtim, the Babylonian Noah. The *Pyrophilus* legend wherever it is found has accordingly been traced back ultimately in every case to the story of Noah.

4) The most wonderful object in the inmost shrine of the great cult center of Aphek, in Syria, where the deeds of Noah and the story of the flood were celebrated in word and ritual, was a stone that shone in the dark.

5) One of the explanations of the *Zohar* given by the ancient Rabbis was that it was a polished jewel which Noah hung up in the ark so that he could tell night from day; the source of this seems to be a very brief, obscure, and little-known remark in the Palestinian Talmud and attributed to R. Ahia ben Zeira, to the effect that "in the midst of the darkness of the Ark Noah distinguished day from night by the aid of pearls and precious stones, whose lustre turned pale in the daylight and glittered at

night.”³¹ This is far from the Ether account, which could hardly have been inspired by it, even if the writer of the Book of Mormon had known of this still untranslated passage from the *Talmud Jerushalmi*. But it is obviously an echo of the old account of the shining stones, the association of which with Noah no one suspected until the discovery of the Gilgamesh Epic. It was that discovery which put scholars on its trail at the end of the last century.

Now whether the ark of Noah was actually lit by shining stones or not is beside the point, which is that the idea of stones shining in the darkness of the ark was not invented by Joseph Smith or anybody else in the 19th century, but was known to the ancient Rabbis in an obscure and garbled version, was clearly indicated in the properties of a very ancient shrine dedicated to the Syrian Noah, and was mixed in among the legends of the very ancient Alexander cycle by means of which scholars quickly and easily ran it down to its oldest visible source, namely the old Sumerian Epic of the Babylonian Noah. However, ridiculous the story of the shining stones may sound to modern ears, there is no doubt that it is genuine old stuff, going back to the proper sources as far as Ether is concerned.

Questions

1. On what grounds does Hrozný defend the thesis of the diffusion of all civilization from a single point?
2. What evidence is there that the great winds mentioned in Ether really occurred?
3. How do winds cause people to scatter and wander?
4. Compare conditions described in the Sumerian temple texts with those described in the Book of Ether. Is there any connection between them?
5. How does the story of King Lib's administration resemble that of the first Pharaoh? How do you explain the coincidence?

6. Where could Joseph Smith have got the story of the shining stones?

7. Is it conceivable that some record of Jared's departure might have been left behind?

8. How do Egyptian and Hebrew traditions of the Great Wind match the report of Ether?

9. Is the story of the plague of serpents historically plausible?

10. In what ancient records do we find remarkable parallels to the peculiar ships of the Jaredites?