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## Converging Paths: Language and Cultural Notes on the Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Book of Mormon

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# CONVERGING PATHS: LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL NOTES ON THE ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN BACKGROUND OF THE BOOK OF MORMON

*Stephen D. Ricks*

In the past half generation, Book of Mormon study has come into its own. The accumulated efforts of scholars in examining the results of major finds, in reassessing reports of other discoveries, and in rethinking the geography of Book of Mormon events have all combined to place the historical plausibility of the Book of Mormon on a very sure footing. In what follows I review nine aspects of Book of Mormon language, history, and culture that were unknown or unexamined at the time of the publication of the Book of Mormon but have since entered the forefront of scholarly discussion.

## **Treaty and Covenant in King Benjamin's Address**

There is an amazing ritual density in King Benjamin's address and its related events, which included a covenant making/covenant renewal ceremony as well as a coronation ceremony in which Benjamin's son Mosiah acceded to



TREATY/  
COVENANT  
PATTERN

the throne.<sup>1</sup> The series of events outlined in Mosiah 1–6 reflects what biblical scholars call the “treaty/covenant pattern” in ancient Israelite literature—a literary feature that was completely unknown when the Book of Mormon was published in 1830 and was not identified and studied until the past two generations. In 1931 Viktor Korosec identified the treaty pattern from ancient Hittite treaties,<sup>2</sup> and in 1950 Elias Bickerman tentatively connected this Hittite treaty pattern with Israelite covenant making.<sup>3</sup> It was not until 1954, however, that George Mendenhall set out in detail that connection, identifying the specific elements of the treaty/covenant pattern: (1) the king/prophet gives a preamble that introduces God as the one making the covenant or that introduces his prophet as a spokesman for God; (2) the king/prophet gives a brief review of God’s dealings with Israel in the past; (3) the king/prophet notes the terms of the covenant, listing specific commandments and obligations that God expects Israel to keep; (4) the people bear witness in formal statements that they accept the covenant; (5) the king/prophet lists the blessings and curses for obedience or disobedience to the covenant; and (6) the king/prophet makes provisions for depositing a written copy of the covenant in a safe and sacred place and for reading its contents to the people in the future.<sup>4</sup>

Among its other connections with ancient Israelite religious practice, the assembly recorded in Mosiah 1–6 mentions three interesting features: the pilgrimage of whole families to the temple site, the sacrifice of animals, and the people’s dwelling in tents. These elements are so typical of the Israelite Feast of Tabernacles that they strongly suggest that the events recorded in these chapters took place during

a Nephite observance of that festival. The Old Testament indicates that the Feast of Tabernacles most likely took place when the Israelites renewed their covenant with God, and that appears to be what the Nephites were doing in the assembly reported in Mosiah 1–6.<sup>5</sup>

The six elements of covenant renewal mentioned above can be found in Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Joshua. In addition, the new king would ideally take office before the death of the old one, and this transfer of power was connected with the ceremony in which the people made or renewed their covenant with God. Interestingly, each of these features is found in Mosiah 1–6.

1. *Preamble.* The passages in the Bible dealing with the renewal of the covenant sometimes introduce God as the maker of the covenant: “God spake all these words saying . . .” (Exodus 20:1). At other times a prophet is introduced to act for God: “Joshua said unto all the people, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel . . .” (Joshua 24:2). Similarly, Benjamin’s covenant assembly in the book of Mosiah begins: “These are the words which [Benjamin] spake and caused to be written, saying . . .” (Mosiah 2:9). Although Benjamin is speaking, he is clearly acting as the mouthpiece of God. In fact, a sizable part of his address consists of words that had been made known to him “by an angel from God” (Mosiah 3:2).

2. *Review of God’s Relations with Israel.* At this point in the covenant renewal ceremony, according to the Bible, the people hear of God’s mighty acts on behalf of his people, Israel. For example, Jehovah says through Moses, “Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles’ wings, and brought you unto myself” (Exodus 19:4; compare Exodus 20:2; Joshua 24:11–23). The Mosiah passage includes a long account of the past relations between

King Benjamin and his people as an *a fortiori* argument for the people's obligation to God (see Mosiah 2:19).

3. *Terms of the Covenant.* Each of the biblical covenant passages states the commandments that God expects his people, Israel, to keep. A prime example is in Exodus 20–23, where God first briefly lists the Ten Commandments (see Exodus 20:3–17) and then spells out in greater detail what the people are to obey (see Exodus 21:1–23:19). Benjamin's address also contains numerous commandments; for example: "Believe in God. . . . Believe that ye must repent of your sins and forsake them, and humble yourselves before God; and ask in sincerity of heart that he would forgive you" (Mosiah 4:9–10).

4. *Formal Witness.* Once in the Old Testament, an object—a particular stone—was made witness to the covenant: "for it hath heard all the words of the Lord which he spake unto us: it shall be therefore a witness unto you, lest ye deny your God" (Joshua 24:27). In general, though, the people themselves were the witnesses, stating, for instance, "All that the Lord hath spoken we will do" (Exodus 19:8). Following King Benjamin's address, the people express a similar desire "to enter into a covenant with [their] God to do his will, and to be obedient to his commandments" (Mosiah 5:5). They further witness their willingness to obey by allowing their names to be listed among those who have "entered into a covenant with God to keep his commandments" (Mosiah 6:1).

5. *Blessings and Curses.* Biblical covenants often end with a list of curses and blessings for those who enter into the covenant: "Cursed be the man that maketh any graven or molten image. . . . And all the people shall answer and say, Amen. Cursed be he that setteth light by his father or

his mother. And all the people shall say, Amen” (Deuteronomy 27:15–16). “Blessed shalt thou be in the city, and blessed shalt thou be in the field. Blessed shall be the fruit of thy body, and the fruit of thy ground, and the fruit of thy cattle” (Deuteronomy 28:3–4).

More often in the Old Testament, however, such curses and blessings are merely implied: “Joshua said unto the people, . . . If ye forsake the Lord, and serve strange gods, then he will turn and do you hurt, and consume you, after that he hath done you good” (Joshua 24:19–20). Similarly, the curses and blessings in Benjamin’s speech are implied rather than stated outright: “Whosoever doeth this shall be found at the right hand of God. . . . Whosoever shall not take upon him the name of Christ must be called by some other name; therefore, he findeth himself on the left hand of God” (Mosiah 5:9–10).

6. *Reciting and Depositing the Covenant.* The Bible frequently mentions that the covenant was read aloud. For example, we read that “[Moses] took the books of the covenant, and read in the audience of the people” (Exodus 24:7). Other passages mention that the covenant was written and put in a safe and sacred place: “Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God, and took a great stone, and set it up there under an oak, that was by the sanctuary of the Lord” (Joshua 24:26). The words of King Benjamin were written and sent out among the people, not only so they could be studied and understood but also, it can be surmised, so they could serve as a permanent record of the assembly (see Mosiah 2:8–9). At the end of Benjamin’s address, when all of the people expressed a willingness to take upon themselves Christ’s name, their names were

recorded and presumably preserved as a memorial of the covenant (see Mosiah 6:1).

## **Kingship and Coronation**

Mosiah 1–6 is also a coronation ceremony for Benjamin’s son Mosiah, a ceremony not unlike those associated with ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean coronations. Kingship in ancient Israel and in the ancient Near East and the various steps of the coronation ceremony remained unexamined until the first decades of the twentieth century, when they became the subject of systematic investigation.<sup>6</sup> The account of Mosiah’s coronation contains the following four key elements of ancient Israelite coronations: the sanctuary as the coronation site, installation in office with insignia, anointing, and receiving a throne name.



### **The Sanctuary as the Coronation Site**

A society’s most sacred spot is the location where the sacred act of coronation takes place. For Israel, the temple was that site. Thus we read that, during his coronation, Joash stood “by a pillar [of the temple], as the manner was” (2 Kings 11:14). However, the temple had not been built when Solomon became king, so he was crowned at Gihon (see 1 Kings 1:45), a site made sacred by the presence of the ark of the covenant (which contained the sacred objects from Moses’ day) within the special tabernacle that David had made to shelter it. The priest Zadok took “out of the tabernacle” the horn containing oil, from which he anointed Solomon (see 1 Kings 1:39). In the Nephite case, the temple at Zarahemla was the sacred site chosen for

Benjamin's address to the people and for Mosiah's consecration as king (see Mosiah 1:18).

### **Installation in Office with Insignia**

At the coronation of Joash, Jehoiada the priest conferred upon him two objects, called the *nēzer* and the *ʿēdūt*. The meaning of the first term is "crown" (see 2 Kings 11:12). The meaning of *ʿēdūt* is far less certain. It may have been a piece of writing that affirmed the king's adoption by God and promised the new king victory over his enemies, as Psalm 2:7–9 suggests, or it may have been a document, one the ruler was to wear, containing the basic terms of Yahweh's covenant with the house of David (Israel's line of the kings).

The transfer of power to Mosiah involved something similar. Benjamin gave him certain objects, passing on the official records of the people (the plates of brass and the plates of Nephi), the sword of Laban, and the miraculous ball, also called the director or Liahona (see Mosiah 1:15–16). Of course, the royal documents were the most important records in the kingdoms of the ancient world, and a sword was a frequent sign of kingship in Europe and Asia.<sup>7</sup> In addition, from the sixteenth century at least back to the Roman Empire, rulers in the Old World commonly held in one hand an orb or ball.<sup>8</sup> Although the Bible does not mention such an object, it still might have been part of the Israelite coronation paraphernalia.

### **Anointing**

To anoint the king with oil was a significant part of coronation ceremonies in ancient Israel and in the ancient Near East generally. The Bible records the anointing of six kings: Saul, David, Solomon, Jehu, Joash, and Jehoahaz.



Indeed, the name-title *Messiah*, which was used to refer to several of the kings of Israel, means “anointed,” no doubt referring to the rite of anointing the king during his installation in office.

The Hittites, northern neighbors of the Israelites, also had a ceremony that included anointing the king with oil. Moreover, although there is no clear evidence that the Egyptian king was anointed when he became king, he was apparently anointed every morning before entering the temple to perform daily chants.

Following his address and the people’s renewal of the covenant, Benjamin “consecrated his son Mosiah to be a ruler and a king over his people” (Mosiah 6:3). The context does not indicate whether this “consecration” included anointing. However, some ritual act was evidently involved since almost the beginning of Nephite history, for Jacob mentioned a coronation that included anointing. He reported that his brother Nephi, the first king, “began to be old, and he saw that he must soon die; wherefore, he anointed a man to be a king and a ruler over his people now, according to the reigns of the kings” (Jacob 1:9). “According to the reigns of the kings” clearly refers to the pattern of kingship in Judah, with which Nephi was personally familiar.

### **Receiving a Throne Name**

In many ancient societies a king received a new name or throne name when he was crowned king. Several Israelite kings had two names, a birth name and a throne name. It may be that all the kings of Judah received a new name when they came to the throne. During the Middle Kingdom period (approximately 2000–1800 B.C.), each king of Egypt had no fewer than five names and received a throne

name at the time he became king. Kings in Mesopotamia also received a new name. Each Parthian king (in ancient Iran) assumed the same throne name, Arsak, at his crowning, an act that has made it hard for historians to distinguish one ruler from another.

Similarly, use of a single royal title marked the early Nephite kings. Jacob wrote, “The people having loved Nephi exceedingly, . . . wherefore, the people were desirous to retain in remembrance his name. And whoso should reign in his stead were called by the people, second Nephi, third Nephi, and so forth, according to the reigns of the kings; and thus they were called by the people, let them be of whatever name they would” (Jacob 1:10–11). While we do not know that this new name was given to the Nephite rulers as part of the coronation rite, there is every reason to expect that it was.

## **The Tree and Waters of Life**

Given the Semitic background of the Book of Mormon, it is not surprising that an ancient Near Eastern symbol such as the tree of life should appear in the Book of Mormon and be supported by many other evidences from other ancient Near Eastern cultures, including Mesopotamia and Egypt.<sup>9</sup> The tree of life is first mentioned in the account of Lehi’s dream, where Lehi states that “it came to pass that I beheld a tree, whose fruit was desirable to make one happy” (1 Nephi 8:10). In Nephi’s similar vision the tree of life is associated with the waters of life: “And it came to pass that I beheld that the rod of iron . . . led to the fountain of living waters, or to the tree of life; which waters are a representation of the love of God” (1 Nephi 11:25).<sup>10</sup>



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SYMBOLISM  
OF THE TREE  
OF LIFE

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Though not expressly named as such, the Semitic *kiškānu*-tree (like the Sumerian *giš-kin*) of Mesopotamia “is identical with the tree of Life.”<sup>11</sup> As in the Book of Mormon, this tree of life is closely linked to the waters of life, since “the tree of Life constantly needs the Water of Life near which it is growing in the garden of paradise.”<sup>12</sup> This is also reminiscent of an ancient Jewish tradition that “the tree of life is planted near the source of the water of life.”<sup>13</sup>

The ancient Mesopotamian legend of the hero Gilgamesh gives further insight into the “plant of Life” that, according to Geo Widengren, is like the “tree of Life.”<sup>14</sup> In the legend, Gilgamesh, exhausted from his search for the very aged Utnapishtim, who lived on an island at the edge of the world, is taken by Utnapishtim “to the washing place” in order to “wash off his grime in water clean as snow.” Gilgamesh is then clothed in “a cloak to clothe his nakedness” with a band placed on his head.<sup>15</sup> Utnapishtim later tells him where to get the “plant of Life.” Gilgamesh does find the plant, but it is spirited away by a snake, thereby allowing the snake to shed its skin periodically but causing Gilgamesh to fail in his quest.

The tree of life and its connection with the waters of life also occur in ancient Egyptian religion and literature: “From the age of the Pyramid texts the word *ḥt n ‘ankh*, ‘Tree of Life,’ appears.”<sup>16</sup> There is a miniature statue of Rameses II stretched out on the leaves of the *ished* (i.e., persea) tree, the Egyptian tree of life. The inscription on the statue indicates that Rameses’ name was written on the leaves of the *ished* tree, which served as a kind of book of life or book of remembrance.<sup>17</sup> The sacred tree and water are found together in many Egyptian temple complexes.

## Hebraisms in the Book of Mormon

We do not know what language was written on the plates of the Book of Mormon.<sup>18</sup> Nephi described the writing as consisting of “the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians” (1 Nephi 1:2), while Moroni, writing at the end of Nephite history, described it as “reformed Egyptian” (Moroni 9:32). The language of the plates may have been Egyptian symbols to represent Egyptian words, Egyptian symbols to represent Hebrew words, or Egyptian and Hebrew signs to represent Hebrew words or Hebrew and Egyptian words. In any event, the day-to-day speech of the Nephites was some form of Hebrew. Even in its English translation, the Book of Mormon reflects Hebrew speech and thought patterns. Of the many such Hebraisms discoverable in the Book of Mormon, I will briefly discuss the construct state, adverbials, the cognate accusative, and relative clauses.

### Word Order of the Construct State

The “construct state” in Hebrew indicates possession or relationship of one noun to another. This relationship is conveyed in English by the possessive case, by use of the preposition *of*, or by an adjective modifying a noun. For example, in English the phrase *the king’s house* or *house of the king* would read *house the king* in Hebrew. Similarly, an adjective-noun pair in English such as *brass plates* would read *plates brass* in Hebrew or, in translation, *plates of brass*, which is precisely what we find in the Book of Mormon. A number of other phrases in the English translation of the Book of Mormon preserve this underlying Hebrew word order. Here are a few examples:



HEBREW  
FORMS

*words of plainness* (Jacob 4:14) instead of *plain words*

*skin of blackness* (2 Nephi 5:21) instead of *black skin*

*night of darkness* (Alma 34:33) instead of *dark night*

### **Adverbials**

Hebrew is decidedly lacking in adverbs. Instead of adverbs, it frequently uses the prepositions meaning “in” or “with.” Two examples will suffice to illustrate how the Book of Mormon conforms with Hebrew syntax in this regard:

*with patience* (Mosiah 24:15) instead of *patiently*

*with much harshness* (1 Nephi 18:11) instead of *very harshly*

### **The Cognate Accusative of “Possess” and “Inheritance”**

It is well known that Hebrew frequently uses a verb and an object using a related word: “she vowed a vow” (1 Samuel 1:11). This feature of Hebrew style is viewed as attractive if not elegant, though English stylists view it as infelicitous phrasing to be avoided. The Book of Mormon contains many examples of the cognate accusative, such as, “I have dreamed a dream [Hebrew *ḥālamtî ḥālôm*]; or, in other words, I have seen a vision [*ḥāzîtî ḥāzôn*]” (1 Nephi 8:2). Other examples include “work all manner of fine work” (Ether 10:23), and “taxed with a tax” (Mosiah 7:15).

Much more difficult to notice, however, are cognate accusatives obscured by the English translation. Consider, for example, the construction that arises from the similarity between the related Hebrew words for *Jershon*, *inheritance*, and *possession* in Alma 27: “And they went down into the land of Jershon, and took *possession* [Hebrew \*YRŠ] of the land of *Jershon*” (Hebrew *yaršôn*, Alma 27:26)

“for an *inheritance*” (Hebrew *yaršôn*, Alma 27:22). This is a remarkable instance of the cognate accusative in the underlying Hebrew text.

### Relative Clause

In biblical Hebrew the relative clause (usually introduced by *who* or *which*) does not always closely follow the word or phrase to which it refers. This unique aspect of the Hebrew language is seen in the Book of Mormon as well. Consider two examples:

*Then shall they confess, who live without God in the world* (Mosiah 27:31) instead of *Then shall they who live without God in the world confess*.

*The Egyptians were drowned in the Red Sea, who were the armies of Pharaoh* (1 Nephi 17:27) instead of *The Egyptians, who were the armies of Pharaoh, were drowned in the Red Sea*.

## Names in the Book of Mormon

In the Book of Mormon, many personal names and place-names reflect the book’s Israelite and Egyptian background.<sup>19</sup> In this section I will discuss two personal names of Egyptian origin—*Paanchi* and *Nephi*—and three names of Hebrew origin—the personal name *Sariah* and the place-names *Jershon* and *Cumorah*.



EGYPTIAN  
AND HEBREW  
NAMES

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### Egyptian Names: Paanchi, Nephi

*Paanchi*. Among those who contended unsuccessfully for the judgment seat was Paanchi (see Helaman 1:3, 7, 8). Egyptologist Günther Vittmann, in an article on the name *P<sup>2</sup>-ꜥnkhi* (pronounced “Pi<sup>ꜥ</sup>ankhi” or “Pa<sup>ꜥ</sup>ankhi”), indicates

that it is a Twenty-Fifth-Dynasty royal name of Meroitic origin.<sup>20</sup> Even critics of the Book of Mormon concede that this name is indisputably Egyptian in provenance.

*Nephi.* In his study *Personal Names in the Phoenician and Punic Inscriptions*, Frank Benz cites a Phoenician name, *KNPY*, found at Elephantine, in Upper Egypt. Benz sees the name as a Canaanite form of the Egyptian personal name *K<sup>2</sup>-nfr.w*.<sup>21</sup> In Phoenician, a Semitic language closely related to Hebrew, the medial *P* in *NPY* would be pronounced /f/, making the name essentially congruent with the name *Nephi*. In addition, in the late Egyptian period (approximately 1000–300 B.C.) the *r* in the personal name *nfr* was pronounced /y/ (“ee”), again recalling the name *Nephi*. (In Coptic, the successor language to late Egyptian, *nfr* was rendered *noufi*, pronounced “noo-fee”).<sup>22</sup> The name *Nephi* is thus “an attested Syro-Palestinian Semitic form of an attested Egyptian man’s name dating from the Late Period of Egypt.”<sup>23</sup>

### **Hebrew Names: Sariah, Jershon, Cumorah**

*Sariah.* Sariah is introduced in the Book of Mormon as the wife of the prophet Lehi and the mother of Laman, Lemuel, Sam, Nephi, Jacob, and Joseph (see 1 Nephi 2:5). Her name, which would be *śryh* in Hebrew spelling, has been found in an Aramaic papyrus dating to the fifth century B.C.<sup>24</sup> In line 4 of this text (denominated Papyrus 22) the name is given as *śry[h br]t hwš<sup>c</sup> br ḥrmn*, which may be vocalized as *Śariah barat Hoshea bar Ḥarman*, “Sariah the daughter of Hoshea son of Harman.” According to Jeffery R. Chadwick, who has studied this text, “Cowley had to reconstruct part of the text, supplying the final *h* of *Sariah* and the initial *b-r* of *barat*, but the spacing is adequate, and

the comparative context of the papyrus leaves little doubt that the reconstruction is accurate.”<sup>25</sup> Papyrus 22 belongs to the Elephantine Papyri, discovered at the beginning of the twentieth century, more than seventy years after the first publication of the Book of Mormon.

*Cumorah.* *Cumorah* is the name of the hill in which Mormon buried the Nephite records before turning his abridgment of it over to his son Moroni (see Mormon 6:6). Suggested etymologies range from a corruption of the biblical place-name *Gomorrah* to a comparison with *Qumran*, the name of the site near the caves where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. The most plausible etymology for *Cumorah*, however, is the Hebrew *kāmôrāh*, “priesthood,” an abstract noun based on the word *kōmer*, “priest.” *Kōmer/kōmer* and *kāmôrāh* may be compared in both form and meaning with the Hebrew nouns *kōhēn*, “priest,” and *kāhunnāh*, “priesthood.”

Some have privately objected that this explanation is unlikely because the term *kōmer* is always used in the Old Testament in reference to false priests (see 2 Kings 23:5; Hosea 10:5; Zephaniah 1:4), while the word *kōhēn* is used to denote Israelite priests. It seems more likely that the term *kōmer* was simply used to denote a priest who was not of the tribe of Levi, while *kōhēn* in all cases refers to a Levitical priest. Since Lehi’s party did not include descendants of Levi, they probably used *kōmer* wherever the Book of Mormon speaks of priests.

*Jershon.* When the Lamanites converted by the sons of Mosiah fled their homeland to escape persecution, the Nephites allowed them to settle in the land of Jershon. The name *Jershon*, though not found in the Bible, has an authentic Hebrew origin, the root \*YRŠ meaning “to inherit”



and the suffix *-ôn* denoting a place-name. Three passages in the Book of Mormon present *Jershon* in context with the idea of inheritance: Alma 27:22 (“and this land Jershon is the land which we will give unto our brethren for an inheritance”), Alma 27:24 (“that they may inherit the land Jershon”), and Alma 35:14 (“they have lands for their inheritance in the land of Jershon”).

The *-ôn* ending of *Jershon* is typical of other place-names belonging to the ancient Near East. Wilhelm Borée, in his outstanding study *Die alten Ortsnamen Palästinas* (The ancient place-names of Palestine), cites fully eighty-four ancient Canaanite place-names with the ending *-ôn* in biblical and extrabiblical sources (e.g., Egyptian and Mesopotamian writings, the El-Amarna letters, ostraca), including *Ayyalon* (spelled *Ajalon* in KJV Joshua 19:42), *Ashkelon* (spelled *Asklon* in KJV Judges 1:18), *Gibeon* (Joshua 9:3), *Hebron* (Joshua 10:36), *Dibon* (Numbers 21:30), and *Heshbon* (Numbers 21:30). The Book of Mormon place-name *Jershon*, then, is right at home with a number of other biblical and extrabiblical place-names.

### “The Place Which Was Called Nahom”

Nephi recounted that at one point in his family’s travels “in the borders near the Red Sea . . . we did pitch our tents again, that we might tarry for the space of a time. And it came to pass that Ishmael died, and was buried in the place *which was called Nahom*” (1 Nephi 16:14, 33–34). It is striking that in this instance Lehi did not follow desert practice and name the locale himself, as he did with “the valley which he called Lemuel” (1 Nephi 16:6), “the place [they called] Shazer” (1 Nephi 16:13), “the land which we called Bountiful,” and “the sea, which we called Irreantum” (1 Nephi 17:5). Instead,



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GEOGRAPHIC  
CORRELATION  
OF NAHOM

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the name *Nahom* predated the group's arrival and was adopted by them.

In his book *Lehi in the Desert*, Hugh Nibley makes the linguistic point that the name *Nahom* derived from the Semitic trilateral roots *NHM* and *NĤM* that mean “lament” or “grieve” (in Arabic *naḥama* means “to sigh, groan, moan” and *nahama* signifies “to groan, roar, complain,” while in Hebrew the root *NĤM* means “to mourn”).<sup>26</sup>

Lynn and Hope Hilton traveled the presumed route of Lehi in the Arabian Peninsula and proposed that the place called Nahom was by al-Kunfidah in the southwest corner of Saudi Arabia.<sup>27</sup> The late Brigham Young University archaeologist Ross T. Christensen cites the instance of a site named Nehhm in an eighteenth-century map drawn by the German explorer Carsten Niebuhr, in a valley to the north of Sana'a, the modern capital of the Arab Yemen Republic.<sup>28</sup> Warren and Michaela Knoth Aston have followed Christensen's lead in seeking Islamic and early modern sources for *Nahom*. They found a 1976 map at the University of Sana'a in the Yemen Arab Republic that indicated a site called Nehem about thirty-five miles northeast of Sana'a, about the same place cited by Christensen. Nehem is the site of numerous tombs dating back centuries, quite possibly suggesting that it served as a cemetery since antiquity. The Astons also note that the medieval Arab authors Ibn al-Kalbi and al-Hamdani “refer variously to a pagan god known as Nuhum (Ibn al-Kalbi), a tribal ancestor named Nuham (Ibn al-Kalbi), and a region and a tribe called Nihm (al-Hamdani), all in southwest Arabia.”<sup>29</sup> Despite the venerable age of these intriguing references, all of them were “1,400 or more years after Lehi's party passed through the area.”<sup>30</sup>

A few years ago, however, Professor S. Kent Brown of Brigham Young University learned that Burkhard Vogt and a German archaeological team excavating the Bar'an temple in Marib, Yemen, had found an inscribed altar dating from the seventh to sixth centuries B.C., "generally the time of Lehi and his family."<sup>31</sup> The inscription on the altar indicates that one "Bi'athar, son of Sawād, son of Naw'ān, the Nihmite," dedicated the altar to the temple.<sup>32</sup> The discovery of this altar is astonishing since, according to Brown, "it predates by almost 1,500 years the Arabic sources cited by the Astons which refer to [a place-name corresponding to *Nahom*]."<sup>33</sup>

### Writing on and Burying Metal Plates

On 21 September 1823, when the angel Moroni appeared to Joseph Smith, "he said there was a book deposited, written upon gold plates, giving an account of the former inhabitants of this continent" (Joseph Smith—History 1:34). Following Moroni's appearance, Joseph went to what was later called the Hill Cumorah and reported: "On the west side of this hill, not far from the top, under a stone of considerable size, lay the plates, deposited in a stone box. This stone was thick and rounding in the middle on the upper side, and thinner towards the edges, so that the middle part of it was visible above the ground, but the edge all around was covered with earth" (Joseph Smith—History 1:51).

A striking parallel to Joseph Smith's receiving the gold plates from a stone box occurred in September 1933, when the German archaeologist Ernst Herzfeld discovered in Persepolis that "two shallow, neatly made stone boxes with [sealed] lids, each containing two square plates of gold and silver, had been sunk into the bedrock beneath



the walls at the corners of . . . the apadana,” the multicol-  
umned audience hall of the palace at Persepolis.”<sup>34</sup> These  
plates “were laid down, probably in the presence of Darius,  
in 516–515 B.C.” and were recovered in perfect condition,  
“the metal shining as the day it was incised.”<sup>35</sup> According  
to Herzfeld:

All these tablets—one gold and one silver from  
Hamadan, two gold and two silver from Persepolis—were  
discovered in situ. . . . The texts of the gold tablets from  
Hamadan and Persepolis vary only in the line arrange-  
ments imposed by different formats. The Persepolis  
tablets underlie the issuance of this “edition,” whose  
unconventional writing [of a particular word] . . .  
shows that all of its copies were created from one and  
the same Urtext in a central office. Darius had under-  
taken simultaneous building projects in Persepolis,  
Susa, and Ecbatana, and the administration of these  
buildings was a unified thing.<sup>36</sup>

This is only one example, among many that could be  
cited, of the burial of metal documents in stone boxes,<sup>37</sup>  
providing evidence not only of the format of the Book of  
Mormon record but also of the manner in which it was  
concealed for some fourteen hundred years.

### **Eyewitnesses of the Translation of the Book of Mormon**

In addition to the Three and Eight Witnesses to the  
Book of Mormon, a steady stream of individuals viewed  
the plates, observed the translation process, and consis-  
tently described that process: members of Joseph’s family,  
members of Emma’s family, even newcomers and strangers.  
The following statements come from these participants in



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TRANSLATION  
PROCESS  
CONSISTENTLY  
DESCRIBED

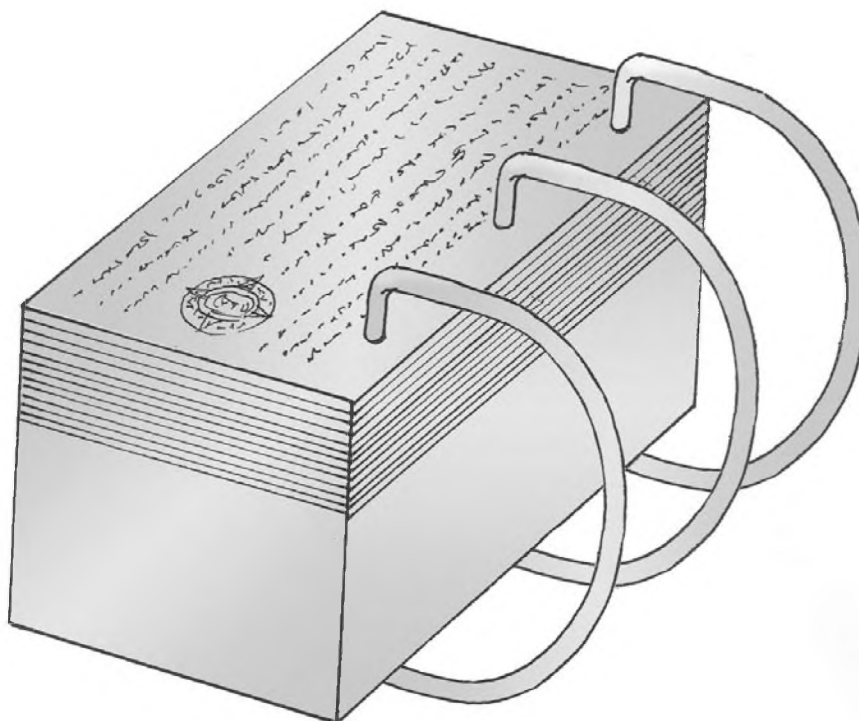
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the translation process—Joseph Smith Jr.; his wife, Emma; and Martin Harris. Significant passages are indicated with italics.

### Joseph Smith

One of the best descriptions of the plates themselves was given by Joseph Smith in his 1842 letter to John Wentworth, editor of the *Chicago Democrat*:

These records were engraven on plates which had the appearance of gold, each plate was six inches wide and eight inches long, and not quite so thick as common tin. They were filled with engravings, in Egyptian characters, and bound together in a volume as the leaves of a book, with three rings running through the whole.



*Based on descriptions by eyewitnesses such as Joseph Smith and David Whitmer, this conjectural reconstruction of the Book of Mormon plates shows how the title page, the last plate written on in the Book of Mormon, could also appear on the first plate in the record. Drawing by Michael Lyon.*

The volume was something near six inches in thickness, a part of which was sealed. The characters on the unsealed part were small, and beautifully engraved. The whole book exhibited many marks of antiquity in its construction, and much skill in the art of engraving. With the records was found a curious instrument, which the ancients called “Urim and Thummim,” which consisted of two transparent stones set in the rim of a bow fastened to a breastplate. Through the medium of the Urim and Thummim I translated the record by the gift and power of God.<sup>38</sup>

### **Emma Smith**

In the latter part of 1827 and the early part of 1828, when the book of Lehi was being translated and Emma was acting as scribe, Joseph translated a passage describing Jerusalem as a walled city and stopped to ask Emma if Jerusalem indeed had walls. In 1856 Emma recalled this incident (which, incidentally, reflects how poorly equipped educationally Joseph Smith was to produce the Book of Mormon on his own):

When my husband was translating the Book of Mormon, I wrote a part of it, as he dictated each sentence, word for word, and when he came to proper names he could not pronounce, or long words, he spelled them out, and while I was writing them, if I made any mistake in spelling, he would stop me and correct my spelling, although it was impossible for him to see how I was writing them down at the time. Even the word Sarah [*sic!*] he could not pronounce at first, but had to spell it, and I would pronounce it for him. When he stopped for any purpose at any time he would, when he commenced again, begin where he left off without any hesitation.<sup>39</sup>

In early 1879 Emma was interviewed by her son Joseph III; her second husband, Major Bidamon; and others. She responded to a number of questions concerning events in the early history of the church:

- Q. *What of the truth of Mormonism?*
- A. I know Mormonism to be the truth; and believe the Church to have been established by divine direction. I have complete faith in it. *In writing for your father I frequently wrote day after day, often sitting at the table close by him, he . . . dictating hour after hour with nothing between us.*
- Q. *Had he not a book or manuscript from which he read, or dictated to you?*
- A. He had neither manuscript nor book to read from.
- Q. *Could he not have had, and you not know it?*
- A. If he had had anything of the kind he could not have concealed it from me.
- Q. *Are you sure that he had the plates at the time you were writing for him?*
- A. The plates often lay on the table without any attempt at concealment, wrapped in a small linen table cloth, which I had given him to fold them in. *I once felt of the plates, as they thus lay on the table, tracing their outline and shape. They seemed to be pliable like thick paper, and would rustle with a metallic sound when the edges were moved by the thumb, as one does sometimes thumb the edges of a book.*
- Q. *Where did father and Oliver Cowdery write?*
- A. Oliver Cowdery and your father wrote in the room where I was at work.
- Q. *Could not father have dictated the Book of Mormon to you, Oliver Cowdery and the others who wrote for him, after having first written it, or having first read it out of some book?*
- A. Joseph Smith . . . could neither write nor dictate a coherent and well-worded letter; let alone dictating a book like the Book of Mormon. And, though I was an active participant in the scenes that transpired,

and was present during the translation of the plates, and had cognizance of things as they transpired, it is marvelous to me, “a marvel and a wonder,” as much so as to any one else.

Q. *I should suppose that you would have uncovered the plates and examined them?*

A. I did not attempt to handle the plates, other than I have told you, nor uncover them to look at them. I was satisfied that it was the work of God, and therefore did not feel it to be necessary to do so.

Q. *(from Major Bidamon): Did Mr. Smith forbid your examining the plates?*

A. I do not think he did. I knew that he had them, and was not specially curious about them. I moved them from place to place on the table, as it was necessary in doing my work.<sup>40</sup>

### **Martin Harris**

Martin Harris aided in the translation of the book of Lehi. Edward Stevenson reported about him:

After continued translation they would become weary, and would go down to the river and exercise by throwing stones out on the river, etc. While so doing on one occasion, Martin found a stone very much resembling the one used for translating, and on resuming their labor of translation, Martin put in [its] place the stone that he had found. He said that the Prophet remained silent, unusually and intently gazing in darkness, no traces of the usual sentences appearing. Much surprised, Joseph exclaimed, “Martin! What is the matter? All is as dark as Egypt!” Martin’s countenance betrayed him, and the Prophet asked Martin why he had done so. Martin said, to stop the mouths of fools, who had told him that the Prophet had learned those sentences and was merely repeating them, etc.<sup>41</sup>



These and other independent witnesses to the translation provide modern researchers with significant information about the Book of Mormon plates. These firsthand witnesses are an indigestible lump in the throats of those who deny that the plates existed and try to explain the experience as an example of “collective hysteria.”

### **The “Garment of Joseph” and Parallels from the Ancient World**

The great Nephite leader Moroni, when attempting to rouse his brethren to defend themselves against Amalickiah and the Lamanites, reminded them of their link to Joseph of Egypt when he said: “Behold, we are a remnant of the seed of Jacob; yea, we are a remnant of the seed of Joseph, whose coat was rent by his brethren into many pieces. . . . Yea, let us preserve our liberty as a remnant of Joseph; yea, let us remember the words of Jacob, before his death, for behold, he saw that a part of the remnant of the coat of Joseph was preserved and had not decayed. And he said—Even as this remnant of garment of my son hath been preserved, so shall a remnant of the seed of my son be preserved by the hand of God, and be taken unto himself, while the remainder of the seed of Joseph shall perish, even as the remnant of his garment” (Alma 46:23–24).<sup>42</sup>



The “coat of Joseph” had a venerable legendary “history.” It was first given by God to Adam in the Garden of Eden, who passed it on through the generations from Seth to Noah. Noah wore it when he sacrificed on an altar, and he carried with him in the ark. But the garment was also seen as having power that might be misused by those into whose hands it fell. Ham stole it and gave it to his son Cush, who later gave it to Nimrod. Nimrod used

this garment to obtain power and glory among men and as a means to deceive people and to gain unconquerable strength. He also used the garment while hunting, thereby causing all the birds and other animals to fall down in honor and respect before him. As a result, the people made him king over them. He first became king of Babylon and “was soon able through skillful and subtle speeches to bring the whole of mankind to the point of accepting him as the absolute ruler of the earth.”<sup>43</sup> Appropriately, it was the garment that finally cost Nimrod his life. According to one account, Nimrod went forth with his people on a hunt at a time when he was jealous of the great hunter Esau. As Nimrod and two attendants approached Esau, Esau hid, cut off Nimrod’s head, and killed the two attendants.

Having obtained the garment, Esau either buried it or sold it to Jacob along with his birthright. Numbers *Rabbah* relates that Jacob desired to offer sacrifice but could not because he was not the firstborn and did not have the birthright, part of which consisted of Adam’s garment. It was for this reason that Jacob bought the birthright from Esau, who said, “There is no afterlife, death ends everything, and the inheritance will do me no good,” and willingly let Jacob have the garment, along with his birthright. Here Muslim and Jewish traditions overlap. In the *Rasā’il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā* (Epistles of the brethren of purity), Esau’s sale of the birthright to Jacob was symbolized by the transfer of the sacred garment. Again, according to the Jewish scholar Micha Josef bin Gorion, “Esau’s garment in which Rebekah clothed him, namely those made by God for Adam and Eve, had now rightfully become Jacob’s, and Isaac recognized their paradisiacal fragrance.”<sup>44</sup>

In a parallel tradition the early church father Hippolytus says that when Isaac laid his hands on Jacob, at the same time feeling Esau's skin garment, Isaac knew that Jacob was the legitimate heir to the blessing—the garment proved that, for Esau would hardly have parted with the garment if he had been worthy of it. Jacob later gave this garment to Joseph. This garment, a Jewish commentary on Genesis 37:3 informs us, was the high priest's tunic.<sup>45</sup> Louis Ginzberg observes that, in the original Hebrew of that passage, “*pargud mesuyyar* is a paraphrase of *passim*, which accordingly is not to be translated ‘a coat of many colors,’ but ‘an upper garment in which figures are woven.’”<sup>46</sup>

According to legendary traditions collected by the Muslim theologian al-Thaʿlabī, Jacob recognized the same fragrance in the garment of Joseph when it was brought to him by Joseph's brothers and at the same time knew by the marks in it that it was the identical garment that he had received from his brother and that Adam had received from God in the garden of Eden. Earlier, when the jealous brothers took the garment away and lowered Joseph into the cistern, Gabriel immediately appeared and brought him a garment so he would never be without protection. The *Testament of Zebulon* says that Joseph's brothers took from Joseph his garment of honor and put on him the garment of the slave,<sup>47</sup> a reminder of traditions about two portions of Joseph's garment, one that decayed and the other that was miraculously preserved.<sup>48</sup>

Why is the story of Joseph and the covenant-making ceremony in Alma 46:21–24 significant? Because it squares with the ancient Near Eastern stories of sacred garments of the patriarchs and patterns of covenant making. Notably, the use of simile curses in that passage (e.g., “he [God]

may cast us at the feet of our enemies, even as we have cast our garments at thy [Moroni's] feet to be trodden under foot, if we shall fall into transgression," v. 22) follows a venerable tradition in the ancient Near East.<sup>49</sup> Further, in mentioning Joseph's garment the Book of Mormon alludes to an ancient tradition in which a patriarch passed on to his successor garments symbolic of his patriarchal authority. Both traditions had a heritage going back to the earliest times, a heritage unknown to Joseph Smith at the time of the translation of the Book of Mormon but with which we have subsequently become well acquainted.

#### NOTES

1. I have drawn materials for this and the following section from my study, "King, Coronation, and Covenant in Mosiah 1–6," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 209–19.

2. See Viktor Korosec, *Hethitische Staatsverträge: Ein Beitrag zu ihrer juristischen Wertung* (Leipzig: Weicher, 1931).

3. See Elias Bickerman, "Couper une alliance," *Archives d'histoire du droit oriental* 5 (1950–51): 26–54; reprinted in his *Studies in Jewish and Christian History* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 1:1–32.

4. See George Mendenhall, "Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition," *Biblical Archaeologist* 17 (1954): 66; and George Mendenhall, "Puppy and Lettuce in Northwest-Semitic Covenant Making," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 133 (February 1954): 26–30.

5. See John A. Tvedtnes, "King Benjamin and the Feast of Tabernacles," in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 2:197–237.

6. Arthur Hocart's *Kingship* (London: Oxford University Press, 1927) is one of the pioneering cross-cultural investigations of the ideology of kingship and of coronation ceremonies.

7. Brett L. Holbrook describes the symbolic aspects of the sword in ancient Israel and among the Nephites in "The Sword of Laban as a Symbol of Divine Authority and Kingship," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/1 (1993): 39–72.

8. On the symbolism of the orb, or *Reichsapfel*, in the ancient, medieval, and modern world, see Percy E. Schramm, *Sphaira, Globus, Reichsapfel: Wanderung und Wandlung eines Herrschaftszeichens von Caesar zu Elisabeth II: Ein Beitrag zum "Nachleben" der Antike* (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1958).

9. I have been assisted in the preparation of this section by C. Wilfred Griggs's excellent article "The Tree of Life in Ancient Cultures," *Ensign*, June 1988, 26–31; also published as a FARMS reprint.

10. The tree of life is frequently mentioned elsewhere in the Book of Mormon, including 1 Nephi 15:22, 28, 36; 2 Nephi 2:15; Alma 5:34, 62; 12:21, 23, 26; 32:40; 42:2, 3, 5, 6.

11. Geo Widengren, *The King and the Tree of Life in Ancient Near Eastern Religion* (Uppsala: Lundequistka Bokhandeln, 1951), 6.

12. *Ibid.*, 15.

13. Bernard Chapira, "Légendes bibliques," *Revue des études juives* 69 (1919): 105 n. 4.

14. Widengren, *The King and the Tree of Life*, 7.

15. Ephraim A. Speiser, ed. and trans., "Epic of Gilgamesh," in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. James B. Pritchard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 96, tablet XI, lines 239–44.

16. Edmund Hermsen, *Lebensbaumsymbolik im alten Ägypten* (Cologne: Brill, 1981), 3.

17. See Griggs, "Tree of Life," 28–29.

18. I have been greatly aided in the preparation of this section by the material in John A. Tvedtnes, "The Hebrew Back-

ground of the Book of Mormon,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Books and FARMS, 1991), 77–91.

19. For this section I have made use of materials from John Gee, “A Note on the Name *Nephi*,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1/1 (1992): 189–92; and Stephen D. Ricks and John A. Tvedtnes, “The Hebrew Origin of Some Book of Mormon Place Names,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6/2 (1997): 255–59.

20. Günther Vittmann, “Zur Lesung des Königsnamens P<sup>3</sup>ⁿkhj” (On the reading of the royal name P<sup>3</sup>-ⁿkhj), *Orientalia* 43 (1974): 12–16. In a personal communication, John Gee informs me that the reading of the royal name as P<sup>3</sup>-ⁿkhj is disputed—Vittmann’s article itself is part of that dispute—but that the name is clearly attested in nonroyal contexts at an earlier period.

21. Frank L. Benz, *Personal Names in the Phoenician and Punic Inscriptions: A Catalog, Grammatical Study, and Glossary of Elements* (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1972), 192; compare Hermann Ranke, *Die ägyptischen Personennamen* (Glückstadt: Augustin, 1935–77), 1:390. Günther Vittmann, “Zu den in den phönikischen Inschriften enthaltenen ägyptischen Personennamen,” *Göttinger Miszellen* 113 (1989): 95.

22. Walter E. Crum, *A Coptic Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1939), 240.

23. Gee, “Note on the Name *Nephi*,” 191. For further discussion of the name *Nephi*, see John Gee, “Four Suggestions on the Origin of the Name *Nephi*,” in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon: The FARMS Updates of the 1990s*, ed. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1999), 1–5; and Paul Y. Hoskisson, “*Nephi*,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9/2 (2000): 64–65.

24. See Arthur E. Cowley, ed. and trans., *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1923).

25. Jeffery R. Chadwick, “*Sariah* in the Elephantine Papyri,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/2 (1993): 196. For further discussion of the name *Sariah*, see “Seeking Agreement on the

Meaning of Book of Mormon Names” and John A. Tvedtnes, John Gee, and Matthew Roper, “Book of Mormon Names Attested in Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9/1 (2000): 28–39, 43.

26. Hugh Nibley, “Lehi in the Desert,” *Improvement Era*, June 1950, 517; compare *Lehi in the Desert and the World of the Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1952), 90–91; also in *Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 79.

27. See Lynn M. Hilton and Hope Hilton, *In Search of Lehi’s Trail* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 94; also in *Ensign*, September 1976, 33–54, and October 1976, 34–63.

28. See Ross T. Christensen, “The Place Called Nahom,” *Ensign*, August 1978, 73.

29. S. Kent Brown, “‘The Place Which Was Called Nahom’: New Light from Ancient Yemen,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/1 (1999): 67; compare Warren P. Aston and Michaela Knoth Aston, *In the Footsteps of Lehi* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994); and Warren P. and Michaela Knoth Aston, “‘The Place Which Was Called Nahom’: The Validation of an Ancient Reference to Southern Arabia” (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1991).

30. Brown, “Nahom,” 67.

31. *Ibid.*, 68.

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Ibid.*

34. See Richard S. Ellis, *Foundation Deposits in Ancient Mesopotamia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 104.

35. J. P. Barden, “Xerxes a Doughty Warrior until He Met the Greeks,” *University of Chicago Magazine*, February 1936, 25.

36. Ernst E. Herzfeld, *Altpersische Inschriften*, Erster Ergänzungsband zu den archäologischen Mitteilungen aus Iran (Berlin: Reimer, 1938), 18–19, cited in English translation in H. Curtis Wright, “Ancient Burials of Metal Documents in Stone Boxes,” in *By Study and Also by Faith*, ed. Lundquist and Ricks, 2:282.

37. For a full treatment see Wright, “Metal Documents in Stone Boxes,” 273–334.

38. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 4:537.

39. As quoted in Edmund C. Briggs, “A Visit to Nauvoo in 1856,” *Journal of History* 9 (January 1916): 454.

40. *Saints’ Herald* 26 (1 October 1879): 289–90, emphasis added.

41. Edward Stevenson’s account of Harris’s Sunday morning lecture in Salt Lake City, 4 September 1870, published in the *Deseret News* of 30 November 1881 and in the *LDS Millennial Star* 44 (6 February 1882): 86–87.

42. I have drawn materials for this section from my study “The Garment of Adam in Jewish, Muslim, and Christian Tradition,” in *Temples of the Ancient World*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1994), 704–39.

43. Bernhard Beer, *Das Leben Abraham’s nach Auffassung der jüdischen Sage* (Leipzig: Leiner, 1859), 7.

44. Micha Josef bin Gorion, *Die sagen der Juden* (Frankfurt: Rütten and Loening, 1914), 2:371.

45. *Keli Yaqar* on Genesis 37:3.

46. Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1967–68), 5:329 n. 43.

47. *Testament of Zebulon* 4:11.

48. *Al-Tha‘labī, Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā’* (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī wa-Awlāduhu, A.H. 1345), 80.

49. Mark Morrise, “Simile Curses in the Ancient Near East, Old Testament, and Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/1 (1993): 124–38.