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The Twig of the Cedar

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Abstract: This article relates Ezekiel 17:22-24 to Mulek's transplantation to America. The author also feels that a Mexican tradition of the arrival of an immigrant group by sea may also be related to Mulek.

The Twig of the Cedar

by John L. Sorenson

MORMONS HAVE always maintained interest in Bible scriptures which prophesy of the Book of Mormon. Nearly all of us are familiar with the phrase from Isaiah, "a voice from the dust," or with Ezekiel's "stick of Joseph." Yet one Old Testament passage has been strangely neglected, although Orson Pratt noted its meaning long ago. The prophecy is in Ezekiel, chapter 17; Mulek is its subject:

Thus saith the Lord God; I will also take of the highest branch of the high cedar, and will set it; I will crop off from the top of his young twigs a tender one, and will plant it upon an high mountain and eminent:

In the mountain of the height of Israel will I plant it: and it shall bring forth boughs, and bear fruit, and be a goodly cedar: and under it shall dwell all fowl of every wing; in the shadow of the branches thereof shall they dwell,

And all the trees of the field shall know that I the Lord have brought down the high tree, have exalted the low tree, have dried up the green tree, and have made the dry tree to flourish: I the Lord have spoken and have done it. (Ezekiel 17:22-24.)

Just who was Mulek? The Book of Mormon says very little about him: he was a son of Zedekiah, last king of the Jews, who, with companions, came to the same land as the party of Lehi. Both Mulek and Ezekiel's prophecy first lived in the same tense age of the ancient Jewish world.

In 598 B.C. eighteen-year-old Jehoiachin had reigned as king of the land of Judah for only three months when Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, sent an army to besiege Jerusalem in reprisal for a rebellion of Jehoiachin's late father. The youthful king, with most of the royal house, plus important citizens of Jerusalem, was carried captive to Babylon of the "Land between the Rivers." Ezekiel, too, was one of the exiles. Mean-

while, a new puppet ruler was installed on the throne of Judah by the masters from the east. He was Mattaniah, renamed Zedekiah, himself but twenty-one.

These facts Nephi did not record on the small plates of the Book of Mormon. He simply begins his story "in the commencement of the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah." (1 Nephi 1:4.) That same year Lehi and his family fled the Holy Land to make their way across Arabia to the sea and finally to the promised land—America.

The Prophet Jeremiah tried vainly to warn stubborn Zedekiah of the danger in his rebellious policy toward Babylon. Egypt, he insisted, was a worn-out, useless ally who could do nothing to help defend the Jews in a showdown of force. Of course the prophet was right. After nine years of uncertain reign, Zedekiah saw his capital besieged by another great army of his master, Nebuchadnezzar. Then in the second year of hungry, helpless entrapment inside the walls of Jerusalem, hope came to an end. The king himself tried to slip out and through the enemy cordon. When he failed, "they slew the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes, and put out the eyes of Zedekiah . . . and carried him to Babylon." (II Kings 25:7.)

That finale was enacted in 587 or 586 B.C., while Lehi's party was still en route to America. (See 2 Ne. 1:4.) Only four years before, Ezekiel had said harsh things about Zedekiah. The prophet favored firm Jewish support of captive monarch Jehoiachin. Zedekiah was characterized by the prophet as a power-grabbing covenant breaker whose fearful punishment would yet come, as indeed it did. Ezekiel (17:1-21) tells with forceful

imagery that side of the story. The prophecy we are concerned with follows in verses 22 through 24.

It is easy to see why the Book of Mormon and its people were on Ezekiel's mind. He lived in an age of terrible crisis for Israel, when his people were being dispersed over the earth as never before. In Ezekiel's own lifetime two small bands were led out of the country, later to meet in America. In one sense, then, both Ezekiel 17 and 37 were utterances on a vital problem that weighed on his mind then and which would enlighten future generations.

The writer of II Kings records that Nebuchadnezzar "slew the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes." The Book of Mormon, however, informs us that one of these sons escaped. Five centuries later the prophet, Alma, said: "Will ye say that the sons of Zedekiah were not slain, all except it were Mulek? Yea, and do ye not behold that the seed of Zedekiah are with us, and they were driven out of the land of Jerusalem?" (Hel. 8:21.)

That one son escaped is not too surprising, after all. Remember, Zedekiah was only thirty-two at his capture. All his children must have been pre-adolescent. Mulek might very well have been a disguised infant whom devoted servants spirited out of the Babylonian grasp. Possibly he was in the company of the "king's daughters" when they finally reached Egypt along with Jeremiah. (See Jer. 41:10; 43:6.)

The Book of Mormon says little of Mulek's party crossing the ocean. Omni (16) reports that "they journeyed in the wilderness, and were brought by the hand of the Lord across the great waters, into the land where Mosiah discovered them." That was the land of Zarahemla.

Dr. Hugh Nibley has pointed out that many Egyptian elements enter the background of the Book of Mormon and that these may be due to experiences in Lehi's own life. Another possible explanation is that these elements made the trip with Mulek and company. For example, Giddonah, a proper name in the Book of Mormon, is read by Dr. Nibley as an Egyptianized version of the name of the famous Phoenician port, Sidon.¹ If we note, too, that the naming of the major river of the land southward in the promised land, the Sidon, was by the Mulekites,² in all probability, the name of the Phoenician

port takes on added significance. Possibly Mulek was carried across the ocean by a Sidonian ship diverted from the age-old Egyptian trade. But this is speculation. The fact remains that Mulek did arrive safely.

Helaman informs us (6:10) that Mulek first came to the land northward in his company's voyage from the Old World. But, Amaleki, one of the early Nephite record-keepers (Omni 15-16), specifically states that Mulek's people "were brought by the hand of the Lord across the great waters, into the land where Mosiah discovered them; and they had dwelt there from that time forth." In Alma's extensive aside on geography (Alma 22, especially verses 30 and 31) he says, the land northward "... was discovered by the people of Zarahemla, it being the place of their first landing.

"And they came from there up into the south wilderness." So the party of Mulek, unlike Lehi, was not satisfied with their first landfall as a place for settlement. For some reason they pushed on "up" to Zarahemla land.

Now, Ezekiel had looked ahead prophetically to see a series of events that sound much the same, despite their being described in figurative language. He saw a stately cedar tree, representing the royal house of Judah, and what was to befall it.

"Thus saith the Lord God; I will also take of the highest branch of the high cedar, and will set it; I will crop off from the top of his young twigs a tender one, and will plant it upon an high mountain and eminent: ..." (Ezek. 17:22.) Previous verses clearly show the meaning: a child of Zedekiah, the king, was to be "cropped" from the family tree and "planted" in another land.

The evidence that this "tender twig" was Mulek of the Book of Mormon is made more convincing by a revealing play on words involving his name. Latter-day Saints who have paid any attention to the matter have assumed, logically, that the Hebrew root of Mulek's name must be *mālak*, to reign, whence *melek*, king, and many other forms of related sense. This however leaves the vowels *u* and *e* unexplained. Such internal vowels are most significant in Hebrew words. Assuming that the spelling of the name as given by Joseph Smith reasonably reproduces the distinctions of the ancient language, it becomes clear that *Mulek* is probably what is termed a *Pu'al* form of the Hebrew verb, and therefore would be read as passive. The passive of *mālak*, "ruled" or "reigned over," would hardly be a name to be retained by any deposed prince! The name must have some other meaning.

If we read the name as *muleq* (with a final letter *qoph*), the meaning would become "to break off, nip off." (This particular variant of this root occurs nowhere in our Old Testament, but neither do thousands of other common ancient Hebrew words.) To the Semitic mind with its love of word play this situation would be perfect. The faithful followers of Prince Mulek would have been reminded at every mention of his name that he was both their king and also the plucked-off twig of Ezekiel's prophecy. Mulek could in this way remain a symbol of prophecy fulfilled in the grim fall of Jerusalem, as well as of prophecy of promise in the transplanting of Judah's ruling house to another land.

The Book of Mormon account thus agrees with the name; a prince of Judah was plucked from the royal tree to grow in a distant high and eminent land. All this was the work of the Lord, not of man. Note that while Ezekiel spoke of Jehoiachin's being "cropped off the top of his young twigs" by a "great eagle" or nation (17:3-4, 12), by contrast, the later twig, Mulek, is said specifically to be the subject of the Lord's plucking action (v. 22). Omni (16) agrees emphatically in stating that Mulek was "brought by the hand of the Lord" across the ocean. Whoever sailed the ship for the adventurous prince doesn't necessarily deserve the major credit for a successful voyage; he had divine help all the way.

Ezekiel also prophesied that Mulek, the twig, was to be planted "in the mountain of the height of Israel." Father Jacob's deathbed blessing on Joseph comes to mind in response to this phrasing. (Gen. 49:22-26.) Jacob promised there upon his favorite son an added blessing, beyond those which he had inherited from his father, Isaac, and grandfather, Abraham. This special heritage of his, Jacob said, extended "unto the utmost bound of the everlasting hills." It was a blessing of a rich land. Lehi's descendants, of Joseph's lineage, fulfilled in the promised land of America both Jacob's blessing and Moses' addition to it in the same vein. (Dcut. 33:13-17.)

Mulek's destination then was the land "of the ancient mountains," "the lasting hills" or "the height of Israel." Was this why Mulek's party kept moving into the wilderness?

(Continued on page 338)



—Religious News Service Photo

A giant cedar, proud monarch of the mountain slopes of ancient Lebanon.

The Twig of the Cedar

(Continued from page 331)

Were they seeking "an high mountain and eminent" as Ezekiel said?

Let us turn now to a fascinating fragment of early traditional history in Mesoamerica—southern Mexico and northern Central America. This was the place "a few hundred miles north and south where the Nephites built their cities" as the Prophet Joseph apparently wrote in 1842.³ In that rich, exotic locale ancient American civilization reached its zenith.

The traditions of the native peoples of the area are full of pitfalls for historical interpreters, but they are also rich with suggestive parallels to the Book of Mormon. Take Don Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl's accounts. A century after Cortez, this Europeanized descendant of Mexican native royalty compiled a traditional history of his people using documents from pre-Spanish times which have since been lost, though available to him then. He speaks of several peoples who arrived to settle in Mexico anciently. Of one of these he says: "Those who possessed this new world in this third age were the Ulmecas and Xicalancas; and according to what is found in their histories, they came in ships or barques from the East. . . ."⁴

But more specifically of interest is the information recorded by avid researcher Father Bernardino Sahagun, back in the sixteenth century in central Mexico. He wrote that "concerning the origin of this people the account which the old people give is that they came by sea from toward the north, and it is certain that they came in some vessels of wood. . . . The first people [which he mentions] to settle this land came from toward Florida, and they came along the coast and disembarked at the port of Panuco, which they call Panco, which means, 'place where those who crossed the water arrived.'"⁵ Other accounts of this immigration also have these ships touch at Panuco, near modern Tampico on the Gulf of Mexico northeast of Mexico City.⁶

He continues: "And from that port they commenced traveling along the coast of the sea, viewing the snowy peaks and the volcanoes, until they arrived at the province of Guatemala. . . ."⁷ In Sahagun's day Guatemala included most of the ter-

ritory south of the narrow isthmus or neck of Tehuantepec, southern Mexico. The picture is then of seafaring immigrants passing up good landing spots in the lands north of that narrow neck only to move into the land southward from the isthmus in search of a home. This brought them into the ruin-rich area of which the Prophet Joseph Smith said: "[the Nephites and Mulckites] lived about the narrow neck of land, which now embraces Central America, with all the cities that can be found. Central America, or Guatemala . . . once embraced several hundred miles of territory from north to south—The city of Zarahemla . . . stood upon this land. . . ."⁸ And the city and land of Zarahemla was the settling place of Mulek and his party.

Why did Mulek's party pass up the land northward to seek out the region of Zarahemla in which to settle? The Book of Mormon does not say. But Ezekiel—and perhaps Father Sahagun—tell us why.

The *padre* writes further, "These people came looking for 'an earthly paradise . . . and they settled near the highest mountains they found.' Furthermore, 'It seems that they or their ancestors had an oracle concerning this matter' of where to settle. They bore as a name Tamoanchan, which means 'we are seeking our home.'"⁹

Note well now: Ezekiel foresaw a prince of Judah crossing the ocean to

OLD BARN AT MORNING

By Christie Jeffries

SUNLIGHT slants through the sagging door
To form a mosaic on the floor,
Where white of pine and gray of dust
Intermingle with gold and rust.

The stall doors creak in the morning wind;
The oaken posts rise, tall and twined,
To the shadowy loft where spiders weave,
And swallows build beneath the eave.

The sunlight moves like a thing alive;
From the cupola the swallows dive,
Circle, sweep, then come to rest
Upon the ridgepole's bony breast.

The roof, snow-whitened, turns to black
As melting flakes form a crystal track
To the thirsting earth, and a steady drip
Sings that winter has loosed his grip.

settle in a rich "mountain of Israel." Mulek's party did just that, passing by extensive lands to be had for the taking so that they could go "up" to the land of Zarahemla to settle. Further, we are told that Mulek's people "had dwelt there from that time forth" (Omni 16), while Sahagun's settlers "traveled inland and founded a town named Tamoanchan, where they lived peacefully for a long time."

Our most eminent scholar of ancient Maya writing and language has recently shown that the name *Tamoanchan* actually came from the Maya tongue of Chiapas state in southern Mexico. There its meaning is best given as "land of rain and mist, the land of abundance" and flowers.¹⁰ The name *Zarahemla* probably means land of "abundant seeds" or crops.¹¹ The descendants of Mulek and his party were known as the "people of Zarahemla." The immigrants of Sahagun's account were known as the people of Tamoanchan. In short, both might easily be encompassed in the name "people of the land of abundance," for such is the essential meaning of the names. Remember what Moses had said of Joseph's distant promised land? "Blessed of the Lord be his land, for the precious things of heaven. . . ."

"And for the precious fruits brought forth by the sun, and for the precious things put forth by the moon,

"And for the chief things of the ancient mountains. . . ." (Deut. 33:13-15.)

Rather unusual to our western minds, or at least illogical, is the symbolism Ezekiel adopts of representing a people by means of a tree, here a cedar. This is regular practice in Semitic literature. Jacob's allegory of the olive tree is a fine example. (Jacob 5, 6.) Do we find a Mesoamerican parallel to this symbolism to accord with the impressive similarities we have already noted in the accounts of the immigrants to ancient Mexico? Indeed we do.

The same Chiapas Maya who gave us the name *Tamoanchan* believed "most certainly that in the roots of that ceiba tree [which was in the center of each of their communities] was where their lineage came from" according to Nuñez de la Vega.¹² The Mixtecs to the north of the Isthmus a bit (but linguistically related to those already spoken of) had a "governing family [who] were said to be

(Continued on page 341)

THE IMPROVEMENT ERA

The Twig of the Cedar

(Continued from page 338)

descended from two youths born from two majestic trees." The neighboring Zapotecs too included "lords of ancient lineage [who] were produced by the trees of greatest size and shade." And as Paul Henning, among the first of professional Mormon archaeologists, pointed out many years ago, the names of Indian tribes of Mesoamerica such as Zapotec, Chichimec, Quiché, and Cakchiquel all refer to trees in some way.¹³

The traditions cited demonstrate vividly the persistent nature of the symbolism Ezekiel used. Mulek was "planted" in the new rich land of mountains, and flourished there. (Compare Omni 17; Mosiah 25:2.) The twig did truly "bring forth boughs, and bear fruit," and was "a goodly cedar." (Ezek. 17:23.)¹⁴

Another time and place may be better to discuss the oracle stone which the ancient immigrants Saha-gun spoke of brought with them. (It sounds remarkably like the Urim and Thummim.) But even without further details, the number of parallels between the scriptural account and the records of ancient America from secular sources is impressive. Let us summarize them.

Ezekiel prophesied of a young child of King Zedekiah who was to be "cropped" from the tree of Israel's royalty by the Lord in order to be planted in the "mountain of Israel," there to flourish. The Book of Mormon tells us of Mulek ("nipped off"), son of Zedekiah, saved from death while still a child, then brought by the Lord across the ocean, first to the land northward, then southward and up to Zarahemla ("abundance") where the colonists lived long in a rich land.

From ancient Mesoamerica we hear of a seaborne party of immigrants from the Old World coming first to a northern land, then moving south to settle in an earthly paradise near a high mountain, which they were guided to by a prophecy. The name of the place they settled meant "land of abundance." They dwelt there long and multiplied. A number of Indian groups long located immediately adjacent to this narrow isthmus of Mexico south had a belief that their ancestors were named after or sprang from trees.

(Concluded on following page)

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"Thy Neighbour as Thyself"

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THE PRINCIPLES of life were never more clearly set forth than when Jesus was confronted with the query,

Master, which is the great commandment in the law?

Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.

This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love *thy neighbour as thyself*. (Matt. 22:36-39, italics author's.)

In recognition of the merits of these profound recommendations the Boy Scout organization has embodied in its basic code the Scout oath—a pledge, "to help other people at all times." This basic principle of Christianity has become fundamental to scouting.

During the dinner hour at leadership training courses offered scoutmasters of the Arrowhead Council of central Illinois, the discussion turned to the National Boy Scout Jamboree held at Santa Ana, California, in July 1953. A scoutmaster in charge of a troop of boys from the Arrowhead Council had the attention of the thirty men at the leading table while he related the difficulties encountered

on the trek from Illinois to California and back.

On the return trip through California, Nevada, and into Utah, they arrived in Salt Lake City during a pouring rainstorm, after fourteen hours of weary traveling in a bus loaded with thirty tired and hungry boys. In the words of the scoutmaster: "We were to have camped for the night in the mountains east of the city. Several miles up the canyon road our bus stopped—it did not have sufficient power for the mountain roads. It was impossible to turn the bus around; it was necessary to back the bus down the road for about a mile while the boys directed traffic in the rain. A city park was suggested as a possible camping place where we could spend the night. The custodian there must have been tired of seeing Boy Scouts or others wishing to use the facilities for camping, for we were not made to feel welcome.

"Just then two Latter-day Saints drove up and had with them a large box of cookies intended for a group using the rain shelter in the park. To our astonishment the cookies were given to us, and, more important, a promise was made for a place to sleep. Our boys were invited to the Bryan

Ward Chapel where we were permitted to use the recreational hall for a place to roll out our sleeping bags. After a comfortable night sheltered from the rain, we were most pleasantly surprised when the women of the ward prepared a big breakfast, giving the boys all they could eat and all the milk they could drink. Then they showed us the city and made certain we could find our way up the canyon road without further difficulty. The Latter-day Saints live the oath of scouting—to help other people at all times."

For a time the discussion turned from the details of the trip. The scoutmaster had been impressed by President McKay who had addressed the assembly at the jamboree. The conference chairman remarked, "The Mormon Church is a bulwark of scouting." The field executive for the Arrowhead Council remembered his aunt who was living among the Latter-day Saints in Challis, Idaho. "Fine people," she had commented. The production manager for a large mid-western business concern recalled two boys in Champaign, Illinois, who were missionaries for the Church. "Boys about six feet tall, conservatively dressed, and as clean-cut in appearance as anyone I have seen." They had talked to him personally.

My emotions were difficult to conceal. I rejoiced in the thought that my Eagle trail had been in the mountains of Utah. How can we better teach the gospel of Jesus Christ than by our daily good turn "*thy neighbour as thyself*!"

The Twig of the Cedar

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Some minds may be able to see in this elaborate series of parallels only the mysterious force of coincidence. But Latter-day Saints need not adopt such explanations. We have a surer witness now than ever that Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon by the power of God; and for the benefit of those without that witness in their hearts, the external testimony in support of the Nephite scripture grows continually.

NOTES

¹H. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert and the*

World of the Jaredites, 25-6; 1952. Bookcraft, Salt Lake City.

²The name *Mulekite* does not occur in the Nephite record, but by analogy and tradition it has come to be used in LDS literature to refer to the people of Zarahemla and might as well be retained.

³*Times and Seasons*, Vol. 3, pp. 915, 927; 1842. Nauvoo.

⁴*Obras Historicas de Don Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl*, Chavero ed., Vol. I, 19, 1952; M. Hunter and Ferguson, *Ancient America and the Book of Mormon*, 123ff., 1950. Kolob, Oakland.

⁵Bernardino Sahagun, *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España*, Vol. I, 2, 13; II, 299-300, 1946. Edit. Nueva España, Mexico.

⁶E.g. Torquemada, *Monarquia Indiana*, Vol. I, 254ff, 1938. Mexico.

⁷Sahagun, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, 34; Hunter and Ferguson, *op. cit.*, 124.

⁸*Times and Seasons*, *op. cit.*

⁹Sahagun, *op. cit.*

¹⁰J. E. S. Thompson, *Maya Hieroglyphic Writing: Introduction*. Carnegie Inst. Wash., Publ. 589, 115, 1950. Washington.

¹¹Cf. Hunter and Ferguson, *op. cit.*, 151-2.

¹²P. Henning, *Apuntes sobre la historia del chalchihuitl en America*, *Mem. Soc. Alzate*, Vol. 31, 29-46, 1911. Mexico.

¹³Henning, *op. cit.*, 42f.

¹⁴Interesting is the possible relation of the name to Molech, a pagan Palestinian god to whom children were sacrificed (cf. Jer. 7:31) at Jerusalem in Zedekiah's day, and to *malqosh*, the spring rains. The apparent linkages of rain ritual, infant sacrifice, and rulership in Mesoamerica suggests that the Jewish prince's name may have meant more things to his descendants than to us!