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## Renewed Latter-day Saint Interest in the Phoenicians

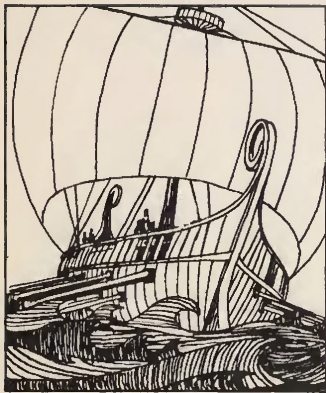
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**Abstract:** New evidence reveals Phoenician contact with the New World between 1000 to 500 B.C. Phoenician inscriptions record in remarkable detail the voyages of mariners, pinpointing both departure and arrival dates and places. Christensen hypothesizes that the guardian(s) of Mulek may have asked Phoenician friends to aid in their escape from the Babylonians.



## Renewed Latter day Saint Interest in The Phoenicians

By Dr. Ross T. Christensen


Illustrated by Jerry Pulsipher

● Members of the Church are no doubt aware of a number of recent attempts to establish the reality of transoceanic contacts between the Old World and the New prior to Columbus.

The most highly publicized of these attempts may have been the epic voyages, from Morocco on the Atlantic coast of Africa to the island of Barbados off the north coast of South America, of the intrepid Norwegian mariner and scientist, Thor Heyerdahl, in reed boats christened the *Ra'* (1969) and *Ra' II* (1970). You will no doubt remember Heyerdahl's 1947 voyage of the *Kon Tiki* in which he demonstrated the feasibility of crossing the Pacific in a vessel fashioned to imitate those known to have plied

the west coast of South America at the coming of the Spaniards. His experiments of 1969 and 1970 now make it clear that ancient civilized peoples of the Mediterranean area were able to cross the Atlantic to the Americas in vessels fashioned after those illustrated in wall paintings of ancient Egyptian tombs. But other efforts to investigate the presumed crossings of ancient man are also worthy of note. A symposium on transoceanic contacts was held as a special feature of the 1968 annual meeting of the Society for American Archaeology in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Most of the 28 papers listed to be read at the symposium bore directly on the question of contact between the Old and New Worlds, across

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(New Evidence on Pre-Columbian Crossings  
to the Ancient New World)

either the Atlantic Ocean or the Pacific. Such subjects as the following were presented: boats and rafts; transoceanic travels of maize (corn), beans, squash, coconuts, sweet potatoes, cotton, and gourds, and of chickens and pottery; Vinland; Quetzalcoatl; and the controversy between Diffusionism and Independent Inventionism.

One of the most significant papers was read by a Latter-day Saint, Dr. John L. Sorenson, who listed 140 specific trait correspondences and grouped them together into 21 major categories. His conclusion: ". . . to a significant degree Mesoamerican civilization had roots in the Near East."

Evidence at present suggests that the principal agents of pre-Columbian contact between the two hemispheres may have been the Phoenicians. Hence, some scholars have awakened to a keen

interest in the Phoenician civilization and an intense curiosity about evidence favoring ancient transatlantic crossings.

Latter-day Saints also should find this development interesting, from both the biblical and the Book of Mormon viewpoints. There is a good possibility, in fact, that the Mulekites of the latter scripture were largely Phoenician in their ethnic origin.

Just who were the Phoenicians, and how did they relate to the peoples of the Bible and the Book of Mormon? The Phoenician civilization was Semitic, and its original speech was identical with ancestral Hebrew. Its homeland lay along the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea from northern Palestine to a point opposite the island of Cyprus. Actually, they were one of the peoples that lived in the area known as Canaan. Hence, at

a point in their history they were identified and called Canaanites. Today the people of Lebanon are probably their purest descendants. Although Arabic in speech because of the Moslem conquest of the seventh century A.D., the Lebanese are nevertheless becoming aware that they are really Phoenicians.

There are numerous references in the Bible to the Phoenicians. The most useful passages are found in the books of Kings, Chronicles, and Ezekiel. You may recall the remarkable friendship between King Hiram of Tyre and the kings David and Solomon of Israel. Tyre was at that time the principal

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kingdom of the Phoenicians, and in fact the terms Tyrian and Sidonian (from Sidon, another important Phoenician city) were synonyms for Phoenician.

Recently, Dr. William F. Albright has shown that the great day of Phoenician exploration and colonization in the Mediterranean area began shortly after King David destroyed the Philistine empire about 990 B.C. With this act, not only was Israel freed but Phoenicia also. In any case, only shortly after this, clear evidence appears of Phoenician activity in the Mediterranean, even to a point as far westward as Spain.

Later, when Sargon II, king of Assyria, led the northern tribes of Israel away as slaves—about 721 B.C.—he also conquered the Phoenicians, who were never powerful after that. However, they did not

come to an end as a free people until the year 572 B.C., when Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, conquered them shortly after his destruction of Jerusalem.

With this brief biblical background, consider some of the Book of Mormon possibilities. The Nephite scripture recounts the coming of three distinct colonies from the ancient Near East: that of Jared and his brother, that of Lehi, and that of Mulek. Who were these “Mulekites” or, as Mormon refers to the descendants of this last-mentioned colony, “people of Zarahemla”?

No answer is given in the text, except for the mention of Mulek himself, a young son of King Zedekiah who evidently, unknown to the authors of the Bible, escaped the wrath of the Babylonians. He was, of course, a Jew of the house of David. But what of the members of his colony?

If you had been the guardian of a young scion of the royal family, charged with protecting his life, and you had known that the rest of the king’s sons were rounded up and slaughtered in the presence of their father and then the monarch’s eyes put out in order that his last visual memory might be of the death of his flesh and blood (2 Kings 25:7 and Jeremiah 39:6-7), perhaps you would have taken drastic action.

If you had wanted to leave by sea, whose help would you have sought? Who were the finest mariners in existence in that generation? The Phoenicians. It was the Phoenicians who had circumnavigated the continent of Africa not long before this—about 660 B.C.—for the first time in recorded history. This was done during the lifetime of Zedekiah and at the behest of Necho II, Pharaoh of Egypt. Following the sixth century, no such feat was accomplished

again for another 2,000 years, when the Portuguese navigator, Vasco da Gama, did it in 1498.

It is only a hypothesis,\* of course, that Mulek escaped with the help of Phoenician mariners, but this view takes on substance when one considers the name of the principal watercourse of the Book of Mormon: the river Sidon. In fact, the Sidon is the only river even mentioned in the record. Why would the Nephites give the name of the principal metropolis of the Phoenician homeland—Sidon—to their main watercourse? The answer is probably that the Nephites did *not* give it that name; the Mulekites did. The first mention of the Sidon in the Nephite record, in fact, is not until *after* King Mosiah brought his people down out of their mountain kingdom about 200 B.C. and discovered the city of Zarahemla.

Omni records (vss. 17, 18) that in order to communicate with the newly discovered Mulekites, there had to be a lapse of time until they could be taught the Nephite language. The implication is that four centuries of isolation had resulted in marked differences between two languages supposedly derived from Hebrew. However, it is probably closer to the mark to think that the original Mulekite language was not Hebrew but actually Phoenician, a language closely related to Hebrew but sufficiently different even in 600 B.C. for the difference to be recognized. Four hundred years later, the two tongues may have separately evolved to a point where they would hardly have been intelligible to each other.

The account of Hagoth in the Book of Mormon (Al. 63) finds

\*I obtained the essential idea of this Phoenician-Mulekite hypothesis years ago in a conversation with John L. Sorenson. So far as I know, the first published mention of it appears in his article in *The Improvement Era*, Vol. 60, (May 1957), pp. 330-31. Dr. Sorenson in turn may have gotten it during his student days at Brigham Young University from M. Wells Jekeman, his professor in archaeology.

some striking parallels in the history of the Phoenicians and their descendants at Carthage. Hagoth's method of colonizing by sea was not typical of the ancient Israelites. But it was typical of the Phoenicians, and it is possible that Phoenician seamanship and attitudes toward the sea persisted for centuries among the Mulekites, at least to the time of Hagoth, around 55 B.C.

Quite aside from the fascinating likelihood of a specific Phoenician element in the Book of Mormon, it is becoming increasingly probable that Phoenician seamen reached other places in the New World during the great years of their civilization, i.e., roughly between 1000 and 500 B.C. Actually, one could plot on a map, from New England to Brazil, the find-spots of a number of purported Phoenician inscriptions. But these writings discovered along the Atlantic seaboard probably have nothing to do with Book of Mormon peoples. They doubtless represent the visits of other travelers in no way connected with the Nephite scripture.

A startling example is that of the Paraíba text found in Brazil in 1872. This commemorative inscription records in the Phoenician language a voyage of mariners from Sidon who set sail into the Red Sea, circumnavigated Africa in a clockwise direction, became separated from their nine companion ships in the South Atlantic, and landed presumably on the eastern tip of South America near Joao Pessoa. Thanks to the scholarship of Dr. Cyrus H. Gordon of Brandeis University beginning in 1968, the Paraíba text now yields a clear account of an actual voyage from the Near East to ancient America of which we can practically pinpoint the place and date of both departure and arrival. Embarkation: Sidon, 534 B.C.; disembarkation, coast of

Brazil, 531 B.C. Although there seems to be no connection with the Book of Mormon, note that this voyage took place in the same century as the voyages of Lehi and Mulek and also, incidentally, that of Necho of Egypt.

An intriguing discovery—apparently unrelated either to the Phoenicians or to the Book of Mormon account—is that of a site called Mystery Hill, located in the thickly wooded terrain near North Salem in southern New Hampshire. Elsewhere in New England more than 75 other constructions of similar rough-hewn stonework have also been discovered. A prominent feature of this whole puzzling complex of ruins is the corbeled vault or “beehive” roof.

Some have said the Indians built the New England ruin sites, but they do not fit into Indian culture at all. Others have said they were built by early New England farmers of British extraction; but even though colonial farmers did in fact use them at a later time for stables and root cellars and left their artifacts strewn about, it is clear that they were not the original builders, for the strange ruins are very un-English in their architecture. One writer was convinced that Mystery Hill had been built by a band of Irish monks fleeing from the Vikings. Another believed that the monks had been later occupants of the site but had not built it in the first place.

None of these explanations, however, is satisfactory. Recently, radiocarbon dating has assisted in formulating a better one. Mystery Hill seems to have been occupied around 1000 B.C. So far, the evidence argues for a transatlantic crossing of colonists connected with the “Megalithic Civilization” of the Late Bronze Age of western Europe.

In the July 18, 1970, issue of *Sat-*

*urday Review*, John Lear wrote an article entitled “Ancient Landings in America: An American Indian Tribe may have Ancestors in Common With the Hebrews of the Bible” (see p. 9). In it he tells of the work of Joseph B. Mahan, Jr., with the Yuchi tribe of Georgia; Cyrus H. Gordon's restudy of the Phoenician text from Brazil; Thor Heyerdahl's successful crossing of the Atlantic in a papyrus reed boat; and other examples of the mounting evidence. A few years ago, the author stated, affirmative conclusions based on such studies “would have had no chance of being taken seriously. . . .” But this past summer, with Heyerdahl still on the high seas, Lear wrote in his paper that “evidence that they are true is circulating in the scientific community. . . .” And his article suggests that he, along with many others of this community, has been much impressed by what has developed.

What does all this mean to Latter-day Saints? The refreshing new evidence now coming in may well please them. For over one hundred years they have been proclaiming such things but have not been “taken seriously,” either by the world or by scholars. Now, apparently, it is about to become scientifically respectable to hold views of pre-Columbian crossings from the ancient East. While many of the findings that support such views probably have nothing to do with the particular peoples mentioned in the Book of Mormon, still Latter-day Saint beliefs about Jaredites, Lehighites, and Mulekites coming to the New World now fit into a context of thought that is becoming acceptable to scholars for the first time in the twentieth century. The Prophet Joseph Smith would have been greatly interested in the recent turn of events and in scholarly responses thereto.