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New Approaches to Book of Mormon Study, Part 6

Author(s): Hugh Nibley

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New Approaches to Book of Mormon Study

by Dr. Hugh Nibley

PROFESSOR, HISTORY AND RELIGION
BRAMHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

Part 6



JOSEPH SMITH wanted only one thing of the Book of Mormon—that people should believe it. The story never sold well and only made trouble for the “author.” Those who believed he was a prophet would have believed him just as much without the Book of Mormon. His enemies would have had far less against him—the Book of Mormon might even be called his undoing. From the day he received the plates it gave him only trouble and pain.

But leave Joseph Smith out of it. Whoever wrote the Book of Mormon wanted before all else that people should believe in it. But what could any impostor gain by that? A deceiver would want people to buy the book, and would write a book that would sell—what concern of his whether anyone *believed* it or not? That rules out anyone but Joseph Smith as the author, for his case only was strengthened by such belief. As for a minister such as Spaulding or Sidney Rigdon producing it, that is completely out of the question once we appreciate the immense emphasis laid by the Book of Mormon itself on being believed, for what greater outrage or deadlier risk could a minister of the gospel run than that of forging scripture? Did Spaulding’s heirs ever think of the terrible crime with which they were charging him? They asked the world to imagine the venerable divine in the presence of his attentive loved one reeling off a recitation of his own composition which, if not genuine, could only be the grossest blasphemy!

Again, we are forced back onto the old dilemma. Joseph Smith was either the fantastic, preposterous, implausible (jinni) genie his enemies describe—perpetrating the most monstrous crimes ever conceived by man with a clear countenance and sunny disposition, performing prodigies of labor for no reward but danger and contempt, engineering the most fiendishly cunning, criminal operations completely without motive—or else he was telling the truth. There is no middle way, for the Book of Mormon was given to the world as scripture, to be believed in the most literal sense. It is that aspect of it which gives us the key to the book’s authorship. One can imagine all sorts of

things, but one cannot imagine any inhabitant of this planet composing just this type of book in the nineteenth century. It is to other ages that we must turn for the prototypes of the Book of Mormon.

Among the Scrolls is a great “Hymn of Thanksgiving,” a literary composition of real merit yet one which contains hardly a single original line! “These songs are as if woven from quotations from the Old Testament. . . . The style closely imitates that of the Psalms and other poetic writings of the Old Testament. Biblical reminiscences abound . . . quotations shine out at every moment.”⁵⁶ This poetry illustrates the use of set and hallowed expressions



The historic town and port of Suez is two miles north of the southern terminus of the Suez Canal.

in religious writing to convey ancient and eternal ideas: the employment of stereotyped phrases is not a sign of mental weakness here, but actually of artistic skill. If the Book of Mormon actually comes from the Old World religious milieu with which it identifies itself, it also should resort often to set and accepted forms of expression, and the last thing we should expect to find in it would be gropings for original means of expression. And this is what, to the distress of modern literary critics, we do find.

An interesting phenomenon, announced by D. W. Thomas in 1950, supplies an important commentary on the Old World background to the Book of Mormon. It can be shown from the Lachish *ostraca* (discovered in 1935 and, up until the finding of the Scrolls, "the most important find ever made in Biblical archaeology"), "that our Hebrew Bible bears upon it the stamp of the dialect of Judah current about the sixth century B.C."⁵⁷ This can only mean that our text of the Old Testament comes from about the time of Lehi and closely resembles the Bible he used—for otherwise the details of the particular dialect of his time and place could not possibly predominate in the text. That being the case, the close—though not slavish—adherence of Old Testament quotations in the Book of Mormon to the style of our own Bible need not be regarded as a suspicious circumstance. If the least be said for it, this is a fortunate coincidence for the Book of Mormon, for though of course it does not prove the correctness of the book, it does prove that the Nephite scripture is not guilty of anachronism when it quotes the prophets in words that seem to be taken from our own version of the Bible.

The Book of Mormon passage most often attacked as evidence of fraud is the statement in Ether that "... faith is things which are hoped for and not seen." (Ether 12:6.) The natural impulse is to detect in the verse an obvious distortion of Hebrews 11:1, but wouldn't Joseph Smith while translating the Book of Mormon have had the same idea? A basic principle of textual criticism is that impostors always avoid *obvious* pitfalls, and when they make crude blunders, it is because of ignorance and oversight—but the Prophet was

not ignorant of the scriptural parallel, nor can he have overlooked it. "There is nothing easier," says Blass, "than to argue from contacts and resemblances that a text is spurious," and he reminds us that, since parallel passages are *extremely* common in literature, to view even close parallels as a proof of fraud is a very uncritical practice.⁵⁸ In the present case, however, it is hard to see how Moroni could have avoided speaking like Paul, since they are both discussing the same limited concept from the same traditional point of view. In the chapter in which the passage occurs, the word *faith* is used no fewer than twenty-six times, for this is Moroni's great treatise on faith. What word did he use? Surely the classic *amn* was the root, for it is used in all Semitic languages as in Egyptian to express the basic ideas of "faith," (1) loyalty or firmness, and (2) expectation.⁵⁹ Both these ideas are clearly expressed in the best-known of all Semitic words, our own "Amen."⁵⁹ This is rendered in the Septuagint by *genoito*, a simple optative expressing hope: "May it come to pass!" Faith, in the direct and concrete language of the Semites, is *something* hoped for: the Arab has no abstract word for "faith" as we do, but instead uses a number of terms all meaning "something in the mind," "something imagined or wished."⁶⁰ What else could Moroni have said if he used any Semitic (or Egyptian)

word for *faith*, except that it was the things we hope for?

If faith is the keynote of Moroni's whole commentary on the Book of Ether, it is also the keynote of the Messianic religion, which was before all things a religion of hope. We have noted above that the Scrolls, the Apocrypha, and the New Testament speak a common language wherever they have "apocalyptic associations." The Book of Hebrews, aside from being the most baffling and mysterious piece in all the scriptures, is also the most apocalyptic, and the eleventh chapter is the nucleus of the whole thing; it runs, in the Apocryphal tradition, through the list of the "elders" of each of the ancient dispensations—Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and Christ, showing how each lived by faith and so received things from heaven. In the same way, Moroni reviews the world's history in terms of faith, showing that men must live by faith in the hope for things to come. And in the same way all the Apocrypha, a huge and very ancient literature—far older than Paul or Moroni—treat of this, their standard theme.^{60a} Since all these writers have the same conception of history, religion, and politics, is it surprising that they should have the same ideas about faith, the cornerstone of the whole doctrine? The Scrolls and Apocrypha are just beginning to show us what the Book of Mormon describes so fully and so

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The Isaiah Scroll, found by Bedouin during the summer of 1947 in a cave near the north end of the Dead Sea.

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well—the complete engrossment of the righteous folk of Israel in a religion of expectation.

The only rival of the “faith-is-things-which-are-hoped-for” passage as a target for critics is Lehi’s description of himself as one “. . . whose limbs ye must soon lay down in the cold and silent grave, from whence no traveler can return.” (II Nephi 1:4.) This is the passage—the lone passage—that has inspired those scathing descriptions of the Book of Mormon as a mass of stolen quotations from “Shakespeare and other English poets.” Lehi does not quote Hamlet directly, to be sure, for he does not talk of “that undiscovered country, from whose bourne no traveler returns,” but simply speaks of “the cold and silent grave, from whence no traveler can return.” In mentioning the grave, the eloquent old man cannot resist the inevitable “cold and silent,” nor the equally inevitable tag about the traveler—a tag so inevitable that not only Shakespeare but also Lehi’s own contemporaries made constant use of it!

Long ago Friedrich Delitzsch wrote a classic work on the Babylonian and Assyrian, i.e., the common Near Eastern, ideas about death and the beyond. And what was the title of his book? *Das Land ohne Heimkehr*—“The Land of No Return.”⁶¹ In the story of Ishtar’s descent to the underworld, the lady goes to the *irsit la tari*, “the land of no return,” (where *tari* may be the same root as that used in our own “re-turn,”), she visits “the dark house from which no one ever comes out again,” and travels along “the road on which there is no turning back.”⁶² Someone is plagiarizing like mad, for these are the most obvious variations on the Hamlet theme—even more obvious than Lehi’s! Recently Tallquist has made a thorough study of Sumerian and Akkadian names for the world of the dead; conspicuous among these are “the hole, the earth, the land of no return, the city of no return, the path of no turning back, the road whose course never turns back, the distant land, the steppe, the desert, etc.”⁶³ Shakespeare should sue. In *Lehi in the Desert* we had occasion to note more than once that Lehi loved poetic discourse and high-flown speech, was

proud of his sound literary education, and was much given to recitation. Since custom sanctioned and expected the use of such terms as he employed in speaking of the grave, it is hard to deny him the luxury of speaking as he was supposed to speak. Especially significant is the fact that the ideas to which the aged Lehi here gives such moving expression by no means reflect either his own, (or Mormon’s, or Joseph Smith’s!) ideas as to what the after-life is really like. That shows that he is indulging in a strictly conventional and normal bit of educated eloquence, as old men are wont to. If he had a weakness for paraphrasing Hamlet’s soliloquy when speaking about death, so did all his contemporaries!

Speaking of Lehi’s poetry, we should not overlook the latest study on the *qasida*, that of Alfred Bloch, who distinguishes four types of verse in the earliest desert poetry: (1) the *ragaz*-utterances to accompany any rhythmical work, (2) verses for instruction or information, (3) elegies, specializing in sage reflections on the meaning of life, and (4) *Reiselieder* recited on a journey to make the experience more pleasant and edifying.⁶⁴ Lehi’s *qasida*, (I Ne. 2:9-10), as we described it in *Lehi in the Desert*, conforms neatly to any of the last three of these types, thus vindicating its claims to be genuine. The same verses may also be described as *saj*, a type of “rhymed prose,” according to Nicholson, “which . . . originally had a deeper, almost religious significance as the special form adopted by poets, soothsayers, and the like in their supernatural revelations and for conveying to the vulgar every kind of mysterious and esoteric lore.”⁶⁵

The most characteristic mark of Apocryphal literature is the constant use of stereotyped imagery—the tower, the vineyard, the kingdom, etc.—to convey familiar and venerable ideas. This same characteristic is conspicuous in Book of Mormon writers of the early period, i.e., those who were educated in the Old World or were brought up by those who were. Lehi himself is much given to allegorical discourse and his dreams are full of striking imagery; but to his son Jacob goes the prize for the longest and most involved parable in

the book. It has to do with repeated visits of the lord of an estate to his vineyard and reminds us that Deissmann showed that the *Parousia* of a governor or estate-owner, a term employed in New Testament times and in the Apocrypha to describe the visits of the Lord to this earth, is not of Christian origin at all. Both the word and the institution are a conspicuous part of the economy of the Near East throughout ancient times,⁶⁶ but this was not known until Deissmann’s studies in the present century.

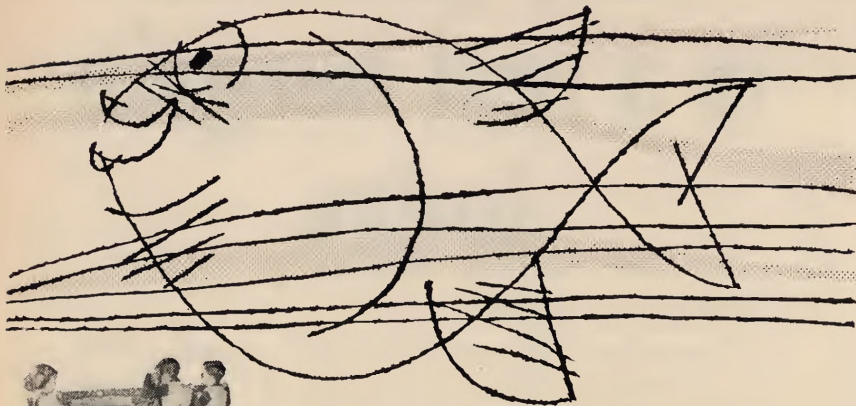
Another Book of Mormon custom on which the discovery of the Scrolls has thrown brilliant light is what might be called the cult of the banner. A text designated by the modern title of “The Rule of Battle for the Sons of Light” shows that the Jews shared with other people of antiquity “a mystical conception of war,” according to which the carnage of the battlefield was “a sacred act” surrounded by definite ritual.⁶⁷

The document in question contains special instructions for the Children of the Covenant on the marshalling of the hosts for war: “On the great ensign placed at the head of all the army shall be inscribed: ‘Army of God’ together with the name of ‘Israel and Aaron’ and the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. On the ensign of the thousand group shall be inscribed: ‘Wrath of God, full of anger, against Belial and all the people of his party, without any survivors.’ On the ensign of the hundred group shall be inscribed: ‘From God comes the energy to fight against all sinful flesh.’” Other inscriptions are given for the other military units, all of them more or less lengthy and proclaiming some inspiring principle or program to guide the hosts, and there are special inscriptions for entering battle, engaging in battle, and returning from battle.⁶⁸

The flag is an Asiatic invention,⁶⁹ and there is a very ancient legend of how in the beginning when Iran was under the rule of the serpent, a blacksmith named Kawe put his leather apron upon a pole, and “that was the flag of Iranian independence, which, under the name of *dirafsh-i-kawiyani* (Flag of Kawe) remained the national standard down to the time of the Arab conquest.” To lead

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New Approaches to Book of Mormon Study

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the nation under its new flag of libera-
tion the hero Threataona was raised
up in the mountains.⁷⁰ This
Threataona is a doublet of King
Cyrus, founder of the Persian nation,
who holds such a high and holy
place in Jewish tradition that he is
next to Solomon alone the holiest of
kings.⁷¹

Turning now to the Book of Mor-
mon, we read how ". . . it came to
pass that he (Moroni) rent his coat;
and he took a piece thereof, and wrote
upon it—In memory of our God, our
religion, and freedom, and our peace,
our wives, and our children—and he
fastened it upon the end of a pole.
. . . and he took the pole, which had
on the end thereof his rent coat, (and
he called it the title of liberty)."
All who followed Moroni on that
occasion entered into a solemn cove-
nant, and once Moroni gained the
upper hand, ". . . whomsoever . . .
would not enter into a covenant to
support the cause of freedom . . . he
caused to be put to death." (Alma
46:12-13, 35.) The surprising savag-
ery and peculiarly Old-World con-
cepts of "liberty" are matched
perfectly in the special instructions to
leaders in the "Rule of Battle" Scroll.
These leaders are priests, whose duty
before the battle is to turn towards the
enemy, denounce them as a "congre-
gation of wickedness," and formally
dedicate them to destruction. Their
song of triumph, "woven entirely of
biblical texts," has a fierce and Asiatic
ring: ". . . bring the riches of the
nations into Thy dwelling! And may
their kings serve Thee, and may all
Thine oppressors prostrate themselves
before Thee, and may they lick (the
dust) from Thy feet!"⁷² However
harsh and unsympathetic Moroni's
character may appear to the modern
reader, he is a true child of ancient
Israel.

The parallels between the Nephite
and Old World practices deserve
comment. The case of Kawe is not
beside the point here, for it has long
been recognized by all scholars in the
field that there are numerous and
clear affinities between old Persian
traditions and Jewish eschatological
lore—and Kawe is at the heart of
the religion of the Magi, his banner
being the holiest symbol of their

priesthood.⁷³ The identity of Kawe with Cyrus, the darling of the Jewish doctors, is enough in itself to justify referring to his story. The fact that we are dealing with false priesthoods does not obscure the significance of traditional institutions: (1) the garment as a banner, (2) the long sermonizing inscription on it, (3) the idealistic program of liberation proclaimed by the banner, (4) the ritual condemnation of all opponents to death as children of darkness. These are now known to be widespread concepts in the ancient world, but the discovery is recent.⁷⁴ What makes the Book of Mormon version particularly significant is the fact that Moroni himself draws the dramatic idea of the "title of liberty" directly from the Old World pool when he attributes the inspiration of the banner not to his own invention but to the teachings of the ancient Jacob, Lehi's son, who, as we have just noted, was steeped in Old World lore and tradition, and when he informs his followers that they are following in the footsteps of their ancestor Joseph in rending their garments even as his garment was rent. (See Alma 46:24.) It is clear that the whole episode of the flag of liberty was consciously carried out in the spirit of the ancients, and that story, which might have been taken as pure fantasy up until about five years ago, is now substantiated by the discovery of the "Rule of Battle" Scroll.

The position of First Nephi on things Egyptian receives confirmation from day to day. In 1949 Couroyer published a study in which he pointed out many notable parallels and a few points of contrast between Egyptian and Israelitish literature insofar as they deal with the subject of the Way of Life, a theme of great prominence in both literatures and a common bond between them.⁷⁵ Lehi, it will be recalled, was obsessed, dreaming and waking, by the concept of life as a way and a journey. Recently A. Mallon has declared that there is evidence for close and continual contact between Egyptian and Hebrew culture not only in Hebrew and Egyptian names (the proper names in the Book of Mormon are split about half and half) but also in the peculiar role that dreams played among both peoples.⁷⁶ The long duration and remarkable constancy of relationships

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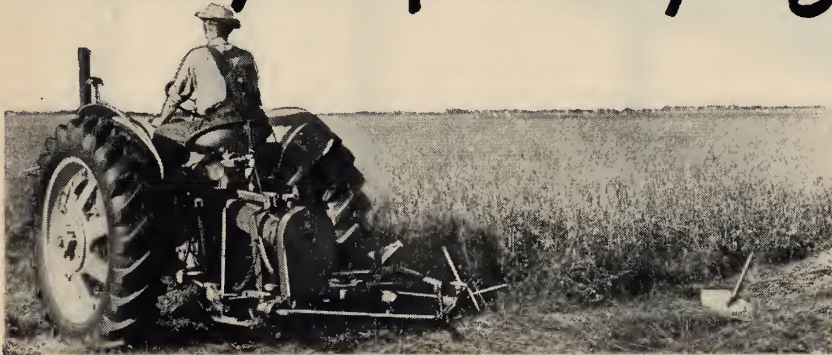
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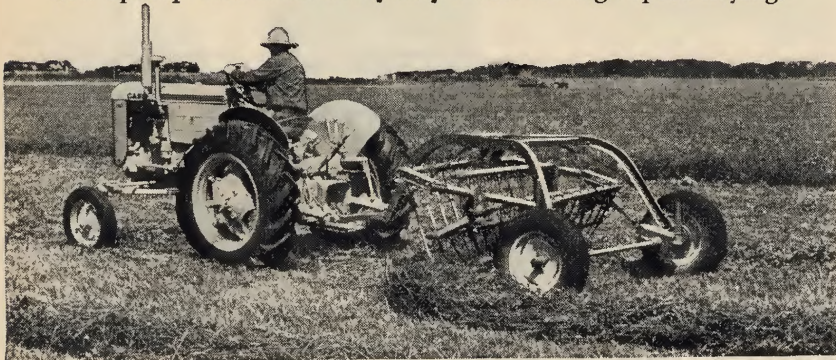


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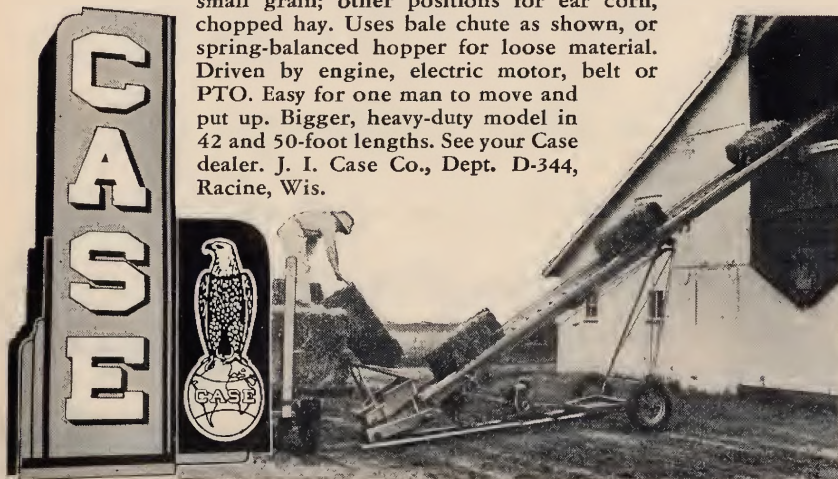


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New Approaches to Book of Mormon Study

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between Egypt and the Hebrews becomes plainer every day. Very recently Rowton has shown how the Exodus followed upon a period of Semitic domination in Egypt, and argued that what prevented the occupation of Palestine by the Children of Israel was an Egyptian occupation of that country.⁷⁷ So we find the people of these two cultures constantly trespassing on each other's lands.⁷⁷ In his latest work, V. Gordon Childe describes the nature of the normal bond between Egypt and Palestine: "Native Giblete clerks were apparently trained in Egyptian hieroglyphic writing. In exchange for the cedars of Lebanon and perhaps olives and dyes, the Gibletes received and adopted elements of Egyptian civilization, including writing and all that that implied, as well as manufactured articles and corn. They remained a friendly but independent civilized community."⁷⁸ Long and intimate ties of commercial and cultural rather than political and military nature are what is indicated by recent excavations, and that is precisely the background of Lehi's world as the Book of Mormon describes it.

(To be continued)

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⁷¹D. Winston Thomas, in *Palestine Exploration Quarterly*, 1950, p. 4. Both quotations are from Thomas.

⁷²Blass, *op. cit.*, p. 292.

⁷³A. E. Silverstone, "God as King," *Journal of the Manchester Egyptian and Oriental Society*, XVII (1932), p. 47, on the Rabbinical interpretation of AMEN, with Messianic connotations.

⁷⁴The oldest Semitic version of Hebrews 11:1, the Syriac, employs the word *haimanutha*, from the conventional AMN root.

⁷⁵When Paul himself speaks of Apocryphal matters, his writing "is nothing but a tissue of ancient prophetic formulas, borrowed ready-made," according to Denis Buzy, "*L'Adversaire et l'Obstacle*," *Recherches de Science Religieuse*, XXIV (1934), p. 409.

⁷⁶F. Delitzsch, *Das Land ohne Heimkehr. Die Gedanken der Bab.-Assyrer ueber Tod und Jenseits* (Stuttgart, 1911).

⁷⁷P. Jensen, *Assyrisch-babylonische Mythen und Epen* (Berlin, 1901), p. 50.

⁷⁸Knut Tallquist, "Sumerisch-Akkadische Namen der Totenwelt," *Studia Orientalia*, V. iv (Helsingfors, 1934), pp. 3, 15f.

⁷⁹A. Block, "*Qasida*," in *Asiatische Studien*, iii-iv (Bern, 1948), p. 116.

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⁶⁵R. A. Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs* (N. Y.: Scribners, 1907), p. 74.

⁶⁶G. A. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* (N. Y.: G. H. Doran Co., 1927), pp. 369-373. The idea is not of Hellenistic origin, for it is familiar in Egyptian literature where Pharaoh brings joy to the lands through which he takes his royal tours, letting his countenance shine (*wbn*) on each in turn, just as his father Re makes the rounds (*shenen*) of the universe with his inspecting eye that gives both dread and joy to all beholders. The concept is even more conspicuous in Asia, where "the monarch moves like the beneficent sun in a tireless round among his people." The theme is treated by Nibley, in *Western Political Quarterly* IV (1951), 241f.

⁶⁷Dupont-Sommer, *op. cit.*, pp. 79ff.

⁶⁸Nibley, "The Stick of Joseph and the Stick of Judah," *THE IMPROVEMENT ERA*, January-May, 1953.

⁶⁹C. Huart and L. Delaporte, *l'Iran Antique* (Paris: Michel, 1943), pp. 454f.

⁷⁰A. von Gall, *Basileia tou Theou*, (Heidelberg, 1926), pp. 182f, 186ff, 219, 456.

⁷¹Dupont-Sommer, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

⁷²Huart & Delaporte, *op. cit.*, pp. 330, 359, 379.

⁷³Nibley, *Western Pol. Quart.* IV, 230-5, 244-7.

⁷⁴R. P. B. Couroyer, "Les Hebreux en Egypte," *Orientalia*, III (1921), pp. 68ff.

⁷⁵A. Mallon, "Les Hebreux en Egypte," *Orientalia*, III (1921), pp. 68ff.

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⁷⁸M. B. Rowton, "The Problem of the Exodus," *Palestine Exploration Quarterly*, 1953, 46-60.

⁷⁹V. Gordon Childe, *What Happened in History* (Pelican Books, 1950), p. 141.

Melchizedek Priesthood Softball

(Concluded from page 218)

the senior Aaronic Priesthood members and the non-members have shared the benefits of this captivating program. Many have joined the Church as a result of their initial activity as members of ward softball teams. Here, it is certain, is an excellent rehabilitating force which will bless and benefit the lives of all male members of the ward. In the interest of projecting this force into the lives of all who need and will benefit from it, stake presidencies and ward bishoprics are charged by the general priesthood committee with direct responsibility for the success of the program.

From Where We Are

Richard L. Evans

SCARCELY does it seem possible, but a twelfth part of the year has already past. More suddenly and sooner than we suppose, it will be spring. More suddenly and sooner than we suppose, it will be summer. And soon again the summer will have passed, and soon again we shall be looking at the closing of the calendar, and, soon again we shall be asking ourselves: Where has it gone, and what have we done with it? And with a twelfth part of the year past, it is not too soon to ask ourselves how we have done with our determination to be better than we have been, to do better than we have done. We are all imperfect. We all have problems. We all wish some things were different. In this life it isn't often (if at all) that anyone finds what could be called a flawlessly ideal situation. But if something hasn't changed that should have changed, if something hasn't happened that should have happened in the month of irreplaceable time through which we have so swiftly moved, it may be because we have somehow supposed that the new face of the calendar would do something of itself without our doing something of ourselves. Time does much in its mellowing influence, in its blessed healing process, in its leavening and leveling—but for us time doesn't do much but deteriorate unless we do some things for ourselves, unless earnestly we endeavor to improve our past performance. Perfecting is a process—and neither character nor conditions are altogether made over all at once. The Lord God has given us the truths, the plans, the purposes, with life and intelligence and the material things of earth to work with (with people and with problems and saving principles). And by beginning here, we can go on from where we are, and begin to come closer to where we would wish to be—always remembering that the only place we can start from is where we are—and there is no time sooner than now. Blessedly, in the swiftly moving scenes of the swiftly moving months there is nowhere we cannot begin to go from here—if we will—with repentance and work and the faith to begin to bring things about.

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