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## "Howlers" in the Book of Mormon

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**Abstract:** Lists over twenty Book of Mormon points that may have seemed ridiculous in 1830 but that "appear very different" in light of modern scholarship, including transoceanic voyaging, gold plates, steel, elephants, coins, names, literary and ritual patterns, execution, modes of prophecy and revelation.

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**I** is the "howlers" with which the *Book of Mormon* abounds that furnish the best index to its authenticity. They show first of all that the book was definitely not a typical product of its time, and secondly, when they are examined more closely in the light of present-day evidence they appear very different indeed to what they did a hundred years ago.

Consider some of the queer gadgets mentioned in the Book of Mormon:

1. According to the Book of Ether the first migrants to America were Asiatics who crossed the violently stormy waters of the North Pacific in eight ships constructed "like unto the ark of Noah," to wit, they had covered decks, " and the top thereof was tight like unto a dish . . . and the door thereof, when it was shut, was tight like unto a dish " . . . and the ends thereof were peaked." It was driven before with wind without sails and was often covered by the heavy seas, " for the mountain waves shall dash upon you."

Within the strange ships men and animals were safe, as "they were tossed upon the waves of the sea before the wind."<sup>15</sup> The oldest accounts of the Ark, the Sumerian ones, describe it as a "magur boat," peaked at the ends, completely covered but for a door, without sails, and completely covered by the waters from time to time as men and animals rode safe within.<sup>16</sup> But the remarkable thing about Jared's boats was their illumination by stones which shone in the dark because they had been touched by the finger of the Lord.

The Rabbis tell of a mysterious Zohar that illuminated the ark, but for further instruction we must go to much older sources: the Pyrophilus is traced back to the Jalakanta stone of India which shines in the dark and enables its owner to pass unharmed beneath the waters; this in turn has been traced back through Classical and Oriental sources to the Gilgamesh Epic, where Alexander's wonderful Pyrophilus stone turns up as the Plant of Life in the Possession of the Babylonian Noah.<sup>17</sup>

A large number of ancient traditions, first brought together in the present century, justify one in assuming some sort of legendary shining stones in the Ark. Whether or not there is any historical reality behind it, the fact is that we now know from sources completely inaccessible to the world of Joseph Smith that such a tradition actually did exist in very ancient times. It is nothing to laugh at after all.

2. As a laugh-getter the shining stones of the Jaredites

A recent study by an Arabic scholar has called attention to the long forgotten custom of the ancient Arabs and Hebrews of consulting two headless arrows whenever they were about to undertake a journey; the usual thing was to consult the things at a special shrine, though it was common also to take such divination arrows along on the trip in a special container. The message of the arrows, which were mere sticks without heads or feathers, was conveyed by their pointing and especially by the inscriptions that were on them, giving detailed directions as to the journey. Mr. Fahd deserves our thanks for having called attention to this interesting and forgotten gadget in 1958; but how would Joseph Smith know about it in 1829?<sup>18</sup>

3. Nothing in the *Book of Mormon* itself has excited greater hilarity and derision than Joseph Smith's report that the original record was engraved on gold plates, the account being condensed from much fuller records on bronze plates. Today scores of examples of ancient writings on sacred and profane, history and religious plates of gold, silver, and bronze make this part of Joseph Smith's story seem rather commonplace.<sup>16</sup> But it was anything but commonplace a hundred years ago, when the idea of sacred records being written on metal plates was thought just too funny for words.

4. For years the most frequent and what was thought to be the most unanswerably devastating charge against the *Book of Mormon* was that it mentioned steel. Steel as early as 600 B.C., was considered a whopping anarchonism: If Laban had a ceremonial sword with a pure gold handle and a blade of "precious steel," so did generations of potentates before him.<sup>20</sup>

5. The earliest immigrants to America domesticated elephants, the *Book of Mormon* tells us, hundreds of years before Lehi's time, there is no mention of elephants in the later Nephite period. This is another absurdity that has recently become a very strong probability.<sup>21</sup>

6. Critics have been scathing in denouncing what they consider an obvious fraud in the *Book of Mormon's* mention of Nephite money, not coins but money. Today we know that the ancients, notably the Egyptians, had real money a thousand years before the purported invention of coinage by the Lydians. The really remarkable thing about the Nephite monetary system, however, was that it was practical rather than traditional: "they altered their reckoning and their measure, according to the minds and the cir-

## in the Book of Mormon

have always had a close competitor in the Liahona. The Liahona was a hollow bronze sphere in which were mounted two pointers, headless arrows that bore mysterious inscriptions and pointed the way that Lehi's party should travel in the desert; beside pointing the direction the arrows and the inscriptions also provided special instructions for the journey. They only worked during the expedition to the New World, after which they ceased to function and were preserved among the national treasures as a curiosity. cumstances of the people in every generation." (Alma 11: 14). Their sole interest was to get the *best* monetary system possible and they did so: for the system of monetary weights given in Alma (units of 1, 2, 4, and 7) has been shown by mathematicians to be the most efficient system possible, that is, for carrying out business transactions it requires less " coins " or whatever monetary units were used, than any other system devisable, including our own.<sup>22</sup>

Whatever Joseph Smith was, he was no mathematician:

wasn't it sly of him to devise the perfect monetary system for his mythical Nephites? Or maybe he wasn't so sly after all, since nobody noticed the fact until the present decade, maybe he was simply wasting his talents.

7. No less impressive than the gadgets in the *Book of Mormon* are the proper names. The Hebrew names often have peculiar non-Biblical forms; highly characteristic is the ending in —iah. The discovery of lists of prisoners from Lehi's own Jerusalem now makes it possible to check on these name types, and the —iah ending is found to be highly characteristic of them too.<sup>23</sup> Lehi as a travelling merchant had frequent contacts with the Arabs, and his elder sons have good Arab names; indeed it was not until 1940 that the name of Lehi itself started turning up as a personal name, first in the old Hebrew settlement at Elath.<sup>24</sup>

The great emphasis in the Book of Mormon on the name of Ammon (and to a lesser degree Manti) both alone and in components faithfully reflects conditions in the Old World in Lehi's day, and there is not much room for quibbling about the "Egypticity" of such Book of Mormon names as Korihor, Paanchi, Pakumeni or Gidianhi.25 There is one name I have that always gave this writer a jolt : Hermounts. What a name! Like nothing you ever heard before. So until about a month ago we completely ignored it; then the question was raised, What is Hermounts? It is not a person, it is the name used to designate wilderness country "which was infested by wild and ravenous beasts." (Alma 2: 37). Right away we thought of Min (good old Book of Mormon Ammon) of Hermonthis, the Egyptian Pan, the God of wild places and wild animals; the name Hermonthis some explain as meaning "House of Month" (good old Book of Mormon Manti!) referring to the shrine of the Southern frontier. Month being the patron of war and colonisation and next to Ammon the commonest name of persons and places in the Book of Mormon.<sup>26</sup> Whatever the real explanation, Hermounts doesn't offend the ear any more. If the Egyptians want to designate their wild country as Hermonthis and the Nephites as Hermounts that is their business,

8. Passing from the particular to the more general, the cultural patterns of the *Book of Mormon* are not to be ignored. The close cultural ties between Jerusalem and Egypt insisted on by the *Book of Mormon* have been thoroughly vindicated. There is a great deal about desert life in the book of 1st Nephi: Lehi's dreams of the perils of the way, of yawning gulfs, mists of darkness, flash-floods, and proud and contemptuous dwellers in lofty desert sky-scraper palaces are matched by everyday manners and customs: passionate debate in the tent of the sheikh, an authentic gasida, ceaseless scouting and prowling, covered fires and breathless escapes, fierce family feuds, and losing the way.<sup>27</sup>

9. More impressive still are the fullness and detail with which the rites of a royal coronation are described : here we have that ritual complex known today as "patternism" set forth with great clarity. The theory and practice of kingship, which of recent years has become almost an independent discipline, are explained in the Book of Mosiah with due attention to its Old World background and its inevitable corruptions. It is only since 1930 that the common ritual pattern of Coronation in the Ancient Near East, with its complicated political, economic, priestly and eschatological connections has become the object of intensive and extensive comparative study.<sup>24</sup>

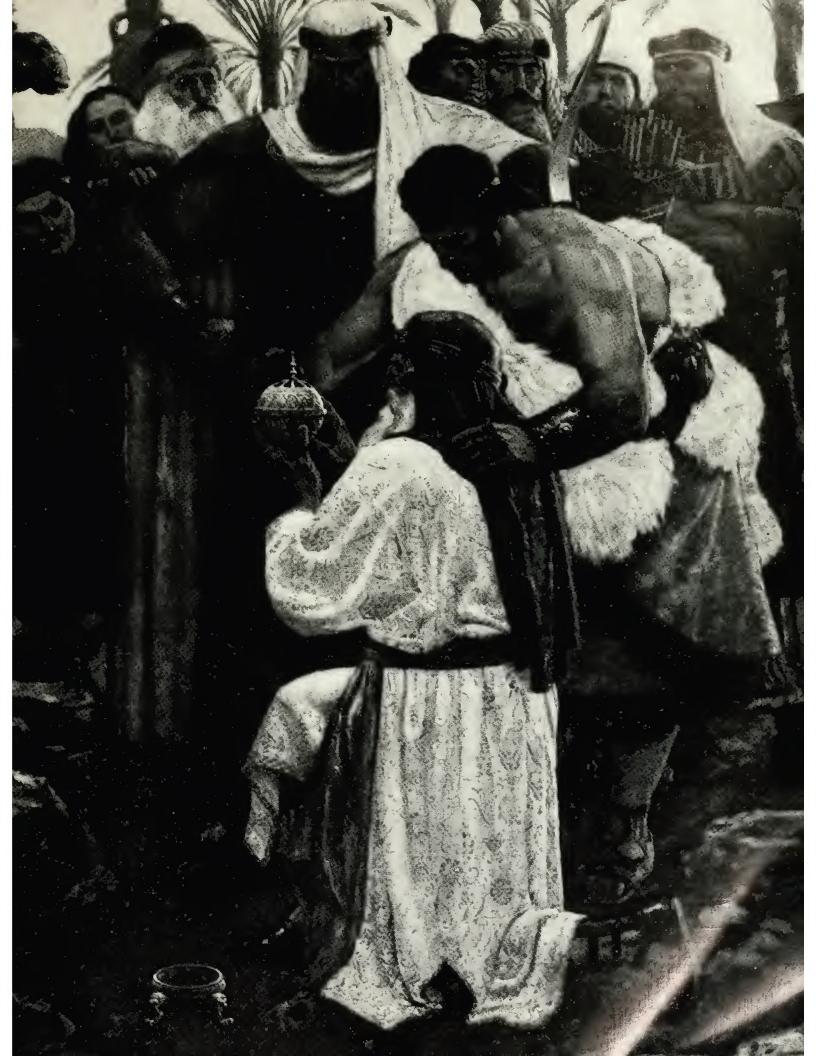
At the coronation of King Benjamin all the elements are met with in their proper setting and relationships, the coronation rite itself being the subject of a long moral and didactic discourse by the King. The great annual assembly is often referred to in the *Book of Mormon*, the case of Benjamin is far from being an isolated instance.<sup>29</sup>

10. A rather gaudy and sensational aspect of the royal cult which has been the subject of some recent historical novels<sup>3a</sup> was that sinister mode of succession that prevailed in the earliest days, when the old king would be beheaded by the new King, who would then proceed to marry the Queen. The Jaredites had hardly arrived in the Western Hemisphere, ages before Lehi's people, when a certain princess inaugurated this system, which was unknown in later times. She didn't invent it, we are told, but brought it to her father's attention from ancient sources: "Hath he not read the record which our fathers brought across the great deep? Behold, is there not an account concerning them of old . ..."

Here on the borderline between the historical and the legendary, the thing to note is not the historical accuracy of the *Book of Mormon* but its perfect legendary consistency. The various people who came to the New World from the old are supposed to have brought certain traditions and legends with them, as the last instance demonstrates. The rustic youth in upper New York shrewdly included a good deal of this *old apocryphal* stuff in the *Book of Mormon*, stuff quite inaccessible to him or the world he lived in. Take a few examples.

11. The Nephite Prophet Mormoni tells a story which he says was common property of his people, concerning the death of the Patriarch Jacob. I have never come across this story except in Tha'labi-and who in Joseph Smith's America had access to Tha-labi? Tha-labi, a Persian in the 10th century, went about collecting old stories of the Prophets from his Jewish neighbours. The story in barest outline is that when the garment of Joseph was brought to Jacob on his deathbed, he rejoiced because part of it was sound and whole, signifying that some of his descendants would always remain true, but he wept because another part of the garment was befouled and rotted away, signifying that part of his descendants that would fall away.<sup>31</sup> The same story is told with the same interpretation in Tha-labi and in the Book of Alma, in the latter significantly as a popular folk-tale. The presence of such a story among the Hebrews has been indicated in a recent study by a Jewish scholar, but could Joseph Smith wait until 1953 to read about it?<sup>31</sup>

12. Moroni tells the story of Joseph's garment as a commentary on his own garment. He had written a high-sound-



ing motto on his cloak, put it on a pole, and gone through the land raising recruits to fight the battles of the Lord. His improvised banner hc calls the title of liberty. One is reminded of the founding of the order of the Magi by an ancient hero who did much the same thing, but even more of the war standards of the Dead Sea Scrolls.<sup>32</sup> The point is that the Book of Mormon tells us that it was a typical and familiar thing that Moroni was doing. The people who came to join his holy host knew just how to go about it, "rending their garments in token, or as a covenant, that they would not forsake the Lord their God; or, in other words, if they should transgress . . . the Lord should rend them even as they had rent their garments." (Alma 46:21). There is much more of this "enacting of a mystery" in the Book of Mormon, one of the most interesting examples being:

13. The peculiar rite of hanging. When the celebrated liberal preacher Nehor killed an opponent in his rage he was condemned to death: "... and they carried him upon the top of the hill Manti, and there he was caused, or rather did acknowledge, between the heavens and the earth, that what he had taught to the people was contrary to the word of God; and there he suffered an ignominious death." (Alma 1: 15). Centuries later the traitor Zemnarihah suffered a like hanging "upon a tree, yea, even upon the top thereof, until he was dead ..." (3 Nephi 4: 28). This acknowledging of one's crime between heaven and earth takes us back to the first sinners, Harut and Marut (another tradition of the Magi) and in the Jewish tradition the angel Shamhozi who "repented, and by way of penance hung himself up between heaven and earth."

14. What religious group has not sought aid and comfort from the Dead Sea Scrolls since their discovery? The most crushing argument against the authenticity of the *Book of Mormon* has ever been its attributing of Christian expressions and ideas to people whose ancestors are supposed to have left Jerusalem 600 years *before* Christ: how could such people ever have brought *New* Testament ideas with them? The Dead Sea Scrolls, to the surprise and alarm of the learned, have now broken down the late and artificial barrier which the Jewish and Christians Doctors erected between the world of the Old Testament and the New. Except where the learned themselves hold sway, they were not two separate worlds at all.

Recently Professor E. R. Goodenough has pointed out with great fullness and clarity that what has long been accepted in the schools as the Jewish tradition is only one Jewish tradition, the Rabbinical or "horizontal" tradition, as he designates it. After long years of dedicated effort, the Rabbis succeeded in so discrediting and effacing the ancient and genuine rival Jewish tradition that few today, even among scholars of Judaism, are aware of its existence.<sup>31</sup> This older tradition Goodenough calls the "mystic" or "Vertical" tradition, the term being suggested by the basic belief that the leaders of Israel should have prophetic inspiration-direct "vertical" ties with the other world revelation, instead of the mere "horizontal" transmission of knowledge from human teacher to student. To judge by Goodenough's presentation, the Book of Mormon is a mine of authentic "vertical" Judaism. To give some examples:

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15. A very common motif in the oldest surviving examples of Jewish and Christian art is the figure of a prophet clothed in a white robe or of three men likewise attired. The white robe is a symbolic garment showing that the wearer has reached a state of celestial purity and enlightenment and, according to Professor Goodenough, is of immense importance for the understanding of "Vertical Judaism." Alma in the Book of Mormon is an authority on Vertical Judaism and knows all about the white robed figures, individually and in threes: "There were many which were ordained and became High Priests of God . . . and were sanctified, and their garments were washed white ... having their garments made white, being pure and spotless before God." He appeals to the people: "... keep your garments spotless, that ye may at the last be brought to sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the Holy Prophets, which have been ever since the world began, having your garments spotless, even as their garments are spotless in the Kingdom of Heaven."35

He discourses at length on the things which Goodenough designates as peculiar to Vertical Judaism: life beyond the grave, the virgin mother of the Messiah, baptism, the importance of a Saviour, the peculiar status of Melchizedek, an unpopular figure in "Rabbinic Judaism," but a great favourite in the "Vertical" tradition. All this is typical of the Book of Alma. And who was Alma?

16. Alma was a priest in the employ of a small-time despot called King Noah. He listened to the preaching of a prophet Abinadi, who knew the old vertical prophetic tradition right back to the beginning, and in his teaching cited extensively from the books and records. When Abinadi was put to death, Alma went into hiding and thought things over; he took months writing down all he could remember of Abinadi's teachings and then went out in the desert and secretly founded his own religious community at a place where there were springs and a grove of trees. The organisation and teachings of his "church in the wilderness" present almost a perfect duplicate or the Qumran community. The surprising thing is that the Book of Mormon traces the institution right back to the old desert sectaries, explaining that Lehi himself was one of many pious Jews who incurred the wrath of the authorities at Jerusalem and deliberately went out into the desert where he could live the Law of Moses in its purity and look forward to the coming of the Messiah.<sup>36</sup> If the least be said, the Scrolls from the Dead Sea make a lot of the Book of Mormon sound very familiar.

17. Speaking of Vertical Judaism, one should not overlook Zenos, an ancient Hebrew prophet who lived before the days of Lehi but is often cited in the *Book of Morinon* as one of the prophets who spoke most clearly and explicitly of the coming of the Messiah. He represents strikingly the suppression of "Vertical" Judaism by the doctors at Jerusalem; for we learn (quite between the lines) that he in a strictly private capacity in his home and was a commoner and a farmer who called upon God in his field and in his house, that God heard his prayer, that he spent some time in the desert, that he succeeded in converting some of the opposition, that he was cast out and despised but that the tables were turned and his enemies suffered a severe setback, that he prophesied things about the Nephites and much about the coming of the Messiah and the gathering of Israel, and that "Zenos did testify boldly, for the which he was slain." (Hel. 9: 19). A typical representative of the *ma'asim*, one might say.

We have chosen the above examples out of hundreds because they have been cited in the past as the strongest possible arguments *against* the *Book of Mormon*. They are the last sort of thing any forger would introduce into a book designed to fool people; they are the sort of thing nobody would dream of in Joseph Smith's day; and they are the sort of thing that one would tend to look for today in a genuine record of the sort indicated.

18. The first and foremost objection to the Book of Mormon was summed up in the first word of Alexander Campbell's opening blast against it: "Blasphemy!" The first thing that would hit any Christian on opening to the title page was the claim of this book to be nothing less than the Word of God-right beside the Bible! "Ye have heard the blasphemy, what think ye of it? " (Mark 14: 64) "... is further testimony necessary?" Again the Book of Mormon has the last word: rare indeed is the Christian scholar today who would maintain that every word declared canonical in the past by committees claiming no inspiration whatever is the absolute Word of God, or that all the writings given non-canonical status by the same learned conclaves are, when they claim the status of scripture, to be condemned out of hand as fraudulent. That won't do any more; today religious journals are full of perplexed and controversial articles on "What is Scripture?"

19. Again, the statement on the front page of the *Book* of Mormon explaining that if it contains mistakes they are the mistakes of men, has always been exploited as a dead giveaway: How, it was asked, could an inspired book have any mistakes at all? Today it would be hard to find a scholar who does not recognise that all the scriptures in our possession bear all over them the marks of having passed through the hands of ordinary fallible human beings.

20. For over a century critics have loudly voiced their shock and amazement that the *Book of Mormon* should stoop to the transparent and suicidal device of actually quoting the Bible. Today any Biblical scholar would be extremely suspicious of a book claiming the background and origin of the *Book of Mormon* that did *not* quote the Bible a great deal. But what about "passages lifted bodily from the King James Version" about which the critics are clamouring? They are simply following the accepted ancient procedure, in which "holy men of God" when they quote earlier scriptures favour not the original language or their own translation but whatever version of the Scripture is most familiar to the people they are addressing. The Book of Mormon was addressed to a society which knew only the King James Version.

21. As all the classic arguments against the *Book of Mormon* fall by the wayside one by one, we are left with one which is being put forward at the moment as unanswerable refutation, namely the quoting of the New Testament by people whose ancestors left the Old World 600 years before Christ. Here again the argument backfires against the critics, for if one examines the quotations in question they are found to belong to a class of scripture which is not original to the New Testament at all. Exhibit A is Moroni's " faith, hopc, and charity," lifted, we are told, right out of 1 Corinthians 13: 13. Only now we know that Paul got the expression from a much older and unknown source, and that he was much fonder of quoting from old Jewish and Greek sources than has been heretofore suspected.<sup>37</sup> While bits of apocryphal writing common to Paul and the Book of Mormon may conceivably confirm the authenticity of the latter, they can no longer be taken as positive evidence against it.

22. But of all the arguments thrown at the Book of Mormon in the past, one completely overshadows all the rest. It is simply this: the book is a fraud because its existence is attributed to divine revelation. A writer in the first volume of the American Anthropologist while dismissing the Book of Mormon as "only grotesque", warned against it as "a portentous danger sign ... a monstrosity born of deceit and bred in falsehood . . . a monster of iniquity and deceit."38 He thus shares the verdict of Professor Meinhold, but like him finds nothing bad in the book itself: "Its teachings and precepts are not in themselves immoral," he explains, "... the Book of Mormon is not an immoral book .... there is nothing immoral in the book. Then what is all the fuss about? It all comes down to one thing: "... its adherents have discovered a most dangerous weapon against the moral world in this doctrine of a continuing revelation ... 'Thus saith the Lord,' is a portentous danger sign to enlightened civilisation."38

In 1889 the leading American intellectuals and liberals signed a statement that had first been drawn up and approved by the leading churches of the land: Ten Reasons Why Christians Cannot Fellowship the Mormon Church. Polygamy had nothing to do with it; the writers were at considerable pains to point out that they had no objections to Mormons on social, political and moral grounds: "The question is a purely religious question," they explained, summarising their ten religious objections in one neat rule-of-thumb: "... their so-called revelations.""

But what do we see today? We turn to the current Protestant journals and come upon articles entitled " Revelation and Religion," "The Need for Revelation," "Why not Prophetic-Apocalyptic?" "The Church and Its Prophets." The opening words of the last-named, from an eminently authoritative and respectable journal, are: "If Christianity is, as it were, congenitally prophetic, the prophetic charisma (gift) must always have existed in some authentic form among Christians. What is that form today?"

The same study tells us that speaking in tongues "Has appeared in the Episcopal Church, of all bodies," very recently, and hails it with approval.<sup>40</sup> Slightly dizzy, we turn to the Catholic publications and find such titles as "Problems in the Field of Inspiration," "Reason without Revelation," "On Inspiration," and an article asking whether St. Augustine really received revelation. Of recent years the religious seem unable to leave relevation alone; the one thing that once made them recoil with

horror and loathing from Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon is the very thing they are now seeking.

- <sup>14</sup> Ether 2: 16ff, 6 4-10, discussed by H. Nibley, "Strange Ships and Chining Stones," in A Book of Mormon Treasury (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1959), pp. 13511
  <sup>14</sup> For a complete description of the "magur hoat," H V. Hilprecht, The Larliest Version of the Babylonian Deluge Story, Vol. V, Fase, i of Bab, Expedn, U. of Penna, (Philadelphia, 1910), pp. 841f, and other sources in Nibley, op. cit., pp. 140-151.
  <sup>15</sup> See our article, "The Liahona's Cousins," Improvement Era IXIV (Feb., 1961), pp. 87f.
  <sup>16</sup> For some examples see F. S. Harris, Jr., The Book of Mormon Message

- <sup>19</sup> For some examples see F. S. Harris, Jr. The Book of Mormon Message and Evidences (Salt Lake City: Descret News Press, 1953), Chap. 10, and H. Nihley in Inprovement Era, IVII (Feh., 1954), pp. 125-6.
  <sup>28</sup> The Egyptians had heen making steel since 1200 B.C., J. R. Forhes, in Ex Oriente Lux, IX, 210f; cf. G. A. Wainwright, in Antiquity, X (Mar. 1936), p. 16; Ehert, Reallexikon der Vorgesch., 111, 63; and the Frontispiece of the Jul. of Eg. Archaeol., XXVIII (1942).
  <sup>21</sup>L. H. Johnson, "Men and Elephants in America," Scientific Monthly, IXXV (1952), pp. 128-9.
  <sup>22</sup> Richard P. Smith, "The Nephite Monetary System," Improvement Era, IVII (1954) pp. 316ff.
  <sup>23</sup> D. W. Thomas, in Palest, Explor, Quart., 1850, pp. 2ft.

- <sup>24</sup>D. W. Thomas, in Palest, Explor, Quart., 1850, pp. 2ft. <sup>24</sup>N. Glueck, in Bull. of Am. Schools of Cr. Research, No. 80 Dec., 1940: 5, hg. 2.
- p. 5, hg. 2. <sup>26</sup> Names are discussed in H. Nibley, An Approach to the Book of Mormon (S.L.C.; Deseret News Press, 1957), Ch. 22, pp. 242:255. <sup>26</sup>See M. Grapow, in Pauly-Wissowa, Real-Encyclop. d. Altertumswiss.,
- VIII, 901-2
- 27 H. Nibley, Lehi in the Desert (S.L.C.: Bookcraft, 1952), 1-139

- <sup>27</sup> H. Nibley, Lehi in the Desert (S.L.C.: Bookcraft, 1952), 1-139.
  <sup>28</sup> S. H. Hooke, ed., Ritual ond Kingship (Oxford Univ. Press, 1958), treats the background and development of "patternism."
  <sup>29</sup> Nibley, Approach to the B. of M., Ch. 23, pp. 256-269.
  <sup>30</sup> E.g., by Robt. Graves, Marie Renault, cf. Ether 8:7ff, and Ch. 9.
  <sup>31</sup> Tha'labi, Kitab ol-Anbivah (Cairo, A. H. 1340), pp. 97, 80f; Alma 46:23-27; E. Baumann, in Zt. f. A. T. Wiss., IXV (1953), 77-81.
  <sup>32</sup> Alma 46, discussed in Approach to the B. of M., Ch. 77, pp. 180-186.
  <sup>33</sup> See Geo. Sale's commentary in his translation of the Koran, Ch. ii, verse 96.
  <sup>34</sup> Le, R. Goodenough, Jewish Symbolism (N.Y.; Pantheon, 1953-8) I, 8-11, 1821. 1821

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- W. C. Klein, "The Cl Review XIIV (1962), 1, 17.

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