

## Light in Noah's Ark & the Jaredite Vessels

*Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, Vol.5, Part.3, Ch.3, Pg.366*

"Well, sirs," he began as they sat down around the table, "I have something for you! Not much, of course--that would take some time--but enough. Let us begin by considering the Jewish sources that worried us yesterday, going from the latest to the earliest. The Midrash Rabbah tells us that the various conflicting opinions of the rabbis as to the true nature of the tsohar, the light in the ark, simply demonstrates the fact that none of them knew what it was. Rabbi Akiba ben Kahmana, for example, says it means a skylight, while R. Levi says it was a precious stone. R. Phineas, quoted by R. Levi, explains that `during the whole twelve months that Noah was in the Ark he did not require the light of the sun by day or the light of the moon by night, but he had a polished gem which he hung up: when it was dim he knew that it was day, and when it shone he knew it was night.' To illustrate this odd arrangement, Rabbi Huna tells a story: `Once we were taking refuge from [Roman] troops in the caves of Tiberias. We had lamps with us: when they were dim we knew that it was day, and when they shone brightly we knew that it was night.' The reference to hiding from the Romans shows that this tradition is at least two thousand years old. But all such stories seem to go back to a single source, a brief notice in the Jerushalmi or Palestinian Talmud, which reports that Noah was able to distinguish day from night by certain precious stones he possessed, which became dim by day and shone forth by night."

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"A good idea," replied the Orientalist, "especially since I have led you on such a tortuous way. Well then, first we found, tucked away in the corner of an old, obscure, and completely neglected Jewish writing, a very brief passage that suggested, along with alternatives, that Noah had shining jewels or stones in the ark, which he used for telling night from day rather than as illumination. That is all the Jews tell us, so far as I can find out, and it is not much. Next we found some traditions about the forming of shining stones by a heat process, and noted that the world-wide dispersion of those traditions indicated their great antiquity. We found then that the shining stone thus produced everywhere went by the same name and was thought to possess the same marvelous properties and powers, the most remarkable of which was its power to enable its owner to pass through the depths of the water. Next it was easy to identify this stone with the very stone that Alexander the Great lost in the Euphrates in an episode which many scholars were quick to identify with a central occurrence in the Gilgamesh epic: the loss of the plant of Life which had once belonged to Ut-napishtim, the Babylonian Noah, who alone could tell the hero Gilgamesh where and how to obtain it. Then we turned to the most renowned survival of a cult of Noah in the ancient world and found that the most remarkable cult object at that shrine was a wonderful stone that shone in the dark--Lucian actually claims to have seen it in operation."

*Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, Vol.6, Part.8, Ch.25, Pg.336 - Pg.339*

### Jared's Ships

Since the story of Jared's barges and the shining stones with which he illuminated them has been the subject of much mockery and fun among the critics of the Book of Mormon, they are all the more convincing evidence if they can be shown to have a genuine archaic background. The key to the barges is found in the declaration that they were built on conventional lines and yet in their peculiarities patterned after Noah's ark. The discovery of a number of Babylonian texts has given rise to a good deal of speculation as to just what the ark of Noah may have been like. According to Babylonian versions of great antiquity which add some important items to the brief biblical account without in any way contradicting it, Noah's ark must have had certain peculiar features which had never been noted by biblical scholars, even though the Bible hints at some of them. These peculiar features are precisely those that have beguiled and amused the critics of the Jared story. Both Noah's and Jared's boats were designed from conventional lines, but, "according to the instructions of the Lord" (Ether 2:16), both were made water tight above as well as below, were peaked at the ends, had a door that could be sealed tight, had a special kind of air-hole, were designed to go under the water, containing all sorts of animals as well as men, were driven by the wind without the use of sails, and were designed to resist the force of unusually violent weather, especially hurricane winds.

### The Luminous Stones

But the Babylonian texts do not tell us how the Ark was lighted and the Bible mentions only a tsohar, about the nature of which the rabbis could never agree. Jared's shining stones have been held up to ridicule as a remarkable piece of effrontery and the invention of a diseased imagination. Yet it can now be shown beyond any dispute:

1) That there existed throughout the world in ancient and medieval times the report of a certain stone, the Pyrophilus, that would shine in the dark. This stone, it was believed, was a pure crystal and could only be

produced and made luminous by the application of terrific heat. It had the miraculous quality of enabling its possessor to pass unharmed through the depths of the water.

2) The story is not a folk tale but is found only in the recondite writings of the most celebrated scholars in the East and West, who passed the tale around among them. The wonderful shining stone is found only in the possession of a Cosmocrator, like Solomon, its most famous owner being Alexander the Great.

3) The Alexander accounts of the stone are actually much older than Alexander, and have easily been traced back to the Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic, in which the stone appears as the Plant of Life which Gilgamesh seeks from Utnapishtim, the Babylonian Noah. The Pyrophilus legend wherever it is found has accordingly been traced back ultimately in every case to the story of Noah.

4) The most wonderful object in the inmost shrine of the great cult center of Aphek, in Syria, where the deeds of Noah and the story of the flood were celebrated in word and ritual, was a stone that shone in the dark.

5) One of the explanations of the Zohar given by the ancient rabbis was that it was a polished jewel which Noah hung up in the ark so that he could tell night from day; the source of this seems to be a very brief, obscure, and little-known remark in the Palestinian Talmud and attributed to R. Ahia ben Zeira, to the effect that "in the midst of the darkness of the Ark Noah distinguished day from night by the aid of pearls and precious stones, whose lustre turned pale in the daylight and glittered at night." This is far from the Ether account, which could hardly have been inspired by it, even if the writer of the Book of Mormon had known of this still untranslated passage from the Talmud Jerushalmi. But it is obviously an echo of the old account of the shining stones, whose association with Noah no one suspected until the discovery of the Gilgamesh Epic. It was that discovery which put scholars on its trail at the end of the last century.

Now whether the ark of Noah was actually lit by shining stones or not is beside the point, which is that the idea of stones shining in the darkness of the ark was not invented by Joseph Smith or anybody else in the nineteenth century, but was known to the ancient rabbis in an obscure and garbled version, was clearly indicated in the properties of a very ancient shrine dedicated to the Syrian Noah, and was mixed in among the legends of the very ancient Alexander cycle by means of which scholars quickly and easily ran it down to its oldest visible source, namely the old Sumerian Epic of the Babylonian Noah. However ridiculous the story of the shining stones may sound to modern ears, there is no doubt that it is genuine old stuff, going back to the proper sources as far as Ether is concerned.

*Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, Vol.6, Part.8, Ch.26, Pg.348 - Pg.350*

Truly remarkable is the statement in Ether that the submarine nature of Jared's ships made them "like unto the ark of Noah," since that aspect of the ark, perhaps its most characteristic, is not specifically mentioned in the Bible, and has led to great confusion among Bible illustrators, ancient, medieval, and modern. The only peculiarities mentioned in the brief three verses of Genesis (Genesis 6:14-16) are the window and the door; but they, combined with persistent traditions about the ark, were enough to perplex the learned for generations. They lead us directly to the most puzzling problem of all--that of the illumination of the ark, for while the window is called a zohar (more properly tsohar), i.e., shiner or illuminator, in the Hebrew versions, the Babylonian word for it is nappashi, meaning breather or ventilator. Of course, all windows have the double function of lighting (hence the common fenester--"light giver"), and ventilation ("window"), but in a boat equipped to go under water other sources for both would have to be found, and it is in the lighting department that the Jewish sources are most specific. For the rabbis do not settle for the zohar--the lighter of the ark--as being simply a window: for some of them it was rather a miraculous light-giving stone. Its purpose, however, was not to furnish illumination as such, but to provide Noah with a means of distinguishing night from day. It is in that connection that the rabbis come to mention the stone, for a very important point in the observation of the Law is to determine the exact moment at which night ends and day begins, and vice versa. The rabbis, according to the Midrash Rabbah, "could not explain the meaning of zohar," but they did know that it had something to do with light in the ark. Rabbi Akiba ben Kahmana, for example, says it was a skylight, while Rabbi Levi said it was a precious stone. He quotes R. Phineas as saying that "during the whole twelve months that Noah was in the Ark he did not require the light of the sun by day or the moon by night, but he had a polished gem which he hung up: when it was dim he knew that it was day, and when it shone he knew it was night," and to illustrate this odd arrangement, R. Huna tells a story: "Once we were taking refuge from [Roman] troops in the caves of Tiberias. We had lamps with us: when they were dim we knew that it was day, and when they shone brightly we knew that it was night." The reference to hiding from the Romans shows that this tradition is at least two thousand years old. But all such stories seem to go back to a single source, a brief notice in the Jerushalmi or Palestinian Talmud, which reports that Noah was able to distinguish day from night by certain precious stones he possessed, which became dim by day and shone forth by night.

Plainly we have here statements which could have given Joseph Smith some hints in writing about the shining stones with which the vessels of Jared, constructed and operated "like unto the ark of Noah," were illuminated. Only there is conclusive evidence that Joseph Smith had no access to such material, either directly or indirectly, and equally clear evidence that if such material was available to him he did not use it. To consider the

last point first, we can be sure that anyone who had access to the old Jewish sources, either directly or indirectly, had a gold mine of useful information at his disposal. Yet of all this wealth of material, the Book of Mormon exploits only one small detail--and that a detail that is merely hinted at in these sources, which say nothing about the stone or gem being actually used to illuminate the ark, but only mention it as a device for distinguishing night from day. But while the Ether version of the shining stones has only a distant relationship to one minor detail in the Palestinian Talmud, it follows much more closely and fully certain far more ancient versions of the story. From that it would appear that the Book of Mormon and the Talmud are drawing on a common ancient source, for there can be no question of Joseph Smith's lifting material from the latter. Why not? Because to this day the Palestinian Talmud remains a rare and difficult book. Only the most eminent rabbis ever read or cite it. Only four printed editions of it have appeared, two of them after 1860, the other two in 1523-24 (the Bomberg edition, containing no commentary) and 1609 (with a very short commentary in the margin). The commentaries are important since it is they that give us the various ancient theories about the stones. The language of this book is a terrible barrier, being the difficult West Aramaic dialect, rather than the familiar East Aramaic of the Babylonian Talmud, which is fairly close to modern Hebrew. Who can and does read this book even today? It is full of technical expressions that nobody understands; it is a much smaller work than the Babylonian Talmud, and considered much duller. The scholars and ministers who studied Hebrew in America in the 1830s knew Rabbinical Hebrew no better than they do today; their whole interest was in the Old Testament, and if any of them ever looked into the Talmud we can be sure it was not the Jerushalmi. Recently Professor Zeitlin has deplored the almost total ignorance of Rabbinical Hebrew among the scholars who are attempting to interpret the Dead Sea Scrolls.

*Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, Vol.7, Ch.7, Pg.209 - Pg.210*

Finally we should mention the crossing of the waters in a peculiar type of ship, constructed according to the book of Ether after the manner of the ark of Noah. The description of the ships suggests nothing in the Bible, where aside from its general dimensions (which are symbolic) nothing is said as to how the ark actually looked; but it exactly matches the description of those sacred magur boats in which, according to the oldest Babylonian stories, the hero of the Flood was saved from destruction. Moreover, that particular hero was in possession of a life-giving talisman which in many legends is a stone that shines in the dark--a reminder that the Zohar itself was, according to the Palestinian Talmud, a shining stone with which Noah illuminated the ark. The point here is that Jared's ships were illuminated by such shining stones. It is interesting that our friend Zenez of the Pseudo-Philo, "the prophet of old," experimented as did the brother of Jared with shining stones, and that in both cases a knowledge of these things was withheld from mankind in general because of their sins.

*Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, Vol.8, Ch.12, Pg.244*

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 of Noah. 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.