The Brother of Jared Sees the Finger of the Lord
by Arnold Friberg

Where did the Brother of Jared Get the Idea of Shining Stones?

When the brother of Jared expressed his concern about the lack of light in the barges which the Lord had instructed his people to build, the Lord responded, “What will ye that I should do that ye may have light in your vessels?” (Ether 2:23). In response to this invitation, the brother of Jared “did molten out of a rock sixteen small stones; and they were white and clear, even as transparent glass” (Ether 3:1). He then asked the Lord to “touch these stones … with thy finger, and prepare them that they may shine forth in darkness” (Ether 2:4). As petitioned, the Lord touched them “one by one” (v. 6), which caused them to “shine in darkness, to give light unto men, women, and children, that they might not cross the great waters in darkness” (Ether 6:3).

Hugh Nibley asked, “But who gave the brother of Jared the idea about stones in the first place? It was not the Lord, who left him entirely on his own; and yet the man went right to work as if he knew exactly what he was doing. Who put him on to it?”

While stones that emit light may seem like an absurdity to some modern readers, legends of their existence and importance were widely spread throughout the ancient world. Drawing upon a substantial body of ancient texts, John A. Tvedtnes has connected the shining stones in Ether to such items as the Urim and Thummim, glowing idols, teraphim, sanctuary stones, and medieval glowing stones. Tvedtnes concluded, “The account of the stones used to provide light in the Jaredite barges fits rather well into a larger corpus of ancient and medieval literature.”

Of particular relevance is the way that shining stones were directly linked to Noah’s ark. In the Babylonian Talmud, for example, one Jewish commentator reported that the Lord instructed Noah to “Set therein precious stones and jewels, so that they may give thee light, bright as the noon.” Another ancient Jewish rabbi explained, “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.” These Jewish explanations are notable when considering that the text in Ether 6:7 explicitly draws a parallel between the Jaredite vessels and Noah’s ark: “there was no water that could hurt them, their vessels being tight like unto a dish, and also they were tight like unto the ark of Noah” (emphasis added).
Considering that his people were already constructing barges after the manner of Noah’s ark, it is possible that the brother of Jared knew something of the stones which illuminated Noah’s vessel when thinking of a potential source of light for the barges of his own people. Nibley thus argued that the brother of Jared was simply “following the pattern of Noah’s ark, for in the oldest records of the human race the ark seems to have been illuminated by just such shining stones.”

The Why
An awareness of the ancient sources which discuss the shining stones and Noah’s ark may offer additional insights about the story of the brother of Jared. For instance, rather than just drawing upon the boundless limits of his own creative imagination, the brother of Jared may have been intentionally demonstrating his faith in the miraculous deliverance of Noah and his family—including the precious stones that, according to a variety of ancient sources, granted them light amidst the deluge. As the brother of Jared likened the sacred story of Noah’s salvation to his own people, he thought of a similar solution to his own vexing problem.

In several ways, this story also helps demonstrate the pattern of the Lord’s interaction with his children. In some cases, God will freely grant His children blessings or solutions, simply because they have the faith to ask (see Ether 2:19–21). In other situations the Lord requires initiative, creativity, and diligent striving on the part of those seeking blessings or solutions. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland taught, “Clearly the brother of Jared was being tested. The Lord had done His part—miraculously, profoundly, ingeniously. Unique, resolutely seaworthy ships for crossing the ocean had been provided. … Now He wanted to know what the brother of Jared would do about incidentals.”

The story about these stones is also deeply layered with rich symbolism. M. Catherine Thomas, for example, has suggested that the stones “evoke the Urim and Thummim” as well as the “white stone mentioned in Revelation 2:17.” Thomas R. Valletta has noted that like the Liahona, the stones “typologically led the Jaredites to the promised land by the power of Christ.” Robert E. Clark saw the transparent stones—initially devoid of light—as a reflection of the brother of Jared’s “own limitations, his own emptiness” that needed to be “filled with light.” Thomas, likewise, viewed them as supplying “not only practical light, but spiritual light as well.”

With these interpretations in mind, it is noteworthy that the stones only received their light after the Lord touched them “one by one with his finger” (Ether 3:6). In this sense, it can be understood that the light which provides revelation, which reveals one’s true identity, which acts as a constant guide through darkness and danger, and which fills the emptiness of the mortal heart with true joy and divine purpose can only be activated through personal contact with Jesus Christ. Ultimately, the brother of Jared believed that stones could shine with light because he had faith in Jesus Christ—the true “light and life of the world” (3 Nephi 11:11).

Further Reading


Notes


4. For a treatment of criticisms regarding the shining stones in the Jaredite barges, see Nibley, An Approach to the Book of Mormon, 273–274. For the scientific plausibility of shining stones, see Nicho-


6. Tvedtnes, “Glowing Stones,” 122–123. See also, Nibley, An Approach to the Book of Mormon, 290–291: “The few sources that might have been available to the prophet were obscure and garbled accounts in texts that not half a dozen men in the world could read, eked out by classical sources that were entirely meaningless until the discovery of the key—the great Gilgamesh Epic—long after the appearance of the Book of Mormon. That key ties the pyrophilus stone, the Alexander Cycle, the Syrian rites, the Babylonian Flood stories and the Urim and Thummim together in a common tradition of immense antiquity and makes the story of the Jaredite stones not only plausible but actually typical.”


9. Hugh Nibley explained, “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 magnesium boats in which, according to the oldest Babylonian stories, the hero of the Flood was saved from destruction.” See Hugh Nibley, Since Cumorah, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, Volume 7 (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 209–210. Since Cumorah originally ran as a series in the Improvement Era from 1964–1967. For parallels between the Jaredite barges and the ship in the Babylonian flood story, see Nibley, An Approach to the Book of Mormon, 276–281.

10. The story of Noah and the flood would have been relatively recent history for the Jaredites, who had departed from the, “great tower, at the time the Lord confounded the language of the people” (Ether 1:33). For information concerning the historicity of the tower of Babel, see Michael R. Ash, “Challenging Issues, Keeping the Faith: Is the Tower of Babel Historical or Mythological?” Deseret News, September 27, 2010, accessed October 28, 2016 at deseretnews.com: “When we shine the light of science and scholarship on the ‘Tower of Babel’, we find some interesting things. First, the word ‘Babel’ comes from an Assyro-Babylonian word that means ‘Gate of God’ and is related to a Hebrew word that means ‘confusion.’ It appears that the author(s) of the Babel account are engag-