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A Study of Book of Mormon Texts III

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Abstract: In this series, internal evidences of the Book of Mormon's authenticity are argued using analysis of words and names used in the book that reflect ancient Hebrew customs, and parallels between the Book of Mormon and American Indian languages. The third part covers the phrase "fiery flying serpents."

A STUDY OF BOOK OF MORMON TEXTS

BY J. M. SJODAHL

Notes on Significant Words and Phrases

Fiery flying serpents.—In I Nephi 17 we find an address by Nephi, in which the prophet reminds his murmuring brothers of the experiences of Israel in the wilderness when the people rebelled against Moses. “God,” he says, “straightened them because of their iniquity. He sent fiery-flying serpents among them.”

Special attention should be given to the expression “fiery-flying.”

The incident is related in Numbers 21. We read there that Israel, during their wearisome journey, became discouraged and rebellious, whereupon God sent “fiery serpents” among them, and many of the people died of the wounds inflicted by the snakes. Then the sinners repented, and the Lord directed Moses to make a “fiery serpent” and raise it up on a pole, and to proclaim that any sufferer who would look upon the image lifted up should be healed. Moses did as he was commanded. He made a serpent of brass and placed it in a conspicuous place, and those who were stricken could “look and live.”

It will be noticed that in the Mosaic narrative the serpents and the image of brass are called “fiery,” referring, probably, to their bright color; this would especially be true of the brazen image, which when raised up would reflect the rays of the burning desert sun almost like a highly polished metal mirror. But Nephi refers to them not only as “fiery” but as “fiery-flying.”

This expression is also used by Isaiah (14:29). The prophet warned the Philistines not to rejoice because King Uzziah had fallen—“the rod of him that smote thee is broken”—for, he says, “out of the serpent’s root shall come forth a cockatrice [or adder] and his fruit shall be a fiery flying serpent;” the meaning of which is that, although King Uzziah was no more, another conqueror would be raised up, viz., King Hezekiah, and he would bring destruction upon Philistia as suddenly and speedily as a fiery flying serpent—by which figure of speech he undoubtedly meant a stroke of lightning. Nephi adopted this expression from Isaiah. (See II Nephi 24:29. Compare II Kings 18:8, where the fulfilment of this prophecy is briefly recorded.)

Now it should be remembered that Isaiah had seen the very image of brass made by Moses in the wilderness, for it was carefully preserved for at least seven hundred years, and Israelites were in the habit of burning incense to it; wherefore King Hezekiah caused it to be

broken to pieces, saying truly that it was only a piece of brass. (II Kings 18:4.) Since Isaiah, in comparing the punishment that was in store for the Philistines with the plague of serpents in the wilderness, referred to those instruments of divine judgment as "fiery" and "flying," it is a safe inference that the brazen image made by Moses was a so-called "winged serpent"—the symbol among the Egyptians and others, of the Almighty as manifested in the dread forces of Nature.

In the conceptions of the Hebrews the flashing lightnings and the rolling thunders were the visible and audible manifestations of the glory, the power, and majesty of Jehovah. When he placed his cherubim on guard at the entrance of the Garden of Eden, he armed them with "a flaming sword which turned every way" (Gen. 3:24); for, "he maketh his angels spirits [or storm-winds]; his ministers a flaming fire." (Ps. 104:4; Heb. 1:7.) When he gave the law on Sinai, his presence was manifested in "thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud; so that all the people that were in the camp trembled." (Ex. 19:16.) When the Tabernacle in the wilderness was set up, a "cloud" covered it and "the glory of God" filled it, so that even Moses was unable to enter, (Ex. 40:34) and a similar manifestation was given at the dedication of the temple of Solomon. (I Kings 8:10, 11.) Job (37:3-5) says that the voice of Jehovah is heard "under the whole heaven, and his lightning unto the ends of the earth. After it a voice roareth: he thundereth with the voice of his excellency. * * * God thundereth marvelously with his voice." Similarly, the Psalmist (97:2-6) says, "Clouds and darkness are round about him * * * a fire goeth before him * * * his lightnings enlightened the world * * * the hills melted like wax at the presence of the Lord * * * the heavens declare his righteousness, and all the people see his glory." Again, "The voice of the Lord is upon the waters: the God of glory thundereth: the Lord is upon many waters." (Psalm 29:3-5.) In I Sam. 7:10 we are told that Jehovah "thundereth with a great thunder," scattering the Philistines before Israel. In the Revelation by John, the presence of Jehovah is always indicated by, "And out of the throne proceeded lightnings and thunders and voices," or some similar expression, (Rev. 4:5; 8:5; 10:3; 4; 16:18) and the coming of the Son of man is compared to the lightning. (Matt. 24:27; Luke 17:24.)

All this goes to prove that in the Hebrew mind the presence of Jehovah was indicated by the awe-inspiring forces of Nature in motion. It follows that when it was desirable to represent this Presence in visible form, as in the wilderness, the simplest and most natural way would be to give to the lightning the form of a serpent and to the storm the shape of wings. These two symbols combined would be the "winged serpent," or a flying serpent, and that would be the symbol of the Lord, who, as the Psalmist says, "rode upon a cherub,

and did fly: yea, he did fly upon the wings of the wind." (Ps. 18: 10; see also 104:3, 4.) That, then, was the symbolical significance of the flying serpent which Moses lifted up in the wilderness for the salvation of his people. John in the Gospel, expressly tells us so. (John 3:14.)

Let us now consider the remarkable fact that the American Indians in the higher stages of culture had, before the advent of the Europeans, the very same conceptions regarding the meaning of the "fiery-flying serpent" as a symbol, as those entertained by the ancient Hebrews. On this subject I can do no better than to quote from the excellent work of Daniel G. Brinton on *The Myths of the New World*. He says:

"The intimate alliance of this symbol with the mysteries of religion, the darkest riddles of the unknown, is reflected in their language [the Algonquin], and also in that of their neighbors, the Dakotas, in both of which the same words, *manito*, *wakan*, which express the super-natural in its broadest sense, are also used as terms for this species of animals. This strange fact is not without a parallel, for in both Arabic and Hebrew, the word for serpent has many derivatives meaning to have intercourse with demoniac powers, to practice magic, and to consult familiar spirits." (P. 132.)

According to one explanation, lightning is an immense serpent coming from the mouth of Manito. We read again:

"As the emblem of the fertilizing summer showers the lightning serpent was the god of fruitfulness. Born in the atmospheric waters, it was an appropriate attribute of the ruler of the winds. But we have already seen that the winds were often spoken of as great birds. Hence the union of these two emblems in such names as Quetzalcoatl, Gucumatz, Kukulcan, all titles of the god of the air in the languages of Central America, all signifying the 'bird serpent'." (P. 140-1.)

"Frequently, therefore, in the codices and carvings from Mexico and Central America we find the tree of life, in the form of the cross, symbolizing the four cardinal points and their associations, connected with these symbols of the serpent and the bird." (P. 141.)

The central figure of Nahuatl mythology is Quetzalcoatl. The name means, as we have seen, Bird-Serpent, evidently the same as the winged serpent. He is the lord of light and of wind. Dr. Brinton says:

"As the former, he was born of a virgin in the land of Tula or Tlapallan, in the distant Orient, and was High Priest of that happy realm. The morning star was his symbol, and the temple of Cholula was dedicated to him expressly as the author of light."

"In his other character, he was begot of the breath of Tonacateotl, god of our flesh and subsistence, or (according to Gomara) was the son of Iztac Mixcoatl, the white cloud serpent, the spirit of the tornado. His symbols were the bird, the serpent, the cross, and the flint." (pp. 215, 216.)

It is exceedingly interesting to compare the ideas expressed in these venerable myths with the teachings embodied in the Scripture

texts quoted above. That the fiery-flying serpent was the symbol, here as in the Old World, of the Almighty Creator, of Jehovah, wielding the forces of Nature for creative purposes, is, further, clear from the myths concerning the organization of the world. The Athapascas trace their descent from "a mighty bird, whose eyes were fire, whose glances were lightning, and the clapping of whose wings was thunder. On his descent to the ocean, the earth instantly rose and remained on the surface of the water."

It is evident that this is symbolical language, depicting the Creator in the act of organizing matter. As in Genesis the Spirit of God "moved upon the face of the waters," so in this myth "a mighty bird" descends to the ocean, and the earth appears.

The Quiche myth is thus given by Dr. Brinton:

"There were neither men nor brutes; neither birds, fish, nor crabs, stick nor stone, valley nor mountain, stubble nor forest, nothing but the sky. The face of the land was hidden. There was naught but the salient sea and the sky. There was nothing joined, nor any sound, nor thing that stirred; neither any to do evil, nor to rumble in the heavens, nor a walker on foot; only the silent waters, only the Pacific ocean, only it in its calm. Nothing was but stillness; nothing but Maker and Moulder, the Hurler, the Bird-Serpent. In the waters, in a limpid twilight, covered with green feathers, slept the mothers and the fathers." (*Myths of the New World*, p. 229.)

The more this word-picture of the creation is studied, the more striking it appears. Here space, chaos, and the Creator appear on the scene as already existing; then there is water covering the solid portions; then there is twilight, and last we hear of life-givers. And the Creator is said to be the "Maker," the "Moulder," the "Hurler"—referring to the thunder—and the "Bird-Serpent,"—the Hebrew Jehovah.

According to the Mixtecs, by the efforts of two winds, called from astrological associations, that of Nine Serpents and that of Nine Caverns, personified, one as a bird and the other as a winged serpent, the waters subsided and the land dried. (*Myths of the New World*, p. 230.)

The question now naturally arises, Whence did the aborigines of America obtain the ideas and conceptions embodied in these and similar myths, so closely resembling revelations preserved in the sacred records?

To those "profound" philosophers who can find no evidence either in Nature or in history of a personal God, a Creator and Ruler, it seems a reasonable supposition that the various races of men just "grewed," like Topsy, in America, Europe, Asia, Africa, etc., each type independent of the others; also, that their ideas of the creation and moral government of the world developed from independent but similar beginnings along similar lines in the various parts of the earth. This they regard as a satisfactory explanation of the similarity observed. But this class is growing smaller. The majority of intelli-

gent students agree with Mr. Fiske, who, speaking of Aryan myths and legends, says:

"There is indeed no alternative for us but to admit that these fire-side tales have been handed down from parent to child for more than a hundred generations. * * * Only such community of origin can explain the community in character between the stories told by the Aryan's descendants, from the jungles of Ceylon to the highlands of Scotland." (*Myths and Myth-Makers*, p. 14.)

This observation cannot but be equally true of traditions common to the descendants of Shem, from the plains of Shinar to the plateau of Mexico or the mountain valleys of Peru.

The Book of Mormon offers the only plausible, or, indeed, the only possible, explanation of the evident connection between the old Indian cosmogonies and symbols and the ancient Hebrew ideas which were the children of divine revelation. It shows us just how those ideas came from the "Old World" to the "New."

It is not maintained that the Indian myths are identical with teachings imparted to the ancestors of the race by the outstanding characters in the Book of Mormon, in the sense that they have been preserved without material change since the sacred volume was completed and sealed up. On the contrary, the changes are numerous and radical. In the "Old World" the teachings of our Savior were so altered in the course of a few centuries that many of them lost their main features entirely; similarly, the ordinances were changed until no longer recognizable as Christian. Yet, we trace them historically to the sacred Scriptures and our Lord. In the "New World," similar changes in both doctrine and practice took place in the course of centuries. And yet, there is an underlying stratum, however thin and broken it may be, that enables us to trace their historical origin to the sacred Scriptures, through the invaluable records preserved in the Book of Mormon. Let me emphasize this important statement of a fact by repeating it in a somewhat different form. The existence of the Jews, their religious beliefs and rites, although in many respects radically different from those of the early Mosaic dispensation, prove the truth of the story of the Old Testament. The theology of the Roman church and her branches, and their ecclesiastical structures, notwithstanding all their variations and unscriptural absurdities, prove that the story of the New Testament is true. In the same way, many Indian myths and legends, social conditions and religious ideas prove conclusively that the story which the Book of Mormon tells is true.

(To be continued)