The Jaredite Exodus: A Literary Perspective of a Historical Narrative

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The application of some techniques of literary analysis to the Jaredite exodus narrative in Ether 1–3 and 6 reveals that it is more than just a historical account. The author or editor of the narrative uses imagery and dialogue to help the reader look beyond the historical facts and see elements of the creation, Christ, and temples, among other things.
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Abstract: By applying some techniques of literary analysis to the Jaredite exodus narrative in Ether 1–3 and 6, the text reveals that it is more than just a historical account. The author or editor of the narrative uses imagery and dialogue to help the reader look beyond the historical facts and see elements of the creation, Christ, and temples, among other things.

Alan Goff's article "Boats, Beginnings, and Repetitions" in the Fall 1992 issue of the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies demonstrates that the Book of Mormon, as an ancient text, follows patterns of antiquity through its "repetition" of the Creation, Flood, and Exodus stories in portions of the Nephite record. Just as Goff notices imagery of these "stories of origination," particularly in the Nephite voyage, I find a similar use of imagery in the Jaredite exodus from the Tower of Babel to the promised land (Ether 1–3, 6), revealing that more than just historical facts constitute the text. Indeed, we find that the author, or at least the editor,

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2 Since Moroni edited the Jaredite record from the twenty-four plates found by the Limhi expedition (see Ether 1:1–2, 6), it is difficult to ascertain which words are direct quotes from the record and thus Ether's words, and which are paraphrased sentences crafted by Moroni himself. To simplify matters, I have avoided direct reference to either writer.
skillfully chooses his topics and words in order to weave Creation, Christ, and temple imagery into the narrative.

Creation Imagery

Charles Long, in his discussion of creation myths from the ancient world, asserts that “the primary motif of the myths which begin with chaos is the story of the development of order out of disorder.” Many of these myths that begin with chaos speak of a primordial “soup” or water from which life and order are created. For example, the Egyptians at Heliopolis recount the first creation when “Atum . . . was on a primeval hillock arising out of the waters of chaos and there brought the first gods into being.” Also, the Babylonian creation epic, the Enuma Elish, declares that all living things originated from the gods of water: “Naught but primordial Apsu, their begetter, (and) Mummu-Tiamat, she who bore them all [existed in the beginning], their waters commingling as a single body.”

The biblical account of creation also refers to a watery genesis for “in the beginning . . . darkness [was] upon the face of the deep” and “the Spirit [ruach, which can also be rendered “breath” or “wind”] of God moved upon the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:1–2).

In comparison, the Jaredite narrative follows the general pattern of chaos to order in the exodus from the Tower of Babel, where languages were being “confounded” and people were to be “scattered” (Ether 1:33), to a new beginning in the land of promise. A central feature of this exodus is the waters upon which the Jaredites travel (see Ether 2:2, 6, 16, 20, 22, 25; 3:3; 6:3–5, 7–8, 10–11). Narrative dialogue between the Lord and the brother of Jared describes these waters as the “great deep” (Ether 2:25), having “mountain waves” which “shall dash upon [the Jaredites],” painting a scene which is tumultuous and chaotic in nature. However, the Jaredites will be brought up “out of the depths” (Ether 2:24) of the chaotic waters and will reach the

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3 Charles H. Long, Alpha: The Myths of Creation (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1963), 111.
5 Ibid., 61.
promised land for the Lord will send a wind (i.e., breath or Spirit) from "out of [his] mouth" (Ether 2:24) to blow "upon the face of the waters, towards the promised land" (Ether 6:5). The "great deep" and "wind . . . upon the face of the waters" echoes almost word for word the biblical account of creation, connecting that great event with the Jaredite exodus in the mind of the reader.

Ether 2:1–3 also reflects Creation imagery in the "seed of every kind," "fowls of the air," "fish of the waters," "flocks," and even the creeping things of the earth—the "swarms of bees"—which the Jaredites take with them on their journey. The request in verse two that the Jaredites prepare a vessel for carrying fish seems odd to the modern reader, especially since the Jaredites would be traveling on water more than once (see Ether 2:6), but the imagery of Creation would not be complete without it, for every type of created being mentioned in Genesis 1–2 is represented here. These three simple verses could have been left out of the record if the writer's purpose was to report major events in the lives of the Jaredites, and, due to the difficulty of engraving on metal plates (see Jacob 4:1), superficial data would most likely be excluded. Therefore, the inclusion of this Creation-related data is a perfect example of how the selection of material gives the reader insight into the theme or themes which the author/editor tries to develop.

We see another example of this principle in the writer's selection of data which he uses to report the Jaredites' arrival in the promised land. In Ether 6:13, the author/editor writes that "they went forth upon the face of the land, and began to till the earth." Tilling the ground seems like such an ordinary thing to do. Why, then, would one waste time and space writing about such things? Such an apparently superfluous piece of information becomes more meaningful when we realize that tilling the earth had symbolic significance among various ancient societies. Mircea Eliade has noticed in his studies of ancient cultures and religions that "when possession is taken of a territory, . . . rites are performed that symbolically repeat the act of Creation: the uncultivated zone is first 'cosmicized,' then inhabited."6 Although different cul-

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tures have different ways of "creating" newly acquired territory (i.e., building an altar, temple, or other structure; establishing a "center" with a pole or edifice around which all other things are organized), tilling the ground is not an uncommon method of accomplishing this purpose. Thus, tilling the ground may symbolize the act of creation to the author/editor of the Jaredite record and therefore warrants inclusion.

Christ Imagery

The rapid movement of the narration from the Tower of Babel to the shore of the ocean (prior to the Jaredites' crossing) slows down significantly as the author/editor focuses the reader upon a theme through the literary device of dialogue. The writer reports a conversation which takes place between the Lord and the brother of Jared (see Ether 2:18–3:16, 21–27), and the primary focus of this dialogue is a discussion of the need for air and light in the barges which would be used for crossing the ocean. After the brother of Jared questions the Lord on what to do for air, the Lord tells him exactly how to obtain it: "Behold, thou shalt make a hole in the top, and also in the bottom; and when thou shalt suffer for air thou shalt unstop the hole and receive air" (Ether 2:20). However, when Jared's brother brings up the issue of light, the Lord merely says, "What will ye that I should do that ye may have light in your vessels?" (Ether 2:23). In contrast to the air, a necessary component to sustain life which is freely given by God, the brother of Jared must work out for himself the problem of light. Eventually, when presenting his plan to the Lord, the brother of Jared pleads: "Suffer not that they [the Jaredites] shall go forth across this raging deep in darkness; . . . therefore touch these stones, O Lord, with thy finger, and prepare them that they may shine forth in darkness" (Ether 3:3–4). This prayer for light produces more than what the offerer had expected. In sum, as the Lord touches the stones, the brother of Jared sees the divine finger

7 Note that the first two things Noah did after leaving the ark were (1) he built an altar and worshipped God and (2) he cultivated the ground and planted a vineyard (Genesis 8:20; 9:20).

8 Hence, God readily gives the solution for the air problem to the brother of Jared.
and is eventually privileged to see Christ (Ether 3:6, 13). When the reader analyzes the narrative as a whole, he or she finds that the answer to the brother of Jared’s plea for light is not necessarily limited to the illumination of the stones, though their presence in the narrative is significant, but it also encompasses Christ himself, the source of light. It is his finger that touches the stones, illuminating them. In other words, the brother of Jared’s diligent search and humble request for light brought him face to face with the Light. This imagery brings to mind the Savior’s words: “I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk [or, in this case, cross the “raging deep”] in darkness, but shall have the light of life” (John 8:12).

The stones of light play a significant role in the story, because the writer uses them to carry the imagery of Christ throughout the rest of the narrative. In chapter six, we read that the brother of Jared “did put forth the stones into the vessels which were prepared, one in each end thereof; and behold, they did give light unto the vessels” (Ether 6:2). However, in contrast to “the” stones in this verse, verse three omits any definite article in reference to stones and also “men, women, and children.” The author/editor seems specifically to ignore direct reference to the stones which the brother of Jared “molted” and the men, women, and children of the Jaredites: “And thus the Lord caused stones to shine in darkness, to give light unto men, women, and children, that they might not cross the great waters in darkness.” The absence of the definite articles prompts the reader to broaden his view, rather than focusing in on the actual stones and Jaredites of the story, allowing the imagery of Christ—who is the “light that shineth in darkness” (D&C 11:11), giving light or truth unto all men, women, and children—to surface.9

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9 Stones of light in ancient traditions are discussed in Hugh Nibley’s Lehi in the Desert/The World of the Jaredites/There Were Jaredites in the Collected Works of Hugh Nibley (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1988), 364–79. In this discussion, Nibley points out that a Pyrophilos or stone of light in Greek tradition is identified with the Epic of Gilgamesh’s “plant of life” (ibid., 435–36, n. 49), which in turn parallels the tree of life found in Eden. This parallel becomes significant when making a connection between Christ and stones of light, for in 1 Nephi the tree of life is likened to Christ. In 1 Nephi 11:4–6, the Spirit asks Nephi if he believes in the tree that his father saw, to which Nephi replies that he does. The Spirit then cries out, “Blessed art thou,
Temple Imagery

Temple Imagery often associated with temples from the ancient Near East also appear in the Jaredite narrative. For example, according to John Lundquist, the plan and measurements of a temple must be revealed by God to the king or prophet, and the plan must be carefully carried out. The Babylonian king Nabopolassar states that he obtained measurements for the temple tower in Babylon under the guidance of the gods Shamash, Adad, and Marduk. Also, the plans for Solomon’s temple are revealed by God to David (see 2 Samuel 7; 1 Kings 8). This same idea is found in the Jaredite narrative when the reader is informed that the Jaredites constructed their barges “according to the instructions of the Lord” (Ether 2:16).

Another common feature of ancient temples is that they are associated with the realm of the dead, the underworld, the afterlife, the grave. As the Jaredites cross the ocean, the author/editor describes them as being “buried in the deep” and “[brought] Nephi, because thou believest in the Son of the most high God.” The image of Christ as the tree of life is further clarified by the fact that Nephi is shown the vision of Christ’s birth in answer to the question, “Knowest thou the meaning of the tree?” (1 Nephi 11:21). This tree of life in Lehi and Nephi’s visions is indeed the tree of life from Eden, for when Laman and Lemuel ask the meaning of the tree, Nephi only replies, “It was a representation of the tree of life” (1 Nephi 15:22, emphasis added). More than likely, Nephi is making reference to the tree of life they are all familiar with, the one in Eden most likely mentioned in the brass plates. Thus, since stones of light may be seen as equivalent to the tree of life in ancient times (as mentioned above) and since Christ is also the tree of life, then the stones could be seen in the mind of an ancient writer as a symbolic representation of Christ.

The difficulty in stating that a text has temple imagery is that temples themselves are images and symbols which point to other “heavenly” things. It may be that the author/editor of the Jaredite narrative is not using imagery to point to actual temples, but rather he is pointing to the same things that temples do, thus the text and temples have similar characteristics.

11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
forth again upon the top of the waters” (Ether 6:6–7). Being “buried” and “brought forth again” conveys the image of death and resurrection, which Lundquist states is “the unifying principle between temple and tomb.”

Covenants and other means of establishing relationships between God and man are another common temple characteristic. The Israelites symbolically demonstrate this fact through the Ark of the Covenant, which is found in the Holy of Holies (Exodus 26:33). Before the Jaredites enter their barges and obtain the promised land, they establish a covenant with the Lord. The Lord says, “whatsoever nation shall possess [the promised land] shall serve God, or they shall be swept off” (Ether 2:9). In other words, the covenant is that God would give them a new land if they would serve him, otherwise the penalty is that they would have no claim upon the land and would be “swept off.” A similar account is given in Genesis where Noah does not enter the ark until a covenant is established: “But with thee will I establish my covenant and thou shalt come into the ark” (Genesis 6:18).

The Jaredites’ action upon arriving in the promised land reflects yet another temple characteristic. The text reads, “when they had set their feet upon the shores of the promised land they bowed themselves down . . . before the Lord” (Ether 6:12). Menahem Haran describes the term “before the Lord” as “an indication of the existence of a temple at the site, since this expression stems from the basic conception of the temple as a divine dwelling-place.”

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14 Ibid. It is interesting to note here that the boats described in Mesopotamian flood narratives have a “roof . . . like Apsu, the Heavens” (Victor H. Matthews and Donald C. Benjamin, Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East (New York: Paulist, 1991), 24. Depicting the heavens or the sky on the lid or ceiling of a man-made structure is a practice usually limited to tombs and temples in the ancient world. For example, many Egyptian coffins and tombs depict the sky goddess Nut on their lid or ceiling, respectively; see A. J. Spencer’s Death in Ancient Egypt (New York: Penguin, 1991), 165. Although this similarity between coffins or tombs and boats is not sufficient to draw any definite conclusions, it does support the imagery suggested by the Jaredite narrative of the barges being tomblike.

tioned in the Jaredite account, being "before the Lord" certainly has temple imagery, as Haran suggests. The promised land as the divine dwelling-place is further suggested in the imagery the author/editor creates through the use of the phrases "they bowed themselves down" and "did shed tears of joy before the Lord." These phrases bring to mind the blessings of the faithful who, after overcoming the world, humbly and joyfully enter into the presence of the Lord.

Conclusion

There is significantly more imagery related to the Creation, Christ, and temples in the Jaredite narrative than what I have briefly pointed out here, and imagery related to the Flood and the Exodus can also be seen through a careful reading of the text. However, in spite of all the parallels and imagery which appear in this story, one main question remains. Why? For what purpose are these images present? One answer may be that through the use of imagery, the author/editor prompts us to read for metaphorical meaning in addition to the literal historical meaning, thus giving us the opportunity to "liken the scriptures unto ourselves." Perhaps if we look beyond the literal meaning of the text and see the Jaredite narrative as symbolizing a journey through life, a common theme of temple-related dramas, a journey which includes the re-creation of the human soul through a covenant relationship with the Lord, then the reason for the imagery becomes clear. Through imagery and by slowing the narrative pace using dialogue, the author/editor stresses the need for the light of Christ as a guide while making this journey through life. Jared's brother illustrates this in a question: "O Lord, in them [the vessels] there is no light; whither shall we steer?" (Ether 2:19). The question, strange as it may be (it seems to focus on the need of light for knowing where to steer rather than for seeing), fits beautifully the imagery of Christ as the Light, who provides the humble traveler with the proper directions and the means to steer his life on a correct course that leads to the presence of God in the "promised land." But regardless of the reason for imagery in the Jaredite record, it is certain that the Book of Mormon contains
lessons of breadth and depth, and even the historical narratives are not to be passed over lightly.

Conclusions

There is singularly more imagery attached to the Creation.

Chapter 1 is incomplete in the narrative structure than what I have previously pointed out here. Any imagery related to the food and the

existence can go to scene throughout a control narrative of the text. However, in spite of all the breadth and imagery which plays into

what you need to a discussion the internal context is missing. This is

an opportunity to "lock the structure into an essence" where we fear

perhaps if we lack personal the literal meaning of the text and see

the collective narrative as a unifying force, a journey which in a

common trope of Jewish-Literary Graham's a journey which

becomes clearer through the affirmation of the need for the

pace could define "the synonyms and the common meaning of the

light of faith as a guide with the sound of ancient verses" to sound

like a "proper introduction in a discussion." On what is from [the

assay] that is no right, another spell we hear. (Ep. 1:12)

The question remains of why or to focus on the need

of light or knowing afraid to see more than we see. The

possibility the imagery of the light is "the light" while bringing the

terms to bear with the proper clue fiction and the meaning of the

promises and the question of the reason for imagery in the

James here is clear, if it is certain that the book of Mormon contains