

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Bird Island

A Lecture by Hugh Nibley

"Bird Island" is a transcription of a talk given several years ago which has become one of the most popular of the Nibley samizdat.

It will come as news to all Latter-day Saints that after many years of deep scholarly research the Hill Cumorah has finally been located—at the north end of Bird Island in Utah Lake. Those familiar with the area may wonder why such a flat place should be called a hill. Ah! You forget, this was the hill Ramah before the great destruction. "And then the whole face of the land was changed," (3 NEPHI 8:12) "and the high places became low." Moreover, as a scholar whose name you all would recognize points out, since it would have to be a big hill many records were buried in there. He believed Popacatphtl was big enough, but if *everything* was changed, a big hill would have to become a small island. More important, the very name of the island proves its identity.

The name Bird Island is indeed a modern name, as we have learned after exhaustive investigation, and probably refers to the presence on the island of birds or of creatures sufficiently like birds to suggest to the mind of the ingenuous observer the actual presence on the island (and this assumes also the presence of an island—another control) of bird-like objects. But though this is the modern name of the island, to be sure, there is no good reason for doubting that birds were on the island for a long time, perhaps even before the island received its name. The Egyptian word for bird is *apid*. If we drop the vowel, which is expendable, and change the consonants only slightly—such as to be hardly perceptible to the Egyptian ear—we get the Hebrew word *zippur*, *zippor*, which by a remarkable coincidence means "bird." The feminine form is of course *Zipporah*, but the Hebrews wrote from right to left, as we learn in our third year Hebrew class. Read *Zipporah* from right to left and what do you get? *Haroppist*. The "o" can be conveniently dropped since Hebrew doesn't write the vowels. This then is an unmistakable allusion to the psalms of David. But since the Hebrews wrote from right to left, and David himself was a Hebrew, we must read his name too in the correct

Hugh Nibley is Hugh Nibley.

direction. The result is the word *Divad*, or *Divot*. This can only refer to the violent removal of the hill by the forces of nature.

If these internal evidences are not enough to clinch the case, we have numerous points of reference in surrounding geography. It was my great-grandfather Adoration Weevil, who when he was living in Holden, had a dream that Zarahemla was situated at the southwest corner of our orchard. Even if one were to question the validity of revelation, the fact remains that the inscription in nearby Chalk Creek Canyon proves this point. This would mean that the narrow neck of land is northward somewhere. My companion and I first located it in Rock Canyon near Provo, which does have a sea on the east, the Atlantic Ocean, and a sea on the west, the Pacific, and does indeed lead to the land northward if one turns off at Rock Canyon Campground and follows the road north to Provo Canyon. In spite of this remarkable coincidence of details, we have lately come to favor the Jordan Narrows as a more likely location of the narrow neck of land, both because of its name "The Narrows" and of its greater accessibility.

An archaeological field survey of the island has already yielded valuable Nephite artifacts, the most significant of which is part of a pre-Columbian zipper. Since at the time of the discovery nothing whatever was known about the use of the zipper among the pre-Columbian Americans, it was necessary to offer a course in the subject at the Brigham Young University. It was not until one of our most promising students produced a master's thesis, *summa cum laude*, on the subject, under the title *An evaluation of some aspects of the possible employment of metal alloy talon fasteners by the pre-Columbian ichthyophagous troglodytes of the southern lateral of Utah Lake extension of lacus monovalentis as based on the opinions of thirty-five selected male and female non-vegetarian students between the ages of thirteen years, eight months and fifteen years, two months, five days from three medially selected classes at the junior high school level of the Juab School District: A study in values and probabilities* that it became possible to give a definitive answer to the question of the provenance of the zipper. (We use the unscientific term "zipper" here in deference to any non-professional archaeologist who may wish to follow the steps of the investigation.)

It seems that the father of one of the students, who was also the uncle of another, had gone fishing and stopped at Bird Island to cool a bottle of 7-Up (see our appendix on the cooling qualities of Bird Island mud) and that he did indeed leave his jacket on the island. On close examination it was determined that the zipper was in fact attached to a badly worn windbreaker with the label of J. C. Penney (probably referring to a line of retail stores that bear that name). But since the zipper was in much better repair than the jacket, it was believed by our trained observers that the zipper and the jacket cannot have been contemporary, or, as the layman would say, of the same age. Moreover, it is absolutely out of the question that a Nephite zipper could possibly have belonged originally to a hunting jacket from J. C. Penneys. This was pointed out in a three day symposium at the Brigham Young University, in which it was concluded after long and careful consideration, that the zipper and the jacket were brought together at a later date, as is plainly indicated by the fact that the two had been obviously joined together by modern techniques of machine sewing.

From that it follows that the incongruous conjunction of an ancient Nephite zipper and a modern garment is indeed the result of later manipulation, thus vindicating the prior antiquity of the zipper. The question of whether this could be a forgery or not sinks into insignificance when one considers the difficulty of forging a workable zipper and, even more important, the lack of apparent motive for hiding such an object produced at such pains, and with such an expenditure of patience and ingenuity, in the mud where the chances of it ever being found by an interested party are, to say the least, unlikely. A federal grant of two hundred and fifty dollars was requested for continued work on the project, but since the Administration felt that such aid would undermine the integrity and weaken the characters of the recipients, the money was supplied by the Church instead.

I would now like to show you Dr. W. H. Sterling's reproduction of the so-called *Izapastella* number five, of which he was the discover. This reproduction is remarkable for its almost total lack of resemblance to the local reproduction familiar to students of the Book of Mormon. Apparently Dr. Sterling does not have access to such refined technical aids as a magnifying glass. The remarkable thing about this document is that even in Dr. Sterling's reproduction, we have the signature of Moroni clearly and unmistakably before our eyes. I call your attention to the two fishes in the upper right hand corner. Now, as G. B. Shaw has shown, a possible phonetic writing for "fish" in English is "gh" as in *enough*, *rough*; "o" as in *women*, "i" and "sh" (ti) as in *nation*, *ration* and so forth. So "ghoti" spells fish. Be that as it may, even a layman will recognize that a goatee is a beard; he may also recall that Aaron's beard reached the hem of his garment. Now "hem" in Egyptian also means warrior, and who will doubt that Moroni was a great warrior? Beyond the shadow of a doubt, Moroni has signed his name on this remarkable stella.

The three pyramids, at the bottom—plainly of Egyptian origin—indicate that the writing is Egyptian. We should notice here that the figure identified locally as Lemuel has a long tail and has been called a monkey, and this confirms the identification since this is the Egyptian scribe's way of indicating that Lemuel aped his brother Laman, behind whom he is standing. Moreover, the resemblance between a small spider monkey and a lemur is remarkable, as is also the obvious affinity between the names lemur and Lemuel, the "r" and "l" being interchangeable in Semitic languages.

The object held by the figure in front of Laman has been identified as a flute. What the layman is liable to overlook is that there is no indication that the iron rod of Lehi's dream was not hollow. It survives in early American tradition as the flute of the spider lady (note the significant allusion to the spider monkey), which was ritually filled with sugar-coated pimientos, symbolic of the earth mother's power of turning herself into the sacred drum, the beating of which made a sound which to the primitive ear must have resembled that of the snapping of a crocodile's jaws, such a sound as "Lehi, Lehi, Lehi." It was this drum that caused the rain to fertilize the upper side of the hallucinogenic mushroom, *agaricus campestris whoopie*, which, when eaten by the natives with a mixture of creosote, buttermilk of the giant sloth, and the breastfeathers of the Walker's flightless hummingbird gives the devotee the sensation of walking on imitation plover's eggs. The significance of all this for the Book of Mormon student needs no commentary.

Some laymen have had the audacity, which we might call the impertinence, to challenge some of our conclusions. The only fit reply to such is that they are hardly in a position to question the opinions of eminent, trained, seasoned, degree-holding professionals. On the other hand, there are those who ask why, since our conclusions are based on interpretations of Egyptian glyphs, we have not bothered to consult any Egyptologists. The answer to that is simple: we are but humble servants of the Lord who neither expect nor receive serious consideration from the haughty and arrogant representatives of worldly learning. We would no more think of asking their opinion than we would of publishing in their journals.

With the discovery of Bird Island's zipper, a new and fascinating phase of Oriental studies has been opened up at the BYU. And now, since there are no questions, I would like to invite you to our next lecture which will be on the subject of Jaredite eggbeaters and their designation in the Adamic language. I thank you.

A Nibley Post Script:

The Bird Island Fantasy was not meant to be read by anybody. It was recited many years ago at a social gathering of the entire Division of Religion at BYU, and was scrambled at the time by the most diabolically refined encoding process so far devised by the mind of man, being read in a rapid bubble from a quickly scribbled script into a faulty tape recorder, picked up by a desperately typical typist, and then corrected by an editor with just enough knowledge to overlook the most extravagant errors of the typist while patiently altering the few things the typist got right. Then it was widely circulated without the writer's knowledge and appears in this journal over his hysterical protest.

Actually the story has a moral, but how easily may the casual reader, lacking the admonition of the composer's great reverberating voice, be carried away by the sheer beauty of the proposition to overlook its profounder implications. For those who may have missed it, the moral is that everything goes in a free discussion as long as the discussion is going on—give it time and everything will come out in the wash.

The trouble with our Bird Island arguments is not that they are silly, but that they stop too soon.

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