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**Ecological Nomadism versus Epic Heroism in Ether: Nibley’s Works on the Jaredites**

Reviewed by David B. Honey

Among the works of Dr. Hugh Nibley recently republished by F.A.R.M.S. in its series *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* are two contributions on the Jaredites. *The World of the Jaredites*, initially published in 1952 by Bookcraft (together with *Lehi in the Desert*) and *There Were Jaredites*, originally issued as separate articles in the *Improvement Era* from 1956 to 1957, have been printed as *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites*. Each work reviewed here takes one cultural pattern as its basic consideration. *The World of the Jaredites* places the Jaredites in the ancient and exotic setting of Central Asia as the traditional patterns of nomadic life are surveyed. The pattern of epic adventures essayed by our heroes after they settled and prospered in ancient America is the subject of *There Were Jaredites*.

*The World of the Jaredites* was a natural companion to *Lehi in the Desert* chiefly because both works deal with the culture of Book of Mormon peoples as they journeyed in traditional Old World settings towards the promised land. These works are therefore happily paired in this reprinting. On the other hand, *There Were Jaredites* deals with a different setting and theme, Jaredite life as a settled populace in the New World. Consequently, there is some dissonance between the themes of nomadism and epic (but still sedentary) heroism even though

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1 Other works by Hugh Nibley that concern nomadism have been reviewed in brief by David B. Honey, “Heroic Legitimation in Traditional Nomadic Societies,” in John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks, eds., *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1990), 1:562-83.

2 The new edition of *Lehi in the Desert* published in vol. 5 of the *CWHN* is reviewed by Stephen Ricks in this issue of *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon*.
they both deal with Jaredite history, albeit at different times. This difference is a result of both themes representing mutually exclusive lifestyles. This review will attempt to mediate between the competing modes of existence and address a few side issues.

But first, a note of explanation. One hesitates to storm the heights of Nibley’s erudition armed only with meager intellectual armament; fortunately, another strategy is called for because, due to the impressive quality and main lines of argumentation of these works, I find myself allied with him. This review will rather reconnoiter Nibley’s thematic battlements and at the same time attempt to shore up minor deficiencies in his conceptual defenses and repair minor gaps in his bibliographical bulwarks, natural and expected weak points given the passage of over thirty-five years.

**Ecological Nomadism in Jared**

*The World of the Jaredites* has been republished with minimal adjustments to the original text. The only discernable differences are in the endnotes (which appeared as footnotes in the 1952 edition), where an occasional updating has been effected, by no means exhaustive, and some references have been simplified. Such standard Latin phrases as *passim* and *op. cit.* have been purged, as have such formulaic abbreviations as “ff.” after a page reference. Also, some notes referring to classical authors have been fortified by citations to specific editions and the inclusion of English translations of appropriate quotes. But there has been no full-scale effort to revise or expand the original text to take advantage of the scholarship of the last thirty-five years. The 1952 edition was published

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3 Nibley consulted an impressively wide range of sources on the nomads. Even so, with the progress of scholarship, it is impossible even to hint at the breadth of studies available today. However, some indispensable reference works that have appeared since Nibley’s work, excluding the critically important Chinese, Japanese, and Russian bibliographies, include the following: Denis Sinor, *Introduction a l’étude de l’Eurasie Centrale* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1963); Gyula Moravcsik, *Bizantinoturcica*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Akademie, 1958); J. Harmatta, ed., *Prolegomena to the Sources on the History of Pre-Islamic Central Asia* (Budapest: Akademiai Kiado, 1979); and Henry Schwarz, *Bibliotheca Mongolica, Part I: Works in English, French, and German* (Bellingham: Western Washington University, 1978); Don Lee, *An Annotated Bibliography on Inner Asia* (Bloomington: Eastern Press, 1983); and Don Lee, *An Annotated Archaeological
without illustrations; in this reprinting two maps have been added to chapter three, and one illustration of the throne of Darius to chapter four, all taken from the 1951-52 Improvement Era articles which formed the basis for the 1952 book. Furthermore, some subsection titles have been eliminated with no other alteration of the text.

Six chapters comprise this work. "A Twilight World" introduces the problem and sources. Nibley employs an epistolary style in addressing a hypothetical "Professor F," a style maintained throughout both The World of the Jaredites and There Were Jaredites (where it is modified into a "conversational" style). The problem to be addressed in this work is the fifth cultural form encountered in the Book of Mormon, the "twilight world of proto-history" of Central Asia. A major theme of the book is introduced early, that the Jaredites had been driven reluctantly from their homes, an important point to which we will return. The episodes of "The Tower" and "The Stolen Garment" form subsections of this chapter.

Chapter two, "Departure," commences with the confusion of tongues at the Tower of Babel and the consequent scattering of peoples, including the Jaredites. The section "A Note on the Weather" links up the terrible sand storms of Central Asia as reported by ancient and modern travelers with the violent winds that dispersed the peoples at the Tower and drove the Jaredites across the sea. "The Way Out," a discussion of the route across the steppes taken by the Jaredites, concludes this chapter. It stresses the common culture that existed in the belt of territory that stretched virtually from what today is Hungary to Korea, and is a good prelude to the next chapter in this work.

Chapter three, "Jared on the Steppes," treats nomadic culture in detail and will be the focus of our attention presently. Chapter four, "Jaredite Culture: Splendor and Shame," discusses the episodes from Jaredite history of the institution of lifelong imprisonment and the dancing damsel as part of a coup and sets them in widespread Old World contexts; also treated in such a context are the elements of steel, glass, silk, hunting, animals, and animal preserves. Chapter six, entitled "They Take Up the Sword," details the unfortunate pattern of the extinction of civilizations as illustrated with the Jaredites. The speed and

Bibliography of Selected Works on Northern and Central Asia (Bloomington: Eastern, 1983).
great distances over which these wars of extermination were concluded is stressed. Once again Jaredite practices are compared with typical nomadic ones. The concluding chapter is “A Permanent Heritage,” in which Nibley surveys the survival of Jaredite customs and even stragglers among the Nephites.

Chapter three, “Jared on the Steppes,” contains the most material on the ecology of the Jaredites, and it is here that we find the lifestyle of the Old World Jaredites portrayed in sufficient detail for comparison with the later New World lifestyle described in There Were Jaredites. Nowhere does Dr. Nibley use the term “ecological” to describe nomadism in the record of Jared. Yet it is implied by the attempt in this chapter to place the Jaredites in the typical camp of Central Asian nomads who are ecological nomads. “Ecological” nomadism is the type that is practiced habitually as a recurring pattern of existence—not a mere expediency to insure survival in times of turmoil or flight—and that utilizes different pastures at different seasons. The pattern of existence with which he compares the Jaredite model is derived from nomadic life as viewed by such widely separated observers in time as “modern travelers in Central Asia,” “the spies and ambassadors of the Byzantine court,” “classical historians from Cassiodorus to Herodotus,” and “Russian archaeologists” (pp. 157-58). He writes, as a methodological maxim, that “we are limiting our curiosity to the sort of thing that happened. The exact time and place of any specific event are no concern of ours. . . . We specialize in patterns” (p. 158).

In the first section of this chapter, “The Moving Host,” Nibley contrasts the migratory mode of Lehi’s band with that of the Jaredites. The migration of the latter is characterized by the terror of the weather,4 by the make-up of the group—a tribal conglomeration of friends and supporters rather than of family members,5 and, most importantly, by the abundance of flocks of

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4 The terror of the weather was one of the most prominent elements associated with Central Asia by the sedentary inhabitants surrounding its periphery. For this and similar elements, see Ruth Meserve, “The Inhospitable Land of the Barbarian,” Journal of Asian History 16 (1982): 51-89.

5 Actually, the basic nomadic social unit is the “tent,” i.e., one family. But Nibley is right, as commonly two to five “tents” form “herding units” based on mutual friendship and trust. On this practice in a modern nomadic tribe, the Basseri, see Fredrik Barth, Nomads of South Persia (Boston: Little and Brown, 1961), 11-12; for a medieval Mongolian
animals of all kinds as the wandering tribes seek a promised land that they might settle. Nomads like the Jaredites are on the move, says Nibley, because they are in reality refugees, pushed from their home farms and pastures by other tribes who had been themselves displaced by weather-induced ruin to their own homelands. Nomadic wanderers are described as concurrent hunters, herdsmen, and farmers, who from time to time take to their great wagons for their epic emigrations. The next section, “Concerning Deseret,” is related to the theme of nomadic migration because, according to Nibley’s authority Eduard Meyer, all of the major migrations out of Central Asia were conducted under the sacred rubric of the bee or “Deseret.”

The last section, “Early Asiatic and Jaredite Civilizations: A General View,” attempts to delineate the process of state formation in the vast spaces of the steppes and to place the Jaredite civilization comfortably in this process. Nibley rightly focuses on individual great men and the steps followed in their rise; his account of recruiting a host and forming confederacies is remarkably complete and parallels the same process discernable in Chinese accounts of the nomads. The only major objection from recent scholarship would be the need for sedentary states to provide the raw materials of nomadic statehood, whereas in Nibley’s view the nomadic state produces them.


6 The name and concept of Deseret were later developed by Nibley in Abraham in Egypt (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), chap. 8, “The Deseret Connection.” See esp. pp. 238-45 for the connection between Deseret and migrations.

7 Honey, “Heroic Legitimation in Traditional Nomadic Sources,” isolates the following elements as crucial: personal prowess, aristocratic heritage and legitimate lineage, the sanction of heaven and the legitimation of religion, and the use of gifts and oaths in gathering and maintaining a following over vast distances. Nibley treats all of these elements.

8 Because ecologically there is no need for any political organization beyond the tribe, great men who attempt to form supratribal confederacies, states, or empires find it impossible unless outside sources are used. These sources are luxury goods provided by sedentary civilization to be used as gifts to bind the newly created aristocracy and bureaucracy in allegiance. On this view of nomadic state formation, see Thomas Barfield, “The Hsiung-nu Imperial Confederacy: Organization and Foreign Policy,”
Despite the intriguing parallels discovered between Central Asiatic nomads and the Jaredites, however, the comparison is not very useful in trying to determine the ecology of the Jaredites. This is because specifics can be as important as patterns in historical comparisons. The pattern of life that does emerge from Nibley’s many authorities is not clearly ecological nomadism because he focuses on those elements of steppe life that parallel Jaredite practices in the Old World; but since the specific nomadic peoples he cites were ecological nomads, we must look closer into this pattern of life. Nibley describes the Jaredites as “reluctant to leave their homes, and when they were finally ‘driven out of the land,’ they took flocks, herds, and seeds of every kind, together with the knowledge and skills (they even took books with them) necessary to establish a great civilization—all these being the necessary products of a long-established and widespread economy” (p. 160). Repeatedly he emphasizes their reluctance to leave and the fact that they were impelled to do so by the weather. This Jaredite pattern is incompatible with the pattern of ecological nomadism as developed by recent scholarship for a number of reasons. The first one is a question of what nomads do on the daily round; the second has to do with what causes nomadizing. The third is a problem of chronology.

Ecological nomads are not predominantly cattle herders, at least not those in Central Asia—they herd chiefly sheep and horses; cattle come in a distant third ahead of camels and goats. David Morgan, in discussing the ecology of steppe nomads in general, characterizes the herds and their usage as follows:

The nomads relied above all on sheep and horses. Sheep provided skins for clothing, wool for the manufacture of the characteristic felt tents (gers, often called yurts in the West) that were the nomads’ homes, mutton, milk and cheese for food, and dung for fuel. Horses were the principal means of transport, both of men and goods, and were essential for

9 We must stress that since Nibley compared the Jaredites to Central Asian nomads, we shall also focus on this type of nomadism. Hence, other types, ecological or otherwise, which may feature different

hunting, which was a major source of food and incidentally a method of military training... and they were needed for warfare. Their milk, when fermented, provided the staple alcoholic drink, qumis.

... Less important, but still an integral part of the stepped economy, were camels, and oxen, which were used to pull carts.10

Therefore, although cattle are present, they are never so predominant as they appear in Nibley, nor as central to the nomadic ethos as compared to the role of beef in the “heroic age” described by Nibley in There Were Jaredites. For instance, the typical ratio of sheep to cows among the Mongols of the decade of the 1950s was 91 sheep to 17 cows per family, or 16 sheep to 3 cows per individual.11 The most valuable herd animal is clearly the sheep, although the most prized and the greatest source of wealth is the horse.12

Furthermore, a distinction must be made between the nomadic pastoralists and nonnomadic pastoralists who practice transhumance, such as the Manchu-Solons. Transhumance, according to Krader, is “where farming and herding jointly comprise the subsistence base of a community.”13 “Under transhumance,” continues Krader, “the livestock not being used for food or work are driven out to the pastures seasonally by village herdsmen while the core of the village remains at home and tills the soil. ... Nomadic pastoralism, in contrast to mixed

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elements than those of the Central Asiatic mode, will only rarely be considered in this review.


12 On this point see Denis Sinor, “Horse and Pasture in Inner Asian History,” Oriens Extremus 19 (December 1972): 171-83.

pastoralism and farming, established itself later." Nibley cites the Manchu-Solons as a typical example of hunters, cattlemen, or cultivators, each guise being adopted "as conditions require or permit" (p. 187); but they were not nomads.

When the nomad wandered, he was not migrating or emigrating but nomadizing. This means that he followed his flocks of sheep and herds of horses from one pasture to another, usually over a set route that took him through territory over which he claimed some sort of temporary ownership. Marco Polo described the ecological nomadism of the Mongols in these words:

The Tartars (his name for the Mongols) commonly feed many flocks of cows, mares and sheep, for which reason they never stay in one place, but retire to live in the winter in plains and in hot places where they have grass in plenty and good pastures for their beasts; and in the summer they move themselves over to live in cold places in mountains and in valleys where they find water and woods and good pasture for keeping their beasts. The nomads were motivated by the exigencies of their economy. In contrast to this, the Jaredites were seeking a promised land (Ether 1:41-42); they were emigrants, not nomads. Furthermore, people fleeing from natural disaster or foreign depredation are refugees, again not nomads. Even if nomadic means are

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14 Ibid.
15 Imanishi Kinji posits that nomadism originated from herders following the natural inclinations of their flocks to migrate; he draws this from his observations that flocks in Mongolia often will leave one pasture even though it is still fit for grazing, and move onto another pasture even though it had been abandoned by a previous Mongol herder as supposedly deteriorated. See his "Nomadism: An Ecological Interpretation" in Silver Jubilee Volume of the Zinbun-Kagaku-Kenkyusyo, Kyoto University (Kyoto: Nissha, 1954), 466-79.
adopted as a mode of travel, such people do not become nomads.

The origins of nomadism are somewhat different than described by Nibley. Although in line with the scholarly thinking of his day, his theories of the influence of weather on nomadism are no longer held. Neither gradual desiccation nor droughts, as variously suggested by Toynbee or Huntington, can account for either the origins of nomadism or the setting in motion of nomadic peoples. Indeed, even the displacement of one people, including a nomadic one, by another conquering people is now viewed by some as no more than a literary topos.

Chronologically, nomadism did not develop until the ninth and eighth centuries B.C. All authorities on nomadism are in agreement on this point. Also, in Nibley’s discussion of the origin of riding it is grossly anachronistic to refer to the Mongols as having lived during the sixth century B.C. (p. 189), for the name Mongol dates no earlier than the T’ang period (A.D. 618-907)—and even this is questionable—and the Mongols as a

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18 On this see Detlev Fehling, Herodotus and His “Sources,” Citation, Invention and Narrative Art, tr. J. G. Howie (Leeds: Francis Cairns, 1989), 46-48.

19 See n. 17 above.

20 For various theories on the dating and meaning of the ethnic name Mongol, see Sechin Jagchid and Paul Hyer, Mongolia’s Culture and Society (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1979), 6. For references to the scholarly debate concerning the earliest appearance of the name in Chinese historical
people did not emerge as a distinct polity until the tenth century, under the name of Tatar (Marco Polo’s “Tartars”). It is true however, as Nibley asserts, that driving did precede riding: the mounted nomad was not portrayed in art until the ninth century B.C., signaling that he was already in full form by this time.

Based on a closer look at certain specifics of nomadism, we must conclude that the overall pattern of Jaredite life in their Old World trek towards the promised land does not match that of ecological nomadism. This interpretive framework was most likely unintentional, caused by having overlooked the differences between ecological nomadism and other forms of pastoralism. Since the scientific study of nomadism had barely begun in the 1950s, it is no disparagement of Nibley to point out sources, consult Louis Ligeti, “Le Tabghatch, un dialecte de la language sien-pi,” in Louis Ligeti, ed., Mongolian Studies, Bibliotheca Orientalis Hungarica XIV (Amsterdam: Grüner, 1970), 269, n. 9.

21 For the rise of the Mongols, see René Grousset, The Empire of the Steppes: A History of Central Asia, tr. Naomi Walford (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1970), 189-97; Paul Pelliot, “Researches sur les Mongols au temps des Leao et des Kin,” T'oung Pao 26 (1928-29): 126-28; and Paul Ratchnevsky, Činggis-Khan: Sein Leben und Wirken (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1983), 1-18. The most important medieval Chinese sources on the origins and rise of the Mongols, the Meng-Ta pei-lu or Record for Providing against the Mongol-Tatars by Chao Hung (1195-1246) and the Hei-Ta shih-lüeh or Epitome of the Affairs of the Black Tatars by P‘eng Ta-yá (fl. 1214) and Hsü T‘ing (fl. 1235), have been recently translated by Peter Olbricht and Elisabeth Pinks, Meng-Ta pei-lu und Hei-Ta shih-lüeh. Chinesische Gesandtenberichte über die frühen Mongolen 1221 und 1237, Asiatische Forschungen, Bd. 56 (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1980). Because of the complicated and composite nature of both the medieval works and the modern translation, it is safest to consult first Igor De Rachewiltz, “On a Recent Translation of the Meng-Ta Pei-lu and Hei-Ta Shih-Lüeh: A Review Article,” Monumenta Serica 35 (1981-83): 571-82.

Nibley presents a different interpretive framework for the history of the Jaredites in the New World, that of "epic heroism." Contained in the last section of volume 5 of The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, There Were Jaredites consists of five chapters, each of which delineates the "heroic milieu" of various eras and regions of the ancient world, and again employs the "epistolary form," modified into a dialogue between "Professor F" and a newcomer, "Mr. Blank."

Chapter one, "The Heroic Age," sets the stage for discussion by defining an heroic or epic milieu to be the cultural equivalent of the Homeric world as described in the Iliad and Odyssey. Since similar themes and events are found in the epic poetry of other cultures, Nibley concludes that every ancient society went through an "heroic age" that is reflected in its native epic poetry, and that "epic poetry in general is not the product of a national spirit or a poet's fancy but before everything else of the Volkerwanderungszeit—the time of the Great Migrations" (p. 289). This chapter, after elaborating on the meaning of the formidable German tag, is largely concerned with isolating the epic elements as discerned in world literature by H. Munro Chadwick.23 These elements in the main include the following: a concentration on individuals, usually an aristocratic hero with superhuman but not supernatural powers; a forced relocation or migration in a time of social collapse or world calamity; a military hierarchy and pervasive interest in warfare, often to the

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extinction of entire peoples with only the king remaining alive; feasting and drinking in great castles, usually on beef, bread, and beer; and blood oaths and terrible revenge.24

The remaining chapters examine the “heroic ages” of various civilizations. Chapter two, “Egypt Revisited,” introduces the theme of nomads versus farmers and discusses the founding of Egypt by the first Pharaoh as a process of invasion and investment. It links up many Egyptian institutions with the heroic elements discussed in chapter one. Chapter three, “The Babylonian Background,” continues the process of linking up yet another culture with the heroic elements identified by Chadwick. We again see cattle-raiding invaders becoming conquerors and founding kings. In chapter four, “Epic Milieu in the Old Testament,” Abraham is held up as the representative figure from the Old Testament who typifies both wandering nomad and sedentary citizen, a marriage of lifestyles typical of the heroic age. However, this chapter soon leaves its stated theme and ranges widely over “the epic worlds of Ugarit and the Hurrians, the Hittites, the Phoenicians, the Greeks, the Persians, the Romans, the Celts, the Germans and Scandinavians, the Slavs, and the heroic cultures of the late Middle Ages, which take their cue from the Arabs and Persians,” as Nibley courteously warns the reader up front (p. 380). The Celts are actually not treated until the final chapter, “Our Own People,” where the heroic ages of the Celtic, Frankish, Gothic, Germanic, and Scandinavian traditions are surveyed. Nibley drops the epistolary style for most of this chapter in his need to cover much ground in little space; he resumes it to end the work. A subsection of this chapter treats “The Book of Ether as an Epic” and will receive most of our attention presently.

Also included are two appendices. “East Coast or West Coast” discusses a particular Native American legend on the founders of the Chichimeca peoples, who seem to have followed an itinerary similar to the Jaredites. Second, “How Far to Cumorah?” cites the Benjamin Cluff expedition of 1900 to South America as an example of how easily Nephite or Lamanite

24 Arnold Toynbee, A Study of History, 12 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934-61), vol. 8, part 3, “Heroic Ages,” includes most of these same characteristics in his own conception of the heroic age which he posits was formed by the decay of civilizations into barbarous groups whose loyalty is turned from the state towards individual great men.
armies could have conducted continent-wide campaigns. They have been slightly edited from their original appearances in the 1952 edition of *Lehi in the Desert and the World of the Jaredites*.

As with the former work, Nibley again specializes in patterns, not specifics, especially those patterns found in the epic poems of the past. As a statement of methodology the following is typical:

As a historical source for "particular incidents and events" these old poems may not be worth a bean, but the sort of thing they describe, the things that happen recurrently, familiar scenes, and accepted patterns of behavior may be reliably reported and carefully confirmed in their verses. In other words, it is possible to detect in the early English ballads just such a genuine cultural milieu as one discovers in Homer. (p. 289)

The congruence between heroic ages widely separated in time and space is convincingly portrayed, and the pattern of Jaredite life is tailored neatly into this epic context. I see no reason, methodological or factual, to challenge the depiction of Jaredite civilization as "heroic" in both its larger concerns and daily details of existence. The interpretive framework hence fits the Jaredites and serves to bring them to life from historical contexts that are familiar to us. It is on an important side issue not affecting the framework that I must concentrate.

Early on Nibley hints that, because epic writing can take may forms but always deals with the same themes, the book of Ether was itself an epic (p. 292). The penultimate section of the fifth chapter, "The Book of Ether as an Epic," suggests that it has been divested of its epic form by the editing of Moroni but that originally Ether was a true epic. The proof, according to Nibley's persona Mr. Blank, is in the power of the work:

The most remarkable thing about a true epic is the way in which it surpasses all other literature in power and directness, a peculiar force and impact that renders a real epic impossible to imitate or translate. Only a real epic milieu can produce it. . . . Moroni in editing Ether is keenly aware of his inability to do justice to the writing before him. It just can't be done, he says, and he is right. He plainly tells us that the original Ether is a type of composition unfamiliar
to the Nephites, "who like ourselves obviously had no true epic literature." (p. 406)

Even if one is willing to concede that the powerful effect of part of the Book of Mormon derives from its genre instead of its message, there are major problems with considering the book of Ether as an edited epic.

The first problem is the nature of epics. Nibley states that "real epics tell the truth. . . . A real epic describes a real world" (p. 407). But the ancient Greeks, namely Plato and Aristotle, reserved the genre of tragedy for "imitating life."25 The epic was more concerned with larger-than-life portrayals of heroic struggles which may or may not have contained authentic details of everyday life. It seems certain that most of the details in Homer are authentic only for his own times, not for an earlier heroic age.26 And Toynbee has convincingly shown how little epic literature has to do with preserving historical facts.27

Another problem is the basic function of epic literature in religious settings. Again, Plato criticized the genre of epic as

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26 Plato, Republic II, 378, complains that the epic "tales of Homer and Hesiod" are erroneous representations of the nature of both gods and heroes—"as when a painter paints a portrait not having the shadow of likeness to the original." (On epic in Hesiod see n. 36 below). K. W. Gransden, "Homer and the Epic," in The Legacy of Greece (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 73, sums up the scholarly consensus on the historical authenticity of Homeric details as follows:

Homer’s picture of the heroic age is primarily a poet’s imaginative reconstruction of the past, in which are preserved many details of the world he knew. In that world there may have survived, if only in the confused form of legend and folk memory, elements from the Mycenaean Age itself. . . . It seems unlikely that for four centuries generations of oral bards could have maintained an accurate and uncontaminated record of the Mycenaean Age.

being insulting to the gods. Nibley’s single authority for an
epic element underlying some biblical narrative, Cyrus Gordon,
cites Exodus 15 as containing epic elements, being ultimately
based on an epic source. But the genre of epic, according to
Robert Alter, is entirely unsuitable for the religious world of the
Bible. He comments that in the Bible

There could be no proper epic poetry, with its
larger-than-life human figures and its deities
conceived in essentially human terms, but there could
be narrative verse on a smaller scale celebrating God’s
power in the affairs of man, as in David’s victory
hymn, or preeminently, in the triumphal Song of the
Sea.

Not only is the spirit and function of epic foreign to the Bible,
but this particular passage, the “Song of the Sea,” Exodus 15:1-
19, has been interpreted by various scholars in other than epic
terms. Umberto Cassuto calls it a psalm, specifically an “Ode of
Triumph.” Frank Michaeli also defines it as a psalm and
concludes that it was a “liturgical conclusion” to the narrative of
Exodus 1-15, a “hymn of victory and deliverance.” Theodore
Gaster terms it a “chante-fable.” Robert Alter stresses its place

28 Plato, Republic II, 379.
29 Gordon states, as quoted by Nibley: “The Exodus is the epic of
the Birth of a Nation, even though most of the text is now in prose form.
Fortunately, chapter 15 of Exodus preserves a sizable poetic fragment... The narrative content includes epic episodes” (443 n. 102).
30 Robert Alter, The Art of Biblical Poetry (New York: Basic
Books, 1985), 50.
31 Umberto Cassuto, A Commentary on the Book of Exodus, tr.
Testament, II (Neuchatel, Switzerland: Delachaux & Niestle, 1974), 128,
130. Michaeli’s theory of the provenance of this song is as follows: its
oldest layer was probably a popular chant which originated close to the time
of the events celebrated, passed on orally until developed liturgically around
the time of either the conquest of Canaan or the kingdom of David (ibid.,
133).
33 A “chante-fable,” the insertion of song into prose narrative, was
used to involve the audience, to relieve tedium, and to prevent strain to the
voice of the reciter of the narrative. See Theodor H. Gaster, Myth, Legend,
and Custom in the Old Testament (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 240-
41.
as an integral part of the narrative, not, we may add, as an archaic element from an early epic incorporated into the narrative. Apart from this specific passage, considerable doubt has been thrown on the whole concept of epic elements underlying parts of Bible, something that has been taken for granted but never convincingly proven. After all, such sacred songs as those found in D&C 84:99-102 are evidence that songs and other oral genres need not be taken for residual epic verses that were later incorporated into historical narratives. We must take care to avoid imitating Macaulay, who after searching in vain for ancient Roman lays, ended up inventing his own!

Another problem is the individualist theme of epics. The focus tends to stay on one protagonist or hero, not a whole succession of individuals as in Ether’s treatment of various kings in succession. And the major clusters of epic motifs re-


35 See the discussion at John Van Seters, In Search of History: Historiography in the Ancient World and the Origins of Biblical History (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 18-31, “The Relationship of Epic to Historiography.” Cassuto can be cited as a typical example for the case of biblical epics based on theoretical musings divorced from specific textual evidence; see Cassuto, A Commentary on the Book of Exodus, 178-80.

36 My colleague Daniel Peterson points out that the Persian epic Shah Nameh is, in fact, an epic portrayal of successive kings. Of course, one may argue over the strict definition of epic and just which texts to compare with Ether. For instance, the ancient Greeks defined epic in terms of meter; hence anything, including Hesiod, was an epic if it was composed in dactylic hexameters. We should go too far afield, however, if we consulted the Theogony, let alone the Works and Days, in our examination of Ether. I have solved the difficulty inherent in definition by opting to confine my comparison to nomadic epics, in particular those of the early Turks and the Mongols (see text at nn. 36-37). But a prominent feature of general epic literature does seem to be its concentration on one heroic individual; and even if several “masterful individuals” share the action, one “individual-in-chief,” according to John Clark, remains the center of the story; see John Clark, A History of Epic Poetry (New York: Haskell House,
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semble nothing in Ether. Since Nibley has focused on nomadic parallels of the Jaredites, let us cite as an example the typical nomadic motifs for Mongolian heroic epics:

1. Period
2. Origin of the Hero
3. Homeland of the Hero
4. Appearance, Character, and Possessions of the Hero
5. His Horse as Friend and Helper
6. Departure and Emigration
7. Friends and Helpers
8. Danger
9. Enemies
10. Encounters with Enemies and Battle
11. Catalogue of Magical Powers of the Hero
12. Courtship
13. Marriage
14. Return

None of these motifs are particularly relevant to the Jaredite heroes with the exceptions of motifs eight through ten, all having to do with battle and its attendant dangers and foes. The pattern of the Mongolian heroic epic, at least, is absent in Jared.

The Turkish epics come somewhat closer. The following elements typify them: aristocratic heroes, heroic women, a setting around tents and tent life, feasting, boasting of courage and strength, attention to details of etiquette and procedure, horses, and minute description of apparel and weapons. Even though many of these characteristics find parallels among the Jaredites, the fact that Turkish epics are wholly individualist in their focus tends to disqualify them for comparison with a hypothetical Etherian epic. For Jaredite narrative, far from focusing on individual exploits, reads much more like a

1964), 47-49; cf. further Bowra, Heroic Poetry, chap. 3; and W. T. H. Jackson, The Hero and the King: An Epic Theme (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).


chronological "king list" than an edited account based on an original individualist epic or epics. Nibley had earlier hinted towards such a provenance for the book of Ether on p. 197 of the *World of the Jaredites*, stating that "the book of Ether is a typical ancient chronicle, a military and political history relieved by casual references to the wealth and splendor of kings." Recently John Welch has suggested that an actual "king list" was the probable provenance after studying possible sources for the record of Jared.39

But notwithstanding the above arguments based on the common characteristics of the epic, if Nibley is right that the general pattern of the epic is present in Ether even if specific elements have been edited out by Moroni, an examination of the text might betray some residual epic features. For this examination it is first necessary to characterize briefly Nephite historiography in general, against which the pattern of narrative in Ether may be compared.

Some recent studies on the Bible have stressed the close relationship between Hebrew historiography and contemporary Greek practice.40 Since early Nephite historiography was based on biblical models brought over from Jerusalem, one profitable approach to the Book of Mormon is to compare its historiography to both Hebrew and Greek historical works. Although this is not the place to survey Nephite historiography, one can state that in general one major structural element is the common tendency found in Herodotus of a narrative consisting of separate *logoi* connected by framing statements.41 For instance,


41 As used by Herodotus, *logoi* (singular *logos*) meant "stories" or "arguments" (Henry R. Immerwahr, *Form and Thought in Herodotus*. American Philological Association, Monograph 23 [Cleveland: Western
the first *logos* in 1 Nephi after the introductory first chapter, although a minor one, is Nephi’s seeking and finding the knowledge which had earlier been revealed to his father (1 Nephi 2:16-23). This *logos* is framed by statements that allude to the tent of his father (1 Nephi 2:15; 3:1). The following outline reveals the structural pattern found in the first fourteen chapters of 1 Nephi as divided into individual *logoi*, each framed by introductory and concluding statements couched either in identical or similar terms, printed here in bold letters:

1 Nephi 2:15  
16-23 Nephi’s desire to know things Lehi saw; obtains this knowledge  
3:1 tent

3:9 journey, tent
4:10-37 brass plates obtained  
4:38 journey, tent

5:7 tent
5:8-7:21 three digressions
7:21 tent

7:22/8:2 tent, tarry in wilderness
8:2-38 dream of tree of life

Reserve University, 1966], 14). Seth Bernardette defines *logos* as a “teaching,” which he contrasts with an “inquiry” (*historie*); see his *Herodotean Inquiries* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969), 5. But modern students, beginning with Max Pohlenz, have applied the term *logoi* to thematically related units or episodes. For detailed treatment consult Max Pohlenz, *Herodot der erste Geschichtsschreiber des Abendlandes* (1937; repr. Stuttgart: Teubner, 1961), 43-58. Immerwahr’s *Form and Thought in Herodotus* is probably the best-known representative of the approach of isolating individual *logoi* and examining their interrelationships. He defines a *logos* as “basically a series of items, which are themselves smaller *logoi*, held together by certain formal elements signifying in turn a selection (but never the totality) of unifying themes” (ibid., 15). As examples he identifies the *logoi* of Croesus, the campaign of Cambyses against the Ethiopians, Skythian ethnography, and the like (see ibid., 329-62, for a comprehensive index of *logoi* in Herodotus; p. 329 gives references to the exhaustive [and slightly differently defined] catalogues of *logoi* of Felix Jacoby and John Myres).
9:1 tent, tarry in wilderness

1 Nephi 9:2 full account
9:2-6 digression on plates
10:1 an account

10:2 dream
10:2-14 digressions on Jewish history—
destruction of Jerusalem
Messiah of the Jews
prophet for the Messiah—John
gospel among Jews and Gentiles,
scattering and gathering of Israel,
simile of Olive Tree

10:17 vision

10:17 desire to know things Lehi saw
18-22 digression
11:1 desire to know things Lehi saw

11:2-3 desires to know things Lehi saw
4-14:28 vision of Nephi
14:29 sees things Lehi saw

The same pattern of "framing sentence—logos—framing sentence" holds for the rest of 1 Nephi, and indeed continues throughout the Book of Mormon in varying degrees of consistency. In contrast to this, the structure of Jared is strikingly different. Although the early parts of Ether follow the same pattern, albeit less densely, once the narrative turns from the brother of Jared to the kings of the New World Jaredites, the structuring principle is a formulaic statement of kingly succession, such as "And he reigned in his stead" or "he began to reign in the stead of his father" (see Ether 7:3, 10; 8:1; 9:6, 14-15, 21-22, 25, 27; 10:4, 13, 16-18, 30; 11:4, 14). Thereafter the narrative treats Ether's mission and account of the fall of Jaredite civilization. At no stage are there enough logoi on individual kings to justify positing an original epic source except for the narratives of the brother of Jared and Ether; but at these two points there is no clustering of epic elements that include the full range of motifs found in the typical epic. Therefore, Nibley
is certainly correct in contrasting Nephite with Jaredite historiography, but the latter was not based on the epic pattern.

Conclusion

The World of the Jaredites and There Were Jaredites share a unity of style in that the same skillful blend of humor, ironic insight, and witty conversational format (epistolary in the former, dialogue in the latter) are employed, which allows us to listen to a rapid-fire exchange that covers many different themes and numerous details without getting bogged down at any point. I found Nibley's light-handed tone delightful, and amusing phrases were well-placed to enliven the text (for example, the phrase “lisp the chaste Mongolian”).

Since we have discovered that the Jaredites did not suddenly switch from nomadism to a sedentary lifestyle upon arrival in the New World, but rather resumed an interrupted ecology, both works now mesh well as they trace the evolution of Jaredite society from refugee migration to sedentary heroism. They share a unity of approach, treating both Jaredite ecology and historiography—which are vastly different from Nephite models.

Both works creatively illuminate many historical facts in Ether. In the first work we found that the specifics of ecological nomadism disqualified it from serving as an interpretive framework for early Jaredite history. But although we have revised and updated Nibley's campaign strategy, the military might he has marshaled—the raw data of history—remain powerfully operative. In the second work we found that the specifics of the heroic age made a fitting framework for later Jaredite history. Speculations about an epic source for Ether were found groundless, but this fact in no way vitiates the validity of the rubric “epic heroism.” His battlements hence have survived with only a minimal adjustment of the logistical support system. All in all, Nibley's defenses remain up in both works. For allied students of the Book of Mormon, they form formidable rallying points for the cause; for the neutral or enemy student, they remain forbidding outposts against either complacent neglect or outright assault. Quite a feat, General Nibley.