



Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011

Volume 10 | Number 2

Article 11

1998

Jewish Seafaring and the Book of Mormon

John A. Tvedtnes

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Tvedtnes, John A. (1998) "Jewish Seafaring and the Book of Mormon," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011*: Vol. 10 : No. 2 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr/vol10/iss2/11>

This Other Scriptures and Ancient Texts is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011 by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.



NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title Jewish Seafaring and the Book of Mormon

Author(s) John A. Tvedtnes

Reference *FARMS Review of Books* 10/2 (1998): 147-55.

ISSN 1099-9450 (print), 2168-3123 (online)

Abstract Review of *The Children of Noah: Jewish Seafaring in Ancient Times* (1998), by Raphael Patai.

Raphael Patai. *The Children of Noah: Jewish Seafaring in Ancient Times*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998. xix + 227 pp., with appendix, abbreviations list, notes, and index. \$25.90.

Reviewed by John A. Tvedtnes

Jewish Seafaring and the Book of Mormon

Raphael Patai, who died in 1996, was an eminent Jewish scholar who published more than 30 books and numerous articles in the United States and abroad. Born in Budapest, Hungary, he received the very first Ph.D. degree granted by the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in 1935 and went on to become renowned for his work in Jewish history, sociology, and folklore, as well as in biblical studies and Middle Eastern culture.

Patai's name first came to my attention in 1968, when I purchased a book, *Hebrew Myths: The Book of Genesis*, which he coauthored with Robert Graves (1963). A decade later, I read his *The Arab Mind* (1973), which fascinated me because I had authored a paper on the subject¹ and had expanded it to a book-length manuscript that has not yet been submitted for publication.²

I was subsequently impressed by Patai's book *The Hebrew Goddess* (1968), which, to a Latter-day Saint, suggests that at least

¹ John A. Tvedtnes, "Arab Logic," *Deseret Languages and Linguistic Symposium*, 1977, papers presented at the symposium 30-31 March 1977 (Provo: Deseret Language & Linguistics Society, BYU College of Humanities, BYU Language & Intercultural Research Center, 1977), 15.1-7.

² Even before I had encountered Patai's book, I had read another of the same title by a reporter, John Laffin, published by Cassell in 1975. Both books confirmed my observations about how Arabs think, though my own work on the subject goes more into the reasons that their system of logic differs from ours. I have long contended that we cannot assume that everyone else in the world sees things from our perspective and that the State Department would do well to try to see things through other eyes—in the case of the Middle East, through Arab eyes.

some Jews in ancient times believed God was married. It was this book that prompted me, in 1981, while serving as chair of the annual Symposium on the Archaeology of the Scriptures and Allied Fields, to invite Professor Patai to speak on the subject on the BYU campus in Provo. He expressed surprise that we should be interested in the topic, and when I explained the Latter-day Saint concepts of God and eternal marriage, he asked that I send him some materials, which I did.³ His presentation at the symposium was well received, and Patai later returned to Provo for other presentations.

In 1996, while researching material on medieval stories of books delivered by angels, I read another of Patai's books, *The Jewish Alchemists: A History and Source Book* (1994). I was already aware of the story of thirteenth-century French alchemist Nicolas Flamel, who told how an angel had delivered to him a copper-bound book that he translated by divine inspiration, but I was interested in Patai's note: "The idea that sacred texts were originally inscribed on metal tablets recurs in the Mormon belief that the *Book of Mormon* came down inscribed on gold tablets. Important documents were in fact inscribed on metal tablets and preserved in stone or marble boxes in Mesopotamia, Egypt, etc."⁴ The note referenced the article by LDS scholar H. Curtis Wright in a book published by FARMS⁵ and thanked one of the editors of that book, John M. Lundquist, for bringing this information to his attention. When I mentioned the reference to Lundquist, he told me that Patai had asked him to contribute an appendix to *The Children of Noah: Jewish Seafaring in Ancient Times*.

Patai's latest book, sixty-three years in the making, had its origins in his 1935 dissertation (published in Hebrew in 1936), which he began to translate into English in 1947. Subsequent to receiving additional information on ancient seafaring from James

³ Patai's 1947 book, *Man and Temple in Ancient Jewish Myth and Ritual* (New York: Nelson, 1947) has, as far as I can determine, drawn little or no attention from LDS scholars.

⁴ Raphael Patai, *The Jewish Alchemists: A History and Source Book* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 573 n. 19.

⁵ H. Curtis Wright, "Ancient Burials of Metal Documents in Stone Boxes," in *By Study and Also by Faith*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 2:273-334.

Hornell, he realized that he would have to rewrite the English manuscript. But the work lay dormant until 1993, when he began writing in earnest. Patai credits John Lundquist for breaking the "writer's block" so that he was able to complete the volume. In the preface (pp. xii–xiii), he writes:

Then, in the late 1980s, I was asked by my friend Dr. John M. Lundquist, head of the Oriental Division of the New York Public Library, to contribute a paper to the *Festschrift* he, together with Dr. Stephen D. Ricks of Brigham Young University, planned to publish in honor of the eightieth birthday of Hugh W. Nibley. Thinking about what would be most suitable for a collection of essays in honor of an outstanding Mormon scholar, and knowing that according to the traditions of the Mormons their ancestors sailed to America from the Land of Israel about the time of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, I felt that a paper discussing some aspect of Jewish seafaring in ancient times would be most appropriate. So I went back to the seafaring typescript, and reworked the chapter that dealt with Rabbinic legal provisions related to seafaring.⁶ It was published in volume one of the Nibley *Festschrift* in 1990, and is reprinted here in a slightly changed format as Chapter 10.⁷

Aside from the misconception that Latter-day Saints are descended from Book of Mormon peoples, found in a few other non-LDS writings, one is impressed with Patai's openness on the subject of the Book of Mormon.

At the end of chapter 2, "Ships and Seafaring in the Bible," Patai refers back to his earlier mention about the first sailors going out beyond the Straits of Gibraltar, then adds (see p. 21):

This daring feat of striking out into unknown waters is dwarfed by what the Mormon tradition attributes to a

⁶ The paper, "Ancient Jewish Seafaring and River-faring Laws," appears in *ibid.*, 1:389–416.

⁷ The chapter suggests that Jewish laws originally designed for land use were reinterpreted in application to sea and river travel and commerce.

group of Jews who lived in the days of King Zedekiah in Jerusalem, that is, in the early sixth century B.C.E.⁸ (the same time in which the Phocaeen skippers were supposed to have sailed through the Strait of Gibraltar). According to Mormon tradition, their venture into unknown waters took place in the year 589 B.C.E., that is, three years before the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, and it was thanks to this extraordinary navigational feat that the American continent was populated by a remnant of biblical Israel.

In friendly response to my request, Dr. John M. Lundquist has summarized for this volume the Mormon version of the origins of the Mormons from sixty[sixth]-century B.C.E. Palestine, at which period, according to the Mormon tradition, the biblical Hebrews had a highly developed seafaring trade (see appendix).⁹

The appendix by Lundquist (pp. 171–75) is entitled “Biblical Seafaring and the Book of Mormon.” Indeed, the volume’s title page lists the author of the book as “Raphael Patai with Contributions by James Hornell and John M. Lundquist.” It seems somehow fitting that, amidst all the criticism leveled against the Book of Mormon by anti-Mormon “ministries,” a top Jewish scholar should write favorable comments about that volume of scripture, that was published by a major university press.

It was not clear whether some of the minor errors in Lundquist’s appendix were of his own making or if they came from the editors. Joseph Smith’s birth date is incorrectly given as “1804” instead of “1805” (p. 171). More serious, however, is the statement that Joseph Smith “received a box containing metal plates . . . from the Angel Moroni” (p. 171). While the plates and

⁸ The Jewish practice is to use “B.C.E.” and “C.E.” rather than the Christian “B.C.” and “A.D.” Many non-Jewish scholars now use the former in their writings, in deference to their Jewish colleagues.

⁹ “Mormon tradition,” of course, says nothing about the extensive nature of Jewish seafaring in the sixth century B.C.E. Indeed, Nephi, who constructed the ship that brought his people to the New World, knew nothing about shipbuilding and had to learn from the Lord (see 1 Nephi 17:17–19; 18:1–2).

other artifacts had been concealed in a stone box, Joseph simply removed the plates therefrom and did not "receive" the large stone box. I was also perplexed to see Lundquist writing that Lehi's group "turned eastward, traveling along the shores of the Indian Ocean, until finally, after eight years, they settled along the seashore" (p. 173). From Nehem to Wadi Sayq, which Lundquist accepts as the Nahom and Bountiful of the Book of Mormon, one does *not* travel "along the shores of the Indian Ocean." While Lundquist discusses both the Nephite and Jaredite voyages to the New World, he does not cite the building of ships by Hagoth mentioned in Alma 63:5-8.

Patai's book blends true stories with parables and traditions of seafaring, calling on the Old and New Testaments, rabbinic writings, and modern research. He deals with such diverse topics as ship construction, seafaring, maritime trade, sailing crews, harbors, naval warfare, and maritime law, especially as they relate to Jewish seafaring. The book is replete with details that were new to me, such as the fact that earth was carried aboard ship to provide soil for quick-growing vegetables and to provide a means to fulfill the requirement of Jewish law that the blood of sacrificed animals (in this case also brought on board) be covered with earth (see p. 67). Illustrations of ships prepared in ancient times supplement the text, and notes are relegated to the end of the book so both the average reader and the scholar can enjoy the reading.

During the course of my reading, I occasionally found myself asking why Patai had omitted this or that piece of information that I was aware of. Surely, I thought, this learned man should have known such facts. But with few exceptions I found my mind being placed at ease as I continued reading and discovered the "missing" data in later chapters rather than where I would have placed them. It was merely a question of author's preference.

Lay readers of the Bible will learn much from Patai that will help them better understand seafaring in biblical times. Chapter 3 draws heavily on the Bible to describe how ships were built anciently, while a section in chapter 11 speaks of "Ships in Biblical Similes" (p. 103). I was pleased that Patai, though Jewish, had a good grasp of the New Testament and frequently referred to it in discussing Jewish seafaring.

Regarding the biblical flood story, Patai notes that Noah's sending of birds (see Genesis 8:6–12) to determine if there was land nearby (found in other ancient flood stories) was a common practice of ancient mariners, who regularly carried such birds on board to help them locate the direction of the nearest landmass (see p. 10).

Writing of Paul's opposition to the fasting of the sailors on the foundering ship in which he was a passenger (see Acts 27:34), Patai cites a talmudic passage that prohibits fasting while a ship is in danger (see p. 69). He draws a comparison between Paul's shipwreck and the shipwreck of the vessel in which Flavius Josephus sailed to Rome (see pp. 69–70) and then cites a similar account of the fifth-century Christian bishop Sinesius (see pp. 70–71), demonstrating the resemblance of the peril in which each found himself.

I have often been perplexed by the apostle Paul's statement in I Corinthians 10:4 that the Israelites with Moses "drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ." How, I wondered, could a rock follow them, and why doesn't the Old Testament speak of such a thing? Thanks to Patai's book, I have now become aware of the Jewish tradition that the rock from which the water gushed forth actually went with the Israelites wherever they traveled in the wilderness and positioned itself before the door of the tabernacle at each stopping point. Patai cites the tradition—which must predate Paul—at length (see pp. 128–29).

Patai cites Psalm 107:23–32 as "a remarkable description of a storm on the sea, the deadly fright that grips the people in the endangered ship, and their relief upon seeing the tempest abate" (pp. 16–17). Though he adds that "no comment is needed on this powerful passage," he goes on to describe the storm on board the ship that the prophet Jonah took (Jonah 1:3–17) to escape his commission from the Lord (see pp. 17–18), which has very close parallels to the psalm, including the storm, prayers, ensuing heaven-sent calm, and arrival at a safe haven. Christian readers might see the psalm as a prophecy of Christ's calming the storm on the Sea of Galilee (see Mark 4:36–5:1). They would also find a parallel (as does Patai in a later chapter, pp. 120–21) in the fact that both Jonah and Jesus slept during the storm, while their ship-

mates were beset by great anxiety. In the Jonah story, "the shipmaster came to him, and said unto him, What meanest thou, O sleeper? arise, call upon thy God, if so be that God will think upon us, that we perish not" (Jonah 1:6). Similarly, Jesus "was in the hinder part of the ship, asleep on a pillow: and they awake him, and say unto him, Master, carest thou not that we perish?" (Mark 4:38). Elsewhere, Jesus compared himself to Jonah, noting that the prophet's three days in the belly of the whale would be paralleled by his own three-day stay in the tomb (see Matthew 12:39–41).

Another story that Christian readers will readily associate with the New Testament is that of Rabbi Bar Kappara (see pp. 114–15), who witnessed the sinking of a ship near Caesarea and saw the Roman proconsul coming ashore naked. He took the man home, provided him with food and drink, and gave him money, much as the good Samaritan of Luke 10:30–35 provided for the man who had been attacked by thieves. In both cases, the hero of the story helps a man who is not of his own people. In time, Bar Kappara's kindness was rewarded when the proconsul released some Jews who had been unjustly imprisoned.

Patai's book also contains items of particular interest to Latter-day Saint readers. He notes, for example, that "according to a popular [Jewish] belief, the malevolent activities of Satan are greatest in times of danger," including when a man "sails on the great sea" (p. 64), and even cites an early rabbinic story that has demons as the cause of storms at sea (see p. 72). This accords well with a modern revelation that declares that God has "cursed the waters. Wherefore, the days will come that no flesh shall be safe upon the waters . . . [for] the destroyer rideth upon the face thereof" (D&C 61:14–15, 19).

Patai cites some of the early Jewish texts that speak of Noah's hanging glowing pearls or stones inside the ark to provide light (see p. 9).¹⁰ Though he deals with this nonbiblical aspect of the

¹⁰ As early as 1927, LDS writer Janne Sjodahl had compared the Jewish traditions with the glowing stones used in the Jaredite barges, as noted in Ether 3:1–4. See Janne M. Sjodahl, *An Introduction to the Study of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1927), 248. Hugh Nibley also discussed the subject at length in "There Were Jaredites: The Shining Stones," *Improvement Era* (September 1956): 630–32, 672–75; *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and

Noah story, Patai's main point is that the description of the ark was probably patterned after later ships known to the author of Genesis.¹¹

A section entitled "The Sand and Sea in Biblical Similes" (pp. 101–2) contains several examples of similes, some of which remind us of Lehi's exhortations to his two elder sons: "He spake unto Laman, saying: O that thou mightest be like unto this river, continually running into the fountain of all righteousness! And he also spake unto Lemuel: O that thou mightest be like unto this valley, firm and steadfast, and immovable in keeping the commandments of the Lord!" (1 Nephi 2:9–10). Of the passages cited by Patai, Isaiah 48:18 most closely parallels Lehi's words: "O that thou hadst hearkened to my commandments! then had thy peace been as a river, and thy righteousness as the waves of the sea."

To be sure, a few things are missing from Patai's book. He did not include some rock and coin depictions of ships from the Holy Land, as well as another early Jewish story of a foundering ship. Unlike another famous Jewish scholar, Cyrus Gordon,¹² Patai did not discuss the possibility of Jewish sea travelers from the Roman era coming to the New World. He does note that papyrus boats like those used in ancient Egypt are still known on the South American lake Titicaca, though he cites not Thor Heyerdahl, who discovered this connection, but a private communication from James Hornell (see p. 40).

FARMS, 1988), 366–79; *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 337–58; *Since Cumorah*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 209–10; and *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989), 243–44. See also John A. Tvedtnes, "Glowing Stones in Ancient and Medieval Lore," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6/2 (1997): 99–123.

¹¹ I was initially disappointed in thinking that Patai had left out important material when describing the glowing stones in Noah's ark. He did not discuss the story found in *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer* 10 and *Zohar* Exodus 48a, where the description of the "great fish" God "prepared" for Jonah (Jonah 1:17) suggests a submarine and that the fish, like Noah's ark, was equipped with a pearl that gave light to Jonah. I was therefore delighted to see that Patai recited the Jonah tradition in detail in a later chapter (see pp. 118–19).

¹² See for example, Cyrus H. Gordon, *Before Columbus: Links between the Old World and Ancient America* (New York: Crown, 1971).

But these minor omissions in no way detract from this fine contribution of Raphael Patai, the production of which spanned much of a lifetime of helping us better understand the peoples of the Middle East.