More on Glowing Stones

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More on Glowing Stones

In July 1992 *INSIGHTS* reported the development of radioluminescent lights that resemble the shining stones used by the Jaredites (Ether 2:19–3:6; 6:2–3, 10). Made of a highly porous silica matrix called aerogel, these modern lights—whose life expectancy is 20 years—employ tritium gas to produce beta radiation that causes a phosphor such as zinc sulfide to glow.

As we await further scientific advances that might help demystify the physical properties of glowing stones, we can profitably review earlier thinking on this intriguing subject, which reminds us that the scriptural account of Jaredite barges lit by 16 luminous stones is not as fanciful as critics contend.

The *INSIGHTS* article noted that in 1963 Elder Spencer W. Kimball proposed that the Jaredite stones were illuminated “with radium or some other substance not yet rediscovered by our scientists.”

In 1909 Elder B. H. Roberts compared experiments on radioactive materials with the Book of Mormon’s description of the Jaredite stones, noting that both radium and polonium glow in the dark. One scientist noted that polonium could transfer its radiant energy to other substances and suggested that it might be used in the future to generate light without heat or combustion.

In 1927 Janne M. Sjodahl drew the attention of Latter-day Saints to experiments that produced a glow in precious stones by exposing them to cathode rays or to radium. He concluded that the brother of Jared “was in possession . . . of a knowledge that scientists of today are just beginning to dip into” and that it is not “unreasonable to suppose that God could make the stones in the [Jaredite] barges luminous.” The cathode ray tube has since come into common use in radar, television, and computer screens. Some precious stones (notably the ruby) are used in lasers, an acronym for “light amplification by stimulated emission of radiation.”

Stones composed of phosphorescent minerals are also known to glow. Barite will shine for some time in the dark after being exposed to sunlight. In a discussion following a 1996 FARMS brown bag lecture on glowing stones, Hugh Nibley recalled that nearly 50 years earlier a BYU professor found a stone that glowed when squeezed in a vise. The stone was sent to the Colorado School of Mines, where scientists confirmed its glowing properties. According to Nibley, the stone was later destroyed when too much pressure was applied.

Minerologist George Frederick Kunz included stories about glowing stones in his 1913 book *The Curious Lore of Precious Stones*. For example, a treatise written in 1675 by physician Christiani Mentzel concerns a phosphorescent stone discovered in 1604 and called the Bologna or lunar stone. In the dark this stone would give off the light it had received from the sun. The book also cites experiments by Kunz and by others two centuries earlier in which certain diamonds were made to glow in the dark.

For many Latter-day Saints, an interest in glowing stones and how they might relate to the Jaredite stones does not reflect a need to satisfy the minds of unbelievers as much as a desire to understand a curious phenomenon. Of course, increased scientific understanding in this area may or may not illuminate the precise manner by which the Lord caused the brother of Jared’s molten crystalline stones to shine.

Notes


By John A. Tvedtines