

# Book of Mormon Anachronisms Part 6: Compass, Coins, and other Miscellaneous

Some of the supposed Book of Mormon anachronisms are difficult to categorize, so they are included here.

## “Coins”

The term “coins” is never actually used in the Book of Mormon text. The chapter heading of Alma 11 which mentions “coins” is in error and was inserted during a nineteenth century editing. It is not part of the original Book of Mormon text. Alma 11 *does* deal with Nephite money, which is not anachronistic. Some ancient Mesoamericans, for instance, used cacao beans for money.<sup>1</sup> Not only were cacao beans used as money anciently but they were still used as money in Mesoamerica until about fifty years ago.

Money need not take the form of coins as long as it serves as a standard measure of value. In the Book of Mormon Alma employs a monetary system based on weight units of metal (though not coins). It is interesting therefore to note that a recent excavation in Ecuador turned up 12,000 pieces of metal money thereby confirming that the ancient Americans used standard units of metal money.<sup>2</sup>

Some critics found the Nephite monetary system laughable – especially the fact that they had a “*fixed* standard of value for *barley*.”<sup>3</sup> While such a monetary system would have been odd for 1830 New York, the system was not so strange for a society with roots in the ancient Near East. The Law of Mosiah, like most societies, recognized a system of legal exchange equivalents. Exchange ratios were given for gold, silver, barley and all kinds of grain (see Alma 11:7). Likewise, in ancient Mesopotamia, the Laws of Eshnunna gave an exchange equivalent of “‘1 *kor* barley for 1 shekel silver’ and then establish fixed prices for services of harvesters, boatmen, and other workers.”<sup>4</sup> The main concept behind the Nephite monetary system appears to be Near Eastern in origin but altered according to the needs of the Nephites.

## Compass

During the Lehtes’ pilgrimage in the wilderness, Lehi was given a device, called “Liahona,” which helped guide them on their journey. Nephi described the Liahona as round, made of brass and containing two spindles or arrows (see 1 Nephi 16:10). Nephi called the ball a compass (see 1 Nephi 18:12) and mentions that there were things written in the Liahona that gave them instructions (1 Nephi 18:27, 29). Likewise, Alma tells us that the word “Liahona” means “compass” (Alma 37:38). The critics, however, deride the Lehtes “compass” claiming that the magnetic compass was unknown in the sixth century B.C.

First of all, the function of magnetic hematite—the naturally magnetic principal core of iron—was well understood in both the Old and New Worlds before Lehi was given the *Liahona*.

The Olmecs may have been using magnetite compasses as early as the second millennium B.C. And the very word “magnetite” comes from *Magnesia* of Asia—the place from which the ore was mined as early as the seventh century B.C.<sup>5</sup>

Secondly, the *Liahona* does not operate in the typical fashion of a magnetic compass. Rather than pointing to cardinal directions (or pointing to magnetic North), the *Liahona* operated by the power of God (1 Nephi 16:28) and told the Lehtes *the direction* they should go.

One of the primary definitions of “compass” is round or circular. In fact the word “compass” seems to be just the word to describe the Liahona. As Dr. Nibley has observed, the derivation of the word “compass” remains a mystery. It has, however, two basic meanings: 1) to move together—always referring to a pair of things in motion; 2) to enclose, embrace, step completely, circle or round. This second definition refers to the motion of making a circle. Either way, the word “compass” could correctly refer to the Liahona because of its round (ball) shape or the motion of the arrows.<sup>6</sup>

Not surprisingly we find that the Liahona/compass fits neatly into Old World traditions, thanks to non-Mormon scholar T. Fahd who, in 1959, “published the hitherto scattered, scanty, and inaccessible evidence that makes it possible for the first time to say something significant about the Liahona.”<sup>7</sup> Fahd engaged in a study of *belomancy*, which is “the practice of divination by shooting, tossing, shaking, or otherwise manipulating rods, darts, pointers, or other sticks, all originally derived from arrows.”<sup>8</sup> Fahd notes how the pre-Islamic Arabs consulted the Lord through the tossing, or manipulating of pointers. Thus the Arabs believed that through such divination the Lord instructed his people. Interestingly enough as noted by Nephi and by Fahd, the pointers, or arrows, had inscriptions upon them that gave the people their instructions. “The inscriptions on the arrows themselves give top priority to travel...”<sup>9</sup> Whether the devices studied by Fahd worked for the ancient Arabs or not is irrelevant (with Nephi it was God who guided the Liahona arrows and messages – certainly something the Lord could see fit to do). The fact that Joseph Smith, however, tells us about an ancient practice, long forgotten to modern man, is very relevant.

## Glass

When the Jaredites were building their barges the brother of Jared was concerned about the lack of light in their vessels. The Lord asked: “What will ye that I should do that ye may have light in your vessels? For behold, ye cannot have windows, for they will be dashed to pieces...” (Ether 2:23.)

Some critics have taken this to mean that the Jaredites understood the concept of glass—which, they claim, is anachronistic for the time period (approximately 2000 B.C.).

Thanks to modern research, however, we find that some Egyptians had plaques of blue glass and glass beads as early as the third millennium B.C.<sup>10</sup>

## Submarines and Shining Stones

More than one critic has found amusement in ridiculing the Jaredite barges—or “submarines” as some critics chide. According to the Lord’s instructions the barges were to be water-tight, peaked at the ends, with holes at the top and bottom creating some sort of reserve air supply (Ether 2:17-20). Because they were unable to have windows the Lord provided sixteen white stones that would shine in the darkness (Ether 3:1-4).

Studies of ancient tales of Noah’s ark (from which the barges were patterned [see Ether 6:7] —and which were not readily available to most frontiersmen in 1830), reveals some interesting similarities. According to these non-Biblical writings, Noah’s ark was also peaked—resembling a crescent moon. Like the barges, the ark was sealed by closing a door—in fact the Egyptian word for “ark” meant “box, chest, or coffin” because of the essential cover or lid.<sup>11</sup>

Like the barges the ark apparently had a special air hole or ventilator (*nappashu*—in some versions translated “window”) that designated a “breather” unlike any ordinary window. Both vessels were sail-less, yet driven by the winds, and both would be covered (at times) by ferocious waves.<sup>12</sup>

While the Jaredites had illuminating stones, some of these ancient texts tell us that the Ark was illuminated with a miraculous light-giving stone.<sup>13</sup> During Noah’s twelve-month journey, this polished gem would provide light in the Ark and would change in brightness to indicate whether it was day or night outside.<sup>14</sup>

One of the names for this gem was “Moonfriend,” or *Jalakanta*, which interprets, “that which causes the waters to part.” Thus the peculiar power of this shining gem was that of “enabling its possessor to pass unharmed through the depths of the waters.”<sup>15</sup> In some texts the Ark is called a “bright house” or “moon-boat” partially because of its crescent shape, partially because it wandered through space for twelve months, and partially because it was illuminated by a miraculous light.<sup>16</sup>

It was mentioned earlier that in some text the Ark was equipped with a breather or ventilator (*nappashu*), which can also be translated as “window.” In Genesis the Hebrew word for the Ark’s window is *tsohar*. This same word can also be translated as *shiner* or *illuminator*.<sup>17</sup> The Book of Mormon version, which is a fuller account than any other, contains both ideas—the ventilator and the illuminator.

## Headless Swordsman

At the end of the last Jaredite battle, Coriantumr decapitated his opponent, Shiz, after which the fallen foe “raised up on his hands and fell; and after that he had struggled for breath, he died” (Ether 15:29-32). Critics have laughed at these verses,

supposing that Joseph Smith had seen too many headless chickens on the farm. One professor of neuropathology has noted however, that Shiz’s death struggle is a not uncommon reflex among animals (including humans) when the upper brain stem is severed from the brain. This M.D. suggests that Coriantumr must have cut Shiz’s head a little high—at the midbrain level—thereby causing the reflex.<sup>18</sup>



For more details on this topic see  
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<sup>1</sup> Virginia Morell, “The Lost Language of Coba,” *Science* 86 (March 1986), 52.

<sup>2</sup> John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company and FARMS, 1985), 233.

<sup>3</sup> Rev. M. T. Lamb, 302-303.

<sup>4</sup> John W. Welch, “The Law of Mosiah,” *ReExploring the Book of Mormon*, edited by John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1992), 160.

<sup>5</sup> Robert F. Smith, “Lodestone and the Liahona,” *ReExploring the Book of Mormon*, edited by John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1992), 45.

<sup>6</sup> Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1967), 296.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 287.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 291.

<sup>10</sup> Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert & The World of the Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 213-214.

<sup>11</sup> Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1963), 279.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 279-281.

<sup>13</sup> Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, 279.

<sup>14</sup> Nibley, *An Approach*, 282.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 285-286.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 289.

<sup>17</sup> Hugh Nibley, *Lehi In The Desert & The World Of The Jaredites/There Were Jaredites*, 364.

<sup>18</sup> M. Gary Hadfield, “Neuropathy and the Scriptures,” *BYU Studies* 33:2 (Spring 1993), 313-325.