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Josephus and Joseph: A Brief Comparative Study of Mormon Scripture and the

Antiquities of the Jews.

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Much of the information known about the ancient Jewish world comes from the writings of the Pharisee Flavius Josephus. When Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70, Josephus left Palestine for Rome, where he began his now-famous works. The first was *Wars of the Jews*, an account of the struggles of the Jewish nation against imperial Roman rule from the time of Maccabees to A.D. 70, which includes his personal experiences with the destruction of Jerusalem. After his completion of *Wars of the Jews*, Josephus wrote *Antiquities of the Jews*, an account of Jewish history from the time of Adam down to his own time.¹

Antiquities of the Jews provides expanded accounts of some of the events of the biblical era. It is the purpose of this paper to show some of the similarities between uniquely held Mormon beliefs about this era and what Josephus had to say in *Antiquities of the Jews* concerning: the daughters of Adam and Eve, the eventual fate of Cain, the attempt on the life of Noah, the astronomical knowledge of Abraham, the blessing given to Joseph by his father Jacob, and the translation of Moses.

It is not the intent of this paper to argue that Joseph Smith plagiarized theological ideas from Josephus, nor is it the intent to try and prove the truthfulness of the Mormon faith through parallelism. Undoubtedly, one's preexisting views of Mormonism's truth claims will influence how one understands these similarities.

Daughters of Adam

The record in Genesis mentions the daughters of Adam and Eve only after Seth was born. At that point Adam was 130 years old.ⁱⁱ However, the Joseph Smith Translation (JST) mentions that Adam and Eve had children before that time.

And Adam knew his wife, and she bare unto him sons and daughters...and from that time forth, the sons and daughters of Adam began to divide, two and two, in the land.ⁱⁱⁱ

Josephus also mentions the daughters of Adam in the same verse as the sons when he wrote, “Adam and Eve had two sons...they had also daughters.”^{iv} Even though the Bible mentions the daughters of Adam, it does so only after mentioning the birth of Seth. Both the JST and Josephus infer that the daughters were born soon after the sons.

The Secret Combination of Cain

The record in Genesis provides us with sparse information concerning the fate of Cain after he was cursed. All that the Bible tells us is that he emigrated to and dwelt in the land of Nod to the East, had a son, and built the city of Enoch^v (not to be confused with the other ancient city bearing the same name). No mention is made of whether he repented, or of his ultimate standing before God.

The account in the Book of Moses in the Pearl of Great Price is more detailed concerning his fate. According to this account, Cain formed the first secret combination in history and became the first Master Mahan (the title of the leader of the organization) before he murdered his brother Abel:

And Cain said: Truly I am Mahan, the master of this great secret,

that I may murder and get gain. Wherefore Cain was called Master Mahan, and he gloried in his wickedness.

And Cain went into the field, and Cain talked with Abel, his brother. And it came to pass that while they were in the field, Cain rose up against Abel, his brother, and slew him.^{vi}

In the context of describing another early murder, the account later identifies Cain's actions as specifically dealing with the formation of a satanic organization.

For Lamech having entered into a covenant with Satan, after the manner of Cain, wherein he became Master Mahan, Master of that great secret which was administered unto Cain by Satan; and Irad, the son of Enoch having known their secret, began to reveal it unto the sons of Adam.

Wherefore Lamech, being angry, slew him, not like unto Cain, his brother Abel, for the sake of getting gain, but slew him for the oath's sake. For, from the days of Cain, there was a secret combination, and their works were in the dark, and they knew every man his brother.^{vii}

Josephus gave a similar, albeit less detailed, account of Cain's ultimate fate and his involvement in organized wickedness:

But Cain was not only very wicked in other respects, but was wholly intent upon getting... He augmented his household substance with much wealth, by rapine and violence; he excited his acquaintance to procure pleasures and spoils by robbery, and became a great leader of men in wicked courses.^{viii}

Both of these accounts are emphatic on the point that Cain never reformed.

Furthermore, Cain's prototypical satanic secret combination is obviously alluded to in Josephus's account when he refers to how Cain became "a great leader of men in wicked courses." The Genesis record is completely silent on the formation of a satanic antediluvian secret organization.

The Attempted Murder of Noah

The JST tells of an attempt on the life of Noah during his ministry.

And in those days there were giants in the earth, and they sought Noah to

take away his life...For it repenteth Noah that I have created them; and he hath called upon me, for they have sought his life.^{ix}

While the Bible mentions that Noah was not well received by the people, no mention is made of an attempt on his life. However, Josephus does record Noah's awareness of the danger towards his life:

For the tradition is that these men did what resembled the acts of those whom the Grecians call giants. But Noah was very uneasy at what they did; and being displeased at their conduct, persuaded them to change their dispositions and their acts for the better: and seeing they did not yield to him, but were slaves to their wicked pleasures, he was afraid they would kill him, together with his wife and children.^x

The Astronomical Knowledge of Abraham

In the Book of Abraham, Abraham is given divine instruction concerning the heavens:

And where these two facts exist, there shall be another fact above them, that is, there shall be another planet whose reckoning of time is longer still.

And thus there shall be the reckoning of the time of one planet above another, until thou come nigh unto Kolob, which Kolob is after the reckoning of the Lord's time; which Kolob is set nigh unto the throne of God, to govern all those planets which belong to the same order as that upon which thou standest.

And it is given unto thee to know the set time of all the stars that are set to give light, until thou come near unto the throne of God.^{xi}

God then allows Abraham to view his celestial creations:

And he said unto me: My son, my son (and his hand was stretched out), behold I will show you all these. And he put his hand upon mine eyes, and I saw those things which his hands had made, which were many; and they multiplied before mine eyes, and I could not see the end thereof.

And he said unto me: This is Shinehah, which is the sun. And he said unto me: Kokob, which is star. And he said unto me: Olea, which is the moon. And he said unto me Kokaubeam, which signifies stars, or all the great lights, which were in the firmament of heaven.^{xii}

Later on in the account, Abraham is commanded to share his astronomical knowledge with the Egyptians; he obeys and instructs the king of Egypt in “principles of astronomy.”^{xiii}

The Bible is completely silent on the subject of Abraham’s divine instruction in astronomy. However, Josephus makes mention of Abraham’s astronomical abilities. In quoting another ancient historian, Berosus, Josephus notes that:

In the tenth generation after the Flood there was among the Chaldeans a man righteous and great, and skillful in Celestial Science.^{xiv}

Later in that same passage Josephus later clarifies that this “righteous and great man” was in fact Abraham, and one could make a safe inference that the term “celestial knowledge” is in reference to his astronomical education.

The Blessing of Jacob

In the Bible account of the blessing given to Ephraim by Jacob while he was on his deathbed, little mention is made of Jacob extolling the virtues of his son, Joseph. Instead, most of the blessing deals with Joseph’s posterity:

And Jacob said unto Joseph, God almighty appeared unto me at Luz in the land of Canaan, and blessed me

And said unto me, Behold, I will make thee fruitful, and multiply thee, and I will make thee a multitude of people; and will give this land to thy seed after thee for an everlasting possession

And now thy two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, which were born unto thee in the land of Egypt before I came unto thee in Egypt are mine; as Reuben and Simon are mine.

And they issue, which thou begettest after them, shall be thine, and shall be called after the name of thy brethren in their inheritance.^{xv}

The JST, however, describes the subject in more depth:

And Jacob said unto Joseph when the God of my fathers appeared unto me in Luz, in the land of Canaan; he sware unto me, that he would

give unto me, and unto my seed, the land for an everlasting possession.

Therefore, O my son, he hath blessed me in raising thee up to be a servant unto me, in saving my house from death;

In delivering my people, thy brethren, from famine which was sore in the land; wherefore the God of thy fathers shall bless thee, and the fruit of thy loins, that they shall be blessed above thy brethren, and above thy father's house;

For thou hast prevailed, and thy father's house hath bowed down unto thee, even as it was shown unto thee, before thou wast sold into Egypt by the hands of thy brethren; wherefore thy brethren shall bow down unto thee from generation to generation, unto the fruit of thy loins forever;

For thou shalt be a light unto my people, to deliver them in the days of their captivity, from bondage; and to bring salvation unto them, when they are altogether bowed down in sin.^{xvi}

Josephus also writes concerning this blessing:

Now when Jacob had lived seventeen years in Egypt, he fell into a disease, and died in the presence of his sons; but not till he made his prayers for their enjoying prosperity, and till he had foretold to them prophetically how every one of them was to dwell in the land of Canaan. But this happened many years afterward. *He also enlarged upon the praises of Joseph*, how he had not remembered the evil doings of his brethren to their disadvantage.^{xvii}

Both accounts speak of Jacob's direct praise for Joseph on his deathbed, something missing in the standard biblical account.

The Translation of Moses

The Old Testament concludes the life of Moses by stating that he died a natural death. The account begins with God commanding Moses to travel to his appointed place of death:

Get thee up into this mountain Abarim, unto the mount Nebo, which is in the land of Moab, that is over against Jericho; and behold the land of Canaan, which I give unto the children of Israel for a possession:

And die in the mount whither thou goest up, and be gathered unto thy people; as Aaron thy brother died in mount Hor, and was gathered unto his people.^{xviii}

Later, the account is given of his actual death:

So Moses the servant of the Lord died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the Lord.

And he buried him in a valley in the land of Moab, over against Beth-peor: but no man knoweth of his sepulcher unto this day.

And Moses was an hundred and twenty years old when he died: his eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated.^{xix}

However, the Book of Mormon account infers that Moses did not die a natural death, but was in fact translated. This event is alluded to in connection with the disappearance of the Nephite prophet Alma the Younger:

And when Alma had done this he departed out of the land of Zarahemla, as if to go into the land of Melek. And it came to pass that he was never heard of more; as to his death and burial we know not of.

Behold this we know, that he was a righteous man; and the saying went abroad in the church that he was taken up by the Spirit, or buried by the hand of the Lord, even as Moses. But behold, the scriptures saith the Lord took Moses unto himself, therefore, for this cause we know nothing concerning his death and burial.^{xx}

Josephus also writes about Moses and his similar final fate:

Now as he went thence to the place where he was to vanish out of their sight, they all followed after him weeping; but Moses beckoned with his hand to those that were remote from him, and bade them stay behind in quiet, while he exhorted those that were near to him that they would not render his departure so lamentable. Whereupon they thought they ought to grant him that favor, to let him depart according as he himself desired; so they restrained themselves, though weeping still towards one another. ... and as he was going to embrace Eleazar and Joshua, and was still discoursing with them, a cloud stood over him on the sudden, and he disappeared in a certain valley, although he wrote in the holy books that he died, which was done out of fear,^{xxi} lest they should venture to say that, because of his extraordinary virtue, he went to God.^{xxii}

Interestingly, the JST account of Deuteronomy thirty-four does *not* mention the translation of Moses, and leaves in the story of his death.

Conclusion

The scriptural traditions listed above are not mentioned in the Bible but are independently mentioned in the LDS standard works and Josephus. Some of these similarities, especially Jacob's praise of Joseph on his deathbed, are vague enough that they could have easily happened by chance. Others, such as the translation of Moses, are specific enough that the probability that they occurred by chance is much less likely. As already stated, the provenance of such similarities is for the reader to decide.

i We know of Josephus's life experiences from his own short autobiographical account: *The Life of Flavius Josephus*.

ii Genesis 5:4

iii Joseph Smith Translation, Gen. 4:2-3, hereafter cited as JST.

iv *Antiquities of the Jews* 1:2:1, hereafter cited as *Antiquities*. For the purpose of this paper I will be using the William Whiston translation.

v Genesis 4:16-17

vi Moses 5: 31-32

vii Moses 5: 49-51

viii *Antiquities* 1:2:1-2

ix JST Genesis 8:6,15

x *Antiquities* 1:3:1

xi Abraham 3:8-10

xii Abraham 3: 12-13

xiii Facsimile 3 Explanation, *Pearl of Great Price*.

xiv *Antiquities* 1:7:2

xv Genesis 48: 3-6

xvi JST Genesis 48:5-11

xvii *Antiquities* 2:8:1

xviii Deuteronomy 32: 49-50

xix Deuteronomy 34: 5-7

xx Alma 45:18-19

xxi As we can see, the book of Alma makes reference to the translation of Moses being recorded in the scriptures, a fact missing in the Bible as we have it, something Josephus states was a deliberate act. If one accepts Book of Mormon historicity, then the record of the Jewish scriptures used by the Nephites was from before the Babylonian sack of Jerusalem. Perhaps there was an earlier tradition regarding the death of Moses.

xxii *Antiquities* 4:8:48