

*The Fable of the Rat and Understanding the Book of Mormon Mariners*  
*By George Potter*

After exploring 40 lands in the Middle and Far East, the famous Arabian traveler Ibn Battuta returned to Morocco. His journey of 20 years ended in A.D. 1349. As he unfolded his stories to the Moroccan court, he was not believed. The famous historian Ibn Khaldun was equally skeptical. He had not witnessed the sites that Ibn Battuta had personally observed, thus such strange concepts were hard for Ibn Khaldun to understand or accept. Ibn Khaldun wrote:

Most of all, he [the explorer Ibn Battuta] talked of the ruler of India, saying things that were hard to believe. For example, he said that before going on a trip, the ruler would have a census made of every man, woman, and child in the capital. Then he would give orders that all their needs for the next six months be paid out of his own income. The day of his return was a holiday, and all the people went out into the countryside around the city and strolled about. Mangonels [catapults] fastened to the backs of elephants flung bags of silver and gold coins into the crowds until the ruler entered his audience hall. Ibn Battuta told a number of such stories, and court officials started to whisper that he was a liar.

It was at this time that I ran into Faris ibn Wadrar, the sultan's well-known wazir. I told him I didn't believe the man's stories, especially since the court was generally agreed that he was a liar. But Faris said, "Don't refuse to believe things about other dynasties just because you have not seen them yourself. That would be like the son of the wazir who grew up in captivity.... When the boy attained the age of reason, he asked his father what kind of meat they had been eating. His father told him it was mutton. The boy asked what mutton was and his father described a sheep. 'You mean a rat?' The same thing happened when they later ate beef and camel. Since the only animal the boy had seen in prison was a rat, he believed that all animals were like rats."<sup>i</sup>

The fable of the rat encapsulates a major stumbling block of human reason. We evaluate new ideas based on our own very limited paradigms. When presented with a new idea that we don't fully understand, we assume it is a rat (misinterpretation) or a lie (denial). For example when Vasco de Gama returned to Portugal after discovering a sea route to India, he reported to King Manuel that the Indians were Christians. Not understanding the Hindi language, de Gama assumed that the Hindu goddess Durga was the Virgin Mary. In like manner, Ma Huan, the interpreter for the Chinese admiral Zheng He, reported that the ruler of Calicut was a Buddhist, a religion that had ceased to be practiced in India.<sup>ii</sup>

As one author explains:

The chances of misinterpretation are even greater when to geographical, cultural, religious and linguistic remoteness we add remoteness in time. We are separated by 500 years from Vasco da Gama and Ma Huan, and by almost 2,000 years from the Greeks, the earliest Europeans to trade in the Indian Ocean. We are almost unimaginably more distant from the men who first sailed these waters, the speakers of Austronesian languages who, beginning around 5,000 years ago,

populated Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia, the Indonesian islands, Madagascar and the islands of the remote Pacific.

The past is like a long archipelago that recedes over the horizon.... The sea that divides island from island corresponds to the intervals of our ignorance, which are plentiful, for the historical record is anything but continuous, and the majority of the islands lie beyond the horizon and beyond our ken, shrouded in the mists of prehistory.<sup>iii</sup>

We can include in the archipelago of misunderstanding what most people believe about the voyages described in the Book of Mormon. Generally speaking, the LDS community has a very limited appreciation of the amazing skills the world's sailors of the past exhibited. In fact, most westerners still believe that Columbus proved that the world was round, and that his voyage to the Americas was a milestone in world maritime chronology. In reality Columbus represented only a breakthrough for the backward navigating skills of the Europeans. The fleets of India, Arabia, and China had known for centuries that the world was a globe and had used that information to sail the open seas. In his book *1421*, Gavin Menzies claims that the Chinese were sailing the world's oceans nearly a century before Columbus and with an armada that dwarfed anything Europe could have mustered. He writes:

Zhu Di now embarked on an incredible expansion of the Chinese fleet. In addition to the warships and the merchant fleet he had inherited, Zhu Di commissioned 1,681 new ships, among them many gigantic nine-masted 'treasure ships,' named after the huge value and quantity of goods they could carry in their vast holds. Tens of thousands of carpenters, sailmakers and shipwrights from the southern provinces around the shipyards were put to work to build them. In addition to 250 treasure ships, the fleet contained more than 3,500 other vessels. There were 1,350 patrol ships and the same number of combat vessels based at guard stations or island bases, 400 large warships and another 400 freighters for transporting grain, water and horses for the fleet (52)....

The only interest of the Spanish and Portuguese was in gathering sustenance, gold and spices, while warding off attacks from the natives. The great Chinese fleets undertook scientific expeditions the Europeans could not even begin to equal in scale or scope until Cook set sail three and a half centuries later.

The staggering size of the individual ships, not to mention the armada itself, can best be understood by comparison with other navies of the same year. In 1421, the next most powerful fleet afloat was that of Venice. The Venetians possessed around 300 galleys—fast, light, thin-skinned ships built with softwood planking, rowed by oarsmen and only suitable for island-hopping in the calm of a Mediterranean summer. The biggest Venetian galleys were some 150 feet long and 20 feet wide and carried at best 50 tons of cargo. In comparison, Zhu Di's treasure ships were ocean-going monsters built of teak. The rudder of one of these great ships stood 36 feet high – almost as long as the whole of the flagship the *Niña* in which Columbus was later to set sail for the New World. Each treasure ship could carry more than 2,000 tons of cargo and reach Malacca in five

weeks, Hormuz in the Persian Gulf in twelve. They were capable of sailing the wildest oceans of the world, in voyages lasting years at a time.<sup>iv</sup>

If our concept of the maritime world of the European Renaissance is distorted, what degree of misunderstanding do we have of the ancient times of the Book of Mormon sailors? Most LDS scholars still treat the voyages of the Book of Mormon as if they came from a children's bedtime storybook. For example there are those who teach that Nephi built his ship at some isolate cove, and without the help of skilled shipbuilders, and without the raw materials necessary to build a ship, he constructed a great sailing vessel. Even more naïve is their notion what without any instruction Nephi was able to command a large sailing vessel and guide it safely across two great oceans. In other words, they place the Lord in the role of Cinderella's fairy godmother, performing hundreds of miracles every time Nephi needed help. However, beyond inspiring Nephi from time to time on the design of his ship, there are no miracles recorded in the Book of Mormon that are associated with Nephi's ship and her passage to the New World. The young prophet, just as you and me deal with our problems, had to avail himself of the best marine technology and materials of his day to build and command his ship. Only when Nephi had done all he could with what he had, did he call on the Lord for instruction. Indeed, only when we understand the maritime world of Nephi's time, can we appreciate why the Lord had Lehi's family endure an eight-year journey to southern Arabia, the home of some of the world's greatest shipwrights and sailors in Nephi's time.

The question begs to be asked, "What were ancient sailors achieving in Nephi's time?" Apparently it was a lot more than you learned about in your history classes. John Wilford reported in the New York Times of the discovery of the Egyptian Red Sea Port of Berenike:

South of Suez, the Egyptian shore of the Red Sea used to be sprinkled with ports that throbbed with life and commerce in antiquity, especially the heyday of the Roman Empire. But long ago, the relentless desert buried their remains so completely that it was almost beyond imagination that these places once were pivotal links in a maritime trade route that rivaled the better-known overland Silk Road.

From here ships ventured down the coast to Ethiopia and Somalia and beyond, bringing back ivory and tortoise shells, drugs and slaves. Other vessels headed for the southern shore of Arabia, mainly for frankincense and myrrh. The biggest ships sailed the monsoons to and from India to satisfy the bounding appetites in the Mediterranean world for spices, precious stones and other exotic goods.

So robust was the India trade 2,000 years ago that Emperor Tiberius, concerned over Rome's increasingly adverse balance of payments, complained that "the ladies and their baubles are transferring our money to foreigners."....

Their [archaeologists at Berenike] spades uncovered building ruins, teak and metal from ships, sail cloth, sapphires and beads, wine and stores of peppercorns. Some of the goods show that Berenike was trading, at least indirectly, with places as far away as Thailand and Java. Inscriptions and other written materials

in 11 different languages, Greek and Hebrew as well as Latin, Coptic and Sanskrit, attest to the cosmopolitan mix of people who lived in or passed through the town.

The co-directors of excavations at Berenike—Steven E. Sidebotham, a historian at the University of Delaware, and Dr. Willeke Wendrich, an archaeologist at the University of California at Los Angeles—said the research showed that the maritime trade route between India and Egypt in antiquity appeared to be even more productive and lasted longer than scholars had thought.

Also, it was not an overwhelmingly Roman enterprise, as had been generally assumed. The researchers said artifacts at the site indicated that the ships might have been built in India and were probably crewed by Indians.<sup>v</sup>

"We talk today about globalism as if it were the latest thing, but trade was going on in antiquity at a scale and scope that is truly impressive," Dr. Wendrich said.

Berenike was only one of at least three ancient Egyptian ports on the Red Sea. Myos Hormos and Nechesia were also important trading hubs. Berenike and Myos Hormos were both established during the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus in the early third century B.C. when the kingdom was under Greek control. A surprising discovery at Berenike was that the hulls of ancient Egypt's Red Sea fleet were made from Indian teak. Ancient maritime specialist Lionel Casson believes that it is possible that the teak timber had been shipped from India, which to Casson means that the Indian ships that delivered them were as long as 180 feet long and could carry 1,000 tons of cargo.<sup>vi</sup>

It is true that in Nephi's time the Israelites had no maritime lore. However, there was in the region a long established maritime industry with a global scope. All Nephi had to do was to cross Arabia to utilize it. The Mulekites, who probably boarded Phoenician ships, did not even have to go that far for a passage to the Promised Land. The Jaredites—experienced shipwrights before they built their famed barges—appear to have been pioneers in that amazing industry.

To help bridge the waters of misunderstanding, LDS sailing and ship experts Frank Linehan, Conrad Dickson, together with myself have commenced our research on our new book, *The Voyages of the Book of Mormon*. Look for our new book in late 2009 or early 2010.

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<sup>i</sup> No author stated, "The Fable of the Rat," *Saudi Aramco World*, (Dhahran, Saudi Arabia: July/August 2005) 2,3.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Gavin Menzies, *1421, The Year China Discovered the World*, (New York: Bantam Books, 2002), 52, 69-70).

<sup>v</sup> John Noble Wilfred, "Under Centuries of Sand, a Trading Hub," *New York Times*, (New York: New York Time, July 9, 2002), see:

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9B03E5DA1630F93AA35754C0A9649C8B63>.

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<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.