A NOTE ON RAFINESQUE, THE WALAM OLUM, THE BOOK OF MORMON, AND THE MAYAN GLYPHS

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A body of literature has begun to grow from the premise that, in some obscure way, the Walam Olum was a source for the Book of Mormon. The Walam Olum is a long narrative poem beginning with the Creation and recording the wanderings of the Delaware Indians through many generations; its text was preserved by C. S. Rafinesque.

Whether the Book of Mormon in any way parallels the Walam Olum, whether Joseph Smith had prior access to Red Indian lore that also appears in Rafinesque’s Walam Olum, or whether Rafinesque’s redaction of the Walam Olum is a trustworthy transcript of Indian beliefs are questions not addressed here. The sole issue of this paper is whether Joseph Smith profited from the Walam Olum as it was recorded by Rafinesque.

Scholars wishing to compare any of the received versions of the text of the Walam Olum—all of which derive from an 1833 manuscript in Rafinesque’s hand—with the Book of Mormon might pause to reflect on Rafinesque’s own trenchant anti-Mormon stance. Under the title “The American [Indian] Nations and Tribes Are Not Jews,” he wrote:

A new Religion or sect has been founded upon this belief! the Mormonites, thus called after a new Alcoran, or Book of Mormon, (which is not a Jewish name). Supposed to be written in gold letters more than 2000 years ago by Mormon[,] leader of the American Jews. This Book which no one has seen nor read but the founder of the sect, the probable writer thereof, has been made the Bible of a new sect. I have tried in vain to procure a copy of the translation, wherein I could certainly detect a crowd of absurdities and incongruities. Meantime a Sect of Fanatics has arisen therefrom, and wandered from New-York to Ohio and Missouri: an evident proof how false beliefs can be spread and made subservient to crafty purposes.

Rafinesque’s personal opposition to Mormonism would not prevent his published writings being used either by the founder of Mormonism or by its later apologists, but it is most unlikely that there was friendly contact between him and any of the Mormons.
Rather, four years before his publication of the text of the Walam Olum Rafinesque was seeking, without success, a copy of the Book of Mormon to "expose" it.

As shown in the most comprehensive discussion of the subject, the Walam Olum came to Rafinesque in two stages while he was living in Kentucky. In brief, a "Dr. [John Russell?] Ward," whose positive identification still remains uncertain, obtained the pictographs alone in 1820, ostensibly from the Delawares themselves, in Indiana. These symbols, each a mnemonic device to recall to memory the verse of a song to the tribal historian, were meaningless to Rafinesque and other Caucasians, but they excited his interest as did other enigmatic "Indian relics" he had begun to collect in connection with his study of American prehistory. He acquired all 184 of the symbols along with the "songs annexed thereto" in 1822. The songs or verbal text, in the language of the Delawares, came "from another individual," who has never been identified. The Walam Olum manuscript as we know it is dated 1833 in Rafinesque's hand, by which time he was living in Philadelphia. Therefore, this manuscript must be a recension from two earlier sources—neither of which has been found—since it contains the pictographs, the Lenape words of the language of the Delawares, and the English equivalents of these words. Rafinesque finally published his English version in 1836 with a sample of the Lenape text but without the pictographs. The problem about the integrity of the Walam Olum—which need not detain us here—stems from the circumstance that no description of the origin of the document, save Rafinesque's own, has ever been found. An outline of the Walam Olum's narrative, however, was independently given earlier by John Heckewelder, whose writings were well known to Rafinesque.

Leaving Kentucky permanently in the spring of 1826, Rafinesque shipped his possessions to Philadelphia in 40 crates and traveled, by a circuitous route, to the same destination. Whatever form the Walam Olum was in at that time—and it could not have been the 1833 MS which is known to us—it must have been included in the shipment, because we know that he traveled light; in the unpublished journal of one who traveled with him part of the way he is described as botanizing while his only shirt dried from an infre-