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Bruce W. Warren and Thomas Stuart Ferguson, *The Messiah in Ancient America*

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Reviewed by Terrence L. Szink

The story behind this book is as interesting as the book itself. One of the coauthors, Thomas Ferguson, founded a research organization named the New World Archaeological Foundation, which has among its purposes the exploration of Southern Mexico and Central America in hopes of finding materials which would “prove” the Book of Mormon as a true historical document (a brief history of this organization and its findings is contained in Appendix A of this book). Apparently in his latter years, although he remained active in the Church, Ferguson lost his testimony regarding both the Book of Abraham and the Book of Mormon. His family and friends claim that before his death he returned to a belief in the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon. With an eye toward supporting this claim, Ferguson’s son Larry hired Bruce Warren, an archaeologist at BYU, to edit and update his father’s *One Fold and One Shepherd*, originally published in 1958. The examination of Ferguson’s life must be left to his biographers; here we can only review the resultant book.

The idea behind the book is a simple one—to find parallels between the cultures of the New World and the ancient Near East and Christianity, specifically between the accounts of the New World deity Quetzalcoatl and the story of the visit of Christ to the ancient inhabitants of America as recorded in the Book of Mormon. Efforts are focused on the area of Mesoamerica, the region currently espoused by many Book of Mormon scholars as the homeland of the Nephites and Lamanites.

The book contains some interesting material which should be looked at by anyone interested in the Book of Mormon as it relates to Mesoamerican archaeology. However, it also has some serious problems. The book is very uneven. Bruce Warren had a difficult task since he had to take a book which had been written thirty years previously, edit and update it, and yet leave major portions of the book untouched since it was to be a “tribute to Thomas Stuart Ferguson” (see back cover). Recognizing which sections were penned by Ferguson and which by Warren is a simple matter. The former was
unfortunately not very critical in the use of his sources and his tone lacks the caution that should accompany any work of this type. For example, I feel he lent too much credence to reports by Spanish explorers regarding elements of the New World culture which are similar to Christianity. It should be remembered that these explorers were Christians themselves and tended to view things in Christian terms. If the explorers had been Hindus from India I suspect we would read of how "Hindu-like" the culture of New World inhabitants was. Ferguson tended to use words like "prove" and "identical with" where the evidence presented does not warrant the use of these words; he should rather have used "suggest" and "similar to." Finally, he used the "shot-gun" approach; instead of focusing on a specific topic with intensity and caution, he blasts away at it with a wide range of universalisms, hoping to hit it somehow. The problem with the "shot-gun" approach is that, although he does hit the target occasionally, much of his ammunition is wide of the mark.

A specific example will illustrate many of these difficulties. At the beginning of chapter two he claims that the date of Christ’s crucifixion and ascension is "confirmed" by Don Carlos de Siguenza y Gongora (1645-1700), an expert on ancient Mexican history who "must have known [that] Quetzalcoatl was the true Shepherd" (pp. 29-31). The evidence Ferguson gives for Siguenza’s alleged confirmation is very feeble. The book in which Siguenza is supposed to have revealed his belief "mysteriously disappeared at the time of his death and has never been found" (p. 30). Ferguson relies on a second-hand account of the book written some two hundred years after Siguenza’s death in which Siguenza is said to have believed that the Apostle Thomas preached in the New World. Ferguson claims that Siguenza only "pretended to give the apostle Saint Thomas credit for establishing Christianity in Mesoamerica" (p. 30) and is using "'coded' or disguised language [to] tell us that Quetzalcoatl was the resurrected Messiah of the Bible" (p. 29). He bases his conclusion on the title of Siguenza’s long-lost book, Phoenix of the West, claiming that the word Phoenix refers to the resurrected Christ. The problem is that the word Phoenix could just as well refer to any number of other things. Any time an author must resort to the invention and breaking of "coded or disguised" language, a signal should go off in the head of the reader.
There are many more examples of this kind of scholarly malpractice throughout the book which cannot be treated here. What should be mentioned is the solidness of Warren's contributions. For example, his examination of volcanic activity in Mesoamerica around the time of the death of the Savior in the Old World is cautious, even-handed, and very interesting. But even Warren is aware of the limitations of this book. In the preface he writes that "this book still depends too much on lists of words and technological traits that are removed from the proper language and cultural contexts necessary for final acceptance by the scholarly community" (p. xiv). Thus, in part this book demonstrates the methodological advances made in Mormon archaeological studies in the last thirty years, i.e., in the interval between Ferguson's writing and Warren's writing and edition. This means that readers must be discerning in their use of this book. I agree with the statement of John L. Sorenson, on the book cover, that "the careful reader of this work is bound to discover a good deal of valuable new information" (emphasis mine), as long as it is understood that the crucial operative word in that statement is "careful."