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Abstract Review of *New Evidences of Christ in Ancient America* (1999), by Blaine M. Yorgason, Bruce W. Warren, and Harold Brown.

NEW EVIDENCES FOR OLD?: BUYER BEWARE

Andrew J. McDonald

The credentials of the authors seem good enough: Blaine M. Yorgason is a popular Latter-day Saint writer, Bruce W. Warren is a longtime Mesoamerican researcher, and Harold Brown's years of service to the church in Mexico are legendary. Yet what they have achieved in their collaboration on *New Evidences of Christ in Ancient America* is decidedly less than the sum of the parts.

The Book of Mormon records the arrival anciently in the Americas of different peoples who had an understanding of Christ. What the authors attempt to show are archaeological evidences for the existence of these people in the pre-Columbian Mesoamerican region of Mexico and Central America. However, while I fully support their premise, a number of their "evidences" seem to me to be overly tenuous in some cases, misguided in others, and at times even misleading in their advocacy. Acceptance and trust, I have found, are more likely where the means are better suited to the ends.

The book itself seems to be, in large part, something of a patchwork of sketchily described topics that are at times difficult to follow and of uncertain relevance. Much of the book appears to be filler—

Review of Blaine M. Yorgason, Bruce W. Warren, and Harold Brown. *New Evidences of Christ in Ancient America*. Provo, Utah: Stratford Books, 1999. xix + 420, with bibliography and index. \$24.95.

commentary adapted from earlier writings on archaeology and the Book of Mormon—compromising somewhat the title's promise of new evidences. As I read the book, I couldn't help wondering what I was missing that had evidently so captivated those who praised the book on its back cover. The book appears to have been all too hastily assembled and rushed to press. In its contents, presentation, editing, and publishing, *New Evidences of Christ in Ancient America* does not compare well with even the most commonplace of published books.

Yet I am not suggesting that the book is completely without merit. Nothing requiring so much time and effort ever is. I share in the authors' interests and enthusiasm regarding the intriguing pre-Columbian history of the Americas, and I appreciate the opportunity to read and think about what they have written. I hope that my review does not misrepresent their intentions.

Early on, the authors consider evidences of Jaredite connections in Mesoamerica. They draw principally on the somewhat controversial writings of the early seventeenth-century Mexican historian Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, who is often cited by Latter-day Saint authors in support of the Book of Mormon. However, other authors and scholars are more wary of citing his work.

On the side of caution, Brant Gardner, a Latter-day Saint Mesoamerican authority, has this to say concerning the writings of Ixtlilxochitl.

A descendent of Aztec rulers and fluent in Nahuatl, Ixtlilxochitl compiled his histories from a great library of early and important sources. Despite the promise of an early mestizo working with official records, Ixtlilxochitl remains very difficult to use as a source. Some of his original sources are known, and his work is not as accurate as could be hoped. More problematic is that his position as a descendent of aristocracy gave him claims against the Spanish. His works are filled with obvious attempts to aggrandize his native Tezcoaco, a member city of the Aztec's triple alliance. There are also bald attempts to Christianize Aztec lore and history, ap-

parently with the motivation of aligning himself with the ruling powers in order to receive the benefits of his heritage.¹

David Kelley, a prominent Mesoamericanist who is not a Latter-day Saint, adds that "Ixtlilxochitl has suffered greatly from his copyists and commentators. . . . Because [he] changed his mind about the interpretation of certain earlier documents in writings over a period of more than 20 years, he has been called 'inconsistent' and 'confused.'"²

Because of these and other concerns, few qualified researchers would consider Ixtlilxochitl's occasional biblical-related comments to have actually had some basis in Indian lore prior to the arrival of the Spaniards. The Tower of Babel is a case in point. Ixtlilxochitl reports the early arrival of people in Mesoamerica following the collapse of an exceedingly high tower. In the Bible, the Tower of Babel and its fall explain the great spread of different peoples throughout the world, and it is possible that Ixtlilxochitl, familiar with the Bible as he was, couched his description of the peopling of the Americas in this way.

Despite these concerns, Ixtlilxochitl's writings are beginning to receive more attention and respect. Kelley goes on to explain that with the groundbreaking two-volume work on the writings of Ixtlilxochitl by the respected Mexican authority Edmundo O'Gorman,³ researchers now are generally viewing the early Mexican historian in a more favorable light and recognizing his care and dedication. Evidently among the many important sources available to Ixtlilxochitl was the original of the *Codex Xolotl*, dating to about A.D. 1428 in Tezcoco; Ixtlilxochitl (with the concurrence of others) considered this codex to be the most authoritative of available documents on the pre-Columbian history of the Valley of Mexico.

1. Brant Gardner, "Reconstructing the Ethnohistory of Myth: A Structural Study of the Aztec 'Legend of the Suns,'" in *Symbol and Meaning beyond the Closed Community: Essays in Mesoamerican Ideas*, ed. Gary H. Gossen (Albany, N.Y.: Institute for Mesoamerican Studies, 1986), 30.

2. David Kelley, "Imperial Tula," *Quarterly Review of Archaeology* 7 (1987): 14.

3. Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, *Obras historicas*, ed. Edmundo O'Gorman, 2 vols. (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, 1975).

Ixtlilxochitl himself indicates his sources to have been pre-Hispanic Indian records and not the Bible. He may have been dissembling; however, nothing proves that he was. The authors may be equally justified in linking Ixtlilxochitl's report to the Jaredite migration to the Americas described in the Book of Mormon.

More problematic, in my opinion, is the authors' elaborate chronological scheme based on Ixtlilxochitl's history.⁴ As they explain it, "Because the history is linked directly to the 'Long Count' calendar (a calendar system that counts days from a base date of 10 August 3114 B.C.) of the Maya, it is possible to assign dates to Ixtlilxochitl's histories with considerable accuracy" (p. 12). A subsequent table (see pp. 14–15) chronicles to the day numerous key events in Ixtlilxochitl's four Mesoamerican solar earth ages covering the history of the earth from beginning to end.

4. As near as I can tell, the critical elements in the authors' decipherment of Ixtlilxochitl's history are (1) Ixtlilxochitl's 1,716 years' (each of 365 days) duration of a solar earth age (15 of which equal a scant 30 years less than the actual 25,692 tropical years of a complete gyration of the earth's axis), and (2) the discovery of the great astrologer Huemantzin, reported by Ixtlilxochitl, that their major misfortunes always befell them in a year beginning with the year bearer of 1 Flint. Since 1 Flint as a year bearer is repeated once every 52 years (of 365 days long) of a calendar round and since 1,716 such years are exactly divisible by 52, if the beginning of the first solar earth age is marked by the year 1 Flint, the same will be true for the others, each 1,716 years apart. Thus the first age of the Water Sun will end by flood after 1,716 years in the year of 1 Flint, the second age of the Earth Sun will end by earthquake after 1,716 years in the year of 1 Flint, the third age of the Wind Sun will end by violent winds after 1,716 years in the year of 1 Flint, and the fourth age of the Fire Sun will end in fire after 1,716 years in the year of 1 Flint. Now to anchor this Mexican sequence of the four solar earth ages, the authors employ the legendary Maya Long Count beginning date of 11 August 3114 B.C. (0.0.0.0.0 4 Ahaw 8 Cumku), described as following a flood. The nearest year to the Maya date beginning with 1 Flint, I take it, is calculated as 3126 B.C. in the preceding Maya era, and this is where the authors of *New Evidences* place the junction marking the end of the Water Sun and the start of the Earth Sun. So the Water Sun, beginning in 4841 B.C., ends in 3126 B.C.; the Earth Sun ends in 1411 B.C.; the Wind Sun ends in A.D. 305; and the Fire Sun ends in A.D. 2019, some 7 years later than the normal Maya ending date calculated in the year A.D. 2012. Others of the authors' date assignments within the solar earth ages are largely at 52-year (365 days long) intervals, also within years beginning with 1 Flint. Just how the authors calculate specific dates within a year (e.g., the Water Sun age destruction on Sunday, 6 October 3127 B.C.) is not explained.

The direct link to the Maya Long Count mentioned by the authors, however, is their own creation, in that they arbitrarily assign the flood ending the first earth age to *ce Tecpatl* (1 Flint) in 3126 B.C., closest to the 3114 B.C. creation date of the Maya calendar. Ixtlilxochitl reports the length of the first earth age as 1,716 years, but his dating is inconsistent, and other earth ages have different lengths. Yet for no other reason than that 1,716 Maya years (each 365 days long) times 15 is only 30 years different from the actual 25,692 tropical years of a complete gyration of the earth's axis, the authors assign 1,716 years as the length of each of the four solar ages of the earth. So the beginning of the first solar earth age is calculated by the authors as 4841 B.C., 1,716 365-day years prior to the period-ending flood of 3126 B.C., as determined from the Maya creation date.

But by Ixtlilxochitl's count, it was 5,263 years after the creation "when the Sun and the Moon eclipsed, and the earth trembled, and the rocks broke, and many other things and signs took place. . . . This happened in the year of *ce Calli*, which, adjusting this count with ours, comes to be at the same time when Christ our Lord suffered."⁵ Yet 5,263 years from the authors' creation date of 4841 B.C. would date this event, which the authors later cite in specifying a crucifixion date of A.D. 33, to A.D. 421.

Turning to another topic, the authors speculate that the people in Mesoamerica who are geographically and chronologically closest to the Jaredites of the Book of Mormon are the southern Gulf Coast Olmec, who flourished from approximately 1200 to 400 B.C. Olmec culture is generally considered the mother culture of Mesoamerica, and the authors present a number of Jaredite personal and place names with seeming Mesoamerican counterparts (see pp. 18–19). With the possible exception of Kish, none strikes me as particularly significant, and the example involving the interpretation of the Tuxtla Mountains of the southern Gulf Coast area as "place of the macaw parrots" is almost certainly in error. It is generally recognized that the name *Tuxtla* derives from *toxtli* or *tustla*, the Nahuatl name for rabbit.

5. Ixtlilxochitl, *Obras historicas*.

The Jaredite name of Kish, the authors correctly point out, is unmistakably represented among the Tablet of the Cross inscriptions of Classic Maya Palenque, where it is recorded that a person by the name of U-K'ix (pronounced K'eesh)-Chan was born on 11 March 992 B.C. and then later installed as ruler on 28 March 966 B.C., at the age of twenty-six. U-K'ix-Chan is translated by the authors—interpreting K'ix as “feather” and Chan as “serpent”—as “he of the feathered serpent.” U-K'ix-Chan himself, the authors indicate, may actually be depicted as the ruler prominently displaying a distinctly feathered serpent on the early first-millennium-B.C. Monument 47 of the important southern Gulf Coast Olmec center of San Lorenzo. Still, Olmec feathered-serpent imagery is not uncommon, and the authors are almost certainly overreaching in suggesting that U-K'ix-Chan and the ruler of San Lorenzo's Monument 47 were one and the same person.

Also, the 1998 communication of Brian Stross to the authors, noting the meaning of *k'ix* to be “spine” or “thorn,” supersedes Kelley's 1965 description of *k'ix* as a feather (see p. 18 for reference to Stross). Yet interestingly, the feathered-serpent tie to U-K'ix-Chan is retained in the significance of spines and thorns as instruments of bloodletting. Millennia later, the concept of creation in Mexica society was patterned after the primordial example of the feathered serpent Quetzalcoatl, who sprinkled the ancestral bones of the first fathers with blood from his penis to create humanity anew. Nearly everyone in Mexica society was expected to let blood in semblance of this first act of autosacrifice.

Within the context of the U-K'ix-Chan discussion, the authors introduce the subject of shamanism, which has been called the universal Ur religion. Central in its teachings is the recognition of a spirit-world complement to our physical world. The shaman, in trance, is able to journey to this spirit world to intercede with spirit entities interacting in human affairs. More and more, Meso-americanists are recognizing that the shamanistic view of the universe as a four-cornered horizontal earthly plane with an upright World Tree or tree of life going through the center of the Underworld, Earth, and Upper World levels is also the enduring fundamen-

tal shape of the Mesoamerican cosmos. The shaman traditionally follows the vertical pathway of the *axis mundi* center, moreover, in accessing the other realms below and above.

Without as yet having discussed possible similarities linking the Olmec feathered serpent, Quetzalcoatl, and Christ, the authors of *New Evidences* nevertheless conclude from the examples of U-K'ix-Chan and San Lorenzo's Monument 47 that the Jaredite/Olmec people knew of Christ. The authors go on to explain that a custom running counter to the way of Christ among these early occupants of Mesoamerica was the ancient practice of secret societies, which the authors then surprisingly equate with shamanism. Mesoamerican shamanism, in their view, is a counterfeit belief in a divine king to whom the people mistakenly looked for the miracle of renewed life in nature and society through the ritual spilling of the king's own and surrogate blood, rather than to the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus Christ. I strongly disagree with the authors' comparison of shamanism with the Book of Mormon concept of secret societies; in fact, as a glaring inconsistency, that same Quetzalcoatl figure of Mexica lore to whom the authors later turn for vestiges of Christ's visit to the Americas is undeniably part and parcel of the Mesoamerican shamanistic tradition they so strongly deplore. When the authors later discuss secret societies for their role in promoting a modern "plop, plop, fizz fizz," Alka-Seltzer age of instant gratification, their link with shamanism becomes even more absurd.

Several early Indian and Spanish sources bearing on pre-Hispanic native beliefs in Mesoamerica are briefly reviewed by the authors. In the *Title of Totonicapan*, which the town's Indian principals compiled in 1554 only a few years after the arrival of the Spaniards in western Guatemala, the authors note the recording of native origins as being near Babylon, from across the sea. Biblical names such as Babylon are unknown in any Mesoamerican language, and the authors cite a prominent authority explaining that the biblical references in the *Title of Totonicapan* were taken from the manuscript of a contemporary Dominican friar. But the authors, I think, rightfully examine the actual significance of nonnative, biblical personal or place names in an account. Is the introduction of Spanish terms in

an otherwise Indian language text always a sure sign of the post-Conquest origin of the concept with which they are associated? The probable answer would be “not necessarily.” The breadth of such native declarations, from one end to the other in Mesoamerica, would seem to lend some credence to the Indian claims of overseas connections rather than simply a desire to gain acceptance in the eyes of the Spaniards. As the authors point out, this and other similar native declarations concerning their origins were nearly always accepted as genuine by those early Indian and Spanish historians who actually recorded them.

The K'iche' Maya Popol Vuh of highland Guatemala, which the authors also excerpt, is a different case. No biblical names are mentioned, but its opening description of the “dawn of life” evokes in ways the flavor of the Genesis account of the Bible. In fact, there are those who, for this reason, stoutly maintain that this Mayan Bible, as it is called, has little basis in native beliefs predating the Conquest. Such views, however, are strongly contradicted by advances in Maya epigraphy as well as in iconography, showing rather conclusively the continuation of themes recorded in the Popol Vuh from as far back as the closing centuries of the first millennium B.C.

The Indian historian Ixtlilxochitl described three main peoples of Mesoamerica, from oldest to most recent: Giants, Ulmeca/Xicalanca, and Tultecas or Toltecs. The authors write that, according to Ixtlilxochitl, children born of this latter group were, as late as the tenth century A.D., sometimes “white and blond.” While the authors do not elaborate on why this is mentioned (as so often happens in this book), I presume they do so to lend credence to the Book of Mormon description of the Nephites as a fair-skinned people. “Fair-skinned,” however, is a relative term, and I have trouble imagining anyone anciently of Middle Eastern ancestry to have been “white and blond” in the manner, say, of a Scandinavian person. When I hear of “white and blond” Native Americans, I find a more apt comparison to be with the likes of the modern-day “white” Cuna Indians of Panama, among whom there is an unusually high incidence of albinism.

As for the specific American setting of the Book of Mormon, the authors identify two main regions known for a level of urban-

centered social complexity believed to match that inferred for the Book of Mormon: namely, northwest Andean South America and the cultural area of Mesoamerica. Of the two, Mesoamerica is the overwhelming choice of the authors, based on geographical considerations and the presence there of the only phonetic script known so far anywhere in the Americas. Bruce Warren's "analytical sociocultural model" (p. 117), also provided as support for a Mesoamerican connection with the Book of Mormon (like so many other topics in the book), is of questionable relevance to issues that themselves are all too vaguely defined.

The authors also discuss the feasibility of ocean travel to the New World in pre-Columbian times. Knowledgeable researchers increasingly accept the fact that outside contacts with the Americas occurred from time to time prior to Columbus, intentionally and otherwise. Awash in their fishing vessels, Japanese fishermen alone, alive and well, continued to wash up on the Pacific shores of the Americas well into the nineteenth century. They do not address the larger question of what effect only a few, occasional outsiders would have on the already well-established and, by almost any measure, more dominant native cultures of the Americas. It seems likely that acculturation would have, over time, increasingly been the fate of the initially outmanned and relatively ill-prepared immigrants.

Social complexity is a largely natural outgrowth of increasing communication among more and more people. It is certainly not something that is taught or achieved solely by design. Choice enters in as social complexity is managed. What this process means is that the various levels of sociocultural development in the Americas are, inescapably, all essentially American rather than the simple reflection of foreign ideas. This theory is in marked contrast to the embarrassingly racist-sounding view of the authors that such developments are best explained by "migrations of highly intelligent peoples from the Near East to America" (p. 261).

I relate the above to provide a more realistic picture of Book of Mormon peoples in the Americas and not in any way to diminish their importance. I am simply suggesting that the contributions stemming from the three migrations to the Americas recounted in

the Book of Mormon were tightly woven within a larger cultural fabric that was fundamentally American. The Jaredites, Mulekites, and Nephites, rather than taking on the reputation of foreign interlopers, I believe, were fully American participants in the development of a remarkable and distinctively American cultural heritage.

After outlining six variants of the feathered serpent, Quetzalcoatl, the authors continue, “We need to start distinguishing among these variant Quetzalcoatl to avoid some horrifying and brutal aspects” (p. 131). What this amounts to, of course, is selectively choosing those attributes that support the view of Quetzalcoatl as a Christ figure while rejecting all contrary indications, perhaps not the most honest of approaches. I suppose that the “good” traits of Quetzalcoatl could be rationalized as vestiges of truth in a tradition gone bad, but I personally think that the reality of Quetzalcoatl is much closer to all that was said of him rather than only a select part.

When we pick and choose those attributes best suited to our preconceptions of Mesoamerica, we construct a version of it after the manner of our own thinking. However, rather than insisting on our explanation, might it not make more sense, in an attempt to truly understand Mesoamerica, to view it on its own terms for what it really is.

But in the comparison of Quetzalcoatl with Christ, I do find it compelling that both exemplify the concept of creation through sacrifice on behalf of humanity. Among the K'iche' Maya of highland Guatemala and the Mexica of highland Mexico, creation was understood as a joining of opposites in sacrifice. The primordial example on which Mexica sacrifice was modeled, moreover, was that of Quetzalcoatl in the spilling of his blood on behalf of humanity. The resemblance in this case of Quetzalcoatl to Christ—who likewise submitted to sacrifice from before the world was to act as a creator and mediator, reconciling man and God in the hereafter and reuniting body and spirit in the resurrection—is clear. Confirming the native origins of Quetzalcoatl's quest to restore life from his father's bones are the related episodes of the Maya Hero Twins of the Popol Vuh and of the Zoque culture hero, Homshuk.

On another issue, the often confusing and even contradictory portrayal of Quetzalcoatl in mythological, legendary, and historical contexts seems natural, not necessarily evidence of backsliding. In other words, the basic symmetry of thought manifest in the shamanistic quincunx horizontal plane and vertical center design of the Mesoamerican cosmos mentioned above likewise informs the Mesoamerican conceptualization of time, space, and a first family of ancestral deities and is broadly incorporated in the structural design of such things as platform complexes, iconography, ceremonial body adornment, and dramas, and in the ritual of succession generally both in nature and society. In this light, it should come as no surprise that the Quetzalcoatl divinity in this primordial design, as much a principle as a person, would also be universally manifest in some appropriate fashion, level after level, in mythological, legendary, and historical settings involving a mixture of attributes both human and divine.

Troubling to some are the drunkenness and sexual encounter with his sister of a historical Quetzalcoatl, resulting in his departure from the idyllic setting of Tollan. But these circumstances are precisely the conditions of the Adam archetype, marking the onset of mortality. Contrary to the contrived sensibilities of our time, Quetzalcoatl's drunkenness is less an example of moral turpitude than an alteration or obfuscation of consciousness, describing what was also true of Adam—and all humanity—when told of a veil obscuring all recollection of Eden. Both descriptions announce a loss of balance and a fall. Just as clear are the similarities of Adam's union with the woman Eve, who, like Quetzalcoatl's sister, was "bone of his bones" and "flesh of his flesh." What was told Quetzalcoatl as he left Tollan could also be said of Christ and Adam in contemplation of mortality: "Thou shalt weep; thy heart will become troubled. Thou shalt think upon thy death."⁶

6. Roberta H. Markman and Peter T. Markman, *The Flayed God: Mesoamerican Mythological Tradition* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992), 287.

Among the evidences of Christ's visit to Mesoamerica cited by the authors is an Indian legend said to have been recorded shortly after the Conquest by an early Spanish friar in Oaxaca (see pp. 134–40). This alleged account describes an occasion in ancient Oaxaca in which a great light shone for four days and then gradually descended to rest on a rock from which a powerful being, glowing like the sun, spoke to the people. His thunderous voice was heard everywhere in the valley and was understood by all. He proceeded to give the people teachings of great importance and at his departure said he would watch over them from above.

This account is notable for its similarity to the Book of Mormon description of Christ's visit to the Americas following his crucifixion. As it turns out, however, the source of the Oaxaca statement is an author said to be familiar with the Book of Mormon (see pp. 139–40), whose evocation of Indian life in the Americas blends poetry with fact. Neither this first author nor the authors of *New Evidences* give an original source for the report of the Spanish friar. The omission of such verification for the first author is not nearly as critical as in the case of this book, which is concerned with marshaling archaeological evidences in affirmation of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon. To so freely accept and promote evidences of unproven authenticity—merely for their positive bearing on the Book of Mormon—runs the very real risk of doing more harm than good.

One of the “new evidences,” as touted in the book's title, is a Mixtec calendar, which the authors claim resembles the Nephite calendar of the Book of Mormon in reckoning time from the birth of Christ. Their rationale, as I understand it, starts with the revelation in Doctrine and Covenants 20 that Christ's birth date is 6 April. Coming at Easter time, this same date of 6 April is also associated with the resurrection of Christ. Easter, moreover, often coincides with the Jewish Passover, which begins after sundown on the 14th of Nisan, the first month of the Jewish ecclesiastical calendar. It is on the 14th of Nisan that Christ is thought to have been crucified. Linking, then, the birth date of Christ to the time of Passover, the authors determine that the closest match of the 6 April date would have been with the 15th of Nisan in the year 1 B.C.

At odds with the birth of Christ in 1 B.C., however, is the report of the Jewish historian Josephus of the death of Herod the Great between 5 and 4 B.C., which event occurred after the birth of Christ. Thus Christ is generally thought to have lived from sometime between 8 and 4 B.C. to around A.D. 29. But, according to the authors, Josephus's dating is not always accurate, and they refer to another source indicating the death of Christ in the nineteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, who ruled from A.D. 14 to 37. In this case, Christ's death would have occurred in A.D. 33, more in line with a 6 April birth date in 1 B.C. Christ's death on 14 Nisan in the year A.D. 33, moreover, would have occurred on Friday, 1 April, consistent with his resurrection two days later on a Sunday, 3 April, in A.D. 33.

The Nephites of the Book of Mormon reckoned their time from the birth of Christ (see 3 Nephi 2:8), and the death of Christ is recorded as having occurred on the fourth day of the first month of the thirty-fourth year (see 3 Nephi 8:5). The Nephite thirty-fourth year corresponding to a birth date in 1 B.C. would be the year A.D. 33.

The sixth of April 1 B.C. in the Maya calendar would be, using the commonly accepted GMT correlation, 7.17.17.17.13 1 Ben 6 Mak. One Ben of the 260-day Mesoamerican sacred calendar is the Maya equivalent of the Aztec date 1 Reed, the legendary birth date of the historical Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl. Six Mak is a day designation in the 365-day Mesoamerican secular calendar (which is combined in a larger calendar round with the 260-day sacred calendar) that is also the origin date of a Mixtec 365-day calendar in the Mexican state of Oaxaca. The authors compare this Mixtec calendar with the Nephite calendar, starting with the birth of Christ, which, by their calculations, is 6 April 1 B.C. Together, 1 Ben repeats every 260 days and 6 Mak every 365 days within a calendar round of 18,980 unique days or approximately 52 years. So once every 52 years 1 Ben is paired with 6 Mak at the start of a new year known by its year bearer, 1 Ben. Thus 7.17.17.17.13 is the Long Count of 1,136,873 days from a mythical Maya creation date on 13 August 3114 B.C. that specifies the 52-year cycle in which the Calendar Round date of 1 Ben 6 Mak corresponds to 6 April 1 B.C. One Ben 6 Mak is paired with 6 April only every 1,507 years. The authors' crucifixion date of 1 April A.D. 33 is,

in the Maya Long Count, 7.19.11.8.1 11 Imix 9 Mak, which in the reckoning of the Mixtec calendar beginning with 6 Mak is the fourth day of the first month in what—given a beginning date of 6 April 1 B.C.— would be the thirty-fourth year.

To compare the Maya and Mixtec calendars in this fashion, however, requires identical day counts and year bearers; this alignment may be the case but is not clearly so. But the authors' statement, "Two scholars, with no awareness of a possible connection of Christ's April 6 birth date, have independently determined that a Mixtec calendar had its point of origin on the Calendar Round date of 1 Ben 6 Mac—Thursday, April 6, 1 B.C." (p. 162), is plainly wrong. In fact, the scholars cited mention only 6 Mak as the Mixtec calendar origin date and do not give any specified Gregorian date equivalent. Six Mak repeats every 365 days, 52 times every Calendar Round of the many since the beginning of the count of days.

Needless to say, the faulty citation only diminishes the credibility of the authors in an otherwise intriguing discussion of dating the life of Christ. It is, furthermore, precisely this kind of misrepresentation, bundled with a rather indiscriminate winnowing of data and serious lapses in logic, that so tarnishes *New Evidences*. The Book of Mormon, frankly, deserves better, much better.

In their discussion of the tree of life, the authors claim

The tree of life is one of the oldest and most prevalent religious symbols in the Near East and in Mesoamerica. This correlation indicates to many students and scholars that widespread religious and cultural ties exist between Mesoamerica and the Near East . . . and tends to confirm the migration of at least some Mesoamerican populations from the Near East to America. (p. 187)

This passage particularly encapsulates the approach of much of the apologetic literature on Book of Mormon archaeology that is so objectionable to outside reviewers. First, the shared religious symbolism that the authors tout as evidence of cultural ties between Mesoamerica and the Near East is not exclusive to these two parts of the world. In this case, the tree of life or World Tree is an archetypal con-

cept of near worldwide proportions. Second, the now largely discredited bias referred to in anthropology as “extreme diffusionism”—which holds that any improvement in what is deemed the naturally primitive and brutish state of humankind results from a diffusion of ideas and practices spreading outward from some favored core location of select people, apart from any inherent evolutionary tendencies acting from within—is very evident.

This latter diffusionist perspective is also apparent in the authors’ discussion of the Stela 5 engraving at the archaeological site of Izapa in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas as a depiction of Lehi’s early dream of the tree of life in the Book of Mormon.⁷ Whatever ultimately proves to be the case, the view of many LDS observers of Stela 5, and Mesoamerican archaeology generally, is clearly shaped by a diffusionist mind-set, casting Mesoamerican achievements as peculiar examples of foreign import (how else could they have occurred?) and ignoring in the process the reality of their existence as integral developments within a long-standing Mesoamerican cultural tradition.

On another topic, to anyone familiar with volcanism in southern Mesoamerica, the Book of Mormon account of the great destruction among the Nephites and Lamanites following the crucifixion of Christ rings particularly true. A short chapter in *New Evidences* effectively compares the description of the crucifixion events in the Book of Mormon with corroborating evidence from archaeological research in Mesoamerica. While talking with residents of Ocozocoautla in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas about thick layers of volcanic ash in the profiles of archaeological excavations at the nearby site of Coita, I learned of a volcanic eruption early in the twentieth century that so darkened the sky that wild animals, in their confusion, wandered openly in the streets of town.

7. See Stewart W. Brewer, “The History of an Idea: The Scene on Stela 5 from Izapa, Mexico, as a Representation of Lehi’s Vision of the Tree of Life,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/1 (1999): 12–21, and John E. Clark, “A New Artistic Rendering of Izapa Stela 5: A Step toward Improved Interpretation,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/1 (1999): 22–33.

Running counter to the authors' claim of current research in *New Evidences*—not included in this book—is Bart Kowallis's important study of volcanic activity in Mesoamerica at the time of Christ that appeared in *BYU Studies*.⁸ *New Evidences* also fails to include the considerable body of recent pertinent studies published under the auspices of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS), a further proof of a disappointingly flawed rehashing of mostly old material and approaches.

The general comparative study of religious imagery in Mesoamerica, while benefiting from recent advances in the decipherment of Maya hieroglyphs, is still, among the area's archaeologists, largely a fringe activity. Few professional archaeologists, who struggle with iconographic comparisons between different regions and even in the same region over time in so limited an area as Mesoamerica, are going to recognize attempts to establish cultural ties such as those developed in *New Evidences* that so thoroughly flout all considerations of space and time.

It is also important to recognize that the discipline of archaeology, in its categorical approach to material remains, is by nature analytical and particularizing, far different from the circumstances of purpose and meaning so important to the religious experience that derive from the integration of parts within a larger perspective. Both in practice and in theory, archaeology is inherently ill-suited to the ends pursued by the authors of *New Evidences*. The idea that archaeology will someday "prove" the Book of Mormon is, virtually by definition, highly unlikely.

So what do you do with legitimate claims of religious thematic resemblances between Mesoamerica and other parts of the world? While the significance of such wide-ranging parallels in religious art as those cited in *New Evidences* is certainly open to debate, I, for one, find several of the comparisons by the authors, such as that of the "Flowing Vase" (p. 335), to be quite apt both in form and in meaning. But I would suggest that the disciplines of art history and com-

8. Bart J. Kowallis, "In the Thirty and Fourth Year: A Geologist's View of the Great Destruction in 3 Nephi," *BYU Studies* 37/3 (1997–98): 137–90.

parative religion are better suited than archaeology to the academic pursuit of such issues. However it is approached, though, one thing seems quite certain. To be truly understood and appreciated for its bearing on the Book of Mormon, Mesoamerica must be studied on its own terms as a largely American phenomenon (perhaps in ways not unlike Mormonism itself) rather than as a cultural import construed after our modern conception of the Bible.