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**Abstract** Review of *Voices from the Dust: New Insights into Ancient America* (2005), by David G. Calderwood.

## A NEW CHRONICLER IN THE OLD STYLE

Brant A. Gardner

**Review of David G. Calderwood. *Voices from the Dust: New Insights into Ancient America*. Austin: Historical Publications, 2005. xxiv + 599 pp., with index. \$32.50.**

The dust jacket of this book describes David G. Calderwood as a former missionary to Uruguay and Paraguay. He has used his acquired skills in Spanish and Portuguese both in his professional life and in pursuing his interest in Latin American history. The ability to read Spanish and Portuguese is essential for his task; it has allowed him to cover an impressive number of early Spanish chroniclers of the New World. In this work, Calderwood mines these sources for possible traces of the people and teachings of the Book of Mormon that might remain.

Calderwood discusses numerous early writers and includes some historical background and a brief analysis of the sources he has assembled. This is an excellent introductory chapter for anyone who wishes to explore this part of Latin American history. Several of these works have not been translated into English, and most are familiar only to specialists. Calderwood's missionary and professional life focused more on South America, and, perhaps as a result, his compilation of sources for South America is more complete than for his Mesoamerican materials.

Calderwood's main argument is not new, although certainly the connection to the Book of Mormon is more recent. In fact, the very

real seeds of this book were sown by the early Spanish fathers serving in Central Mexico from the mid-1500s to the mid-1600s. Several of those early writers openly commented on what seemed to be Christian or Jewish teachings or practices among the natives. These interesting observations become the lode that Calderwood mines for his own purpose. Calderwood not only accepts these observations unquestioningly, but in many ways seems to have absorbed some of the early Spanish chroniclers' thought processes and methods. As a result, he has produced a history that is very much in the tradition of the early chroniclers who attempted to understand the native cultures around them in terms of what might have, or what should have, happened.

*Voices from the Dust* is the intellectual descendant of the relatively large body of early Spanish speculations on the appearance of St. Thomas (traditionally the wandering apostle who was said to have preached in India) in the New World. For example, in method and often in particulars, Calderwood sees as Diego de Durán saw. Where Durán saw elements in the native culture and history that he believed could be attributed to the preaching of St. Thomas, Calderwood reads Durán (and other chroniclers) and attributes their descriptions to the Book of Mormon.

Calderwood has covered an impressive range of material and has done the proper work to read them in the original language. My issues with his work are not with his sources but with what he makes of them. His declared purpose is "to bring together the folklore, legends, and accounts collected by the early chroniclers and compare them with accounts recorded in the *Book of Mormon*. Whenever possible, I will compare my findings with scientific evidence, discovered by archaeologists and art historians" (p. xi). That is an admirable goal. Because of this stated goal, as well as most readers' unfamiliarity with the historiographical issues involved with this Christian-sounding material, many Latter-day Saint readers will find this book very convincing and faith-affirming.

Unfortunately, Calderwood's arguments will be convincing only to those who are unaware of the methodological difficulties with the book's thesis. These underlying methodological issues are a serious

flaw in an otherwise extensively researched and well-written book. Much good information is presented in a pleasing style, but it cannot be trusted to fulfill its desired goal of providing contextual historical evidence for the Book of Mormon.

Elder Robert E. Wells, emeritus member of the First Quorum of the Seventy, wrote the foreword to Calderwood's book and unintentionally brings out one of its theoretical shortcomings:

The author does not resolve nor get into the discussion of two Hill Cumorahs nor a narrow neck of land nor anything about the exact geography of the *Book of Mormon*. Part of the appeal of this new book to me is that here is a non-judgmental portrayal of patterns and parallels coming from the Guarani/Amazon basin as well as the Andean area of South America that fits in with the information found in Central America, (Mesoamerica), Mexico, and North America. Rather than defend a theory or position, Calderwood just lays it out for us to read and digest ourselves. Yet it is a solid defense of the fact that the *Book of Mormon* fits into all of these geographical areas and into the cultures and beliefs of virtually all the "Indian Nations" found by the invading Spaniards and Portuguese. (p. xiv)

Elder Wells sees this wide scope as a positive. I think it is not. That very broad scope that Wells praises is actually one of the chief methodological problems with this text. Without identifying a specific geography, Calderwood accepts (by default) a virtual hemispheric geography in which the Book of Mormon could have taken place. In order for the chroniclers of the civilizations in both Peru and Central Mexico to have relevance to the Book of Mormon, populations in both those areas must have had contact with Book of Mormon peoples. Only with a remembered contact with the Book of Mormon people and events can any folklore and legend that was collected be traced to the Book of Mormon. Either Calderwood defends the hemispheric geography of the Book of Mormon by default, or he forfeits the ability

to pull information from texts so far distant as those from Peru and Central Mexico.

John L. Sorenson has argued forcefully that, regardless of where one would want to place it on the map, the Book of Mormon events had to have taken place in a relatively confined territory.<sup>1</sup> The Book of Mormon text does not allow for both Peru and Central Mexico to have remnants of Book of Mormon peoples. If the text's historical information tells us that all the similarities Calderwood finds cannot be attributed to the Book of Mormon (because its people never existed in that wide a dispersion), then why are there so many similarities between Andean and Central Mexican stories?

This is where Calderwood makes his second major methodological error. He does not use his texts with critical caution but with altogether too much faith in a process he has not examined. Calderwood is, however, aware of the issue of how Spanish chronicles might relate to native beliefs:

The scientists reject the theories of the chroniclers concerning the origins of the Indians. Scientists and historians view the chronicle writers as well-meaning Catholics who put a Catholic spin on everything they discovered, but did not have the advantages that modern scientists enjoy, were not trained historians, and did not utilize "scientific methodology." They refer to these writings only occasionally; generally when the chronicle writings support a point of archaeology or iconography.

In rejecting the Chronicler theories, however, the scientists generally reject or undervalue the eyewitness accounts of these early New World writers who spent years among the Indians. Scientists who have focused their efforts upon Pre-Columbia [*sic*] America apparently do not take into account what the Indians have related about themselves as they recite their folklore and legends that have been handed down for centuries. (p. 15)

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1. John L. Sorenson, *Mormon's Map* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2000).

I confess that I am nervous when the introduction of any book on history blithely dismisses years of scholarship. Calderwood is correct about the scholarly opinion about much of the Christian-sounding material but quite incorrect that scholars have ignored the chroniclers. At least in the area of Mesoamerica, where I am more familiar with the sources, I cannot agree that there has been a dismissal of the chroniclers. For the Mexica, H. B. Nicholson's masterful work *Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl: The Once and Future Lord of the Toltecs* easily belies the idea that the chroniclers have been ignored.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, Robert Carmack's *Quichean Civilization* follows the same pattern in carefully and exhaustively examining the relevant chroniclers for the Quiché.<sup>3</sup> Both works cover not only the Spanish chroniclers that Calderwood lists, but also a large number of chroniclers of which he is possibly unaware. Calderwood is simply incorrect that the scholarly opinion comes from "reject[ing] or undervalu[ing] the eyewitness accounts." The scholars' opinions come from a very careful examination of those sources.

Calderwood's personal area of expertise appears to be South America. However, the richest mine of historical material comes from Mesoamerica. While Calderwood covers some of the more important Spanish chroniclers, he does not cover the whole range of historical material available and gives no indication of familiarity with the various documents that are available in Nahuatl (the language of the Aztecs). Even in citing Sahagún (the most important of the early Spanish chroniclers of the New World), Calderwood cites an English translation of the Spanish work—not the English translation known as the *Florentine Codex*, which translates Sahagún's Nahuatl-speaking informants' material into English. The value of using documents translated from the native language is that they come closer to viewing the native world from the natives' point of view rather than from the way the Spaniards interpreted it. While even these Nahuatl texts

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2. Henry B. Nicholson, *Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl: The Once and Future Lord of the Toltecs* (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2001).

3. Robert M. Carmack, *Quichean Civilization: The Ethnohistoric, Ethnographic, and Archaeological Sources* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

were written after the Conquest and under strong Spanish tutelage, they are nevertheless essential correctives to the perspectives taken in the chroniclers. Because Calderwood too easily accepts the chroniclers' accounts, he misses the complex issues in intercultural transmission that are known to have colored them.

In *The Aztec Image in Western Thought*, Benjamin Keen surveyed the literature on Aztec themes and found "a link between the positions of the Spanish writers on Indian policy and their attitudes toward Aztec civilization."<sup>4</sup> I have examined the chroniclers of Mesoamerica for their treatment of the Aztec deity called Quetzalcoatl. The differences in the treatment of the Quetzalcoatl material in these sources are dramatic. Anti-Indian writers consistently describe only the idol of the god. Pro-Indian writers are virtually the only ones who give elaborate details of the Quetzalcoatl legends but usually very little about the idol. It is almost as though the two camps are writing about an entirely different subject. While all represent Calderwood's eyewitness accounts, they present the same basic information in very different ways, according to their own interests and perceptions and not necessarily according to those of the natives about whom they are writing.<sup>5</sup>

The filtering process is clearly seen when a text from the Nahuatl *Florentine Codex* is compared with the way Sahagún represented that text in his Spanish version. The English translation of the Nahuatl text is:

[The story of] Quetzalcoatl, who was a great wizard; and of the place where he ruled, and of what he did when he went [away]. . . .

There, it is said, he lay; he lay covered; and he lay with only his face covered. And, it is said, he was monstrous.

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4. Benjamin Keen, *The Aztec Image in Western Thought* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1971), 77.

5. See Jacques Lafaye, *Quetzalcóatl and Guadalupe: The Formation of Mexican National Consciousness 1531–1813*, trans. Benjamin Keen (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1974), 30–50, for an excellent discussion of the spiritual mind-set involved in the discovery of the New World.



His face [was] like a huge, battered stone, a great fallen rock; it [was] not made like that of men. And his beard was very long.<sup>6</sup>

Sahagún's version of this passage in his *Historia General* loses some of the information contained in the native version:

Quetzalcoatl was esteemed and held to be a god, and they adored him in ancient times in Tula, and he had a very tall temple with many stairs which were so narrow that a foot would not fit on them.

And his statue was always lying down and covered with blankets, and his face was very ugly, and his head large and bearded.<sup>7</sup>

The first change is subtle because it changes the context of the ugly Quetzalcoatl. The native statement on Quetzalcoatl's appearance comes in a passage concerning the priest-king of Tula, whereas Sahagún's follows a description of Quetzalcoatl's temple in Tenochtitlan. Sahagún is describing an idol, where the native informants were giving information considered to be related to the person. The second slight shift occurs when Quetzalcoatl is described as ugly rather than monstrous. Ugly is an aesthetic value judgment; monstrous is attempting to define something more than mere appearance. The description that has been translated as "monstrous" is attempting to communicate the essential "otherness" of Quetzalcoatl (remember that his face was described as a "huge, battered stone, a great fallen rock; it [was] not made like that of men"). These "monstrous" characteristics were important signals to the native mind that classified him as an extrahuman demigod. That context is lost entirely in Sahagún's Spanish translation.

The third change is a similar selection of the information Sahagún decided to exclude from his Spanish version of the Nahuatl information.

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6. Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, trans. Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble (Salt Lake City: School of American Research and the University of Utah, 1952), 3:13.

7. Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia General de las cosas de Nueva España*, ed. Ángel María Garibay Kintana, 4 vols. (Mexico: Editorial Porrúa, 1969), 1:278, my translation.

The *Florentine Codex* introduces Quetzalcoatl with the phrase “in hue nahualli catca.”<sup>8</sup> This phrase is translated by Anderson and Dibble to describe Quetzalcoatl, “who was a great wizard.” Our English “wizard” is perhaps the best word to use, but even it fails to provide the full connotation of the Nahuatl *nahualli*. The *nahuatl* was a shaman, a shape-shifter who could appear as various animal alter egos. This phrase, which would have imparted extremely important information to the native mind, is totally absent from Sahagún’s Spanish account. Just as when Sahagún chose to label Quetzalcoatl “ugly,” but not “monstrous,” he again strips important cultural information from the native account. Sahagún is one of the best of Calderwood’s eyewitness accounts, but even Sahagún’s account does not accurately represent the native information he was given. If Sahagún did not accurately represent the native religious information, why should we assume that all other chroniclers did?

One of the chroniclers of Mesoamerica that Calderwood quotes is Diego de Durán, an early Spanish father who was one of the earliest proponents of the idea that Quetzalcoatl was a remembrance of the Christianizing mission of St. Thomas in the New World. Durán had already interpreted the information he received through this particular Christian-historical filter. When Calderwood (or any other modern LDS writer) reads and then relies upon Durán to establish a connection between ancient native history and the Book of Mormon, he layers yet another modern perception on top of information that may already have been distorted in an effort to make it appear more Christian than it really was. However, the problem is even more complex. The Spanish impact on our understanding of native history and religion was so pervasive that it began to alter even what the early fathers heard from the natives themselves. Durán himself noticed this phenomenon:

Asking another old Indian what information he had of the departure of Topiltzin, he began saying that the Papa

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8. De Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 3:13. I have substituted the more standard orthography for the Codex’s “in vej naoalli catca.”

[Topiltzin] had arrived at the sea with many people and that he continued and had struck the sea with a staff and it had dried up and become a road through which he entered. Both he and his people. Also that his persecutors had entered after him and the waters had returned to their place and nothing more was ever known of them. And as I saw that he had read the same as I and I knew where he was going with the story, I didn't ask him more so that he would not relate Exodus to me, of which I felt he had received notice, yet he went as far as to mention the punishment which the children of Israel had with the serpents because of their murmurings against God and Moses.<sup>9</sup>

Even Durán (who saw many correspondences to Christian stories and beliefs) noticed that the Spanish influence had begun to alter the information he received from the natives. His was not the only observation, though others might not have been as perceptive. Under such conditions, it is imperative that historians carefully sift through the material to discern as well as possible the truly native information from that which was colored by the way the Spanish fathers perceived the Native Americans and their reasons for writing their chronicles. Calderwood unfortunately does not approach his sources with this critical eye. This significantly undermines the value of the parallels he has discovered.

Additionally, when so much material appears to be “parallel” over such a vast expanse of time and different cultures, one wonders what thread holds them together. Calderwood suggests that it is the Book of Mormon, even though the Book of Mormon could not have influenced a geographic area so widely dispersed (where there is no known contact among different cultures) or have persisted through that length of time. What is consistent, however, is the fact that the parallels exist in Spanish sources (but are typically absent from the more directly native sources).

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9. Diego de Durán, *Historia de las Indias de Nueva Espana: e Islas de la Tierra Firme* (Mexico: Editorial Porrúa, 1967), 1:12, my translation.

Calderwood sees only the parallels. He neglects to consider any other reason for the apparent similarities in his sources. In the historical materials from Mesoamerica, with which I am most familiar, I find much stronger evidence that it really was the common perceptual layer imposed by the Spaniards that created the parallels in the chroniclers' accounts.<sup>10</sup>

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10. See Brant A. Gardner, "Crucible of Distortion: The Impact of the Spanish on the Record of Native Oral Tradition," [frontpage2000.nmia.com/~nahualli/Quetzalcoatl/crucible.htm](http://frontpage2000.nmia.com/~nahualli/Quetzalcoatl/crucible.htm) (accessed 14 November 2006), for a larger treatment of the ways in which the Spanish writers altered both the record of native tradition and at times the native accounts of those traditions.