



Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011

Volume 20 | Number 1

Article 4

2008

Where Much Is Promised, Less is Given

Brant A. Gardner

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Gardner, Brant A. (2008) "Where Much Is Promised, Less is Given," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011*: Vol. 20 : No. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr/vol20/iss1/4>

This Book of Mormon is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011 by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.



NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title Where Much Is Promised, Less Is Given

Author(s) Brant A. Gardner

Reference *FARMS Review* 20/1 (2008): 15-32.

ISSN 1550-3194 (print), 2156-8049 (online)

Abstract Review of *Decoding Ancient America: A Guide to the Archaeology of the Book of Mormon* (2007), by Diane E. Wirth.

WHERE MUCH IS PROMISED, LESS IS GIVEN

Brant A. Gardner

Review of Diane E. Wirth. *Decoding Ancient America: A Guide to the Archaeology of the Book of Mormon*. Springville, UT: Horizon Publishers, 2007. 110 pp. \$12.99.

Diane Wirth is quite well-read in Mesoamerican art and art history. She has attended the Texas Maya workshops and has also taken classes from some of the stars of Mesoamerican scholarship. That background is apparent in the breadth of the Mesoamerican information she covers in *Decoding Ancient America*. She addresses topics certain to intrigue a Latter-day Saint audience hungry for external proof of the Book of Mormon. Some of the information she presents has appeared before in her works on the Book of Mormon or those of other Latter-day Saint scholars. However, there are some additional new ideas in this book, making it more valuable than simply a synopsis of previous work. In virtually all chapters, Wirth also provides some examples culled from some of the best modern secular works on Mesoamerica.

The first chapter begins by limiting Book of Mormon lands to the area known as Mesoamerica, or roughly from Mexico City south to a little farther south of the current border between Guatemala and Honduras and El Salvador. She does not review the history of this particular geographic proposition but bolsters it with specific archaeological elements mentioned in the Book of Mormon that are found in that area. These include cement, roads, fortified cities, a tropical climate,

and writing systems. None of these receive extensive treatment; they are mentioned more to justify the concentration on this geographical area that will be the subject of later chapters.

The next chapter gives an overview of the Mulekites and the Jaredites, two of the three immigrant nations mentioned in the Book of Mormon. Wirth then discusses what she considers to be unusual archaeological data that might indicate the arrival of foreigners, such as artistic representation of bearded figures (her label is “bearded foreigners”) and the Mesoamerican legend she labels as “seven tribes,” which she compares to Lehi’s sons. The third chapter concentrates on the Egyptian influence on Old World Israel, followed by a discussion of parallels between Hebrew and Nephite festivals, with a focus on comparing a modern Maya harvest festival to the Feast of the Tabernacles.

Wirth next discusses Mesoamerican knowledge of the creation and Adam and Eve and then continues her theme of finding remnants of Nephite teachings in Mesoamerican religion (the latter discussion touching on rebirth and baptism and concepts of death and resurrection). A chapter on Quetzalcoatl and Jesus Christ reprises her understanding of the topic as articulated in a *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* article.¹ Wirth then takes up the tree of life in Mesoamerica, comparing Old World imagery to that of the New World and emphasizing Izapa Stela 5, commonly known in Latter-day Saint literature as the “Lehi Stone.” The final chapter justifies a Mesoamerican Hill Cumorah in addition to the one in New York.

Decoding Ancient America is short, easy to read, filled with facts that appear to support a connection between the Book of Mormon and Mesoamerica, and copiously illustrated with line drawings of art relevant to her discussion. The typical Latter-day Saint reading audience will enjoy this book, and the information from its “proofs” may begin to show up on apologetic defenses of the Book of Mormon in Internet chat rooms and blogs.

1. Diane E. Wirth, “Quetzalcoatl, the Maya Maize God, and Jesus Christ,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 11 (2002): 4–15.

More Can Be Less

Wirth's book, however, presents some problems. Although much of her information is excellent, aspects of the work decrease the value of the conclusions drawn. One problem is perhaps an issue only for scholars in the field. Either Wirth or the editors have chosen to use bibliographic entries as though they were endnotes. The text has appropriate references where Wirth is citing other scholars, but the endnotes themselves are to entire works and not to specific pages. Thus it is difficult to verify her interpretation of the sources used. Only those who are already very familiar with the sources will be able to check her work.

More important, however, are two problems with the way Wirth uses her broad reading of Mesoamerican materials: her uncritical use of some secondary sources and a flawed methodology that creates false positives rather than firm connections between the Book of Mormon and Mesoamerica.

Incautious Reading of Secondary Sources

Latter-day Saints are excited to see the Book of Mormon vindicated by empirical research, and many enjoy reading and writing about such findings. However, Latter-day Saint scholarship on the Book of Mormon, particularly when it comes to comparisons with Mesoamerica, is of uneven quality. Along with the very good there is the marginally good (and sometimes much worse). The typical Latter-day Saint reader lacks the necessary training to discern between reliable and unreliable scholarship. Wirth has not helped her readers to assess the quality of her secondary sources.

Wirth draws on Bruce Warren to demonstrate an amazing linguistic correlation between a Mesoamerican king's name and a Jaredite king named in the Book of Mormon.² Wirth cites Warren

2. Blaine M. Yorgason, Bruce W. Warren, and Harold Brown, *New Evidences of Christ in Ancient America* (Provo, UT: Book of Mormon Research Foundation, Stratford Books, 1999), 17–18. Although three authors are listed, this particular information is clearly from Warren.

and is obviously repeating his analysis. Hence the following: “This points to evidence that not all of the Jaredites were destroyed in their last battle in Mesoamerica. In fact, many years later in the Maya city of Palenque, Chiapas, Mexico, an Olmec king named U-K’ix-Chan is mentioned. In the Mayan language, *x* is pronounced ‘sh.’ Therefore K’ix would be pronounced ‘Kish,’ and Kish is a Jaredite name (see Ether 10:17–18)” (p. 13).

Commendably, Wirth does add a little caution to Warren’s assertion since she understands the long time difference between the Jaredites and the time of Palenque. Yet despite the key qualification “many years later,” she offers no analysis that would allow the connection to be made over the large time gap or that would satisfactorily address the cultural and geographic differences involved. Most importantly, she relies on Warren’s understanding and not on the most recent interpretation of the Mayan glyph that bears the king’s name.

Warren’s use of the translation “K’ix” for the stingray spine (and the claimed connection to the Jaredite name *Kish*) is based on an outdated reading of the glyph. Mark A. Wright, a PhD candidate in Mesoamerican studies at the University of California, Riverside, pointed out to me that the “K’ix” reading of the glyph has been shown to be incorrect. He provided the following from Stanley Guenter’s article that describes the new reading: “While the ‘thorn’ in this name is normally read as **K’IX**, Marc Zender (personal communication 2001) and Albert Davletshin (2003) have recently suggested **KOKAN**, a word for ‘fish spine’ in Yukatek, as the glyph is occasionally complemented by **-na** (e.g., Palenque Tablet of the 96 Glyphs).”³ It is easy to see how Wirth might not have been aware of a new reading of a single glyph, but the new reading underscores the caution that should be taken when making leaps of vision over the extensive difference between time, place, and culture to draw connections that seem parallel.

The next example comes from her reading of Aztec mythic material. This is a particularly difficult task since the best records we have of

3. Stanley Guenter, “The Tomb of K’inich Janaab Pakal: The Temple of the Inscriptions at Palenque,” 9 n. 14, <http://www.mesoweb.com/articles/guenter/TI.pdf> (accessed 23 September 2008), emphasis in original.

Mesoamerican myths and legends come from a time after the Spanish conquest, which places nearly a thousand years between the recording of the myth and the end of the Book of Mormon. In addition, the majority of the recorded Mesoamerican myths and legends come from peoples and languages that had nothing to do with the Book of Mormon. Finally, the very process of determining how to reconstruct those myths from the way the Spanish interpreted and recorded them into their more native, precontact state is a complex task.⁴ Very few Latter-day Saint writers who attempt to handle Mesoamerican materials have spent the time necessary to master this complex body of material. Thus it is not surprising that some writers' enthusiasm leads them to see connections where none exist. The problem is compounded when an original fanciful connection is perpetuated by other writers. Wirth is guilty of perpetuating such incorrect information that will unfortunately become more accepted simply by its repetition and the fact that most Latter-day Saint readers lack the background to know the errors.

Wirth describes the fascinating parallel between a Mesoamerican origin myth of seven tribes arriving in the New World in seven ships and the seven sons of Lehi arriving in a ship:

There is a great tradition in Mesoamerica of the people's ancestors originally coming from seven tribes. There are several examples of this tradition in art, but first we need to understand what caves mean to Mesoamericans, even today. Caves are damp and can give shelter, especially in the rain forests of Central America. Rain was also believed to come from caves in the mountains. These legends, as depicted in Mesoamerican art, show that seven tribes came from seven caves. These caves are considered to be like a mother's womb. A mother's womb is a protective enclosure and is also associated with water. (p. 17)

4. See my paper "The Impact of the Spanish upon the Record of Native Oral Tradition among the Nahuatl," <http://frontpage2k.nmia.com/~nahualli/Quetzalcoatl/crucible.htm> (accessed March 2008), for an analysis of issues involved in reconstructing the precontact Quetzalcoatl mythology.

She then indicates that “Sahagun, an early Spanish friar, stated that the Indians believed that these caves referred to a ship or ships that brought their seven ancestral tribes to this land” (p. 17). This becomes implicitly parallel to the arrival of the Lehites by ship and the seven sons who became the heads of seven tribes. Even on the surface, this “parallel” has problems. It assumes a continuation of the veneration of all of Lehi’s sons when the Book of Mormon makes it clear that what becomes important is not the individual tribes but the collective terms *Nephite* and *Lamanite*, into which the tribal identifications are subsumed (see Jacob 1:13–14). There is no indication why a Lamanite would continue to venerate Nephi’s line or why a Nephite would venerate Lamanite heritage.

It is true that there is a legend of descent from seven caves, but it is an Aztec origin myth.⁵ The Aztecs were relative newcomers to Mesoamerica, not arriving until the Book of Mormon had been closed for over six hundred years. Even the artistic representation of the myth that Wirth uses as an illustration (p. 18) confirms that it is a myth hailing from northern Mexico or southwestern United States. Around the depicted landscape intended to be above the seven-lobed, womblike cave are saguaro cacti. These grow only in the region comprising the Sonoran Desert and a little outside of Arizona. They cannot grow in any area connected to the Book of Mormon. In both time and location, Wirth’s parallel myth is far from the Book of Mormon. Wirth does not explain that contradiction between her “parallel” and the text.

5. Some part of this tale may have been integrated after the Aztec’s arrival in Mesoamerica. Mary Ellen Miller, in *The Art of Mesoamerica from Olmec to Aztec* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986), 68–69, makes this observation: “During excavations to install Sound and Light at Teotihuacan in 1971, a cave was found under the pyramid. Ancient rituals there may have hallowed the site. The cave itself features several small chambers, almost in a clover-leaf configuration. Ceramics recovered indicate the cave’s use from Late Formative through Classic times, and it could well be an extremely ancient focus of worship. The later Aztecs claimed to have come to Tenochtitlan from a mythic place called ‘Chicomotoc,’ or Seven Caves; might not the underground chambers of the Pyramid of the Sun have been an ancient sacred place to them as well as to the Teotihuacanos?”

More importantly, however, she has incautiously repeated an argument from other Latter-day Saint writers that was ill-advised in the original and becomes all the more so when she perpetuates their error. Tracing the history of this error is made more difficult by the bibliography-as-endnote system and the general impression that this book was pulled together quickly rather than carefully re-vetted for its sources. Wirth cites Bernardino de Sahagún as the source for the seven caves as ships. She then notes that it is Sahagún as quoted in one of her earlier books. Although I have not been able to trace her original footnote, I am fairly certain that the actual origin of her source (based on the very similar story, reference, and error) is Milton R. Hunter and Thomas Stuart Ferguson's *Ancient America and the Book of Mormon*. They report: "Concerning the origin of these peoples, the report the old men . . . give is that they came by sea from the north . . . , and true it is that they came in some wooden boats but it is not known how they [the boats] were hewn, but it is conjectured by a report found among all these natives that they came from seven caves, and that these seven caves are the seven ships or galleys in which the *first* settlers of this land came, as gathered from likely conjectures."⁶ Both Hunter and Ferguson's footnote and Wirth's endnote cite Sahagún's *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* and specifically the very same "introduction to Book 1" in the very same edition. I have never seen any reference to the caves as ships in any other work that I recall. I also confess to not completely doing my homework and finding that particular edition. However, I have searched through another excellent Spanish edition of that work. There is no Sahaguntine introduction to Book 1. Sahagún's Book 1 deals with the Aztec gods and does not cover this origin myth. There is nothing like this in Book 1. There is a possible Sahaguntine passage to which it might be related that comes later in the text: "It is said that the first peoples who came to settle this land of Mexico, which is now called West India, arrived in that port with ships in which they passed that sea; and arriving there, and going

6. Milton R. Hunter and Thomas Stuart Ferguson, *Ancient America and the Book of Mormon* (Oakland, CA: Kolob Book, 1950), 30, emphasis in original.

by that location they named it Pantlan.”⁷ Sahagún does give an origin myth of arrival by sea, but it is not connected to seven caves.

There was an authentic myth of seven caves, known as *Chicomoztoc*. They were very clearly considered caves, not ships.⁸ Neither Sahagún nor anyone else familiar with either the meaning of the word *chicomoztoc* or with the legends would have made the error of suggesting that they were rather ships. That assertion is probably the unnamed editor’s, perpetuated in Hunter and Ferguson and apparently twice now in Wirth (in her earlier book and now this one).

Wirth perpetuates an even greater error of fact when she repeats the marvelous story of a personage who appeared from the sky in a great light and spoke like thunder (p. 76). She has also referenced this myth in an article in the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*,⁹ though in this book she provides a different source than she did for her article.¹⁰

I attempted to trace this reference, because it is unquestionably the best putative New World remembrance of Christ’s appearance at Bountiful. What I found, however, was that the cited source was a poet (Tony Shearer) who had read the Book of Mormon and included this passage in a poetic retelling of the Quetzalcoatl tale. Shearer attributed the quotation to a Juan de Córdova but didn’t give a specific source, so it is impossible to be certain that he took it from the real Juan de Córdova or simply exercised his poetic license in the attribu-

7. Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*, ed. Angel María Garibay Kintana (Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa, 1969), 3:203 (my translation).

8. Mary Miller and Karl Taube, *An Illustrated Dictionary of the Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 60.

9. Wirth, “Quetzalcoatl, the Maya Maize God, and Jesus Christ,” 15.

10. In this book she references Juan de Córdova, *Arte en Lengua Zapoteca* (Mexico City, 1578), and Tony Shearer, *Beneath the Moon and Under the Sun* (Albuquerque: Sun Publishing, 1975). In the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* article she gives what I believe to be the original source, Bruce W. Warren and Thomas Stuart Ferguson, *The Messiah in Ancient America* (Provo, UT: Book of Mormon Research Foundation, 1987). Warren cites Shearer, who attributes the statement, without a specific reference, to a Juan de Córdova. Wirth may have examined Shearer since finding the quotation in Warren and Ferguson, but I strongly doubt she examined Juan de Córdova’s *Arte*, since I did examine that text and did not find the quotation. Had he provided a page number, I would gladly admit my error. Without it, I believe that it is not in Córdova’s grammar.

tion. Juan de Córdoba wrote a grammar of the Zapotec language (the work Wirth secondarily references in this book). I was able to examine that grammar. At the end there is some text describing culture, but I was unable to find this particular quotation. I believe that the story was invented by Shearer and informed directly from his reading in the Book of Mormon.¹¹ The marvelous parallel between putative Mesoamerican legend and the Book of Mormon is really a parallel between the Book of Mormon and itself, hardly an external “proof.”

Unfortunately, this incautious approach to reading secondary sources is not limited to repeating mistakes from Latter-day Saint authors. Wirth “decodes” information very differently from her source. When discussing the mythology of Tezcatlipoca (whom she paints as a decoded Lucifer), she notes:

In Mesoamerica, legends say that Quetzalcoatl hit Tezcatlipoca with a club, knocking Tezcatlipoca from the heavens and down into the waters of the earth. When Tezcatlipoca was cast out, his foot was ripped off as he was being thrown out of heaven (see Fig. 20). This story may be compared to Revelation 12:7–9. Tezcatlipoca’s foot was replaced by a smoking mirror, through which he saw a dark future for mankind (see Fig. 21). (pp. 43–44)

In the above excerpt, I have kept the references to the figures even though I am not reproducing them here. Tracing this statement tells us much about the way Wirth is decoding Mesoamerican material because those references are given as support for her position. Her reading of the myth is at odds with the way I remembered it, so I checked her source (Brundage’s *The Phoenix of the Western World*).¹² I was looking for confirmation that the severing of the foot took place as Tezcatlipoca was knocked from the sky and that the smoking mirror was used to see “a dark future for mankind.”

11. See also Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon, Volume 6, Fourth Nephi–Moroni* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 392–94, where I provide more information on this passage.

12. Burr Cartwright Brundage, *The Phoenix of the Western World: Quetzalcoatl and the Sky Religion* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982).

Without a specific page reference, I searched all references to Tezcatlipoca in Brundage. I found the most likely location of her source both because it discussed the myth of the severed foot and because it had the same line drawing illustration she included in her work (which she does footnote to Brundage rather than to the original).¹³ Neither of the two questionable readings in Wirth are found in Brundage. In the first, Brundage clearly notes that the foot is severed after his presence on earth, a fact corroborated by the illustration that clearly shows a battle with an earth monster (the very illustration that Wirth used in support of her retelling). The story of the loss of the foot is, as Brundage indicates, a lost myth. We have the story in pictures but no text of the myth.¹⁴ The myth of the celestial battle between Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca does not lead to the story of Tezcatlipoca's lost foot. The final reference to a figure shows Tezcatlipoca painted with a smoking mirror in place of a foot, but that cannot be support for the idea that he saw "a dark future for mankind." As with other Mesoamerican deities, Tezcatlipoca is ambiguously good and bad. Polished obsidian mirrors were used for divination among many Mesoamerican tribes, and the idea that Tezcatlipoca foresaw a "dark future" must be another "decoding" because it does not faithfully represent the Mesoamerican ideology.

In both cases, Wirth's decoding adds information that makes the text appear much more parallel to her thesis that Tezcatlipoca was a parallel to Satan. Without a background in Mesoamerican mythology, a reader will be amazed at the similarities—even though in reality the similarities are part of the decoding and are not found in the original mythology.

13. Brundage, *Phoenix of the Western World*, drawing on p. 239. Compare http://www.famsi.org/research/loubat/Vaticanus%203773/page_26.jpg (accessed 23 September 2008), where the differences are slight and relegated to detail rather than to important interpretive content.

14. Brundage, *Phoenix of the Western World*, 238.

Parallelism as a Methodology

Over thirty years ago, eminent Mayanist Michael Coe bemoaned the state of what has been called “Book of Mormon archaeology.” There is no reason to doubt that his opinion continues to be shared by non-Latter-day Saint Mesoamericanists:

In hundreds of motels scattered across the western United States the Gentile archaeologist can find a paperback Book of Mormon lavishly illustrated with the paintings of Arnold Friberg depicting such scenes as Samuel the Lamanite prophesying on top of what looks like the Temple of the Tigers in Chichen Itza, Yucatan.

Any curious archaeologist can hear guides in L.D.S. visitor centers from Sharon, Vermont, to Los Angeles confidently lecturing that the Nephites built the Maya “cities” and expounding on other subjects that are usually the preserve of experts in these matters. Small wonder that the outside archaeologist often feels bewilderment if not downright hostility when confronted with things he is sure cannot be true.¹⁵

Coe had been reading Latter-day Saint literature on the Book of Mormon that relied heavily on the methodology of parallelism to draw connections between Mesoamerica and the Book of Mormon.¹⁶ In that methodology, two things that appear similar in disparate cultures are assumed to be connected because of the similarity. The passage of time and criticism of the methodology¹⁷ has not diminished its

15. Michael Coe, “Mormons and Archaeology: An Outside View,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8/2 (1973): 42.

16. Regarding studies of Book of Mormon geography, Latter-day Saint authors produced little based on any different methodology until the publication, twelve years later, of John L. Sorenson’s *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985). Even Sorenson frequently follows the parallelist methodology.

17. Latter-day Saint historian William Hamblin has pointed out problems with the methodology of parallels that Hugh Nibley used: “Nibley’s method does contain some weaknesses. The first, and perhaps most important, is Nibley’s view that the ‘East’ is somehow unchanging. In reality the Near East has witnessed some of the most tremendous periods of social, economic, technological, political, and cultural transformations

use in Latter-day Saint literature.¹⁸ As with the example I noted above concerning the myth of Tezcatlipoca's severed foot, the methodology too easily creates superficial parallels that, in Coe's words, the expert "is sure cannot be true."

Wirth compares two elements and, when there is a similarity, presumes that the similarity is an indication of a historical connection between the two. For example, she notes that "in order to understand how the Mesoamerican culture was influenced by the Jaredites, Lehites, and Mulekites, we need to understand the cultures of the Middle East where these three groups came from" (p. 21). In spite of her assertion, Mesoamericanists have developed a fairly detailed picture of Mesoamerica without relying upon a Near Eastern interpretation. Wirth's is therefore hardly an accepted interpretive basis. Both the idea that we must understand the ancient Near East to understand Mesoamerica and the idea that the Nephites and Lamanites had sig-

in world history. . . . To me his case is weakened by including these other marginal parallels.

"A second methodological problem is that in attempting to draw parallels between ancient Near Eastern cultures and the Book of Mormon, Nibley often ignores equally significant differences. What is important here is not that the differences between the Book of Mormon and ancient Near Eastern cultures somehow threaten to undermine the historicity of the Book of Mormon, but rather that the differences are often just as important evidence as parallels in obtaining a more complete understanding of the ancient historical setting." William J. Hamblin, "Time Vindicates Hugh Nibley," review of *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, by Hugh Nibley, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 2/1 (1990): 123–24.

Martin Raish expressed a similar view: "Many LDS writers provide what I call shopping lists to prove their points. They assemble rather impressive-looking lists of words, customs, and architectural features which are found both in the Old World and the New. The longer the list, of course, the greater the 'proof.' Unfortunately such an approach is rarely of any real value. . . . To be meaningful, such a list must cite a *complex* system . . . or a *unique* manner . . . which is found *only* in the two cultures in question." "All That Glitters: Uncovering Fool's Gold in Book of Mormon Archaeology," *Sunstone* 6/1 (1981): 13.

18. In addition to Wirth, the methodology underlies the arguments in David G. Calderwood, *Voices from the Dust: New Insights into Ancient America* (Austin, TX: Historical Publications, 2005); John L. Lund, *Mesoamerica and the Book of Mormon: Is This the Place?* (np: The Communication Company, 2007); Bruce W. Warren and Thomas Stuart Ferguson, *The Messiah in Ancient America* (Provo, UT: Book of Mormon Research Foundation, 1987); and Yorgason, Warren, and Brown, *New Evidences of Christ in Ancient America*.

nificant cultural impact on Mesoamerica are controversial assumptions. They require argumentation, but Wirth never indicates that there is any controversy at all. She accepts the propositions, and they form the foundation of her arguments.

Because Wirth understands there are issues with the kinds of parallels one finds in Mesoamerican material when placed against the Middle Eastern background of the Book of Mormon, her method requires another conceptual reading (perhaps the definition of her “decoding”) of the material. It must be posited that what we see is a distorted remembrance of Book of Mormon practices, and therefore dissimilarities are due to apostasy and similarities are due to remembrances. She notes: “Some gospel stories managed to seep through to the existing Mesoamerican population as the truth became quickly distorted by apostasy” (p. 35). This same interpretive scheme is repeated frequently: “many ceremonies became distorted over time” (p. 27); “most of these stories are weak imitations of what their ancestors possessed” (p. 35); “thus the Aztecs thought the precious and sacred beliefs they once possessed were gone” (p. 36); and “the apostasy, around AD 150–200, was a time of forgetting true gospel principles. By AD 231, the apostasy was in full swing . . . , but still a small glimmer of truth remained from what the Nephites once knew” (p. 36).

Wirth’s methodology (and perhaps understanding of her task of decoding) is that one finds the similarity to something that the Latter-day Saint people believe and then suggest that it appears because of a continuation of that belief from Nephite times. All differences that might make it “unparallel” are assumed to be part of the process of apostasy. Wirth explains her understanding of how Nephite ideas traveled through time:

The Maya nobles made grand monuments and painted pottery with detailed scenes that told stories. But the commoners in ancient times spread ideas by word of mouth and through their household art. This was the method by which most traditions passed from one generation to the next. Can you guess what happened?

What happened was similar to the “telephone game” children play in which one person whispers something into the ear of the person next to him, and that person passes on the message to the next to him, and that person passes on the message to the next person, until the message has gone all the way around a circle of children. The original message always becomes distorted because it is transferred to more and more people. (p. 36)

What Wirth misses is that the telephone game is a very different process from oral transmission (the process by which most information was transmitted in Mesoamerica). The telephone game relies on three elements: the possibility of mishearing a whisper rather than regular speech, an emphasis on very short-term memory, and no corrective mechanism for the message. None of these elements describe the transmission of oral traditions.

In particular, oral tradition’s corrective mechanisms are very strong. Oral traditions are told out loud to a number of people, including many (and typically most) who have heard it before. Any significant errors are immediately corrected by the community. Oral traditions do change, and they may also have remarkable longevity.¹⁹ In some oral traditions, there is extremely high accuracy in the passing of the most important stories precisely because they are practiced to become virtually verbatim to the version from the teacher. Wirth’s assumption of how one decodes the material is based on a flawed understanding of the process of oral transmission. As a result, although Wirth has read well and widely, her decoding of ancient Mesoamerica with respect to the Book of Mormon is more an exercise in creative parallelism rather than convincing argumentation.

An example of the problem of parallels and interpretations comes from her chapter that presents a new insight on the connection

19. Albert B. Lord, “Yugoslav Epic Fold Poetry,” in *The Study of Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 267–68. Lord recorded two instances of the same performance around twenty years apart. There were certainly differences, but he notes: “This single example indicates very well the essentially conservative character of the tradition in so far as the major thematic material is concerned.”

between a Maya ceremony and the Hebrew Feast of Tabernacles. After a section describing the Hebrew ceremony and then the Maya Cha Cha'ac ceremony, "which is still practiced today in Yucatan, Mexico," she presents the two parallels more directly:

Rain was a very important objective for both the Feast of Tabernacles and the Cha-Cha'ac ceremonies. In both ceremonies, liquid was poured on the altar while the king (Israel) or the shaman (Mesoamerica) prayed for rain. It was at the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem that Christ spoke of the "living water" (see John 7:36–38). The Lord was saying, in so many words, that he was the living water from which all should drink.

We do not know if the Maya ever knew the significance of water in this sense, but the Nephites did. It was Jehovah (Christ) who spoke through the prophet Jeremiah when he said, "They have forsaken me the fountain of living waters" (Jeremiah 2:13). Jeremiah lived in Lehi's time.

. . . When the Cha-Cha'ac ritual was completed, as is similar to the Sukkot, the Maya sat around the table/altar and feasted on the food that was prepared for this occasion. This was a time of joy, whether performed by the Hebrews or the Maya. (p. 30)

This is a fascinating parallel. We have a Hebrew festival that appears to be very similar to a Maya festival. How could the Maya have received such knowledge without the Nephite influence? Wirth uses that question as its own answer, with no attempt to find out whether or not there really is another explanation for the parallels she draws.

At issue is the nature of the parallels themselves. She acknowledges that the modern Maya perform this ceremony. She assumes, without any evidence, that it was performed anciently. While that is certainly possible, some argument to that fact is required in order to bridge the gap of nearly sixteen hundred years between the close of the Book of Mormon and this modern practice.

Even if we could accept the great difference in time, we have a Maya ceremony compared to a Hebrew ceremony. The unstated assertion

is that it is a remembrance of faithful Nephite practice. The problem with that assertion is that the Nephites were probably in Zoque territory from about 200 BC to the end of their days. The Maya would have fallen under the label of “Lamanite.” Wirth never tells us how a faithful Nephite ceremony would cross linguistic, cultural, and (most importantly) hate-laden boundaries to be adopted (faithfully) by apostate Lamanites.

A final problem here is the very assumption of causality in the parallels. For her case to be effective, Wirth would need to demonstrate that the two ceremonies exhibit unique features that would be difficult to replicate by independent invention. Unfortunately, these parallels between the two ceremonies are quite easily explained by independent invention based on a similar goal and a similar approach to manipulating the spiritual world. For example, Wirth notes that both ceremonies include a prayer for rain (pp. 27, 29). The parallel of the pouring of water is just as likely to be an independent realization that poured water is a form of invoking the falling water of rain.

One of the failings of the methodology of parallels is that much of what is “parallel” comes in the art of the telling. Similarities are heightened and differences typically ignored. In this case, Wirth overstates the parallels. She says of the Hebrew ceremony: “Tvedtnes also says that Sukkot (the Feast of Tabernacles) was ‘the reenactment of Yahweh’s [Jehovah’s/Christ’s] enthronement as king of the universe and controller of the elements’” (p. 28). For the Maya, she notes that “when a Maya shaman was in charge of the Cha-Cha’ac, he was considered their supreme god, just as the Hebrew king represented God” (p. 29). While both statements are true, Wirth sees them as directly parallel. Their important differences are left unexamined.

In most ceremonies, the practitioners enter a state where they represent deities (or representatives of a different realm), so that in and of itself is not a compelling connection between the two ceremonies. We must assume that Wirth did not notice the significant conceptual difference between acting as a god and being seated as a king. In par-

ticular, the Maya idea of deity is sufficiently different from the Hebrew conception as to make precise comparisons more difficult.²⁰

Wirth's chapter on Quetzalcoatl and Jesus Christ will certainly be popular because it presents some new perspectives while retaining the old connection between the two. Her analysis is very heavily based on both the perception of parallels and the dismissal of differences as apostasy from the true remembrance. I am particularly familiar with the sources and issues of this historical and methodological problem and have written extensively on the issue.²¹ In a word, I find no evidence that supports the conclusions Wirth draws. She does not engage my research.

Similarly, although she at least acknowledges a contrary position concerning Izapa Stela 5, she does not engage that argument but glosses over it: "Latter-day Saint archaeologists do not completely agree with the interpretation of this stela, but even so, there appear to be strong parallels between the design of Stela 5 and similar themes found in the Near East" (p. 85).²² When parallels are proposed as evidence in the face of contrary data, more is required than the simple assertion that the parallel is "strong."

Although impressing non-Latter-day Saint archaeologists like Michael Coe is never the ultimate goal of Latter-day Saint scholarship on the Book of Mormon, many of the reasons why Coe found such efforts

20. Karl Taube, *The Major Gods of Ancient Yucatan* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1992), 8; and Stephen D. Houston and David Stuart, "Of Gods, Glyphs, and Kings: Divinity and Rulership among the Classic Maya," *Antiquity* 70 (1996): 290.

21. See my studies "The Christianization of Quetzalcoatl," *Sunstone* 10/11 (1986): 6–10; "Digging for Quetzalcoatl's Christian Roots," <http://frontpage2k.nmia.com/~nahualli/LDStops/DigQ/DigQ%20TOC.htm> (accessed 23 September 2008); and most recently an expanded discussion in *Second Witness*, 5:353–95.

22. Wirth cites John E. Clark as one archaeologist who holds a contrary opinion. See Clark's study "A New Artistic Rendering of Izapa Stela 5: A Step Toward Improved Interpretation," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/1 (1999): 22–33. I strongly suggest that when a believing Latter-day Saint archaeologist of high professional standing, such as John Clark, disagrees with an interpretation, he or she deserves a fair hearing rather than a summary dismissal. For the record, I agree with Clark. Regarding the Near Eastern parallels that Wirth sees in the Book of Mormon, the same could also be said for Scandinavia and the Far East. Tree of life symbolism is widespread, and Wirth does not examine the imagery outside the Near East. See Gardner, *Second Witness*, 1:154–56.

unconvincing should be warning signals that some of the arguments set forth by Latter-day Saints really are unacceptable. This is not to say that stronger connections between Mesoamerica and the Book of Mormon are not to be expected. In fact, John E. Clark, a prominent Latter-day Saint archaeologist who specializes in Mesoamerica, has noted: “As seen by science, the Book of Mormon is stronger today than it was in 1830, 1844, 1950, or even 2000, so I expect it will continue to become stronger in the future. . . . The absolute percentages of confirmed items will change, of course, but not likely the pattern. If the book were a hoax, we would not expect any more than about 1 percent of the items to be confirmed beyond random chance, but several hundred items supporting the book’s historical validity have already been verified.”²³

As I noted at the beginning, Wirth’s mentors are excellent and her familiarity with Mesoamerican materials is impressive and encouraging. Her knowledge of the field is an obvious improvement over what many other Latter-day Saint authors bring to the discussion. Along with her accomplishments, I would like to see a similar upgrade in her caution with secondary sources and particularly in the methodology she uses when comparing cultural aspects seen in the Book of Mormon with what is known about Mesoamerica. When she applies her talents to those improvements, I will be first in line for the next book.

23. John E. Clark, “Archaeological Trends and Book of Mormon Origins,” in *The Worlds of Joseph Smith: A Bicentennial Conference at the Library of Congress*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2006), 95.