

# The Decline of the God Quetzalcoatl

*“There were many churches in the land . . . which professed to know the Christ, and yet they did deny the more parts of his gospel.” (4 Nephi 1:27)*

Some Latter-day Saints have long been struck with the similarity between certain characteristics of the god Quetzalcoatl, as known from native traditions in Mexico and Guatemala, and Jesus Christ, whose visit to Lehi’s descendants is described in 3 Nephi. In *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*,<sup>1</sup> the dramatic decline of the god Quetzalcoatl in the period around A.D. 200 at the giant city of Teotihuacan near Mexico City was discussed in comparison with 4 Nephi. The book relied on a study by Mexican scholar Enrique Florescano.<sup>2</sup> A new study now presents even clearer parallels.<sup>3</sup>

The face of what Mexican archaeologists term “the old Temple of Quetzalcoatl” at Teotihuacan has been photographed by innumerable tourists. Dramatic symbolic representations of Quetzalcoatl as a serpent dot the facade of this impressive structure. Additional mapping, ceramic study, and excavation have established quite surely that this building was constructed at the same time as the huge Pyramid of the Sun—between A.D. 150 and 200.<sup>4</sup> As visitors clearly see, the original building was later covered over with another structure bearing very different symbols.

In Book of Mormon history, this half century was the golden age following the appearance of the resurrected Jesus to the Nephites in Bountiful; however, 4 Nephi gives only two brief verses about this period (see 4 Nephi 1:19–20). (Of course we do not positively know that Teotihuacan was one of the cities of the Nephites or Lamanites, but the change in deities that Cabrera reports is so striking that we may at least speculate that worship of Jesus Christ, under the name translated by the later Aztecs as Quetzalcoatl, prevailed there.)

Cabrera’s picture of the transition between the two sacred buildings is interesting: “the Plumed Serpent [representing Quetzalcoatl] . . . acquired for this [earlier] period of time a preponderant force in the political and religious aspect of Teotihuacan. This is shown by the ostentatious, sculpture-decorated structure, which to construct required enormous labor . . . making it one of the great glories of Teotihuacan.” But what was the reason, the author goes on, for them to mutilate many of the enormous, plumed serpent heads and then construct a new edifice of lesser quality covering the first one? The change was not simply one of architectural style. More likely it had to do with changing political and religious power.

Cabrera continues: “The band or group of priests representing Quetzalcoatl held power at Teotihuacan from at least the time when the first structure was erected, before A.D. 200. But then other religious groups arose who were represented by the symbolism of jaguars, coyotes, birds and fishes along with other mythological beings.” Priests or followers of this new religious persuasion eventually gained control of the city; the date for the change is not known precisely but is usually considered as approximately A.D. 300. Paintings and sculptures of jaguars and other symbolic animals are found widely throughout the sacred portion of the metropolis thereafter.

Fourth Nephi 1:26–41 reports the rise of new “churches” rivaling “the church of Christ,” which eventually came to dominate the society. This took place about A.D. 210 to 260, a reasonable approximation to the scholars’ estimate of A.D. 300.

Cabrera concludes with questions about this “period of social crisis whose causes are unknown”: “Do the phenomena mentioned represent other Teotihuacan groups, or groups coming in from elsewhere, intent on establishing at Teotihuacan their own religion?” Or, “what was going on in Teotihuacan society in the area of religious and political organizations in the interval between A.D. 200 and 350?”

Those who read the Book of Mormon as authentic ancient history will feel they already have a useful explanation at least in part. But we too would like, in the author’s final words, “better information, to establish more exact dates of these social events and determine their causes.”

*Research by John L. Sorenson, originally published as a FARMS Update in Insights (September 1992): 2.*

### Notes

1. See John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985).

2. See Miguel León-Portilla, “Quetzalcoatl: espiritualismo del México antiguo,” *Cuadernos Americanos* 105/4 (1959): 127–39.

3. See Rubén Cabrera Castro, “La secuencia arquitectónica del edificio de los animales mitológicos en Teotihuacan,” in *Homenaje a Román Piña Chan* (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1987), 349–71.

4. Cabrera, 364, reports a new carbon 14 date of A.D. 148.