

Old World People in the New

“And who knoweth but the Lord will carry us forth into a land which is choice above all the earth?” (Ether 1:38)

Joseph Smith is said to have “quoted [in 1842] with approval from the pulpit reports of certain Toltec [Mexican] legends which would make it appear that those people had come originally from the Near East in the time of Moses”; he did not connect the purported migration at all to the Book of Mormon.¹

Many traditions existed in Mesoamerica that told of ancestors of the native peoples, or at least of part of them, coming from across the ocean.² For instance, the “Título de los Señores de Totonicapán,” signed in 1554 by dignitaries of the Quiché Maya Indians of highland Guatemala, said, “the three nations of Quichés . . . came from where the sun rises, descendants of Israel.”³

Interpreters of this document have commonly supposed that the Indians had inserted a Bible tradition about “Israel” that they had picked up from the Spaniards. (The process by which such a cultural intrusion might have taken place in the first generation after the Conquest, and why anyone would put the notion into a legally important native document, is never clear in this speculation.)

One possible source for Joseph Smith’s comment can now be identified. A nineteenth-century Guatemalan historian, Domingo Juarros, published in 1809 an obscure work in Spanish that was translated into English and issued in 1823 in London as *A Statistical and Commercial History of the Kingdom of Guatemala*. Even if Joseph never saw this book, by 1842 he may have come across a newspaper piece based upon it.

Juarros said he had access to manuscripts held by families descended from Quichean royalty at the time of the Spaniards’ arrival. Those were documents apart from the famous Totonicapán title or from the Popol Vuh. He reported that the manuscripts stated that their ancestors, called Toltecs, had descended “from the house of Israel.” They were said to have escaped under Moses from captivity in Egypt; but being confirmed idolaters, they chose to separate from him and his brethren. At length, the story goes, they reached Mexico where they founded the famed city of Tula. The chief who commanded and conducted this multitude from one continent to the other was named Tanub. From him, it was claimed, sprang the Toltec kings of Tula. Two of the manuscripts relate that “thirteen armies” left the old continent, headed by as many principal families, all related.

Tanub’s fifth successor led them from Mexico to Guatemala. There the kingdom was divided into three nations (the Quichés, Cakchiquels, and Tzutuhils), which the manuscripts said took place on “a day marked by three suns being visible at the same time,” an incident that induced some Spaniards to think it was on the day of the Savior’s birth, “as it is commonly asserted such a phenomenon then occurred.”

When the Quiché king heard by private ambassador from his Aztec kinsman Moctezuma, then a prisoner, that white men had overcome his nation and planned to conquer the Quiché, the Quiché priests prognosticated coming disaster, based on the splitting in two of a divining stone that their forefathers had brought from Egypt and that they worshipped as a god.

How this tradition reflects real history, and how, if at all, it might relate to the Book of Mormon we do not know, but clearly certain Indian groups interpreted their own annals to mean that their ancestors were connected to the

biblical history they were learning from their conquerors, even at the risk of being considered descendants of idolaters. That they simply concocted the notion of a transoceanic connection is hard to believe.

This Quiché Indian tradition of Toltec migrants from the Near East reaching Mesoamerica appears to be supported by new linguistic research reported by a senior linguist at one of this country's most prestigious universities. Dr. Mary LeCron Foster delivered two papers in 1992 at the Association of American Geographer's annual meeting in San Diego and the Language Origins Society at Cambridge University.⁴ They duplicate each other considerably; the following summary is an amalgamation.

Her linguistic reconstruction shows that Afro-Asiatic languages, in particular ancient Egyptian (and related Hebrew?), are genetically close, and possibly ancestral, to geographically distant languages in both the Old and New Worlds. In the Old World they include Dravidian of southern India, Chinese, and Malayo-Polynesian, and in the New World, Quechua (the language of the Incas) and Zoquean, Mayan, Zapotec, and Mixtec in Mesoamerica. More specifically the Mixe-Zoque languages of southern Mexico, which have been hypothesized by other linguists to derive from the language spoken by the Olmec, as well as the Mayan languages of Mexico and Central America, are closely related to and probably descended from ancient Egyptian.

Another genetic relationship uncovered is between Proto-Indo-European (the ancestor of most western European tongues) and the Uto-Aztecan languages of North America, including Nahuatl (Aztec) of Mexico. She has arrived at this picture using the standard linguistic comparative method with reliance on regularity of sound changes and pattern congruence.

Quechua she says is closely related to the "Egyptoid" languages in Mesoamerica, but it also contains an admixture of Semitic vocabulary that seems to be Arabic. Various cultural parallels are correlated with the language relationships hypothesized. For instance, the Mayan origin myth in the Quiché sacred book, the Popol Vuh, tells of four great sages (Q'uq'kumatz, Tepev, Tzakol, Bitol) who arrived on the sea coast and found nothing, so they created everything. The names of these four in Mayan she finds relate to Egyptian roots in both sounds and meanings. She includes a table of twenty cognate sets of words in Egyptian, Mixe-Zoque, Mayan, and Quechua.

Some connections between Old and New World languages are so close as to throw doubt on an exclusive scenario of ancient Bering Strait crossings; hence conventional migration theories will need revision. This seems particularly true of Egyptian ties to the New World. The Olmec and the Chavin culture of Peru appeared abruptly around 1500 B.C. At this period Egypt was involved in an intense period of conquest and organized rule abroad; oceanic voyages by Egyptian ships were clearly possible then. A further example of an interesting parallel is a Zoque myth that tells of the life and death of Homshuk, the maize god, that bears much similarity to Egyptian tales of Osiris. Yet proof of these assertions lies not in a few cultural parallels but in the accuracy of the linguistic analysis, which is extensive, she says.

Research by John L. Sorenson, originally published as FARMS Updates in Insights (April 1995): 2; (June 1995): 2.

Notes

1. Hugh W. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 250; citing Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979), 267.

2. See John L. Sorenson, "Some Mesoamerican Traditions of Immigration by Sea," *El México Antiguo* 8 (1955): 425-38.

3. Adrián Recinos and Delia Goetz, trans., *The Annals of the Cakchiquels and Title of the Lords of Totonicapán* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953), 170.

4. Although these papers remain unpublished, they are annotated in some detail in John L. Sorenson and Martin H. Raish, *Pre-Columbian Contact with the Americas across the Oceans: An Annotated Bibliography*, 2nd ed. rev. (Provo, Utah: Research Press, 1996), 1:325–26.