2000

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The Bearded, White God Is Everywhere—or Is He?

Diane E. Wirth

Review of

Many Latter-day Saints eagerly anticipate a definitive book of scholarly external evidence that will "prove" that Jesus Christ came to the Americas in ancient times. In a roundabout way, this is what T. J. O'Brien has attempted to accomplish in *Fair Gods and Feathered Serpents*.

O'Brien begins by quickly running through the gamut of bearded, white foreigners who were known from "the Bering Straits in Alaska to Cape Horn in South America" (p. 13). Later in the book he briefly discusses many of these culture heroes individually but never examines them in any real detail except for Quetzalcoatl.

O'Brien contends that these fair, bearded visitors (each comparable to a generic Quetzalcoatl) were everywhere identified with the feathered serpent (see p. 14), yet of almost thirty individuals mentioned as fitting the category, only a few are clearly associated with the feathered serpent. O'Brien's suggestion that the famous serpent mound in Ohio may have been dedicated to one of these culture heroes is one example of an assertion that clearly lacks support (see p. 111). Furthermore, the individuals listed on O'Brien's chart identifying the "Bearded, White Mystery Man" (see p. 30) were most

certainly not all bearded, white men; see, for example, Gukumatz in Guatemala.¹

Beginning with chapter 1, O’Brien makes numerous statements without giving sources for his information, although he does warn the reader in his introduction that he has no intention of covering “all available sources—there are too many” (p. 17). There are end-notes for each chapter; however, many of these are inadequate, and it is difficult to determine to which textual statements they refer.

Those who have not made an in-depth study of Mesoamerica will miss many of the inconsistencies that O’Brien presents in a very matter-of-fact, reader-friendly manner. The following example reveals his approach. Referring to Quetzalcoatl among the Aztecs, O’Brien claims that “no god was held in higher esteem” (p. 22). Then in the very next paragraph, O’Brien rightly informs us that the Aztecs replaced Quetzalcoatl with a tribal war god, whom he does not name. Huitzilopochtli, the god of war, was the god of prime importance to the Aztecs, not Quetzalcoatl. Matos Moctezuma refers to the Aztecs as “Huitzilopochtli’s people” and identifies Huitzilopochtli as their patron god.² The main temple in the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, the Templo Mayor, was dedicated to Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc, the latter a god of rain and fertility. Quetzalcoatl was a borrowed god and was considered a lesser god among the Aztecs than among other Mesoamerican peoples. The temple dedicated to Quetzalcoatl at Tenochtitlan is clearly secondary to the Templo Mayor, where Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc reigned supreme.

O’Brien then reports portions of the myth of Quetzalcoatl, as he does throughout the book, but again source citations are scarce. He presents various aspects of the Quetzalcoatl legend without question, revealing yet another flaw in his presentation. When making a controversial statement or discussing a controversial topic, an author

¹. O’Brien lists Gukumatz on page 38 in a list of those who have fair complexions, beards, long robes, and sandals. There is no evidence that the Maya deity or the men called Gukumatz fit this description.

should either support his or her hypothesis by giving reliable sources or present a feasible argument to justify proposed claims.

Laymen as well as scholars must exercise extreme caution when interpreting the corpus of Quetzalcoatl (feathered serpent) mythology. Scholars have argued that Spanish priests made embellishments to most post-Conquest texts. Some of the Spanish input appears to be quite intrusive, while in other instances it is subtle. In either case, some have suggested that these interpolations were written with the prime objective of swaying natives to the Catholic way of thinking. Latter-day Saint scholars therefore have an even more arduous task as they attempt to equate the deity Quetzalcoatl with Jesus Christ, although some of the material regarding the legend of this god may be relevant to this supposition. The dilemma investigators face is the problem of sorting fact from fiction—authentic pre-Columbian native beliefs from Hispanicized misinterpretations of the same.

Unfortunately, no pre-Columbian texts refer to Quetzalcoatl. What we do have are a few native codices, which are picture books used to prompt well-established oral traditions. Strangely, O'Brien fails to mention the codices that contain illustrations of Quetzalcoatl. Other works of art with a possible relation to Quetzalcoatl include sculpture, murals, and pottery. For the Mesoamerican, certain motifs had meaning even on an international level. In other words, much Mesoamerican art was a cross-cultural, visual communicator of the religious beliefs of the times; however, in most cases we can only theorize as to the intended interpretations. Further, when different types of sources corroborate one another, we have a higher probability of deducing a more reliable interpretation, at least until a better one comes along. The Quiché Maya’s *Popol Vuh*, for example, has


4. The *Popol Vuh* is the sacred book of the Quiché Maya of highland Guatemala, believed to be derived from native oral traditions. It contains creation accounts, the history of their origin, and a chronology of their rulers. See, for example, Allen J. Christenson, *Popol Vuh: The Mythic Sections—Tales of First Beginnings from the Ancient K’iche’-Maya* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2000).
many portions of its story confirmed in pre-Columbian narrative-
style art painted on pottery. The many representations of Quetzal-
coatl in art, however, still present a major complication because it is
sometimes difficult to determine exactly who is portrayed. Could it
be Quetzalcoatl the god; one of the lesser-known followers of Quetzal-
coatl; Ce Acatl Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, the renowned culture hero and
ruler; or perhaps the latter dressed as the god Quetzalcoatl? Thus the
dilemma.

One of the more controversial aspects of the Quetzalcoatl myth
is his promise to return, which O'Brien mentions quite frequently.
Some scholars contend that many of the accounts referring to this
particular legend have a Spanish influence. A prime example of this
scenario is in Letters from Mexico, where the Aztec king Motecuzoma
incorrectly spelled by O'Brien as Mutezuma in Fair Gods) suppos-
edly speaks to the Spaniards, relating a tale of his people's ancestral
relationship with them. He asserts that the natives are descended
from "foreigners who came from a very distant land" and that "a
chieftain...brought our people to this region." According to this re-
port, the foreign chieftain went back to his native country but then
returned to Motecuzoma's ancestors, by whom he was rejected; he
departed again but promised to return. O'Brien accepts this story as
an accurate historical account (see p. 26), but did Motecuzoma really
believe the Spaniards were his long-lost relatives? This may very well
be a tainted history promulgated to ensure a Spanish stronghold in
the New World. By manipulating what may be, in part, a factual report,
the Spaniards may have made the developing conquest look as
though Motecuzoma was welcoming his lord home after a long
separation.7

Nonetheless, some who support the authenticity of various ac-
counts speak of the "return" of Quetzalcoatl, and although it is true

5. See Michael D. Coe, Lords of the Underworld: Masterpieces of Classic Maya
6. See Hernan Cortes, Letters from Mexico, trans. A. R. Pagden (New York: Gross-
7. See ibid., 467.
that the original legend has a late Spanish "spin," the "return" myth may still have been derived from an original and authentic belief among the natives. One of the primary advocates of this opinion is David Carrasco of Princeton University. Carrasco writes, "There are a number of references in the primary sources to the expected return of Quetzalcoatl. . . . These references strongly suggest that the belief in Quetzalcoatl's return was a pre-Columbian attitude and not, as some have suggested, invented by the Spaniards." O'Brien also refers to Carrasco's findings (see p. 41) but perhaps goes too far with his acceptance of most "return" myths.

Now, does it make any difference if the accounts refer to the return of Quetzalcoatl the god or Ce Acatl Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl—the great culture hero? Indirectly, no. To the Mesoamerican community, the past, present, and future were all woven together. Rituals were often played out with the express purpose of including occurrences that took place in the past. A good example of this mentality is recorded in the Annals of Cuauhtitlan, which was originally written in the native tongue and which recorded the pre-Cortesian history of the Valley of Mexico. The Annals tell the life story of the culture hero Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl who, according to this account, lived from A.D. 817-95. At his death, Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl miraculously became a star, the Lord of the Dawn—he became what we call the planet Venus. It was at this time that he descended to the land of the dead. This is nothing but a repetition of what his god, Quetzalcoatl, is said to have done; thus the storytellers were able to bring the events of the past into the present. Quetzalcoatl the deity is clearly shown in the codices as the planet Venus and as the god who descended to the realm of the dead. It is true that we cannot know for certain that the story of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl's return also refers to the deity Quetzalcoatl, but there is a high probability that it did.

8. David Carrasco, Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire: Myths and Prophecies in the Aztec Tradition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 192. See page 192 and the following pages for Carrasco's argument and sources.


10. See ibid., 36.
Early in his discussion, O'Brien quickly moves from the Mexican myth of Quetzalcoatl's return to the Peruvian legends of the god Viracocha, who, he claims, is "hauntingly similar to the Aztec/Toltec Quetzalcoatl." He does not explain the ways in which the two are similar other than to say that Viracocha visited the natives, left, and promised to return (see p. 27). O'Brien mentions the name Viracocha numerous times throughout the book, but we see nothing even close to a well-rounded description of this god, and no real "feathered serpent" imagery is associated with him.

Dropping the chain of thought he began to establish in chapter 1, O'Brien commences in chapter 2 with the Conquest of Mexico and Peru, post-Conquest discoveries of ruins, and myths contained in post-Conquest documents. With regard to the latter, O'Brien writes, "As one might expect, many of these first writings include numerous references to the ancient bearded visitor. However, they so involve this culture hero with supernatural events that it is difficult to discern whether the tales are embellished history, legend or mythology" (p. 36). O'Brien does little to separate these three and much to muddy the already murky waters. His line of reasoning appears to be that since the legends of the bearded, white man are established in so many locales throughout the Americas, the myth in general must be accepted. But this is not methodologically sound scholarship.

Where is O'Brien going with all this? We do not find out until the end of the book because he never states his objective up front. In the meantime, O'Brien continues to flit from legend to legend of visitors throughout the Western Hemisphere, all supposedly white, bearded, and (questionably, we might add) associated with the feathered serpent. O'Brien admits that "material on other culture heroes of the Americas is often scant and difficult to find" (p. 44), yet he continues to promote each one as part of this stereotype.

A considerable portion of chapter 3 is dedicated to the Mexican culture hero Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl. As O'Brien shows, the redundant post-Conquest stories of this leader are varied, telling us the good and the bad of this man who took upon himself the name of an earlier Quetzalcoatl (see pp. 46–57). O'Brien is to be congratulated for
doing so—he is one of the few LDS writers who have shown the less desirable side of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl. The drawback is that O’Brien combines all the legends of the culture hero Quetzalcoatl as if they represented one individual and then admits to a confusing array of Quetzalcoatl legends (see p. 51). It has recently been suggested that the various Quetzalcoatlts were united in a single figure, combining “several historical episodes probably separated by centuries.”

Again, typical of his imprecise approach, O’Brien appears to be on the right track by trying to separate the Tula Quetzalcoatl from the Chichen Itza Kukulcan (see pp. 51–52), but then he writes of Quetzalcoatl and Kukulcan: “there is enough similarity to assume that the two culture heroes are indeed the same individual” (p. 55). So, which is it?

O’Brien gives a reasonable explanation of bird and serpent symbolism in Mesoamerica (see pp. 53–54), which together constitute the feathered serpent. It is here that we discover one of the clues to O’Brien’s reasoning that all bearded, white visitors are to be identified with the feathered serpent. As O’Brien explains, these bearded culture heroes have attained a release from our earthbound sphere and are able to rise toward heaven. He follows Sejourne’s mystic line of thinking that it was Quetzalcoatl’s mission to “lift his people out of their carnal element and make them divine” (p. 54). The “carnal element” is associated with the serpent, who resides on earth, while heavenly pursuits are associated with birds, who take to the air. Obviously, in O’Brien’s eyes, the feathered serpent has become a paradigm for all bearded, white culture heroes.

The story behind the myth is almost unveiled in chapter 4—the culture heroes of Mesoamerica were all influenced by the original Quetzalcoatl (see p. 58). For a few this may be so, but once again O’Brien faces the same predicament he did in his discussion of

12. Both Quetzalcoatl and Kukulcan translate as “feathered serpent.”
Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl: Do the legends refer to the culture hero or the deity? And which portions of the legends contain Spanish interpolations? Rather than refer to the god simply as Quetzalcoatl, O'Brien now chooses to use the name Ehcatl Quetzalcoatl, the wind aspect of Quetzalcoatl, who was popular in late times in the Valley of Mexico.

This chapter then moves on to a series of topics, most notably the sarcophagus lid of the Maya king Pacal, the great ruler of Palenque in Mexico (see p. 68). The author equates the serpent symbolism on this beautifully carved stone slab with the culture heroes Quetzalcoatl, Kukulcan, and Votan; however, Maya hieroglyphics at Palenque never mention these individuals nor do Mayanists consider this particular double-headed serpent a “feathered serpent.”

O'Brien then claims, without giving a source, that “Schele believes all this elaborate art provides a means for these theocratic rulers to prove they are divine descendants of Kukulcan” (p. 72). The reader needs to understand that what Linda Schele would have been referring to here is not Kukulcan, the bearded, white visitor as seen through the eyes of O'Brien, but to what is known as a “Vision Serpent.” As depicted in Maya art, deceased, deified rulers, as well as unborn future rulers, were metaphorically “conjured up” through the mouths of Vision Serpents via bloodletting rituals. The Maya were not considered literal descendants of Kukulcan, i.e., the “feathered serpent,” in the same way that O'Brien seems to insinuate.

Surprisingly, O'Brien mentions the remains of some two hundred individuals who were sacrificed in a dedicatory rite under the Temple of Quetzalcoatl at Teotihuacan, Mexico, circa A.D. 200 (see p. 75). John Carlson surmises that these people were sacrificed as eternal guardians to the tomb of a “great charismatic leader.” Instead of emphasizing the loathsome nature of this practice, O'Brien suggests that this “charismatic leader” may have been one of

the bearded, white men. To quote O’Brien, “Did the mysterious visitor make his first appearance at Teotihuacan?” (p. 75). What kind of charismatic leader would justify killing two hundred people for his burial? Certainly not the benevolent Quetzalcoatl. O’Brien suggests that missionaries from Teotihuacan may have spread their beliefs of a powerful god, and he speaks of Teotihuacan in glowing terms.

Chapter 5 is entitled “Bearded Visitors to South America.” Not much new appears here, except that O’Brien suggests that the feathered serpent motifs and the bearded, white visitor may have come up from the south to Mesoamerica (see pp. 91–93, 96). A few more details than usual are given in chapter 6 on the fair gods of North America, but once again this chapter is lacking a great many citations.

In search of the fair god in chapters 7 through 11, O’Brien leads us to what he believes may be plausible candidates from various cultures throughout the world. These chapters discuss possible early voyages to the Americas, reflecting a phenomenon referred to as diffusionism. Some of those mentioned, such as the Vikings (see pp. 115–26), contribute nothing to the argument—they are too late.

Portions of O’Brien’s discussion in chapter 9 regarding “Prospects from the Pacific” are more logical than those he previously mentions and are supported by several top scholars of our day (see pp. 154–57). However, on the last page of this chapter (see p. 162), his timeline illustration is misleading for the Maya. According to this chart, the Maya civilization commenced with the site of Tikal, circa 800 b.c., followed by El Mirador at the time of Christ. On the contrary, El Mirador flourished and declined long before Tikal rose to power around A.D. 300.16 In fact, Tikal emerged as the successor to the earlier, dominant site of El Mirador, which actually dwarfs Tikal in size.

O’Brien then goes on to pursue a Mediterranean connection in chapter 10, and he includes a very controversial collection of artifacts said to have come from a cave in southern Illinois in 1982 (see pp. 163–64, 172–74, 186, 199, 274). Russell Burrows, the self-proclaimed discoverer of this cave, says it is filled with wondrous, ancient relics containing scripts, portraits, and motifs of peoples from areas around the Mediterranean. The catch? These items cannot be authenticated, and Burrows refuses to divulge the location of the site. In a personal letter to me, Burrows claims there were some rolls of parchment in the cave. If true, the parchment could be dated through carbon-14 testing or some other viable test; however, Burrows refuses to return to the cave in fear for his life. He claims he has been chased by gun-toting men who are out to get his treasure. Burrows could have removed the parchment, copper spears, skeletons, or gold coins that he claims remain to this day in the cave; instead, he chose to bring out rocks—rocks carved with figures and strange writing, nothing that can be proven or dated.

O’Brien plows through the Romans and Greeks as possible voyagers to the Americas and then returns to the wonders of Burrows Cave. But wait. The real clincher is yet to come! O’Brien actually suggests that treasures from the tomb of Alexander the Great may be in the Burrows Cave (see pp. 171–73). An illustration of someone’s interpretation of this chamber in the cave, in which Egyptians carve the walls with hieroglyphics and others open the lid of a sarcophagus, is shown (see p. 172). Is this scholarship? O’Brien does write, “Still, fascinating as this may be, one can not yet assume anything” (p. 174). Then why relate such a bizarre tale at all? An adequate summary of opposing views is not presented regarding this controversial find.

The Brazilian artifact referred to as the Paraiba stone—which may contain a Phoenician script—has never been authenticated and in fact has mysteriously disappeared; nevertheless, it is included in O’Brien’s book (see pp. 180–81). O’Brien’s list next features the large...
stone Olmec heads. Scholars do not view these heads as having the Negroid characteristics O’Brien postulates (see p. 183). Those who have visited the Veracruz area where many of these heads have been found will have seen Indians with similar features. Far more convincing clay sculptures of the Negro race appear in the Jalapa Museum in Mexico.¹⁹ Some of the information O’Brien provides is dependable, but how can the layman be expected to differentiate between what is plausible and what is outrageous?

Moving on to some post-Conquest documents, such as the Title of the Lords of Totonicapán, the Annals of the Cakchiquels, and the Popol Vuh, O’Brien informs the reader that these accounts were written by indigenous Indians and describe their peoples’ wanderings. He quotes from several of these sources; one in particular claims that the natives are descended from the ten tribes of Israel (see p. 189). Latter-day Saints, of course, believe that members of the house of Israel (not the ten tribes, per se) came to the Western Hemisphere, as is attested in the Book of Mormon. Therefore, we must use caution and remember that some scholars have noted that the use of such words as Israel, Abraham, and Jacob was most likely the result of Spanish influence in these post-Conquest texts. The corruption of the texts is never questioned by O’Brien.

The author then gives a short history of Israel (see pp. 191–96) and even leads us to the probable whereabouts of the lost ten tribes. This history sets “the stage for the search for the bearded, white traveler among the Israelites” (p. 193). O’Brien runs through a slipshod list of similarities between Hebrew and Mesoamerican practices, using dated sources such as Bancroft and Kingsborough (see pp. 196–208).²⁰ Some of these points are dependable parallels; others are not. Again, the reader will never know because O’Brien does not use a scholarly,


analytical approach even though he briefly mentions the controversies surrounding some of these concepts or objects (see pp. 201–3). This list is but one more example of the confusion resulting from poorly developed methodology and organization.

Again citing the obsolete opinions of some authors, O’Brien mentions that Kingsborough saw representations of “Quetzalcoatl as a crucified person bearing the prints of nails in his hands and feet” (p. 222); however, when we look at Kingsborough’s illustrations (see p. 223), it is quite obvious these sacrificial victims are tied to scaffolding, not nailed to it, and there is nothing whatsoever in their accouterments to suggest they were considered Quetzalcoatl (i.e., Christ). The story of Quetzalcoatl’s visit to the underworld is only mentioned in passing (see pp. 224, 227, 263). Had this subject been developed in a scholarly manner, it would have proved to be one of the more salient features of Quetzalcoatl that may conceivably correspond to Jesus Christ, but the whole scenario is omitted.

In looking for more “ground support” to show that Christ and his followers were related to the bearded, white visitors to the Americas, O’Brien presses forward with a fanciful group of artifacts known collectively as the Michigan Plates, Michigan Relics, or the Soper Savage Collection (see pp. 232–34). Again, if their authenticity is in question, which is the case, why discuss them? O’Brien states that Dr. James E. Talmage “surprisingly, believed them to be forgeries” (p. 233). Why so? Dr. Talmage interviewed the discoverer’s stepdaughter, who stated that her stepfather fraudulently manufactured many of the relics.21 O’Brien also cites David Deal, who claims to be able to translate the Hebrew letters on the Michigan Relics. FARMS scholar John Tvedtnes, after examining Deal’s work and going into lengthy discussions via correspondence with Deal, is of the opinion that Deal does not have an adequate knowledge of Hebrew to make accurate translations of Hebrew texts.22

In chapter 13 O'Brien delves into Old World culture heroes in hopes that such studies will prove enlightening and perhaps bring closure to his great quest. He finds the ubiquitous symbols of culture heroes worldwide (see p. 236). There is no question that many traditions and motifs are universal, but what does this prove? Herein comes one of O'Brien's alternate theses, that of "types and shadows," although he does not use that terminology. O'Brien suggests that Christ's life is mirrored in the culture heroes not only of the Americas, but of the rest of the world (see p. 237). In addition to those already mentioned, he includes Marduk, Osiris, Tammuz, Dionysus, Sargon, and so on (see pp. 249-51). At this point, it is almost as though O'Brien is writing another book with another theme.

Chapter 14 once again returns us to New World myths, but it examines an isolationist's point of view. What if "New World culture heroes . . . originated not from bearded foreign visitors but from purely native sources" (p. 256)? O'Brien does a lot of wondering in this book. Almost all the data for chapter 14 is from modern sources, unlike the previous chapters, but before he finishes with this chapter, O'Brien returns to the now time-worn subjects of the Quetzalcoatl legend and diffusionist/isolationist approaches to the dilemma, which he perceives are part of the formula to be used in solving the issue of the "Fair God."

At last we reach chapter 15, the final chapter, which attempts to "weave" together all the information presented in this book (p. 271). Because the numerous culture heroes of the Americas seem to be everywhere present and appear throughout the centuries, O'Brien concludes, "it would seem that the mysterious visitor is more than a human being" (pp. 272, 276).

As anticipated, since this book comes to us from an LDS publisher and will be read by many Latter-day Saints, O'Brien equates the root of culture hero myths in the Americas with Jesus Christ (see pp. 274–83). Latter-day Saints believe that Christ visited others of the seed of Israel besides a select group of Nephites and Lamanites at Bountiful (see 3 Nephi 15:17 and 16:1), but is it logical to accept all
mysterious, bearded, white visitors to places throughout the Western Hemisphere as being one and the same with Jesus Christ?

Instead of ending the book on a positive note, O’Brien digresses, going back to subjects already discussed; this reflects a major problem of the book as it does not flow well from beginning to end.

O’Brien does make many attempts to be objective, but at times it is difficult to determine if he includes the information because it is factual or if he simply presents the data as information that is available to the researcher but not something the general reader would spend time investigating. In fact, this is not a book for the lay Latter-day Saint reader looking for “new” external proofs for the Book of Mormon. O’Brien seems to have an enormous amount of speculation in his theory in lieu of firm, supportive evidence for those things the reader is led to believe he is attempting to prove.

Although top-notch LDS Mesoamerican scholars such as John Sorenson have not “proven” the Book of Mormon, they have certainly presented a good case for the plausibility of the proposition that Book of Mormon peoples came from the Middle East and lived in a limited geographical area of Mesoamerica.23 O’Brien, on the other hand, lacks a sense of scientific methodology and thus incorporates a vast amount of questionable material in his book. In the end, this approach may do more harm than good. My objection to *Fair Gods and Feathered Serpents* concerns not so much the conclusions O’Brien reaches but the fact that he reaches them via poorly documented sources, inconsistencies, and unproven external evidences.

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