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Prophetic Decree and Ancient Histories Tell the Story of America

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Clark V. Johnson

When Joseph Smith began receiving instructions from Moroni in 1823, he gained a new perspective on the American Indian. After his initial interview with Moroni, and before he obtained the plates, his mother observed that he described “the ancient inhabitants of this continent, their dress, mode of traveling, and the animals upon which they rode; their cities, their buildings, with every particular; their mode of warfare; and also their religious worship. This he would do with as much ease, seemingly, as if he had spent his whole life among them” (Smith 83). Yet the rest of the world had to wait until some years later for detailed information on the origin and nature of the great early American civilizations to become available. As explorers and archaeologists began to uncover the remains of these New World peoples, they also began to reevaluate previous ideas concerning them.

The records that had been kept by the Indians were purged by their Spanish conquerors either in the name of the church or for the valuable metal plates on which they were written. Many of these metal records were melted down into bullion for shipment to Spain. However, we do know of a few major pieces of Mayan literature that survived the Spanish conquest. Among these are (1) the *Popol Vuh*, (2) *Los Anales de los Cakchiquels*,

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(3) *El Título de los Señores de Totonicapán* (hereafter *Totonicapán*), (4) *El Libro de Chilam Balam*, and (5) *La Probanza de Votan*. Of these five the *Popol Vuh* is of primary importance while the other works generally “supplement the information given in the *Popol Vuh*” (*Popol Vuh* 15). Sylvanus G. Morely said that “the *Popol Vuh* . . . is, beyond any shadow of doubt, the most distinguished example of native American literature that has survived the passing centuries” (*Popol Vuh* ix; see also Morley 255). Although these ancient books have been reviewed from several different perspectives—archaeologically, historically, linguistically, and prophetically—I will confine the parameters of this paper to prophecy and history.

Before proceeding, however, I will sketch an outline of the two works that are central to this paper, namely the Book of Mormon and the *Popol Vuh*. While I do not intend to rehearse every parallel between the Book of Mormon and the *Popol Vuh*, I will note similarities that exist in three areas: the origin of the ancient Americans, the gods they worshipped, and their belief in the Creation, the Fall, and the Flood.

Origin of the *Popol Vuh* and the Book of Mormon People

The *Popol Vuh* comes from the Quiché Indians, a tribe of Mayan people who lived in the southern highlands of Guatemala (Morley 255, 422). We do not know the name of the Quiché Indian author who wrote it, but we do know that it was written shortly after the Spanish conquest of Guatemala in 1524. The original manuscript remained in obscurity for over 150 years until early in the 18th century when the Indians in the parish of Santa Tomás Chichicastenango showed it to a Dominican priest named Father Francisco Ximénez. A linguist who spoke fluent Quiché, Father Ximénez first transcribed “the original Quiché text and [then] translated it into Spanish under the title *Historias del Origen de los Indios de esta Provincia de Guatemala*” (*Popol*

Vuh 4-5). His transcription has been preserved, but the original Quiché manuscript has disappeared. The Spanish translation of the *Popol Vuh* was published in Vienna in 1857 (*Popol Vuh xi*), while an English translation was not published until 1950 by Adrian Recinos.

The Book of Mormon was compiled from early records by two ancient American prophets, Mormon and Moroni, between AD 322 and 421, and was translated into English by the Prophet Joseph Smith in 1829. Shortly after the completion of his translation, Joseph Smith returned the plates to their original custodian, the prophet Moroni. The Book of Mormon was first published in Palmyra, New York, in 1830, and it remained the sole religious authority on the beliefs and cultures of ancient America from the ancient people until the publication of the *Popol Vuh* in Spanish in 1857. Although a Spanish translation of the *Popol Vuh* was available, there is no evidence that it had any impact on the North American frontier until it was translated into English 93 years later.

Both the *Popol Vuh* and the Book of Mormon are religious histories that record migrations to the New World. Both are confined to specific peoples. The *Popol Vuh* tells about the earliest settlers of Guatemala and is known as “the *Sacred Book*, or *National Book* of the Quiché” (*Popol Vuh* 5). The Book of Mormon relates the religious history of three groups who settled in the Americas and is a sacred book “written by way of commandment, and also by the spirit of prophecy and of revelation” (title page).

The *Popol Vuh* “contains the cosmogonical concepts and ancient traditions of this aboriginal American people, the history of their origin, and the chronology of their kings down to the year 1550” (*Popol Vuh* 5). The preparation of the *Popol Vuh* was done in great secrecy. Referring to his book, the author wrote: “We shall bring it to light because now the *Popol Vuh*, as it is called, cannot be seen any more, in which was clearly seen the coming from the other side of the sea and the narration of our obscurity, and our life was clearly seen. The original book, written long ago

existed, but its sight is hidden to the searcher and to the thinker” (*Popol Vuh* 79-80).

The Book of Mormon clarifies much of the mystique surrounding some of the Indians who were living in America when it was discovered by Columbus. It gives insight into three separate peoples who migrated to America by boat, but does not claim to explain the origin of all those who lived on the North and South American continents anciently. Rather, it is a record containing the teachings of the Savior to a group of transplanted Israelites, and speaks of the struggle they had following their prophets and receiving God’s laws through them. Other peoples may have come before, during, and after the Book of Mormon civilizations were in existence (see Gordon).

The Origin of the American Indians

The author of the *Popol Vuh* maintained that his ancestors, the ancient ones, originated on the other side of the ocean. Tradition indicates that these ancestors watched “for the coming of the star, which comes just before the sun. . . . ‘We came from there, but we have separated’” (*Popol Vuh* 182).

In the 1560s, Diego de Landa, a Catholic Bishop who had lived in Yucatan since 1549, wrote that the people of Yucatan insisted they were descendants of a people “who came from the East and whom God had delivered by opening twelve paths through the sea” (Tozzer 16-17). The *Popol Vuh* says that “it is not quite clear . . . how they crossed the sea; they crossed to this side, as if there were no sea; they crossed on stones, placed in a row over the sand” (*Popol Vuh* 183). Finally, Fray Bernardino de Sahagun, a Franciscan who had lived in Mexico from 1529 until his death in 1590, states that the ancient ones came by ocean in seven caves which are seven boats or galleys (Sahagun 1:30). These people landed at the port of the Panuco River, which they called Panco, meaning “those who crossed the waters” (Sahagun 1:30). Torquemada records that these ancient ones were industrious and had no disposition for war (1:254-55).

These histories indicate that the first people came after the world had been destroyed by the Flood (*Ixtlilochitl* 1:11). According to Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, the grandson of the last king of Texcoco and an interpreter for the Viceroy in the Court of Indians, the ancient ones were giants (*Quinametzin*) who came from a very high tower when everyone's language was confused, 1964 years after the creation of the earth (*Ixtlilxochitl* 1:13). Seven friends were able to understand each other, so they brought their wives with them to the Americas. Ultimately, the *Quinametzin* were destroyed by punishments and calamities because of the sins they committed (*Ixtlilxochitl* 1:12, 17).

The ancient ones in the Book of Mormon also came at the time of the Tower of Babel and are known as the Jaredites. "Jared came forth with his brother and their families, with some others and their families, from the great tower, at the time the Lord confounded the language of the people" (Ether 1:33). Their prophet, the brother of Jared, asked the Lord not to confound their language (Ether 1:35). Like the *Quinametzin*, the Jaredites were "large and mighty men" (Ether 15:26) who were destroyed by civil war because they rejected their God (Ether 13:2, 15-17; 15).

According to the *Popol Vuh*, the second settlers, known as the Nahuales, came after the destruction of the giants. The Nahuales "came from the other part of the ocean, from where the sun rises, a place called *Pa Tulán, Pa Civán*" (*Totonicapán* 169; see also *Popol Vuh* 170-71). Quiché traditions indicate that the forefathers of the Nahuales (Tepeu, Olomán, Cohah, Quenech, and Ahau) had multiplied in the East (*Popol Vuh* 170). They were artisans and builders who built the cities of Teotihuacan, Tula, and Cholula. They suffered much for the want of food during their journey. In fact, their historian records that "they did not have sustenance; they only smelled the ends of their staffs and thus they imagined they were eating; but they did not eat when they came. . . . [T]heir hearts were troubled when they talked together, because they had nothing to eat, only a drink of water and a handful of corn they had" (*Popol Vuh* 182-83). They lamented their coming: "Oh, we have come without joy! If only we could

see the rising of the sun! What shall we do now? If we lived in harmony in our country, why did we leave it?" (*Popol Vuh* 185).

God gave the Quiché lords a gift before they left their ancient homeland in the East and crossed the sea (*Popol Vuh* 205). This gift from God was a stone which was "the symbol of his being," the *Pizom-Gagal* (*Popol Vuh* 205 fn 3). The author of *Totonicapán* called it the *Giron-Gagal* (*Totonicapán* 170). Delia Goetz explained that, "'The great father Nacxit ¹ [God] gave them a gift called the Giron-Gagal.' Giron, or quirón, is derived from *quira*, 'unfasten,' 'unroll,' 'to preserve' a thing" (*Popol Vuh* 205 fn 3).

In the Book of Mormon, the second group of people, the Nephites, left Jerusalem for the New World in 600 BC, but did not arrive until approximately 589 BC (1 Nephi 18:23; see the asterisk for that verse). They traveled "nearly a south, southeast direction until they came to the nineteenth degree of north latitude; then, nearly east to the Sea of Arabia" (Richards 272). The Prophet Joseph Smith wrote that "Lehi went down by the Red Sea to the great Southern Ocean, and crossed over to this land, and landed a little south of the Isthmus of Darien" (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* 267).

Lehi led his family into the wilderness where, like the Nahuales, they suffered from privation and starvation (1 Nephi 16:18-19). While journeying in the wilderness Lehi also received a gift from God, which he called the Liahona (1 Nephi 16:10; Alma 37:38). The Liahona directed their travels, and writing appeared upon it which gave the colony instructions (1 Nephi 16:10, 16, 27, 29). Whether the *Giron-Gagal* and the Liahona

¹ The Lord Nacxit was the Quiché supreme judge of all kingdoms. Nacxit is the abbreviated name of "Topiltzin Acxiltl Quetzalcoatl, the famous Toltec king" (*Popol Vuh* 207 fn 3). An earlier definition of Quetzalcoatl refers to him as the Great White God, the god of precious plumage, the god who flies through the air without sound, and the god of wind. Some feel that Quetzalcoatl is the Indian name for Jesus Christ while others maintain that there were two Quetzalcoatls. According to them the second ruled for twenty years, during which time the Indians had peace and prosperity. A conspiracy was drawn for his downfall that succeeded. He was seduced by a harlot and left Tula in shame "promising that one day he would return" (Padden 26-27).

are the same cannot be determined, but both served as a symbol of God's power among the two groups of travelers.

Indian traditions also refer to a third group of immigrants known as the Ulmecas or Xicalancas. They came by boat from the east and settled in Potochan. Later they encountered some of the giants who had escaped the calamities of their age (Ixtil-xochitl 1:19-20), and eventually they united with the Nahuales, the second settlers (Torquemada 255). The account of the third settlers in the Indian histories is brief, probably due to their merging with the Nahuales.

The Mulekites, the third settlers in the Book of Mormon, left Jerusalem about 587 BC, during the time that Nebuchadnezzar's forces sacked the city, slew king Zedekiah's sons, and put his eyes out (2 Kings 25:4-7; Nebuchadnezzar's forces captured Jerusalem about 587 BC [see BD 639]). King Zedekiah's youngest son, Mulek, escaped the Babylonian holocaust and migrated to the New World. After several centuries, the Mulekites were discovered by the Nephites.

Wickedness had increased so much among the second group, the Nephites, that during the days of king Mosiah I, the Lord called upon the righteous to migrate to a different part of the land. King Mosiah was "warned of the Lord that he should flee out of the land of Nephi" and take with him as many as would "hearken unto the voice of the Lord." Mosiah "did according as the Lord had commanded him. And they departed out of the land into the wilderness, . . . and they were led by many preachings and prophesyings. And they were admonished continually by the word of God; and they were led by the power of his arm, through the wilderness until they came down into the land which is called the land of Zarahemla" (Omni 1:12-13).

At Zarahemla, Mosiah and his followers found a numerous people (Omni 1:17). The people of Zarahemla were the followers of Mulek who had fled from Jerusalem during the reign of Zedekiah, the last king of Judah. They had lived in the New World for several centuries, during which time they were plagued by civil war and internal strife (Omni 1:15, 17). Even though the

Nephites arrived in the New World in 589 BC, they still did not encounter nor merge with the third group of settlers, the Mulekites, until between 279 and 130 BC. Amaleki indicates that Mosiah and the people who followed him were warmly received by the people of Zarahemla, and that they soon made Mosiah their king (Omni 1:12, 19). The merger of these two civilizations lasted between 515 and 664 years.

King Mosiah I learned about the ancient ones, or Jaredites, when the people of Zarahemla brought him “a large stone . . . with engravings on it.” He interpreted the characters on the stone “by the gift and power of God” (Omni 1:20). The writings “gave an account of one Coriantumr, and the slain of his people” (Omni 1:21). They also spake a few words concerning his fathers: “And his first parents came out from the tower, at the time the Lord confounded the language of the people; and the severity of the Lord fell upon them according to his judgments, which are just; and their bones lay scattered in the land northward” (Omni 1:22).

In the Book of Mormon these three civilizations, the Jaredites, the Nephites, and the Mulekites, remained more or less apart until the Mulekites discovered the Jaredites (the giants in the *Popol Vuh* and Coriantumr in the Book of Mormon), and until the second and third migrations united.

The Gods They Worshiped

The Book of Mormon and the *Popol Vuh* also agree that once their peoples had established themselves in America they developed a culture centered around their belief in God. The Indians in the *Popol Vuh* believed in multiple gods, accepting a pantheon of deities from the other world, and looking to them for guidance. The creation of the earth was carried out by three deities, Caculhá Huracán, Chipi-Caculhá, and Raxa-Caculhá, who were known as “the Heart of Heaven” (*Popol Vuh* 82). A primitive people who migrated to Guatemala called their god Gucumatz “because their salvation was in the water” (*Popol Vuh*

81 fn 2). Bishop Núñez de la Vega said that “Gucumatz is a serpent with feathers, which moves in the water” (*Popol Vuh* 81 fn 2). Ancient records indicate that the appearance of Gucumatz, or Quetzalcoatl, changed Indian culture. Traditionally, he left peace in Yucatan and traveled to Mexico. He dwelt at Champoton and when he left the people, he promised them he would return (*Ixtlilxochitl* 1:21). Quetzalcoatl was described as a man of good disposition, grave aspect, white and bearded, and dressed in a large tunic. As a result of Quetzalcoatl’s visit to Izmachi, there were no difficulties or disputes, and their kingdom was peaceful (*Popol Vuh* 212-13). Ixtlilxochitl noted that some years after the appearance of Quetzalcoatl the Indians built a temple to him (*Ixtlilxochitl* 1:21).

The god of the Book of Mormon is Jesus Christ, and he is referred to as the Only Begotten Son, the Son of God, and the Messiah, among many other titles (Jehovah, the Lamb, etc.). The Nephite record tells of the coming of the resurrected Christ to the Americas. The ancient prophet Nephi wrote that the people “cast their eyes up again towards heaven; and . . . saw a Man descending out of heaven; and he was clothed in a white robe; and he came down and stood in the midst of them; and the eyes of the whole multitude were turned upon him, and they durst not open their mouths, even one to another, and wist not what it meant, for they thought it was an angel that had appeared unto them” (3 Nephi 11:8). As the multitude at Bountiful gazed upon him, the personage identified himself, saying, “Behold, I am Jesus Christ, whom the prophets testified shall come into the world. And behold, I am the light and the life of the world; and I have drunk out of that bitter cup which the Father hath given me, and have glorified the Father in taking upon me the sins of the world, in the which I have suffered the will of the Father in all things from the beginning” (3 Nephi 11:10-11). When the people realized who the personage was, they bowed themselves to the earth, “for they remembered that it had been prophesied among them that Christ should show himself unto them after his ascension into heaven” (3 Nephi 11:12).

At his second appearance, the number of people gathered to hear him had increased many times (3 Nephi 19:3, 5). The Messiah's personal instruction changed Nephite-Lamanite society for over two centuries. The people were all converted to Jesus Christ. "There were no contentions and disputations among them, and every man did deal justly one with another. And they had all things common among them; therefore there were not rich and poor, bond and free, but they were all made free, and partakers of the heavenly gift" (4 Nephi 1:2-3; see also vv 15-17). Following these two centuries of peace, factions developed among the people and gross wickedness prevailed.

In addition to believing in the Heart of Heaven, Gucumatz or Quetzalcoatl, the Indians also believed in a god of darkness known as Vucub-Caquix, who said about himself,

"I shall now be great above all the beings created and formed. I am the sun, the light, the moon. . . . Great is my splendor. Because of me men shall walk and conquer. . . . I am the sun, I am the moon, for all mankind. So shall it be, because I can see very far." . . . But he was not really the sun; he was only vainglorious of his feathers and his riches. And he could see only as far as the horizon, and he could not see over all the world (*Popol Vuh* 93-94).

According to Guatemalan tradition, Vucub-Caquix was eventually overthrown by two youths who were really gods (*Popol Vuh* 94).

The Nephites also believed in a god of darkness who once was an angel of light. According to Lehi, an angel of God "had fallen from heaven; wherefore, he became a devil, having sought that which was evil before God" (2 Nephi 2:17).

The Creation, the Fall, and the Flood

The first chapters of the *Popol Vuh* relate Guatemalan traditions about the Creation, the Fall, and the Flood. The Gods saw that "all was in suspense . . . nothing [was] brought together. . . . There was nothing standing; only the calm water. . . . Nothing existed" (*Popol Vuh* 81). A narrative of the creation of the earth

by Gucumatz, the Heart of Heaven, follows. Under God's direction, the void was filled and man was formed. Gucumatz rejoiced in his accomplishments (*Popol Vuh* 83-84).

The Book of Mormon is silent about the details of the Creation and simply refers its reader to other records which contain detailed accounts of the Creation. Lehi said that the brass plates, which parallel some of our Old Testament, contained "an account of the creation of the world" (1 Nephi 5:11). The 24 gold plates, which were part of the Jaredite record also contained an account of the Creation, but Moroni chose not to include it in his abridgment of the story of the Jaredites (Mosiah 8:5-9; 28:11-12; Ether 1:3).

After the earth was finished and filled with plant and animal life, the Heart of Heaven held a council. Xpiyacoc and Xmucané, the old man and the old woman, were assigned to work together "so that man . . . will nourish and sustain us, invoke and remember us.' . . . The old woman and the old man said to the Heart of Heaven, 'Your figures of wood shall come out well; they shall speak and talk on earth.' . . . And instantly the figures were made of wood. They looked like men, talked like men, and populated the surface of the earth" (*Popol Vuh* 87-89). So according to the *Popol Vuh*, it was the old woman and the old man who gave life to man, and who were charged with teaching man to remember the Heart of Heaven.

Lehi taught his children of the fall of man (2 Nephi 2). Adam, the Ancient of Days, along with his wife Eve, took an active role in transgressing a law which brought mortality to mankind (2 Nephi 2:25). Their actions allowed the spirit children of God to come to earth where they were given time to be tried and tested (2 Nephi 2:18-22). Lehi also spoke to his children of a Messiah who would come to "redeem the children of [Adam and Eve] from the fall" (2 Nephi 2:26; see also 9:21; Mosiah 3:11).

According to the *Popol Vuh*, after men were given life on the earth by the "old man and old woman" (the transgression of Adam and Eve in the Book of Mormon), they multiplied upon

the face of the earth, and there were great numbers of men and women. But eventually the people of the earth forgot the Heart of Heaven.

The author of the *Popol Vuh* also related that men and women degenerated. Their faces were “without expression.” They lacked strength and their “flesh was yellow. . . . They no longer thought of their Creator nor their Maker, nor of those who made them and cared for them” (*Popol Vuh* 89). Finally, the Heart of Heaven brought about a flood which destroyed man. The Quiché wrote, “The mouths and faces of all of them were mangled. And it is said that their descendants [those who survived the flood] are the monkeys which now live in the forests; these are all that remain of them because their flesh was made only of wood” (*Popol Vuh* 92). A second creation followed the destruction of the world by the Flood. The Heart of Heaven began again, and the earth was renewed and life once again abounded.

The Book of Mormon also speaks of the Flood. In the book of Alma, Amulek, a Nephite missionary, tells the Nephites that “if it were not for the prayers of the righteous, . . . ye would even now be visited with utter destruction; yet it would not be by flood, as were the people in the days of Noah” (Alma 10:22). In Moroni’s abridgment of the Jaredite record, he refers to “the ark of Noah” (Ether 6:7), and speaks of when “the waters had receded from off the face of this land” (Ether 13:2).

Conclusion

As this paper has demonstrated, there are similarities in the accounts of the Creation, the Fall, and the Flood in the Book of Mormon and the *Popol Vuh*. It has also shown that the ancients believed in a former god of light, Vucab-Caquix or Lucifer, who fell from the presence of God and became evil. The narrative of the *Popol Vuh* declares that Vucab-Caquix was destroyed by two youthful gods, while the Book of Mormon testifies that Lucifer will ultimately be defeated by the Christ. The ancients of the

Popol Vuh also worshiped Gucumatz or Quetzalcoatl, while the Nephite record testifies of the Messiah or Jesus Christ. Both records teach that the god of the ancient Americans appeared to them and brought peace.

Although we have noted the similarities that exist between the *Popol Vuh* and the Book of Mormon, there are also many differences. It is sad to realize that although these early American cultures kept records, only a few are available for our study today. Even the *Popol Vuh* was not written until after the Spanish conquest of Guatemala. It is clearly the product of oral traditions passed down from generation to generation until they were finally recorded by an unknown writer between AD 1524 and 1550. The purpose of that unknown author was to preserve the historical tradition of his people for his descendants. Unfortunately, the lack of organization and the unclear language of the *Popol Vuh* hinder the reader's efforts to understand the theology and history of these ancient Americans.

Unlike the *Popol Vuh*, the Book of Mormon was written by the ancients themselves. Its writers recorded their feelings as they struggled to know and obey their God. The Book of Mormon was abridged by two prophets who recorded those parts of their history and theology that would be the most beneficial for their descendants. Their carefully prepared record was hidden away for nine centuries, until the last custodian of the record, Moroni, delivered it to Joseph Smith in 1827 to be translated into English. Although narrow in its focus, the Book of Mormon clarifies the theology concerning the fall of man and the nature of God. It also directs the reader to the life and mission of the Savior, which is the purpose for which the book was prepared. While much of the history of its peoples is missing, the Book of Mormon does give some detail concerning three migrations to America which helps to clarify our understanding of the *Popol Vuh*. In addition, the religious and cultural histories in the *Popol Vuh* and the Book of Mormon enhance our understanding of ancient America, and support Joseph Smith's early claims about the American Indians.

Finally, the Book of Mormon fulfills its divine purpose as an ancient witness to a modern world that Jesus is the Christ.

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