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A New Witness for God, Chapter V

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Abstract: The Book of Mormon story of Lehi's flight from Jerusalem to the western hemisphere explains the origin of the Native American people and their traditions and rites that are similar to Christian traditions and religious rites.

 THE LATTER-DAY SAINTS' MILLENNIAL STAR.

 MONDAY, JUNE 11, 1888.

 A NEW WITNESS FOR GOD.

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CHAPTER V.

Oh, Truth divine, enlightened by thy ray,
 I grope and guess no more, but see my way.

How is it that Mexican mythology reflects so distinctly so many incidents of our Bible history—the Fall, through woman's transgression; the Flood; the escape of a single family by means of the ark; the building of the Tower, and its destruction through the displeasure of the deity—whence came all these ideas? Then again the traditions respecting their God Quetzalcoatl, reflecting many of the characteristics of Jesus, the Son of God; while the doctrine of the Trinity, the Incarnation, the celebration of the Eucharist, holding the cross as an object of veneration, the rite of baptism as celebrated among them, and the notion of three states of existence in the future life—conforming so admirably with Paul's doctrine of there being “one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars— . . . so also is the resurrection of the dead”—leads one inevitably to the conclusion that by some means or other the forefathers of the Mexicans must have been acquainted with the leading principles of the Christian religion.

As by a shadow one may know that some substance is passing between the light and where the shadow falls, so one may know by the traditions of the aborigines of America, containing as they do so much that is analagous to the leading incidents of Bible history, and the fundamental principles of the Christian religion, that at some time, and in some manner, the ancient inhabitants of America had some positive knowledge respecting these great truths.

So sure of this were some of the Catholic priests who accompanied Cortez to Mexico, that they invented the theory that the Apostle St. Thomas made his way to America and taught the Gospel to the people, and thus laid the foundation for the traditions we treated of in our last chapter. Others again maintained that the devil had counterfeited the principles of Christianity in order to allure the people to their destruction. The latter proposition is so improbable and absurd, that its consideration need not detain us; the former is so uncertain—a mere conjecture with nothing to sustain it—that it is re-

jected by those who have closely studied the subject. There is also another theory advanced, *viz.*, that the Hebrew and Christian traditions passed into America with the Scandinavian colonies, formed since the eleventh century. This hypothesis Humboldt rejects, for the very good reason

That the religious ceremonies, the dogmas, the traditions which struck the imagination of the first Spanish missionaries were incontestably found at Mexico ever since the arrival of the Toltecks, and consequently three or four centuries before the navigation of the Scandinavians to the eastern coasts of the New Continent.—*Travels in America*, vol. I, p. 168.

The fact is, the theories of the learned travelers who have treated of this subject are conjectures merely. They are as blind men groping for the wall. They look upon the ruined temples, pyramids and cities of ancient America, and read there something of the extent and grandeur of the civilization that could produce such monuments, and will tell you, perhaps, that in some respects it resembled the Hebrew, and in others it partakes of the Egyptian character. They look upon the hieroglyphics cut deep in the walls of temples and shafts of basalt, but they are as a sealed book—none can read them. With the same puzzled air they turn to the mythology of that land; they see its wonderful analogy to the truths of Scripture, and the mystery deepens; they cannot account for it. They question, but there is no answer. Even conjecture breaks down in conflicting and unsatisfactory results, and the cloud of mystery which hangs over ancient America remains impenetrable to all human efforts.

Meantime, through a revelation from God, some of the records of the ancient, civilized peoples of America have been brought to light, and by the power of inspiration they have been translated into the English language. From that source is learned the following concerning the origin, development and final decay and loss of that civilization which distracts the wisdom and learning of man, yet challenges his astonishment:

In the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, King of Judah, 600 years B.C., a prophet named Lehi being warned of God that Jerusalem would be destroyed, and the Jews dragged into bondage, and being so commanded of the Lord, gathered his family together and departed into the wilderness by the Red Sea. This little company was subsequently increased, being joined by one Ishmael and his family. For several years they wandered through the wilderness of Arabia, until they came to the coasts of the Arabian Sea. There they constructed a vessel by command of God, and sailing in a south easterly direction landed on the west coast of South America, 30 degrees south latitude.

This to the colonists was the land of promise. They found it fertile, and abounding with resources necessary to their happiness. But unfortunately the elder sons of Lehi—Laman and Lemuel—were not at all times in sympathy with the commandments which the Lord gave to their father and to a younger brother—Nephi, a leading spirit and a prophet of God. It was with reluctance they left Jerusalem and their wealth, and *en route* to the promised land their rebellion and wickedness frequently marred the peace and happiness of the migrating band.

Nor did this rebellious spirit subside after their settlement in America. On

the contrary, it increased until it ended in a division of the colony; the righteous portion, who believed in the revelations that God had given, following the prophet Nephi northward into the wilderness, and calling themselves Nephites. The others adhered to the elder brother Laman, and were called Lamanites. This split in the colony led to the development of two distinct peoples in the land of promise—America. One civilized, the other barbarous. The former were the Nephites, who cultivated the soil, fostered the arts, built temples and cities, and lived under regular systems of government.

In the second century B.C. the Nephites, being hard pressed by their implacable enemies, the Lamanites, were commanded of the Lord to remove to the northward, which they did, until they came to the northern borders of South America, where they found a great people, known as the people of Zarahemla. According to the traditions of this people—they had kept no records—their forefathers had been led out of Jerusalem by Mulek, one of the sons of Zedekiah who had escaped the vengeance of Nebuchadnezzar, and had been led to that portion of America where the Nephites had found them.

The Nephites and the people of Zarahemla amalgamated—became one people, and developed, in time, into a powerful nation; enjoyed a free and noble government, and made no inconsiderable advancement in civilization.

The Lamanites, as before mentioned, were the descendants of Laman, the eldest son of Lehi. They chose an indolent life, living on the wild game and fruits which existed in the land in abundance. They neglected all industries and arts, and soon sank into barbarism; all the while cherishing a settled hatred against their more prosperous and happy brethren, allowing no opportunity to plunder them to pass unimproved. Assisted as they frequently were in their attacks on the Nephite government by traitors and apostates from the Nephites, they several times in the centuries preceding the coming of the Son of God, threatened the destruction of the Nephite nation and civilization. Happily, however, up to that time that disaster did not take place.

The Lord was not unmindful of this people—this branch of the house of Israel; but raised up prophets to teach them in the things of heaven, holding out to them the promise of a Redeemer, who should save them to the uttermost on condition of their faith and obedience.

Moreover, when leaving Jerusalem, the colony led out by Lehi took with them a copy of the books of Moses and many of the writings of the prophets, among them the prophecies of Isaiah and some of Jeremiah's, engraven on brass plates—all of which were sacredly preserved by the Nephites—hence the analogy between much of the Mexican mythology and incidents of Bible history.

But notwithstanding the instructions they received, the warnings that were given, the admonitions of the prophets of God, and occasional chastisement from the Lord, unrighteousness like a black pall settled over the people, and wickedness prevailed. Wonderful signs were given in the heavens at the birth of the Messiah, that they might know that the words of the prophets, both those whom God had raised up among them from time to time,

and those whose words were recorded in the Scriptures that had been brought from Jerusalem, were fulfilled so far as the birth of the Messiah was concerned.

These things produced a partial repentance, but it was not permanent; the greater part of the people soon relapsed into their former state of wickedness, and at the crucifixion of the Messiah great judgments were visited upon them. Earthquakes convulsed nearly all parts of the continent. Valleys and plains were thrown into mountain ranges, until the whole physical aspect of the country changed. Many of the large cities were buried in the earth; others were sunk and the waters of the sea rushed in and filled the vacuum; others still were consumed by fire, and many were destroyed by the whirlwinds. After these convulsions a thick darkness in which no light could live, settled for three days over the entire land, like a funeral pall. Comparatively but few people survived this great visitation, and they were of the more righteous part of the population.

It will be remembered that after Jesus arose from the dead He remained for some time—more than a month—among His disciples at Jerusalem; and some time after His departure from among them He visited the remnant of the Nephites. He proclaimed Himself among them as the Son of God, the Messiah, and they received Him as such. He taught them the Gospel—established His Church among them, organizing it as He did at Jerusalem, with apostles, prophets, etc.; delivered to them the same moral precepts to observe, the same ordinances to practise, promised them the same gifts and powers, held out to them the same hope of eternal life—in a word, He taught them the Gospel in its fullness.

In this the Son of God not only acted upon the principles of justice, which would seem to demand that some such work should be done among the people of the western continent, that they might have equal chances of salvation with the children of God living on the eastern continent—but He also fulfilled a very important declaration which he made to His apostles while at Jerusalem. It was this:

As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father: and I lay down my life for the sheep. And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd" (John x, 15, 16).

This cannot be explained away by saying that He had reference to the Gentiles who were to be made partakers of the Gospel. From the language it is evident that it was some personal ministry he referred to; and on the occasion of being requested to confer a blessing on the woman of Canaan, He said:

I am not sent but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matt. xv, 24). Therefore when He said "other sheep I have, which are not of this fold (meaning some other people than those who were at Jerusalem)—them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice," he certainly had in mind some branch of the house of Israel; and inasmuch as the Nephites and Lamanites were of the house of Israel, when He visited them on the western continent, He fulfilled the terms of His prophecy as found in John.

After this visit of the Messiah among the people of the western continent,

the old distinctions of Nephite and Lamanite ceased—all became one in Christ Jesus, and a long period of peace and righteousness was enjoyed in which the people rapidly increased and rebuilt many of the waste places. But only a few centuries removed from this advent of the Messiah, and the golden age which succeeded it, men again departed from righteousness. Apostates from the Church united with those who were skeptical, and resurrected the old names of Nephite and Lamanite and all the bitterness that accompanied them. Secret societies were formed which shook the government to the centre, and finally destroyed it. The light once enjoyed by the people became darkness, and how great was that darkness! They were given up to destruction; and at the close of the fourth century we see their lands laid waste, their cities ruined, the Nephites annihilated, their civilization destroyed,—barbarism was everywhere triumphant and left to revel in its own darkness.

This it did for centuries, but still preserved in its tradition some remembrance—though the facts were doubtless distorted and exaggerated—of that glorious period when civilization blessed their country with peace and smiling plenty. This remembrance of what once existed, imperfectly preserved as it was in their traditions, led, no doubt, to occasional efforts to re-establish that desirable order of things; and in Peru and Mexico a partial success attended their efforts—from the midnight darkness of anarchy, and on the ruins of the Nephite civilization they had evolved to a semi-civilized state. Such was their condition when the Europeans found them.

This is but a brief and imperfectly sketched outline of the history of the inhabitants of America from about 600 B.C. to 400 A.D. But those who accept it can easily understand from whence comes the wonderful analogy between the mythology of the American Indians and the chief incidents of Bible history. Quetzalcoatl is no longer a mystery, and they know from whence came the rites and ceremonies which resemble the ordinances of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They understand also the incongruity, as Prescott terms it, of the religious system of the Aztecs, which apparently had “emanated from a comparatively refined people, open to gentle influences, while the rest breathes a spirit of unmitigated ferocity,” and which “naturally suggests the idea of two distinct sources.”

The outline I have sketched of the events and circumstances connected with the history of the people of the western continent, necessarily brief and imperfect, accounts for these mysteries that perplex the learned. But the manner in which these historical facts came to light, together with the evidences to sustain their truthfulness, must be left for subsequent chapters.

R.

The company of Saints which left Liverpool on the Guion S.S. *Wisconsin* on April 28th, arrived in Salt Lake City on Thursday, May 17, 1888.

On Saturday, May 26th, eleven of our people sailed on the Guion S.S. *Arizona*; ten were from the Swiss and German Mission, and one from Iceland. Elder F. W. Schoenfeld, late President of the Swiss and German mission, accompanied them; Elder J. Spori and family were also with the party