

## Archaeology, Mormonism, and the Claims of History

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The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (“Mormonism”) is one of the fastest growing religions in the world today (Stark 1998a, b), including India, where membership (especially in the South) has increased dramatically over the last decade. With notable exceptions (e.g., Leone 1979; Murphy 1999; Olsen 2000; Rodseth and Olsen 2000), however, Mormonism has been neglected in the anthropology of religion. The purpose of this paper is to act as a corrective to this imbalance by addressing changes in Mormonism’s conception of itself as a world religion that makes certain claims about its own history. Specifically, I examine Mormonism’s claim – possibly unique among the major world religions -- that a large part of its scriptural tradition took place in ancient America. My purpose is not to explore the history of this claim, nor to take any position on its validity. Instead, I explore the claim itself as it unfolds with reference to a particular domain, Mesoamerican archaeology, and a particular object – the so-called “Tree of Life” stone (also known as Izapa Stela Five) that some Mormons occasionally cite as archaeological evidence for the ancient American origins of the *Book of Mormon*.

Diffusionist narratives that postulate a link between native American and Middle Eastern cultures significantly predate Mormonism. As early as 1640, for example, Thomas Thorowgood published *Jews in America or Probabilities that the Indians are Judaical*. Thorowgood argued that, "The Indians do themselves relate things of their Ancestors suteable to what we read in the Bible . . . They constantly and strictly separate their women in a little wigwam by themselves in their feminine seasons ... they hold that Nanawitnawit (a God overhead) made the Heavens and the Earth." He further proposed that, "The rites, fashions, ceremonies, and opinions of the Americans are in many things agreeable to the custom of the Jewes, not only prophane and common usages, but such as he called solemn and sacred." His final and crowning proof, "The Relation of Master Antonie Monterinos, translated out of the French Copie sent by Manasseh Ben Israel," begins:

The eighteenth day of Elul, in the yeere five thousand foure hundred and foure from the creation of the World, came into this city of *Amsterdam* Mr. *Aron Levi, alias, Antonie Monterinos*, and declared before me *Manassah Ben Israell*, and divers other chiefe men of the Portugall Nation, neer to the said city that which followeth. (Thorowgood 1640: 345)

What then follows is a tale by Montezinos of meeting in Brazil representatives of a mysterious mighty nation of Indians who claimed descent from Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Israel, and from the Tribes of Reuben and Joseph. They announced their readiness now to rise up and drive the Spanish and Portuguese invaders from their continent.

Similar accounts proliferated in the eighteenth century. In 1775, James Adair published *The History of the American Indians*, in which he relates that he heard of five copper and two brass plates in the possession of an Indian tribe, which were kept closely guarded and used only in ceremonial activities. An Indian named Old Bracket stated that "he was told by his forefathers that those plates

were given to them by the man we call God; that there had been many more of other shapes, some as long as he could stretch with both his arms, and some had writing upon them which were buried with particular men; and that they had instructions given with them, viz. they must only be handled by particular people" (Adair [1775] 1986, 188).

During and after the Colonial period, interest in this question intensified, partly as a result of westward expansion and the discovery of large-scale native habitations. Between 1775 and 1830, the date of the *Book of Mormon's* publication, a host of books were published with the same or similar themes, including *A Star in the West, or, a Humble Attempt to Discover the Long Lost Ten Tribes of Israel* (Boudinot 1816,) *Sketches of the Ancient History of the Six Nations* (Cusick 1827,) *The Natural and Aboriginal History of Tennessee* (Haywood 1823,) *A Statistical and Commercial History of the Kingdom of Guatemala* (Juarros 1823,) *A Selection of Some of the Most Interesting Outrages Committed by the Indians in Their Wars with the White People* (Loudon 1811,) *Researches on America* (McCullough 1817,) *History of Mexico* (Mills 1824,) *A New System of Modern Geography* (Parrish 1810.)

Because of its widespread appeal, the most important of these was *View of the Hebrews; or the Tribes of Israel in America* (1823) by the Congregationalist minister Ethan Smith. No one else, probably, had a more determining influence on the question of Middle Eastern origins for the native Americans. Ethan Smith was born in Belehertown, Massachusetts, 19 December, 1762, and died in Pompey, New York, 29 August, 1849. He was apprenticed to the leather trade in his boyhood, and then served as a private in the Continental army in 1780-81 before studying at Dartmouth. He graduated in 1790 and received his license to preach. From 1791 to 1832 Smith was pastor of Congregational churches in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, and Vermont, and he served as city missionary in Boston. He was a founder of the New Hampshire missionary society, its secretary for sixteen years and the author of many publications, including: *Dissertation on the Prophecies* (Concord, New Hampshire, 1809); *Key to the Figurative Language of the Prophecies* (1814); *A View of the Trinity* (1824). Of course the most famous of these was *A View of the Hebrews*, designed to prove that the aborigines of America are descended from the twelve tribes of Israel (Smith 1823).

Ethan Smith wrote the book in order to present the native Americans as educable and therefore convertible to Christianity, a task many considered impossible. The Indians were seen as inherently savage and entirely incapable of civilization. Mistreatment therefore became easy to justify. However, establishing that the Indians were the descendants of ancient Hebrew immigrants would not support this contention. It would also justify intense missionary work and protect the Indians against encroachment and seizure of their lands. Smith's speculative history tried to mitigate the view that the native Americans were inherently savage, and thus, as Pearce puts it, Smith was "part of a last-moment revivalist effort to find a secure place for the Indian in a civilized, Christian world" (Pearce 1965.)

Ethan Smith found much that he admired among the American Indians, features that he attributed to their ancient Israelite heritage. Indians had become degraded, he said, because of the mistreatment of unprincipled whites. Certainly, Smith concluded, the Indians "have deserved better treatment than [sic] they received from the whites." He pleaded with his fellow Americans: "Let them not

become extinct before your eyes; let them no longer roam in savage barbarism and death!" (1823: 60.) By associating the Indians with the ten tribes of Israel, he hoped to stop the Indian's destruction and place a burden of responsibility on America for their conversion.

This duty of Christianizing the natives of our land, even be they from whatever origin, is enforced from every evangelical consideration. ... If our natives be indeed from the tribes of Israel, American Christians may well feel, that one great object of their inheritance here, is, that they may have a primary agency in restoring those "lost sheep of the house of Israel."

His advice to the missionaries followed:

You received that book [the Bible] from the seed of Abraham. All your volume of salvation was written by the sons of Jacob . . . Remember then your debt of gratitude to God's ancient people for the word of life. Restore it to them, and thus double your own rich inheritance in its blessings. Learn them to read the book of grace. Learn them its history and their own. Teach them the story of their ancestors; the economy of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob . . . Teach them their ancient history; their former blessings; their being cast away; the occasion of it, and the promises of their return. (Smith 1823: 61)

Mormon apologists and detractors alike have argued how much influence *A View of the Hebrews* might have had on the composition of the *Book of Mormon*. Here we take no position on the issue. However, no one disputes that from 1821 to 1826 Ethan Smith was the minister of the Congregational Church in Poultney, Vermont. Joseph Smith and his family lived in Sharon, Vermont, from 1805 to 1811 and Sharon and Poultney were in adjoining counties. It is also acknowledged that Joseph Smith's primary scribe and colleague, Oliver Cowdery, lived in Poultney until 1825 and his stepmother and three sisters attended Ethan Smith's church. It is also known that the first edition of *View of the Hebrews* was published in 1823 and that Joseph Smith said that the angel Moroni first visited him and told him about the gold plates in 1823. Ethan Smith enlarged and reprinted his book in 1825, and Joseph Smith stated that he finally obtained the gold plates in 1827.

The purpose here is not to assess the influence of Ethan Smith on the Prophet Joseph Smith, but simply to suggest that the prophet's claims were bound to elicit a powerful response from readers who were already knowledgeable of (and fascinated by) such claims for a number of reasons. First, and most obviously, few people could accept the possibility that great ruins being discovered in Mexico and Central America could have been constructed by the ancestors now resident in those lands. Sophisticated architecture clearly required European or Asiatic origins. The story of the "lost tribes" of Israel provided a convenient mythology in which to group these assumptions. It followed that the native Americans must be the descendants of ancient Hebrew-speaking folk.

It is true that various earlier writers, including the 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch jurist, Hugo Grotius, tried to make northern Europe the point of origin for the original inhabitants of the Americas. But this theory never caught on, and this brings us to the second reason nineteenth century Americans were

more likely to accept Middle Eastern origins for the Indians. It simply eliminated Europe and thus the need for any cultural or historical mediation between the New World and the ancient world where Judaism and Christianity developed. The Revolutionary War, after all, had been fought to end European control of America, but this was conceived as much as a religiously endowed project as a political one. America was to be the shining “city on a hill,” specially chosen by God as the place where his government on earth would be established. A historical cosmology that eliminated Europe from this narrative was therefore uniquely serviceable since it suggested that not only had the land been divinely appointed but also that God’s ancient chosen people, the Jews, had settled on the land and blessed it ages before the first Europeans ever set foot.

### **Cultural Identity and Mormonism**

Over the last century, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormonism) has changed from a geographically centered group of putative blood kin to a universal membership for whom adherence to doctrine is the primary qualification for membership. Of all the changes the Church has undergone – including the official proscription of polygyny in 1890 – this is the most significant. Concepts that were once central now rarely appear at all, and may not even be understood by Mormons under a certain age. For example, whereas older Mormons grew up believing in their lineal blood descent from one of the tribes of Israel, younger Mormons interpret this largely symbolically, as a way of signaling social membership in a community of belief. It is easy to understand why. A globalizing Church whose membership now consists mostly of non-Americans may not easily assert lineal blood descent without hampering recruitment.

Some symbols, however, remain important to Mormon belief precisely because they straddle the line between history and doctrine. One example is the symbol of the “tree of life,” one of the most familiar allegories in the *Book of Mormon*. The story of the tree of life concerns the prophet Lehi, who establishes the Church in the New World around 600 B.C. and whose descendants, the Nephites, receive a visitation from the resurrected Jesus Christ shortly after his crucifixion. The story goes that just after Lehi and his family left Jerusalem, Lehi had a dream or vision in which he saw a beautiful tree hanging with shining fruit. There was also a river, and mist of darkness which kept others he saw in his vision from finding their way to the tree. Lehi, however, made it to the tree and ate the fruit. It filled him with joy, and he wanted the rest of his family to share it. His family included his wife Sariah and their four sons: Laman, Lemuel, Sam, and Nephi.

In his dream Lehi saw his family in the distance, and called to them to come and eat the fruit of the tree. While Sariah and the two youngest sons, Sam and Nephi, came and ate the fruit, Laman and Lemuel refused. Lehi saw a path (straight and narrow, of course) leading to the tree and the mists of darkness that prevented people from seeing clearly to find their way to the path or to the tree. There was help, however, consisting of an iron rod that lay beside the path. If grasped and held firmly, the iron rod would lead one safely to the tree whether or not the way could be seen.

Lehi’s dream is a powerful metaphor, embodying in a single image some of Mormonism’s most central doctrines. The family is the root of that metaphor, and its extensions frame many of the important propositions of Mormon theology. Lehi is above all a father, and he leads his wife and

children toward the tree, whose fruit, once grasped, assures the faithful believers of eternal salvation. But not all of Lehi's children understand or agree; they exercise, in Mormon terms, "moral agency" and reject the truth. That is their right. Lehi is the father, and he guides and directs, but he cannot determine. God is also a father – in Mormon terms, the literal progenitor of all human beings – but he does not rule by decree, nor is he in all things perfect and eternal. The same is true of Mormonism's living prophet, the spiritual descendant of Joseph Smith, and indeed of all the men who hold priestly office.

Of course the symbolism of the tree goes beyond its power to represent the principles of patriarchal guidance, family, and free agency. It shares with mainstream Christianity the significance of the tree as an emblem of unity with the divine, and of Christ himself. Obedience to God's command not to eat the fruit of the tree in the Garden of Eden preserves this unity, just as eating it serves to separate human beings from God and set in motion the chain of events that ultimately requires a savior. Jesus Christ as the savior atones for the act of separation and restores the unity lost through the original humans' misdeeds. He therefore becomes like the tree, and therefore eating of the tree's fruit, in Lehi's dream, is the same as the sacrament of communion. In both cases, unity with the divine is achieved through oral ingestion and incorporation of the token of salvation.

### **Izapa and the *Book of Mormon* Lands**

The *Book of Mormon* is believed to consist of records maintained by the "Nephite" people, descended from a group that left Jerusalem in 600 B.C. They traveled across the ocean and landed in the Americas, in an area many Mormons today assume to be Central America. That group, consisting of the family of Nephi's father, Lehi, and others, split into two rival groups which became known as the Nephites (descended from Nephi) and the Lamanites (descended from Laman, eldest son of Lehi). After his resurrection in Jerusalem, Jesus Christ came to America and preached to the Nephites and Lamanites. A great Christian commonwealth flourished for awhile, but then sin and apostasy created division and a series of internecine battles ensued, culminating in the destruction of the Nephites by the ancestors of the American Indians, the Lamanites, in 400 AD. Moroni, the last survivor and son of the Nephite general Mormon, deposited the record of the Nephites – the golden plates – to be recovered 1400 years later by the first Mormon prophet, Joseph Smith.

When the ruins of Central America were discovered in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, no one could doubt these things were of Old World origin, since the idea that people original to the place could have invented them was obviously unconvincing. Not only was their sophistication too great, the parallels to the ancient Middle East were simply too many and too striking to be attributed to mere chance or coincidence. There must have been contact with the old world, and Mormons had a story to explain how – and also why – in a way that linked the development of Mesoamerican civilization to the people and government of the United States today.

The Mormon connection to Central America, however, was not suggested immediately. Possibly it all began with the publication of John Lloyd Stephens's 1841 best-seller, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan*. Passages of the book were excerpted in the early Mormon

publication *Times and Seasons* in 1842, and the editor (possibly Smith himself) speculated that the ruins could be Nephite (Ostling and Ostling 1999: 269). In 1842, the newspaper announced in fairly unequivocal terms:

Central America, or Guatemala, is situated north of the Isthmus of Darien (Panama) and once embraced several hundred miles of territory from north of south. The city of Zarahemla [referred to in the Book of Mormon], burnt at the crucifixion of the Savior, and rebuilt afterwards, stood upon the land as will be seen from the following words in the Book of Alma [in the *Book of Mormon*]. . . (*Times and Seasons* 3: 927)

Later the same year, Smith himself, in a signed editorial, spoke directly to the value of the Stephens' discoveries in light of Mormon history:

Stephens's and Catherwood's researches in Central America abundantly testify to this thing (i.e., that a great civilization existed on the American continent.) The stupendous ruins of Guatemala, and other cities, corroborate this statement, and show that a great and mighty people – men of great minds, clear intellect, bright genius, and comprehensive designs inhabited this continent. Their ruins speak of their greatness; the Book of Mormon unfolds their history. (*Times and Seasons* 3, July 1842, 860.)

Neither then nor since has the official Church hierarchy officially sanctioned this view. But that does not alter the fact that, for ordinary Mormons, Central America is the place of the first Nephites.

In fact, the Church itself implicitly endorses the Mesoamerican origin hypothesis in its choice of art work to adorn its new conference center in Salt Lake City. Completed in 2000, the building's cavernous hallways contain mostly subdued expressions, except for the wall in the central hallway. There, stretched across a fifteen foot length of the wall, is a huge mural – one of the most frequently produced images in Mormon art: John Scott's 1967 depiction of Jesus appearing in the vicinity of what looks like the Temple of the Tigers in Chichen Itza. Wherever it is, the Mesoamerican resonances are legion, and most of the rank and file accept it at face value: Jesus Christ came to America and that makes America the promised land.

### **The Izapa Stone**

Fifty years ago a Mayan stela now known as "Izapa Stela Five" was reported to the Mormon community as historical evidence of early Israelite presence in the Americas. For many (or perhaps most) Mormons this history is not an incidental aspect of the faith. The fact that the Israelites came and settled in the Americas is crucial both to the legitimacy of the Mormon account and to the justification of America as the promised land. In addition, the discovery of the stone, with its putative representation of Lehi's dream, seemed to confirm one of the central messages of the Church: that the Church is true both doctrinally and as a history of ancient America.

The importance of this combination was suggested by Mormon archaeologist Garth Norman, who writes about the stone as he imagines a dialogue of the Lehi figure talking to the Lemuel figure:

As your hands are open in supplication to God through this burned offering, as his priest I perform this offering in your behalf and in so doing point the way to everlasting life in the heavenly Tamoanchan paradise. Through your observance of sacred status in life's journey, you can reach this goal and partake of the fruit of the Tree of Life as I partake. The incense smoke rises heavenward before your face, blinding your eyes as with a mist of darkness, but it can carry your prayers heavenward through your inner faith returning the blessings of God upon your head as the dews from heaven (fish water symbol overhead), and the water of life and the fruit of the Tree of Life will be bestowed upon you from above. (Norman 1976: 329).

The Izapa stone still provokes such reflections, and that is why hundreds of Mormon tourists pay thousands of dollars and journey to see it as part of tours to the "Book of Mormon" holy lands in Central America.

### **The Story of the Stone**

The Museum of Peoples and Cultures, located in a converted dormitory on the edge of the Brigham Young University campus, contains a variety of objects related to the history Mormons claim as their own. The Museum has never had an easy time justifying its existence, and now supports itself as a repository for cultural resource management under state legal mandate. At the same time, the Museum is attempting to make itself more relevant, and this, at a Church school, means linking itself explicitly with *Book of Mormon* subjects.

The majority of its collections, for example, come from countries that have long constituted proselytizing targets of the Church. Staff members provide information about Mesoamerican and Native American material culture, "thereby enabling informed and thoughtful deliberation by Church members with respect to the restored gospel of Jesus Christ" (Museum, 2000:19). One object, in particular, stands out in the rhetoric of relevance: "The Museum houses certain Book of Mormon-related objects, such as the Stele V Tree of Life Stone cast from Chiapas, Izapa, Mexico" (Museum, 2000: 4).

The Museum's replica of Izapa Stela Five is actually a plaster cast made from a latex mold fifty years ago. It is a huge thing, and very heavy. For years, the cast rested in its own special niche in the Museum's main exhibition hall. A few years ago, a new director moved the cast into a locked storage room, and to see it one must make a special request. At the same time, the cast was placed on a specially designed wooden platform, complete with wheels, and this cost the museum over \$3,000 – not a small amount given how strapped for operating funds the Museum always is. Keeping the cast at all might seem strange, since the director, as well as several archaeologists familiar with the original, assert that the cast was altered by the maker, Mormon archaeologist Wells Jakeman, to conform to his own concept of the stone's meaning. As an accurate representation of an

Izapan sculpture, therefore, it is nearly useless. But this is the problem: is the replica the image of an artifact, or is it a religious relic with symbolic significance to the Mormon faithful because of its power to testify to Mormonism's history?

The site of Izapa is located along the Pacific coastal piedmont of Chiapas in a location that sat at the juncture between Mixe-Zoquean-speaking peoples to the West and Mayan-speaking peoples to the East. Although there is evidence of occupation at the site during the Early Formative, the site reached its height during the Late Formative period (300 BC - AD 250). The site is most famous for the many stelae that were erected in combination with carved and plain altars. These were placed within large quadrangular plazas that were bounded by pyramidal mounds.

Stela Five is a slab of volcanic material (andesite) that measures 2.5 m high, 1.5 m wide, and .5 m thick, and weighs around one and half tons. A school-teacher in Chiapas, Carlos A. Culebro, discovered the stela in 1939, and published a pamphlet containing his drawings. Actual investigation, however, did not begin until 1941, when archaeologist Mathew Stirling cleared the vegetation around the stone and photographed it. In 1943, he published an illustrated report, in which he called Stela Five the most intricately carved sculpture he had ever discovered. However, he did not try to interpret the stone's meaning, nor did he link it to any current belief system.

The Mormon interpretation of the stone began in 1950 with the publication of Irene Briggs' master's thesis, *The Tree-of-Life Symbol: its significance in Ancient American Religion*. She concluded that what appears to be the Tree of Life on Stela Five was in fact a special symbol of the ancient life god or "Fair God" of Mesoamerica, called Itzamna by the Mayas and Quetzalcoatl by the Aztecs. Briggs' supervisor, Mormon archaeologist M. Wells Jakeman, found the stone fascinating. He agreed that the scene carved on Stela Five "was a depiction of Lehi's vision of the Tree of Life described in 1 Nephi 8:10-15" in the *Book of Mormon*. If this were so, then it would go along way to providing evidence that the history described in the *Book of Mormon* was true, and took place just where many Mormons thought (and still think) it did: Mesoamerica. His interpretation of Stela Five, together with a condensation of Briggs' thesis, appeared in 1953 (Jakeman 1953; see also Jakeman 1957, 1963.)

Jakeman is an important figure in the development of Mormon archaeology. He received his undergraduate degree in history from the University of Utah, and his M.A. in history from the University of South California, with a specialty in ancient and Near Eastern history. In 1938, Jakeman received a Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley in 1938 with a dissertation entitled *The Maya States of Yucatan, 1441-1545* (Parrish 1986). In 1946 he was hired at BYU as the newly created Chair of Archaeology at the recommendation of John A. Widtsoe of the Council of the Twelve Apostles. The same year he was appointed as the chairman of the new Department of Archaeology.

In 1950, news of Jakeman's interpretation of the Izapa stela spread quickly through the Mormon community, and Jakeman was immediately in demand as a public speaker. Such was the enthusiasm, in fact, that it caused the Mormon-supported SEHA (Society for Early Historic Archaeology) membership to increase by several hundred per cent during the next few years. In 1954, Jakeman conducted a Brigham Young University archaeological expedition to Central America. The same year Mexican archaeologist Alberto Ruz (well known as the discoverer of the



tomb beneath of the Palenque Temple of the Inscriptions) came to Salt Lake City and lectured to an audience of almost 2,000 people. "It was during these lectures, illustrated with beautiful color transparencies, that Professor Ruz stated his opinion that the Tree of Life carving on the sarcophagus lid was clear evidence of a connection in ancient religious belief between this sacred symbol and the hope of resurrection" (Christensen 1968: 3).

By the mid-1950's the importance of the stela to Mormon history led the first known Church official to visit Mexico and see the stone. This was Milton R. Hunter of the First Council of the Seventy, on the highest leadership structures of the Church. With the help of local citizens, he and his team constructed a shelter over the stone to protect it from the elements. In a general Church conference message Hunter even used Jakeman's conclusions in a faith-promoting sermon regarding the *Book of Mormon's* authenticity (*Conference Report*, October 1954:108). In a few years Hunter had taken this to yet another extreme, announcing in his book, *Christ in Ancient America*, that Quetzalcoatl is Jesus: "Quetzalcoatl could have been none other than Jesus the Christ, the Lord and God of this earth, and the Savior of the human family. Thus Jesus Christ and Quetzalcoatl are identical" (1959:51-53). At the same time, Jakeman prepared the first actual-size facsimile drawing-reproduction of the Izapa stone. The drawing was exhibited in Utah later the same year to large and enthusiastic crowds.

The fact that the sculpture rises to prominence in the 1950's is interesting because this coincides with the beginning of what Mauss describes as the Church's retreat from scientific explanation into fundamentalism. Mauss attributes the Mormon retrenchment to a more general transformation, as the institutional Church shifted from an assimilationist posture to one of withdrawal in the face of a liberalizing American society (Mauss 1994). The preceding period was a time of alliance, or at least cooperation, between Mormon scientists and theologians. B.H. Roberts and James Talmadge -- both high authorities in the Church -- believed that faith and reason ultimately supported each other, and Widtsoe and Merrill (two of the Mormon twelve apostles) warned against an overly literal interpretation of the scriptures. A third or more of the men appointed as apostles during this period were comfortable with scientific learning and confident that eventually Mormonism would be able to hold its own in intellectual competition.

This changed by the time Joseph Fielding Smith, the future president of the Church, published the anti-evolutionist *Man, His Origin and Destiny* (Smith 1954). Smith argued against Mormon acceptance of the theory of evolution -- even to the point of stopping publication of B.H. Roberts' *The Truth, The Way, The Life*, a book that tried to reconcile Mormon theology and the developing sciences of evolutionary biology and astronomy (Roberts 1984). After apostles Widtsoe and Merrill died in 1952, Smith effectively came into his own, and put a stop to most attempts to synthesize Mormon theology and scientific discovery. Evolutionary theory, of course, was considered the primary threat. Archaeology, on the other hand, does not seem to have worried Smith, and so, beginning in the 1950s, Jakeman was able to put together a series of major projects, all with Church backing, that would attempt to provide physical evidence of Mormon history in the Americas.

In 1958 the next Brigham Young University archaeological expedition to Mexico left for the field. The director was Ross Christensen, accompanied by Welby Ricks, Alfred Bush, and Carl Jones. Their first objective was to obtain a latex (liquid rubber) mold of Stela Five. The idea was to

use this mold to prepare a cast, and thus preserve the details of the carving. This is the cast that would be installed at Brigham Young University. The latex mold was made under the direction of Ricks on January 18, 1958, and flown to Provo the following day. The cast prepared from the mold was completed in time for display in the Carl F. Eyring Physical Science Center during the Society's 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Symposium on the Archaeology of the Scriptures in June, 1958.

Jakeman published his two most important monographs on Stela Five not long after (Jakeman 1958, 1959). It should be noted that Jakeman was the founder and director of BYU's Anthropology Department, and the department still bears his imprint in the fairly high concentration of Mesoamericanists among its faculty. Back in the late 1950's and 1960's, Jakeman continued to speak often and publicly about the stone, and always attracted huge crowds. In his publications, however, Jakeman avoided explicitly linking the Stela with *the Book of Mormon's* account of Lehi's dream. The author apparently believed it was better to emphasize the numerous New World – Old World parallelisms to be found in the carving. "With such a foundation, he felt, it would then be appropriate to open the question of a possible Book of Mormon explanation of such Old World contact (SEHA Newsletter, 69:2).

In 1962, the plaster cast of Stela Five in the possession of the BYU Department of Archaeology was moved from the old archaeology classroom (Room 205 of the Eyring Center) to the "Tree of Life Salon" in the new Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, located on the first floor of the Maeser Memorial Building. As to the real stone, various attempts had been made by Jakeman and others to move the stone to Mexico City, where it could be protected. None of these efforts were successful, in part because tourism of the site (increasingly made up of Mormon tourists) depended on the stone being kept in place. Occasionally, the BYU archaeologists would build a shed or canopy above the stela, only to find it gone the next time they returned. On at least two occasions they found the stone itself moved, or turned over, and each time they set it upright again.

In 1965, archaeologist Susan Miles published a paper in which she referred to Stela Five. Her article identified various styles of ancient sculpture in Chiapas and Guatemala and tried to determine their distribution in time and space. She did not offer an interpretation of the stone, but she did dispute Jakeman's identification of some figures. She thought, for example, that the figure in the lower right-hand part which Jakeman identified as a scribe (i.e. Nephi) was instead a sculptor holding a chisel. She did agree with Jakeman, however, on the approximate date of the carving, i.e., around the time of Christ (Miles 1965).

An interesting early criticism of Jakeman's interpretation came from Hugh Nibley, then a professor of Ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University. Nibley was one of the chief scholarly defenders of the faith, and his work is often cited as providing critical argument in favor of the *Book of Mormon* account. At some point in 1958 a typewritten seven-page paper by Hugh Nibley was circulated, severely criticizing Jakeman's methods and interpretations. Nibley said of Jakeman's work on Stela Five: ". . . the author's loving hand, guided by a wishful eye has actually created the only evidence available to the reader for testing the author's theories" (1958: 17).

The article listed six reasons Nibley found Jakeman's analysis wanting. First, Jakeman never compared the carvings on Stela Five with other Mesoamerican art, which is standard practice for this kind of interpreting. Second, Jakeman had visualized evidence on the stone that no one else

could see. He ignored those items that contradicted his theory, rather than explain the reason for them. Third, said Nibley, Jakeman's linguistic and iconographic analysis was seriously in error. Fourth, Jakeman did not submit his conclusions to peer review. Instead, he "published it himself with unjustified and ungraceful fanfare." Fifth, his argument was full of words such as "evidently", "probably" and "apparently" -- words that assert details as facts without solid evidence. And finally, Jakeman also did not subject his work to review by his peers, instead opting to publish it himself.

To this criticism – from one of the Mormon faithful, no less -- Jakeman responded in 1967 in an address to the Society for Early Historic Archaeology's annual symposium (Jakeman 1968). He published a new drawing of the stone with various items on it identified as Mormon-specific features – Sariah, Laman, Lemuel, Sam, Nephi, and a figure in a white robe. In this paper he repeated his interpretation of the figures represented on the stone. The most obvious parallel, Jakeman continued to insist, is a fruit-bearing tree in the center with a stream running nearby. A path extends from the river's head to the fruit tree, and a line next to the path suggests the rod of iron. Two figures stand next to the tree, and seated around it are six people who, it is said, represent Lehi's family in the attitude they assume in Lehi's vision. Jakeman inferred that the figures represent Lehi, on the left, attended by Sariah, facing Lama, on the right Nephi, attended by Sam, facing Lemuel. Jakeman even went so far as to claim (without argument or evidence) that he had deciphered the hieroglyphics above the heads of the two figures as "Lehi" and "Nephi."

Jakeman's latest drawings were published in the *Book of Mormon Syllabus*, College of Religious Instruction at Brigham Young University. In that form that were used in courses all students at BYU were required to take. The Tree of Life stone was, by this time, virtually synonymous with Mormonism's claims about its own history. By March of 1968, Jakeman's drawings were published in *The Instructor*, an official Mormon magazine, and distributed world-wide.

From 1963 to 1973 (and, to a certain extent, today), the principle apologist for a Mormon interpretation of Stela Five was V. Garth Norman, working under the auspices of the New World Archaeological Foundation. He produced a series of drawing and photographs – the most detailed to date – that were published together with an extensive analysis of the scenes depicted on the stone (Norman 1973, 1976.) Norman has avoided references to the stone as an object with Mormon religious significance. He even criticized Jakeman for using reproductions that were incomplete or inaccurate, and for jumping to conclusions on the identities of various figures represented on the stone. Nevertheless, Norman never concealed his faith that the stone was indeed a depiction of the tree of life as the *Book of Mormon* describes it. He continues to defend this interpretation to this day (Norman 1999).

Jakeman's conclusions continued to provoke controversy. In the Spring of 1966, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, John Sorenson, Professor of Anthropology at Brigham Young University, weighed in on the subject. Concerning the attempt to link Stela Five with the *Book of Mormon*, Sorenson wrote, ". . . the uncontrolled use of trait comparison leads to absurd conclusions. Particularly, it leads to over-ambitious interpretations of shared meaning and historical relationship as in Jakeman's previous pseudo-identifications of Lehi (and other characters from the Book of Mormon) on an Izapan monument." By "trait comparison" Sorenson refers to the

interpretative technique popular in the nineteenth century that identified objects as comparable to each other without taking into account their different contexts. James Frazer was an especially adept practitioner. Jakeman had done the same thing when he removed specific figures of the stela's depiction and interpreted them *in isolation* as revealing ancient Israelite themes.

There is a certain irony here, however, since Sorenson is probably the scholar most closely identified with *Book of Mormon* geography. He has argued for decades that Central America is the most likely site of the Nephite colonies based on maps he constructed from the calculation dates, times, and marching distances mentioned in the *Book of Mormon*. To be sure, Sorenson does not put much weight on the Tree of Life stone, nor does he have to, since he accepts the fact that the Book of Mormon is an ancient document. Jakeman and others, however, were embarked on a somewhat different quest, and that was to prove that the Book of Mormon itself was true – not just that the geography it describes must be located in one place or another.

Despite opposition to the Jakeman hypothesis the idea continued to receive favorable attention. In 1968, Mormon archaeologist and historian Ross Christensen could still describe Stela Five thus:

. . . the most direct and striking evidence in support of the *Book of Mormon* which has yet come forth from the science of archaeology. I do not know who carved this sculpture – whether the artist was a Nephite, a Lamanite, or of some other lineage – but whoever did it was beyond any doubt familiar with the story of Lehi's vision of the Tree of Life as recounted in 1 Nephi, Chapter 8. (quoted in Cheesman 1974: 18).

In 1982, Michael Griffith called it “no less than an ancient picturization in stone of the Lehi tree-of-life story in the Book of Mormon” (Griffith 1982: 1). By 1984, the stone was called “the most direct and striking evidence that has yet come forth from archaeology” (Christensen 1984: 2).

Archaeology and *Book of Mormon* geography developed without significant critique until the 1960's. At that point the story changes, because in relating itself to artifact recovery the truth claims of Mormonism made themselves vulnerable to questioning on the basis of new discoveries. The problem, when it came, emerged not from the New World but from the Old, in the form of the rediscovered papyri from which Joseph Smith allegedly translated the “Book of Abraham,” part of the *Pearl of Great Price*. The papyri were held, unknowingly, by the New York Public Library.

When they were finally translated in 1967, the Joseph Smith papyri were interpreted by some specialists to Egyptian funerary spells, known collectively as the “Book of Breathings,” a part of the *Book of the Dead*. Critics claims that fascicle No. 1, for example, did not depict the biblical Abraham being scarified on an altar by the idolatrous priest of “Elkenah,” as Smith claimed, but rather the Egyptian god Osiris being embalmed by the jackal-headed Anubis for the next life. The fascicle is still to be seen in every edition of the Book of Mormon, just before the Book of Abraham, and is understood by Church members as referring to the prophet Abraham. Nevertheless, the Church's enthusiasm for historical recovery has been tempered in the years since the Book of Abraham incident, and this has led, one supposes, to the quiet loss of enthusiasm for Stela Five.

After this, mention of the stone disappears altogether in church teaching materials, and high-ranking Mormon officials no longer pointed to the stone as stunning evidence of Mormon claims. A

few people continue in the Jakeman tradition, however. One of these is Bruce Warren. In 1987, Warren still spoke of Stela Five as clear evidence that the *Book of Mormon* peoples were Central American:

The *Book of Mormon* also gives the meaning and interoperation of the symbols carved in the stone. The river represents the barrier of evil between people and happiness. The rod of iron represents the word of God, which, if followed, leads one to the tree of eternal life and happiness. The tree represents the love of God – and if one loves God he will keep His commandments, and this leads to the fruits of the tree – happiness and eternal life. It is an entire philosophy of life set out succinctly on 15 tons of stone. (Warren and Ferguson 1987: 74).

This statement appears in a book that lists both Warren and Thomas Ferguson, creator of the New World Archaeological Foundation, as co-authors, despite the fact that Ferguson died four years prior to its publication. What are we to make of that?

Thomas Ferguson apparently lost some of all of his faith in Mormonism before he died in 1983, in part because of doubts concerning the history of the *Book of Mormon* (Larson 1996). Ferguson had spent his life trying to provide evidence for the historical validity of the *Book*. After he died, Bruce Warren, a part-time anthropology instructor at BYU, took some of his unpublished notes written before his loss of faith and published them as a book with himself listed as co-author. Just how much of the book is Ferguson's is not clear, nor do we know to what extent, if any, Ferguson still believed in the Mormon significance of Stela Five (Larson 1996). What we do know is that the Ferguson and Warren book, *The Messiah in Ancient America*, was written to prove that Jesus Christ appeared in Central America, and Stela Five is used as evidence.

But more needs to be said about this reference. On the one hand, it appears to continue the line of scholarly apologetics begun by Jakeman in support of the stone's significance to Mormonism. On the other hand, few other Mormon scholars referred to the stone in recent decades, and Church officials no longer appear to embrace the stone as material testimony of the faith. Does Bruce Warren stand outside this development, or does he represent simply a muted continuation of long-standing Mormon interest in Central American artifacts? Both could be true. Warren's interest in the stone is partly commercial, after all. He was until recently employed by one of the travel companies that sells trips to "Mormon Lands" of Central America, including a stop at Izapa. It would be bad for business if the stone were debunked, and so, perhaps, Warren might have a vested interest in fortifying the Mormon perspective on the stone. It is not true, however, that Mormon interest in Izapa Stela Five now depends only on its commercial viability.

The authoritative (if not exactly official) *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, published in 1992, is a case in point. The *Encyclopedia* is no mere compendium of knowledge related to Mormonism. More than a decade in preparation, it is considered the greatest summation to date of Mormon concepts and history. The tree of life story figures prominently as an entry, but what stands out is the *Encyclopedia's* reference to four distinct appearances of the tree – all, apparently, of equal significance: the Garden of Eden tree, Lehi's vision, Alma's parable (see Alma 32: 28-43), and

Izapa Stela Five. It is as if to say the Izapa stone ranks with the others, including the Bible and the *Book of Mormon*, in testifying to the significance of the image of the tree. In fact, the *Encyclopedia* goes further and suggests that the famous sculptured sarcophagus lid from Palenque's Temple of the Inscriptions also depicts the Tree of Life (Raish 1992: 1488). Far from retreating from its assertions about Mesoamerican archaeology, Mormonism continues to embrace them and therefore the Izapa stone.

### **The Stone Today**

The following, taken from a Mormon discussion web site, is typical of current Mormon understanding of the Izapa stela.

Can we successfully overturn the evidences presented by archeologists . . . ? Can we successfully maintain the Book of Mormon's comparatively recent advent of man in America and the existence of his iron and steel and domestic animal, and written language stage of culture against the deductions of our late American writers upon these themes? If we cannot, what is to be the effect of it all upon the minds of our youth? What is to be our general standing before the enlightened opinion of mankind? Is silence to be our answer?

The author expresses the very same doubt that led Thomas Ferguson to spend decades looking for archaeological proof and then to give up on the quest as fruitless. Here is the response:

I don't understand your post. I have seen such *Book of Mormon* artifacts which prove the Book of Mormon true. Have you ever heard of the Lehi stone? It is a large stone covered with hieroglyphics telling the story of the tree of life from the *Book of Mormon* including the names of the three main characters - Lehi, his wife Sariah, and Nephi. Also, the *Book of Mormon* used to be published with many color pictures of such artifacts. Suggest you contact BYU's archeology dept. for more information on the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon. (<http://www.truth-in-love.org/bofmevidencearchaeo.htm>)

Clearly the stone has lost none of its power to convince some of the faithful of the truth of Mormonism's claims about its own history. Against all of the criticism – that the iron tools and horses which the Book of Mormon speaks of simply did not exist in ancient America – the Izapa stone can still be used as a defense. What Mormon apologists of the 1950s would find surprising, however, is that the stone is virtually alone in this category, without the vast body of recovered relics and ancient writings that they thought would be revealed by now to support Mormon historical claims.

The most recent event in the history of the stone took place in 1999. BYU archaeologist John Clark published a reinterpretation of Stela Five based on a new drawing created by Ayaz Moreno. The drawing was produced in three stages, and involved direct tracing of details onto clear plastic draped over the stone, and with the aid of artificial lighting to highlight details. This resulted in a

reproduction very different from the photograph-based drawings produced by Garth Norman in the 1960's.

Using the new drawings, Clark was able to cast doubt on the commonly held assumption that the slab represents an episode from the *Book of Mormon*. "The internal evidence from the Book of Mormon seems to be definitive that the Nephites had nothing to do with Izapa, and it is doubtful that the Lamanites did either" (1999: 28). By "internal evidence" he meant that there is no textual confirmation that Lehi's dream figured prominently, or at all, in the teachings of the later Nephite prophets. Why, then, would it have been used to provide a sculptural motif? Clark instead proposed that the stela was what it seemed to be in the first place: an artifact whose features placed in the tradition of ancient Mesoamerican religious sculpture. "The Lehi connection that Jakeman espoused," he concluded, "goes nowhere, in my opinion." Nevertheless, Clark finished up the article with this tempered concession: "But long-shot though it may be, a Jaredite link to Izapa cannot be completely ruled out" (1999: 33). The article does not provide any support for this hypothesis, however. Does Clark then seek to deny all links to Central America? The answer to this is straightforward: he does not.

Not surprisingly, Clark's interpretation of the stela is seen by many as the most damaging critique of the Jakeman hypothesis since Nibley's attack almost four decades ago.

So far, published responses to Clark have been few but strongly felt. Several appear in the *Book of Mormon Archaeological Digest*, published by tourism entrepreneur Joseph Allen. Allen owns and operates a travel business and takes people on tours of the "Book of Mormon" lands in Central America – the same business, in fact, with which Bruce Warren is associated. One of his destinations – one the "Jaredite Tour" – is Izapa and Stela Five. Allen also makes brass reproductions of the Stela, and sells them for \$80 a piece. Clearly, it would not be good for business if the stone were to be debunked as a Mormon artifact. He has therefore been among the first to defend it. An issue of the *Digest* was devoted to criticism of Clark, and included articles by Joseph Allen, Diane Wirth, Alan Miner, and most importantly, Garth Norman (Norman 1973, 1976, 1985, 1999).

Some criticism has focused on particular elements of the sculpture, which do look strikingly different in the Norman and Clark renderings. Consider the figure on the lower left side of the stone, which some have identified as Lehi, the prophet (see figure 2). Using Garth Norman's earlier drawing, Allen sees the figure as Lehi leaning forward with his hand in a gesturing or teaching position. He sits on a cushion similar to the altars that rest in front of the stone monuments in the area where Stela Five is located. An object Jakeman identified as a jawbone immediately behind his head represents Lehi's name, according to Allen. Clark, on the other hand, looks at the new Moreno drawing (see figure 3) and sees an old man with a pointed cap. He is sitting, not on a cushion, but a throne of skulls – hardly a Lehi theme. The bones of the old man show prominently, and Clark suggests that he may represent death, or a priest or king in a mask representing death. The pointing finger that Allen sees is interpreted by Clark as rope that signifies kinship.

Garth Norman does not deny that figures on the stone are hard to identify. Nor does he claim that the stone is exclusively a representation of a *Book of Mormon* theme. Diane Wirth, writing in the same issue, sums up this position:

It is my personal opinion that what we have at Izapa is a melting pot of traditions. In this light it is conceivable that portions of the scenario have aspects of Lehi's Tree of Life vision, together mixed with earlier traditions held by the Mixe Zoque and their predecessors, the Olmec. This mixing of iconographic images was popular among the later Maya who incorporated symbols of Mexican origin (primarily from Teotihuacan) into their artwork – these emblems were important because they were symbols of power. (Wirth 1999: 10).

The purpose of their defense of the stone, therefore, is not to affirm its standing as a legitimate Mormon artifact, but simply to preserve this as a possibility. As the stone weathers and its details become harder to read, this will not become harder, but easier.

## Conclusion

Mormonism is predicated on the truth of its own history, and the history of the ancient people its founding text describes. The first history holds that an uneducated New York farm boy, Joseph Smith, translated the contents of golden plates first revealed to him by the angel Moroni in 1820. The fact that the plates existed and Joseph translated them is not subject to dispute in Mormon thought; it happened, just as everyday events happen, in real time and real space. The second history asserts that the plates document the affairs of an ancient Israelite people as they left the old world and settled in America, in the period from the sixth century B.C. to the fourth century A.D. The most important event in this history is the appearance of Jesus Christ in America following his resurrection.

The two histories of Mormonism, of the finding of the plates and of the plates themselves, depend on each other, but they are predicated on different kinds of evidentiary claims. The "Joseph Smith history" provides evidence for itself in the testimony of witnesses whose account of seeing and "hefting" the golden plates appears on the first page of the *Book of Mormon*. This evidence is always cited as adequate to secure the Joseph Smith story against the claim that he never found the golden plates and therefore fabricated the *Book of Mormon*. The second history – the history within the Book itself -- is unsecured by the same kind of eye-witness account. That is, there are no witnesses, outside the book itself, for the history the book relates. This difference in evidentiary claims has consequences for the nature of Mormon belief. The recovery of the ancient past thus becomes as important as the growth of the Church in the present, and subject to the same strictures: the need for witnesses, not as living testimony, but in the form of physical artifacts that confirm the testimony after the fact.

The two histories are sources of opportunity and vulnerability, and this, to the observer, is one of the most interesting aspects of the religion. It is a source of opportunity because history is seen as a set of facts to which the faith can appeal as proof. For all of its talk about heavenly kingdoms and celestial spirits, Mormonism likes to think of itself as an extremely practical, fact-oriented religion. "Facts" are appealed to in a way Catholics, for example, would find quite unusual, because Mormonism generally denies that there is anything other-worldly about its beliefs. It eschews



mysticism. This is no more than one would expect from a religion that identifies Earth itself as the ultimate heaven and points to Independence, Missouri, as the place where Christ will appear.

Vulnerability is the other side of the coin. It exists because every factual “proof” is subject to disconfirmation through the discovery of new facts. Mormonism cannot escape its histories, but it manages its vulnerabilities by shifting between the two. When one falters or seems likely to fail, the other is taken up and emphasized as sufficient by itself to ground the faith. There is, of course, a third option, and that is to stress the power of revelation and the confirmation of the Holy Ghost. The importance of history can then be attenuated, and appeals for verity are made directly to spiritual realization. All three alternatives are serviceable mainly to the extent they are used in conjunction with each other, enabling rapid shifting between them.

The purpose of the three rhetorical strategies is to create or maintain faith, which is manifest in adherence to the church’s organizational structure. Any of them, however, can be pursued on its own – in a theory of history, for example, or in a theory of personal revelation. In any case, such an inquiry can easily end up in a realm of evidentiary claims over which the church hierarchy has no control. The criteria are set by others – professional historians, perhaps – and not by the authority of the Church. They are therefore dangerous. This is one of the core paradoxes of Mormonism: to pursue any of its chosen routes to making truth claims runs the serious risk of challenging the institutional structure that is predicated on prophetic authority.

That is why church officials are sensitive to the possibility of extreme positions developing in one of its evidentiary routes. Early on, in the 1840’s, Joseph Smith himself prohibited unauthorized revelation, and strongly discouraged “speaking in tongues.” It took the Church considerably longer, however, to attempt to control its own history, a task by no means over as we can see in the current debate between historians and church authorities over the meaning of the notorious Mountain Meadows Massacre (Bagley 2002.)

Mormon historiography does not differ that much from mainstream Christian and Jewish thought, of course. All three seek the physical remains of the people their sacred texts describe. Mormonism goes beyond this, however, in one crucial sense, and that is in its philosophy of materialism. The Mormon theology of existence asserts the identity of spirit and matter, while mainstream Christianity has always maintained that the two are separate and distinct, and the former is always seen as superior to the latter. The God of mainstream Christianity is incorporeal and creates matter out of nothingness. The God of Mormonism finds matter already in existence, as well as “intelligences,” which he then organizes according to a plan of development.

The Mormon assertion of identity, or interdependence, between matter and spirit has important implications. First, things that are true spiritually must also be true physically. They should therefore leave physical signs that are susceptible to inspection. Second, physical evidence is never dispensable, although it may become unavailable, temporarily or permanently, because of God’s plan. *The Book of Mormon* itself, in all its printed versions, contains the testimony of witnesses who make a point of saying that the golden plates were real and that they “hefted” them. Physicality is fundamental. This means that the believer cannot, in principle, convert truth claims into philosophical statements in which only revelation operates as verification. Third, since there are no *a priori* limitations on the type and number of physical evidence, Mormons must, in

principle, be open to new discovery. In fact, they are enjoined by their own Articles of Faith to seek it out, which means that there will always be a place for Mormon archaeology (and the rest of science, for that matter) no matter how controversial or damaging its results.

Consequently, there will probably always been a certain tension between faith and the claims of history, and Mormonism will always face certain challenges in the role it assigns to archaeology. In this regard, of course, Mormonism is not so difficult from other religions, or even from nativistic elements in various nationalist movements. Japan is a good example (e.g., Kohl & Fawcett 1996). No other country, it is said, spends as much of its resources on archaeological excavations than the Japanese government. To a large extent, this is driven by a nationalist purpose: to provide evidence that Japanese culture is unique and that its essential contours were established before assimilation of Chinese forms and values (Habu & Fawcett 1999). The problem with peeling an onion, however, is that you never get to the absolute core. And the Japanese have discovered that no matter how deep they dig, artifacts bearing traces of contact with the Asian mainland are still to be found. The Mormon context is different, of course, but not so different that one can see similar difficulties arising to the extent that archaeology and artifacts are used to buttress matters of a spiritual order.

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