

Christian Myths in Pre Columbian Mexico

Digitized By Glen W. Chapman- August 2003

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It has been said that mythology is of little if any historical value simply because it usually not possible to determine exactly where to draw the line between truth and myth. While this would perhaps be a legitimate argument if the myth is evaluated independent of other sources, this is an often unnecessary limitation. We may evaluate a myth and arrive at a reasonable conclusion regarding its truth by evaluating it along side other available evidence. Once truth has been found in a myth, it may be combined with previously established facts to yield greater illumination of the past than either of the two sources would have provided alone.

To illustrate, we turn to President John Taylor's description of how this method was applied more than 300 years ago: "*The knowledge that the Mexicans, and other aboriginal races of America had, at the time of their discovery by the Spaniards, of the life of the Savior, was so exact that the Catholics suggested two theories (both incorrect, however) to solve the mystery. One was that the devil had invented an imitation gospel to delude the Indians; the other, that the Apostle Thomas had visited the Americas and taught its people the plan of Salvation. The story of the life of the Mexican divinity, Quetzalcoatl, closely resembles that of the Savior; so closely, indeed, that we can come to no other conclusion than that Quetzalcoatl and Christ are the same being. But the history of the former has been handed down to us through an impure Lamanitish source, which has sadly disfigured and perverted the original incidents and teachings of the Savior's life and ministry.*"

President Taylor's application of the scriptures to the fragmented myths of Quetzalcoatl demonstrates the value of combining the two sources. Through this combination, President Taylor reveals the true origins of the Mexican deity. This technique may also yield valuable insights about specific Book of Mormon events. For example, archaeologist Bruce Warren has recently shown how information from Central American myths and the Book of Mormon (as well as early native calendars) may be combined to suggest that the Savior's appearance to the Nephites in Bountiful took place during the week of the Passover in 34 AD.

Even without the Book of Mormon, the Catholic priests who speculated about the presence of gospel elements in the Quetzalcoatl myths profited thereby. Their attempt to correlate mythology with scripture to arrive at historical fact led them closer to the truth than were those who did not study them together.

Unfortunately, as President Taylor's statement indicates, they didn't get it right when they concluded that Quetzalcoatl was St. Thomas. Rutgers University professor, Susana Rotker, explains: "*The list of those who supported the thesis that Saint Thomas and Quetzalcoatl were one includes illustrious seventeenth-century figures such as the priests Bernardino de Sahagún, Diego Durán and Juan de Tovar, and in the eighteenth century, Manuel Duarte and the well known writer Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora.*" These men were making what reconciliation they could between their observations of native Mesoamerican beliefs and their scriptures. Without the plainness of the **Book of Mormon** record, St. Thomas was the best available solution to the mystery of how Christianity found its way to preConquest Mexico?

Explaining why the priests generally favored Thomas over the other disciples as the one who had visited the Americas, Rotker continues: "From the theological point of view, the thesis is not far-fetched: Saint Gregory, in his *Acta Thomae*, had assured his readers that it fell to this apostle to preach in The regions supra Gangem, that is to day, to the east of India." With this doctrinal conviction, the Catholic priests were predisposed to attribute any apparent *elements* of

Christianity in pre-Conquest Mexico to the doubting disciple of old.

By accepting the notion that St. Thomas and Quetzalcoatl were the same individual, these men simultaneously accepted the so-called “preevangelization” of Mexico. Whether or not this evangelization was performed by St. Thomas as they supposed, their acknowledgment that the gospel had been preached by anyone prior to the Spanish Conquest was a powerful and dangerous truth. Rotker observes that “none of these authors. . . dared put forth the theory of the pre-evangelization of Amerka. For more than two centuries, the cornerstone of the Spanish Conquest had been evangelization.”

Without the pretense of evangelization the Spaniards were wholly without excuse for the atrocities they had inflicted on the Native American populations, thus it was prudent for these priests keep their volatile beliefs about Quetzalcoatl and St. Thomas to themselves.

However, at the end of this prominent procession of Thomasites was a Creole priest, Fray Servando Teresa de Mier who dared to be imprudent. Not only did he endorse the Thomas-Quetzalcoatl connection, but unlike his predecessors he did it publicly.

In his celebrated speech of 1794, de Mier justified his position by asserting scriptural authority: “I have said that this opinion is the one that most closely conforms to Sacred Scripture, because Jesus Christ, sending his apostles forth to preach the Gospel, commanded them: ‘Go into the whole world and preach the Gospel to every creature under heaven; and be witnesses for me from Jerusalem and Judea to the ends of the earth.’ Is it feasible that in an order so compelling, general and absolute{that} half the globe had not been included?”

De Mier paid dearly for his unorthodox preaching. He was publicly denounced and repeatedly imprisoned, “but he . . . never disavowed his sermon . . . , even though once it had been delivered, and in the face of the general scandal it aroused, he tried in vain to, apologize for it.”⁷ Not only did he never retract his ideas about pre-Conquest Christianity ~in Mexico, he reaffirmed them and even added to them in a letter he wrote in 1821, nine years prior to the first publication of the Book of Mormon.

This letter, written as de Mier’s formal farewell to Mexico, focuses on the Hebrew roots of several Nahuatl (Aztec) names, most notably that of Mexico itself⁸ The following is my translation of extracts from the letter:

“Upon returning from the other world . . . I found a great variation in orthography, and that the x was excluded from a number of strong letters, so much so that it contradicted the origin of the words. . . in some printed works the j was the only guttural letter, in others the g alternated with the vowels e and i; I believed that all of this novelty probably came from the printers. Finding themselves loaded with work and with the liberty of the press, and not knowing how to distinguish the origin of the words in order to distribute the three guttural letters [g, j, and x~, they had been tossed out in a shortcut.

“I taught Spanish as a professor in Paris and Lisbon; I have meditated much over it, I have come to fix its prosody, and I have many reasons to oppose these useless novelties—and especially the extension that would give the j as ugly a pronunciation as its form, as unknown to the Latin’s as to the ancient Spaniards—that would obstruct our learning of Latin and its European dialects. When I have more room I will expound my reasons.

“Whatever else it may be, this letter is a farewell plea to my countrymen that they refuse the suppression of the x in the Mexican or Aztec place names that remain with us, and especially in Mexico, because it would be the end of destroying them. And it is a great shame, because all of them are significant, and in their meaning they are topographical, statistical, or historical.

“According to Torquernada. the first missionaries, in order to write the Aztec tongue . . . that we call Mexican, were in agreement with the wisest Indians created in the School of

Santiago Tlatilolco (sic). and as their pronunciation has two Hebrew letters, Sade and Scm, they substituted them in their writing by approximating the first with tz and the second with a soft x. But in order to soften this they had still not adopted the circumflex accent over the following vowel, and the majority of the conquistadors, being from Extremadura or Andalucia, or Arab in their pronunciation, strongly pronounced all of the x's written by the missionaries, and they filled the terms they had adopted from the Mexican language with guttural letters, which does not admit any.

“Because of this the Spaniards said ‘Mexico’ (Méjico), even though the Indians invariably pronounced it ‘Mexlco’ (Mescico) with the Hebrew letter Scm. And it is a source of pain, Mexicans, that Italians, Frenchmen, Englishmen, and Germans pronounce the name of our native land better than we do, because no one, except us, pronounces Mexico with a guttural letter. In any case, my countrymen, let us continue to write it with an x, or in order to get with the times, if the new orthography predominates, to pronounce it as it should be as well as the other Mexican terms, or in order to not entirely forget one of our greatest glories. Yes, ‘Mexlco’ with a soft x like the Indians pronounced it means: ‘where Christ is worshiped,’ and ‘Mexicans’ is the same as ‘Christians.’

“Needless to say, the full word Mescichô is found, as the Indians pronounced it, in verse 2 of Psalms 2 in Hebrew, where the Vulgate translated Christum eius, ‘his Christ.’ With all this, [Francisco Javier] Clavijero believes that the particle co of Mexico is the Mexican part meaning ‘where,’ and putting himself in charge of the different interpretations that have been given to the name of Mexico by the words Metl, or Metzi, moon or month, of what can be composed, decides that the true meaning should be deduced by Mexican history; and according to that it should mean: where is or is worshiped Mexi, or Méxtil.

*“And Mexi, I ask, means what? As the Indians pronounced it, it is a Hebrew word that means, taking it from the Latin **unctus**, what we call ‘anointed,’ taking it from the Greek Chrestous, what we call ‘Christ,’ and taking it from the Hebrew Mesci, what we call ‘Messiah.’*

“And as the Mexicans understood it, what does Mexi mean? Again, history should tell us with certainty. Mexi was a man-God, called by other names ‘the Lord of the crown of thorns,’ Teohuitznahuac, ‘the Lord of Paradise,’ Teotlaloc, etc., etc., who was conceived by a work of heaven by a virgin called ‘Holy Mary,’ Malintzin, and she gave birth to him without injury to her virginity, now made a perfect male. Foemina circundabit virum. This is how Father Toruquemada recounts it.

“If any are shocked that they would call Jesus Christ by a Hebrew name, we also call him Messiah, and Jesus is a Hebrew name though approximated, as Christ is Greek though Latinized. The Indians could not say Christ, because their language does not have an r, nor Jesus, because neither does it have aj, and so they were better suited to Mexi, according to their language; and above all they always preferred the names that they could write figuring their meaning as that of Mexi; aside from the fact that the Hebrew language is the liturgical language of the Christians of Saint Thomas in the Orient, whence it appears that Christianity came to the Mexicans: what is certain is, that according to the Holy Bishop Casas, in his Apologia de los Indios, they were baptized by the Tome priests with all our ceremonies in the name of the Trinity in Hebrew; since the three names that were said in baptism, are precisely the names of the Father, the Son, and the Holy.. Ghost in Hebrew, even though he did not know it.

“Hernando Cortez. . . feigned being an ambassador of Saint Thomas. ‘My effort,’ he writes to Carlos V, ‘was to make Montezuma believe that V.M. was the same Saint Thomas, whose people awaited.’ ‘If in this you bring no deceit,’ Montezuma told him, ‘and it is certain that that great Lord who sent you is our lord Saint Thomas (toteotl-quetzalcohuatl), this empire is yours, and I will do whatever you command. Regarding the religion that you have presented, I see that it is the same that he taught to us, and we are in agreement. We, with the lapse of time, have forgotten it

or upset it; you who come now from his court, will have it more current; you no longer need to say what we should have or believe, and we will go on practicing.’ By which, says Acosta, had there been no object other than that of religion, it would have been established without one drop of blood. The preaching and prophecies of Saint Thomas about the coming of peoples of their same religion, and from the direction of the Orient, that would dominate the country for some time, are the true key to the Conquest in both Americas. I have studied it well; and as long as this foundation is not set, nothing will be written but nonsense and absurdities.

“When they say that in the dedication of the temple of Mexico they sacrificed 22 thousand human victims, it is an equivocation with the 22 thousand bullocks that Solomon sacrificed according to the Scripture on the dedication of the temple of Jerusalem. And it is to be admired, that it is believed to the letter by being in disfavor of the Indians an absurd size like the pacific slaughter that it is believed to the letter by being in disfavor of the Indians an absurd size like the pacific slaughtering of a city or army of 22 thousand men to dedicate a temple, when nobody believes to the letter the famous journey of the Mexicans, that lasted 40 years, and that it is no more than a literal copy of that of the Israelites through the desert with the same sojourns and miracles. The Indians had in their control (of which the missionaries in Veracruz gave written testimony to the renowned Fray Gregorio Garcia) all of the Bible in images and hieroglyphic figures, they confused them with time, applied the stories from the Scripture, and upset their own history and religion.

“What was the religion of the Mexicans but a Christianity upset by time, and the natural mistake of the hieroglyphs? I have done a great study of their mythology and at the bottom it is reduced to God, Jesus Christ, his Mother, Saint Thomas, his seven disciples called the seven Thomases, chicome-cohuatl and the martyrs that died in the persecution of Huémac. The Spaniards, because they did not recognize it in another language and liturgy, and [because] enormous abuses had been introduced, destroyed the same religion that they professed and replaced the same images, that they burned, because they were under different symbols. What an immensity of things I have to say about this!

“Veytia says. . . of the Mexican MS compiled by Boturini, that there were two preachers of the Gospel in Anáhuac: one very ancient that came twelve years after a great eclipse that he and Boturini calculate to have been that of the death of Christ, and another at about the 6th century. He believes that the first was Saint Thomas the Apostle and that same the celebrated Quetzalcohuatl of the Indians. Of that same opinion was D.Carlos de SigUenza in his Fénix del Occidente el Apóstol Santo Tome, a Mexican Jesuit that wrote in Manila the Historia del Verdadero Quetzal-cóhuatl el Apóstol Santo Tome.

“It is already supposed that the enemies of the glories of our homeland are to call all of this fiction, delirium, and even blasphemies and impieties.. . the persecution would recommence that by that same group excited the Archbishop Haro against me since the year 1794. But know, my countrymen, that I put my lawsuit before the Council of the Indies, that I won it, that he was ordered to be reprimanded, fined, and to withdraw his edict, to restore me to the homeland with all honor at the expense of the public treasury, to reinstall me in all of my honors and goods, and to indemnify me at the cost of my persecutors for all of my injuries and sufferings. Soon I will extensively relate all in my Manifiesto Apologético that I am concluding for press.

“My countrymen, stop barking and be instructed. The Fénix del Occidente de Siguenza was lost, but the Historia del verdadero Quetzalcóhuatl that I cited, exists in Mexico....And finally, read Fray Gregorio Garcia, Predicacion del Evangelio en el Nuevo Mundo viviendo los Apóstoles,”⁴ printed in Baeza. And Fray Antonio Calancha, Crónica de San AgustIn del Peru, that occupies all of book 2 to prove the preaching of Saint Thomas in America. You will see there cited many other authors: The deists themselves now confess that the ancient preaching of the Gospel in America is

irrefutable.”

Unable to explain de Mier’s devotion to the idea of pre-evangelization from a rational perspective (and dismissing out of hand the possibility that he was simply advancing truth), scholars criticized his writings. Edmundo O’Gorman, one who has devoted a great deal of time to the writings of de Mier, attacks him on the grounds of his political motives:

“The independence movement [of which de Mier was a part] was sustained by, among other things, an ever more popular feeling that sought to forget the Spanish Colonial past as if it were a nightmare. This feeling can be expressed as a romantic intention to restore the pre-Cortez native past. From there the great interest was in everything that tended to formalize this restoration, as is the case with the Carta of Father de Mier, that in this way gains an unsuspected importance. Intimately connected with the former is the subject of the American preaching of the apostle Saint Thomas. The favor with which such an absurd thesis was received is consistent with the anxiousness of proving that they [the Mexicans] were not indebted to the Spaniards for so much as even the news of the true religion. In this way, at the same time he depreciated the debt to Spain, he gilded ancient Mexico with a varnish of Christianity, now worthy of being restored without ugly excuses.”

By addressing his motives rather than his argument, however, O’Gorman and his fellow critics leave de Mier’s ideas unscathed. Whatever his motives, Father de Mier joins the ranks of other venerable scholars who used historical evidence to laud the truth that pre-Conquest America possessed an impressive knowledge of the gospel. Accusations of imagination and fabrication do not account for the number (or the stature) of witnesses to this claim. We can be sure, with the Book of Mormon as our faithful guide, that there is more to de Mier than mere myth.