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## Appendix II: Crossing the Oceans

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## Old World Connections with the New



A nineteenth-century visitor to the Yucatan ruin of Uxmal copied this design. The circular device at the top is, of course, the star of David, a significant symbol among the Jews.

One of the beliefs widely shared among Mesoamerican groups at the time of the Conquest by the Spaniards was that at least some of their ancestors had arrived from across the ocean. Conventional archaeologists and historians, on the contrary, believe that the entire civilization and, indeed, all Amerindian cultures developed independently of the Old World. They handle the traditions about transoceanic voyaging as inexplicable superstitions or ideas borrowed from the Spaniards. But the frequency of the stories of ancestors crossing the sea may indicate that the natives knew more than scientists allow them.

For example, the Aztec ruler Montezuma told Cortez, "We are foreigners and came here from very remote parts. We possess information that our lineage was led to this land by a lord to whom we all owed allegiance." A different version of the same tradition went this way: "It has been innumerable years since the first settlers arrived in these parts of New Spain, which is almost another world; and they came in ships by sea." A Guatemalan tradition maintained that "they came from the other part of the ocean, from where the sun rises." Many other legends sound much like these.<sup>215</sup>

Modern researchers seeking to clarify the origins of the Mesoamericans have found and published a vast body of information that convinces some observers that the Indian traditions were correct. Much of the data consists of parallels in cultural patterns shared between Mesoamerica and other parts of the Americas, on one hand, and various parts of the Old World, on the other. Of particular interest is a set of over two hundred features found in both Mesoamerica and the ancient Near East. Some of them are highly specific, and it seems unlikely that they were all independently originated by American "indigenous" peoples with no connection to the ancient civilizations in the Old World.<sup>216</sup>

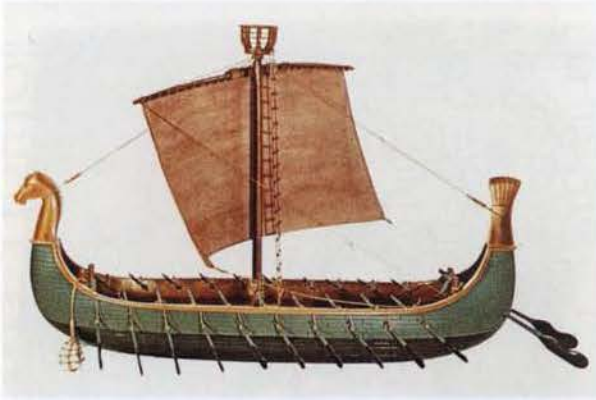
Among the theories offered to explain Old World similarities to Mesoamerica is the proposal that Israelites reached the area by sea from Bible lands. Versions of

this notion have been around since the first Spanish priests arrived in the sixteenth century. One of the better-informed recent treatments of this theme is by Dr. Cyrus H. Gordon, a renowned expert on Hebrew and related languages and history.<sup>217</sup>

One version of the Near Eastern theory is recounted in the Book of Mormon. It remains a question for future research to determine, however, what degree of influence the three Book of Mormon voyages had on Mesoamerican cultures, or whether other voyages, say by Polynesians or Chinese, had major, direct influence on New World areas. We cannot tell from the Book of Mormon text exactly how much of Israelite culture was transplanted to the new scene. Nephi<sub>1</sub> was explicit in saying that he tried to weed out many Jewish notions in founding his new colony (see 2 Nephi 25:1–5), although a version of the law of Moses was followed. In the less material aspects of culture such as religious beliefs and ceremonies, which are hard to detect through archaeology, the Judaic influence is represented in the Nephite record as important, at least among the leading lineage. But Israelite elements in the life of the more numerous Lamanite group are hard to detect in Mormon's account.

There is a huge body of writings—good and bad—on transoceanic contact between the Americas and many other parts of the Old World. It was recently made accessible for the first time in a massive guide to the literature.<sup>218</sup> The introduction to that study concludes, "It is both plausible and probable on nautical grounds that numerous voyages crossed the oceans at multiple points before the age of modern discovery."<sup>219</sup> Ships from China, Southeast Asia, Japan, the Mediterranean, and Africa, as well as from the Near East, seem to have voyaged across before Columbus, and they left a great deal of evidence of their arrival. This information makes more believable the traditions that ancestors of the Mesoamericans arrived by boat, despite the fact that a majority of scholars still refuse to examine the evidence seriously.



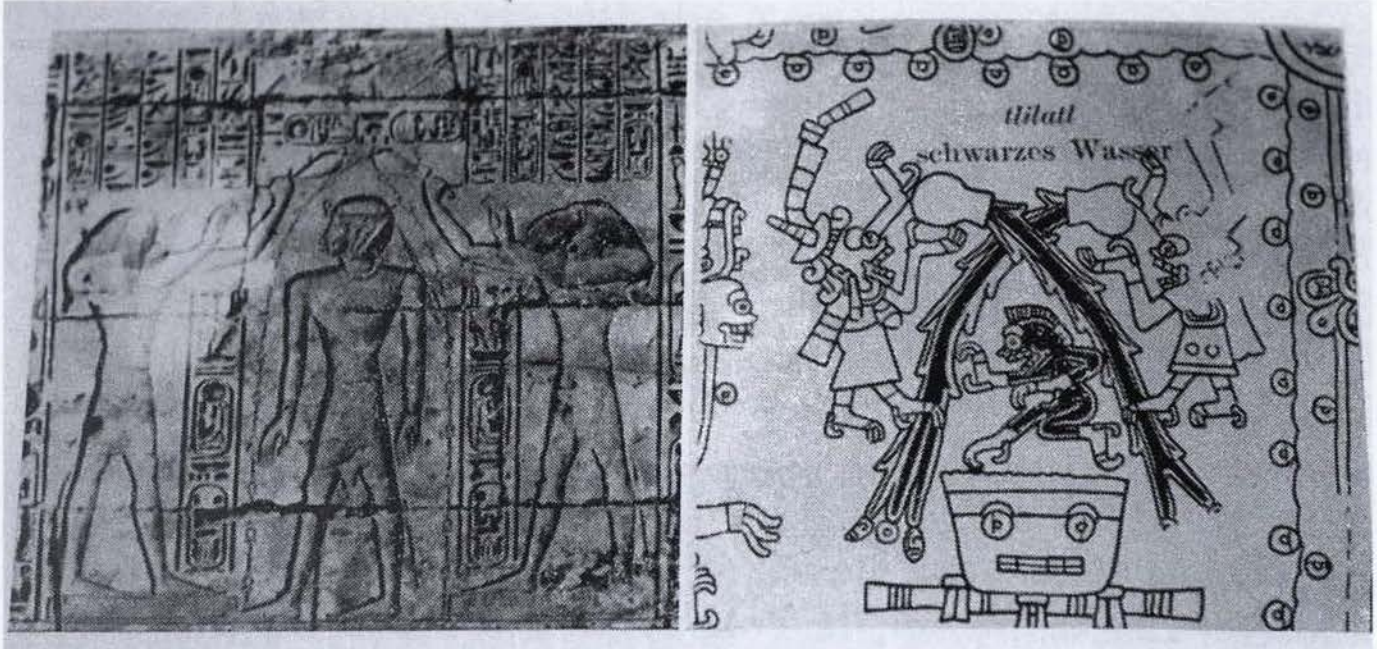


Model ships in a museum in Haifa, Israel, illustrate types of vessels that could have been available to make an early crossing of the ocean to America. On the left is a Phoenician vessel of about 700 B.C. The ship on the right was used by Jews in the eastern Mediterranean in the third century A.D.



Cyrus Gordon, one of the great scholars on the Near East, sees Jewish features in this stela from the state of Veracruz. It dates perhaps a bit before Mormon's day. Gordon claims that the cord wrapped around the forearm of the major figure is arranged precisely like the ritual wrapping of the Judaic phylactery of medieval times. However most Mesoamericanist scholars, unacquainted with the Old World material, consider the scene simply to show preparation for a ritual Mesoamerican ball game.

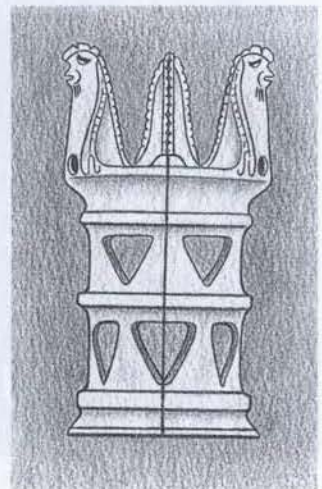
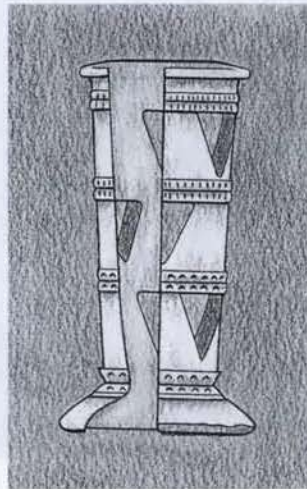




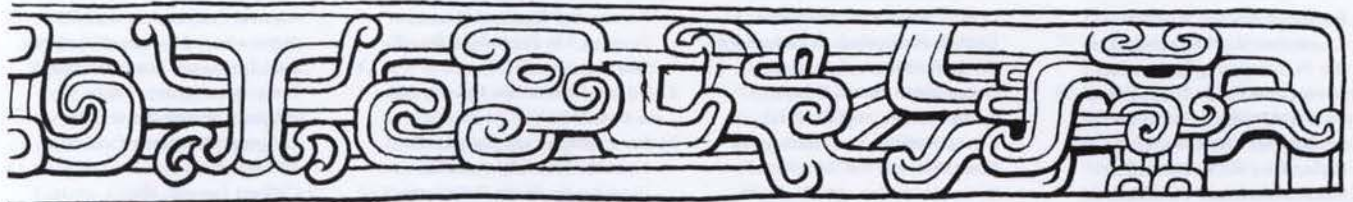
A well-known series of Egyptian carved relief scenes like this shows a rite known as the "Baptism of Pharaoh." The gods Horus and either Thoth or Seth, who are associated with death, life and health, and the directions, stand on either side of the ruler, pouring a stream of life symbols across him. In a parallel scene, from the Mexican Codex Borgia, the lord and lady of the region of

death pour water, a symbol of life in that area, in a similar pattern over the god of healing.<sup>220</sup> A famous archaeological expert on ancient Israel, William F. Albright, considered that this comparison would be convincing evidence of communication between the cultures of the artists had the one scene not been from the distant New World.<sup>221</sup>

We may also wonder about how makers of these ceramic incense burners would independently come up with the concepts and motifs behind such remarkably similar specimens. The one on the right is from Kaminaljuyu, Guatemala, dated about the sixth century B.C. That on the left is from Nuzu, Mesopotamia, a few centuries earlier.<sup>222</sup>







Artists have been intrigued by a variety of similarities between Chinese and Mesoamerican art. The design above is from China before our era, while that on the right is from the southern Maya area in the Late Classic period. Given the time difference, some observers maintain that this comparison is coincidental; however, much more complicated artistic themes show an equal or greater similarity and the notion of coincidence is not very persuasive.<sup>223</sup>



This striking arrangement of jade figures below was found in precisely this position in a carefully prepared cache excavated at La Venta in 1955.<sup>224</sup> The cache is dated to around 700 B.C., although at least some of the objects were clearly older than that. Some profound cultic and social ritual is obviously being represented.

In 1996 H. Mike Xu, a teacher of Chinese at an Oklahoma university, published a short study claiming to identify and translate Chinese writing inscribed on the stone celt

the background of this scene. Xu supposed that refugees from China reached southern Mexico around 1122 B.C. as a result of a historically documented crisis that occurred then in their homeland and that these objects and the inscriptions on them came from the migrants.<sup>225</sup> Prominent Mesoamerican archaeologists immediately disputed his claim, although he backed it up with opinions from eminent mainland Chinese scholars to whom he had shown copies of the inscriptions.

